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# A Dialogue of the Seven Cardinal Virtues and the Seven Deadly Sins in British Library MS Harley 2399

EDWARD WHEATLEY

The online Manuscript Catalogue of the British Library describes MS Harley 2399 as a “composite miscellany relating to philosophy, theology, medicine, and poetry” with material from the late twelfth to the early seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> Among the texts in the manuscript is a fifteenth-century copy of an infancy gospel of Christ in Middle English verse that begins “Almighty God in Trinity/That bought man” (fols. 47v-61r).<sup>2</sup> Two undiscovered poems in the margins of the manuscript, a dialogue of the seven cardinal virtues and the seven deadly sins along with a moralizing quatrain ornamented with crude drawings, appear to be the work of a different fifteenth-century hand which is generally clear and legible.<sup>3</sup> On folio 54r, the poem’s first line is adjacent to line 436 of the infancy gospel, which is part of the episode in which Jesus has gone to school with other children and Master Juby asks him about his ABC’s; the placement of the poem seems unrelated to the larger text. Although the poet is obviously not a master of style, he seems to be aiming for octosyllabic couplets in most lines. Severe discoloration at the edge of folio 54r has made some words at the ends of lines illegible. The poem follows:

Mekenys  
Thu man consider wat þu ert  
And mekenys take on to þy hert  
Prede rydyng  
apon a lyon

My hert to mekenys ye shal never . . .  
 For al þe worle to me shal . . .  
 Charyte  
 Yf þu wyle heve blys . . .  
 At charyte frist þu . . .  
     Envy rydyng  
     apon a wolfe  
 Yf hevne y lese and þe ioy þeryn  
 My hert and envy wyl never . . .

Chastyte (& continens)  
 Þy flayshly lustys wyl sone [ende]  
 Þerefore lofe chastyte and now þe am[ende]  
     Lechery rydyng  
     apon a gote  
 As long as my tyme doth here . . .  
 My lustys y wyl not leve . . .

Abstynens  
 A þu glotyn þat þyngs doyst devowre  
 Remember me abstynens for þy sokowr  
     Gloteny rydyng  
     apon a foxe  
 Socor, nay, do way, þereof no worde  
 For we ii. togeder may never acorde  
 (f. 54v) Pacyens  
 Þy wrath þy sylve evyr will [wrie?]  
 Þerefore have pacyens er þu dye  
     Wreth rydyng  
     apon a bore  
 Y shal kille and slee wiþout more delay  
 Al þat ever agaynst me wyl say nay

Largynys  
 Þy golde and sylver þat so moche dost love  
 Geve some for the love of god above  
     Covetys rydyng  
     apon a sowe  
 Wat shulde y geve sum of þys good away  
 And y laber for hit nyght and day

Ocupacion  
 Awake þu slomberer of þy slepe  
 And occupye þy sylve lest þu hit wepe  
     Slowthe rydyng  
     apon a nasse  
 How schuulde y awake and my sylve occupye  
 Lo evyn for sclowth lo her y dye.

The poem gives few clues as to its provenance. Neither the orthography nor the lexicon suggests a particular dialect, and the characterization of the vices and virtues is fully orthodox. The parenthetical addition of “(& continens)” to the stanza on chastity may suggest a lay audience, because the poet is apparently attempting to differentiate between sexual abstinence and sexual fidelity in marriage.<sup>4</sup>

This brief dialogue exemplifies two fifteenth-century conventions relating to the vices and virtues: nearly equal emphasis on the two groups of allegorical figures, and the representation of the vices riding animals. Richard Newhauser has recently studied the history of what he calls the “contrary virtues” in homiletic and other types of religious discourse. After the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 which began the codification of confession by Christians, the seven deadly sins received a great deal more attention in penitential literature than did their corresponding virtues. Newhauser points out that the virtues “do not have a place among the catechetical pieces assigned for instruction in the Church’s program of education of, first, the clergy and, then, the laity that were developed as a response to the canons of the Fourth Lateran Council.”<sup>5</sup> However, in the later Middle Ages, the virtues began to receive more attention as the positive counterbalances to the sins. Newhauser sees this development as a departure from psychomachic allegory; rather, the virtues and vices “are to be imagined in general as contrary moral qualities rather than more specifically as opposing forces at war with each other.”<sup>6</sup> The virtues’ frequent appearance in English sermons in the later Middle Ages attests to their growing popularity,<sup>7</sup> and the dialogue in Harley 2399 could have been inspired by such a sermon. The relative popularity of the virtues is indicated by the poem’s structure, with each virtue speaking before its corresponding vice.

