

Coincidence, convention or copycat crime?

A curious case of the twelfth century

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One of the worst things that can befall an academic—and I hope it has never happened to our honorand—is to lose the sole copy of one's current research. The result is at best a delay and at worst the abandonment of the project (I have known two cases of the latter). If the loss is the result of theft, our sense of outrage knows no bounds; fortunately, such events are rare. It is remarkable, therefore, to observe two occurrences of the theft of unique copies of work-in-progress within a few years of each other, in the middle of the twelfth century. Neither case, as far as we know, was ever solved—but both had happy endings.

Lawrence of Durham (died 1154) was a monk at the Benedictine abbey of Durham, but was also involved in the life of the bishop's palace at the other end of what was then the town; he was thus constantly pulled between the calm of the cloister and the bustle of the bishop's court.¹ At the same time he was working on the *Hypognosticon*, a poem on the religious history of the world from the Fall to the Redemption, divided into the periods of Natural Law (creation to Moses), Given Law (Moses to the fall of Jerusalem), and Grace (Christ's incarnation to the present).² At the time of the disaster he had already finished 5½ books:

Cum enim tempus specialiter deputatum legi naturali tribus libris exegissem,
et in tempus specialiter legi date deputatum, duobus libris expletis,

dimidiasset iam tertium, natalicii solempne festum dominici nos Dunelmum invitavit.

[When I had completed the time specifically assigned to Natural Law in three books and, having finished two books, had written half of the third book on the time assigned to Given Law, the solemn feast of Our Lord's birth summoned me to Durham.]

As he went back and forth in preparations for Christmas festivities, welcomed by both the abbey and the palace, by monks and knights, someone observed his popularity and resented it:

familiaritatem principis, amorem ecclesie, cleri iudicium, favorem curie, et laudem populi munere divino michi multipliciter contributa, fuit qui simplici oculo nequaquam potuit videre, quia fuit qui ista videns non potuit non invidere.

[There was someone who could not behold with a "simple eye" (Matt 6: 22) the familiarity of the prince (i.e. the bishop), the love of the church, the approval of the clergy, the favour of the court, and the praise of the people, all bestowed on me in many ways by God's gift, since he was the kind of person who, seeing (*videns*) these things, could not but envy (*invidere*) them.]

In order to take away some of the source of Lawrence's popularity, he stole the manuscript:

Ut autem aliqua michi conclamate laudis eripi videretur materia, versus quotquot iam edideram surripuit, et quos extolli viderat plausu favorali, fraude, ne furto dicam, hos subtraxit ancillari.

[So that some of the source of my praise might be seen to be taken away, he stole all the verses that I had already produced, and by a slavish treachery, not to say theft, took away the verses that he saw were being extolled by popular applause.]

What was Lawrence to do? He had no exemplar and no idea who the thief might be; he could not abandon the work, as he had promised it to a friend:

Et quid agerem? Num ad exemplar recurrerem? Sed preter illud quod subductum est nullum erat. An surrepta repeterem? Sed a quo hoc facerem

certi nihil apparebat. An illud prorsus omitterem? Sed esse non poterat, ut pari fructu tibi responderet amico quod a me visus es diligenter petere, quo solet agricole quicquid in arena videtur insipienter seminare.

[What was I to do? Should I go back to the exemplar? But there was none, apart from the one that had been stolen. Should I look for the stolen material? But I had no certainty from whom to seek it. Should I give up the project entirely? But it was not possible that what you seemed to seek urgently from me should be repaid to you in the same measure that the farmer is repaid by whatever he foolishly sows in the sand.]

He therefore dug in the barn of his memory (*memorie promptuarium*) and was able in a month to recover the 3076 lines which had taken him more than three years to compose:

Totum enim illud quod surripuerat invidia, memoria suggestit; et tria milia versuum et versus sex et septuaginta, quos ingenium tribus annis non potuit conficere, potuit infra mensem ipsos in noticiam memoria revocare.

