

The JOURNAL

OF THE RUTGERS UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

VOLUME XXXI

DECEMBER 1967

NUMBER I

Dives and Pauper: ORTHODOXY AND LIBERALISM

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A FIRST glance at *Dives and Pauper*, an *incunabulum* recently purchased by the Rutgers University Library by means of the Charles Brower Fund, might suggest that its primary interest is simply as a rare artifact. The work is long, the printer's errors an intermittent distraction, and the plates often unevenly inked. Most of all, the subject matter is of unsure appeal to many twentieth century readers. A debate expounding the ten commandments, introduced by a Preface which argues the relative merits of the rich and poor estates, may well stir memories of uncomfortable excursions through *The Parson's Tale*. If a list of the work's contents seems discouraging, however, the modern audience may suspend judgment on learning that even a cursory history of *Dives and Pauper* demonstrates its wide attractiveness for earlier readers.

Manuscripts dating from the opening years of the fifteenth century provide the earliest known English version of *Dives and Pauper*. When printing was introduced into England, the work was among the first publications of both Pynson (1493) and de Worde (1496); the Rutgers copy is from the latter edition. Internal evidence points to the manuscripts as the source for the printed editions, although the latter are longer than the former. That it was published twice within three years attests to its continuing popularity.

OWES & PAUPER



Woodcut introducing the debate of *Dives and Pauper*
(Westminster, 1496), [B iv v.]

To pursue briefly the lasting interest of the book for past generations of readers, we have only to look at the marginalia in the Rutgers copy. Commentaries have been made in several hands, two of them noteworthy. One we may date as sixteenth century, the other probably nineteenth. The earlier belongs to a reader clearly imbued with Reformational zeal—most references to the pope as well as to many uniquely Roman Catholic practices have been carefully stricken. Frequently, too, scurrilous comments are added in the margins. Yet this editor shows his respect for the book by always censoring in a way that will preserve the continuity of the sentence or section. Dives at one point asks Pauper if the people are “bounde to obeye to the pope, to theyre bysshop, to theyr curate in al thynges what they wyll bid them do.”¹ The phrase “pope to theyre” has been inked out, but the grammar and sense of the question remain intact. More important, however, the fact that this person read the book at all perhaps provides a clue to its attractions for many decades of readers: its contents and their treatment were evidently broad enough to find an audience among Catholic and Protestant alike.

The writer of the later hand, on the contrary, does not argue with the text, but instead shows a strong predilection for its many references to the obligations of a pastor to his congregation, for he consistently glosses these passages. Here again, we find evidence for understanding the wide dissemination of the work. In the prefatory section, Pauper has clearly defined the laity as his audience, since he expounds the gospel narrative of the young man who sold his goods and wished to serve Christ in terms of the active rather than the contemplative life: “and of this lyfe [active] spake that yonge riche man whan he sayd, ‘Lord, what shal I do, how shal I lyue to haue the lyfe withouten ende?’” (Pref.ch.11) He then relates to the quotation the corporal—rather than the spiritual—works of mercy. Despite this avowed focus, a nineteenth century reader, most likely a cleric from the nature of his glosses, finds the book worth reading.

Before passing to the substance of *Dives and Pauper* and its possible attractiveness for us, we might also notice that the work has

¹ *Dives and Pauper* (Westminster, 1496), Fourth Commandment, ch. 19. Subsequent citations of this work will be identified by Roman numerals referring to the commandment and Arabic numerals referring to the chapter in question. The spelling of this edition is retained, but in some instances, the punctuation has been silently modernized.

claimed the attention of a younger reader. Printed in folio form with double columns and wide margins, the book invites notes written on the page. Across the bottom of one a youthful hand has begun to print the alphabet, but evidently disenchanted with the project, he has given it up in favor of wavy scribbling.

In content and form, *Dives and Pauper* participates in at least two traditions popular throughout the Middle Ages. Numerous works, both in prose and poetry, explicate subjects such as the mysteries of the Christian religion, its articles of faith, and the seven deadly sins. Moreover, many of these works take the form of dialogues or debates, although in England especially, the element of argumentation frequently gives way to simple questions and extensive answers reflecting the doctrinal point of view.² Thus, the dialogue often becomes little more than an elaborate catechism, a shortcoming the author of *Dives and Pauper* does not always escape. Yet even in its structure, this work reveals characteristics which set it apart from many others in the *genre* and suggest that the author had a strong desire to please as well as to edify.

