

“THE MURMURE AND THE CHERLES REBELLING”: POETIC AND
ECONOMIC INTERPRETATIONS OF THE GREAT REVOLT OF 1381

BY

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ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship on the Great Revolt of 1381 and its literary interpretations successfully shows the importance of text around moments of cultural shifting. However, many of these studies refrain from considering economic influences on poetry. Furthermore, there has been no scholarship on the *Harley* lyrics and their foreshadowing of the Revolt. Applying both a Marxist and a Cultural Materialist method to four of the *Harley 2253* lyrics and three Chaucerian tales, I argue that the poetry encapsulates the economic and political changes that took place before the Revolt. The increase in wage-restriction, taxation, labor laws, and the dispossession of individuals from their means of production contributed to the rebels' discontent; this period in English history marks a change in lower class identity and formations of class and political consciousness. By considering the lyrics from British Library MS *Harley 2253*, I investigate the influence of a burgeoning market-economy on the lower classes, who recognized these changes and were constricted by upper class oppressive ideology. Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale* coincides with this same mercantile ethos, and demonstrates the subordination of personal relationships to monetary transactions. His *Physician's Tale* and *Nun's Priest's Tale* can be conceptualized as poetic interpretations of the 1381 Revolt itself. What can be discovered, is that these tales embody rebellion at multiple levels, revealing the "political unconscious," in Frederic Jameson's words, that is inherent to all literary texts.

INTRODUCTION

“In order that the whole community of the realm should know that they [the rebels] were not motivated by avarice, they made a proclamation that no one should retain for his own use any object found there [the Savoy]...Instead they broke the gold and silver vessels...into pieces with their axes and threw them into the Thames or the sewers. They tore the golden cloths and silk hangings to pieces and crushed them underfoot; they ground up rings and other jewels inlaid with precious stones in small mortars, so that they could never be used again. And so it was done.”

-from *Historia anglicana*¹

When twenty-thousand rebels from Essex, Kent, Suffolk, and elsewhere in England streamed into London on the feast of Corpus Christi in 1381, they were welcomed enthusiastically by the commoners of the city. Together they marched to the Duke of Lancaster’s palace, the Savoy, and destroyed it: sumptuous and splendid, this palace represented the corruption and greed of the English ruling class. Symbolic gestures motivated them; ruining the precious materials instead of stealing them for their own personal gain, the rebels protested the vast disparity in wealth between themselves and the Duke. Ironically, the author of the excerpt above, Thomas Walsingham, who felt particular disdain for the rebels and frequently calls them *rustici* in his prose, intends to portray them as unrestrained and vicious in his description of the Savoy wreckage. His report, however, unintentionally shows the rebels as a unified, organized, and calculated group. They were one-minded in their protests. As one of the largest insurrections in English history, the Great Revolt of 1381 had effective leadership that coordinated participation from rural areas and cities, and also generated symbolic demonstrations

¹ Excerpt from the *Historia anglicana* chronicle found in *The Peasant’s Revolt of 1381* by R. B. Dobson (169-70).

such as the Savoy events.² Walsingham's account is not the only text that unconsciously shows the efficacy of the rebels. The events of 1381 produced many chronicles, poems, songs, and other writings that were written by elites who tried to understand the uproar.

This thesis seeks to explore a selection of lyrics from the *Harley 2253* manuscript and a selection of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in order to demonstrate the poetic interpretations of economic disparity and destructive proto-capitalist modes of thought in England that contributed to the growing discontent in the fourteenth-century, as well as investigating moments of revolt found in the texts. Two concepts emerge from this assertion that require brief explanation: poetic interpretation and economic disparity. Economically, the fourteenth-century saw tremendous change. The constant presence of war caused an increase in taxation of the lower classes in order to fund various political engagements and skirmishes in Europe (Barker 58, Hilton 157). These engagements can be summarized as personal vendettas held between kings that were fought with peasant labor. Additionally, as a result of the Black Plague in 1349 (and subsequent plagues in the 1360s and 1370s), one-third to one-half of the population of Europe was eliminated (Barker 64, Hilton 152). These population changes across Europe and England caused the demand for labor to increase, allowing a brief period of economic opportunity for members of the non-ruling classes. They could demand higher wages and larger tenancies because of the unfortunate circumstances of population decrease (Kaminsky 94).³

² Commonly called the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, although this name is misleading. The group of individuals who protested unfair conditions and treatment were from a broad range of economic and social statuses—from country peasants, preachers, mid-level clergy members, artisans, merchants, and many others. Throughout this paper, I will use "Peasants' Revolt of 1381," "Great Revolt," "Revolt of 1381," and "the Revolt" interchangeably.

³ Kaminsky famously and provocatively argues that the Black Death, for all its calamity, "brought truly enormous socioeconomic benefits" and "enriched the survivors with the wealth of the dead" (94). Although this may be true, these benefits were almost immediately regulated by the central government.

Though, this does not remain the case for very long. Rodney Hilton in his book *Bond Men Made Free* explains that “It is an apparent paradox that the rising [of 1381] should have occurred when the general trend in the distribution of incomes between landowner and peasant was in favour of peasants, whether in their capacity as tenants or in their capacity as labourers” (153).

One potential solution to the paradox is to understand that law makers saw the potential for economic improvement and quickly eradicated these opportunities with the enforcement of strict labor laws. One example is the Ordinance of Labourers of 1349, which fixed wages for peasants, required anyone under the age of sixty to work eighteen hour days, prohibited the hiring of extra laborers from neighboring landholdings, and made it illegal—under pain of imprisonment—to offer alms or charity to beggars (Barker 62-4). It was also heavily enforced by both county sheriffs and consistory court judges, supporting the idea that “enforcement of law and order has never been a purely neutral act of government, especially when the power to do so is held exclusively in the hands of one social class” (Hilton 151). The 1349 law was followed by another in 1351 which further restricted higher wages, and made it illegal for serfs to move off their owner’s property (“Peasants’ Revolt”). Finally, the poll tax of 1381, which raised taxes for every person in England, acted as the spark which inflamed open rebellion. The Revolt was a revolutionary act that was incited from economic inequality and a misuse of power. Conceptualizations of this moment are mediated through text. Such cultural texts are both representative of their time and fabricated by their authors to convey certain meanings.

The second concept, poetic interpretation, is the primary focus of this thesis. My title contains a reference to Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* where the god Saturn explains to

Venus his capacity to cause suffering and destruction. The “murmure and the cherles rebellyng,” is characterized as an ever-present, looming threat (I 2459). The reality of serfdom, the murmur of rebels, inevitably rises up to confront the oppressors. This reality is in the background of chivalric tales, in folk lyrics, and buried beneath centuries of feudal ideology. Yet, for every text that demands the common people remain subjugated, there are alternative narratives within these texts that refute this claim. The ability to articulate radical viewpoints, or merely just opposition to the status quo, is a byproduct of the formation of culture. As a historical event, the Revolt of 1381 has a multitude of interpretations, both deliberate and unconscious, represented in literary form. One aim of this project is to illuminate some of those interpretations in order to demonstrate a growing class and political conscious of the lower classes within text.

When chronicles are the source of knowledge for a time period, this leads to flawed representation that excludes marginalized communities and individuals.⁴ Alternative texts exist in poetic form. Even though much of the poetry that remains from the fourteenth-century is written by individuals who could be described as elite, this does not mean that the stories of the common people are not present in the poetry. I will focus on a selection of poetic lyrics from *Harley 2253* and a selection of Chaucer’s tales from the *Canterbury Tales* to demonstrate this very point. What can be seen from these texts is a rebellion *within text* that mirrors the open rebellion of the Revolt.

⁴ The chronicles that cover the Revolt include *Anonimalle Chronicle* (author unknown), *Historia anglicana* (commonly called the Walsingham Chronicle, by Thomas Walsingham), Henry Knighton’s account, and Froissart’s account. *The Peasants’ Revolt* by R. B. Dobson provides the entirety of these chronicles, as well as other types of personal accounts and songs.

Focusing on the years leading up to 1381, Chapter One explores four political lyrics from the *Harley 2253* manuscript. These lyrics are *intentionally* political, signifying an increased economic stress felt on the part of the lower classes during the mid-fourteenth-century. They provide a baseline for contextualizing the Chaucerian tales and they will frequently be utilized in subsequent chapters to demonstrate the continued presence of a mercantile ethos that provoked the events of 1381. Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale* and *Physician's Tale* are the subject of Chapter Two. Neither of these tales have been considered within the context of "revolt" in previous scholarship, yet it will be made clear that they are interacting with topical issues of Chaucer's era. The *Shipman's Tale* displays the substitution of personal interactions for monetary transactions and the *Physician's Tale* iterates the corruption in the court system, ending with a scene reminiscent of 1381. Chapter Three focuses on Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*, which famously houses his only *direct* reference to the Revolt.⁵ Providing scholars with seemingly endless material for interpretation, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* reveals the concept of text as both representative and fabricated. I argue in Chapter Three that the tale is unconsciously political: both representative of the culture of rebellion and fabricated through Chaucer's use of allusions.

In his book, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*, Steven Justice makes a compelling statement: "As long as canonical texts set the agenda of research, as long as they dominate the field of attention, 'the middle ages' [sic] will be, at least for the literary historian, what canonical authors made it" (7). This is true, yet one could go a step further

⁵ "Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee / Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille / Whan that they wolden any Flemyng kille, / As thilke day was maad upon the fox" (VII 3394-7).

to argue that even canonical texts contain alternative narratives. Over the next three chapters, I hope to seek out and reveal these alternative narratives, as well as consider the critical moments where English society began to shift towards a proto-capitalist economy, which further restricted and commodified human labor. To borrow from Frederic Jameson, I hope to demonstrate the “political unconscious” present within the lyrics and the tales.⁶ As much as the Revolt is a singular event, it is equally about the culmination of the issues that led to its emergence. In order to understand these issues, we must look backwards from June of 1381.

⁶ I borrow here from his title, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Although, this thesis does not focus so much on utopia, a central tenant to his argument in this book.

CHAPTER ONE

IMPENDING REVOLT: A STUDY OF FOUR LYRICS FROM *MS HARLEY 2253*

Nearly forty years prior to the start of the Peasants' Revolt, a manuscript was born in northern Hereford, England. The text that scholars now refer to as *MS Harley 2253* came into existence in England at a time of economic and social strife. From this manuscript, which houses 116 lyrics and verses, there emerges a vivid picture of a society on the verge of cultural change. In such a rich repository of medieval life, there are lyrics which stand out amongst the others in their interpretation of and reaction to the political and economic environment. *Ich herde men upo mold*, *Ne mai no lewed lued libben in londe*, *Mundus iste totus quoddam scaccarium est*, and *Dieu, roy de magesté*, are lyrics that directly interact with such topics, and provide context on what led to the Rebellion in 1381.¹ Remarkably, the movement was conceptualized and enacted entirely by the lower classes. This was an inclusive group of individuals, including merchants and artisans, as well as some members of the lower and middle clergy. The demands of the rebels varied tremendously and included everything from tax reduction to the eradication of the government (Barker ix).² Largely, however, the group was arguing for the abolishment of serfdom. When Richard II met Wat Tyler and his followers at Mile End and asked them what they desired, they answered, ““We will that ye make us free for ever, ourselves, our heirs and our lands, and that we be called no more bond [serf] nor so reputed”” (Dobson

¹ These titles signify the first line of each lyric, as is customary. In the collection, however, they are referred to by numbers. From *Volume 2*: Art. 31 (*Ich herde men upo mold*) and Art. 40 (*Ne mai no lewed lued libben in londe*). From *Volume 3*: Art. 109 (*Mundus iste totus quoddum scaccarium est*) and Art. 114 (*Dieu, roy de magesté*).

² Other demands included: freedom from tolls and taxes on buying and selling goods, the freedom to choose to work for the wages each person determines is right, and finally that the state absorb the enormous wealth of the Church (Barker ix).

192). Such demands “anticipated the French Revolution by four hundred years” (Barker ix).

Acting as a quasi-chronicle, *Harley 2253* demonstrates the *precursors* to those demands. It shows what drove the people to rebellion, as well as the critical shift that caused economic challenges. The use of timely allusions, moral commentary, allegory, and satire present in the lyrics expose the social landscape in England as complex and unstable. As with many texts of the medieval period, morality is imbedded in all matters of life; political, economic, and social. The lyrics are topical – referring to current events – as well as invested in more universal ideas. These two concepts are not in opposition to one other, but rather, signify a dialectical relationship; the lyrics are intent upon untangling ideological issues, as well as gaining a larger understanding of class and economic consciousness through *both* the use of political references and the moral imperative.

Scholarship on the *Harley* manuscript has blossomed in the last five years, particularly in the field of manuscript studies.³ Carter Revard, John Scattergood, Julia Boffey and other scholars are interested in the textual details of *MS 2253*.⁴ For them, this particular text provides a wealth of knowledge about manuscript production in the fourteenth-century. Most likely, this manuscript was commissioned by a lay (non-clerical) household to be completed by the clerks at the priory of Leominster, near Ludlow,

³ There are other trends of interest in the manuscript; recently, Julia Szirmai analyzed the Biblical Anglo-Norman stories in *MS 2253* (“The Anglo-Norman Bible Stories in Ms Brit. Libr. Harley 2253” in *Neophilologus*) and Ingrid Nelson features a chapter on the lyrical tactics of the manuscript in her book *Lyric Tactics: Poetry, Genre, and Practice in Later Medieval England*.

⁴ Other scholars include Theo Stemmler, “Miscellany or Anthology? The Structure of Medieval Manuscripts: *MS Harley 2253*, for Example”; Carter Revard “Scribe and Provenance”; and Marilyn Corrie, “*Harley 2253*, Digby 86, and the Circulation of Literature in Pre-Chaucerian England.” All selections from *Studies in the Harley Manuscript*, edited by Susanna Fein.

Shropshire in northern Hereford (Boffey 9, Revard, "Political Poems" 60). Due to the passage of time, historians are unsure of who the patrons were, though there are three possibilities: the baronial lords of Richard's Castle (located three miles south of Ludlow), the Ludlows of Stokesay, or the Cheneys of Cheney Longville (Revard, "Political" 63). The poems were copied into the manuscript between 1338 and 1342. These dates are relatively new information; previously, the manuscript was thought to have been produced at the beginning of the fourteenth-century. However, the topical references in the political poems and lyrics point to a later date, which is now accepted knowledge (Fein 7, Revard, "Political" 63). As for the scribe, he is presumed to have had a legal background, because there have been legal documents found in his handwriting. It can also be assumed that he was educated, even more so than would be typical for a scribe during this time.

It is a unique manuscript. A trilingual miscellany, *Harley 2253* interacts with nearly all social classes and facets of late medieval life. Latin, Anglo-Norman, and Middle English are all used in a variety of poems, significantly showing the difference in the Three Estates: the clergy (Latin), the nobility (Anglo-Norman), and lower classes (Middle English).⁵ The manuscript includes lyrics of religious devotion, love and thwarted desire, great and bloody battles, and political satires. Although the poetry in the manuscript is referred to as lyrical, there is, in fact, no mention of musical

⁵ The Three Estates of feudal society are described by Adalbero, Bishop of Laon, who wrote in 1025 that all three estates depend on one another. Rodney Hilton quotes his explanation in *Bond Men Made Free*. Adalbero says, "These three groups exist together, they cannot be put apart. The services rendered by one are the condition for those of the others. Each in turn is charged with the support of the whole. This triple assemblage is as one, and so the law may triumph and the world enjoy peace" (Hilton 54). Hilton later discredits Adalbero as being overly simplistic in his representation of the peasant class as exclusively "servile." There was a lot of nuance and social stratification even among the lower classes (55-56). Furthermore, Adalbero's observation only stands to exacerbate the ideology that certain groups of people are meant to serve and others meant to rule.

accompaniment nor any musical scores within the manuscript. The lack of musical accompaniment in conjunction with the complexity of the poetry, indicate that the lyrics were most likely meant to be read from the text aloud in a private setting. Because of the range of its contents, *Harley 2253* has become known—by the small group of people who have taken the time to study it—as a quintessential text that displays the social imaginings and problems facing England (Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry* 18, Turville-Petre 178). In her introduction to *Studies in the Harley Manuscript*, Susanna Fein establishes the connection between this manuscript and other texts that are commonly thought to be representative of the later Middle Ages, such as *The Canterbury Tales*. Fein explains that the range of contents “resemble the assemblage of styles and topics found in Chaucer’s work some fifty years later” (Introduction 8). The manuscript also addresses “a wide range of human nature as it plays out in social behavior,” similar to the *Canterbury Tales*, in the use of “*storial* matter, *cherles* tales, *gentil* songs...and *moralitee* and *hoolynesse* (Revard, “Political” 63).

