Dives and Pauper: Superstition and Catechesis in the Fifteenth Century

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The Middle Ages are popularly remembered as a dark period of uneducated superstition. A careful study of primary sources, however, reveals a more nuanced picture of the period before the Renaissance. While superstition was prevalent—and would remain so well through the Renaissance and Enlightenment—such superstitions competed with widespread educational efforts by the clergy and scholarly elite. Both the Catholic Church and the leaders of the Reformation fought—often against each other—to reduce the superstition that they saw as a threat to the integrity of their beliefs. This article will explore the Church’s response to some common medieval superstitious beliefs by closely examining Dives and Pauper, a fifteenth-century theological treatise that explores questions of religion, magic, and superstition in everyday life. Structured as a homily in the tradition of Peter Abelard’s Sic et Non, the text was used by members of the clergy in their fight against magical practices among the faithful.

INTRODUCTION

A proud man, riding along the path from London, came upon two friars walking along a footpath to avoid the foul roadway. Coming up behind them near the edge of a ditch, the man cried “On the left hand, friar! On the left hand!” and tried to cross onto the footpath so the two mendicants would pass to his left. When one friar asked the man to stay on the horse-path so that they could use the footpath, the man refused and began to press in with his horse between the two hapless travelers and the steep ditch on the right side of the road. Frustrated, one of the brothers shoved both man and horse into the ditch, where they lay for several hours until a passerby helped drag them out.

For what reason was the man on horseback so insistent that the friars pass to his left, even if it required them to step onto the muddy main roadway? A literal reading of Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew had him superstitiously terrified that his passing on the friars’ left-hand side would doom him to hell. Because those placed at Jesus’ left in that story “will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life,” presumably the man was afraid that getting caught on the left side of God’s earthly delegates would earn him the same punishment as being to the left of God himself.²

The above story is found in the fifteenth-century manuscript Dives and Pauper, a lengthy theological exposition on the Ten Commandments, and is but one example of the superstition, magic, and misunderstood theology that permeated pre-modern England. Medieval people ascribed mystical powers to clergy and the religious, carried charms and amulets, and said prayers to cure illness or ward off bad weather. In response, many members of the Church, such as the two friars above, fought a constant battle against the superstitious and magical beliefs they considered parasitic to official Church teaching.

While scholarship on the period has amply demonstrated the prevalence of superstition in medieval and early-modern England, there is less research on the counterpoint to this culture of magic: the efforts of a small but zealous group of clergy and elites who fought fiercely to educate the laity about the danger superstition posed to orthodox belief. They did not deny the existence of magic, but rather cast it as the treacherous deceptions of Satan, since true supernatural power could emanate only from God himself.³

Though scholars such as Keith Thomas and Euan Cameron make brief mention of early Church attitudes toward magic, they and most scholars consider the main thrust of anti-superstition efforts to have begun during the Reformation and counter-Reformation. A close analysis of Dives and Pauper, a text written in the vernacular and so clearly intended for a wide audience, suggests that a strong and organized catechetical effort to counter superstition predates the Reformation by centuries.

AUTHORSHIP

Though the author of Dives and Pauper is unknown, a close reading suggests that he was a member of the educated elite, well-educated and literate. The text is structured as a conversation between two men, divided into ten “precepts” that each correspond to one of the Ten Commandments. Dives, the rich man, usually proposes a theological question or makes an observation, which Pauper, the poor man, rebuts or clarifies. Pauper nearly always prevails in these discussions, and the obvious superiority of his arguments makes it easy to assume that the author at least identified with the character, even if he did not intend it to be a self-portrait.
Other portions of the text offer further hints to his identity, such as this passage:

DIVES: Of what country art thou?
PAUPER: By dint of heritage, my country is paradise… Once I was free as others are, but for Christ’s sake, to win the souls that he bought so dear, I have made myself servant to all men rich and poor…and for my travel I beg my meat and my clothing.

DIVES: Thou seemst to have been a lettered man and a cleric…

The above passage suggests that the author is a wanderer—perhaps a friar or a monk—who has taken a vow of poverty and lives to preach the gospel. He was quite possibly a friar, either of the Franciscan order or intimately familiar with Franciscan writings, especially since he mentions reading the “life of St. Francis” in Precept Four. In any case, the man who wrote Dives and Pauper was a demonstrably learned theologian, literate in Latin and well-versed in the laws and teachings of the Church. He is able to quote such erudite figures as St. Augustine in his attack on astrology and cite canon law with ease.