Because these were imperfect and had fallen into the hands of a jealous enemy, he rewrote them and then finished the whole work:

omnes pene vel in alium ordinem vel in novam formam permutavi. Dehinc quod residuum erat explicui, et tria tempora opere librorum tripartito distinxī.

[I changed almost all the verses either into a new order or a new shape. Then I finished the remainder and distinguished the three time-periods in a tripartite order of books.]

The whole work now consists of nine books totalling 4684 lines.

These events probably took place in the 1130's. Lawrence recalls his service to Geoffrey Rufus, who was bishop 1133-40, and it is likely that it was in this period that he was to-ing and fro-ing from cloister to court.³ After 1140 the bishopric was vacant, and then the abbey faced the turmoil of 1142-43, described in the *Dialogi*. Lawrence had also known Ralph Flambard, bishop 1099-1128, and he may have begun work on the *Hypognosticon* in Ralph's time.⁴

On the other side of England and a long way south, Osbern Pinnock, a monk of St Peter's abbey, Gloucester, was at work on his *Derivationes*, a lexical work in prose.⁵ When he finished it, he presented it to Hamelin, who was abbot 1148-79. In his prefatory letter to Hamelin he says that he had begun it as a young man but, because of many interruptions and other pursuits, finished it only in his old age. On the other hand, Hamelin had already read it through often:

Librum quem derivationes vocant, quem et tu, dilectissime pater, sub
scolaribus alis ad minus intelligentes instruendos frequentius percurristi,
iuvenis componere incepti, senex tandem usque ad unguem perduxisti, non
quod tantum temporis assidue in hoc opere peragendo impendi, quia et
ingruentibus vicissim utriusque fortune successibus quandoque intermisi, et
aliis interim studiis prout necessitas urgebat intendi.

[In my youth I began to put together the book called the *Derivationes*, which,
dearest father, you have often, under the wings of the school, perused in
order to instruct the less knowledgeable. Finally, now an old man, I have
completed it—not that (*or* not because) I constantly spent so much time in
working at it, since (*or* but since) I sometimes interrupted it, because of
alternating fortunes of both kinds, and sometimes I gave my time to other
pursuits as necessity demanded.]

He expounds at length on the importance of etymological studies, listing his primary sources, and then reports that he composed his book as soon as he became a monk but that someone had stolen it:

Nec lateat lectorem me, cum primum scholaribus ferulis relictis monachum
induissem, ad eos corrigendos qui in partibus exponendis errabant, et alia
pro aliis recipientes inconcinnum ubique et dissonum reddebant intellectum,
alium derivationum librum, opus egregium et summo studio confectum,
fecisse, sed a quodam invidie peste laborante furtive mihi surreptum fuisse.

[The reader should know that as soon as I had taken monastic habit, after
leaving behind the rods of school (as student or teacher?), in order to correct
those who erred in explaining parts of speech and who mistook one thing
for another and so rendered the interpretation totally absurd and
inconsistent, I completed* another book of *Derivations*, an outstanding work,

produced by very great study, but it was thievishly stolen by someone labouring under the pestilence of envy.]

*By *alium* he must mean “other than the one presented here,” rather than “another in addition to one I had composed before.”

Like Lawrence, he did not want to see his effort wasted, so he began again and produced a work double the length and (his emphasis) even more perfect:

Quocirca ne mihi verba in ventum dedisse ab emulis imputaretur et tam insignis laboris utilitas frustra inchoata videretur, ipsum iterato librum exordiens multo perfectius quam erat non solum reparavi, immo et duplicavi.

[Consequently, lest my rivals assert that my words had been thrown to the winds and the usefulness of such a splendid work should seem to have been begun in vain, I began the same book a second time, and not only restored it more perfect than it was before, but also doubled its size.]