The Ludlow Scribe, as he is called by scholars, seems to have had an affinity for political and socially-conscious lyrics. Carter Revard identifies seventeen lyrics in *Harley 2253* which can be defined as “political” (“Political” 61).⁶ The Scribe most likely worked in Ludlow from at least 1314 to 1346, and copied the bulk of the manuscript in 1340 (Fein, Introduction 8). Scholars are confident of this date due to the myriad references to current events and specific taxes referred to in the lyrics. Relying on lyrics or poetry to obtain historical research is quite common. Even many official chronicles of the day

⁶ Other than the lyrics I investigate in this chapter, Revard lists the following lyrics as political: *A Song of Lewes*, *Lament for Simon de Montfort*, *The Execution of Sir Simon Fraser*, *Death of King Edward I*, *The Flemish Insurrection*, *Trailbaston*, *The Man in the Moone*, *Death of Piers Gaveston*, *Office for Saint Thomas*, *Fouke le Fitz Waryn, Parts 1 & 2*, *The Prophecy of Thomas Erceldoune*, and *Satire on the Retinues of Great* (76).

included verses and lyrics because they present a view of daily life that few genres can match (Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry* 10). The term “political” can be widely interpreted and it is necessary to concisely define it within the terms of this project. Turville-Petre defines four categories of political lyric: topical lyrics focused on current events, social protest lyrics, satires that comment on specific groups or classes, and lyrics that have social or political *implications*, but are perhaps not directly political (171). These categories provide a productive baseline for demonstrating the rich variety of political texts. Yet, the very existence of the categories perhaps falsely indicates that they are mutually exclusive; this is not the case. It is inevitable that a lyric could inhabit one or more of the categories.⁷ The four lyrics chosen for this project display a rich variety of languages and socioeconomic classes, yet they all comment equally on the direness of over-taxation and larger political, ideological questions. In this chapter, the language and devices of each lyric will be considered along with the economic, political, and social changes that led to the Revolt, and how this affected the ideology of the era.

Disagreeing with Kane and Pearsall’s trite summation of the political lyrics in *Harley 2253* as “universal” (Kane 83), John Scattergood describes them as the opposite: current and precise (*Politics and Poetry* 12). Carter Revard, expanding on these two statements, argues that they encompass both “timeliness” and “timelessness” (“Political” 61). In the way that medieval poetry can be both irreverent and serious, satirical and earnest, elusive and pointed, it can also be timely and timeless. *Ich herde men upo mold*, a complaint poem about unfair taxation, combines contemporary detail with larger moral

⁷ As I argue in subsequent chapters, even poetry not considered technically “political” is indeed, political; as all text is socially and politically conscious in some way.

implications of robbing the poor.⁸ The poem is written in alliterative Middle English verse in six twelve-line stanzas, with an abababcbcd rhyme scheme. There is much debate about the poet of *Ich herde men*. According to Newhauser, some scholars, such as J.P. Oakden, claim that the lyric is “crude” and not accomplished, therefore it must have been written by a poor farmer. Arthur K. Moore labels him as a *wealthier* farmer, with perhaps some education. Pearsall asserts that he was a member of the lower clergy, and thus an educated man (Newhauser 205-206). I am more inclined to agree with Newhauser and Pearsall who argue that the poet had training; the rhyme scheme is complex, the alliteration nearly flawless, and the use of allegory indicate an individual with experience. The last four lines of each stanza reference allegorical figures and state a moral axiom.

The speaker of the lyric relays the complaints he has heard from his peers; in this way, the lyric reads as a *public* outcry, with the speaker using “we” and “us” frequently. The farmers exclaim that their years of good farming have vanished. They must labor without singing songs:

Ich herde men upo mold make muche mon,

Hou he beth itened of here tilyynge:

‘Gode yeres ant corn, bothe beth agon!’

Ne kepeth here no sawe ne no song synge:

‘Nou we mote worche—nis ther non other won—

Mai Ich no lengore lyve with mi lesinge!

⁸ In his article, “Historicity and Complaint in *Ich herde men upo mold*,” Richard Newhauser is reluctant to label *Ich herde men upo mold* a political lyric at all, because the moral imperative is so strong.

Yet ther is a betterore bid to the bon,

For ever the further peni mot to the kynge! (1-7).⁹

The “further peni,” or every fourth penny, is a tax that is required of the farmers, but it becomes nearly impossible to pay due to the Black Plague impacting population (and thus a loss of laborers contributing to family income), and a drastic shift in the climate which caused crops to rot before they could be harvested. The farmers must increase the number of hours they work in order to pay it; thus, they no longer have time to “synge.” In 1334 a new kind of taxation procedure was implemented by Edward III and Parliament. Each town or village had a certain amount of taxes they were responsible for paying, and it was up to the individuals in the community to provide that exact amount (Barker 112). The execution of this plan was disastrous. It did not adjust over the years to consider demographic changes, nor did it recognize disparities in wealth between rich and poor (Barker 112, Hilton 148).¹⁰ Instead, every household had to pay a fourth of every penny to the king, regardless of ongoing crises occurring throughout Europe or the state of the crops in England.

Refusing to acknowledge the variations in wealth and status, the English Crown continued to increase its taxation requirement; there were no reductions for those who were poor. *Dieu, roy de magesté* is an anti-taxation lyric, accusing the king of being misled in his decision to exploit his people. The lyric is in both Anglo-Norman and Latin.

⁹ “I heard men of the earth make much moaning, / How they are tormented in their tilling: / ‘Good years and corn crops, both are gone!’ / They care not for solace nor for singing songs: / ‘Now we must work – there’s no other way – / May I no longer live with my leasing! / Yet there is a bite more bitter to the bone, / For every fourth penny must go to the king!” (1-7). Translations for this lyric are my own.

¹⁰ According to Hilton before the 1334 changes the tax laws stated that the richest should pay the most and the poor the least; but because the rich and powerful were the ones doing the assessing, they could skew the data in their favor. Similarly, after 1334 when lump sums were required, the wealthy could again demand larger amounts from tenants, while only giving a little from their own manors (148).

It has seventeen ten-line stanzas: the first eight lines are in Anglo-Norman and the final two lines in Latin, with the rhyme scheme ababcbbdd. The same structure that is found in *Ich herde men upo mold* is here, as well: the last lines of each stanza contains a wise axiom for the reader. Likely composed by an educated clergy member, *Dieu, roy de magesté* integrates timely complaints about Edward III's taxation policies in Anglo-Norman, with definitive, universal moral statements in Latin. For instance, in the seventh stanza, the speaker argues:

Depus que le roy voderá

Tam multum cepisse,

Entre les riches si purra

Satis invenisse.

E plus, a ce que m'est avys,

Et melius fecisse

Des grantz partie aver pris,

Et parvis pepercisse.

Qui capit argentum,

Sine causa, peccat egentum.¹¹

¹¹ "Since the king wants / To take so much, / Among the rich he may thus / Find enough. / And besides, in my opinion, / He would do better / To have a portion from the great, / And have spared the lowly. / He who, without cause, takes money / From the needy commits a sin" (61-70). Translations for this poem are from *The Complete Harley 2253 Manuscript, Volume 3*, edited by Fein. Fein cites Wright, Aspin,

Here, there is an acknowledgment of a crucial disparity in wealth, and the relationship to the larger political structures which make such laws. As exemplified by this stanza, the poet's view is not localized to only his town or village. Instead, the view has expanded to include an understanding that economic decisions affect one's conceptualization of identity as either "rich" or "poor." Beyond this, the poet argues for collecting *more* taxes from individuals who generally have *more* wealth. Indeed, commenting on the taxation of the poor facilitates the expression of larger critiques of the power structures in which the people find themselves trapped.

Lines from *Ich herde men upo mold* also demonstrate this larger social consciousness. For instance: "Thus me pileth the pore that is of lute pris, / Nede in wot ant in swynk, swynde mot swo [Thus they plunder the poor man that is of little worth, / His needs perish in work, toil and much sweat]" (18-19); and "Thus me pileth the pore ant pyketh ful clene; / The ryche me raymeth withouten eny rhyt [Thus they plunder the poor and pick them quite clean; / The rich extort without any right]" (25-26).¹² And in the second-to-last-stanza, a repetition of a hunting image: "That me us honteth ase hound doth the hare: / He us honteth ase hound hare doth on hulle [They hunt us as a hound does the hare: / They hunt us as a hound does a hare on a hill]" (56-57). The poor of "lute pris," or little price or worth, hunted like hares by hounds is a violent image. Unfair taxation of the poor and its relationship to hunting or robbery speaks more to the ideological frameworks in place during the later medieval era, in which, according to Henry Heller, upper-class demands on the lower classes grew exponentially because of

Scattergood, and Scase as providers of other translations of this poem ("Art. 114, Dieu, roy de magesté: Introduction").

¹² Although the word "me" appears, it is actually a generalized "they" in the language at this time (Fein, "Art. 31").

the desire for luxury goods (and the war in France, which would eventually come to be known as the Hundred Years War) (26). The poet's use of words like "hunt," "pick," and "plunder" denote violence, not merely robbery. Plunder is destructive; it is the act of arriving, looting, and leaving the problems of the aftermath to someone else. The tax collectors, as the enactors of this violence, are then cast as villainous. In the minds of the farmers the tax collectors are after much more than just money; they hunt and plunder, leaving the peasants stripped of their possessions and all that they have previously known. Associations of taxes and violence are two-fold. There is an understanding, as exemplified by *Ich herde men*, of taxation and violence at the local level. In *Dieu, roy de magesté*, the poet seems to understand a deeply ideological correlation between war and taxation.

The start of the Hundred Years War had considerable effect on the European economic system. This relationship between taxation and war is established in the lyric *Dieu, roy de magesté*, with its critique of the warmongering king, Edward III:

Roy ne doit, a feore de gere,

Extra regnum ire,

For si la commune de sa terre

Velint consentire.

Par tresoun, voit honme sovent

Quam plures perire (11-16).¹³

The speaker draws a parallel between a king's unlawful increases of taxes to treason. "Commons of this land" specifies the House of Commons in Parliament, without whose consent Edward III could not request tax funds for his campaigns in France (Barker 111). Not only treasonous, but warlike, implying violence. *Ich herde men* correlates heavy taxation with violence, as well, which demonstrates that the two concepts are intertwined in the mind of the public. Manifested in the passage above is the association the public has between taxation and war, and anger at the central government's authoritative demand of large funds, regardless of the poverty present throughout the country. For instance, the poet laments in the third stanza:

Ore court en Engleterre

De anno in annum

Le quinzime dener pur fere,

Sic commune dampnum

E fat avaler que soleyent

Sedere super scannum,

E vendre fet commune gent

Vaccas, vas, et pannum.

Non placet ad summum,

¹³ "A king should not, in a warlike way, / Depart from his realm, / Unless the commons of his land / Wish to consent. / On account of treason, one often sees / Many perish" (11-16).

Quindenum, sic, dare nummum (21-30).¹⁴

Repetition of “commune,” or “common” signifies that the poet conceives of this tax as being equally terrible for all groups of people—those who sit on the bench and the common people. More than a burden on the poor, is the burden on *everyone* in the society.

¹⁵ The tax “Sic commune dampnum [inflicts common harm].” The “common harm” of the tax, on both lower and upper classes (although felt much more strongly in the lower classes) contributed to conceptualizations of class and economics. Though the tax is experienced in *local* communities, there is also the understanding of larger, ideological forces at work. The allusions to tax increase in the lyrics not only articulates as association of common violence with taxation, but also signifies a broader change that was happening in society: the shift from a feudal society to an increasingly commercial-dependent society.

The shift from feudalism to capitalism is a source of scholarly tension. Although scholars disagree about when the birth of capitalism happened, it is apparent in both *Ich herde men upo mold* and *Dieu, roy de magesté*, that there was a change occurring even as early as the mid-fourteenth century.¹⁶ Dobb developed the agrarian approach: capitalism began not in towns and cities, but in the rural areas which produced the goods for the markets and developed enclosures in the early modern period, ultimately arguing that mercantilism actually strengthened serfdom (Heller 26). Meanwhile, Sweezy argues that

¹⁴ “Now proceeds in England / From year to year / The tax of the fifteenth penny, / Thus inflicting a common harm, / And it brings down those wont / To sit upon the bench, / And it forces common folk to sell / Cows, utensils, and clothing. / Most unpleasant is it, / Therefore, to pay the entire fifteenth” (21-30).

¹⁵ Interestingly, *Dieu, roy de magesté* is written in Anglo-Norman, indicating that a wealthier individual is the original poet, because a member of the lower class would most likely not speak this language.

¹⁶ For more on this, see Henry Heller’s chapter, “The Decline of Feudalism” in his book *The Birth of Capitalism*.

serfdom was a stagnant economic structure, and the prime mover was actually the growth of trade which marks the beginning of capitalism (Heller 28). Ellen Meiksins Wood argues that while there were pockets of profit-making in pre-capitalist societies like medieval Europe, there was still no cultural or ideological imperative to participate in competition across geographic and cultural boundaries (Wood 77).¹⁷ Historically, it is not clear that the fourteenth century relied on a capitalist mode, according to scholars such as Stephen Rigby, Heller, and Wood.¹⁸ Yet, all things must have a beginning.

The seeds of capitalism are present in the changing relationship between peasants and their means of production. Heller argues that “Within Western countries, dispossession of producers from the means of production and the increase and intensification of work...played their part in capitalism’s development as much as markets and technical improvements” (Introduction 6). While the dispossession of lands did not occur until the early modern period, with the enclosures, the ideological backing for this process is found in the fourteenth-century. The *Harley MS* contains lyrics like *Dieu, roy de magesté* and *Ich herde men* that demonstrate this ideology of dispossession. When these lyrics were composed, there was already the assumption that dispossession was an acceptable practice. Already, due to taxation practices of the Crown, the poor are required to sever themselves from the resources they need to survive. The lyrics display the direct connection between an increase in taxes, and the common folk suddenly needing to sell their own means of production, such as seed, grain, and even livestock.

¹⁷ Wood argues that the *beginnings* of capitalism began in situations like the separation of laborers from their own means of production (though she places the actual start of capitalism several centuries later); that capitalism is, in fact, not the result of exchanges happening in cities, but rather the “complete dispossession of direct producers, who (unlike chattel slaves) are legally free and whose surplus labour is appropriated by purely ‘economic’ means” (96).

¹⁸ For more on Rigby’s approach, see “Historical Materialism, Social Structure, and Social Change in the Middle Ages” in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*.

Dieu, roy de magesté contains specific details such as “commune gent [common folk]” having to sell “Vaccas, vas, et pannum [Cows, utensils, and clothing]” in order to pay the tax (27-28). The reality of having to sell one’s own material possessions in order to pay taxes is also present in *Ich herde men upo mold*, when the farmers lament that “Thah Y sulle mi bil ant my borstaz, / Ich mot legge my wed wel, yef Y wolle. [Though I sell my hoe and my logging axe, / I must pay my debt well, if I can]” (43-44); and later, “To seche selver to the kyng, Y mi seed solde, / Forthi mi lond leye lith ant leorneth to slepe! [To seek silver for the king, I sold my seed / Therefore my land lies fallow and falls to sleep!]” (62-63). There is an economic shift in the day-to-day lives of the laboring classes. Whereas they would have previously been living on land that they could work themselves, for their own usage (in addition to providing for their feudal lords), suddenly their own resources are dwindling away in order to keep up with the demands of the noble landowners. According to Heller, in some cases, the poor were even completely denied access to the means of production, such as the beginnings of the wool trade (31), which is discussed in *Dieu, roy de magesté*.

This is quite a serious implication of heavy taxation, in more ways than one. Logically, without access to seed and grain, farmers are not able to plant as much and therefore had less to feed themselves and others. Yet, there are larger repercussions to such a drastic change in agricultural life. In *Ich herde men upo mold*, a farmer laments that “Ant ure ruye ys roted ant ruls er we repe: / Ruls ys oure ruye, ant roted in the stre. [Ant our rye is rotted and useless before we reap; / Useless is our rye, and rotted on the stalk]” (67-68). The rye is rotted because the land falls asleep and “leye lith,” or lies

fallow (63).¹⁹ Where once the farmers were connected to their land, indeed had a relationship with what they produced, that has now been taken away. For the farmers of this time, it was necessary to own the means of production in order to produce the materials that everyone would need, so that they would have enough to support themselves and their own communities (Wood 95). Rye was the *largest* source of food for a peasant diet during this time (Barker 109), and the prospect of surviving without it must have been bleak. The rotting of crops is also symbolic of what is going on in society: that the agricultural relationships and communal ties are rotting away. Rye was one resource that was integral to survival during this time. Another was wool; the wool trade, and wool tax, further crippled peasant communities.

The wool tax played a large role in bringing renewed havoc on an already ravaged group of people. As the largest exporter of wool, England had to collect huge amounts of the resource in order to stay afloat in the emerging European economy (Scattergood, “Authority” 165). Wool trading is a focal point for *Dieu, roy de magesté* and demonstrates the root of the issue; the people who worked with the sheep and wool no longer had a relationship with their means of production. Note the following passage from *Dieu, roy de magesté*:

Unquore plus greve a simple gent

Collectio lanarum.

Que vendre fet, communement,

¹⁹ In the decades preceding the 1340s when this manuscript was composed, what is commonly referred to as the Great Famine was sweeping across Northern Europe, the Low Countries, and the British Isles (Jordan 17). This could also be what the poet is referring to when he writes of the grain rotting on the stalk.

Divicias earum.

Ne puet ester que tiel consail

Constat Deo carum,

Issi destrure le poverail

Pondus per amarum!

Non est lex sana

Quod regi sit mea lana! (41-50).²⁰

The speaker describes the travesties of the wool trade, and how the people no longer have access to what they previously owned. Such subject matter for lyrics surrounding Hereford (where the *Harley* MS was produced) would have been relevant and of great interest to many people, as this area was the center of the wool trade, and also had high-quality wool for which people all over Europe were willing to pay high prices (Revard, “Political” 68, Rose 18). Many of the Ludlow merchants who were heavily invested in the wool trade lost massive profits due to Edward III’s war with France (Revard, “Political” 68, Barker 113). Scattergood’s “Authority and Resistance: The Political Verse” brings to light the importance of new wool taxes on the average person living in this area of Hereford. In 1333 and 1334, taxes and levies on wool exports were set by Edward III and Parliament. The next three subsequent years also saw these taxes increased. Edward had debts of his own to pay off to the Low Countries, as well as a war to fund (“Authority”

²⁰ “Still more oppressive for simple folk / Is the wool collection. / Commonly, it forces them to sell / Their valuables. / It cannot be that such a policy / Is pleasing to God, / Thus to crush the poor / Under a bitter burden! / It is no just law / That gives my wool to the king!” (41-50).