DATE

The author of the work references two specific historical events that suggest he began writing between 1402 and 1405. The first of these is a spectacular comet that brightened the skies over Europe in 1402. The second is a reference to the fact that the kalends of January fell on a Thursday in 1400, and “this year [i.e. 1405] is come again on the Thursday.” The first event is a terminus post quem for the date the author began work, and his reference to 1405 as “this year” makes it a likely terminus ante quem for the work.

AUDIENCE

Dives, the direct recipient of Pauper’s teachings, gives a hint as to the wider audience in Precept I:

Much of my nation is enchanted and blinded by such fantasies, many more than I can tell, and so they forfeit highly against the first commandment that ought most to be charged… and there is neither bishop nor prelate nor curate nor preacher that will speak against these vices and errors that are so high against God’s worship.

Dives hopes that Pauper will take on the duties that the bishops, priests, and other preachers have neglected: namely, to speak out against the “fantasies” (i.e., superstitions) and vices that plague the nation of England.

But as a written text, the audience for these teachings would seem to be limited to those able to read and understand English. An examination of the scope of the text’s influence therefore hinges on an understanding of literacy in the late Middle Ages.

Modern medieval scholars have made a strong case against the traditional model of literacy, with its “rapid decline in the period after the barbarian invasions, followed half a millennium later by an equally dramatic rebirth, to one of continuity punctuated by periods of acceleration.” In the Middle Ages, the ability to read was not necessarily linked to the ability to write, and a minimal capability in both was not described as literacy.

While most of the common people did not possess the scholarly learning of the literati and the clergy, there nevertheless was “an extent of pragmatic literacy among the peasantry.” An increase in demand for books and literature in the vernacular led to a rise in the number of texts available, which in turn led to more readers, so that “by 1400 the principal difference between the court and the increasing bourgeoisie was one of taste, not of literacy.”

Even the wholly illiterate still lived in a “culture of literacy” in which texts were disseminated orally to those who could not read them. Such a culture enabled the author of Dives and Pauper to address his work to a wide audience, including those ignorant of Latin, for whom he translates passages from the Vulgate into English whenever he cites the Bible.

A large number of extant manuscripts and editions suggest that this text was quite popular. In 1490, it was widespread enough for a London merchant, John Russhe, to finance a first printing of six hundred copies, which was followed by a second printing in 1496. Such popularity indicates that it was relevant to the people reading or hearing it. The text’s anecdotes and documentations of magic—especially magic derived from corrupted religious belief—can therefore be considered representative of common occurrences in fifteenth-century England.

SACRAMENTALS AND RELIGIOUS MAGIC

Pauper was by no means a skeptic. He readily believes in the power of witches and charmers to summon the devil and in the power of priests to cast such demons out, and he considers it common knowledge that “spirits [of men] walk about when the men are dead.” In most cases, however, Pauper had little patience for magical practices not in line with traditional Church doctrine.

Magic and religion were intrinsically linked in the collective consciousness of the Middle Ages. As Keith Thomas notes, “the magical aspects of the Church’s function were often inseparable from the devotional ones” for many of the faithful. Like the thin line that divided veneration from idolatry, the distinction between prayer and charm was often too vague and undefined for the masses to fully understand. Many practices straddled
this line, such as the celebration of Mass for a special purpose, but the most common conflation of superstition and religion came from the use of sacramentals and prayer. 

Sacramentals are objects, devotions, and rituals blessed by the Catholic Church and believed to have special religious power. This power includes “the virtue to drive away evil spirits whose mysterious and baleful operations affect sometimes the physical activity of man.” Although they do not work *ex opere operato*—i.e., of their own accord—they do have a “special efficacy” that can “move God to give graces which He would otherwise not give.” Prominent examples of objects regarded as sacramentals include holy water, blessed salt, and amulets dedicated to Jesus or the saints. Ritualistic sacramentals include anything from the simple sign of the cross to more sophisticated devotions, such as novenas and fasting.

The objective power that the Church granted to such objects made them easy targets for abuse. Holy water in sacred fonts was often kept under lock and key to prevent it from being used for magical spells, and priests presided over the sacred fires on the Nativity of John the Baptist to prevent their misuse. The friar of *Dives and Pauper* is especially concerned with the use of sacramentals by witches:

> All that use [for charms and conjurations] holy water of the font, holy chrism, singing in the Mass, fasting, continence, wearing sheep’s wool as penance, and such others, in their witchcraft they make a high sacrifice to the devil.

But he is quick to point out that it is not the holy objects themselves that enable the witch to do evil:

**DIVES:** What have the Pater Noster [Our Father] and the holy candle done thereby?  
**PAUPER:** Nothing. But since the witch worshipped the devil so highly with that holy prayer and with the holy candle and used such holy things in his service, against the will of God, therefore is the devil ready to do the witch’s will.

