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*Riches and Poverty in English Protestant Culture, c.1550–1800: Vernacularising the Parable of Dives and Lazarus**

David Hitchcock and Brodie Waddell

In the Gospel of Luke, a sickly beggar named Lazarus lay starving at the gate of an extravagant rich man, later known as Dives. The wealthy glutton refused to help the poor man and so upon his death he was conveyed to hell while the beggar was carried up to heaven. The story of Dives and Lazarus was retold and reinterpreted many times by English Protestants in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The vivid language and unsubtle moral implications of the parable gave contemporaries an opportunity to appraise the social and economic behaviour that they saw around them, while adjusting both the imagery and message to fit their own societies. By analysing this process we can illuminate one important aspect of how people at the time understood the relationship between the rich and the poor.¹ In this article, we show how the universalising moral messages of the parable were translated—‘vernacularised’, in effect—into the shifting social, religious and cultural contexts of early modern England, and we assess how much these moral messages might have shifted in turn. As will be seen, the often superficial adaptation of the parable to new contexts enabled the preservation of a remarkably stable core message: a critique of mispending riches on luxury

* We extend our thanks to the anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful and encouraging comments on an earlier version of this article, and to the organiser, Catherine Kovesi, and other participants at the event on ‘Luxury and the Ethics of Greed in the Early Modern World’ at Villa I Tatti and the European University Institute, Florence, in 2014, where Brodie Waddell first presented on this topic. We are also grateful to the Revd. John Whittaker, rector of St Mary’s Putney, and to the staff of London Metropolitan Archives for their assistance and kind permission to reproduce the image in Fig. 1.

¹ The best overview of early modern interpretations of biblical socio-economic issues is N. Tadmor, *The Social Universe of the English Bible: Scripture, Society, and Culture in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2010).

rather than charity, combined with a celebration of patient-but-deserving poverty which the predestinarian theologies of the Reformation barely touched.

The whole scriptural text of Dives and Lazarus consists of just thirteen verses (Luke 16:19–31). The first seven are the most significant for our purposes and they are short enough to be quoted in full:

There was a certaine rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linnen, and fared sumptuously euery day. And there was a certaine begger named Lazarus, which was layde at his gate full of sores, And desiring to bee fed with the crummes which fel from the rich mans table: moreouer the dogges came and licked his sores. And it came to passe that the begger died, and was caried by the Angels into Abrahams bosome: the rich man also died, and was buried. And in hell he lift vp his eyes being in torments, and seeth Abraham afarre off, and Lazarus in his bosome: And he cried, and said, Father Abraham, haue mercy on mee, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and coole my tongue, for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham saide, Sonne, remember that thou in thy life-time receiuedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus euill things, but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.²

The relevance of these verses to the questions of social and economic relations should be immediately apparent. We have, in only a few short lines, Jesus offering a powerful narrative about the contrasting fortunes and fates of two simple but evocative characters: a hard-hearted rich man enjoying a life of extravagance and indulgence, and a helpless poor man who lacked even the barest of necessities. How, then, did English Protestants interpret this story in an age

² *The Holy Bible, Conteyning the Old Testament and the New: Newly Translated ...* [Authorised Version] (1611), Luke 16:19–25. All pre-1800 printed sources were published in London unless otherwise stated.

that supposedly witnessed the end of 'holy poverty' and the birth of a 'consumer society' alongside sharpening economic polarisation?

The parable of Dives and Lazarus provided early modern English culture with a clear but flexible lesson in the virtues of contented and deserving poverty, set against the sinfulness and inevitable punishments that accumulate to riches improperly stewarded. This message was preserved across three centuries of cultural, social and economic change through a constant process of vernacular adaptation, which enabled the story to speak to localised priorities. The theological upheavals of the Reformation led to a fundamental shift in understandings of the relationship between one's behaviour on earth and one's fate in the afterlife, including the disavowal of 'good works' as an effectual route to salvation. At the same time, population growth and inflation accentuated the growing gulf between the labouring poor and the propertied 'middling sort'. Practices of consumption also changed as developments in trade and technology radically expanded the range of 'consumer goods' available in England. Some thinkers increasingly lauded the potential economic and social benefits of 'luxury', despite its potential link to immorality. The impact of these changes on how people interpreted the tale of Lazarus and Dives was potentially immense. Yet the first impression one has when comparing late medieval and early modern versions of the story is of surprising continuity. The core lesson did not simply survive the theological transformations of the Protestant Reformation and the social changes of early capitalism, but thrived in a remarkable variety of retellings, individualised interpretations and vernacular translations of the biblical original. Over the course of the period, the narrative was frequently reworked and explained in preaching and in print, as well as in other media such as images, plays and songs. Its evident popularity shows that it is worth studying more carefully as an example of a widespread cultural trope with significant social implications. Across a diverse range of primary sources emerging from

hundreds of years of cultural production, the central themes of the Dives and Lazarus parable were consistently on display: the simplicity of poverty endured was a virtue that would be rewarded in heaven, whereas the extravagance of luxurious living was a sin that would be punished with hellfire.

The importance of religious culture in shaping attitudes towards wealth and poverty in the early modern period has received extensive coverage in the existing historical scholarship, yet this particular parable has received remarkably little attention.³ Perhaps partly as a result of this omission, historians have sometimes underestimated the power of carefully adapted ‘traditional’ views of relations between the rich and the poor. In social histories of the early modern period, scholars typically advance a long-standing and well-evidenced position that perceptions of the poor were slowly ‘de-sacralised’ or secularised across the early modern period. For this reason, many accounts of poverty tend to neglect the role of religion or to regard it, in Weberian fashion, as unintentionally encouraging capitalist self-discipline.⁴ Although this account has some truth to it, particularly when focused on educated elites towards the end of the period, it does far less to illuminate the broader moral framework which informed attitudes among the middling and lower sorts, where good evidence exists showing the primacy of religious thinking in conceptions of poverty, charity and deservingness. Work by scholars such as Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, Matthew Kadane, Una McIlvenna, Scott Oldenburg and

³ Classic interpretations of this issue can be found in M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the ‘Spirit’ of Capitalism, and Other Writings*, ed. T.B. Bottomore and M. Rubel (New York, 2002); R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London, 1926); C. Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London, 1964); K. Wrightson and D. Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525–1700* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1995).

⁴ Specialist monographs on poverty that touch on secularisation in England or Europe include B. Geremek, *Poverty: A History* (Oxford, 1994); C. Lis and H. Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Brighton, 1979); A.L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England* (London, 1985); P. Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement: Public Welfare in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999). For key works which avoid the secularisation narrative, see S. Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England, c.1550–1750* (Oxford, 2004), ch. 2; A. Wood, *Faith, Hope and Charity: English Neighbourhoods, 1500–1640* (Cambridge, 2020). For a summary of this historiography, see the introduction to D. Hitchcock and J. McClure, eds, *The Routledge History of Poverty, c.1450–1800* (London, 2021).

Naomi Tadmor has begun to redress this imbalance by acknowledging the resilience of ideas of ‘stewardship’ and godly charity after the Reformation.⁵ Still, only a small number of scholars have touched on this remarkably popular parable and there remains a historiographical tendency to emphasise novel Protestant ideas about poverty rather than the continued importance of earlier Christian teachings.⁶ While there is a substantial literature on the issues of luxury and deprivation in post-Reformation religious culture, a historical study of the social message of Dives and Lazarus adds a valuable new perspective to the existing scholarship.

