Who Were “The People”?

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The term popular literature is actually not very specific, and it quite naturally suggests for the period of the late Middle Ages “vernacular” literature, or where England is concerned, literature in Middle English. It may well be argued that even where Middle English works are translations or adaptations from Latin, Anglo-Norman, or French they are still “popular” by virtue of the language in which they are written. However, M.T. Clanchy has recently suggested that it was often “the most sophisticated and not the most primitive authors who experimented with vernaculars,” so that “we should not be misled by the prefatory apologies in vernacular works, or by their unusual orthography, into thinking that they were composed by the less educated.” Today we often associate popular literature with unlettered folk, or, alternatively, with best-selling books, the most popular of which at the moment are romances written for women, cook books, diet or exercise books, or books on sexual techniques. Except for certain books falling under the general category “religious instruction,” like The Prick of Conscience, for example, and perhaps certain songs and carols, it would be difficult to describe Middle English works generally as being popular in this sense. It is probably fair to say that there was no popular literature in the modern sense in late medieval England and except for certain religious beliefs held in common, it lacked a “mass culture.” For this reason, it should be helpful to know something about the various kinds of audiences that did exist at the time.

No one who studies English dialects or local customs, social, legal, or, to use a rather inappropriate modern term, “political,” can escape the conclusion that England was a highly diversified country during the late Middle Ages. Each shire had its own distinctive customs, and some shires, like Kent in the south or Cheshire in the north, had their own
peculiar laws and organizational structures. The same principle holds, perhaps to an even greater extent, for English towns. The national economy was basically agricultural, but agricultural procedures varied enormously with soil and climate, and with other features like proximity to the coast, proximity to waterways, the availability of pasture, or even proximity to towns that sheltered a preponderant population of tradesmen, as not all towns did. Proximity to active mining areas, like the tin mines of Cornwall, might also have a marked effect on manorial practices and agricultural prosperity. Areas of “open field” agriculture, sometimes regarded as being “typical,” were actually extremely diversified, for manorial customs varied from manor to manor. Manors under the lordship of large ecclesiastical or monastic organizations were generally more closely supervised than those under lay jurisdiction, even when these were controlled by “liberties,” like the Duchy of Lancaster; and, finally, the relationship between lord and tenant was determined in part by whether the lord was resident, occasionally resident, or nonresident, with his jurisdiction in the hands of stewards or local bailiffs.

Much depended also on the character of the lord and his relationships with other lords in the vicinity. Land in the hands of the Crown, or in “ancient demesnes,” enjoyed access to royal legal jurisdiction, and lands in the hands of lords who enjoyed liberties were sometimes subject to local jurisdiction for offenses that would ordinarily be referred to royal courts. Other factors that influenced manorial communities were the proportion of free and unfree tenants, the absence of one of these classifications, the proportion between demesne and tenant lands, susceptibility to inclement weather, whether flood or drought, and, finally, the little understood local variation in the effects of plague or murrain. Tenants in some areas, moreover, were more exposed than those in others to mistreatment by extortionate sheriffs, bailiffs, summoners, archdeacons, rural deans, or diocesan officials. Again, some areas suffered more than others from the activities of royal purveyors or purveyors acting for noblemen, from the itinerant jurisdiction of the marshall and his court, from the intervention of the Court of the Admiralty, or from the depredations of soldiers moving to and from the coast or awaiting departure in the neighborhood of ports, or from raiders from France or Castile. We should, I think, understand that agricultural workers or “peasants” were not by any means all alike, that their immediate interests were not the same throughout the country, and that they did not constitute “the masses” of the time. Community interests were still very strong, and manorial communities tended to arrange themselves in hierarchies. The easy generalizations of

Marxist and post-Marxist rhetoric should be restrained when we think about them.

It is true that many agricultural workers underwent extreme hardship during the early years of Edward III, and that the plagues, murrains, droughts, and floods of the second half of the fourteenth century (not to mention the wars) produced a great deal of suffering. On the other hand, plague left many survivors with larger holdings that could be more efficiently managed, encouraging a new prosperity resulting from greater productivity. At the same time a shortage of labor inconveniented landlords, who were forced to pay higher wages, while artisans in towns demanded higher prices or engaged in the production of substandard goods. People and their attitudes not only varied from place to place; they also varied in time.