164). Edward III was called by many a “wool monger extraordinaire”; as such, he and his counselors decide upon ways for the crown to profit from the work of the lower classes by banning the exportation of wool without a special license, which were only bestowed upon those in the upper ranks of the middle class (Rose 64).²¹

The poet reflects on the long-term effects of such turmoil: anger, confusion, and an identity crisis. Lines 47-50 of *Dieu, roy de magesté* describes the pain and longing in the voices of the farmers, the urging to consider the spiritual ramifications of such practices, and the lament at the separation endured between farmer and material. If you are a shepherd, yet have no control over what happens to the product you produce, are you still a shepherd, or merely a cog in a machine? The poem highlights the meaningful relationship between person and tool, resource, or object—and the separation is not to be taken lightly. The next stanza further questions the process of wool collection, redirecting anger away from the king and instead to the collection agents. “A quy remeindra cele leyne? / Quidam respondents / Que ja n’avera roy ne reygne, / Set tantum colligentes [By whom will this wool be taken? / Some respond / That neither king nor realm will have it, / But only the wool collectors]” (55-58). Recall the emphasis placed on tax collectors in *Ich herde men upo mold*, and the way their methods are described as thievery. A similar approach is found here, signifying a distrust and suspicion of what can only be described as middle-management. The anger expressed (“Non est lex sana / Quod regi sit mea lana! [It is no just law / That gives my wool to the king]”) is not actually directed at *king*, but at *law-making*, and *law enforcement*.

²¹ Susan Rose’s book *Wealth of England* goes into more detail about this. Essentially, wool merchants began making profits from the wool trade because of specific prices that the English Crown was setting. The only people not profiting from these new ventures were the shepherds and farmers who actually worked with the sheep. Previously, before this shift, the shepherd and farmers had more control over how much they sold their wool for, who got it, and how much they would produce (62-66).

In *Dieu, roy de magesté* and *Ich herde men upo mold* it is evident that the people feel deeply for the loss of their livelihoods, consider the larger implications of this change in their daily lives, and hold resentment towards law enforcement officials. In *Dieu, roy de magesté* the speaker cries out that “Non est lex sana / Quod regi sit mea lana! [It is no just law / That gives my wool to the king!]” (51-52), and in *Ich herde men upo mold* the farmers complain that “Whose hath eny god, hopeth he nout to holde, / Bote ever the levest we leoseth alast [Whoever has any goods, he hopes not to hold on to them / But always the dearest possessions we lose in the end] (10-11). Each of these passages displays the author’s awareness that something which is rightfully theirs has been taken away. Political verse aims to have an effect on government, society, and public life. As these lyrics comment on the struggles of the common people, they simultaneously question the structures of power in place in order to have a certain effect.

These economic factors create larger moral crises among the common people. The complaints and rising awareness of unfair taxation and the corruption of the wool trade by royal merchants and collection agents eventually contributed to the Revolt of 1381, and areas such as Hereford would later become essential in raising groups of rebels who carried out the Revolt (Prescott 77). So far in this chapter, the two lyrics *Ich herde men upo mold* and *Dieu, roy de magesté* have been discussed, and the reflections they make on unfair taxation, wool collection, and other hardships imposed on the laboring classes. These lyrics, therefore, can be described as “timely” (to borrow Revard’s phrasing), topical, or current; though they also interact with questions of morality and ideology. *Ich herde men upo mold* employs the use of allegory, as does *Mundus iste totus quoddam scaccarium est*, a Latin prose poem.

C.S. Lewis, referring to the political allegories present in *The Faerie Queene*, dismisses the important role that politics plays in medieval allegory (Lewis 321), favoring the more traditional approach of considering allegory only within the universal or moral realm.²² Of course contemporary scholarship has broadened this view, and understands that politics and cultural movements can in fact *not* be separated from even the most religiously-motivated allegories. In the medieval period, allegory was an immensely popular form, and particularly with the late fourteenth-century Ricardian poets (Chaucer, Gower, and Langland). *Ich herde men upo mold* uses allegorical figures, but it is not a strictly allegorical lyric. It vacillates between realistic and allegorical, told as a vivid, public complaint. The five figures—Will, Law, Poverty, Falsehood, and Woe—walk the earth at their leisure, depriving hard working men of their livelihoods. In every invocation of the allegory, what is being represented and alluded to is *class consciousness*; the idea that class structures are interrelated to economic structures, which stem from ideological and moral issues.

Those represented in *Ich herde men* are of a variety of classes, but all of them are laborers, which demonstrates the strict hierarchies even within the lower classes. Incidentally, the first stanza that contains allegorical figures also contains the first mention of intra-class division. As mentioned previously, the speaker complains that “Thus me pileth the pore that is of lute pris, / Nede in swot ant in swynk, swynde mot swo [Thus they plunder the poor man that is of little worth, / His needs perish in work,

²² In *The Allegory of Love*, Lewis remarks that he chose to “neglect entirely [the] political allegory” of *The Faerie Queene* because his “qualifications as a historian are not such as would encourage [him] to unravel it” (321).

toil and much sweat]” (18-19). The next lines describe the individuals behind this increased work load:

The hayward heteth us harm to habben of his;

The bailiff bockneth us bale ant weneth wel do;

The wodeward waiteth us wo, that loketh under rys.

Ne mai us ryse no rest, rycheis ne ro! (14-17).²³

The final lines of this stanza read as follows: “Thus Wil walketh in lond, ant Lawe is forlore, / Ant al is piked of the pore the prikyares prude! [Thus Will walks the land, and Law is forsaken / And all horsemen’s finery is plundered from the poor!]” (22-23). The placement of the allegorical figures at the end of the stanzas (this construction is repeated throughout the lyric), broadens the complaints from a localized view to one more focused on ideology.

Each person—the hayward, the bailiff, and the woodward—all overwork the farmers in order to “wel do” or have their own share of wealth. According to Heller, the fourteenth-century saw such a rise in production for the market that there emerged new variations and differentiation among the peasant class (30, 48). Because of this, there was also an increase in resentment among members of the lowest classes, who continued to be exploited. The allegory is set up by the speaker’s listing of more well-to-do individuals, like the hawyard, woodward, and bailiff. While everyone is attempting to get their share of the wealth, the farmers’ “Nede in swot ant in swynk,” or disappear under sweat and

²³ “The hayward threatens us harm to have his [share of the wealth]; / The bailiff causes us balefulness and believes he will do well; / The woodward brings us woe, that looks under trees. / We may never have rest, wealth, or peace!” (14-17).

toil. And so, “Wil walketh in lond, ant Lawe is forlore [Will walks the land, and Law is forsaken]” (22). In this context, Will most likely refers to men’s desires, or “wills.” Will and desire are personified as stepping across farmland, ruling over the laborers and urging them towards profit obsession. The earlier references to robbery in this same stanza no doubt explain the presence—or lack thereof—of Law. Heavy taxation engenders consistent complaints throughout this poem due to the farmers’ belief that it is *unlawful*. Abandoned Law could also indicate corruption within the judicial system in which justice is defined more by market than morality.

The figure of Will shows up again in the next stanza, this time alongside Poverty and Falsehood. While the previous stanza focused on the division of labor within the lower class, this stanza is more focused on law enforcement and the intellectual class. It also should not escape notice that law enforcement officials like bailiffs are closely associated with the baron, bondsman, and clerk. Note the following lines:

Thorh bidding of baylyfs, such harm hem hath hiht!

Meni of religioun me halt hem in ful hene –

Baroun ant bonde, the clerke ant the knyht.

Thus Wil walketh in lond, ant Wondred ys wene;

Falsshipe fatteth ant marreth wyth myght (27-31).²⁴

²⁴ “Through the bidding of bailiffs, such harm is promised them! / Many of religion they hold in full contempt – / Baron and bondsman, the clerk and the knight. / Thus Will walks in the land, and Poverty is anticipated: / Falsehood grows fat and mars with might” (27-31).

According to Revard, bailiffs frequently engaged in horrendous practices to obtain the taxes and debts owed to the king, which were signified by writs sealed with “grene wax,” which the poet also mentions in lines 37 and 54. These are overdue taxes, not paid because of the immense poverty of the lower classes (Revard, “Political” 77). Bailiffs could demand sums over the tax requirement, and get away with doing this because the lower class could not read the writ—all that they see is the referent of green wax. The bailiffs are allegorized in the previous lines, again, as Will. References to bailiffs, barons, and bondsman also refer to the figure of Law which has abandoned the land in the previous stanza.

Meanwhile, Poverty is the expectation of reality. In this lyric, Poverty is a negative figure, aligned with needs, and the greedy desires of Will. Finally, Falsehood grows fat, implying that deceit plays a large role in the lives of the officials. The last two lines of this stanza contain a moral comment. The poet remains true to his construction of topical allusion, allegory, and moral statement: “Thus we beth honted from hale to hurne; / That er werede robes, nou wereth rages! [Thus we be hunted from hiding place to hiding place, / He that before wore robes, now wears rags!]” (34-35). Not only does this exclamation contain a tangible reference to a lack of materials, but it also contains a spiritual reference. The use of “robes” stands out as a curious word choice—it could imply that members of the lower classes were at one time revered, due to the views on humility and poverty that were commonplace in the century prior.²⁵ Whether or not this

²⁵ The mentality that poverty was aligned with Christ and humility can be traced back to Saint Francis of Assisi in 1206 when he famously took all his clothes off and gave up his earthly possessions in front of the bishop. This act was instrumental in transforming the idea that poverty is associated with Christian practices (Crassons 1). His identification with the poor has inspired many debates surrounding the function of poverty in medieval society, and how we conceptualize poverty today. Some argue that his theories only

reverence was actually present in society, the poet states that nonetheless it is gone. The carefully placed abstractions of Will, Poverty, and Falsehood correlate with the specific occupations in reality. The allegorized figures are implemented to give a name to the larger moral ramifications of the continued oppression of the poor.

Will creates Poverty, and Poverty creates Woe: this is the construction the poet has established. The sixth and final stanza centers on the crisis of needing to sell one's own means of production, provoked by Poverty and inevitably causing Woe. Recall the line, "To seche selver to the kyng, Y mi seed solde [To seek silver for the king, I sold my seed]" (62); and consider, "Seththe he mi feire feh fatte y my folde— / When Y thenke o mi weole, wel neh Y wepe! [Since then they took my fair fattened livestock from my fold / When I think of my possessions, well night I weep!]" (65-66). Such practices will result in Woe. The lyric ends with "Thus wakeneth in the world Wondred ant Wee: / Ase god is synden anon, as so forte synke! [Thus waken in the world Poverty and Woe: / As good to perish now, as work so hard!]" (70-71). Woe is embodied through the horrors of starvation. The farmers end their complaint with the resignation that death would be preferable compared to their current situation. All of the allegorized characters are inevitably connected to economic crisis. It is more productive to consider the economic along with the moral—as opposed to a binary between "economic" and "moral"—as the two are inexorably intertwined. Poetry then becomes the medium through which this ideology of power and oppression can be sorted out, in a space that is open to members of lower classes, where they are free to consider their identity within a changing society. The composing of political poetry becomes something meditative and introspective,

increase the exploitation of the poor (in other words, making it "acceptable") and others argue that his lifestyle is the "final triumph over capitalism" (Crassons 3).

while it is simultaneously focused outward on societal issues. This concept is also approached in the moralistic lyric *Mundus iste totus quoddum scaccarium est*.

Mundus iste totus is placed in a curious spot in the *Harley* manuscript. Carter Revard, a medievalist and an expert on manuscript production, notes the importance of sequence in a manuscript. He asserts that the Ludlow Scribe had control over how the entries flowed from one to the other, and this sequence is itself a political comment. *Mundus iste totus* is included in a succession of moral-based poetry such as devotions and prayers (Revard, “Political” 66). It is a Latin prose poem in nine stanzas, with each stanza varying in line number. Different from an allegory, though still containing vivid imagery, it can be described most concisely as a *moralitee*, or a moral instruction. Immediately following *Mundus iste totus*, however, is *Dieu, roy de magesté*—an overtly political poem. The Ludlow Scribe clearly sees a connection between morality and taxation. The author of *Mundus iste totus* at first appears to adhere to the strict class structures of the day by explaining the merits of nobility and the downfalls of peasantry. However, each stanza—representative of a different chess piece—ends with a remark that subverts this idea and reveals the oppression present in society. In addition, there are comments that attempt to equalize the classes represented in the poem.

By describing the characteristics of the chess pieces in the bag before the game begins, the poet simultaneously describes the nature of human kind: “Moreover, the pieces of this chessboard are all the people of this world, who are drawn / out of one bag—a mother’s womb—and are positioned in various places of this / world...” (3-5).²⁶

²⁶ Original Latin: “Familia autem huius scaccarii sunt homines huius mundi, qui de uno sacco materno extrahuntur, et collocantur in diversis locis huius muni...” Translations for this Latin poem are from Susanna Fein in the *Complete Harley 2253 Manuscript, Volume 3*.

After the game is finished, “they are put back again in one bag, just as they came out of one, / and there is not a difference between a king and a poor pawn because the rich and / poor are together at the same time” (8-10).²⁷ The speaker is not oblivious to the rigidity of medieval social structure because of the interesting use of “positioned,” a word which denotes a lack of free will. However, there is also the recognition that these classes are arbitrary when facing the greater reality of death. As many scholars have agreed upon, this poem has political *implications* while not being explicitly political (Revard, “Political” 66, Scattergood, *Politics* 10, Turville-Petre 178). The *moral* implications of a rigid social system are discussed within the lyric—the speaker’s ultimate goal is to save the soul of the listener by separating what does not matter (class attributes) with what does (eternal salvation). Note the ending lines: “...he [the Devil] will not be freed by entreaty or / payment because in hell there is no redemption” (45-46).²⁸ The moral and religious elements in the poem only enhance the relationship to revolt, because there are spiritual repercussions that come with the exacerbation of poverty and oppression.

The stanza on the king demonstrates attitudes toward the monarchy as a governing body, and is both diplomatic and quietly critical. Consider these lines: “But whatever the king does is / regarded as justice, because whatever suits the prince has the rigor of law” (15-16).²⁹ In a mere two lines the speaker acknowledges the power that

²⁷ “...sicut de uno sacco exierunt, ita iterum reponuntur, nec est differentia inter regem et peditem pauperem quia simul in unum dives et pauper” (8-10). These and other lines in this lyric are emblematic of the medieval concept of the Wheel of Fortune. For example: “...and it often happens that when the pieces of / this chessboard are put back in the sack, the king is positioned and put back lower” (10-11). The Wheel of Fortune, operated by Lady Fortune, is the personification of the belief that what goes up, must come down. Depictions of the Wheel of Fortune usually have a king at the top, a merchant or clergy member clinging to the side, and a peasant at the bottom—but Lady Fortune continually turns her wheel and eventually the king will be at the bottom and the peasant at the top. However, in this lyric, it does not end in such a manner. Rather, the end is occupied by the Devil winning the chess match.

²⁸ “...nec prece nec pretio quia in inferno nulla est redemptio...”

²⁹ “Set quicquid agit rex iusticia reputatur, quia quicquid principi placet legis habet vigorem.”

kingship possesses—being supreme interpreter of justice—and then immediately tempers this with phrases like “regarded as” and “whatever suits,” implying that the sovereignty is variable. The leadership of one man cannot ever be steadfast, because kings will make decisions that “suit” them in that particular moment. In other words, whatever the king calls justice is only true because he is a king, not because it is the pure form of justice.

If one figure should be the embodiment of justice, it would be the rook, or the judge, who “travers[es] the entire board in a straight line” (20). However, even the rook is debased. It turns out that the judge is “corrupted by bribes” and has “pervert[ed] judgment” (22).³⁰ Profiteering judges who accept money in exchange for a falsely constructed form of justice also make an appearance in *Ne mai no lewed lued libben in londe*, discussed later. The ending to the stanza—the judge has turned “the fruit of justice into wormwood” (24)—is reminiscent of *Ich herde men upo mold* and rotting crops that indicate corruption.³¹ The correlation between social and moral corruption continues throughout the poem. Like the reference to bribery, the inclusion of commercial language throughout the lyric further entangles the threads of morality, class, and economics.

Far from what readers might expect, the stanza on the knight is devoid of any reference to chivalry or *gentillesse*—instead it is purely economic. The poet highlights that the role of a knight in society is simply to ensure that the appropriate incomes are distributed:

The KNIGHT moves three squares, two of them in a straight line, as an indication that knights and earthly lords can justly take the incomes owed them and justly

³⁰ “...permambulans totam terram directe in linia” (20); “...iusticia muneribus corruptus, obliquari debet” (21-2).

³¹ “...fructum iusticie in absinthium.”

impose correction in keeping with the requirement of the crime, but they move aside a third square when they extort unjust taxes and exactions from their subjects (24-27).³²

The knight's defining characteristic has nothing to do with his honor, loyalty, or other traits emblematic of a medieval knight (or, the idealized version of a knight). His function is associated only with money. The poet's choice to highlight this particular role of a knight in the lyric indicates that in the mid-fourteenth century there was a heightened association of class with commercialism.³³

The *alfins*, or the bishops, are also described with economic language. According to the poet, they do not have spiritual authority because of genuine "discussion with God, / but rather because of royal power and thanks to entreaty or payment" (28-29). They "glide" across the board, passing by other men in orders with indifference, because they have arrived at their high positions through "bribery" (29-31).³⁴ The bishops receive no kind word from the poet, which solidifies the higher, spiritual purpose of the lyric. Those who *should* be there to guide sinners, "bark out against vices" and "hand over sins for rent by a yearly payment" (32-33).³⁵ Deeply troubled, the poet ends his railings against the bishops by connecting the acceptance of bribes and payment for sins with that of vice; the bishops "enrich the Devil" and are "agents of the Devil" (33, 34).³⁶ Once again, although the poem's message is centralized to that of morality and a recognition of vice

³² "MILES tres punctos pertransit, duos directos, in signum quod milites et terreni domini possunt iuste capere redditus sibi debitos et iustas emendas secundum exigenciam delicti, set tertium punctum obliquant cum tallagia et exactions iniustas extorquent a subditis" (24-7).