To show the process of vernacularisation and the underlying continuities in the message, in this article we consider how the story was used in a broad range of primary sources across three centuries, such as poems, pamphlets, homilies, sermons, dialogues and ballads.⁷ We supplement this tranche of printed and preached texts with spiritual diary entries, material culture, biblical glosses and personal invocations of the story which survive in the archival record. The article concentrates on the cultural transmissibility of the social message of the Dives and Lazarus verses, and builds on the use of biblical parables by historians to excavate common early modern cultural priorities with respect to wealth and luxury.⁸ We also take

⁵ I.K. Ben-Amos, *The Culture of Giving: Informal Support and Gift-Exchange in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2008), esp. ch. 7; M. Kadane, *The Watchful Clothier: The Life of an Eighteenth-Century Protestant Capitalist* (New Haven, CT, 2013), esp. ch. 8; U. McIlvenna, ‘The Rich Merchant Man, or, What the Punishment of Greed Sounded Like in Early Modern English Ballads’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, lxxix (2016), pp. 279–99; S. Oldenburg, *A Weaver-Poet and the Plague: Labor, Poverty, and the Household in Shakespeare’s London* (Philadelphia, PA, 2020); Tadmor, *Social Universe of the English Bible*, ch. 1; and see B. Waddell, *God, Duty and Community in English Economic Life, 1660–1720* (Woodbridge, 2012), ch. 1. See also the conclusions in J.M. Bennett, ‘Conviviality and Charity in Medieval and Early Modern England’, *Past and Present*, no. 134 (1992), pp. 19–41, esp. 39–41; I.W. Archer, ‘The Charity of Early Modern Londoners’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., xii (2002), pp. 223–44, esp. 225–9.

⁶ For previous discussions of Lazarus and Dives in early modern culture, see T. Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 202–3, 205–9; Waddell, *God, Duty and Community*, pp. 44–9.

⁷ We employed simple ‘fuzzy’ keyword searching to locate most of the printed primary sources in this article. Except where otherwise indicated, they were all found in the following databases: JISC *Historical Texts*, including *Early English Books Online* and *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* (<https://historicaltexts.jisc.ac.uk/>); the UCSB *English Broadside Ballad Archive* (<https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/>); and the Gale *Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Burney Newspapers Collection* (<https://www.gale.com/intl/c/17th-and-18th-century-burney-newspapers-collection>).

⁸ For instance, the discussion of the Parable of the Talents in S. Deng, ‘Money, Ritual, and Religion: God’s Stamp and the Problem of Usury’, in S. Deng, ed., *A Cultural History of Money in the Renaissance* (London, 2019), p. 68.

inspiration from the trail-blazing work of Tessa Watt in *Cheap Print and Popular Piety*, and particularly from her astute observation that the most popular biblical stories in visual media and oral culture came from the ‘bottom rungs of the ladder of sanctity’ (they depicted no holy figures) and focused on everyday moral messages about the treatment of others.⁹

While we are keen to emphasise the transmission and adaptability of the parable, we do not argue that the range of sources presented here suggests an uncomplicated, uncritical or even stable reception of Dives and Lazarus in English culture. In a few cases, the parable was reworked in dramatic ways. Instead, we reveal how the story was used as a tool which enabled contemporaries to ‘think socially’ about the consequences of inequality often evident around them; to hold up a mirror to their surroundings and to compare them with the expectations set out in that most important of shared texts, the Holy Bible.¹⁰ Like the popular providentialism studied by Alexandra Walsham, the reworking and recycling of this parable by English clergymen and laypeople not only reflected the syncretic nature of Protestant culture at this time but also helped to strengthen that culture by providing elements of traditional moral teachings in a reformed package.¹¹ The first main section of the article, therefore, examines its popularity and vernacularisation; the second focuses on portrayals of Lazarus and their implications for the poor; and the third turns to representations of and commentary about the rich man, Dives.

I

Lazarus and Dives, despite appearing in only one chapter of one book in the Bible, were not obscure or unimportant characters in Christian culture. They had been immensely popular subjects for artists and commentators in the medieval period, when the narrative ‘was

⁹ Watt, *Cheap Print*, p. 202.

¹⁰ S. Handley, R. McWilliam and L. Noakes, ‘Introduction: Towards New Social and Cultural Histories’, in eid., eds, *New Directions in Social and Cultural History* (London, 2018), pp. 4–5.

¹¹ A. Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999).

represented throughout Europe in every medium and location imaginable', from illuminated manuscripts and stained glass to sermons and church entranceways.¹² In early sixteenth-century London, a merchant named Richard Hill extracted and adapted an extended discussion of Lazarus and Dives from a well-known fourteenth-century text, showing that it was still considered relevant and useful on the eve of the Reformation.¹³

During the sixteenth century, however, the theology and popular religious cultures of the Middle Ages were violently torn asunder. Protestant clergymen and laypeople dramatically reconfigured how they understood the route to salvation, the nature of the afterlife and the place of the Church in English society. Given its popularity, it would be easy to imagine that a parable which appealed so strongly to the clergy and laypeople of late medieval Christendom might be rejected or marginalised by Protestant reformers and their followers, but this was not to be the case. The parable seems to have lost little if any of its cultural resonance during the religious upheavals of the Tudor period. English Protestant leaders evidently found it helpful for explaining both theological and moral precepts. For example, the parable was well known enough to be deployed in three of the official *Homilies Appointed To Be Read in Churches* every Sunday—two citing the eternal punishment for 'vncharitable' worldliness, one as proof of the 'the vaine error of Purgatory'.¹⁴ As will be seen in the closer analysis below, it was regularly cited by preachers from across the Protestant spectrum for similar reasons. Moreover, the parable was the central topic of many published sermons from the beginning of the

¹² C.F. Altman, 'The Medieval Marquee: Church Portal Sculpture as Publicity', in J.P. Campbell, ed., *Popular Culture in the Middle Ages* (Bowling Green, OH, 1986), pp. 6–15, at 10; M. Raschko, *The Politics of Middle English Parables* (Manchester, 2018), ch. 3.

¹³ A. Harper, 'The Merchant Richard Hill and His Book: Using *Confessio Amantis* Tales to Negotiate the Spiritual Marketplace in Henrician London', in K.M.S. Bezio and S. Oldenburg, eds, *Religion and the Early Modern British Marketplace* (New York, 2021).

¹⁴ *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed To Be Read in Churches* (2 bks in 1 vol., 1623), Book 1, Homily IX; Book 2, Homily V; Book 2, Homily VII.

seventeenth century onwards.¹⁵ While numerous godly laypeople would have read the printed versions of these, still more would have heard the story expounded from the pulpit, whether as an illustration of a larger point or as a core text for an hour of preaching.

Lazarus and Dives also appeared as the main protagonists in other genres. In the 1640s, for example, as the civil war raged, the poet Edward Calver penned a thirty-four-page verse dialogue between the rich man and the beggar to warn readers against ‘want of charity’.¹⁶ After the Restoration, an enterprising printer published an octavo chapbook entitled *Heavens Glory, and Hells Horror, or, The Parable of Dives and Lazarus Opened and Applied*, which was sold for twopence alongside ‘other small Books, all of them very godly’.¹⁷ In innumerable other cases, the parable was briefly alluded to when discussing the infernal dangers of misapplied wealth. Such passing references—as in a topical pamphlet in the 1590s or a fashionable periodical in the 1690s—do not reveal much about the specifics of contemporary interpretations of the parable, but they do offer strong evidence that the basic elements of the narrative were so well known that they did not require explanation.¹⁸

One of the main reasons why the tale of Dives and Lazarus was so familiar was the many ways it was repeated and represented beyond printed texts. Whether or not one could read, encounters with Lazarus and Dives must have been common. According to Tessa Watt,

¹⁵ George Phillips, *The Life and Death of the Rich Man and Lazarus Anothomized* (1600); S.I., *Certain Godlie and Learned Sermons ... Of the Rich Man and Lazarus* (1601); Robert Horne, *Certain Sermons, of the Rich Man and Lazarus* (1619); Robert Johnson, *Diues and Lazarus, or rather, Diuellish Diues* (1620); Thomas Hodges, *The Vanity of Man at his Best Estate, and the Vanity of Dives, his Desire when at his Worst* (1676), pp. 27–46; Roger Hough, *Sighs from Hell, or, The Groans of the Damned: Delivered in a Sermon* (1680); Deuel Pead, *The Wicked Man's Misery; and the Poor Man's Hope and Comfort: Being a Sermon upon the Parable of Dives and Lazarus* (1699); Richard Theed, *An Admonition from the Other World, or, The Story of Dives and Lazarus Practically Improv'd in Two Sermons* (1711); J. Basset, *The Punishment of Sinners ... In a Sermon Preach'd at Birmingham* (1734); Laurence Sterne, *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick*, IV (1769), pp. 33–68 (Sermon VIII); Thomas Ashton, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (1770), pp. 439–55 (Sermon XX).

