

HENRY OF LANCASTER AND *LE LIVRE DE SEYNTZ MEDICINES*

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Henry of Lancaster -- contemporary, companion, and cousin of Edward III -- was regarded as one of the outstanding figures of a reign which abounded in colourful chivalric personalities.¹ Created earl of Derby in 1337, Henry succeeded to his father's earldom of Lancaster in 1345. His work for King Edward as military leader, political adviser, and diplomat was so outstanding that the king in 1351 gave him the personal title of duke of Lancaster -- the first time that a duke had been named outside the immediate royal family. In many ways Henry appeared cut to Froissart's favourite pattern, for he was universally admired as a noble and courteous knight, good-looking, fond of hunting and jousting, proud of his armour and skill in dancing. More surprisingly, even other French and Scottish chroniclers recognized this enemy's abilities, praising him as one of the best warriors of his day, a man who was wise and brave, famous for largesse and honesty, generous in almsgiving and gifts to religious foundations.

Lancaster's range of activities suggests the best elements of the fourteenth-century pattern of knighthood. This was rather more secular, both in theory and practice, than that which had inspired a thirteenth-century knight. The earlier crusading ideal, with its emotionally convincing emphasis on the Christian knight's duty to fight to free the Holy Land from the infidel, had been weakened by the series of ignominious defeats there, and by the dubious application of the term "crusade" to a number

of primarily political conflicts. In the fourteenth century crusading was still seen by some as a religious exercise, but it also served as a convenient strategic manoeuvre, as a recognized way to extort financial support, or as an irreproachable excuse for removing one's self from an awkward political situation at home. However, even with the fourteenth-century emphasis on secular display and magnificence, the religious underpinning of life continued to be fundamental, and elaborate religious rituals were built into the statutes of the new chivalric orders such as the Garter or the Star. Certainly for many nobles religious practice was a formal thing, part of the unquestioned framework of their lives; but others were being affected by a new current of personal and emotional piety. Literary culture had become much more general among the laity, and nobles not only read -- witness the growing popularity of the Books of Hours, which could combine both devotion and display -- but also occasionally wrote. For example, Gaston Fébus, the famous fourteenth-century count of Foix, was the author of *Le Livre de la Chasse*,² a highly acclaimed and very popular manual of information on his favourite pastime, hunting. Gaston also wrote *Le Livre des Oraisons*,³ a longwinded and repetitious cry of repentance. Since the count had an ungovernable temper and had killed his own son in a fit of rage, he had ample cause for penitence, and this work exhibits his desperate emotional craving for reassurance of God's mercy.

Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines,⁴ the pious treatise written by Henry of Lancaster, is very different from that of his younger contemporary. K.B. McFarlane has described it as "the most remarkable literary achievement of them all," which has "added a third dimension to our otherwise somewhat thin knowledge of that warrior class."⁵ Although repetitive, Henry's treatise is a sincere, attractive, and temperate book of piety, which bears witness both to the duke's ascetic and religious turn of mind and to his wide range of practical knowledge and experience. It is this unusual combination of background and interests which particularly attracts our attention, for it illuminates the varied nature of Duke Henry's activities in the ten years before his book was written, activities that illustrate the two sides of his character.

In 1343-44 Henry served as English ambassador in Castile, attempting

to dissuade that kingdom from making an alliance with France, as the well-equipped and permanent Castilian navy could seriously threaten England's lifeline to Gascony by harassing shipping in the Bay of Biscay. When there was a pause in diplomatic business, the duke and his fellow ambassador took the opportunity to join the fight against the Moors at Granada.⁶ In 1345 Henry was appointed by King Edward to spearhead the first major English effort in Gascony since the beginning of the Hundred Years War.⁷ As both a general and a tactician he won notable successes. A sudden cross-country march to Bergerac surprised the French army and led to the surrender of this strategically valuable town. Lancaster tried to consolidate this and other military successes by a sensible policy of conciliation. When Bergerac's defenders offered to surrender and asked mercy, Lancaster replied: "Who prays for mercy should have mercy," and accepted their surrender.⁸ A little later, after the capture of Saint-Jean-d'Angely, Henry spent some time in that town and worked to encourage its loyalty by receiving the local bourgeois and their wives with great joy and high honours, giving them gifts and inviting them to dinners. Froissart's comment was that "it was said of him that he was the most noble prince who could ride a palfrey."⁹ After fighting with Edward III before Calais in 1347, Henry commanded an inconclusive *chevauchée* across Gascony as far as Toulouse, where the Carmelite prior who displayed the banner of Our Lady on the city walls was reported to have provoked the duke and some of his followers to pious devotion.¹⁰

