

# The Gem-Bearing Serpents of the Trinity Homilies: An Analogue for Gower's *Confessio Amantis*

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The Trinity homilies, the collective name given to thirty-four prose pieces found in Cambridge, Trinity College, B.14.52 (s. xii<sup>2</sup> and xiii<sup>1</sup>),<sup>1</sup> have served as important texts for the study of early Middle English.<sup>2</sup> Five of these homilies are also found in London, Lambeth Palace 487 (s. xii/xiii<sup>mn</sup>), as is the *Poema Morale* (*Conduct of life*), a verse-sermon that has perhaps generated the most scholarly interest of all the texts therein.<sup>3</sup> Together the Lambeth and Trinity collections form an integral

1. The three hands of the manuscript have been variously dated. See Bella Millett, "The Discontinuity of English Prose: Structural Innovation in the Trinity and Lambeth Homilies," in *Text and Language in Medieval English Prose: A Festschrift for Tadao Kubouchi*, ed. Akio Ozumi, Jacek Fisiak, and John Scahill (Frankfurt: Lang, 2005), 129; Betty Hill, "Cambridge, Trinity College MS B.14.52," *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 12 (2003): 393–94. See also N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (1957; repr. [with suppl.], Oxford University Press, 1990), xix; and M. B. Parkes, "On the Presumed Date and Possible Origin of the Manuscript of the Ormmulum: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 1," in his *Scribes, Scripts and Readers: Studies in the Communication, Presentation and Dissemination of Medieval Texts* (London: Hambledon, 1991), 196. Full descriptions of the manuscript include M. R. James, *The Western Manuscripts in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge*, 4 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1900), 1:459–62, no. 335; and Linne R. Mooney, *The Index of Middle English Prose: Handlist XI; Manuscripts Containing Middle English Prose in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1995), 15. The homilies are edited by Richard Morris, *Old English Homilies: Second Series*, EETS o.s. 53 (London, 1873).

2. See, for example, Margaret Laing and Angus McIntosh, "Cambridge, Trinity College, MS 335: Its Texts and Their Transmission," in *New Science Out of Old Books: Studies in Manuscripts and Early Printed Books in Honour of A. I. Doyle*, ed. Richard Beadle and A. J. Piper (Aldershot: Scolar/Ashgate, 1995), 14–52; and Margaret Laing, "Anchor Texts and Literary Manuscripts in Early Middle English," in *Regionalism in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts: Essays Celebrating the Publication of "A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English"*, ed. Felicity Riddy (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1991), 27–52.

3. Betty Hill, "The Twelfth-Century *Conduct of Life*, Formerly the *Poema Morale* or *A Moral Ode*," *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 9 (1976–77): 97–144.

part of our knowledge of homiletic material and suggest the possibilities for vernacular preaching in the period between the Norman Conquest and the proliferation of the scholastic *artes praedicandi*, on the one hand, and the preaching of the mendicants, on the other. Both collections have been viewed as having a “tenuous” relationship to Old English manuscripts;<sup>4</sup> in this respect the Trinity homilies, which, unlike the Lambeth homilies, have no clear pre-Conquest antecedents, may be seen as having the more tenuous relationship.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the works in these manuscripts offer insight into simultaneously developing methods for religious exposition in the twelfth century.

On the whole, the Trinity homilies have elicited little praise for their style or exegesis; nevertheless, one sermon has received its own article-length study, and several topoi in the collection in general have been noted as odd or interesting.<sup>6</sup> One of these interesting illustrations is found in Trinity homily 31, *Estote prudentes et uigilate in oracionibus*, and takes the form of a snake with a jewel in its head that, pursued for its treasure, lays one ear to a stone and holds its tail to the other to shut out the alluring songs of its foes. In elaborating the types of serpents to be emulated in accord with the command *Estote prudentes sicut serpentes*, the homilist states:

*Est et aliud genus serpentis. quod habet in capite gemmam ne exaudiat incantantes. alteram auriculam ad lapidem applicat. Alteram postremittatis sue obturat.* Oðer kinnes neddre is ut in oðer londe. þat haued on hire heued derewurðe zimston. and te londes men hire bigaled oðer wile. and swo lacheð. and doð of liue; for to hauen þe zimston. ac wanne þe neddre hit underzit þat hie sechen after hire. hie warned hire wið hem also þe salm wurhte seið. *Sicut aspidis surde et obturantis. aures suas que non exaudiet uocem incantantium.* þe neddre secheð á ston and leið hire

4. Ker, *Catalogue*, xix; cf. Mary Swan and Elaine Treharne, introduction to *Rewriting Old English in the Twelfth Century*, ed. Mary Swan and Elaine Treharne, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 30 (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2–3.