¹⁶ Edward Calver, *Divine Passions Piously and Pathetically Expressed in Three Severall Bookes* (1643), pp. 6–40.

¹⁷ Jon Hart, *Heavens Glory, and Hells Horror, or, The Parable of Dives and Lazarus Opened and Applied* (1662), sig. C8.

¹⁸ *The True Lamentable Discourse of the Burning of Teuerton in Deuon-shire* (1598), sig. B2; ‘News’, *Athenian Gazette*, no. 19, 27 Sept. 1691, p. 22.

the evidence of surviving wall paintings and the observations of contemporaries suggests that the pair were one of the ‘most popular biblical subjects of the late sixteenth century’.¹⁹ In some wealthy homes, such as Pittleworth Manor in Gloucestershire, paintings of the parable might cover a whole wall.²⁰ For those who could not afford a specially commissioned mural, a simpler painted cloth version could be hung up to present a visual reminder of the message to every resident and visitor.²¹ In the eighteenth century we even find a depiction of the story on an earthenware tile, showing its enduring place in Protestant material culture.²²

If they preferred a dramatic spectacle, people could watch the story on stage. Although no surviving playtexts focus directly on the parable, there are several references to performances of titles such as *Dives and Lazarus*, *The Dialogue of Dives* and *Dives and the Devil* by travelling players in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, suggesting that it may have been a popular if not prestigious item in some troupes’ repertoires.²³ This impression is reinforced by the fact that ‘the *Storie of Dives & Lazarus*’ was one of the ‘certayne rare motions’ licensed by the Master of the Revels in 1619, and by the performance of a puppet play with an ‘episode’ of this name at Oxford in 1628.²⁴ By the 1680s, if not before, it was

¹⁹ Watt, *Cheap Print*, p. 202.

²⁰ Watt, *Cheap Print*, pp. 205, 208–9; E.A. Honig, ‘Lodging Dwelling Painting: Dives and Lazarus at Pittleworth Manor’, *Explorations in Renaissance Culture*, xlvii (2020), pp. 135–75. According to Honig, although the Elizabethan owner of Pittleworth was a recusant, the tenants seem to have been Protestants, so the wall painting was theologically conservative but not explicitly Catholic.

²¹ Watt, *Cheap Print*, p. 209.

²² Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, J.W.L. Glaisher Collection, C.2823.32-1928, *Lazarus at the Door of Dives* (c.1700–1800), tin-glazed earthenware (title from: <http://museums.eu/collection/object/134610/lazarus-at-the-door-of-dives?pUnitId=428>, accessed 27 Mar. 2024). It was also the subject of several single-sheet prints which were probably often used to decorate interiors: London, British Museum [hereafter BM], 1958,0712.96, John Baptist Jackson, *Dives and Lazarus* (1743); BM, 2010,7081.683, Carington Bowles, *The Parable of the Rich Man, and Lazarus the Beggar* (c.1784); BM, 1871,1209.346, Richard Earlom, *The Torments of Dives* (1758–1817).

²³ A. Harbage, S. Schoenbaum and S.S. Wagonheim, *Annals of English Drama* (3rd edn, London, 1989), p. 42; M. Wiggins and C. Richardson, *British Drama, 1533–1642: A Catalogue* (4 vols, Oxford, 2012–18), ii, pp. 56, 147–8. Dives, ‘a damned soul’, also has an important part in Thomas Lupton’s play *All for Money* (c.1577): Wiggins and Richardson, *British Drama*, ii, p. 178.

²⁴ B. Wagner, ‘A Licence by Sir George Buc’, *Notes and Queries*, clxix (1935), p. 98; M. Rogerson, ‘English Puppets and the Survival of Religious Theatre’, *Theatre Notebook*, lii (1998), pp. 98, 100.

reportedly a fixture at Bartholomew Fair in London.²⁵ In the eighteenth century, the parable continued to circulate in this form. A playbill advertisement of 1720 shows that one Robert Sheppard had permission to stage a play called ‘Dives and Lazarus’ alongside a variety of more light-hearted entertainments that seemed suitable for a fairground, including ‘a piece of Machinery, where you will see the heathen Gods and Goddesses ascending and descending in the Clouds; with a Prospect of Cupid’s Paradiſe’.²⁶ Given that Sheppard himself was available to more wealthy patrons to stage a ‘private Play’ and ‘at any Time of the Day at Half an Hour’s Warning’, it seems safe to surmise that this dramatic version was popular entertainment, pitched at less discerning audiences and demonstrating the use of the Dives and Lazarus parable as a latter-day morality play to be followed by lighter relief, comedy and variety acts.

Most people were likely to have heard the story not only from the pulpit or the stage but also from the mouths of their more musically inclined neighbours. A ‘ballet ... of the Ryche man and poore lazarus’ was licensed to be printed in 1557–8 and re-licensed in 1570–71, and then a ‘godly newe ballad’ about ‘the Riche dives and poor Lazarus’ was licensed in 1580, a testament to its success in a very competitive market.²⁷ In the early seventeenth century, contemporaries referred casually to singing ‘the merry Ballad Of Diverus and Lazarus’ and to a ‘Dives’ ballad sold in churches.²⁸ This association between parable and balladry was lasting; when the *Athenian Gazette* was asked in 1691 where the soul goes after death, they wrote disparagingly that ‘The Ballad Singers will tell us, ’tis—with Dives and Lazarus—and the

²⁵ H.P. [Henry Playford], *Wit and Mirth: An Antidote against Melancholy* (3rd edn, 1684), p. 120.

²⁶ Robert Sheppard, *Dives and Lazarus* (1720; ESTC T029851).

²⁷ G. Bergel and I. Gadd, eds, *Stationers’ Register Online* (University of Glasgow et al.), at <http://stationersregister.online>, SRO8, SRO1314, SRO1964 (accessed 1 Apr. 2022). Presumably this was also the focus of ‘A ballade intituled A message of Newes sent from the highe courte of heaven sent latelie by Lazalus [*sic*] prince of povertie vnto all his lovinge freindes the poore distressed people here on earth’ in 1583 and the ballad entitled ‘Devill and Dives’ recorded in 1624 and 1626: SRO2352, SRO8054, SRO8250. On the prevalence and reach of broadside ballads, see P. Fumerton, A. Guerrini and K. McAbee, eds, *Ballads and Broad-sides in Britain, 1500–1800* (Farnham, 2010).

²⁸ John Fletcher, *Monsieur Thomas: A Comedy* (1639), 3. 3; Watt, *Cheap Print*, p. 73.

whole of Creation—in the other world’.²⁹ While this view of the afterlife was seen by the periodical’s editors as far too simplistic, we might suspect that the worldviews of ordinary laypeople were more influenced by balladeers than by the *Athenian Gazette*. Unfortunately, the actual contents of these ballads sung in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are unknown, as no copies have survived. The first extant texts were not published until the early nineteenth century, though a version printed in the 1860s was said to come from ‘a sheet copy printed at Worcester in the last century’, and this is the version analysed later in this article.³⁰ It may be that the texts licensed in the sixteenth century were essentially the same as the Victorian version, but all we can say with certainty is that these thirteen verses from Luke inspired innumerable rounds of song from the 1550s onwards.