But even if the virtues have structural precedence over the vices, the latter group benefits from stronger, more concrete imagery due to the animals that they ride. Although the metaphorical association of sins with particular animals predates this poem by centuries,<sup>8</sup> the representation of the vices mounted on animals became popular in England and France in the fifteenth century. In an article on the popular iconography of the seven deadly sins in France, Joanne S. Norman quotes Jean Leclerc’s assertion that the laity

required concrete images such as these that could be brought to mind “with the help of a certain literary and spiritual tradition and also seen and lived over again by the fact that they were drawn, painted, represented for the eye to see in one way or another.”<sup>9</sup> The stark simplicity of the sins mounted on animals in the penitential poem in Harley 2399 would have served as the kind of mnemonic device that Leclerc describes.

Norman examines the iconography of the sins mounted on animals in the visual arts in France. She discusses two late fourteenth-century examples, a painted ceiling in the parish church of St-Sulpice in Roussines (Indre) and an illuminated manuscript dated 1392 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France MS fr. 400). However, she states that the motif of the procession of sins on animals “is very much a part of the fifteenth century,”<sup>10</sup> during which it gained some popularity, especially in wall paintings in penitential chapels and parish churches in several non-contiguous regions of France. She writes, “The procession of the seven deadly sins developed in regions that were generally poor and remote from large centers of power and aristocratic patronage.”<sup>11</sup> Whether such rural, far-flung examples could have made their influence felt in England is uncertain at best; indeed, the influence of one program of sins on others in France is dubious, because there is considerable inconsistency in the animal assigned to each sin from one program to the next. The most consistent associations among these paintings are Lechery on a goat and Sloth on an ass, and Pride, when not on horseback, rides a lion.

Although I have not been able to find evidence of representations of the procession of the deadly sins painted in English churches, the subject appears in illuminations in an important English manuscript probably from the first quarter of the fifteenth century, Cambridge University Library MS Gg. 4. 27. According to the editors of the facsimile edition of this manuscript, M.B. Parkes and Richard Beadle, it is “the only surviving example of a fifteenth-century attempt to collect Chaucer’s major poetical works in one volume: *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Legend of Good Women*, and *The Parliament of Fowls*,”<sup>12</sup> along with three minor poems and two short lyrics. Significantly in relation to the dialogue of virtues and sins under consideration here, the virtues are depicted alongside the vices as nimbed, standing women. The illuminations are appropriately placed in “The Parson’s Tale,” a treatise on the seven deadly sins and their remedial virtues, but the text itself does not suggest their allegorization; each pair of figures appears at the beginning of the section describing that particular vice and virtue. Unfortunately, because the manuscript was mutilated before the end of the sixteenth century, only three pairs of the opposing figures survive: a male Envy rides a wolf toward Charity; a male Gluttony on a bear approaches Abstinence, who has turned away but looks over her shoulder at him; and a female Lechery riding a goat moves toward Chastity.<sup>13</sup> The illuminations, which have no

background other than blank parchment, show the imbalance between the vices and virtues that the poem suggests: the personified sins, whose animal mounts are apparently walking across the page, take up more visual space and draw the viewer's eye more forcefully than the slender, motionless, rather isolated virtues. This imbalance is also true of "The Parson's Tale" itself, in which the vices are generally described at greater length than the virtues.

The motif of the virtues paired with vices on animals also appears in the literature of England, though the earliest example, John Gower's *Mirour de L'Omme*, probably written between 1376 and 1379, is in French.<sup>14</sup> Near the beginning of this lengthy poem, the seven daughters of sin come to their wedding mounted on animals: Pride is on a lion, Envy on a dog, Anger on a boar, Sloth on an ass, Avarice on a horse ("baucan"), Gluttony on a wolf, and Lechery on a goat.<sup>15</sup> This program shares with most of the French paintings the animals generally associated with Pride, Sloth, and Lechery.

The fifteenth-century allegorical dream vision *The Assembly of Gods*, which was heavily influenced by both Chaucer and Gower,<sup>16</sup> also features a procession of the deadly sins on animals. Here Pluto calls forth his son Vice to do battle with Virtue, and Vice is accompanied by the sins.

An ungoodly soort folowyd hym, pardé,  
Of unhappy capteyns, of myschyef, croppe and  
roote:  
Pryde was the furst, that next hym roode, God  
woote,  
On a roryng lyon; next whom came Envy,  
Syttyng on a wolfe; he had a scornfull ey.

