1. The Deadly Sins in a Changing Social Order: An Analysis of the Portrayal of Sin in the Medieval English Theater*  
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The Seven Deadly Sins originated from a remnant of a Gnostic "Soul Journey" in Egypt of Syria in the early Christian centuries and ultimately from the seven Babylonian planetary deities. The Soul Journey, which came from Persia, described the primordial descent and imprisonment of the divine element, which received a characteristic from each of the seven heavens as it descended. In the gnostic religion, the telonia, or guardians of the seven planetary spheres, inspected the soul on its upward journey back to the divine, searching for each unrepented sin, and took the soul if uncleansed. In Christianity, the telonia became the Seven Cardinal Sins, first listed by the monks Evagrius of Pontus (ca. 400) and John Cassian (ca. 425). Later Gregory the Great made a seven-fold list which became dominant in the West after the twelfth century and was given final authority by Peter Lombard: inanis gloria (superbia), ira, invidia, accidia or tristitia, avaritia, gastrimargia (gula), luxuria. This order made a distinction between spiritual sins (the first four) and carnal sins (the last three), and represented exactly the order in which English morality plays in the fifteenth century listed them. Theology always retained the distinction between cardinal and deadly sins, since non-cardinal sins could be mortal, while the Seven Cardinal Sins themselves did not inevitably lead to Hell and thus were not always "deadly." St. Thomas Aquinas thought that cardinal sins were final causes giving rise to particular sins in humanity, and as late as the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries some laymen still distinguished mortal from cardinal sins, as did Dante, who put the Seven Sins in Purgatory, not in Hell. But since the Deadly Sins were never standardized, most laymen after the twelfth century, and most preachers after the fourteenth century identified the Seven Cardinal Sins with the Seven Deadly Sins.1 They appeared

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thus in the poem *Piers Plowman*, and in *The Castle or Perseverance*, one of the earliest morality plays, dating from about 1420 in Lincoln.

The Seven Deadlies usually appeared in action, more highly differentiated and more human than the corresponding Seven Heavenly Virtues, who were usually static ideals.¹ Avarice, in the days before money assumed the less tangible form of checkbooks and stock certificates, always appears heavily weighted down with moneybags, the weights which keep the soul from rising into heaven.²

The rise of the burgher class affected the relative importance of the Deadly Sins to each other. Gregory the Great and the early Middle Ages had put pride in first place, but from the twelfth century onwards avarice increased in importance, until in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries it replaced pride, though pride still headed the official list, which by that time had acquired fixed status. In feudal times, economic power was concentrated in land rather than cash, and the personage of the noble himself carried a certain supernatural aura of power which appeared in pomp and magnificence.³ Pride was also the chief sin of a rigidly-ordered feudal society for another reason: it meant the rebellion of the individual and the incipient destruction of the social order.

Pride — is the sin of rebellion against God, the sin of exaggerated individualism. In a disciplined and corporate society, which the Middle Ages held as an ideal, exaggerated individualism, rebellion against the will of God, was considered particularly heinous. The modern world since the Renaissance, with its emphasis on individualism, has tended to look upon pride as a venial sin ... A civilization in which order and balance were the chief ideals could not look upon the vice of pride lightly: it struck at the roots of society, both human and divine.

Pride meant rebellion, dangerous, independent thinking, setting up one’s own thoughts as supreme.⁴

In the changing social order of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, society valued the entrepreneur’s individualism and reduced pride to a subordinate sin. Usually pride appeared on the stage as a satirical slam by the burghers at the pretensions of the declining nobility. Instead of pride, avarice appeared as the chief sin of the late Middle Ages; power now depended more on monetary wealth than on hereditary land or title, yet this wealth remained the solid yellow gold which misers could heap up in a chest. Enjoyment of riches was direct and primitive; one could either live in luxury or hoard up gold by gross covetousness. Although some sources emphasized avarice even in the earliest times, and although all sins were more stressed by preachers after the

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¹ A mural at Ingratestone, Essex (ca. 1400) showed the sins in the form of a wheel with a Hell-mouth at the center. Pride was a woman enthroned; Wrath, two men fighting; Lechery, an embracing couple; Sloth, a man in bed; Avarice, a woman counting money; Gluttony, a Tavern gathering; Envy, a scene of perjury.

² The facade of Amiens Cathedral, and also a table-top by Hieronymous Bosch now in the Prado, showed Avarice putting a money-bag in a chest. A fifteenth-century French *Ars Moriendi* showed a demon pointing out a chest full of sinfully-gotten money at the foot of the dying man’s bed, a theme which may explain the stage direction in *The Castle of P.* that “Covetous” cupboard shall be at the (death) bed’s feet”. Emile Male, *Religious Art from the Twelfth to the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949), pp. 150ff.


⁴ Bloomfield, p. 75.