In the 1680s, the parable also appeared in a more formal poetic form. The popularity of this version, and its location within one of the most widely read collections of religious songs in the eighteenth century, must have done much to promote the story of Dives and Lazarus and to keep traditional interpretations of its moral messages foregrounded in Protestant culture. This collection was *Spiritual Songs, or, Songs of Praise to Almighty God*, initially authored by the millenarian Church of England clergyman John Mason (d. 1694). Described as ‘one of the first compositions of English hymnology’, *Songs of Praise* was exceedingly popular in the century that followed its initial publication in 1683, when it was rarely if ever out of print, and is considered to have been a strong influence on John Wesley.³¹ In 1685 a new edition of the *Songs of Praise* was released which had been doubled in size by the addition of a long poem by Mason entitled ‘Dives and Lazarus’. In 1761, it reached a sixteenth London edition, with

²⁹ ‘News’, *Athenian Gazette*, no. 19, 27 Sept. 1691, p. 22.

³⁰ William Henry Husk, *Songs of the Nativity* (n.d., [1868]), p. 94; *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. F.J. Child (5 vols, 1882–98), ii, pp. 10–12 (Child Ballad 56). For the earliest extant dateable printing, see *Dives & Lazarus* (Birmingham, 1806–1827; Roud Number 477).

³¹ K. Harvey, ‘Mason, John (b. 1646?–d. 1694)’, *ODNB*, available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/18282>.

the same stable version of the poem, and further editions followed in both England and North America through the rest of the century.³² The poem ‘Dives and Lazarus’ runs to slightly over thirty stanzas across twenty pages, and it both versifies and vernacularises a traditional account of the parable: pleading necessity, charity withheld, the contrasting deaths of poor man and rich, and then the reversal of roles in the afterlife.

The consistent popularity of the story must have been partly due to the willingness of its adaptors and interpreters to ‘modernise’ it. The vernacularisation of Lazarus and Dives was already common in the medieval period but it continued apace after the Reformation. Writers and artists frequently pulled these characters out of the ancient Levant and placed them squarely in early modern England. They were not ancient or foreign, but contemporary and English. ‘Lazarus’ was even in use as a given name in this period, meaning that it would have been very easy for contemporaries to imagine this parable as a real encounter in their own neighbourhoods. The most obvious way for contemporaries to bring the story into their current era was to update the look and language of the principal characters. In the late sixteenth-century wall painting at Pittleworth Manor, for example, the artist depicted them dressed in ‘Elizabethan costume’.³³ In other cases, they were described in terms that identified them with current social stereotypes. For Thomas Adams, preaching at Paul’s Cross in 1612, Dives was a wealthy upstart who used conspicuous consumption to claim gentility:

Diues hath no other armes to proue himselfe a Gentleman; but a scutchion of these 3
colours: first he had money in his purse: he was rich: secondly, he had good rags on his

³² For the addition of the poem in 1685, see ESTC R216737. Attribution for the poem is confirmed by a singular 1785 edition of it released separately from the *Songs* in ESTC T201469 and copies of the poem exist in Mason’s private verse. For the ‘sixteenth edition corrected’ in 1761, see ESTC T90777.

³³ Watt, *Cheap Print*, pp. 205–6.

backe, clothed in purple: thirdly, dainties on his table; he fared deliciously, and that, euery day: this was a Gentleman without Heraldry.³⁴

His audience would have instantly recognised this ‘Gentleman without Heraldry’ as part of the new class of men attempting to buy their way into the landed elite at this time. Adams thus used the parable as a weapon to attack the pretensions of the ‘rising gentry’. A little over a century later, the rich man not only acted like a contemporary miser but sounded like one too. A children’s book entitled *A Voice from Heaven to the Youth of Great Britain* used the parable to explore themes of greed and charity. Unsurprisingly, the protagonists spoke in the colloquial language of the age, with Lazarus calling for help from the ‘noble Sir’ only to be spurned as a ‘begging idle Thief’.³⁵ Such depictions ensured that the story maintained its familiarity among English Protestants even as fashions changed.

We can see the familiarity of the parable—its cultural ‘everydayness’—in a remarkable set of churchwardens’ accounts penned by William Charlwood from the parish of Putney in 1762/3.³⁶ The small, hand-bound book of accounts features as its frontispiece a pasted copy of a printed image of the Dives and Lazarus parable (Fig. 1), apparently a later version of the copper engraving found in *The Holy Bible in Sculpture* as early as 1683.³⁷ The accounts beautifully render the connection between the moral message of the parable and the records of casual charity contained within, with payments made to ‘a Woman and three Children with a Pass’ on 23 September of 1s 6d, and to another woman with two children ‘and she Big with Child with a pass’ on 14 February the following year of 2s 6d. It seems clear that William

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³⁴ Thomas Adams, *The White Deuil, or, The Hypocrite Vncased in a Sermon Preached at Pauls Crosse, March 7. 1612* (1613), p. 16.

³⁵ *A Voice from Heaven, to the Youth of Great Britain. Containing ... a Dialogue between Miserable Dives, and Happy Lazarus* (c.1714–1727), sig. B1v.

³⁶ London Metropolitan Archives, P95/MRY1/154, St Mary, Putney, Churchwardens’ accounts and vouchers, 1762–1763, fos. 1–9.

³⁷ *The Holy Bible in Sculpture* (1683), n.p. [fo. 632].

Charlwood conceived of his duties as a churchwarden as fundamentally about charity to the unfortunate, and that he could take inspiration from the Dives and Lazarus parable every time that he opened his account book.³⁸

The sheer popularity of the Dives and Lazarus biblical narrative makes it a useful lens for historians attempting to understand how riches and poverty were perceived in early modern England. The fact that it remained a common trope in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries shows its resilience in the face of immense changes in theological doctrine and devotional practice, thanks partly to the way it could be adapted to represent contemporary social behaviours. The durability of the Dives and Lazarus parable is interesting in itself but leaves open the question of interpretation. What lessons did early modern English Protestants actually take from this parable? Two readings were the most common: the first concerned with the poor and the second with the rich.

II

Lazarus, the beggar at the centre of the parable, provided a convenient archetype for thinking about the roles and responsibilities of the poor in Christian society. In early modern texts, Lazarus himself was always depicted as a straightforwardly positive figure, offering an unusually clear association of poverty with virtue. However, many authors also used him to present a model of acceptable behaviour that imposed severe limits on the agency of the poor, and some turned him into a foil to criticise sharply those who failed to conform to such a model.

In almost all early modern versions, the parable showed that poverty could be a godly state. We can see this message in a printed sermon entitled *Dives and Lazarus, or rather,*

³⁸ For a much later and more direct example, see the anonymous letter complaining of mistreatment from a pauper who decided to use the pseudonym 'Lazarus' in 1835: Brighton, East Sussex Record Office, The Keep, PAR 360/37/6/42.

Diuellish Diues, preached at Paul's Cross in London, the most famous pulpit in England, by an undistinguished clergyman named Robert Johnson. It was first published in 1620, but proved so popular as to go through twenty-two editions by 1684.³⁹ Here Johnson describes Lazarus as 'a member of Christ' and a representative for all 'our Poor Brethren' who 'lyeth in your Streets, that pineth at your Gates, that starveth in your Prisons for want of crumbs'.⁴⁰ At some point after the twelfth edition in 1638, the printer sought to widen its appeal still further by adding a large woodcut to the first page illustrating the whole parable in a single image.⁴¹ In this image, Dives is marked by conventional symbols of luxury, wearing fine clothes and clutching an ostentatious goblet. Lazarus, in contrast, is dressed in the most ragged of cloaks and holds only a crutch, demonstrating his total destitution and his daily physical pain. According to Johnson, even Lazarus's death and burial must have occurred with 'little or no respect', with Lazarus perhaps 'cast into some ditch, by reason of his sores'.⁴² The sores of Lazarus mark out a sort of 'vagrant pollution' which gestures knowingly at the larger cultural distrust of 'beggars and their necessary sores' in early modern society. But here, at least, readers are left in no doubt that Lazarus deserved help; his disease-ridden body was always presented as genuine, unlike the bodies of his begging peers.⁴³

Just as in late medieval depictions of the parable, the woodcut also shows the reversal of the fortunes of Dives and Lazarus at the time of divine judgment.⁴⁴ A celestial sword hangs

³⁹ Robert Johnson, *Diues and Lazarus, or rather, Diuellish Diues* ('The two and twentieth edition', 1684). The popularity of Johnson's sermon is confirmed by the fact that most of the text was plagiarised for a 'treatise' attributed to another clergyman: John Dunton, *Dunton's Remains, or, The Dying Pastour's Last Legacy to his Friends and Parishioners* (1684), pp. 65–104.