³³ Even within the higher classes, there was economic competition. One could maximize their income based on rental properties (Heller 30).

³⁴ "...ex colloquio divino, set potius region imperio prece vel pretio sublimati" (28-9)

³⁵ "Et contra bicia latrant, set potius annuo censu peccata ad firmam tradant" (31-2).

³⁶ "Sic Diabolum ditant" (33); "promotores et Diaboli procuratores" (34). The poet could be referring to the corrupt system of papal pardons or other indulgences.

in society; that vice is intertwined with money and profiteering which opens up the opportunity to read the lyric as topical and political. Political and moral grappling continues and reaches its height in the second-to-last stanza about the pawns, or the poor.

Here is the heart of the ideological complexity of the place of the poor in medieval society. *Dieu, roy de magesté*, *Ich herde men upo mold*, and *Ne mai no lewed lued libben in londe* are all told from the perspective of the poor.³⁷ As such, they exhibit certain characteristics such as assertive claims against their oppressors, as well as acknowledging the injustice of being delegated to a lower class. However, in *Mundus iste totus* there is a more subtle approach taken to the lower class and their purpose. It was beginning to change by the fourteenth-century, but the ideology of the past century stated that being poor was God's will; there was nothing wrong with being poor, *if you stayed poor* (Crassons 6). This mentality is present in the pawn stanza: "The PAWNS are the poor and humble who, in advancing, traverse two squares in a / straight line because so long as a person remains poor, he always lives in direct / fashion in his simplicity and poverty" (35-37).³⁸ Words such as "humble" and "simplicity" cast a rosier glow to being poor than is accurate or truthful—as displayed by the lyrics discussed earlier. The caveat, of course, is that those who are poor are not allowed to rise up in either status or wealth. The pawn moves in a straight line to indicate being steadfast, but if the pawn moves at an angle then he "desires to obtain something worldly" and will arrive "at the final move of the chess game" (37, 40).³⁹ He becomes a *fers*, which is the same word used to describe

³⁷ This is the case, and yet the lyrics were most likely written by members of the clergy due to their use of multiple languages and complex rhyme scheme and meter (Scattergood, *Political* 15).

³⁸ "PEDINI pauperculi sunt qui, incedendo, duos punctos pertranseunt directos quia dum pauper manet, in sua simplicitate et paupertate semper directe vivit" (35-6).

³⁹ "...obliquat quia cum cupit aliquid temporale vel honores..." (37); "donec ad summum gradum scaccarii perveniat" (40).

the queen: they are both takers, characterized as greedy and selfish. It is dangerous to desire to be in a better situation than you currently are. For if a pawn does take, then suddenly he “traverses three squares” in quick succession, because of his perceived greed. Statements such as these position the lyric towards a later composition date. The ideology surrounding poverty and begging was beginning to change, to be solidified by the later labor laws, such as the Statute of Labourers, which fixed wages and restricted serfs to certain areas of work (“The Statute of Laborers”).⁴⁰

The ideology surrounding poverty was nuanced; in some ways it was liberating, and supportive of the poor, and in other ways it sought to reduce the power of the lower classes by establishing the false characterization that the poor were “fraudulent and sinful idlers” (Crassons 8).⁴¹ The growing market economy provided some opportunities for the poor to increase their personal wealth, but these opportunities were not actually *for* them—instead they were for those who were already wealthy. And furthermore, as the government began to notice the potential for profit even for those among the lower classes, this was immediately snuffed out due to restrictive laws passed in quick succession. From here, the question begs to be asked: why attempt to snuff out potential power in the lower classes at all? Because, “nothing is harsher than a humble man when he rises” (*Mundus* 41).⁴² At the heart of the critique of the poor’s quest for wealth is ultimately *fear*: fear that they will rise up and become more powerful than those currently

⁴⁰ From the original Statute of Labourers: “Because a great part of the people and especially of the workmen and servants has now died in that pestilence [the Black Plague], some, seeing the straits of the masters and the scarcity of servants, are not willing to serve unless they receive excessive wages, and others, rather than through labour to gain their living, prefer to beg in idleness...” (“Statute of Labourers”). The rhetoric of Edward III’s Statute affirms the view on poverty from the upper classes: you are either poor and good, or poor and greedy.

⁴¹ She goes on to articulate that medieval poverty “is a highly flexible concept that tests our capacity to define material reality and to assess its ethical implications” (4).

⁴² “...asperius nichil est humili cum surgit in altum” (41).

in charge. So the necessity then arises to keep the poor impoverished, and the wealthy powerful.

The importance of poverty and the close ties with morality, politics, and economics is observable in *Mundus iste totus*. In addition, poverty and oppression are the sparks which caused the fiery rebellion of the Revolt of 1381, and it is pertinent to discussions surrounding the years leading up the Revolt. In *Mundus iste totus*, “wealth” as a concept is frowned upon, and “poverty” regarded as humble and appropriate. With the burgeoning commercialization in the society of fourteenth-century England, it is clear that there was an effort to attempt to sort-out how this functioned within the structures of feudalism. Indeed, writers and poets of the fourteenth-century frequently invoked theological and political discourse in order to debate the issue of poverty (Crassons 5). The lyrics from *Harley 2253* attempt to enter into this conversation because of the economic crisis that was occurring due to the increase in reliance on wages and market-driven costs for products and materials. *Mundus iste totus* acts as the more subversive, moral imperative to lyrics such as *Dieu, roy de magesté* and *Ne mai no lewed lued libben in londe*, which overtly discuss impoverished conditions. Although a lyric like *Ne mai no lewed* is quite different from *Mundus iste totus*, in its tone—*Ne mai no lewed* is satirical and accusatory, while *Mundus iste totus* is serious and compelling—they both discuss economic matters in conjunction with ideological frameworks.

All of the lyrics respond directly to the growing use of the ephemeral “market” as a place of profits and bribes, even state-controlled public arenas, such as the consistory court. *Ne mai no lewed lued libben in londe* is a satirical, comedic lyric that takes place in one of these consistory courts. It has five, eighteen-line alliterative stanzas, with the

complex rhyme scheme aabccbddbeebfgggf. The lyric is in Anglo-Norman. In the poem, the speaker is being sued by two women for refusing to marry one or the other, even though he is presumably the lover of both of them. He loses his case, though not because the court supports the women charging him, but because he refuses to pay the bribe to the judge. Although the lyric uses humor, the heart of the message is pointed. The real villain is not the speaker (who has his own character flaws) but the judges, who are described as violent, sweaty, and fiendish. A recurring theme is the conflation of court room and market. The only way to win a case, other than being well-versed in the field of law, is to offer up a bribe. The speaker notes, “Ther Y mot ‘for menske munte sum mede’ / Ant thonkfulliche hem ‘thonke.’ [I could ‘pay them some money for a favor’ / And gratefully ‘thank’ them]” (29-30).⁴³ The quotes around “pay them some money for a favor” indicate that the judges are slyly suggesting (or overtly demanding) that if the accused wants to be acquitted, all he has to do is pay. Corruption among judges and officials ended up being one of the many issues which sparked the Revolt forty years later. Furthermore, merely the fact that the judges felt the *need* to require bribes indicates an increased reliance on a profit-driven economy. This became such a pervasive problem that in 1346 judges had to swear that they would no longer accept gifts or rewards from any individual or party attempting litigation, as this was an affront to the king (“History of the Judiciary”).

Use of words like *chaffare* and *ware* later in the lyric further establish the poet’s recognition that the concept of market has infiltrated judicial life. There is clever word-play with “chapter” in the following quote: “”Such chaffare Y chepe at the chaptire / That

⁴³ The Anglo-Norman translations for this poem are provided by Susanna Fein and can be found in “Art. 40, Ne mai no lewed lued libben in londe” from *The Complete Harley 2253 Manuscript, Volume 2*.

maketh moni thryve mon unthenfol to be, / With thonkes ful thunne! [Such merchandise do I buy at the chapter / As causes many a thriving man to come to grief, / With very thin gratitude!]" (73-75). "Chapter" can be thought of as twofold. In one way, it refers to the monastic "chapter" house and by extension canon law, which the speaker would be ignorant of (due to his lack of education). Also, and more to my point, is that "chapter" is synonymous with *chaffare*. A *chaffare* is an exchange of goods or trade that takes place at a market. It is commerce-driven; and more specifically, it has a negative connotation associated with dishonest dealings ("chaffare"). The inclusion of words like merchandise and chapter, or *chaffare*, into a lyric about a court hearing is emblematic of the transition taking place to a more market-driven society. Courtrooms are no longer place of justice and ethics (if, indeed they ever were), but instead a place for buying and selling, for bribes and profits. Due to his refusal to pay up, the narrator doesn't win the case. Incidentally, he does not deserve to win the case because of his treatment of the woman in the lyric, whom he describes as "bymodered ase a morehen [covered with mud like a moorhen]" (61). He finishes the lyric with this phrase: "Wyde heo worcheth us wo / For wymmene ware! [Far and wide they give us woe / For the ware of women!]" (90-91). "Ware" in this instance can mean both a good that someone would sell at market, and a woman's genitals, indicating the woman's sexuality is also a commodity to be purchased.

Heller asserts that during the mid- to late-fourteenth century there was a steady growth in the European market's influence into everyday life (32). And the narrator sees these changes not as promising or "freeing" (as capitalist ideology attempts to suggest), but as restrictive. In her book *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*, Ellen Meiksins Wood makes a compelling argument that although "market" seems to imply a kind of

freedom, what it actually connotes is a coercion to participate in said market (6). In the case of *Ne mai no lewed*, the only viable way to win the court case is to participate in the market; even by participating in the rhetoric of commerce the speaker shows that commercialism has pervaded every element of society.

One can understand from reading this particular lyric that the figure of the judge was one met with contempt and suspicion. What is evident in the lyric is that this suspicion arises primarily from the disparity between illiterate underclass and literate elite. In *Ich herde men upo mold*, the speaker notes twice the significance of “grene wax” of the writs carried by tax collectors; although the speaker does not read, he recognizes the wax (37, 54). *Ne mai no lewed lued libben in londe* contains similar references to illiteracy, although more overtly critical through the use of satire. As Turville-Petre cites, the most ironic character of all is the narrator himself: he has pledged himself to two women, is accused of being a *lewed* man, and gets charged by the women (176). Despite this, the focus is on the judges and the clergy who are villainous; partly because of their large, imposing numbers in comparison with the one complainant, and partly because of their greedy grasp on knowledge.

John Scattergood has also noted that the lyric is filled with “overbearing officialdom” (198). In the small space of one poem, there is a judge, the clerks, and the summoners. The descriptions of each official would be at home in Chaucer’s “Prologue” to his *Canterbury Tales*, due to their vivid characterization. The judge, for instance, is described thus:

Furst ther sit an old cherl in a blake hure;

Of alle that ther sitteth, semeth best syre,

Ant leyth ys leg o lonke –

An heme in an herygoud with honginde sleven (19-22).⁴⁴

He is old, he “seems” magisterial but is not, and even his manner of dress is offensive to the narrator. The clerks, “mo then fourti [more than forty]” of them, sit and wait behind the judge to record the penalty (23). Finally, there are the summoners, “syexe other sevene, / Mysmotinde men alle, by here evene [six or seven, / False accusers all, by their appearance]” (37-38). Similar to the Chaucerian approach, all of these descriptions are irreverent and comedic, yet still contain an element of truth. The Summoner in the “General Prologue” is described by the narrator as deceptive: “But wel I woot [know] he lyed right in dede; / Of cursing oghte ech gilty man him drede” (I 659-60).⁴⁵ Imagining six or seven of these “False accusers” is the poet’s satirical, absurdist approach to the situation. This signifies the overly-bureaucratic, elitist environment of the consistory court circuit.

Accusations are flown at the judge and his clerks, who are “fayly [fools]” despite their great learning (43). They sit, “swart ant forswat [dark and sweaty]” in the court room, implying a hellish atmosphere (70). The poet masterfully crafts the scenario, balanced between a fabliaux and a political song; between comedy and earnestness. A lyric as a court room drama is quite modern for this time. What it displays is a growing “legal consciousness,” to borrow a term from Anthony Musson (2). More specifically

⁴⁴ “First there sits an old churl in a black cap; / Of all who sit there, he seems most magisterial, / And lays his legs stretched out— / A churl in a cloak with hanging sleeves” (19-22)

⁴⁵ The Summoner inspires fear into all who perceive him: “As hoot he was and lecherous as a sparwe, / With scalled browes blake and piled berd. / Of his visage children were aferd (I 626-8).

The Law's nature as an integral part of social relations and *experiences*; not simply a list of official rules that govern. Because judges were nearly unanimously despised by the common folk during this time, the perceptions of what law means in the context of the larger socio-economic sphere is negatively influenced by these judges. Furthermore, the space of a court was a public, open space. This public space then becomes an arena where the strong-arm of the royal government is in full view, and the awareness of class, economic, and political disparities are emphasized. The "general violence against the profession that was exhibited in 1381" (Musson 37) is preceded by the experiences relayed in *Ne mai no lewed lued libben in londe*. The narrator's hatred of the corruption within the judicial system is at its strongest when he thinks on the disparity in literacy levels, further aggravated by the official language of the court.

At the crux of the narrator's complains in the lyric, is the fact that he has not been given the opportunity to learn to read. This source of contention sparked many public burnings of records, writs, and other documents which accused individuals of defrauding on taxes. In her book, *1381: The Year of the Peasants' Revolt*, Juliet Barker describes these acts of demonstration: "These records, together with all those seized from Sewale, were carried off to Chelmsford, where they were ceremoniously burned in a public bonfire the following day" (198). Burning the written records then became an act of public defiance, a "symbolic rejection of an abuse of power" (Barker 198). Illiteracy was prominent among the rebels (and in general during the fourteenth-century) and much of their anger arose from writs drawn up in writing that they could not read, only to be

expected to somehow fulfill the orders.⁴⁶ In *Ne mai no lewed*, the ability to read and write is embroiled with violence, denoting it as a weapon that was used against the lower classes. Although the narrator takes pains to ridicule the judges, clerks, and summoners, he actually finds them quite frightful. The clerks “pynkes with heore penne on heore parchemyn [stab with their pens on the parchment]” (27), the summoners “clastreth syth heore colle [ensnare with their nets]” (42), and “Ne mai no lewed lued libben in londe / Be he never in hyrt so haver of honde. [No unlettered man may survive in the land / Unless he be always in court so craftily skilled / As the learned who lead us about]” (1-3). There is a connection formed in these lines between literacy and physical *survival*. The urgency relayed is juxtaposed to lines of comedic absurdity, and is what makes this lyric a satirical political piece. Using the guise of professionalism to trick the average person was common practice. By considering lyric poetry, as opposed to chronicles which are elitist and biased towards the lower classes, one can see that the people are wanting to be politically engaged in order to combat this manipulation.

The lyrics are all quite different in their aims and style. *Ich herde men upo mold* is a lament that uses both allegorical figures and earnest description; *Dieu, roy de magesté* is a complaint, with assertive critiques of oppressive powers; *Ne mai no lewed lued libben in londe* is a satirical comedy piece, which reveals the corruption within the court systems; and *Mundus iste totus quoddum scaccarium est* is a *moralitee* that uses the premise of a chessboard and chess pieces to describe the different roles of society, and how they have all been corrupted by a new profit-driven economy. When considering all

⁴⁶ In *Writing and Rebellion*, Steven Justice takes this point up throughout his book. For specifics relating to the problem of the courts, and the importance of literacy in this arena, see his first chapter “Insurgent Literacy” (13-66).

four lyrics together it is evident that there is an interconnectedness between the economic landscape and all other elements in society, including law and class structures. Given the issues confronted in the political lyrics of *Harley 2253*, it is not surprising that there was a rebellion four decades later. The abstraction of class hierarchy gave rise to an environment where commercialism eventually thrived. The distinctions of class are critical in this formation because class is more than a collection of social norms and mores—it is an ideology. Sheila Delany states that “It permits those in power and, more important, those who are controlled to think of exploitation as inevitable, as the natural order of things” (Delany, “Up Against” 311). The composers of these lyrics certainly do not see it as the natural order.

Dieu, roy de magesté has an especially pointed stanza which foresees the future:

Tel tribute a nul feor

Diu nequit durare.

De voyde qy puet doner,

Vel manibus tractare?

Gentz sunt a tiel mischief

Quod vellent levare.

Sepe facit stultas

Gentes vacuata facultas (121-130).⁴⁷

Towards the end of the lyric the lines, “E vengauce en facez / Ad tales vexatores, / E confermez e grantez / Inter reges amores! [And may you [God] take vengeance / On such oppressors, / And confirm and grant / Love between kings!]” (165-168). These lines are complicated in what appears to be competing ideals—or so it seems in our modern era. Centuries of monarchical rule cannot be understated, and the stakes are extremely high for those who rebel. Merely the composition of such lyrics shows courage; beyond this, however, is that medieval lyric provides a window through which to look at the changing economic landscape of the fourteenth century.