Continuing devotion to the crusade encouraged Lancaster to lead an abortive expedition to Prussia to help the Teutonic Knights in their struggle against the Lithuanians. Not only were he and some of his companions captured as they passed through Germany and forced to pay a high ransom, but they arrived in Prussia only to find that a truce had already been signed. On their return journey a bitter dispute arose between Duke Henry and Otto of Brunswick which led to a challenge to single combat which Lancaster, an enthusiastic jousting, gladly accepted. The chronicler Knighton describes with great relish the elaborate protocol of the affair, arranged to take place in Paris in 1352 under the supervision of King John the Good. At the last moment Otto withdrew his challenge, suffering great loss of face, and the French king tried to soothe Duke Henry's

offended pride by, as the chronicler says, "showing him the many delectable things he proposed to give him."¹¹ The English duke edified all his contemporaries by refusing all presents except a thorn from the Crown of Thorns, St. Louis' precious relic, which he then gave to his own foundation, the collegiate church at Leicester.¹² By 1354 Henry was busily employed by King Edward in continuing diplomatic negotiations with Cardinal Guy of Boulogne and the papal curia at Avignon over peace with France. We also know that at the same time he was writing *Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines* (p. 249).

Even this brief summary illustrates the continuing juxtaposition between prowess and piety in Henry's life and actions. In his *envoi* to *Le Livre*, which he specifically described as written in 1354, the duke signs himself as "a foolish miserable sinner" (p. 249). The duke had summarized his book and apologized for its defects. He made excuses for his French, because he was English and had not studied French much; for his lack of qualifications for such high work; and for not being a good writer, because he had learned late and by himself (p. 239). Despite his weaknesses he had undertaken the work because he wanted to devote his spare time to the service of God, wishing to confess his wickedness openly. Besides -- shades of a modern author's acknowledgments -- he had been urgently encouraged by some of his good friends, so that if there was any value in it they should have at least as much credit (p. 240). The combination of his disparate activities is fascinating in itself as well as for the occasional hint it gives of the transference of the duke's ideas from his public to his private life and his work on his book. There is one particularly interesting example. In March and April of 1354 the duke and Cardinal Guy of Boulogne were engaged in a highly sarcastic exchange of letters over the successful French wooing of the volatile Charles of Navarre. The cardinal wrote with considerable glee of the stopping up of a mousehole, that is, England's access to France through alliance with Charles, while Lancaster replied that a mouse which knew of only one hole was likely to be in danger.¹³ At about the same time Henry was writing in *Le Livre* a long and detailed simile which compared his heart to a foxhole to which his sins have retreated. His vivid and specific description of the country methods of driving out such vermin,

meanwhile making the parallel application of the ways of destroying sin (pp. 104-16), reflects both his own experience of such rural activities (perhaps brought back to mind by his correspondence with the cardinal) and his ability to go beyond the usual pious platitude.

Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines attracts our interest not only because of the eminence of its author but also because it is written specifically from the point of view of the devout but active layman. It gives us some insight into what a pious aristocrat felt were his weaknesses and what could be considered suitable behaviour for a man of his station. He does not condemn dancing or jousts or feasts so long as lords do what their estate requires, with moderation and without sin, but he is uncompromising in disclosing where he had fallen from the ideal (pp. 78,20).

Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines is basically an allegory in which the author, as a man mortally wounded by sin, lays himself open before Christ the divine physician and his *Douce Dame*, the Virgin Mary. In describing the wounds of his soul Henry details how each of the five senses were infected by the seven capital sins, suggesting and praying for the appropriate remedies. In addition there are several long asides in which the duke compares his heart to the *donjon* of a castle (a favourite mediaeval device) and, more imaginatively, to a whirlpool in the sea, a city marketplace, and the foxes' hole previously mentioned. For the historian the interest of the book lies especially in its concrete detail and in the specific examples taken from the duke's own experience rather than in his use of extensive symbolism. His profound piety is often expressed in unfamiliar and to us extravagant terms, but his comparisons frequently illustrate the everyday life of the upper classes. Lancaster tells us how he loved the crying of hounds, the singing of man or woman or nightingale, and the sound of instruments (p. 10), and we know that he had his own troop of minstrels.¹⁴ He confesses ruefully that in his youth he had boasted of his beauty, his height, and his gentle birth (p. 16), and that he had taken pride in the shapeliness of his arms and hands and the handsome rings on his fingers (pp. 66-67). It had been his delight to stretch his stirrup at tournaments and to dance elegantly at the accompanying festivities. Indeed, dancing must have been a favourite pastime, for he had a special dancing chamber in Leicester Castle.¹⁵ Henry recognizes

the temptations it had posed, admitting that his intentions had been sinful and adding realistically "and perhaps still would be if I was as hot and young as once I was" (pp. 77-78).

Gluttony was another recurrent temptation. The duke echoes the manners of his day when he writes feelingly of his passion for good food, rich with spices and pungent sauces, and accompanied by red and white wine strong enough to make him and others drunk. He confesses he had cut short his time for God by dreaming of dinner or disregarding days of fasting because he had fasted yesterday or would fast tomorrow (pp. 19-21). He accuses his feet of being reluctant to go on pilgrimage, of being happy to find him good food and wine but unable to bring him home because of over-indulgence. He is forced to admit that in middle age he suffers from the results of his indulgence and is plagued with gout (pp. 75-76). Other of the duke's faults are typical of his level of society. He was too ready to give favours or "light judgments" in his courts and shared the usual noble passion for the acquisition of more land and riches. "If only," he says regretfully, "I had had all my life as much covetousness for the kingdom of heaven as I have had for 100 l. of land" (p. 19).

Lancaster's comparisons and examples bear witness to the range of his experience. He talks of the salmon going up-stream to spawn and of how their young must return to the sea before they can properly be called salmon (pp. 84-85). He mentions as a casual, well-known fact that the surgeons of the medical school at Montpellier and elsewhere were given the bodies of executed criminals to dissect in order to discover how a man's nerves and veins work, and he wishes that the soul could be thus dissected to show its wickedness (pp. 85-86). Personal experience as Admiral of the Western Sea and on his many voyages may have suggested his dissertation on the sea and its dangers, even though those familiar with it prefer it to land. His final comparison of the heart to a city marketplace where all roads meet not only offered him generous scope to portray the work of the capital sins, but also allowed him to draw a vivid picture of the crowded scene he must have observed so often. He makes us see the cooks and innkeepers incessantly crying their wares, the women better dressed than on Easter, the men drinking in the taverns and going to brothels while citizens and merchants brawled loudly. Meanwhile

the lord's officials inflexibly asserted his rights and collected the tolls while the sergeant, whom Henry compares to the devil, stood ready to carry out a distraint without mercy (pp. 117-23). Most domestic of all these comparisons, and written at a time of great devotion when the duke had just confessed and made his Easter communion, is his likeness of his soul to a house taken over by a lord. In such a case the poor man cleans his house, scrubs it to kill the fleas, and evicts the cat. If he is feeble the lord sends his own servants to prepare the place properly, clearing away all the old furniture and putting the lord's standard on all the doors to mark his occupancy. But, says Henry wistfully, after the lord has departed the dirty old furniture is all brought back and the cat once more sneaks in to sit in the master's chair. Completing his devout comparison, he asks that Christ's harbinger, Grace, put the arms of the Passion on all the gates of his soul, and help him to sweep the house with discipline and wash it with the hot water of his tears so that the cat (the devil) may be permanently scared off (pp. 99-103).