For these reasons the question, Who were the people? is very difficult to answer, but a few details may be helpful. The “peasantry,” with whom we shall begin, included not only free and unfree tenants of manors but miscellaneous agricultural workers (including Welshmen in border areas) who could be hired legally by the year, like those, for example, compelled by the Statute of Laborers to bring their implements to town and offer their services publicly where everyone could see and hear (so that landlords could not offer wages beyond the statute). Both manorial lords and tenants with larger holdings after the great plague could afford to hire workers of this sort. There were also cottagers or small artisans on many manors who worked for more prosperous tenants. A manor might contain tenants who held only a portion of a virgate, a virgate, more than one virgate, or several virgates. This matter is also complicated by the fact that a nobleman (or noblewoman) or a merchant might hold tenements under the manorial lord operated by local families. In any event, by the later fourteenth century, social status on a manor generally depended on wealth rather than legal status, so that a bondman might have a higher status in the manorial community than many of his free neighbors. It is also true that a tenant might hold both free and unfree lands, since rents and services were often attached to the land rather than to the person. In the years preceding the Great Revolt of 1381 (which involved ecclesiastics and minor noblemen as well as villeins, of whom there were none in Kent), there is evidence that some villein tenants were withdrawing their services. In 1377 it was alleged in Parliament that they were the victims of “Counsellors, Maintainers, and Abetors in the Country, which hath taken Hire and Profit of the said Villaines and Landtenants, by Color of certain Exemplifications made out of the Book
of Domesday of the Manors and Towns where they have been dwelling, and by virtue of the same Exemplifications, and their evil Interpretations of the same, they affirm them to be quite and utterly discharged of all Manner Servage, due as well of their Body as of their said Tenures, and will not suffer any Distress or other Justice to be made upon them; but do menace the Ministers of their Lords of Life and Member, and, which more is, gather themselves together in great Routs, and agree by such Confederacy, that everyone shall aid other and resist their Lords with strong Hand. In the following year there was a complaint that many agricultural laborers had gone to “vills, boroughs, and towns” and there “become artificers, mariners, or [surprisingly] clerks,” making it difficult to keep lands in cultivation. This sort of exodus apparently continued throughout the remainder of the century in spite of efforts on the part of the justices of the peace to stop it, for the temptation of ready cash afforded by wages by the day was very great. Villeins on manors generally held the offices of ordinary manorial servants at stipends fixed by manorial custom and were elected by the manorial court. That is, the reeve, carter, shepherd, ponder, oxherd, butcher, dairymaid, and, at times, the miller or other regular servants of the manor (whose offices varied from manor to manor) were now demanding higher stipends. The examples afforded by hired laborers, or by laborers turned “artificers, mariners, or clerks” probably stimulated them to demand what was regarded as “outrageous and excessive Hire,” so that a statute seeking to control them was passed in 1388.

On many manors landlords, who were also interested in ready cash, commuted the labor services of their villeins for cash in the form of higher rents, or leased their demesne lands, often the most productive on the manor, so that labor services were no longer of interest to them. At the same time efforts on the part of lords to maintain the traditional work obligations of villeinage were ultimately doomed to failure, and this fact was becoming more and more obvious. A rather amusing petition in the parliament of 1393–1394 complained that some religious had avoided the statute of Mortmain by arranging to have their villeins marry women holding free lands so that such lands might be inherited by the sons of villeins and, concomitantly, fall into the seizin of religious houses. One can imagine the good brothers furnishing their more prosperous villeins to make them attractive to the ladies in prospect. Considering the agricultural economy as a whole, one should not assume that later fourteenth-century peasants were generally very poor persons gaining a mere subsistence in lamentable circumstances. The “spirit of enterprise” sometimes said to be characteristic of the age extended to agricultural communities, often at the expense of community spirit and mutual cooperation, a fact that troubled the moralists of the age, but, nevertheless, at least from a rigorous economic point of view, seems a promising development, although the promise was not fulfilled in the fifteenth century, when real wages declined generally.