5. On the relationship between the Lambeth homilies and Old English, see (most recently) Mary Swan, “Old English Textual Activity in the Reign of Henry II,” in *Writers of the Reign of Henry II*, ed. Ruth Kennedy and Simon Meecham-Jones (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 151–68, and “Preaching Past the Conquest: Lambeth Palace 487 and Cotton Vespasian A. XXII,” in *The Old English Homily: Precedent, Practice, and Appropriation*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages 17, ed. Aaron Kleist (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 403–23.

6. Jeremy Oetgen, “The Trinity College Ascension Sermon: Sources and Structure,” *Mediaeval Studies* 45 (1983): 410–17. On the style, see, for example, John Edwin Wells, *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050–1400* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1916): “the pieces are rambling and incoherent . . . [and] the homilies exhibit a yielding to weak subtleties in subdivision, and to trivial and thin-drawn symbolic interpretation” (281).

on eare þer to. and hire oðer eare pilteð hire tail þer inne. and swo  
for-ditted eider. þat hie ne muge heren nere remenge. ne here gal. and  
þus atbrested hire fo. and berged hire liue. Nime we zeme of þis faier  
forbisne. and folþen hire bi ure mihte. (197, lines 16–29)<sup>7</sup>

The homilist's reference to the snake that stops its ears to avoid the charmers' voices alludes to Psalm 57.<sup>8</sup> In turn, Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos* offers a rough correspondence for the method by which the snake stops its ears,<sup>9</sup> an explanation echoed in Isidore's *Etymologiae*.<sup>10</sup> There are, however, significant differences between the homilist's

7. "There is another type of serpent which has a jewel in her head; so that she does not hear charmers, she lays one ear on a stone. She closes the other with her tail. There is another type of snake far off in other lands, which has in her head a precious gemstone, and the men of the land sometimes charm her and so capture her and take her life in order to get the gemstone. But when the snake perceives that they seek her, she guards herself against them, as the psalm notably says: *like the deaf asp that stoppeth her ears: which will not hear the voice of the charmers*. The snake seeks out a stone and lays her ear thereto and she thrusts her tail into the other and so stops both so that she might not hear calling nor song and thus she escapes the enemy and protects her life. Let us take heed of this fair example and follow her according to our ability." Parenthetical references to quotations from Morris, *Old English Homilies*, are by page and line number. All translations of Middle English and Latin are my own. Here and elsewhere quotations of the Vulgate are rendered in accord with the Challoner revision of the Douay-Rheims Bible, which has been extensively reprinted, in this case as *The Holy Bible Translated from the Latin Vulgate* (Baltimore, 1899; repr., Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1971).

8. "Furor illis secundum similitudinem serpentis sicut aspidis surdae et obturantis aures suas quae non exaudiet vocem incantantium et venefici incantantis sapienter" (their madness is according to the likeness of a serpent: like the deaf asp that stoppeth her ears: which will not hear the voice of the charmers; nor of the wizard that charmeth wisely); quotation from *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, ed. Bonifatius Fischer and Robert Weber, 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994).

9. "Adlidit unam aurem terrae et de cauda obturat alteram, atque ita voces illas quantum potest evitans non exit ad incantantem" ([the serpent] presses one ear against the ground, and stops the other with its tail, and therefore avoiding those sounds as much as possible, it does not go out to the charmer) (Augustine, commentary on Psalm 57:7, in *Enarrationes in Psalmos 51–100, Pars 1: Enarrationes in Psalmos 51–60*, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 94.1, ed. H. Müller [Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2004], 279, lines 36–37).