⁴⁷ Such tribute [taxation] can by no means / Last for long. / Who can give from emptiness, / Or touch it with his hands? / People are in such bad straights / That they cannot give more; / I fear that, had they a leader, / They would rise in rebellion. / Often people turn foolish / For loss of possessions (121-130).

CHAPTER TWO

INCREASED CORRUPTION: A STUDY OF TWO CHAUCERIAN TALES

In the previous chapter, four lyrics from the *Harley Manuscript* and the way they present a keen awareness of the political and economic transition of the fourteenth-century were discussed at length; particularly, the way the lyrics draw attention to corruption within centralized government, including the court system, and the way they attempt to configure a new mercantile ethos. This chapter will explore two of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the *Shipman's Tale* and the *Physician's Tale*, and the ways they interact with these same questions. The tales are quite different, both in genre and style. Chaucer frequently disrupts generic presuppositions in his *Canterbury Tales*. For example, the *Shipman's Tale* has been described as a fabliau in its "purest form," and yet, the tale nonetheless contains commentary about the way relationships function in a society based on monetary transactions. While the *Physician's Tale* is typically thought to be a tale of female martyrdom, it is as political as the events of 1381. It is in the *Physician's Tale* where rebellion takes place, though in a somewhat distanced manner. In both of these tales reside sentiments that are within the *Harley* lyrics as well. What can be inferred from this connection between the two collections of texts is the continuity of a

socioeconomic consciousness throughout the fourteenth-century; this consciousness is ultimately expressed by the populace in the form of revolution.

Scholars in decades past have acknowledged that the *Shipman's Tale* is a typical, straightforward fabliau.⁴⁸ A merchant has a frivolous wife, she spends beyond their means and requires a loan so she asks her husband's friend for the money in exchange for sex; all unbeknownst to the merchant. This is the classic plot of the fabliau. Specifically in this tale, the comedic elements and clever word-play are used to parody a form of relationship-making based on monetary transactions as opposed to familiar interactions. The tale asks of the reader what the meaning of *value* is in the late medieval period—where does value come from? What should it be based on? In his book *Social Chaucer*, Paul Strohm notes that the *Shipman's Tale* almost inextricably fuses together “human and monetary values” to the point where a mercantile ethos extends “to all spheres of activity” (100). Although the tale is comedic, it is also representative of a society shifting from a localized economy to a more expansive economy.

From the first lines of the tale, the narrator explains that the merchant and the monk, daun John, have been friends since childhood; they are “knyt with eterne alliaunce” (VII 40) and daun John uses the word “cosyn” to describe his friend the merchant. Interestingly, the figure of the merchant is never given a name, and neither is his wife—leaving daun John to be the center of the tale. The tale demonstrates his own savviness in getting something (sex with the merchant's wife) out of nothing (he doesn't have to pay for it with his own money), which is parallel to the way the merchant gains profit by

⁴⁸ D.A. Pearsall in *The Sphere History of Literature in the English Language*, Charles Muscatine in *Chaucer and Chaucerians*, D.S. Brewer in *Companion to Chaucer Studies*.

leaving St. Denis in pursuit of exchanges in Bruges or Flanders. The difference between these two scenarios is the reader's awareness of how daun John makes his "profit," while the merchant's practices remain in the shadows, as if the *real* transaction is not the fortune he makes out-of-town but rather the sexual exchange happening back home. This is clearest in the parallel language used by the merchant to refer to his profession, and his wife to discuss her marital status with daun John.

One day, the merchant goes to his counting-house to put his finances in order: "And up into his countour-hous gooth he / To rekene with hymself, wel may be, / Of thilke yeer how that it with hym stood, / And how that he despended hadde his good" (VII 77-80). Accounting is not an unusual exercise for a merchant. Here, the language of economy is expected. The merchant, unaware and engrossed in counting his profits, does not realize daun John and his wife are discussing her marital dissatisfaction in the garden below. Daun John asks her, "I trowe, certes, thatoure goode man / Hath yow laboured sith the nyght bigan" (VII 107-8). He refers to her sexual duties as wife, or her marriage "debt" as labor.⁴⁹ Her response uses similar language to the merchant's practices upstairs:

This faire wyf gan for to shake hir heed

And seyde thus, 'Ye, God woot al,' quod she.

'Nay, cosyne myn, it stant nat so with me;

For, by that God that yaf me soule and lyf,

⁴⁹ Typical for late medieval Europe was the idea that a wife had a sexual "debt" to pay her husband, and he a "debt" to pay her. Called the *debitum*, or conjugal debt, a legitimization of sexual relations due to both marriage partners. Found in the *Parson's Tale* (X 375, 940), the *Merchant's Tale* (IV 2048), and the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* (III 198).

In al the reawme of France is ther no wyf

That lasse lust hath to that sory pley (VII 112-17).

It is apparent in this passage that the wife is unhappy, and that her debt to her husband is one she would rather not pay. The wife explains how it “stant not” with her marital happiness at the same time the merchant wants to know “how that with hym stood” with his finances. Such clever word play between how something “stands” financially and how something “stands” in a relational sense gives the fabliau its comedic tone. Yet, there is also a connection established in this early part of the tale between relationships and money. This connection is furthered solidified when the narrator parodies courtly love language and whispered promises between lovers by centering their vows on profit.

When the wife asks daun John for the loan of one hundred francs, and explains that her husband is “the worste man / That evere was sith that the world began” (VII 161-2), daun John perceives the failed (most likely arranged) marriage between the wife and the merchant and subsequently sees an opportunity. Knowing that the wife loves money,⁵⁰ and knowing that the merchant has *largesse* (VII 22) or generosity, daun John is cognizant of the fact that he can profit from their marital discord. He gives this reply to the wife:

‘Now trewely, myn owene lady deere,

I have,’ quod he, ‘on yow so greet a routhe

⁵⁰ In the opening lines of the tale, the narrator describes the wife as being fond of money and parties: “A wyf he had of excellent beautee; / And compaignable and revelous was she, / Which is a thyng that causeth more dispense [expense] / Than worth is al the chiere and reverence / That men hem doon at festes and at daunces” (VII 3-7).

That I yow swere, and plighte yow my trouthe,

That when youre housbonde is to Flaundes fare,

I wol delyvere yow out of this care;

For I wol brynge yow an hundred franks' (VII 196-201).

The use of the phrase “plight yow my trouthe” is ambiguous, denoting either a promise between friends, perhaps a promise between lovers, or even marriage vows. Either way, the language used here is intentionally establishing an interpersonal relationship between daun John and the wife. His promise to bring her the hundred francs at the end of the passage above resonates with courtly quests and promises. Also established with the courtly language however, is irony and satire: the monk’s inappropriate role as “courtly knight” is attributed less to his honor and more to his financial savviness. The wife is unsatisfied, potentially because their marriage is based on convenience (as opposed to love), or because the merchant refuses to give her the allowance she desires; daun John understands that in order to profit sexually from the wife he must rely on new modes of economy. In these new modes, it becomes increasingly unclear who actually “profits” in the end.

When daun John asks the merchant to borrow one hundred francs, he uses causal language instead of the oath-like phrase “plight yow my trouthe.” Rather, he merely says: ““Bitwix us two nedeth no strange fare; / Farewel, cosyn; God shilde yow fro care!”” (VII 263-4). The merchant readily agrees: “My gold is youres, whan that it yow leste, / And not oonly my gold, but my chaffare. / Take what yow list; God shilde that ye spare” (VI 284-6). In his generosity, the merchant offers up not only the amount the monk requested

but also something that *daun John* did *not* ask for. The use of *chaffare* in this context is ironic. *Chaffare*, as discussed in the previous chapter, means “merchandise” or really any kind of monetary exchange.⁵¹ Yet, what the merchant owns—his merchandise—that *daun John* takes from him, is both his money and his wife. The “joke” of the tale is that the *chaffare* is the merchant’s wife, who is cast as a commodity to be purchased. Like the merchant, she also receives no name—only the label of a profession, in this case the profession of “wife.” Even this role is satirized and mocked because of the affair between her and *daun John*. Further mocked by the narrator, is the changing sentiments surrounding love-affairs: even these are devoid of love. Both the friendship between the merchant and *daun John*, and the tryst between the wife and *daun John*, are created under the guise of making profit. *Daun John* can only exploit the wife by also exploiting her husband, leaving all parties to reside in a world where relationships have been made subordinate to money.

When the merchant returns, the wife pays her “debt” to her husband with her body. The same way she and *daun John* discussed their love affair, the wife and the merchant discuss their marriage. Again, there is a conflation of “sex” and “profit.” The wife says:

Ye han mo slakkere detours than I am!

For I wol paye yow wel and redily

Fro day to day, and if so be I faille,

⁵¹ See *Ne mai no lewed lued libben in londe*: “Such merchandise [*chaffare*] do I buy at the chapter / As causes many a thriving man to come to grief, / With very thin gratitude!” (73-75).

I am youre wyf; score it upon my taille,

And I shal paye as soone as ever I may (VI 413-7).

The phrases “paye yow wel” and “score it upon my taille” are both indicative of financial language and sexual relations. “Paye” and “taille” (or tally) work on two levels: to pay a financial debt and to pay the debt a wife owes her husband, meaning score the debt “on my tail,” or body as well as a tally. Peter Beidler notes the merchant’s nonplussed response to the large amount of money his wife has spent on clothing; he readily accepts the sexual form of payment because of his successful endeavors (the profit of one thousand francs) in Bruges (Beidler 8). Although the concept of sexual “debt” owed to partners within a marriage is found in the other tales (including the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, the *Clerk’s Tale*, the *Reeve’s Tale*, and others), what is original about the *Shipman’s Tale* is the circulation of money through various hands, allowing everyone to indulge their own desires through profit, yet still under the guise of relational ties. Daun John receives sexual favors from the wife, the wife spends the hundred francs on clothes, the merchant makes a large profit from his own ventures, and he receives a sexual profit from his wife. The audience expects the cuckoldry that is typical for a fabliau, but what they are perhaps not expecting is the concept of “profit” to be the sole mover of the cuckold plot. The merchant is tricked out of his wife and his hundred francs, placing him in the position of the oblivious fool: consumed by his financial success in Bruges, he is oblivious to the absence of meaningful relationships around him.

Despite his role as the fooled husband, Chaucer seems to have developed the figure of the merchant into a more rounded character than in the analogues for this tale. A

sympathetic merchant character would have been unusual for Chaucer's time; usually they were met with distrust and skepticism (Scattergood, "The Originality" 221). This complication of roles is customary of Chaucer, who often reverses or disrupts common "stock" characters or plots; or intentionally uses these stock characters and plots in nuanced ways to demonstrate a reversal of expected theme. For instance, the cuckold plot is in place in the *Shipman's Tale*, but the element of financial transaction is poignant and topical, because of the increased activity of trade markets in the fourteenth-century. Another disruption of generic norms in the tale is related to oath-breaking. Kinship-bonds of loyalty and trust are established between the merchant and the monk, only to be undermined by the end of the tale, leaving the merchant oblivious. Trickery is commonplace within a fabliau, but important to note for this tale is the inclusion of profit and mercantile-language *associated with* the promises, which are inevitably broken by daun John's own mercantile practices. Broken ties and the pursuit of profit (no matter the social cost) demonstrate an encroaching mercantile ethos within the context of the tale. Moreover, it showcases Chaucer's own awareness of the growing trends in his society towards transaction-based social interactions.

In the previous chapter, the lyric *Mundus iste totus quoddam scaccarium est* was discussed, and it is also relevant to Chaucer's tale. The poet of this lyric has harsh words for the bishops, and by extension other members of the clergy, and their desire to accumulate wealth when they should be concerned with matters of the soul; recall that in the lyric the clergy "bark out against vices, but they / hand over sins for rent by a yearly payment" (32-33). In the *Shipman's Tale*, when the wife first comes to daun John for help, he is praying, yet he abandons this spiritual persona quickly. "Daun John was rysen

in the morwe also, / And in the gardyn walketh to and fro, / And hath his thynges seyde ful curteisly” (VII 89-93). In this context, “thynges” means devotions or prayers. This is the only reference to daun John’s spirituality in the entirety of the tale. Otherwise, he is in the process of making deals and aspiring to gain profit. He is an “officer” in his abbey of some kind, most likely a cellarer who sells wine from the priory at St. Denis. For example, “This noble monk, of which I yow devyse, / Hath of his abbot, as hym list, license, / By cause he was a man of heigh prudence / And eek an officer, out for to ryde, / To seen hir graunges and hire bernes wyde” (VII 62-6). Daun John’s interest in mercantile practices was not uncommon for monks and other clergy members at this time,⁵² and this characteristic of religious leaders invoked rebellious attitudes from the populace.

A more recent reading of the *Shipman’s Tale* situates the plot within the contexts of tithing, and mirrors the economic and spiritual frameworks that were commonplace in the fourteenth-century. David Coley observes that the only two values mentioned in the tale are 100*d* and 1,000*d*. Ten percent of 1,000*d* (the amount the merchant makes in Flanders) is 100*d*, the amount requested by daun John. Ten percent of an income is typically given over to the Church for the tithe. This has relevance with the Revolt. In the fourteenth-century the theory and practice of tithing was being questioned due to the vast amounts of wealth accumulating in religious orders. In the lyric *Ich herde men upo mold*, we are told that “Meni of religioun me halt hem ful hene [Many of religion they hold in

⁵² Note the Monk’s portrait in the *General Prologue*: “A Monk ther was, a fair for the maistrie, / An outridere, that lovede venerie, / A manly man, to been an abbot able” (I 165-7). In Hilton’s *Bond Men Made Free*, he explains that while Church wealth varied over the centuries (sometimes obtaining large endorsements, other times their wealth was met with hostility), by the fourteenth-century monasteries had acquired more land, and they began to act more like wealthy landowners in resources, power, and influence (51).

contempt]” (28). The heretical priest John Wycliffe argued against the practice of tithing, because it allowed clergy members to live extravagantly at the expense of their parishioners (Coley 463). Coley sees Wycliffe, the disgruntled parishioners, and the corrupt clergy as all contributing greatly to the 1381 Revolt (463-7), as does Steven Justice in *Writing and Rebellion* (234-8). Although, Justice later refined some of his arguments in a later article, “Religious Dissent, Social Revolt and ‘Ideology,’” in which he asserts that the idea of relating the Wycliffe Movement to the 1381 Rebellion is a historiographical problem, not a historical one, because there are simply no records to prove that there was a connection (205).⁵³ Yet, the urge to connect these two events remains strong. The issues with corruption and greed that were present in the governing institutions were also present in the clerical institutions.

The *Shipman’s Tale*, although a comical fabliau, shows the tendency towards wealth, and the deception that went along with this, that was prevalent in the higher ranks of the clergy. Take, for example, the response of Harry Bailly to the Shipman after the tale is done, who cautions the company not to make friends with a monk. He says, “The monk putte in the mannes hood an ape, / And in his wyves, eek, by Saint Austyn! / Draweth no monkes moore unto youre in,” effectively signaling that clerical members will quickly make fools out of everyone (VII 440-2). Although Coley’s reading of the *Shipman’s Tale* as a tithe is compelling, there is more to be said about the increasingly profit-driven society as a whole during the fourteenth-century. It remains relevant that the cuckold is the merchant. The tale blurs the line between who is considered a “merchant”

⁵³ Justice’s argument hinges on the tendency to associate “heretical” or “unorthodox” with “political rebellion,” and the way this is perhaps reductive, or simply not true for the fourteenth-century. In other words, the rebels could have been fervent supporters of the Catholic Church and also been active in the 1381 Rebellion. Furthermore, Wycliffe was an Oxford theologian and his views were perhaps unknown to the general public.

(someone who seeks out profit) and who is considered the “cuckold” (the duped). It is inevitably possible to be both: the merchant makes a profit in the urban spaces, but is unaware of the activities in his own home. The narrator attempts to both humanize the merchant and cast him as the individual most easily conned. Such an expansion of genre-norms and stock characters correlates with the expansion of an individual’s world view during Chaucer’s lifetime. The *Shipman’s Tale*, told by such a well-traveled character, indicates a growing awareness within society of the trans-European expanse of the market.⁵⁴ There is an ideological change from a society which previously relied upon kinship-ties, personal interactions, and personal relationships to carry out economic practices to the opposite: a society which requires the seeking of profit in order to create a personal relationship.

Chaucer’s *Shipman’s Tale* reflects the new mercantile ethos emerging in fourteenth-century Europe. Despite the fact that the tale does not contain material considered politically revolutionary, the tale nevertheless remains relevant to the Revolt. Just as important as taking stock of what is discussed in a text, is taking stock of what is unsaid. Silent in the tale are the people kept from these opportunities. The merchant, his wife, and the monk are already wealthy; meanwhile, those affected by the Ordinance of Labourers (issued in 1349), are experiencing wage-limits and a tightening of serfdom laws. Scholars have noted for many decades Chaucer’s curious silence on matters of the Revolt, aside from his direct reference in the *Nun’s Priests’ Tale* to “Jakke Straw and his meynee” (VII 3394). But Chaucer is far from silent. Rather than only present the reader

⁵⁴ The three locations mentioned in the tale—St. Denis, Flanders, and Bruges—are all important to the trade routes of Europe at this time. Flanders and Bruges both experience revolts of their own over the course of the medieval period. For more on this see, “*Takehan, Cokerulle, and Mutemaque: Naming Collective Action in the Later Medieval Low Countries*” by Jan Dumolyn and Jelle Haemers, in *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt*.

with overt allusions he interrogates larger, structural forces within his society. The *Shipman's Tale* exemplifies this by Chaucer's disruption of generic structures in order to show similar disruption in his own culture. These economic and social disruptions ultimately led to open rebellion; whether or not Chaucer intends for his tale to be "about" 1381, it inevitably brings to the surface parallel ideas about economic disparity.