An ordinary peasant lived in a “long house,” a rectangular structure, one end of which, containing perhaps two chambers, sheltered the tenant and his family while the other was used for his beasts. A more prosperous family might have a separate building for farm animals, placed at a right angle to the dwelling so as to form a kind of courtyard, and some tenants boasted two or three residential buildings. Although in a few areas these houses may have been of stone, ordinarily they were walled with wattle and daub set within a timber framework. The resultant walls were not very sturdy and, as the coroners’ rolls reveal, could be broken down by a determined robber, or by persons inside seeking to escape pursuit. Surrounding the house or houses was a tract of land, usually rectangular, with a short side on the lane. This might contain four or five acres more or less, affording room for a garden of vegetables and herbs, some fruit trees, and a small pasture. In some instances several families along a lane shared a common pasture at the rear of their tenements bordered by a service lane. Poor cottagers lived in smaller houses, perhaps with the “bower and hall” divided by a hanging. The animals might be cows, pigs (especially in Cheshire), sheep, goats, and fowl, and occasionally horses or oxen. Not infrequently a peasant wife brewed ale, which she sold, but each new batch was supposed to be judged by the local ale-taster, who also kept a watchful eye for violations of the assize and on some manors saw to it that the lord received a portion of each brew. Violations of the assize of ale had to be reported to the bailiff of the hundred or to the manorial court if its lord held the “view.”

Before the ill effects of plague (which varied from place to place) weakened traditional manorial communities there was a considerable amount of cooperation among manorial tenants, free and unfree, practically necessitated by overpopulation. This did not entirely disappear in the later fourteenth century, although some tenants were clearly more interested in making money than they were in the welfare of their fellows. The tenants elected their own jurors or “affecors,” who imposed fines in the manorial court. They determined in cooperation with the lord and his steward the customs of the manor, reached decisions about such matters as alterations in manorial field systems, and cooperated in keeping the peace. In accordance with the frankpledge system, male tenants of twelve years or more who were neither ecclesiastics nor persons under
the direct jurisdiction of noblemen were divided into groups or "tithings," ideally of ten (although the number varied), presided over by a chief tithingman, who was bound to report transgressions by any of his men at the View. The whole tithing could be fined for a transgression by any one of them; indeed, the whole vill or township might be fined in severe cases or on occasions when the tithingmen had failed to report transgressions of which they were clearly aware. The behavior of one's neighbors was thus a matter of some interest to everyone. Anyone being attacked or molested was required to raise the "hue and cry" so that the perpetrator might be seized by his neighbors. Those who raised the hue falsely or who failed to raise it when they should have done so could be fined. Transgressors might find "pledges" among their neighbors to guarantee payments of fines or future good behavior. On some manors the tenants might be divided into rather rigorous hierarchies, depending on the kind of tenure they held and on the size of their holdings. Although these hierarchies often became fictions when demesnes were leased, they were replaced by hierarchies depending on wealth.

The peasant diet has received much attention, and here one must allow for considerable local variation, although the widespread impression that peasants for the most part ate little more than gruel is probably erroneous. The gardens referred to above, not to mention the livestock, probably afforded ample supplements of vegetables, eggs, milk, cheese, and some meat, like the "scew bacoon" of Chaucer's abstemious dairymaid. Food offered at "boonworks" when tenants assisted at the lord's harvest varied from place to place. Thus gruel might be served on some manors, but at Stoneleigh Abbey workers received a small white wheaten loaf, four eggs, potage, sometimes cheese, and ale. At Waltham in Essex a worker was given at dinner (in the early afternoon) bread and ale, potage, a dish of either pork or mutton, or a dish of fish and some herring. In the evenings he had bread, ale, and herring or milk and cheese. At Streatham, a manor of the Bishop of Chichester in Sussex, a bond tenant received wheaten bread and ale for breakfast; at dinner wheaten bread, soup, beef and mutton or other meat of two kinds and cheese; and for supper a wastel (gâteau), a drink, two herrings, and cheese. There is no reason to think that agricultural workers generally suffered from a lack of protein, even in those areas where their bread was made of oats, in the fourteenth century. After the great plague they often demanded better food as well as higher wages. By modern standards they may have been somewhat injudicious in asking for white bread, as they sometimes did.