10. "Fertur autem aspis, cum coeperit pati incantatorem, qui eam quibusdam carminibus propriis evocat ut eam de caverna producat: illa, cum exire noluerit, unam aurem in terram premit, alteram cauda obturat et operit, atque [ita] voces illas magicas non audiens non exit ad incantantem" (it is said moreover that the adder when it begins to endure the charmer, who calls her out with certain songs so that he may draw her out of the cave: she, because she did not wish to go out, presses one ear to the ground, stops and covers the other with her tail, and so not hearing the magical sounds does not go out to the enchanter) (*Isidori Hispalensis episcopi Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. W. M. Lindsay [Oxford University Press, 1911], vol. 2, bk. 12, pt. 4, sec. 12, hereafter Isidore, *Etymologiae*).

version and that found in these authorities. In Augustine (and Isidore) the snake presses the one ear not on a stone, as in the Trinity homily, but to the ground. Furthermore, in the Augustinian explanation the snake represents those who refuse to hear the word of God, whereas in the Trinity homily the behavior is said to demonstrate wisdom.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps most conspicuous of all is the absence of the gem on the serpent's head in Isidore and Augustine, the very motivation for the charmer in the Trinity homily.<sup>12</sup>

There is a closer analogue found in another twelfth-century homiletic manuscript, namely, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 343 (s. xii<sup>2</sup>).<sup>13</sup> Like Trinity B.14.52, Bodley 343 has received substantial attention as evidence for the so-called transition from Old to Middle English.<sup>14</sup> Unlike Trinity B.14.52, almost all of the English items in Bodley 343 have identified antecedents written in the eleventh century.<sup>15</sup> One recently discovered antecedent, the eleventh-century Taunton fragment,<sup>16</sup> has drawn increased attention to the series of sixty-seven short Latin homilies that make up the second section of the Bodleian manuscript (and the majority of the work of the first scribe). Most of these short homilies constitute a witness to the Homiliary of Angers.<sup>17</sup>

11. "Huic similes dixit spiritus dei quosdam non audientes verbum dei et non solum non facientes, sed omnino ne faciant audire nolentes" (the spirit of God has said that similar to this are certain persons who do not hear the word of God, and not only do they not do so, but they altogether do not wish to hear so that they might not do so) (Augustine, commentary on Psalm 57:7, in *Enarrationes on Psalmos*, 279, lines 37–38).

12. Elsewhere, Isidore does note a dragon with a jeweled head, but this is a creature lured from its cave by medicated grass that induces sleep (cf. Isidore, *Etymologiae*, vol. 2, bk. 16, pt. 14, sec. 7) and is more appropriately considered part of the story of the *dracontides* (cf. below, p. 115), as the context does not apply to the exposition of Psalm 57.

13. Ker, *Catalogue*, 368–75, no. 310.

14. See Peter Kitson, "When Did Middle English Begin? Later than You Think!" in *Studies in Middle English Linguistics*, Trends in Linguistics, Studies and Monographs 103, ed. J. Fisiak (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 221–69, and also "Old English Dialects and the Stages of the Transition to Middle English," *Folia Linguistica Historica* 11 (1992 [for 1990]): 27–87.

15. The single exception is the "Transfiguration of Christ," in *Old English Homilies from MS Bodley 343*, EETS o.s. 302, ed. S. Irvine (Oxford University Press, 1993), 166–77, but like all other items in the manuscript, this homily is assumed to have been originally composed earlier than the manuscript itself.

16. Mechthild Gretsch, "The Taunton Fragment: A New Text from Anglo-Saxon England," *Anglo-Saxon England* 33 (2004): 145–93.

17. Aidan Conti, "The Circulation of the Old English Homily in the Twelfth Century: New Evidence from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 343," in *The Old English Homily: Precedence, Practice, and Appropriation*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages 17, ed. Aaron Kleist (Brepols: Turnhout, 2007), 365–402; cf. Helmut Gneuss, "The Homiliary of the

The fifty-seventh homily, an item not found in the Homiliary of Angers itself, elaborates on Jesus's speech to the twelve apostles before sending them out into the world (Matt. 10:16).<sup>18</sup> In response to the command "Be wise as serpents," the homilist relates:

Duo genera serpentibus inputantur. Genus serpentium imprudens est quod habet gemmas aureas in capite suo et cantantibus musicis faluntur usque dedormiunt et in somnis eorum occiduntur aurumque eorum ab eis aufertur. Non sic est genus prudens quia serpens prudens aurem suam contra petram portat caudamque suam in altera aure mittit. Serpens imprudens, ipse peccator est. Aurum quod non custodiunt significat animam spiritalem. Cantatores sunt diaboli. Hii sunt persecutiones, persuasiones diabolice: fallatia, contumelia, discordia, auaritia, sompnolentia, periuria, falsa testimonia, fornicatio, adulteria, uana gloria et his similia. Per hec fallitur anima. Serpens autem prudens aurum suum custodit quia aurem suam contra petram portat et caudam in aurem dexteram ponit et cantationes non audit. Figura<m> sancti portat qui custodit animam suam. Aurem contra petram, id est contra Christum. Vnde apostolus ait: *petra autem erat Christus* (1Cor 10, 4) et caudam suam in aure dextera, id est penitentia de preteritis peccatis. Et ideo cantationes non audit, hec sun't' persuasiones diaboli et secundum prudentiam huius serpentis unumquemque hominem custodire animam suam oportet.<sup>19</sup>

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Taunton Fragments," *Notes and Queries* 52 (2005): 440–42, esp. postscript. On the Homiliary of Angers, see Raymond Étaix, "L'Homélie carolingienne d'Angers," *Revue Bénédictine* 104 (1994): 148–90.

18. The numbering of these homilies follows that in Irvine, *Old English Homilies*, xxiv–xxviii.

19. "Two types are ascribed to serpents. The imprudent type of serpent is that which has golden gems in its head and is beguiled by musical songs until they fall asleep and (then) they are killed in their sleep and their gold is taken from them. Not so is the wise type because the wise serpent sets its ear against a rock and thrusts its tail in the other ear. The imprudent serpent, this one is the sinner. The gold that they do not protect signifies the the spiritual soul. The singers are devils. These are the persecutions, the diabolic enticements: deceit, insult, discord, avarice, laziness, perjury, false testimony, fornication, adultery, vainglory, and similar things. Through these the soul is deceived. However, the wise serpent protects its gold because it puts its head against a rock and places its tail in its right ear and does not hear the singing. It denotes the figure of a saint who protects his soul. An ear toward a rock, it means toward Christ. Whence the apostle said: *and the rock was Christ*. And the tail in the right ear, this means penance from previous sins. And so the songs he does not hear, these are the enticements of the devil and following the wisdom of this serpent it is appropriate that each man protect his soul"; quoted from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 343, folios xxxiv<sup>r</sup>, line 12–xxxiv<sup>v</sup>, line 4. Abbreviations have been silently expanded and the punctuation modernized. My English translation places fluency over fidelity to the idiosyncrasies of the Latin.

Here in the Bodley homily, we find the gem in the snake's head and the same formulation describing how the snake manages to stop both ears. Indeed, the pressing of one ear against a stone allows for the significant identification with Christ based on the quotation from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Additionally, there are further echoes of Bodley lvii in the Trinity homily. For example, the Trinity homilist, like the Bodley lvii homilist, links the charmers to the devil and his temptations ("Diabolus incantator. suggestio incantacio")<sup>20</sup> and elaborates thereafter a list of enticements in English that is reminiscent of that in Bodley lvii, ending with a reference to the stone as Christ: "Man mid is gele. egged us and fondeð. and forð-teð to idele þonke. and unnutte speche. and iuele speche. and mid wizes bipecheð. bute we þe warlukes us burezen. ac þenne we ateð þat te iuele fondeð us. also ich er seide. buze we to þe stone þe þe apostel of spac þo he sede. *Petra autem erat christus*" (199, lines 6–11).<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, Trinity 31 is an elaboration of the same ideas found in Bodley lvii. Consequently, it is all the more remarkable to see the reversal of rather specific elements in the two. In Bodley lvii, the snake places its tail in its right ear, thereby leaving its left ear to be placed on the rock. In Trinity 31, the right ear is placed on the stone, the left stopped with the tail: "To him [Christ, i.e., the stone] we leggeð ure riht eare þenne we understondeð þat he is soð god. and þerefore nehleche<ð> us to him. and ditteð swo þat eare wið þe wersed lore. Ure left eare we ditteð mid ure after ende. þenne we understonden þat he bi-com man for us. and noht for ure erninge. ac for his admodnesse þolede on his lichame deð. and arerde us of deðe. and eche lif us biget gif we it ofernið. and swo ditteð þe eare. and noh<t> ne hercnið here gal" (199, lines 12–19).<sup>22</sup> The discrepancy between the designation of the snake's ears highlights the way in which homiletic material was reconstructed by different homilists working in different contexts. Yet

20. *Estote prudentes*, in Morris, *Old English Homilies*, 197, line 31.