⁴⁰ Johnson, *Diues and Lazarus*, sigs B7r, C7r.

⁴¹ The first surviving version with this image is the 1677 edition.

⁴² Johnson, *Diues and Lazarus*, sig. A5v.

⁴³ For more information on the embodied nature of 'vagrant pollution', see D. Hitchcock, 'Rogue Bodies', in S. Toulalan, ed., *The Routledge History of Early Modern Bodies* (London, forthcoming); and see an example of this contrast in Timothy Cruso, *Discourses upon the Rich Man and Lazarus* (1697), p. 18.

⁴⁴ For a pre-Reformation version that shares many of these elements, see Los Angeles, Getty Museum, MS Ludwig IX 18, fos 21v–22r, 'Spinola Hours' (c.1510–20).

over the head of the rich glutton, ready to inflict the eternal agony of damnation, and a holy crown hovers above the poor beggar, denoting the heavenly riches that come with salvation. Johnson's words in the sermon rhetorically emphasised this inversion. The 'great Rich Man' went 'from his Purple Robes, to burning Flames, from his soft Silk and white Byssus, to cruel Pains in black Abysses, from his Palace here on earth, to the Palace of Pluto in Hell'. Meanwhile, the 'Poor Begger clothed in Rags' travelled 'from a House of Clay, to a House not made with hands, from a Wilderness, to a Paradise, from an earthly Prison to a Heavenly Palate'.⁴⁵ As the Elizabethan composer Thomas Whythorne expressed it, much more concisely, 'Lazarus with God did rest, when the rich gulch to hell was prest'.⁴⁶ Popular Protestant representations of the parable in the seventeenth century thus seem little different from those of their pre-Reformation forebears.

Such portrayals could partly counteract the frequently negative image of the poor that circulated widely in England at this time. As Paul Slack, A.L. Beier and others have shown, plenty of early modern authors described poor people in general—and beggars in particular—in extremely critical terms. They were, according to some, a class of 'sturdy rogues', 'drone bees' and 'children of Belial', producing only crime, immorality and disease.⁴⁷ This depiction was, according to Beier, part of the 'de-sanctification of the poor' that had begun in the late Middle Ages and became especially vigorous in the sixteenth century.⁴⁸ Yet more than one Protestant commentator on Lazarus and Dives seemed to be saying exactly the opposite about

⁴⁵ Johnson, *Dives and Lazarus*, sigs A3v–A4r. For a very similar portrayal by another well-known preacher of this era, see Thomas Adams, *The Happiness of the Church* (1619), p. 325: 'This rich man might be wheeled and whirled in a Coach, or perhaps Pope-like, be borne on mens shoulders; but the poore begger, whose hope is in heauen though his body on earth, that could neither stand, goe, nor sitte, is now carried in the highest state, by the very Angels; when the other dying, hath no better attendance then deuils'.

⁴⁶ Thomas Whythorne, *Triplex, of Songes, for Three, Fower, and Fiue Voyces* (1571), pp. 10–11.

⁴⁷ Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement*, p. 35, and see p. 82 for distinctions from 'shamefaced' poor; Beier, *Masterless Men*, p. 6 for 'Children of Belial'; Hitchcock, *Vagrancy*, 'Introduction', for discussion of 'rogue' terminology and wider perceptions.

⁴⁸ Beier, *Masterless Men*, pp. xvi–xxi.

poverty and deservingness.⁴⁹ Here we find a beggar who is thoroughly ‘sacralised’; he is innocent, pure and almost Christ-like in his selfless suffering. Another sermon on the parable, this one preached by George Phillips in 1600, said that the story was ‘Teaching us howe to conceave of the poor on earth’, because poverty was ‘the state wherein our highest Lord was born’.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Johnson critiqued those of his contemporaries who complained about beggars by putting their vitriol into the mouth of the villain Dives: ‘I warrant you he is some runnagate Rogue, and so long as he can be maintained by such easie means, he will never take any other trade upon him ... Away hence thou idle Rogue’.⁵¹ Such insults were, according to Johnson, undeserved. Instead, these preachers argued that when one of their listeners encountered a ragged beggar on the road or at their gate, they ought to look upon him not as Satan’s spawn but as one of God’s chosen children. Such a view seems—in the context of the current historiography—remarkably ‘medieval’ and ‘unreformed’, yet it was central to Protestant interpretations of the parable.

Alongside this image of virtuous poverty for wider consumption, commentators on the parable also offered a message of hope directly to the poor. It was they, not the rich, who were destined for everlasting joy in the world to come. It was the poor who needed only to wait for their just reward. In one sense this was a very positive interpretation. Johnson claimed that the fate of Lazarus should ‘comfort *all* poor men, that although they are afflicted in this life with great miseries and calamities, yet they shall be comforted in the life to come, and rest in

⁴⁹ Scholarship on charity and the ‘deserving poor’—traditionally widows, orphans, the sick, lame and infirm—supports a more rounded view of the place of the poor in English society. A complete indicative reference list would be far too lengthy, but see L.A. Botelho, *Old Age and the English Poor Law, 1500–1700* (Woodbridge, 2004); P. Crawford, *Parents of Poor Children in England, 1580–1800* (Oxford, 2010); H. Cunningham and J. Innes, eds, *Charity, Philanthropy and Reform: From the 1690s to 1850* (Basingstoke, 1998); A.M. Scott, ed., *Experiences of Charity, 1250–1650* (Farnham, 2015); A. Nicholls, *Almshouses in Early Modern England: Charitable Housing in the Mixed Economy of Welfare, 1550–1725* (Woodbridge, 2017).

⁵⁰ Phillips, *Life and Death*, fo. 13r. See also Pead, *Wicked Man’s Misery*, pp. 6–7: ‘Good men, for the most part, are in mean and low Circumstances ... God has chosen the poor of this World heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven’.

⁵¹ Johnson, *Dives and Lazarus*, sig. B2r.

Abrahams bosom'.⁵² Other meditations on the parable devoted much attention to this message of passive deservingness in the face of persecution, and asked readers to ponder, in the words of George Fox, if 'you [do] not think, that all these poor Lazaruses, that you have persecuted, and do persecute, that when they dye, they will not be carried into *Abraham's bosom*'?⁵³ In the later seventeenth century, Fox focused in particular on the plight of Quakers and other non-conformists reduced to poverty by persecution, but the message inherent in Lazarus's deserving passivity proved powerfully universal even here: 'the poor' are 'your Fellow-Creatures that be in Misery', so the godly must 'mind the poor *Lazaruses*, and not talk only, if you will escape Hellfire'.⁵⁴

For the poor themselves, the prospect of eventually joining Lazarus in celestial paradise could be a welcome consolation, a source of mental and emotional strength amid the dark, hungry conditions that afflicted so many paupers and labouring people. However, this reading also had a less pleasant side. To borrow from Johnson's sermon again:

In the life of the Begger we noted what he desired in this life, crumbs, desired to be refreshed with the crumbs that fell from the Rich mans Table. Out of these words I do observe that the Godly do desire no great matters in this Life, they thirst not after honour & promotion, but if they have wherewith to serve their present necessities, therewith to be content.⁵⁵

Here we find the doctrine of quietude and passivity fully expressed. The poor ought to imitate Lazarus and accept their miserable existence whole-heartedly. They should be 'content' with grinding poverty and seek not even the smallest material comforts, much less any 'petty

⁵² Ibid., sig. A4v (emphasis added).

⁵³ George Fox, *Christ's Parable of Dives and Lazarus for all call'd Christians and others to Consider* (1677), p. 6.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 6–7.