The most important centers of social activity for agricultural workers were the church and the manorial court. Unfortunately, we have little first-hand evidence of parish entertainments in the fourteenth century. Writers on morals like Robert Mannyng may complain about dances in the churchyard, beauty contests, and "summer games," but such complaints are often traditional so that it is difficult to determine whether they reflect current activities. It would be safe to assume, however, that parish priests organized pilgrimages to nearby shrines, which, in accordance with late-medieval attitudes toward decorum on "religious" occasions, might be very pleasant without being scandalous. There were processions on Rogation Day governed by similar prepentitical standards, and festive celebrations on major holy days, probably with an element of pageantry. Itinerant friars interlaced their sermons with songs and stories, some of which modern scholars would call folk tales, and weddings offered occasions for community celebration. Less decorous forms of entertainment, organized by the men of the vill, might give rise to difficulties. Thus in 1381 a football (soccer) game produced a "fray" between men of two villages under different lordships in Durham, and the prior's tenants were heavily fined in court. Dice playing had been forbidden in one of the prior's vills in the previous year. A statute of 1388 stipulated that no "servant of husbandry" carry a "buckler, sword, or dagger," but have bows and arrows to use on Sundays and holy days, and that such servants leave all "playing at Tennis or Football, and other games called Coits, Dice, Casting the Stone, Kales [skittles], and other such impertune Games." We may assume that such games had been popular and that archery gradually came to replace them, although statute law, in spite of being proclaimed at county courts and marketplaces, was notoriously ineffective until the fifteenth century. Other opportunities for entertainment were afforded at fairs, where professional singers, dancers, and prostitutes might well be found among the merchants in their stalls. In the late fourteenth century there were still large fairs at St. Ives and Stourbridge, as well as lesser ones elsewhere. Local marketplaces probably afforded occasion for discussion of current events and the exchange of witty tales, not to mention songs airing current grievances.

Meetings of the manorial court, theoretically "from three weeks to three weeks," but often less frequently, gave everyone an opportunity to gain new insights into the character and behavior of his neighbors as well as to observe their land transactions of various kinds and to effect his own. Trespasses and other grievances were aired, including failures to clean ditches (which might become dangerous if blocked), digging in or otherwise obstructing highways, and failure to pay debts. Licenses to
marry were granted, and fines were imposed on women of villein status for fornication, pregnancy out of wedlock, or adultery. Occasionally young men were warned about illicit affairs, a Durham tenant was warned, for example, in 1380 not to keep a certain Katerina within the vill nor to come with her to a suspect place on pain of a heavy fine. Among the various trespasses against the lord were allowing children to raid his orchard, pasturing beasts on his land, or taking thorns, an event immortalized, so to speak, in the lyric "The Man in the Moon." There were frequent cases of defamation, or verbal assault. For example, on the estates of Crowland Abbey a man was fined 2s. for saying to a villein that he wished he would burn. It was, in effect, illegal to call a woman a prostitute or a man a robber. A woman could not lightly be called a witch, although it was considered worse to call a man a thief than for him to call her a whore, probably because theft might be a felony punishable by hanging if the perpetrator were found guilty before royal justices. The pinder, who impounded stray beasts, must have often aroused the ire of negligent tenants, so that in a Durham vill it was a trespass to insult him. The Durham court also forbade calling a tenant a "native" (villein) in 1364 on pain of 20s., and in the following year began fining tenants for calling their fellows "rustics." Women were especially prone to use abusive language. In the vills of Durham shrewish women seem to have become a problem after 1378. At the court of Carshalton in Surrey, five women were accused in 1393 of being "communes garulatores, ad grave nocentum patrici." Occasionally a woman might become sufficiently obstreperous to beat a man. Generally, manorial courts sought to keep the peace as best they could and to prevent contentiousness among neighbors. When courts were held, food was sometimes served, and the occasion was social as well as legal. The various cases and judgments undoubtedly produced much discussion, some of it amusing.