Direct references, however, are also useful in considering how poets of the fourteenth-century conceived of revolt. The *Physician's Tale* contains a brief moment of public revolt towards the end of the tale. The majority of the action takes place within a courtroom, with a false bill demanding ownership of a serf: a situation many were familiar with in the late fourteenth-century. Scholars have often remarked upon the wooden nature of this tale's characters and plot. The *Physician's Tale* is, "simply, a bad piece of work no matter how we read it" (Delany, "Politics and Paralysis" 55); it is an example of Chaucer working "rather routinely" (Donaldson 927); or, it is a stock story under the influence of the *Legend of Good Women* (Middleton, "Physician's Tale" 27-30). Sheila Delany's comment that it is "simply, a bad piece of work" stems from her preoccupation with the aesthetic qualities (or lack thereof) of the tale. Indeed, it is difficult to disagree with Delany on this point: the tale is full of plot holes, flat characters, multiple themes that never seem to fully take root, and it lacks the quintessential spark that Chaucerians are accustomed to encountering in his work.

For many years, scholars were not sure what to make of such a tale. Decades ago, Tatlock, a prominent scholar who established the chronology of Chaucer's tales, sees it having political parallels to Chaucer's own time, but fails to expound upon what those "political parallels" are, merely that it was written between 1383 and 1390 (Boitani 165).

More recent scholarship provides more promising and productive readings of the tale, such as Samantha Katz Seal's approach of reading the Physician as a quasi-Jew, who is portrayed as being intelligent, but lacking moral virtue, explaining why Chaucer gives him such a morally-ambiguous tale.⁵⁵ Finally, and more to the point, Sheila Delany's article, "Politics and the Paralysis of Poetic Imagination in *The Physician's Tale*," highlights the ways in which the tale lacks dedication to the public voice compared to its analogues, which are far more revolutionary.⁵⁶

While Delany's argument is valid—the analogues *are* more focused on the Roman plebeian voices than Chaucer's version, thus they could be interpreted as more revolutionary—she perhaps labels the *Physician's Tale* as "depoliticized" too quickly ("Politics and the Paralysis" 49). The political elements at the end of the tale seem to rise up out of nowhere, and upon a first read one would never guess the ending in the context of the way the tale begins. The villain of the tale, the judge Apius, sees the virtuous Virginia and wants to own her. With the help of an enlisted *cherl* from the village, Claudius, he invents a plan to trick Virginia's father, the knight Virginius, into giving over his daughter. His method: a courtroom, a false bill, false accusations, and using the power of the consistory court to deliver the false verdict. If we consider this tale within the historical context of the corrupt judicial system, and the way it relates to the lyric *Ne mai lo lewed lued libben in londe*, it becomes clear that the politics of revolt are present, as is the power of the *vox populi*, and their ability to influence expected outcomes.

⁵⁵ Seal's article, "Reading Like a Jew: Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* and the Letter of the Law," is a compelling and unique reading of this tale. Drawing from medieval Christian depictions of Jewish literalism and materialism, she demonstrates the fear of the figure of the Jew in the "General Prologue" and throughout the *Physician's Tale*.

⁵⁶ Delany lists the analogues, beginning with Livy's version (which is mentioned by the Physician in the opening lines of the tale), as well as Gower's, Boccaccio's, and Jean de Meun's (*Romance of the Rose*) versions.

The wicked judge, who is referred to throughout the tale as the “fals juge,” sees Virginia and decides to take her, though he knows he would not be able to make her sin due to her virtue, and he must resort to trickery and ultimately claim her as his own, “legally” allowing him to rape her.⁵⁷ In *No mai lo lewed lued libben in londe*, the description of the consistory court judge could almost stand in as a Chaucerian description of Apius: “Furst ther sit an old cherl in a blake hure; / Of alle that ther sitteth, semeth best syre [First there sits an old churl in a black cap; / Of all who sit there, he seems most magisterial]” (19-20). He “seems” magisterial, but is not. Furthermore, in the first lines of the lyric the poet complains that nobody can hope to win in court unless you rely on trickery: “Ne mai no lewed lued libben in londe / Be he never in hyrt so haver of honed / So lerede us biledes. [No unlettered man may survive in the land / Unless he be always in court so craftily skilled / As the learned who lead us about]” (1-3). The characterization of a judge as “craftily skilled” maps neatly unto Apius. In the audience’s first encounter of Apius, his craftiness is revealed when he sees Virginia: “Anon the feend into his [Apius’] herte ran, / And taught hym sodeynly that he by slyghte / The mayden to his purpose wyne myghte” (VI 130-3). He knows he can win her “by slyghte,” or trickery. He hires the churl Claudius in town who is known “for subtil and for boold” (VI 141), and together they shape their “conspiracie / Fro point to point, how that his lecherie / Parfourned sholde been ful subtilly” (VI 149-151). The judge and Claudius are both described as “subtle” or crafty, characteristic of the way judges were perceived at this time.

⁵⁷ This is exemplified by his thoughts that “She was strong of freendes, and eek she / Confermed was in swich soverayn bountee / That wel he wiste he myghte hire nevere wyne / As for to make hire with hir body synne.” (VI 135-8).

Later, when Claudius takes Virginius to court (strange to have a churl successfully draw charges upon a knight), Claudius uses specific legal language to make his false case. He shouts the following to the judge:

To yow, my lord, sire Apius so deere,

Sheweth youre povre servant Claudius

How that a knyght, called Virginius,

Agayns the law, agayn all equitee,

Holdeth, expres agayn the wyl of me,

My servant, which that is my thral by right,

Which fro myn hous was stole upon a nyght,

Whil that she was ful yong; this wol I preeve

By witnesse, lord, so that it nat yow greeve (VI 178-186).

Claudius claims that Virginius has stolen Virginia from him when she was just a girl. Virginia is Claudius' "thral by right," and it does not matter that Virginia is the daughter of Virginius or that there is no proof to such a claim. What matters is the verdict, evidence or no evidence. The "witness" that Claudius claims to have in order to prove his case is never called. Neither Virginius nor Virginia are allowed to speak. The judge gives his ruling that "this cherl his servant [shall] have" (VI 199), thus quickly ending the trial.

In his book, *Peasants and Landlords in Later Medieval England*, E. B. Fryde discusses in detail the diverse kinds of trials that were heard in the years leading up to and after the Revolt of 1381. According to Fryde, the Ordinance of Labourers had a provision which gave justices the power to force any “able-bodied persons without property of their own or regular employment to enter into the service of employers chosen for them” (35). It was entirely plausible that an average person could be forced into serfdom. Such a demonstration of power by the landowning rulers attempted to halt new kinds of economic opportunities for what they considered “their” labor forces. Fryde notes two examples among many which tell of blatant unfair treatment given to free individuals. In both cases, the individual was deemed a serf, regardless of letters of manumission or the jury’s verdict.⁵⁸ Special juries were convened and loopholes were discovered by crafty judges to ensure that these people were kept as serfs, regardless of their free status (Fryde 26).⁵⁹

The corruption within the courts emerged out of the fear of a loss of power. With a growing demand for both higher wages and the abolishment of serfdom, the lower classes began to develop an awareness that their lives were filled with injustice. Landlords, the royal government, and the legal system were all working together, “trying to keep down wages of labourers and the exceptionally zealous enforcement of this

⁵⁸ Hilton defines a serf as “not only dependents of other men, in the sense that they were tenants of land which they did not own, but those who were restricted by law in various ways as to freedom of movement, freedom to buy and sell land and goods, freedom to dispose of their own labour, freedom to marry and found a family, and freedom to leave their property to heirs (55).

⁵⁹ The first case Fryde refers to was in 1356, in which a man, Adam le Bedel, was accused of having skipped out on his lord’s service. Both he and the jury (in multiple trials) claimed he was a free man, as his father had been. Regardless, the verdict was given that he had to return to serfdom. The jury that protected him was fined an enormous amount of £20. The second case in 1373, stated that Alice Comyn was a serf and must pay marriage fines, which she denied to pay previously due to her free status (26).

legislation was a major cause of the hostility to the legal system” (Fryde 29). The “hostility” that Fryde mentions, no doubt refers to the murder of Sir John Cavendish, the Chief Justice of the King’s Bench, which occurred during the Revolt (as well as the murders of many other officials). Fryde certainly makes a connection between the judicial and economic systems in the dialogue surrounding the Revolt. To be more specific, the gentry were able to maintain control of economic factors, including the keeping of serfs and fixing of wages.

Considering this historical context, the greed of the judge to keep Virginia as his thrall obtains new meaning. Apius says to himself, ““This mayde shal be myn, for any man!”” (VI 129). Additionally, when the narrator introduces Apius, he tells the audience that his name is *real*, demonstrating the authenticity of the tale: “So was his name, for this is no fable, / But knowen for historical thyng notable” (VI 155-6). Although told within the confines of a tale, this scenario was being played out in reality over and over again. Claudius’ bill is fictional, but many bills and accusations were also made up by judges and baronial lords who wanted to keep their workers relegated to their lands, regardless of the free status of those laborers.

Serfdom originated with Common Law (at the end of the twelfth-century) and the denial of royal justice, or protection, for the peasantry by the Norman rulers. Two hundred years later, many groups of people had no idea why they were serfs, merely that it was unjust and required modification (Fryde 8).⁶⁰ The rulings of the judges seemed arbitrary, and certainly not based on anything resembling justice. *Mundus iste totus*

⁶⁰ Fryde notes that the enforcement of serfdom varied through the decades; sometimes landowners were absent-minded enough (or did not care) to not enforce the laws strictly, and at other times it was very strict (12).

quoddum scaccarium est cautions against relying too heavily on a judge. A judge should move in a straight line because “in no case ought justice be omitted and shunted aside” (21), and yet this is exactly what happens. Because of their unfair rulings, justices were targets in the Revolt of 1381. In his “*Vox Populi* and the Literature of 1381,” David Aers discusses the use of all avenues to prevent the ruled from gaining access to higher incomes and more freedom. The new opportunities for wage increases encouraged “self-confidence and determination on the part of the ruled, while the governing classes inevitably met this threat to their incomes with the full range of resources at their disposal – political, legal and ideological” (Aers 433). There was violence that stemmed from the courtrooms in the form of unjust rulings and enforcement of new labor laws, and then subsequent violence inevitably found its way back there in the form of murders of court officials as retribution. In both the *Physician’s Tale* and *Ne mai lo lewed lued libben in londe*, the courtroom becomes a space of violent acts.

In the lyric, the violence is quick and metaphorical: the judges “stab with their pens on their parchment” (25), correlating their ability to read with their ability to inflict violence. Illiteracy is a fatal flaw because the judges will be crafty and insist on keeping the lower classes from their elitist knowledge. The speaker in *Ne mai lo lewed* illuminates another facet to the *Physician’s Tale* which has historical relevance. As a serf (or any member not in the ruling class) the opportunity for literacy was slim to nonexistent. Their illiteracy was frequently used against them in the court rooms, which utilized highly technical language. And so, even the potential for access to education and literacy is snuffed out. The speaking complains:

That Y ne mot me lede ther with mi lawe

On alle maner othes that heo me wulleth awe

(Heore boc ase unbredes),

Heo wendeth bokes unbrad,

Ant maketh men a moneth amad! (10-14).⁶¹

In these lines, the speaker is oppressed by his inability to testify for himself: he has been made mute. Mirrored in the *Physician's Tale* is this same idea: neither Virginia nor Virginius are allowed to defend themselves.

After Claudius relays the false accusations against Virginius, Virginius is shocked, and like the man in the lyric, left mute. The narrator describes him thus:

Virginius gan upon the cherl to biholde,

But hastily, er he his tale tolde,

And wolde have preeved it as sholde a knyght,

And eek by witnessing of many a wight,

That al was fals that seyde his adversarie,

This cursed juge wolde no thyng tarie,

Ne here a word moore of Virginius (VI 191-7).

⁶¹ "So that I may not testify for myself in my own defense / Against many sworn charges by which they'd subdue me / (As they censure with their book), / They turn over unclasped books, / And cause men to go mad for a month! (10-14)."

Virginius “wolde have preeved” the truth, but he isn’t allowed to. Hypothetically, he would have produced witnesses and pled his case, yet the judge refuses to listen. What Virginius has to say means nothing in the courtroom; the decision has already been made. Apius hands down the verdict that “The cherl shal have his thral, this I awarde” (VI 202). The second person to be silenced is Virginia. She is not even present in the courtroom and her father then hands down a sentence to *her*, making him a judge in his own right, and leaving her with no choice but to accept her own death: “O doghter...Take thou thy death, for this is my sentence. / For love and nat for hate, thou most be deed” (VI 221-5). She accepts her fate, and agrees to let him kill her instead of being enslaved and defiled by the judge. Virginius’ form of revenge is to take his daughter’s head to the courtroom, where he displays the outcome of Apius’ verdict.

The passage where Virginius returns to the court to showcase his daughter’s head is unexpectedly grisly in the framework of this particular tale, which has remained dialogue-heavy and lacking in detail, until this critical moment. Suddenly, there is extreme violence present in the courtroom: “Hir heed of smoot, and by the top it hente, / And to the juge he gan it to presente, / As he sat yet in doom in consistorie” (VI 255-7). After being confronted with the results of his verdict, the judge demands Virginius be hung for his refusal to give Virginia to Claudius. In a moment reminiscent of 1381, the townspeople, absent from the tale until this point, surge against Apius in a mass of righteous anger. There is no deliberation, no careful plotting on the part of the townspeople, just action:

But right anon a thousand peple in thraste,

To save the knyght, for routhe and for pitee,

For knowen was the false iniquitee.

The peple anon had suspect in this thyng,

By manere of the cherles chalangyng,

That it was by the assent of Apius (VI 260-5).

They go on to throw Apius in prison, where he commits suicide (VI 267). “A thousand people” is a large number to suddenly appear out of nowhere. Yet, twenty thousand people showed up in the streets of London in 1381, and it must have seemed rather sudden. From historical records, it is clear that the Revolt began in more rural areas, and slowly gained favor among the commoners, reaching its zenith in London. Yet, to an individual not “in the know,” the onslaught of twenty thousand people demanding the end of serfdom and the heads of royal counselors must have been shocking. Chaucer presents the reader this odd moment of large rebellion, hurriedly described in the last fifty lines of the tale. The thousand people which show up to express their discontent of Apius’ ruling could be an interpretation of the 1381 Revolt.

As Delany notes, compared to the analogues of this tale, the people are *not* a collective hero. She goes on to argue that the protestors at the end of the tale are “agents of justice and moral retribution, but must not be shown to act in their own legitimate interest, must not be allowed to ‘go too far,’ above all, must not emerge from the story as a genuinely sympathetic model for social action” (“Politics and Paralysis” 57). Her critique is a valid one; within what *could have* been possible for this tale, there is

something lacking. For instance, not a single noise is heard from the people in the last scene. Like Virginius, they too are silenced in the courtroom and they only have so much power on the outcome of events. Such a view of rebellious individuals is drastically different from the portrayal of peasants that other authors, such as Gower, construct. Scholars including Michael Sizer and Sebastian Sorbecki have produced enlightening scholarship about oral culture in the Middle Ages. The portrayal of peasants as noisy, beast-like, and tumultuous is one that Gower illustrates in his infamous *Vox clamantis*, a poetic interpretation of the Revolt (Sizer 11, Sorbecki 636). Contrarily, Chaucer's rebels are silent—there is no clamor and great noise.⁶² Does this, as Delany observes, dispel them as legitimate models for “social action”?

To answer this question, the actions of the mob at the end of the tale must be considered in the context of Chaucer's innovations with generic norms. Namely, interruption. Consider briefly the frame narrative of the *Canterbury Tales*, and the Miller's interruption of delineated social order. The pilgrims draw straws to determine who will tell the first tale, and conveniently the Knight wins. After he has completed his tale it should be the Monk next, if one is to follow societal hierarchies. Harry requests: “Now telleth ye, sir Monk, if that ye konne, / Somewhat to quite with the Knyghtes tale” (I 3118-9). Suddenly, the Miller, “dronken was al pale,” begins to cry out and swears, ““By armes, and by blood and bones, / I kan a noble tale for the nonnes, / With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale”” (I 3120-7). The Miller's interruption of the strict social order effectively overturns expectations. For the remainder of the pilgrimage, social order is not followed in any particular way. Chaucer's fondness for interruptions both adds a

⁶² The *Physician's Tale* interpretation stands in marked contrast to the *Nun's Priest's Tale* which is noisy and chaotic, discussed in the next chapter.

realistic dimension to his writing, and also translates onto figures like the Miller and the mob in the *Physician's Tale*.⁶³

By their sudden appearance, or interruption into the story, they derail an ending that would have had Virginius hung and Apius continuing on in his corrupt practices. As David Aers has noted, the *vox populi* (public voice) as a collective social agent is able to challenge structures of authority ("*Vox Populi*" 436). In the *Physician's Tale*, they do this through their abrupt revolt; they insert themselves into the action of the tale. Although this particular mob isn't heard actually speaking, they still have a voice in their *actions*. They effectively throw Apius in prison: "For which unto this Apius they gon / And caste hym in a prisoun right anon, / Ther as he slow hymself" (VI 267-9). They have plans to take revenge upon Claudius; Virginius spares him and the people agree, since Claudius was "bigyled" by the judge. As for "the remenant" of court officials, however, the people are not as understanding; they are all hung because of their "consentant of this cursednesse" (VI 276). And so, through their interruption into the plot, the crowd of people have their revenge on corrupt officials just as the rebels interrupted daily life in London that June of 1381, to have their revenge on all those who have wronged them, and all those guilty by association.