⁵⁵ Johnson, *Dives and Lazarus*, sig. B6v.

luxuries', such as new clothes or household goods. This too presents a very different image from the one offered by some historians of early modern England. In the historiography of consumption, one finds numerous early modern authors extolling the economic benefits of broad-based consumerism.⁵⁶ By contrast, Johnson and others strongly asserted that 'present necessities' were enough for 'the Godly', and for the godly poor in particular. Timothy Cruso explicitly compared the patience of Lazarus with that of saints: '*Poverty and Grace* are not *convertible terms*; Every Saint is not a Lazarus, nor every Lazarus a Saint' but 'Poverty and Grace are many times *in conjunction*', he wrote.⁵⁷ To be in a state of Grace was to endure God's temptations with equanimity and patience, and to be God's poor was to understand one's poverty as '*the meer hand of Providence*'.⁵⁸ This view was common, and Donna T. Andrew has summarised it as 'the minimalist position' that the poor needed only basic necessities to thrive.⁵⁹ Accordingly, the godly poor were to be understood as virtuous, but only if they were grateful for what they had, for mere 'crumbs'.

While most retellings simply set out Lazarus as an example of godly poverty rewarded with everlasting life, some adaptations used this opportunity to offer their complaints about the ungodly poor who failed to meet Lazarusian standards or to caution the poor against lofty demands. Robert Horne, preaching in 1618, praised Lazarus because, despite his miserable condition, the biblical beggar 'breakes not out by impatience, as our beggers would ... nor would chuse his almes, as some that come to our doors now, who have more neede of the Magistrates discipline then of that they ask'. Lazarus was, in this reading, 'a reproofe of our

⁵⁶ For one example from a vast scholarship, see M. Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2010), ch. 1.

⁵⁷ Cruso, *Discourses upon the Rich Man and Lazarus*, pp. 20–21.

⁵⁸ Cruso, *Discourses upon the Rich Man and Lazarus*, p. 21. One preacher even argued that if—like Lazarus—you cannot even afford to feed yourself then 'thy Life will only be the shorter; and possibly God keeps thee short here, that he may plentifully reward thee hereafter': Pead, *Wicked Man's Misery*, p. 15.

⁵⁹ This is the phrase of S. Lloyd in *Charity and Poverty in England, c.1680–1820: Wild and Visionary Schemes* (Manchester, 2009), p. 54; see also D.T. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 1989), pp. 135–55.

unthankfull poore' who were 'proud' and 'insolent' rather than asking for charity 'submissively' and 'dutifully'.⁶⁰ The refrain of Lazarus's meekness, his 'humility' in asking for only crumbs, echoes again and again across the commentary on the parable; the clear implication was that it was the modesty of his requests which rendered him Christ-like. This humility was set forth for Jon Hart by 'the smalness of that which Lazarus desired, only a few crumbs; he did not come to Dives to beg any of his Lands or Lordships, neither any of his messes or costly dishes; had Lazarus desired any of these he might have denied him as too bold'.⁶¹ 'You know we have a common Proverb amongst us', Hart wrote, 'that Beggars must not be chusers'.⁶²

III

If Lazarus was the very image of how the poor ought to be, the miser Dives (and his fate) was easily understood as an example that the rich should never follow. According to the marginal commentary on the parable in the 1560 Geneva Bible, 'By this storie is declared what punishment thei shal have, which live deliciously & neglect the poore'.⁶³ These warnings were propounded again and again in the decades that followed, with most commentators giving much more attention to the lessons that the parable of Dives and Lazarus held for the wealthy than those it had for the poor. As in the Elizabethan biblical commentary, they tended to focus on the dangers of two related sins: gluttony and mercilessness.

Many contemporaries used the rich man's 'fine' clothes and 'sumptuous' diet to illuminate the problems associated with luxury and as a lesson on 'the right use of riches'.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Robert Home, *Of the Rich Man and Lazarus* (1618), p. 41. See also the denunciation of 'another sort of poore', whose hardship is due to 'prodigality' or 'idleness', in Phillips, *Life and Death*, fo. 15r-v.

⁶¹ Hart, *Heavens Glory, and Hells Horror*, p. 9.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *The Bible and Holy Scriptures* (Geneva Bible; Geneva, 1560), Luke 16:19, note '1'.

⁶⁴ The 'right' or 'wise use of riches' was a common phrase but was used with specific reference to the parable in Basset, *Punishment of Sinners*, p. 9.

Wealth could be laudable if used correctly, but they damned those who, like Dives, spent money on greedily gratifying 'base desires' or seeking social advancement through conspicuous consumption. If, on the other hand, one lived in a manner appropriate to one's 'degree and estate', fine food and apparel could be perfectly acceptable. Indeed, 'liberal' spending was often praised so long as it included godly generosity to the poor. It was only during the tumult of the 1640s and 50s that some radical preachers went further and used the parable to condemn all 'proud clothing' as damnable. Taken together, these various interpretations show how Protestants attempted to reconfigure a key biblical text to suit their own circumstances and, in so doing, revealed their own preoccupation with 'the right use of riches'.

The first lesson was that the rich should, like the poor, be 'content' with what God gave them and avoid the dangers of luxury. Commentators drew on traditional critiques of gluttony to condemn Dives for his excess and extravagance. Niels Hemmingsen, a Danish Lutheran whose *Evangelie Postill* was translated and reprinted in at least five editions in Elizabethan England, claimed that the parable was a warning for 'they that wast away their goodes in drinking, feasting, and apparell too sumptuous for their degree'.⁶⁵ The vivid biblical description of the rich man's dress and diet gave moralists an excuse to launch into long, florid denunciations of contemporary fashions. Richard Theed, in a 1711 discourse, argued that Dives's lifestyle was almost a perfect inversion of godly living: 'His Morning-Devotion seems to have lain among his Hounds, and the drowning of his Senses was his Evening-Sacrifice'.⁶⁶ Hunting and drinking, rather than prayer and penitence, were his primary pursuits. Hemmingsen and Theed agreed that the wealthy should be 'content' with a lifestyle 'fit for

⁶⁵ Niels Hemmingsen, *A Postill, or Exposition of the Gospels that Are Vsually Red in the Churches of God, vpon the Sundayes and Feast Dayes of Saints* (1569), p. 193.

⁶⁶ Theed, *An Admonition from the Other World*, p. 2.

their degree'. A bit of luxury could be acceptable, but only if it was suited to one's traditional rank and status. This was a profoundly conservative reading which left little room for social mobility or innovative consumption.

In some cases, the focus was more on wealth itself rather than consumption. A simple version of this message even found its way into the manuscript notebooks of an ordinary layperson. Elizabeth Fowler recorded the lesson from a sermon she heard in 1692: 'It is said of the Rich man in Luke 16.24 Thou has receiv'd thy good things in this Life, but Lazarus his evil things, and he is comforted, and thou art tormented. A prosperous Life is a dangerous Life. It's hard to carry a full cup without Spilling'.⁶⁷ The central message in this sermon—at least as she heard it—was that prosperity brought temptations to sin, which those without 'a full cup' of 'good things' could blissfully avoid.

The sins of Dives proved not only the dangers of luxury and riches but also the virtue of charity. Indeed, some commentators explained both lessons under the heading of 'the right use of riches'. The 'Homily Against Gluttony and Drunkenness', which was read regularly in English churches for decades after its publication in 1563, made the link explicit:

Had not the riche glutton ben so greedely geven to the pamperying of his belly, he woulde never have ben so unmercifull to the poore Lazarus, neyther had he felt the tormentes of the unquenchable fire.⁶⁸

That is to say, Dives's extravagance fuelled his mercilessness and, in turn, led directly to his damnation. His behaviour was seen by several commentators as a form of idolatry, for he clearly prized his riches and luxuries higher than God. Dives worshipped the Golden Calf and

⁶⁷ Washington, DC, Folger Library, V.a.468, fo. 124r (LUNA), 'A Sermon preach'd by Mr Flower at a Lecture in Tedbury on the September 20th, 1692' in the manuscript cookbook of Elizabeth Fowler. For another sermon that mostly uses the parable to stress how 'dangerous Temptations are Riches', see Pead, *Wicked Man's Misery*, p. 5 and *passim*.