When sacramentals are properly used, the objects themselves hold no power, but rather move God to act. Similarly, in this example of improper use, the holy candle was used to induce the devil to act, but possessed no evil power in and of itself.

A key feature distinguishing sacramentals from the sacraments is that sacramentals are not guaranteed to work. As the author of *Dives and Pauper* notes, men “must not bind God nor put him to any laws,” because sometimes God “grants them not that end or effect that they fasted for.” A person who uses sacramentals must “call on the grace of God in his doing” and trust Him to make the final decision regarding their petition and not believe that the temporal objects themselves hold the power.

Such a distinction—e.g., that holy water works as a facilitator of divine grace, rather than on its own merits—would have been a difficult concept for people without theological training to grasp. To the theologically educated clergy, divine power and false superstitious power competed in a cosmic conflict for the allegiance of the faithful. But for the majority—including many in the clergy itself—that cosmic conflict did not take place. Rather, overlapping and mutually supporting forms of spiritual energy were available to see them through the perils of life. This majority considered countless forms of religious magic acceptable, even without a full understanding of the theology behind them.

For example, the use of holy water or relics to cure illness in livestock and people was an acceptable practice, as was crossing oneself to fend off demons, ringing bells to dispel storms, and the use of prayer in *ex opere operato* fashion. Along similar lines, the author of *Dives and Pauper* permits the “hanging of scrolls about man, woman, child, or beast for sickness, with scripture or figures or words” so long as the words are the “Pater noster, Ave, or the creed, or holy words of the Gospel.…or the token of the holy cross.” Like St. Thomas Aquinas, who wrote that “it would seem that it is not unlawful to wear divine words at the neck,” Pauper believes that the wearer must place his faith in God and not in the object itself.

In contrast to such benign blessings, the twisting of religious practice for superstitious or nefarious means was unacceptable in any manner. A communicant who carried away the host in his mouth possessed a source of great power, with which he could cure blindness, avoid ill fortune, or protect his home, even though the Church forbid any use of the Host except consumption. A person might fast in order to cause the death of an enemy or use attendance at Mass as a way to ascertain the guilt or innocence of a suspected criminal, like the “poison ordeals” common in primitive societies, and some corrupt priests even tried to use the Requiem Mass as an imprecation against the living.

*Dives and Pauper* also warns of witches who pray the words of the Gospel or the Lord’s Prayer backwards, or use holy water, holy oil, and chanting to summon the devil. Those who “say the Pater Noster or other holy words…to imply that what is done is done by way of miracle and by his prayer and holiness, when in fact he did it by reason and working of nature” are condemned as committing a “very great hypocrisy and grievous sin.”

Fasting to avoid sudden death and fasting on certain days based on the Church calendar in hopes of a lucky year are both sinful, as is the use of witchcraft to turn men and women into the likeness of beasts or birds.

**CONCLUSION**

The Church did not encourage its adherents to attach magical significance to religious observances. In fact, since
its arrival in England, the Christian Church had consistently campaigned against the resort of the laity to magic and magicians.\footnote{Matthew 25:46.} It is unsurprising, however, that such beliefs persisted, since the subtleties of Church doctrine were incomprehensible to the average person in 1400. Transubstantiation, for example, seemed especially magical—a priest muttered incantations and gestured over simple bread and wine, which then physically changed into the body and blood of Christ.

When such mystical processes were official practices of the Church, the persistence of superstition in the face of institutional attempts to educate or suppress believers of magic is unsurprising. \textit{Dives and Pauper} is just one of the many attempts by well-educated theologians to address the problem of superstition among the faithful and explain the difference between acceptable religious custom and heretical magic. In fact, evidence of a series of sermons by the same author has recently been discovered,\footnote{The entire episode of the superstitious horseman and the irritated friars can be found in: Priscilla Heath Barnum, ed. \textit{Dives and Pauper Vol. I}, (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 187.} which offers further evidence that the homily was intended to provide clergy a tool with which to educate their flock.

Countless other examples of magic and superstition can be found in \textit{Dives and Pauper}, including fascinating discussions of astrology, witches, religious curses, and miracles. The topic is too vast to explore at any proper depth within the restrictions of this short paper,\footnote{Although the author of \textit{Dives and Pauper} wrote 1500 years later, it seems likely that he, who did his best to encourage one and destroy the other, would have agreed with the Roman orator.} but it provides at least a glimpse of the fascinating, enchanted world of the fifteenth century and the struggle the Church faced to keep its teaching clear amidst a sea of superstitious belief.

