CHAPTER 18

Chivalric Violence and Religious Valorization

Last summer I worked in the new British Library in London, reading sermon stories collected for preachers and readers (lay and clerical) in beautiful manuscript books dating from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. Of course I read those I thought most important first. So on the afternoon of the final day, I opened a book, a small folio volume, that contained only stories I had already read in other manuscripts. My thought was that I would find nothing new. To my great surprise, what I discovered as I opened the book at random was the wonderful manuscript illumination you see on the screen. It was drawn before 1250. The right-hand page shows a mounted thirteenth-century knight in full armor. At the top of the page, the Latin inscription quotes the Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible: “Militia est vita hominis super terram: the life of humans on earth is militia.” This final Latin word can mean hard struggle, or warfare, or knighthood. I became so excited that I went out into the courtyard to pace, and almost grabbed a passing stranger to tell him the important news. The knight is a symbol of the chivalric struggle mentioned in the biblical quotation. Each part of his equipment is labeled with a religious meaning. The terms are not those used by by St Paul (in a well known passage which exorts the believer to put on the whole armor of God). Neither are they the symbols used by the most popular writer of a manual on chivalry, the Catallan Ramon Llull. They have been chosen by the writer or illustrator. The knight is, for example, firmly seated in the Christian religion. His lance is perseverance. In each comer of his shield is a member of the Christian Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the lines converging in the center of the shield as Deus (God). His sword is the word of God. Even the parts of the horse are assigned religious meanings. Overhead, an angel descends from stylized heaven bearing a crown. It is not, I think, a royal crown, but rather the crown of victory won by the knight in his determined struggle. All doubt is removed by the inscription on the band held in the angel’s right hand. It is taken from St Paul and says roughly “Only he who fights the good fight wins a crown.” Equally interesting, the angel holds in its left hand a set of scrolls; on these are written, at least in abbreviated form, some of the famous sayings of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, the so-called “beatitudes:” blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy; blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth; blessed are the peacemakers. We might already at this point sense some tension between the determined, armed knight and these mild, pacific sentiments from the Sermon on the Mount.

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The eye of the knight (as I hope you can see) is firmly set on what is coming against him on the left page. This is a composite illumination, uniting the two folio pages. The names of these hideous demons cannot be read in the picture, because their names are hidden by the page curving into the binding. But as soon as one counts them, it is obvious that they represent the seven deadly sins. Each grotesque figure is backed by figures representing its supporting sins in a wonderfully medieval hierarchical pattern. Avarice, a chief sin, is for example backed up by a smaller demon labeled usury. The knight does have allies, the seven cardinal virtues pictured as doves, who are ranked before him on his side of the illustration. But the knight and the devils easily capture our eye.

I submit to you that this illustration, splendid as it is, must be read as a piece of propaganda, one which clerics would surely advance as an ideal for knighthood and which knights might be happy to accept, perhaps even to pay for handsomely. But it is most emphatically not a realistic picture, not a description of what knights actually were or what they actually did. This is illustration is prescriptive rather than descriptive. We would, I believe, make a great error if we were to accept as realistic this idealized and wishful view that flattered warrior sensibilities as it tried to direct warrior energies. I will only assert this point of view for now, but will return to it shortly.

For now, let me supplement this manuscript illustration with two simple stories of the sort I found in those books in the British Library.

A religious writer, a friar named Thomas of Cantimpré around the mid-thirteenth century wrote a book with the unforgettable title of *Bonum universale de apibus* (The Common Good from Bees). He was one of a group of thirteenth century natural philosophers and he thought that bees achieved a harmonious society that humans should emulate. Actually his book is largely a collection of stories told to friars by confessing sinners... He provides my first story, which came to him from a fellow friar to whom the widow of a knight had made a confession. So much for the “seal of the confessional". This powerful German knight, devoted to tournament, apparently had died in one; at least Thomas says, “he died as miserably as he had lived (mortuus est autem misericordius sicut vixit).” His holy and devout widow, with much weeping (absolutely required in confession stories), told her spiritual father of a vision given her of her departed husband. His exact location was not specified, but he was surrounded by a great gathering of demons who performed a devilish version of the arming ceremony. They first outfitted him with caligas, heavy soldier’s shoes—using spikes that penetrated from the soles of his feet to his head. Next came the knightly hauberk, the suit of chain-link armor, secured to his body again with spikes that pierced him through, this time front to back and back to front. His great helmet was then nailed to his head, with spikes tearing through