The parallels between the stories of Lawrence and Osbern are obvious. It is thus of some importance to know which occurred first. As we have seen, the theft of Lawrence’s manuscript probably occurred in the 1130’s and before the death of Geoffrey Rufus in 1140; his *Dialogi*, in which he refers to the *Hypognosticon*, was written shortly after 1143. The date of the theft of the *Derivationes* is even less secure, as we have no dates for Osbern other than his presentation of his work to Hamelin between 1148 and 1179. He could have been *senex* in 1148, i.e. born ca. 1088, or in 1179, i.e. born ca. 1119 (or even later, if he was feeling his age). He was probably already a monk at Gloucester some time between 1139 and 1148, when Gilbert Foliot (to whom he dedicated his unpublished commentary on *Judges* when Foliot was bishop of Hereford, 1148-63) was abbot of Gloucester, but even this does not clarify his dates exactly. We have no idea how long it took him to finish his first version; theoretically, the theft could have taken place any time between 1118 (if he was born in 1088) or 1168 (to give him time to rewrite the work before 1179). On the other hand, as far as we know, Osbern did not publicly tell the story of the theft until he wrote his prefatory letter to Hamelin after 1148.⁶ We can be fairly sure that Lawrence could not have read of Osbern’s loss before his own occurred.

Coincidences do happen (which is why we have a name for them), and work-in-progress does get lost or destroyed. In about 1693 Sir Isaac Newton lost several years' work to a fire; tradition has it that the fire was caused by his dog, which had upset a candle and caused him to lament "O Diamond! Diamond! Thou little knowest the mischief done!"⁷ In 1835 Thomas Carlyle was desperately working on his *French Revolution* in order to make some money. He lent the first volume of his unique manuscript to John Stuart Mill, who dolefully reported on 6 March 1835 that the manuscript had been accidentally destroyed, wiping out five months' work. It is a relief to record that Mill graciously pressed £100 on Carlyle in compensation.⁸

Human beings, however, and especially academics, are prone to suspicion. In Ian Fleming's novel, when the villain Goldfinger finds that he has been thwarted for a third time, with James Bond suspiciously in evidence on all occasions, he remarks, "Mr. Bond, they have a saying in Chicago: 'Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. The third time it's enemy action.'"⁹ When faced with a recurrent literary theme, historians of literature—especially since Curtius—have been inclined to scent a convention and to label it a *topos*. The two thefts, Lawrence's and Osbern's, have the marks of a literary *topos*, since both were motivated by the traditional vice of envy, and the twelfth century is full of authors worrying about their potential detractors. It seems at times as if scarcely a book was written in the century in which the author, in a *propempticon*, did not warn it to beware of the *livor* and *invidia* of backbiting critics.¹⁰ The present scenario almost demands capital letters: the Stolen-Manuscript-Restored-from-Memory-and-Much-Improved has the added advantage, from the author's point of view, of highlighting his powers of memory and resourcefulness. As it happens, I have not been able to find any other examples of it, and a *topos* that occurs only in the two places that it is intended to explain would be a fine example of circular reasoning.

Another possibility is that some enemy of Osbern—perhaps a student smarting under his excessive pedagogy—read about the theft of Lawrence's manuscript and thought that this would be an exquisite revenge to take on Osbern. This is certainly textually possible. The neighbouring Cistercian abbey of Dore owned a twelfth-century copy of the *Hypognosticon*, now B.L. MS Cotton Vespasian D. xi. We do not know when this copy arrived there, but it may have been in Osbern's lifetime. There were many connections between St Peter's, Gloucester, and Dore: indeed, Dore possessed a copy (s. xii/xiii) of Osbern's *Derivationes*, now Hereford Cathedral Library,

MS P.5.V, one of the oldest manuscripts and possibly the most authentic. A Dore-Gloucester connection would provide a route by which the story of Lawrence's loss could pass. This would be a case of a copy-cat crime.