In a treatise on divination published in 44 BC, Cicero declared that “religion is not destroyed by the destruction of superstition.”\footnote{http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13292d.htm.} Although the author of \textit{Dives and Pauper} wrote 1500 years later, it seems likely that he, who did his best to encourage one and destroy the other, would have agreed with the Roman orator.

\section*{ENDNOTES}

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\footnote{Roland Bishop Dickison, \textit{“Dives and Pauper”: A Study of a Fifteenth Century Homiletic Tract}, (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1950), p. 38. Evidence for the author’s membership in the Franciscan order includes his praise of costly churches, his assertion that the preacher’s word is God’s word, and a mention of his footgear, which seems to describe Franciscan sandals rather than Dominican high shoes. Franciscans are also the only religious order mentioned favorably in the text. The only indication that he might not be a Franciscan is the frequent translation of Bible passages into English, a practice anathema to Franciscan leadership.}{Roland Bishop Dickison, \textit{“Dives and Pauper”: A Study of a Fifteenth Century Homiletic Tract}, (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1950), p. 38. Evidence for the author’s membership in the Franciscan order includes his praise of costly churches, his assertion that the preacher’s word is God’s word, and a mention of his footgear, which seems to describe Franciscan sandals rather than Dominican high shoes. Franciscans are also the only religious order mentioned favorably in the text. The only indication that he might not be a Franciscan is the frequent translation of Bible passages into English, a practice anathema to Franciscan leadership.}
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\footnote{And herefore seith he lave bat he offys of teeching and chastysying longth not only to he busynche but to every gouvernour after his name & his degre, to he pere man gouernynge his pore houshold, to he riche man gouernynge his mene. Ibid, p. 328. The canon laws cited here are Causae 23 q4 c.35 and 23 q5 c.41. Emil Friedberg, ed. \textit{Corpus Iuris Canonici}, Vol I. (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1879).}{And herefore seith he lave bat he offys of teeching and chastysying longth not only to he busynche but to every gouvernour after his name & his degre, to he pere man gouernynge his pore houshold, to he riche man gouernynge his mene. Ibid, p. 328. The canon laws cited here are Causae 23 q4 c.35 and 23 q5 c.41. Emil Friedberg, ed. \textit{Corpus Iuris Canonici}, Vol I. (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1879).}
And þerfor God graunteth hem nouȝt þat ende ne þe effect þat þ fastyn fore...We mon nouȝt artyn God ne putyn hym to no lawys, and þerfor we shuldyn putyn al our lyf and our deth only in his wil... Ibid, p. 172.

To helyn mennys woundys...blac wolle and olee ben wel medicinable... But þouȝ a man in þe doynge seye his Pater noster or som holy prayere, clepyng þe grace of God in his doynge, it is no wychecraft but it is wel don. The friar finds it acceptable to use holy oil [olee] and chanted prayers to heal a wound, so long as the petitioner realizes that he is calling on God’s grace in his doing. Ibid, pp. 168–69.

Cameron, Enchanted Europe, p. 62.

For the use of relics, see ibid p. 28. For the use of holy water, the sign of the cross, and church bells see ibid p. 49. For the use of prayer as a charm that worked simply by virtue of the words said, see ibid p. 42.


Thomas, Religion, p. 34.

Ibid, p. 44.

He þo þat for hate or wratthe þat þey beryn aȝynys man or woman...syngyn messe of requiem for hem þat ben olyue in hope þat þey shuldyn faryn þe verse and þe sonere deye, þe preest shulde ben disgradit, and bohe þe preest and he þat styrde hym perto for to don it shuldyn ben exylyd foreuere. Barnum, ed. Dives and Pauper, Vol. I, p. 159.


Dives: What jif he seye þe Pater noster or oþer holy wordis...for to don þe peple wenyn þat it is don be weye of miracle and for his prayere and his holynesse, wan he doth it be reson and werkyng of kende? Pauper: Þan is it a wol gret ypocrysye and wel gresse synne in hym. Ibid, p. 169.

Dives: [Is it] leful to trostyn in þese fastyngis newly foundyn to flen sodeyn deth? Pauper: It is gret foly to trostyn þerinne... Ibid, pp. 172–3.

And alle þo þat seyn or leuyn þat men and women myȝtyn be wychecraft ben turnyd into bestis / or into þe lyknesse of bestis or bryddis bodly ben warpren byn ony paynym. Ibid, pp. 158–59.


My forthcoming undergraduate honors thesis will contain a much longer study of Dives and Pauper, relating the work and the beliefs it describes to the writings of later Renaissance scholars such as Sir Thomas Browne.

Nec vero, id enim diligenter intellegi volo, superstitione tollenda religio tollitur. Cicero, De divinatione, Book I, Chapter LXXII, sec. 148.