This practical, observed element also remains strong in the second part of the work when Lancaster turns to discussing the remedies for sin. Although his rhetoric is often repetitive and his pious similes seem far-fetched, he equates the cures for sin with the homely medicine he knew. For example, he underlines the value of drinking goat's milk in May because of the fresh herbs the goats had eaten (p. 135), details the two methods of making rosewater with which to sponge a feverish patient (pp. 149-50), and provides a recipe for making capon broth in the mediaeval equivalent of a double-boiler (p. 194). In his description of how to treat wounds and fractures he draws heavily on his experience in war and tournaments, mentioning the necessity of amputation in case of gangrene (p. 164) and remarking that a man's nose usually betrays the fact that he takes part in tournaments (p. 134). He writes with the emphasis born of experience of the efficacy of warm white wine to sponge out wounds (pp. 145-48) and of baths for the recovering fever patient (p. 202). Plaster was required to ensure the healing of fractures, aided by clean bandages to hold the plaster and ointment in place while keeping off flies and dust and avoiding infection (pp. 207-8). While it is

difficult to accept a practical value in the treatment he reports for frenzy, which prescribed that a red cock be cut open and placed, still warm, on the head of the patient (p. 161), this is one of the few places where the duke's relation of fourteenth-century practice differs notably from what might be called timeless common sense buttressed by wide experience.

After the completion of *Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines* Lancaster continued his work as diplomat and adviser, including encouraging King Edward to accept the Treaty of Brétigny. He died in 1361, leaving no male heirs, during one of the recurrent attacks of plague which afflicted Europe in the fourteenth century. His title and the duchy of Lancaster passed to John of Gaunt, the husband of Henry's youngest daughter, Blanche, whose beauty and goodness inspired Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*. The finest manuscript of Duke Henry's treatise (in the possession of Stonyhurst College) bears the autograph of the book-loving Duke Humphrey of Gloucester, the great-grandson of the author (p. x).

To look, even thus briefly, at the achievements of Henry of Lancaster is to see very clearly that the education and culture, as well as the prowess and piety, of a fourteenth-century noble could be very many-sided. Admittedly it was unusual that such a great lord would combine a life of arduous military and political activity with the composition of such a devout and charming book. Its modern editor even compares the author with St. Francis de Sales, both for personal charm and for his emphasis on moderation and legitimate enjoyment.¹⁶ Henry of Lancaster's book still makes rewarding reading for historians as well as literary specialists, for it provides unusual illumination on the personality, beliefs, and background of one of the fourteenth century's most attractive and balanced characters.

NOTES

¹ The standard biography is K. Fowler, *The King's Lieutenant: Henry of Grosmont, First Duke of Lancaster* (London 1969).

² *Le Livre de la Chasse* par Gaston Phébus, eds. R. et A. Bossuat (Paris 1931), is the modern edition.

³ Gaston Fébus, *Livre des Oraisons*, eds. G. Tilander and P. Tucoo-Chala (Pau 1974).

⁴ *Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines*, ed. E.J. Arnould, Anglo-Norman Text Society, II (Oxford 1940).

⁵ K.B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford 1973) 242.

⁶ *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, ed. J.R. Lumby (R.S., 1889-1893) II, 28.

⁷ Froissart, *Chroniques*, ed. Kervyn de Lettenhove (Brussels 1870-1877) IV, 214; Fowler (at n. 1) 230-2.

⁸ Froissart (at n. 7) IV, 231.

⁹ *Ibid.* V, 117.

¹⁰ G. Le Baker, *Chronicon*, ed. E.M. Thompson (Oxford 1889) 78.

¹¹ Knighton (at n. 6) II, 73.

¹² *Ibid.* 69-73.

¹³ E. Perroy, "Quatre Lettres," *Revue du Nord* 36 (1954) 159-64; Froissart (at n. 7) XVIII, 350-61; Fowler (at n. 1) 127-8.

¹⁴ Fowler (at n. 1) 194.

¹⁵ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁶ E.J. Arnould, "Henry of Lancaster and his *Livre de Seyntz Medicines*," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 21 (1937) 386.