Chaucer is adept at establishing hierarchies in his literature, only to tear them down or disrupt them over the course of a text (Strom, "Social and Literary" 16).

Interruptions are one aspect of this, but another is that of reversal. Considering the

⁶³ Another famous Chaucerian interruption that is relevant to this discussion is found in *The Parliament of Fowls*. The interruption comes from lesser birds who disrupt the third tercel (or an eagle, a noble bird): "The goos, the cokkow, and the doke also / So creyde, 'Kek kek! kokkow! quek quek!' hye, / That thourgh myne eres the noyse went tho" (498-9). A few lines above, they also interrupt with jeering: "The noyse of foules for to ben delvyvered / So loude rong, 'Have done, and lat uswende!... / Com off!' they cried, 'allas, ye wol us shende! / Whan shal youre cursede plenyngge have an ende?'" (491-5).

authenticity of the tale's legal proceedings regarding serfdom, the reversal of social status for accuser and accused stands in marked contrast to this authenticity. Virginius, a knight, is the one being summoned to court while Claudius, a *churl*, is the one with the power to accuse. The plea to Apius by Claudius is an ironic statement: "Yeld me my thral, if that it be youre wille" (VI 189). As a commoner, Claudius would never have the kind of social power to even own a serf, let alone demand another man's daughter. This is only made possible by the backing of the judge, which could indicate the absurd amount of power consistory court judges had in determining the outcome of cases: it is enough power to grant a *churl* his request for a knight's daughter. Meanwhile, the knight Virginius, who would have had more clout in the traditional hierarchy, is rendered silent in the courtroom.⁶⁴ In this way, the tale is rather more socially conscious than previously thought. Chaucer's use of stock plotlines (the story of female martyrdom, the story of a false judge) is complicated by his additions, subtractions, reversals, and interruptions. *These* are the moments of rebellion: generic and literary rebellion. Through upending genre expectations he highlights his own culture turned upside down.

After considering these two tales it is apparent that Chaucer was an active interpreter of his cultural moment, and of rebellion. As with the *Harley 2253* lyrics, these two tales contain historical parallels which demonstrate the problems facing the lower classes during the fourteenth-century. The role of the financial transaction, and how it both creates and dominates personal relationships, is the subject of the *Shipman's Tale*. The *Physician's Tale* harbors topical references to the corruption within governing bodies

⁶⁴ In Livy's story, "The History of Appius and Virginia" from the *History of Rome*, the proceedings to determine if Virginia is a slave are entirely public, with many voices chiming in to defend her. The most vocal defender is her betrothed, Icilius, because her father Virginius is in a nearby army camp. Virginius eventually makes it to the court and also defends his daughter vocally ("The History of Appius and Virginia"). The absence of voices in the *Physician's Tale* is therefore one of Chaucer's inventions.

and one interpretation of the 1381 Revolt. In both tales, Chaucer employs either interruptions, role-reversals, or generic reconfigurations in order to encompass the growing social and political problems his society was facing. By extension, these reconfigurations of genre allow for untold stories. For instance, the mob which silently, yet powerfully come to Virginius' aid, their quick consensus to act "right anon," and their demand for a real form of justice. Within those last fifty lines lie a new story presented for readers' interpretation. This leads us to Chaucer's shining gem of his *Canterbury Tales*. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* is a kaleidoscope of meaning and symbolism, and it also contains Chaucer's only direct reference to the 1381 Revolt.

CHAPTER THREE

THE POLITICS OF INTERPRETATION IN CHAUCER'S *NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE*

In his book *Disseminational Chaucer*, Peter Travis observes that Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* has a "plethora of self-interpreting philosophemes" (3). Derek Pearsall calls it "elusive," saying that "the life and wisdom it contains are of a kind that must necessarily defy formulation" ("A Rereading" 12). At the height of Chaucer's artistic skill lies the shining and crafted masterpiece that is the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. Filled with idiomatic wisdom, the tale inevitably parodies itself in addition to parodying a multitude of other texts, historical events, mythic pasts, and medieval medicinal knowledge. Chaucer's tale of Chauntecleer and Pertelote is a literary text that has inspired scholars to continuously interpret and re-interpret it. In the past decade, this inspiration has contributed to the argument that the *Nun's Priest's Tale* may be engaging with the very *concept of interpretation* (Travis 4). In a similar vein, the Revolt of 1381 has become a touchstone of historiography, demonstrating the slippery slope of historical interpretation. Accounts of the Revolt are found in chronicles, written by the same people who were targets of the rebels. Essentially, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the Revolt of 1381 are both *texts* that can be read and interpreted, and they have a connection to one another. I argue that Chaucer's allusion to Jack Straw is not the only element of the tale that references the Revolt. Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* is inescapably political, beyond the confines of the Ricardian allegory often discussed by scholars; it interacts with the ideology of the peasantry, economics, and revolt. This chapter will explore four elements of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* that go beyond political allegory or intellectual allusion: the peasant widow and her tenancy, the theft of Chauntecleer, the noisy peasant community at the end, and

the allusion to the Fall of Troy can all be approached with renewed focus on the inherently social and political nature of this tale.

The *Nun's Priest's Tale* acts as a prism, through which one can see multiple points of interpretation. The political allegory present within the tale has not gone unnoticed, and these readings mark out the princely Chauntecleer as a figure for Richard II. Indeed, the name “kyng Richard” appears in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* (VII 3348), as well as the narrator's comparison of his “storie...trewe” to what a “rethor” could compose “for a sovereyn notabilitee” (VII 3211, 3209). In Ann Astell's book, *Political Allegory in Late Medieval England*, she spends considerable time establishing this connection. Astell's analysis of the Ricardian allegory hinges on the way Chauntecleer is represented: “as a royal figure who listens to flattery and takes wommanish [sic] counsel—charges that were frequently directed against Richard II” (*Political Allegory* 109).⁶⁵ The argument can be made for a political allegory. Richard's love of flattery, the diatribe on receiving good counsel, and the reference to “Jakke Strawe and his meynee” (VII 3394) which Astell remarks is “to offer a key for the discovery of Chaucer's carefully constructed allegory of the king” (113). Astell's reading is thorough in its historical research, and tidy in its conclusion. And yet, while the political allegory is certainly *present* in the text, it also *excludes* other elements at the expense of rigidly defining the allegory. The peasant widow, and the community that comes to her aid at the end of the tale, are not mentioned in any political allegory. Astell's explanation of the Revolt reference as only relating to the Ricardian allegory reduces the presence of the

⁶⁵ She also explains the importance of St. Kenelm for both Chauntecleer and Richard. Chauntecleer claims to have read the *Life of St. Kenelm* and it is of great importance to him. Richard II was crowned King on St. Kenelm's feast day and the public associated Richard with Kenelm. Chaucer's audiences would have understood the relationship that Chaucer establishes between Chauntecleer and Richard (*Political Allegory* 109).

widow and her community to a subplot, with Richard at the center; this contributes to the false idea that “political” must equal “monarchical” or “kingly,” instead of encompassing a variety of groups of people. More rigid medieval allegories often do not allow for nuance nor alternative modes of interpretation, contrary to the allegory found in this tale.⁶⁶ The tale allows for other kinds of readings in addition to the allegorical one; readings that Chaucer perhaps did not intend when he composed it.

Due to its openness for interpretation, the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* has encouraged scholarship from nearly every discipline and facet, and the influence of 1381 has not gone unnoticed. Recent studies by Sylvia Federico and Vincent Rotkiewicz note the feminine revolt that takes place within the *Canterbury Tales*. Federico highlights the gendered narrative within the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* in her insightful article, “The Imaginary Society: Women in 1381,” a study that names the women of the rebellion and the instrumental role they played before, during, and after the event. She argues that the rebellion at the end of the tale is specifically *feminine*, and the space of female domesticity is transformed into a space of rebellion. Rotkiewicz’s “Reimagining revolt: 1381, feminine authority, and the Wife of Bath” connects the Revolt not to the tale of Chaucer but to the Wife of Bath’s aggression towards clerical texts and the way this parallels the rebels’ aggression towards texts during the Rising.⁶⁷ Both of these critical studies use “imaginary” to conceptualize of feminine communities in the Revolt—communities which were largely (though not entirely) omitted from the “official” records of 1381, but were nonetheless crucial to its realization. While chronicles and poets did

⁶⁶ Sheila Delany, in *Medieval Literary Politics: Shapes of Ideology* argues that earlier forms of allegory were stricter than forms like Chaucer’s and Dante’s, suggesting that later medieval allegories can be read more loosely, with the option to *not* read the tale as an allegory (*Medieval Literary* 48).

⁶⁷ Rotkiewicz also characterizes the Wife’s desire as feminine power, and the ways these attributes are considered a rebellion towards patriarchal structures (89).

often use women as symbols as a way to come to terms with the destruction that happened, the real women involved have not been considered until the last decade (Federico 160). These two studies are important to the discussion in this chapter because of their positioning of the imaginary versus the real events.

Even in the years following the Revolt the events are often thought of as imaginary in the chronicles, with the invocation of mythical references and even fabricated rebel activity. Individuals would make up accounts of their neighbors' "rebellious" practices during June of 1381 in order to settle old scores (Federico 162). There is no way to know the actual validity of the records, chronicles, or personal accounts that might have been written in the aftermath.⁶⁸ Even seemingly straightforward questions—such as "What were the aims of the Revolt?"—are challenging to answer; it is, in the words of L. R. Poos, a "synthetic analysis" that attempts to assign priority to the main impulses of the Revolt (Federico 160). All that remains is *interpretation*. This chapter is concerned with one interpretation of the event, found in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. Interrogating literary texts can bring awareness of how poets remembered the Peasants' Revolt in their own time. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* can be added to this list of chronicles, poems, reflections, pardon lists, and tax tallies, as a text both fabricated (imaginary and constructed) and representative of its historical moment.

To be more precise, the social representation Chaucer is often esteemed for—his realistic portrayals of multiple social classes, his lifelike characterization, and his affinity for societal allusions—is nonetheless a fabricated representation, and thus infused with

⁶⁸ According to Federico, even the list of pardons released by Richard II and his councilors most likely contained names of people who *purchased* pardons preemptively, in order to protect themselves in the event someone accused them of being a rebel, regardless if they were actually active in the Revolt (163).

his own interpretation of the world he is existing in. Texts, as David Aers argues, are “immersed in history, are social acts” (*Chaucer* 2). Frederic Jameson in his *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* takes this concept even further by stating that any interpretation of text cannot escape the political interpretation; that literary texts are predetermined to *always* be political (17). Chaucer’s fabricated, representative act of tale-telling is quintessentially social and historical. Therefore, to read the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is to in some ways read the Revolt of 1381.

It cannot be said that scholars have neglected to study the moment of revolt in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. Much scholarship has been produced that focuses on the direct connection Chaucer makes between peasants, rebellion, and noise. For example, Michael Sizer’s essay, “Murmur, Clamor, and Tumult: The Soundscape of Revolt and Oral Culture in the Middle Ages” uses the Jack Straw allusion as a focal point for discussing associations in the medieval mind between unpleasant noise and moral turmoil. Likewise, Peter Travis’ chapter on the tale, “The Noise of History” further establishes Chaucer’s own interest in the history of sound and music as corresponding to societal flourishing or ruin.⁶⁹ Sebastian Sorbecki explores the intertextuality between Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, Gower’s *Vox Clamantis*, and the 1381 Poll Tax. His article, “A Southwark Tale” discusses the emphasis placed on peasants making raucous noise; Gower’s text is notoriously cruel to the lower classes, characterizing them as beast-like (Sorbecki 631).

⁶⁹ Travis cites other thinkers from antiquity that are referenced in the tale and their thoughts about the correlations between music and society. Two examples further articulate this point. Cicero writes about *concordia* in social hierarchy, or a pleasing harmony of “unlike individuals” including the lowest, middle, and highest classes. Augustine builds upon Cicero’s explanation by including the music of the heavens into societal structures (203-4).

While Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* takes on many of the attributes of a beast fable, his approach is not to dehumanize people by relating their noise to animals, but rather to *humanize* the animals.⁷⁰ In her essay "The Peasant's Revolt: Cock-Crow in Gower and Chaucer," Ann Astell notes that the sound of revolt signals the "passing away of a familiar social order" ("The Peasants Revolt" 53). She also explores the interaction between Chaucer, Gower, and noise, but with the added interest in Chaucer's own authorial self-definition he seems to be positing in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* (60). The works of these scholars are productive in what they set out to accomplish: contextualizing this uproarious moment of revolt within the literary sphere. Although, studies on the communal aspect of sound have not been as prevalent in scholarship. For the remainder of this chapter, I will explore the community-building potential that sound possesses in the tale, the economic parameters of the widow's tenancy, the theft of Chauntecleer, and the allusions to mythical Troy—all of which contribute to the assertion that the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is more political than has been previously suggested. Turning first to the peasant widow and her tenancy, the importance of the animals to the farm and to the widow's livelihood becomes clear. When this is stolen from her, she rebels.

The tale begins with classic English pastoral imagery of a country cottage and an old peasant widow.⁷¹ Framing Chauntecleer and Pertelote's lively and informed debate

⁷⁰ Federico succinctly explains this relationship: "Chaucer humanizes the henhouse, while Gower dehumanizes the *rustici*. And where Chaucer shows a small landholder responding to the cries of her tenants, Gower emphasizes servants rising up unnaturally against their masters" (177). This is contrary to Derek Pearsall's view in his critical biography of Chaucer, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* where he argues Chaucer most likely felt outright contempt for the rebels, exemplified by the Jack Straw reference (145).

⁷¹ Summarizing decades of scholarship, Peter Travis lists the various generic categories the *Nun's Priest's Tale* has been marked as: "In addition to a beast fable, it has been defined as a sermon, an *exemplum*, a comedy, a tragedy, a tragicomedy, a satire, an apyllion, a mock epic, a romance, a fabliau, even a fictional *poème à clef*" (8). Yet, to anyone who reads the tale, none of these categories are *quite* correct; inevitably, an exception can be found to omit it from one genre or the other.

about the nature of dreams is the brief narrative of the peasant widow who owns both the animals. The entirety of the tale takes place within the boundaries (excepting when everyone breaks loose from these boundaries during the fox chase) of this widow's yard; what we can assume to be a tenancy. The narrator begins the tale with a description of her home, painting a picture of a virtuously frugal woman. She is a "povre wydwe, somdeel stape [advanced] in age" who lives in a "narwe cotage" (VII 2821-2). Since she became a widow she has led a simplistic life:

In pacience ladde a ful symple lyf,

For litel was her catel and hir rente.

By housbondrie of swich as God hire sente

She foond [provided for] hirself and eek hir doghtren two.

Thre large sowes hadde she, and namo,

Three keen [cows], and eek a sheep that highte [called] Malle (VII 2826-31).

The widow lives a life as a tenant (she pays little "rente"), most likely an allocated plot of land she is allowed to work with her two daughters. It can be understood from this passage that the widow is responsible for several animals. As such, these animals provide her with a source of income. Indeed, other than her small cottage, they are her only possessions of value. Using a peculiar word, "housbondrie" or husbandry, to characterize the widow's work, the narrator immediately places her in a position of virtuous poverty. The OED defines "husbandry" in this context as "careful management; employment of a thing sparingly and to the best advantage; frugality, providence, thrift, economy"

(“husbandry”). Through careful husbandry, she maintains economic control over her plot of land and by extension what it can produce.

Views of poverty during the medieval period were complex, as was discussed in Chapter One. The Church and laity recognized that Christ and his Apostles were poor, owned no property, and shared whatever they had—therefore poverty and virtue were connected. Yet, there is also a portrayal of the poor as lecherous, idle, and prone to mischief. Recall the lines from the lyric *Mundus iste totus quoddam scaccarium est* about the pawns, or the poor. The speaker says “The PAWNS are the poor and humble who, in advancing, traverse two squares in a / straight line because so long as a person remains poor, he always lives in a direct / fashion in his simplicity and poverty” (34-7).⁷² If he takes more than necessary, he then moves “at an angle” and is no longer virtuous (38). The poor are characterized in this lyric as having lecherous tendencies, “always taking with false oaths, flattery, or lies” (39).⁷³ Both representations of the poor are problematic: the reverence towards poverty can easily be coopted by the ruling class in order to argue for the continuation of serfdom; that is somehow “rightful.” Meanwhile, views on idleness place blame on lower class individuals who in many cases are denied higher wages, and so they must look elsewhere for resources. Viewing the widow as an *exemplum* of modest living, her “husbandrie” falls into the ideological myth that it is her “rightful place” to be poor. Unlike individuals who elect to join the clergy and live a life of poverty, she has no choice in the matter. She only has her small tenancy; she must tend her animals and land well, because her and her daughters’ survival depends on it. Yet,

⁷² “PEDINI pauperculi sunt qui, incedendo, duos punctos pertranseunt directos quia dum pauper manet, in sua simplicitate et paupertate semper directe vivit” (34-7).

⁷³ “...semper capiendo cum falsis iuramentis, vel adulationibus, seu mendaciis obliquat...” (39).

there is an alternative; instead, one can view the widow *not* as an *exemplum* but rather as a rebel-in-waiting.