Instead of blaming a rival, however, we could perhaps combine the literary and criminal motifs. Could Osbern himself have appropriated Lawrence's story in order to puff his own abilities? The *Hypognosticon* is not mentioned among the many citations in the *Derivationes*, but Osbern could have read the story when he was composing his prefatory letter to Hamelin and found it remarkably apt to his purposes. He is obsessed with the idea of envy. Each letter of the alphabet is prefaced by a speech by Grammatica, and almost every preface contains a denunciation of envy. For example, under the letter C, Grammatica declaims:

Detestanda quidem invidie pestis que de suis desperata de alterius bonis misere egra sese tanto autumat infirmari quanto alios in bonis perspexerit attolli. Factiosum, inquam, et inquietum invidie malum que nullum bonum quiescere permittit, immo tunc se bonorum censet expertem cum quemlibet in bonis senserit eminentem, tum pronior fit et ingeniosior ad fraudem ingerendam cum in bonis accumulatio animadvertit bona.

[O detestable pestilence of envy: despairing of its own merits, it grows wretchedly sick at someone else's. The more it sees others exalted in good things, the more it suspects that it is itself being weakened. O turbulent and restless evil of envy, which allows nothing good to lie still; it thinks itself lacking in goods when it feels that anyone else is superior in them. It is more prone and shrewd to devise trickery when it sees benefits accumulating among good men.]

Under G:

Garrula vero oblatrantium invidorum ora ad ingerendas contumelias totiens relaxamus, quotiens impigrum vivi ingenii acumen ad commune nobis commodum aliquid utilitatis enodare desudat.

[We unloose the chattering mouths of the howling enviers whenever the tireless sharpness of our lively intellect labours to unfold something useful for the common profit.]

Under I:

Sicut quispiam viam transiens, qui a clamosis et dire morsitantibus infestatur canibus, nisi inimico eos immissi lapidis impetat ictu, nequit non indiscussus evadere, sic qui aliquid egregii facinoris communique actitat usui ad commodum, nisi viva interdum voce veritatis inimicis invidis obsistat, ex rabido eorum demorsu illaceratus abire nequibit.

[Someone on a journey, attacked by noisy and savagely biting dogs, cannot escape unharmed, unless he repels them by throwing stones at them. Similarly, whoever acts for the common good and produces some excellent work, unless he resists the envious enemies of truth, sometimes vocally, will not be able to escape unscathed from their savage bite.]

An account of the supposed theft of his own draft work would, for Osbern, have been an effective way of substantiating his paranoid anxieties.¹¹

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Notes

1 For a brief account of Lawrence and a summary bibliography, see A.G. Rigg, *A History of Anglo-Latin Literature 1066-1422* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 54-61, 340-1.

2 *The Hypognosticon of Lawrence of Durham: a Preliminary Text with an Introduction*, ed. M.L. Mistretta, Ph.D. diss. (Fordham, New York, 1941).

3 *Dialogi Laurentii Dunelmensis monachi et prioris*, ed. J. Raine, Surtees Society 70 (Durham, 1880), Book I:418-21, 483-524; III:435-88.

4 *Dialogi*, II:235-40.

5 *Osberno: Derivazioni*, ed. P. Busdraghi et al., under the direction of F. Bertini and V. Ussani, Biblioteca di Medioevo Latino 16 (Centro Italiano di Studi sull'alto medioevo (Spoleto, 1996); preface in I, pp. 1-3.

6 We must accept the possibility that the theft of Osbern's work was much earlier, say in the 1120's, and that news of it could have reached Lawrence earlier orally. I regard this as unlikely.

7 *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. Newton, Sir Isaac, p. 383, mentions only the fire (no dog) and uncertainty about the date. The *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, p. 364, quotes from a poem of 1780 by Thomas Maude with the traditional story.

8 *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. Carlyle, Thomas, p. 1027.

9 Ian Fleming, *Goldfinger* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1959), p. 204.

10 The *topos* is, of course, classical: cf. Ovid, *Remedia*, ll. 361-70. A prime twelfth-century Anglo-Latin example is John of Salisbury's *Entheticus in Policraticum*; for some poems on what was regarded as a peculiarly monastic vice, see my *History* (note 1 above), Index, s.v. envy.

11 I am grateful to Roberta Frank for her (as always) perceptive comments on my first draft of this article.