Wrethe bestrode a wylde bore, and next hem gan  
ryde;  
In hys hand he bare a bloody, nakyd swerde.  
Next whom came Covetyse, that goth so fer and  
wyde,  
Rydyng on a olyfaunt, as he had ben aferde.  
Aftyr whom rood Glotony, with hys fat berde,  
Syttyng on a bere, with hys gret bely.  
And next hym on a goot folowyd Lechery.

Slowthe was so slepy, he came all behynde,  
On a dull asse, a full wery pase.  
These were the capyteyns that Vyce cowde fynde  
Best, to set hys felde and folow on the chase. (619-  
34)

The pairings of sins and animals correspond with Gower's in the cases of Pride, Lechery, and Sloth, which had the strongest iconographic associations with their mounts, but also Anger, who rides a boar in both poems. However, the discrepancies in the other three sin and animal pairs diminish the likelihood of the direct influence of *Le Mirour de L'Homme* on this poem—and the *Assembly* poet's use of an elephant for Avarice is unusual indeed.

Norman has suggested that the popularity in the south of France of the procession of deadly sins riding on animals may have been due to its appearance in drama performed by confraternities,<sup>17</sup> and the poem in MS Harley 2399, dialogic in form, clearly has a dramatic dimension. Regardless of the validity of this hypothesis, her general idea that the sins riding animals have popular rather than learned roots is soundly based on the paintings from southern France that she discusses. The inelegant poem in MS Harley 2399 suggests that this iconography also had a popular dimension in England, but its instantiations not only in Gower's French poem and the mythologically informed *The Assembly of Gods*, but also in the program of illuminations in the luxurious and ambitious Cambridge University Library MS Gg. 4. 27 show that the iconography of sins astride animals was clearly known to and appreciated by relatively educated and perhaps even wealthy readers of vernacular literature. It seems likely that the circulation in popular circles of the idea of sins riding beasts contributed to the variety of animals assigned to the sins; no single example of the program was well known enough to fix the sin-to-animal correspondences permanently, even within limited geographical areas.

In the bottom margin of folio 55v, the leaf after the dialogue of the sins and virtues, the same writer, using the same ink, wrote a quatrain that is less theological than political in its focus:

he is but a lordon he schal never be good  
 þat wil bere too faces and oo hoode  
 For gret clerks sayth þat in every land  
 He þat is false hap a glove for every mannys hand.

To the right of this quatrain is a drawing in the same ink of a two-faced man wearing a multi-lobed hat called a chaperon, and a short, hip-length robe; the right face is sticking out his tongue. Both elements of his costume suggest he is a wealthy, perhaps even aristocratic urbanite, but we should also be reminded of the vice figures in *Mankind*, particularly New Guise who represents the excesses of fifteenth-century male dress. To the left of the poem is a strange glove with four fingers in the middle and thumbs on both sides, presumably repeating the motif of two-timing. Gloves, as opposed to the mittens worn by the peasantry, were also "the prerogative of nobility."<sup>18</sup>



The man with two faces in one hood representing a duplicitous person was proverbial in medieval England and remained popular for centuries thereafter.<sup>19</sup> Its strongly visual nature not only led the writer or scribe of the quatrain in the Harley manuscript to test his own talent as a draughtsman, but also gave rise to the appearance of such figures in fifteenth and sixteenth-century English drama. In the late fifteenth-century morality play *Wisdom*, the so-called three Might of Mind, Will, and Understanding become corrupted by Lucifer and change their names to reflect their newly acquired evil natures. Formerly the character of Understanding, Perjury calls upon six false jurors, of whom he says, “Jurour in on hoode beer to facys/ Fayer speche and falshede in on space is.” The actors playing the jurors have “hodys about her nekys” and are “vyserede [masked] diversly.”<sup>20</sup>

The quatrain draws on another literary tradition that was popular in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: warnings against false flattery and evil counsel. The motif features prominently in *Furstenpiegel* (mirrors for princes) literature such as Hoccleve’s *Regiment of Princes*, where 150 lines of the 5000-line poem are devoted to the perils of false counselors.<sup>21</sup> John Gower addresses the issue in Book VII of the *Confessio Amantis*, fleshing it out with both classical and biblical exempla.<sup>22</sup> The generally courtly nature of these narratives is aligned with the foppish appearance of the figure in the margins of folio 55v.