In previous versions of this tale there is no poor widow, signifying that Chaucer made a conscious choice to have the owner of Chauntecleer be both a woman and impoverished. One analogue to the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is *Roman de Renart*, a well-known beast epic in Chaucer's lifetime. In this version, the owner of Chauntecleer, Constant de Noues, is a very wealthy peasant, with a well-stocked farm.⁷⁴ This is in stark contrast to the widow with a small house and few possessions. She has nothing in abundance like Constant de Noues. Her landholding—including house, animals, and workable land—must be a viable economic unit. The “viability” of a peasant landholding was determined by what that landholding could produce (and reproduce, in the form of offspring), according to Rodney Hilton in his chapter on the medieval peasant economy (*Bond Men* 38). It is critical that her “yeerd, enclosed al aboute / with stikkes, and a drye dych withoute” produce an income for her and her two daughters (VII 2847-8). Furthermore, Hilton explains that the belief that products of labor and possessions remain on the landholding was deeply instilled in peasant communities. He states that:

Linked with the wish to keep the family labour on the family land was a belief that the product of that labour should remain in the possession of the labourers for their subsistence and to provide, by the sale of the surplus, for such extra needs as could be satisfied only by exchange (40).

⁷⁴ The full description from the analogue is as follows: “Constant de Noues, an extremely wealthy peasant, lived just by the farmyard in a very well-stocked house with a rich supply of hens and capons. There was a great deal of this and that: salted meat, hams and bacon, and he had an abundance of corn. He was in a splendid situation; for his orchard was very productive, with many fine cherries and all kinds of fruit, apples and so forth” (Correale 456). The description continues, elaborately describing his property. Analogue found in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales, Volume 1*, edited by Robert Correale.

Exemplified by Hilton and the opening of the tale, it is clear that animals are considered a valuable resource for peasant communities; in some cases, the difference between a productive farm and starvation. In the tale, the widow has a possession valued above all other animals: Chauntecleer. She is upheld for her thriftiness and he is valorized for his sparkling beauty.

Chauntecleer receives a full *blazon* by the narrator. Several lines are devoted to his lovely crowing voice: “In al the land, of crowyng nas his peer. / His voys was murier than the murie orgon” (VII 2850-1). His awareness of time is glorified: “By nature he knew ech ascencioun / Of the equynoxial of thilke toun [By nature he knew each ascension of the equinox, every twenty-four hours]” (VII 2855-6). The most lines are dedicated to his physical appearance:

His coomb was redder than the fyn coral,

And batailled as it were a castel wal;

His byle was blak, and as the jeet it shoon;

Lyk asure were his legges and his toon [toes];

His nayles whitter than the lylve flour,

And lyk the burned gold was his colour (VII 2859-64).

His princely description contains a number of jewels and gemstones including coral, jet, azure, and gold.⁷⁵ The widow’s yard is a simple place, but Chauntecleer is her single

⁷⁵ Because of the abundance of jewels, this description is used as support for the allegorical reading of Chauntecleer as Richard II.

jewel: he is the prized possession, a beacon of beauty on the farm. She has no actual jewels or gold to speak of; he stands in for these. Additionally, the narrator tells us that Chauntecleer and the hens have a perch in the widow's hall in her home: "As Chauntecleer among his wyves alle / Sat on his perche, that was in the halle, / And next hym sat this faire Pertelote" (VII 2883-5). Clearly, her animals hold places of honor. Disparate descriptions of the widow and Chauntecleer only emphasize her poverty and his vitality, her frugality and his pomposity. The stately description of Chauntecleer shows his prominence on the farm, and contextualizes the revolt from the widow when he is taken from the "yeerd" by the fox: it is as if a priceless gem has been stolen.

To add perspective to the widow's revolt, it would be beneficial to recall the lyrics from Chapter One. In Chapter One I discussed the heartache felt by peasant communities when their means of production were taken from them; either sold to pay the taxes or stolen from various collection officials. Recall the lines from *Ich herde men upo mold*: "Whose hath eny god, hopeth he nout to holde, / Bote ever the levest we leoseth alast. [Whoever has any goods, he hopes not to hold on to them / But always the dearest possessions we lose in the end]" (10-11). From the same lyric: "Thus me pileth the pore ant pyketh ful clene; / The ryche me raymeth withouten eny ryht. [Thus they plunder the poor and pick them quite clean; / The rich extort without any right]" (24-25). From *Dieu, roy de magesté*: "E vendre fet commune gent / Vaccas, vas, et pannum. [And it forces common folk to sell / Cows, utensils, and clothing]" (27-8). And most poignant for this discussion: "Seththe he mi feire feh fatte y my folde— / When Y thenke o mi weole, wel neh Y wepe! [Since then they took my fair fattened livestock from my fold / When I think of my possessions, well night I weep!]" (*Ich herde* 64-5). The speaker in the

lyric laments the loss of his animals; they are crucial for his own sustenance. The Revolt was also an intensely personal and domestic issue, involving crises of identity amongst the laboring classes. These passages from the lyrics demonstrate that the laborer and his or her means of production, such as land and animals, have a tight bond that contributes to conceptions of identity. This perspective can be mapped onto the peasant widow in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. Chauntecleer is stolen by a fox, not by tax collectors like in the lyrics. Yet, the principle is the same. The reaction of the widow, daughters, and what can be assumed to be neighbors to Chauntecleer's capture is vivid.

Upon hearing the cries of the hens, the widow and her daughters run out of the house and immediately begin pursuing the fox:

'Out! Harrow and weylaway!

Ha, ha! The fox!' and after hym they ran,

And eek with staves many another man.

Ran Colle oure dogge, and Talbot and Gerland,

And Malkyn, with a dystaf in hir hand;

Ran cow and calf, and eek the verray hogges,

So fered for the berkyng of the dogges

And shoutyng of the men and wommen eeke

They ronne so hem thoughte hir herte breeke (VII 3375-88).

It is not the peasant widow alone who pursues the fox, but the entire community, including animals. The theft of one animal causes a massive uproar. The reaction of the peasants both intensifies the mock-epic qualities of the tale and demonstrates the vital importance of animals to a peasant community. Additionally, it demonstrates the importance of peasant *communities* as a whole. Indeed, “what provided the best protection for peasants, rich and poor, free and unfree, was the strength of common action in the local communities. This...was the starting point of the peasant movements (Hilton 61). Despite the view that scholars have typically held towards this passage (that it is parodying Gower’s *Vox Clamantis*, and ultimately comparing the peasants to animals), the running of the peasants and animals together shows solidarity and strength. The “basic organisms of peasant communities—the family holding, the hamlet, the village—were deeply rooted, and had...common practices and a consciousness of their own interest” (Hilton 29). Their group reaction to the theft of Chauntecleer mirrors the communal action of the rebels in June of 1381.

Jameson argues that society and politics do not only resonate within literary texts, but that literary texts are always political; that narrative itself is a social act. Text and narrative often go beyond authorial intent; they produce social acts of their own accord. The peasant community at the end of the tale is representative of the same communities that rose up against oppressive forces. Ideas of community engagement and rebellion are not only present within the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, they are also *socially* symbolic. There is an element even within Chaucer’s own interpretation that cannot understand rebel activism, yet nonetheless he unconsciously reproduces it in narrative form. The noise of

the peasants can further articulate this point: described in the passage, it only seeks to unify the peasants and make real their rebellion.

The chase scene continues; men and women are shouting and yodeling, dogs are barking, bees are swarming, and ducks are crying. The narrator then makes the infamous comparison between the peasant sounds and Jack Straw and his rebel bands:

So hydous was the noyse – a, benedictee! –

Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee

Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille

Whan that they wolden any Flemyng kille,

As thilke day was maad upon the fox.

Of bras they broughten bemes, and of box,

Of horn, of boon, in which they blewe and powped,

And therewithal they skriked and they howped.

It semed as that hevene sholde fall (VII 3393-3401).

Included in this uproar are human voices, animal voices, and even the addition of instruments like the trumpets made of brass and box-wood. From this passage, three layers of interpretation emerge. Firstly, and most obviously, is the comparison Chaucer makes between the noise of the fox chase to that of the Peasants' Revolt, drawing a correlation between the rebels and the variety of animal sounds expressed here in the

passage. Like many aspects of the Middle Ages, even sounds had specific moral, religious, and social meanings. Peasants were frequently characterized as making too much noise and disturbing the peace, marking them as individuals with no morals (Sizer 10). At various points, the Froissart account of the events in London describes the rebels as devils. For example, “For some time these unhappy people shouted and cried so loud, as though all the devils of hell had been among them” (Dobson 189). Their noisiness is attributed to their fiendishness, and vice versa.

Yet, there are two other layers to this narrative moment: one within the context of the tale and one relating to the Revolt as an interpreted historical moment. Within the context of the tale, the peasants’ noise is a provoked response from the theft of Chauntecleer, who is an integral piece of the farm’s functioning. It is not questioned whether the community will assist or not—there are no deliberations and debates like in the rest of the story—they are one organism and their cries are representative of this. According to Sizer, cries were a way to “express solidarity, unanimity, and anonymity” during the late medieval period, when most groups of people could not write down their dissatisfaction with governing bodies (Sizer 16). In other words, it is precisely their noisiness which creates a community that has political agency. Again, from the Froissart chronicle, the depiction of rebels as criers, yet this time “they cried all with one voice” (Dobson 188). They are a unified force; organized, in common, and strong. It is this common voice which gives them political agency.

The last layer to the “Jakke Strawe” interpretation is one that takes place in the larger context of the 1381 Revolt. Peter Travis delineates the abundance of musical allusions that Chaucer utilizes in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* and how these allusions

ultimately produce a text that is preoccupied with harmony and its counterpart, discord (201-3). Contributing to this is the peasant rebellion at the end of the tale, in which the world seems turned upside down. Chaucer's remembrance of the Revolt characterizes the peasants as disturbers of the peace, which then causes tremendous political and social upheaval. However, the noise the peasants make at the theft of Chauntecleer can be considered as incredibly powerful and unifying. Because sound is at once striking and ephemeral, it has the capacity to cause change and allows "for the expression of discontent while leaving an elusive and anonymous target" (Sizer 21).

The depiction of revolutionary cries differs significantly from similar sounds employed in other activities not associated with critiquing rulers. The medieval principle of *vox populi, vox Dei* (the voice of the people is the voice of God) is frequently used by authors to articulate "perceived moral and social decay" (Sizer 18). In other words, if the people are in an uproar, there is something seriously wrong with the status of society. There is a duality, then, between recognizing the cries of peasants as being symbolic of larger societal issues, and fearing peasant or lower class cries because they signal an end to that same society. Particularly negative depictions of peasants as beast-like are clearly motivated out of fear of the possibility of widespread, influential revolution. If one can control the soundscape of an environment, one can have political control. This is what occurred during the Revolt, when thousands of rebels disrupted the peace of their cities. Such disruption was inevitably described in poetry and chronicles; one event medieval thinkers often looked to when imagining a disrupted society was the Fall of Troy.

The final element of the tale that hearkens back to the Revolt is the narrator's allusion to the Fall of Troy towards the end of the tale. Referring to the mythic past was a

common trope in medieval literature and philosophy, and such references go beyond merely seeing similarities between one's own time and the past.⁷⁶ The fourteenth-century English obsession with Troy has roots in the firmly held belief that London was founded by Brutus, who was descended from Trojan kings. Believing Troy to have been the greatest civilization to have existed, the English fashioned themselves as progenies of a mythic past. London was the New Troy. "New Troy," like the 1381 Revolt, refuses to have one singular meaning or interpretation. In her book *Chaucerian Conflict*, Marion Turner describes New Troy as the "ideological concept of civic progress, manifested in the Janus-like image of New Troy, [it] was a potent sociopolitical tool in late fourteenth-century London" (Turner 56). It is a shining city on a hill: an ordered, utopian, productive place. While Troy is symbolic of the greatness of human potential, at the same time it also symbolizes the tragedy that can befall a great civilization. When Troy is mentioned in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* it acts as a substitution for the city of London. The glorious splendor of Troy is not mentioned, however; only the inevitability of its destruction.

When the "col-fox, ful of sly iniquitee, / That in the grove hadde woned yeres three" enters the narrative with his scheme to eat Chauntecleer, the action is interrupted by the narrator to caution against deceivers (VII 3215-6). The narrator continues, calling the fox a "false mordroure, lurkyng in thy den" (VII 3226) and calls him "Greek Synon, / That broughtest Troye al outrely to sorwe!" (VII 3328-9).⁷⁷ Astell observes that these

⁷⁶ The coexistence of multiple "times" happening simultaneously, versus the finite, sequential happening of events was a subject of much debate during the fourteenth-century. Paul Strohm summarizes this idea as it relates to literary imagination: "An attitude toward time is a precondition of narrative, with different conceptions of time encouraging different narrative forms (*Social Chaucer* 110). Medieval thinkers associated their own time with that of the Ancients, and saw many similarities between their world and the civilizations of the past, such as Troy. Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is set during the Fall of Troy.

⁷⁷ Synon is also mentioned in more detail in Chaucer's *House of Fame* where he is blamed for the destruction of Troy because of his lies (*House of Fame* 152-161). There are other moments in the tale that

references to Troy reflect on the Ricardian allegory: Richard II was waylaid by false flatterers and deceivers, and as a result of this he falls from grace in the same way Troy was destroyed partly from internal discord (*Political Allegory* 113). She establishes the parameters of the allegory as it relates to Richard and his own false deceivers in his court, but not as it relates to London as a whole. This is the other element to the Trojan allusion.

Invoking Trojan mythology would immediately signal to readers that London is going to fall. The cries of the hens that follow Chauntecleer's capture are compared to the long-suffering widows of Troy:

Certes, swich cry ne lamentacion

Was nevere of ladyes maad whan Ylion [Troy]

Was wonne, and Pirrus with his streite swerd,

Whan he hadde hent kyng Priam by the berd,

And slayn hym, as seith us *Eneydos* (*Aeneid*),

As mayden alle the hennes in the clos,

Whan they had seyn of Chauntecleer the sighte (VII 3355-61).

Chauntecleer is suddenly ripped from the peaceful and intellectually-stimulating environment of the farmyard. His pontificating about dreams and their significance now seems absurd to the reader, as he is carried off easily by a fox, like any normal farmyard

refer to Troy, as well: Chauntecleer tells the story of Andromache's premonition of Hector's death to solidify his case for dreams (VII 3141-8) and the narrator compares Chauntecleer to "Kyng Priam" (VII 3358).

animal. Though of course this is *not* just a normal farmyard, it is a London in miniature; the conceptualization of New Troy rendered in narrative form. The hens are crying and the peasants are rebelling because Chauntecleer has been so easily deceived, and as a result their entire world falls.⁷⁸ It is not just the stolen animal from the widow's tenancy, but also the stolen dream of an orderly society, which causes such a massive tumult.

Turner argues that New Troy was an "emblem of social fantasy" (58). And yet, Troy always falls. After the 1381 Revolt, this social fantasy was destroyed, giving rise to apocalyptic imaginings in the chronicles that followed. Chaucer's use of the Fall of Troy is in this same vein of conceptualization. A society defines itself upon the myths that it creates, and alternately destroys. The Revolt caused a complete upheaval of "normal" social and political structures. The "sociopolitical tool" of New Troy suddenly is no longer viable, as demonstrated in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* by Chauntecleer's fall from head of the farmyard, the peasant widow's loss of her valued possession, and the community's uproar at such a loss. More specifically, Chaucer's invocation of Trojan mythology *is* his interpretation of the Revolt. It is an imaginative reality. His remembrance of the event is realized in a text already imbued with so many literary and historical allusions: the Revolt is buried, but nonetheless it is present.

An earlier point clarifies this idea. Texts are both fabricated and representative—and so it is with Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*. While there are moments which are clearly fabricated, crafted allusions to the 1381 Revolt—such as "Jakke Strawe and his

⁷⁸ As Federico argues, it is a specifically *feminine* revolt (the widow, her daughters, and the hens). In poetic interpretations, chronicles, and even official records of the Revolt, feminine imagery is often invoked to explain the chaos. These texts use women as a way to "describe the social and political causes and consequences of the rebellion," because like representations of peasants, women were seen as both powerful and powerless (174). Such is the case in the passage above, as well.

meyne” and the peasant and animal cries—there are other moments which are representative of a cultural moment. The tale is an interpretive magpie. As Travis states, it “remains remarkably unresponsive to our golden spangled critical ambitions” (4). Likewise, conceptualizing of the Peasants’ Revolt is “tricky historical terrain” that has “stimulated a rich variety of interpretation” (Pearsall, “Interpretive Models” 63). The political interpretations of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* presented in this chapter has revealed buried, yet substantial relationships to the Revolt of 1381. Although we can never know Chaucer’s true intentions, the tale nevertheless provides moments where peasant and rebel communities can be recuperated, and their intentions explored. Economically, the beginnings of the revolt are there in the peasant widow’s tenancy. In their immediate unity and assistance to the widow, the peasant community in the tale parallels the rebels who came together from various towns and counties to express their discontent. Finally, the Fall of New Troy signifies the passing away of an older order of society.

CONCLUSION

Texts, both literary and historical, do not exist in a stagnant state. We are always interpreting them and reinterpreting them; they are dynamic, living organisms that change over time. At the same time they are entirely of their own historical moment, needing the support of historicism to *allow* for productive interpretation: this is their dual nature. The method of this style of reading is one that reveals alternative narratives. In the *Harley* manuscript, the political poetry reveals that there is discontent in society; as well as anger, confusion, and attempts to navigate the new economic climate in what was once a feudal society. Yet, there is also strength and unity in the poetry; a strong sense of identity with one's land, animals, family, and community. As Rodney Hilton so compellingly argues in many of his works, peasant communities in England and Europe are ancient and resilient, and entirely deserving of deeper analysis. Although the rebels in 1381 consisted of a variety of social groups, the communal ideals and goals for the movement began in country villages. When this sense of community and identity is challenged, like the widow and her small farm in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, the people rebel and cry out together. What we can see with the lyrics and the Chaucerian tales is a society on the brink of change (or perhaps already changing) and the subsequent internal debates of individuals that arise from this disruption. Beyond this, the texts display a crucial step to questioning one's own ideological structures: widespread political consciousness that can affect change.

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