Although manuals on the Ten Commandments are common enough in fourteenth and fifteenth century England, *Dives and Pauper* appears to be the only one which presents such material in dialogue or catechetical form.³ Additionally, the disputants personify general states in life rather than some specific aspect of the themes they discuss, and this device may explain the presence of the prefatory conversation between Riches and Poverty which establishes the priority of Poverty. The dialogues of this period frequently offer advance notice of a disputant's subject matter and point of view in the name he is given. As an example, there are debates between the body and the soul or between specific vices and virtues, where a list of the *dramatis personae* almost suffices to outline the argument and the various points of view. In *Dives and Pauper*, on the other hand, the Preface does not by itself anticipate the matter of the following narrative. Instead, it presents some of the most spirited debate in the

² Elizabeth Merrill, *The Dialogue in English Literature* in Yale Studies in English, XLII (New York, 1911), 14-17.

³ For other treatments of the Ten Commandments, see *A Treatise on the Ten Commandments*, ed. James F. Royster, in *SP*, VI, 1-35, and *Religious Pieces in Prose and Verse*, ed. George G. Perry, in *EETS*, XXVI, 4-7.

entire work as it develops the respective stances of *Dives* and *Pauper*. By this means the speakers gain a measure of interest as characters in their own right even though they personify abstractions. Furthermore, their initial characterization adds a dimension to the discussion of the commandments, because they themselves are not simply pasteboard representations of the subjects they consider.

Dives' initial determination to resist *Pauper*'s arguments carries over from the Preface into the discussion of the first two commandments. Thereafter, he only sporadically attempts to refute his teacher. But other devices enable *Dives and Pauper* to gain interest even as its formal structure begins to crumble. The author consistently follows the same general plan in treating each commandment: first he develops the abstract theological and moral aspects of the subject, always being careful to enumerate beforehand the precise number of points he will treat. His methodology does much to help the reader traverse the less interesting stretches, a route through the terrain having already been sketched out. Once the doctrinal foundations are established, *Pauper* adduces numerous examples drawn from a wide variety of sources to illustrate the matter. He often manifests familiarity with the Bible, the Church Fathers, Canon Law, and most importantly, the life surrounding him. From his comments we glimpse not only many aspects of English life in the early fifteenth century, but we also gain an insight into the cast of mind of the man who saw fit to record them.

That the author was a cleric and almost certainly a preacher we can infer from his repeated explication of the proper behavior expected from a responsible cleric and from the unequivocal precedence accorded sermons in the life of the laity. Though he may be trying not to draw undue attention to the matter by discussing it in his treatment of the fifth rather than the third commandment, he even goes so far as to prefer sermons over attendance at Mass. He asserts ". . . that it is more profytable to here goddes worde in prechyng than to here ony masse. And rather a man sholde forbere his masse than his sermon. For by prechyng folke be styred to contrycyon and to forsake synne and the fende, and to loue god and goodnes and be Illumyned to knowe ther god. . . . By the masse be they not so, but yf they come to masse in synne, they goo awaye

in synne, and shrewes they come and shrewes they wende” (V.ch.10). Furthermore, his unstinting censure of the cloistered clergy for their abuses of the property they own suggests a preacher rather than a monk. But whatever the specifics of his calling, the liveliness of his narrative, which is frequently interspersed with original and common-sense observations, interests us today.

In an age where belief in astrology, witchcraft, and alchemy was commonplace, the author of *Dives and Pauper* reveals that he is both of his times and ahead of them. He assigns Pauper to defend the *incubi* and *succubi*, the male and female spirits sent by the devil to tempt women and men: “the fende by suffraunce of god . . . may make hym a bodye of the ayer in what lykenesse god suffreth hym. . . . Moche more than he may transfigure hym in to lykenesse of man or woman by suffraunce of god for mannes synne & womans. . . . Whan they appere in manes lykenes they be called Incubi. And whan they appere in lykenes of wymen they be called Succubi” (VI.ch.21). In his acceptance of the superstition, Pauper is much more credulous than the Wife of Bath to whom Chaucer had attributed the following comment several years earlier:

Wommen may go now saufly up and doun.
In every bussh or under every tree
There is noon oother incubus but he [the friar]
And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.⁴

Although Pauper here succumbs to folk belief, in other instances he shows unmistakable insight into many of the world’s phenomena.