According to the British Library catalogue of manuscripts, the Middle English poem on the infancy of Christ in which these marginal poems appear “was possibly written and owned by Johannes Arcuarius, i.e., Bower or Archer, Augustinian canon at Bodmin, co. Cornwall., in the second half of the fifteenth century.”<sup>23</sup> This identification is based on a poem on folio 47r, “Eke to the souls thy mercy,”<sup>24</sup> attributed to “Dominus Iohannes arcuarius Cononicus Bodmine.” Whether the manuscript remained at Bodmin after the canon’s death clearly cannot be known. While the dialogues of the virtues and sins could certainly have been the product of a cleric, such material was also of interest to lay people (viz. Gower), so it provides no real clues about the writer of the marginalia. Somewhat more helpful is the illustrated quatrain, with its focus on the courtly; while such subject matter could have been of concern to a cleric even in a place as far from centers of power as Cornwall, it seems both more urban and more secular. Furthermore, the infancy of Christ poem, written in the vernacular, was probably meant for a lay audience, because such infancy literature was not only held in low esteem by the church but also deployed romance elements (e.g., Jesus taming lions or turning clay birds into real ones) that would have appealed to lay readers.



## NOTES

1. <http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelpprestype/catblhold/all/mss/msscats.html>
2. *Digital Index of Middle English Verse* 429 (www.DIMEV.net). This text was edited by Carl Horstmann in *Altenglische Legenden* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1875), "Pueritia vel Infancia Christi," 111-123.
3. Neither of these poems appears in Carleton Brown and Rossell Hope Robbins, *The Index of Middle English Verse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943); Rossell Hope Robbins and John L. Cutler, *A Supplement to the Index of Middle English Verse* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1965); Julia Boffey and A.S.G. Edwards, *A New Index of Middle English Verse* (London: British Library, 2004), nor in the *Digital Index of Middle English Verse* (www.DIMEV.net). The poems are also absent from William A. Ringler et al., *Bibliography and Index of English Verse in Manuscripts, 1501-1558* (London: Mansell, 1992), but their absence in this case is to be expected since they appear to have been products of the fifteenth century.
4. See *Middle English Dictionary*, "continen[n]ce," "2.a) moderation in sexual intercourse (as between spouses)."
5. Richard Newhauser, "Preaching the 'Contrary Virtues,'" *Medieval Studies* 70 (2008), 141.
6. *Ibid.*, 137.
7. *Ibid.*, 138.
8. See Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (Michigan State College Press, 1952), Appendix I, "The Association of Animals and Sins," 245-249. Bloomfield's list does not specify the ways in which sins are associated with animals: some examples are metaphors while others are of the sins mounted on animals.
9. Joanne S. Norman, "Lay Patronage and the Popular Iconography of the Seven Deadly Sins," in Carol Garrett Fisher and Kathleen L. Scott, eds., *Art into Life: Collected Papers from the Kresge Art Museum Medieval Symposia* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 213-236 (214). The quotation is taken from a lecture given by Leclerc at the International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo, MI in 1984.
10. *Ibid.*, 215.
11. *Ibid.*, 224.
12. *The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Facsimile of Cambridge University Library MS Gg.4.27*, ed. M.B. Parkes and R. Beadle (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1979), 3 vols, vol. 3, 1.
13. The illuminations appear on folia 416, 432, and 433. The images are also reproduced in the more widely available *A Mirror of Chaucer's World* by Roger Sherman Loomis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), figs. 177-79.

14. *The Complete Works of John Gower*, vol. 1: The French Works, ed. G.C. Macaulay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), xlii-xliii.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14, lines 841-936. Each of the women also carries a symbolic bird, but they need not concern us here.
16. *The Assembly of Gods*, TEAMS Middle English Texts Online, ed. and intro. Jane Chance. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999). <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/asint.htm>
17. Norman, "Lay Patronage and the Popular Iconography of the Seven Deadly Sins," 230-31.
18. Laura F. Hodges, *Chaucer and Costume: The Secular Pilgrims in the General Prologue* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 15.
19. B.J. and H.W. Whiting, *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1968), F 13. Whiting's list includes such poets as Lydgate and Skelton.
20. *Wisdom*, ed. David Klausner, originally published in *Two Moral Interludes: The Pride of Life and Wisdom* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Insitute Publications, 2009), lines 718-19; the costume description follows line 723. This edition of *Wisdom* is also available on the TEAMS Middle English Texts website (<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/kl1wisfr.htm>).
21. Thomas Hoccleve, *The Regiment of Princes*, ed. Charles R. Blyth (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), lines 4859-5019.
22. John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, vol. 3, ed. Russell Peck with Latin translations by Andrew Galloway (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), Book VII, lines 2177-2689.
23. <http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelprestype/catblhold/all/mss/msscats.html>
24. *DIMEV* 1182.

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