21. "The wicked one with his charms provokes us and tempts and leads us to idle thoughts and unprofitable speech and evil speech and with his wiles he deceives unless we the more wary defend ourselves; but when we escape the evil that tempts us as I said before, let us turn to the stone which the apostle spoke of when he said, 'and the rock was Christ.'"

22. "On him we lay our right ear when we understand that he is true God and therefore draw ourselves to him and so stop up the ear against the wicked one's lore. Our left ear we stop with our tail when we understand that he became a man for us and not on account of our merit, but on account of his humility he suffered death in his body and delivered us from death and acquired [or Morris suggests *bihet*, "promised," tentatively in the margin] eternal life for us if we merit it here and so we stop the ear and do not hear his [the devil's] song."

the course of the influence and borrowing is often difficult to chart, for whereas most of the short homilies in Bodley 343 have been identified,<sup>23</sup> Bodley lvii and its sources have not.

Nevertheless, there is some indication that the motif of the serpent with a jewel on its head achieved a fair amount of lasting popularity. In Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (1390), Genius relates the tale (which later scholars have given the name) of Aspidis the serpent:

A Serpent, which that Aspidis  
 Is cleped, of his kynde hath this,  
 That he the Ston noblest of alle,  
 The which that men Carbuncle calle,  
 Berth in his hed above on heihte.  
 For which whan that a man be sleyhte,  
 The Ston to winne and him to daunte,  
 With his carecte him wolde enchaunte,  
 Anon as he perceiveth that,  
 He leith down his on Ere al plat  
 Unto the ground, and halt it faste,  
 And ek that other Ere als faste,  
 He stoppeth with his tail so sore,  
 That he the wordes lasse or more  
 Of his enchantement ne hiereth;  
 And in this wise himself he skiereth,  
 So that he hath the wordes weyved  
 And thurgh his Ere is noght deceived.<sup>24</sup>

Gower's serpent differs from the homilies and agrees with the model in Isidore and Augustine in that it stops one ear by pressing it to the ground.<sup>25</sup> Yet, as in the homilies, Gower's serpent bears a gem on its head. Moreover, in this case the stone is named: the carbuncle. It has been argued that the detail of the carbuncle relied on medieval lapidary tradition relating to the *dracontides*, a jewel found in the brain of a dragon or serpent. Leo Hankin thus suggested that "the passage in

23. Primarily, as stated above, the items are a witness to the Homiliary of Angers. Among these short homilies are also two abridged versions of homilies by Gregory the Great, as well as a copy of a Latin translation of pseudo-Eusebius Alexandrinus's homiletic account of Christ's descent into hell; see Conti, "New Evidence from Bodley 343," 391-92; cf. Rémi Gounelle, "L'Enfer selon *L'Évangile de Nicodème*," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 86 (2006): 313-33.

24. John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, bk. 1, lines 463-80, in *John Gower's English Works*, EETS e.s. 81, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 2 vols. (London, 1900), 1:48-49. Macaulay notes that Gower also uses the illustration in the *Mirour de l'Omme*. Therein, however, the serpent has no gem atop its head.

25. Macaulay, *Gower's English Works*, 1:468, note to lines 463ff., notes the connections with Isidore and Augustine.

Gower's *Confessio Amantis* is either a confusion or a conscious combining of two legends, one dealing with a snake in whose head is imbedded a carbuncle, the other with a snake with a trick to nullify a charmer's incantations."<sup>26</sup> The evidence provided by the Trinity homilies and Bodley 343 indicates a precedent for this conflation within homiletic exegesis for the passage "Be ye wise as serpents." Indeed, it appears that in this instance Gower's priest Genius employs the rhetoric of a sermon as part of a sequence of *exempla* on the sins aroused by the senses.

26. Leo Hankins, "The Carbuncle in the Adder's Head," *Modern Language Notes* 58 (1943): 38.