During their discussion of the first commandment, *Dives and Pauper* treat the subject of destiny. Pauper denies the existence of this force either abstractly or as manifested in natural wonders controlling specific future events. He bluntly dismisses any cause and effect relationship between destiny and unusual events in nature by pointing to the soot that falls in a house before a rainstorm: “fallyng of soote in houses is token of rayne soone comynge and yet it is not the cause of the rayne; but the rayne is cause of the sote fallyng. For whan the ayer wexeth moyste, the soote by moysture of the ayer wexeth heuy and falleth downe. And soo the fallynge of the sote

⁴ *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2d ed. (New York, 1957), p. 84, ll. 877-880.

is token of grete moysture in the ayre" (I.ch.27). His explanation here is completely naturalistic—and accurate. So soon as he reveals his procedure, he continues with a catalogue of superstitions based on similar natural events and disposes of them in precisely the same way.

It would be difficult in such a compendium for the disputants to avoid mention of astronomy and astrology, subjects often hopelessly intermixed in the medieval world. The use of judicial astronomy, or the forecasting of important events from the motion of the planets and stars, gets short shrift from Pauper. He will not permit even the appearance of the star at Christ's birth as an exception to his assertion that the movement of heavenly bodies is absolutely constant. He succinctly describes the boundaries of astronomical inquiry in these words: "the leste sterre sette faste in the fyrmente is more than all the erthe within the see & without the see, and euery planete also is more than all the erthe outake [except] the mone & mercury, whiche be somdele lesse than all the erthe. And therefore somtyme they lese theyr lyght that they haue of the sonne by the shadowe & the vmbre of the erthe whan it falleth right bytwene the sonne and theym" (I.ch.23). His description includes eclipses, events often providing astrologers with the basis for extensive predictions, but again his explanation is naturalistic.

A somewhat less dramatic but still arresting example of the writer's preference for the naturalistic rather than the superstitious explanation comes in Pauper's remarks concerning witchcraft. He believes in its existence, although his definition is rather loosely inclusive of many things: "euery craft that man or woman vseth to knowe ony thyng or to do ony thyng that he may not knowe ne do by the waye of reason ne by the werkyng of kynde is wytche-crafte" (I.ch.39). His censure of it, however, turns largely on the exposure of ruses used by supposed witches and wizards. Among them he mentions the performance of incantations over fresh wounds which have been bound up with oil and black woolen. He points out that the wound frequently heals, not because of the charms, but because the materials applied are efficacious in themselves, "as experyence sheweth well" (I.ch.39).

Although the author's theoretical knowledge and his ability to

draw practical conclusions from his own observations manifest themselves most emphatically in the consideration of technical subjects, they appear too in his presentation of questions eternally debated. Concerning the relations between the sexes, two distinct traditions are common by the time of the fifteenth century. The correspondence between the Church Father Jerome and his adversary Jovinian had provided a basis for frequent attacks on women as the spiritual and intellectual daughters of Eve. On the other hand, the ideals of courtly love, whatever may have been the actual practice, elevated women in literature to a position not only of respect but very nearly of reverence. During the discussion of the sixth commandment, the author assigns to Pauper arguments which pursue a middle ground and at the same time express a remarkable sympathy for the contemporary problems of women.

Pauper initiates the catechism on the sixth commandment with the observation that God has ordained marriage a sacrament. From this beginning, where he avoids the usual apology for marriage as the second-best way of life, he continues by pointing out that the sacrament was instituted with Adam's marriage to Eve. This union followed from her creation from Adam's rib, a fact instructive in defining her role with regard to man: "God made not woman of the fote to be mannes thrall ne he made hyr not of the hede to be his mayster but of his syde & of his rybbe to be his felowe in loue & his helper at nede" (VI.ch.4). Pauper cannot, however, avoid the problem of Eve's part in man's fall, and he finally admits that she has forfeited her original equality as a result: "but whan Eue synned, than was woman made sujet to man so that the wyfe sholde be ruled by hyr husbond & drede hym and serue hym as felowe in loue & helper at nede & as next solace in sorowe, not as thrall & bounde in vyleyne servage. For the husbonde ought to haue his wyfe in reuerence & worshyp in that they be both one flesshe & one blood" (VI.ch.4). While he must retreat from his initial assertion about woman's position, he still denies the old bromides about her utter depravity.