⁶⁸ *Certain Sermons or Homilies*, Book 2, Homily 5.

ignored the virtuous beggar at his gate. In the words of Henry Smith, a well-known Elizabethan preacher, Dives was damned because he ‘forgot God, and thought there was no God (but his gold) that could in justice punishe him for despising the poore’.⁶⁹ Likewise, in a sermon preached at Birmingham in 1734, J. Basset claimed the ‘Contempt of Revelation was the rich Man’s Crime and Sin’, which led inexorably to ‘his Cruelty and Uncharitableness to such an Object of Pity’.⁷⁰ At times, such readings of the parable appeared to be saying that ‘good works’—in this case charity—were the clearest route to salvation.⁷¹ God, they implied, monitored men’s account books, condemning or saving them in accordance with their spending on alms or opulence. Thomas Hodges, preaching in the 1670s, was typical in using the parable to argue that ‘rich men are stewards’ who ‘must not lay out their Lords money upon themselves’, because ‘rich men must expect mercy in the other world according as they have shewed mercy to the poor in this’.⁷² In this respect, religious commentators often came across as essentially pre-Reformation in their soteriology, offering the prospect of heaven to the great benefactors of the poor instead of asserting the Protestant argument for ‘faith alone’, much less addressing Calvinist notions of ‘total depravity’ or double predestination.

This simple, quasi-medieval interpretation seems to have been the most common way to make sense of Dives. Nonetheless, it would be misleading to claim that these were the *only* readings. For example, a few authors presented a much more specific—and in some cases radical—exposition of the parable. This was especially true in the 1640s and 50s during the civil wars and interregnum. In 1640, for example, the political agitator William Prynne used the story as an extended metaphor in his attack on the Church of England’s ecclesiastical

⁶⁹ Henry Smith, *The Poore Mans Teares Opened in a Sermon* (1592), p. 3.

⁷⁰ Basset, *Punishment of Sinners*, pp. 28, 33.

⁷¹ Revealingly, Basset claimed that some critics labelled his sermon ‘the mischievous Names of *Arminian*, *Socinian*, &c.’ because it put so much stress on ‘asserting Man to be a free Agent’, thus offending strict solifidians: Basset, *Punishment of Sinners*, p. iii.

⁷² Hodges, *Vanity of Man*, pp. 42, 44.

hierarchy. For him, ‘true Ministers’ or ‘Presbyters’ were like Lazarus in their afflictions and persecutions, whereas ‘Lord Bishops’ and ‘Antichristian Prelates’ were akin to Dives:

our rich Lord Prelates (and which of them is poore) goe in their Purple, Satten, Velvet, and the finest linnen, as their Lawn sleeves and Rochet, and faire deliciously every day, not induring once in their lives, with their good wills, to keep one extraordinary Fast day, so zealous are they of the observation of Lent, and other Embers; wherin they can faire deliciously with the choycest Fish, and Fruits, and Wines, and other Cates.⁷³

Likewise, George Fox, the controversial Quaker, went further still, for he essentially condemned the entire wealthy ruling elite to hellfire. Addressing ‘all the great and rich men upon the Earth, that fare sumptuously every day’, Fox declared that they had ‘slighted God’s Messengers’ just as Dives had slighted Lazarus.⁷⁴ Unless they renounced their worldly pleasures and wicked persecutions, they too would spend eternity in the flames. He was, in other words, arguing that England’s aristocratic governors would be damned for their unwillingness to abandon material comforts and religious intolerance. Such radical interpretations were not common, but they were clearly present by the mid-seventeenth century, and they serve as a reminder of the many ways that contemporaries could—and did—adapt scripture to fit their circumstances.

In the eighteenth century, virtually all interpretations of the parable continued to denounce Dives for extravagance, for mercilessness or for both. Richard Theed’s 1711

⁷³ William Prynne, *Lord Bishops, none of the Lords Bishops, or, A Short Discourse, wherein is Proved that Prelaticall Jurisdiction, is not of Divine Institution, but Forbidden by Christ Himselfe, as Heathenish, and Branded by his Apostles for Antichristian* (1640), sigs F1v–F2r.

⁷⁴ Fox, *Christ’s Parable*, p. 5. Likewise, another Quaker offered a radical interpretation which condemned ‘you that are called Lords, Ladies, Knights, Gentlemen, and Gentlewomen’ because ‘like Dives you sit at ease, and poor Lazarus lyes starving without’: James Parnell, *The Trumpet of the Lord Blowne, or, A Blast against Pride and Oppression, and the Defiled Liberty, which Stands in the Flesh* (1655), pp. 1–2. See also the uncompromising interpretation in Richard Baxter, *A Sermon of Iudgement* (1655), p. 76: ‘The very cloathing, and ornaments by which Proud persons did manifest their Pride, will be sufficient Evidence against them as his being cloathed in Purple and fine linnen, is mentioned, Luk. 16.19’. For a much earlier example of the use of this parable by a controversial preacher, see S. Brigden, *London and the Reformation* (1989; London, 2015), p. 269.

Admonition from the Other World promised to ‘practically improve’ the story of Dives and Lazarus, accomplished in this instance through a flowery exegesis of the temporary nature of material life and, as noted above, a few snide condemnations of dissolute gentlemen who cared more about their hunting hounds than the poor at their gates.⁷⁵ In much the same way, a discourse on the parable by Clement Ellis, published posthumously in 1704, argued that Dives was hell-bound because he was ‘a vain, proud, sensual and uncharitable Epicure’, whose ‘want of Charity and Compassion to the poor and needy ... rendered all other Sins of the rich Man more sinful’.⁷⁶ The poetic version in *Songs of Praise*, which went through many editions in the eighteenth century, described how Dives responded to the beggar’s ‘petition’ for charity by snarling:

What Dog is this that dares presume on me?

Accurst be all such crawling Toads as he:

Pests of my Gate, Vermin that creep so nigh,

I hate ’em; let him rot and die.

After his death Dives realised, too late, that God’s poor representatives had ‘often knocked at my bolted Gate’, but ‘my Pomp and Pride, my Feasts and Sports’ were ‘Chains’ that had made him unmerciful and kept him from heaven.⁷⁷ The poet thus damns Dives for his unwillingness to open his ears to the words of the prophets and, in turn, to the pleas of the poor.

Despite these strong continuities in the central message, it is possible to detect meaningful shifts in tone and emphasis in some later interpretations. A clear example of this can be seen in *A Practical Discourse on the Parable of Dives and Lazarus* by Edward Welchman, published in 1704. Welchman was rector of Lapworth, Warwickshire, and a fellow

⁷⁵ Theed, *An Admonition from the Other World*, p. 2.

⁷⁶ Clement Ellis, *Three Discourses: One on the Parable of Dives and Lazarus...* (1704), pp. 18, 22.

⁷⁷ John Mason and Thomas Shepherd, *Spiritual Songs, or, Songs of Praise to Almighty God* (1701), pp. 2, 8 (internal pagination restarts at 1 for the poem’s beginning).

of Merton College, who had already published a popular *Husband-Man's Manual* calling on farmers to 'improve' their worldly callings to benefit their souls.⁷⁸ In his account of the parable, Welchman condemned Dives for almost precisely the same reasons given by previous commentators: the rich man was too worldly, intemperate, vain, proud and uncharitable. Yet Welchman devoted more of his discourse to defending the presence of economic inequality in the world than to decrying the sins of the wealthy. According to him, not only was the unequal distribution of earthly goods necessary for good government and spiritual discipline, but it was also 'the great Encourager of Arts and Industry'.⁷⁹ Furthermore, while many previous commentators would have agreed with Welchman that 'no hurt' comes 'meerly in being Rich', few would have spent three pages explaining this in such detail and fewer still would have agreed that getting great wealth 'by dishonest means ... is very rarely done'.⁸⁰ Welchman specifically argued that 'for the Rich to go Richly Apparell'd' was a reasonable act of 'Civility' and 'faring sumptuously' could be a sinless 'Recreation'.⁸¹ While there is no known connection, readers would also not be amiss in seeing here a preamble to the arguments of Bernard Mandeville, whose first foray into debates over luxury, in the form of the poem *The Grumbling Hive*, would be published only a year later.⁸² Although there was nothing in the *Discourse* that directly contradicted the traditional lessons about the dangers of wealth and the necessity of charity, Welchman's emphasis was novel: 'in short, Riches, honestly gotten, are

⁷⁸ Edward Welchman, *The Husband-man's Manual* (3rd edn, 1706). He also preached a sermon on *The Duty and Reward of Charity especially as it Regardeth the Education of Poor Children* (1706) to encourage subscriptions to a charity school in Banbury, in which he claimed that it was through 'want of Education that our Streets are pester'd with Beggars, our Highways infested with robbers, our Gaols fill'd with Criminals and Bankrupts, and our Gallows loaded with Thieves and Murtherers' (p. 6).

⁷⁹ Edward Welchman, *A Practical Discourse on the Parable of Dives and Lazarus* (1704), p. 6.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 23–5.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 27–8. According to another eighteenth-century preacher, if Dives had also been charitable, his sumptuous lifestyle would have been excusable because 'it contributed to the circulation of money' and benefited the tradesmen who supplied his 'luxury': Ashton, *Sermons*, p. 441.

⁸² For the 'luxury debates' at this time, see Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*; E.B. Pires and J. Braga, eds, *Bernard de Mandeville's Tropology of Paradoxes: Morals, Politics, Economics, and Therapy* (Cham, 2015), esp. chs 3 and 11.

the Gift of God, and it can be no fault, surely, to receive anything at God's hands'.⁸³ Welchman's practical discourse on the parable proved popular enough that, at his own death in 1739 at the age of 75, when his obituary was featured in the *London Evening Post*, the discourse featured prominently among the writings that distinguished him.⁸⁴ There Welchman was described as a man 'truly orthodox, and firmly attached to the Doctrines of the Church of England', though one who made many 'reasonable allowances' to those of differing consciences. Orthodox though he may have been, in Edward Welchman's *Practical Discourse* we can see the parable of Dives and Lazarus refracted through a lens that allowed, perhaps even encouraged, a gospel of prosperity.

The traditional interpretation nonetheless remained strong long into the eighteenth century, and perhaps beyond. In 1762, an anonymous letter to the *Evening Post* noted that 'the parable of Dives and Lazarus sufficiently explains' that every miser with a 'lust for lucre' will find himself in hell, where he will be forced 'to give a severe account for all the ills he committed to acquire his wealth, and to answer for all the good that he might have done, by a right application of the wealth he acquired'.⁸⁵ The parable could also take on an even sharper edge when circumstances seemed to demand it. As scarcities of grain and livestock swept through England in the late 1790s, James Mathews denounced profiteers as no better than Dives and reminded his readers that the parable showed how the starving poor were 'in a more fit state to meet the Saviour of the world at the great day of awful judgement than their worldly oppressors; nevertheless, contrition may gain the blessing, eternal salvation'.⁸⁶ By linking this

⁸³ Welchman, *A Practical Discourse*, pp. 23–4. For a similar message about the 'good things' received by Dives 'from heaven' while he was alive, see Sterne, *Sermons*, pp. 51–3.

⁸⁴ 'News', *London Evening Post*, no. 1799, 24–26 May 1739, p. 2.

⁸⁵ 'News', *London Evening Post*, no. 5425, 12–14 Aug. 1762, p. 3.

⁸⁶ James Matthews, *Remarks on the Cause and Progress of the Scarcity and Dearness of Cattle, Swine, Cheese, &c.* (1797), p. 220. For a topical critique of the treatment of the poor in the judicial system mentioning Lazarus, see *The Briton*, i (1793), pp. 21–2 (reprinting no. 3, 6 Feb. 1793).

specific group of traders to the biblical rich man, Mathews showed that this story could still be used as a rhetorical weapon against those who seemed to be taking advantage of the poor in a crisis.

Throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Dives provided a powerful and widely known example of the misuse of riches. Merely being wealthy was never seen as inherently sinful, but most writers and preachers regarded it as dangerous because it could so easily lead to a life of worldly gluttony and indulgence. Moreover, being rich brought with it great obligations that had to be fulfilled. Only the rich who relieved the poor beggars at their door—whether literal or metaphorical—had any chance of avoiding the fate that awaited Dives. Some radicals went further in condemning nearly all the rich and powerful with a broad brush, while a few eighteenth-century commentators adopted a gentler tone that seemed to encourage an embrace of virtuous consumption. Despite these adaptations of Dives to changing social and cultural contexts, it is impossible to ignore the strong interpretative continuity that stressed above all the right use of riches.

IV

In 1952, an elderly housemaid named Emily Bishop performed some songs for a folklorist visiting her village in Herefordshire. One of her choices was ‘Dives and Lazarus’. She sang of how the rich man invited his friends—‘gentry of the best’—to a feast while the poor beggar lay at his door. When asked for some meat or drink, Dives not only refused to ‘bestow upon the poor’ any relief but also sent his men ‘to whip poor Lazarus away’ and his dogs ‘To bite him as he lay’. Yet God protected the beggar from the whips and the dogs, and when the two

men died, ‘brother Lazarus’ was raised to heaven while ‘Rich Dives’ was sent to the ‘dismal place’ below.⁸⁷

This particular version of the story had been around for at least a century and a half by the time Emily Bishop offered her rendition, for, as we have seen, it had been published in a late nineteenth-century folksong collection which reportedly copied the text from an eighteenth-century printed ballad. This ballad might well have been an adaptation of the now-lost song first published in the 1550s, though proof is lacking. The story of Dives and Lazarus was as simple as it was venerable. Unlike the increasingly complex explanations of the parable offered by some clergymen in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Emily Bishop’s exposition was unequivocal: ‘Well really it’s about being kind to the poor, I should say. Because he wouldn’t give nothing to the poor, ... Divers [*sic*] was a wicked man you see. All he thought was himself. He wouldn’t bestow nothing on the poor, for this was a poor old man who needed help. That’s all I know about it’.⁸⁸

What, then, can we take from all this? Studying the evolution of the parable of Dives and Lazarus across these centuries reveals a striking duality. On one hand, we can undoubtedly see significant changes in the way the English made sense of Lazarus and Dives. They ‘vernacularised’ the parable by placing these characters into early modern England, complete with appropriate clothing and contemporary idioms, turning Dives into an aspiring claimant to gentility. We can also see how more radical interpretations emerged during the crisis of the mid-seventeenth century—interpretations that would probably have remained invisible if not for a more general proliferation of oppositional publications at this time. On the other hand, it

⁸⁷ *British Library Sounds*, Peter Kennedy Collection, ‘Emily Bishop, Bromsberrow Heath, Herefordshire 1952’, beginning at 44:31, at <https://sounds.bl.uk/World-and-traditional-music/Peter-Kennedy-Collection/025M-C0604X0098XX-0001V0> (accessed 31 Mar. 2023). The parable had received renewed attention when the ballad version was adapted by Ralph Vaughan Williams in a new composition for the 1939 World’s Fair entitled *Five Variants of Dives and Lazarus*.

⁸⁸ *British Library Sounds*, ‘Emily Bishop’, quotation at 44:31.

would be impossible to ignore the striking continuities in the use of the parable across more than three centuries. Despite religious reforms, social polarisation, expanding markets and decades of political turmoil, the meanings ascribed to Lazarus and Dives in the eighteenth century were rarely very different from those common two or even three centuries earlier. The lessons remained simple: be content with your lot in life; avoid the sins of gluttony and vanity; spend money on the needy rather than on luxuries. If you lived according to these principles here on earth, then after death you too could expect to join Lazarus in Abraham's heavenly bosom. If not, be prepared to share with Dives the unquenchable fires of hell.

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Figure 1. Pasted-in frontispiece of churchwardens' accounts of William Charlwood, Putney, 1762/3. London Metropolitan Archives, P95/MRY1/154.