His sympathy toward women is further elaborated not through recourse to the platitudes and idealization found in the literature of courtly love but through recognition of the difficulties she must endure in daily life. He first undertakes her defense through con-

clusions deduced from Biblical narrative. If men and women indulge in illicit sexual relations, the man is to blame, because woman, by virtue of the Fall, is now capable of less good than man. It is her problems in day-to-day life, however, which are the focus of attention, and the arguments become correspondingly less theoretical and more pragmatic. According to Pauper, the current state of affairs is so miserable that men try to tell their wives that lechery is acceptable for men but not for women, and he explains that licentiousness is currently more associated with women than with men simply because men manage more successfully not to get caught (VI.ch.5). He simultaneously articulates the notion of a "double standard" and condemns it. But the strongest example of his pragmatic approach to the problem comes in his observation that should a woman accede to a man's advances, the man accuses all women; if she refuses, he calumniates her. Though Pauper develops his defense through the medium of homely examples, the most surprising aspect of the discussion is that while he uses many of the same texts propounded by the anti-feminists, he reaches conclusions almost diametrically opposed to theirs. Yet while his thinking may sound surprisingly modern to us, he always manages to stay within the bounds of contemporary doctrine.

Despite the passages which may suggest a somewhat radical strain in the author's thought, we never lose sight for long that he is writing in the early fifteenth century and that he reflects a good many of its attitudes. Since the spokesmen in the catechism represent riches and poverty, it is not surprising to find them returning often to this theme. In the Preface, as they debate the relative worth of the two estates, the mode of argument is much the same as in the discussions of the commandments themselves, for the more formal and even pedantic points are always interspersed with homely and common-sense observations favoring one side or the other. Pauper defends his way of life theoretically by reference to the gospel narrative of the young man who wanted to know how best to serve God; and practically by explicating the parable of the camel passing through the needle's eye through the analogy it provides to the rich man's difficulty in gaining heaven. He admits that the kind of poverty he espouses is voluntary and will not satisfy many of the people who

are poor from circumstance rather than choice. By pointing to Augustine's remark that riches and poverty are necessary to one another, "dives et pauper sunt duo sibi necessaria" (P.ch.4), he refuses to confront poverty as a social problem. Indeed, he criticizes the poor who wish to alter their position: "for more [greater] shrewes fynde I none than poore beggers that have no good that the worlde hath forsake, but they not the worlde" (P.ch.7). In his repeated exhortations that the rich should freely give alms, Pauper recognizes a responsibility to the poor; but they themselves are advised to accept their lot according to orthodoxy, so that they may be rewarded hereafter.

Personal expansiveness of spirit within the framework of accepted attitudes also characterizes the author's treatment of Jews and Judaism. Pauper repeats the time-worn belief in the Jewish responsibility for Christ's death, but he foregoes rancorous elaborations of this theme. Moreover, the exposition of the third commandment, with its lengthy section detailing the Christian preference for Sunday over Saturday in celebrating the Lord's Day, reveals knowledge not only of Jewish religious practices, but of the debt the Christian liturgy owes to them. He is quick to acknowledge that the Jews celebrate the Sabbath with greater solemnity than the Christians accord Sunday, and while he justifies Catholic practice, he clearly respects this manifestation of Jewish piety.

Jews enter the discussion in another regard, the practice of usury. As is expected, Pauper severely censures the institution in principle, whoever the agent, because the "usurer selleth the thyng that he leneth in that he taketh more ouer for the vse of the thyng" (VII.ch.24); that is, he charges both for the thing and for its use, thus gaining a double price. But the teacher concedes that "some tyme it is suffreth, not for that it is good ne lefull, but for to flee the more euyll, for ofte men sholde perysshe but they myght borowe vpon vsurye" (VII.ch.26). His ambivalence in the face of practicalities is clear also from his justification of Jewish usurious dealings in ancient times. Jews were permitted this traffic with the heathens, according to Pauper, in order to prevent the practice among themselves and to redress some of the wrongs they had suffered from the heathens (VII.ch.24). In his condemnation of the practice currently, he indicts

all usurers, be they Christian, Jew, or heathen (VII.ch.27), and no one group becomes the scapegoat for an apparently widespread usage.

In conclusion, the author of *Dives and Pauper* reveals his own cast of mind just as clearly as he enlightens his audience on the various responsibilities imposed by the Ten Commandments. He is not a particularly original thinker, although he often articulates common sense conclusions drawn from personal observation and in so doing refutes many beliefs whose foolishness has become apparent only in later centuries. Furthermore, his orthodoxy never comes seriously into question, but within its context he almost always chooses the gentler path. His sensitivity to his surroundings either reflects or develops his fundamental sympathy to mankind's plight and leads to an exposition of man's obligations that is everywhere marked by a sense of moderation. He takes care to censure the serious faults without wasting breath on the harmless foibles. The twentieth century reader suspects that the author's personality as much as the education he offers has attracted past generations of readers to *Dives and Pauper*. Whatever the reasons, the paucity of extant copies testifies to the continued use the book has formerly enjoyed, and Rutgers Library is indeed fortunate to possess one of them.