The question of peasant literacy is a difficult one. Clanchy contends that reeves, who were required to make fairly elaborate accounts annually to a steward or auditor and were admonished not to alienate anything without a writ, might have been able to read, but P.D.A. Harvey has pointed out that reeves' accounts at Cuxham were compiled by clerks, probably from wooden tallies simply labeled with drawings (not unlike labels used to mark bundles of some government documents) and kept by the reeves. It has also been noted that some peasants had seals and conveyed land by charter. Ada E. Levett noted that villeins at St. Alban's Abbey frequently conveyed lands by charter, registered wills, some of which (unlike wills made by freeholders under the common law) conveyed lands, and that they sometimes held copies of records describing their holdings. The fact that peasants of villein status often sought and obtained for a fee permission to send off their sons to acquire sufficient education to enter the clergy suggests strongly, moreover, that small schools for boys conducted by priests, chaplains, monks, or canons were probably more numerous in rural areas than has been generally supposed, for the boys in question had probably shown some aptitude in elementary instruction. This may well have included, in addition to some psalms, "Cato," the Liber parabolæ of Alenus de Insulis (PL, 210.581–94), the Cartula (PL, 184.1307–14), the Facetus on good manners, and Bishop Grosseteste's Stans pauper ad mensam.

Some peasants, especially reeves, who traditionally acted as pledges for those elected to parliament, guaranteeing their attendance, probably attended sessions of the shire courts, and in the general round of social activities that accompanied such sessions may have been exposed to some "literary" entertainment. Meanwhile, it is undoubtedly true that peasant mothers often sang to their infants or children, or told them stories, about which we know very little, although there is reason to believe that they may have included ghost stories. And men in the countryside, like men anywhere else, probably relished jocular stories, or, as folklorists call them, "merry tales."

If we turn to the more prosperous towns, especially to chartered boroughs with their own governments, the "literary" situation immediately improves, and here we find a ready audience for songs, romances, plays, and for popular works of religious instruction, which were numerous and varied, ranging from simple creed or confessional formulas to much more elaborate works of doctrine or spirituality, not to mention informative or instructive works that we should be inclined to call literary. The Canterbury Tales contains a reworked saint's legend, an elaborate moral treatise by Albertanus of Brescia, and a sermon (or treatise) on penance. But Chaucer was fortunate in having a court audience that included noblemen, ecclesiastics, clerks, and officials about the royal court. These are, of course, "people" too, although their tastes were not exactly "popular." Audiences in lesser towns were somewhat less sophisticated and less responsive to various kinds of literary subtlety. Perhaps a few brief remarks about boroughs and their inhabitants may be helpful.

A borough was, as H.P.R. Finberg wrote, "a place where the tenements were held in burgage tenure," or for rents without services, although the terms under which various persons held could and did vary, and in some boroughs there were remnants of heriot, fealty, and
alienation and entrance fees. By population the largest towns were London (about three times as large as the next largest town), York, Bristol, Coventry, Plymouth, Norwich, Lincoln, and Salisbury. Coventry was a monastic town, the largest of some thirty such towns in England and a thriving commercial center. Town governments varied a great deal, for, as J.S. Furler wrote, “in the Middle Ages . . . there was no uniformity; the system of government in a town depended on its individual history.”

Borough customs, involving such matters as inheritance, the treatment of felons, and so on, varied from place to place. In some boroughs primogeniture was the rule, as under the common law (except in Kent); in others, “borough English,” in accordance with which the youngest son inherited, prevailed. Wives ordinarily took over the shops and tenements of their deceased husbands, whereas under the common law they were entitled to only a third of their husbands’ lands for life, except in Kent, where they received half for life, or for so long as they remained single and did not become pregnant. And many borough tenants, like many villein tenants, had the right to will or devise their holdings to others, a privilege denied free tenants under the common law. Chartered boroughs or towns with their own courts and governments tended to have a great deal of civic pride and to be very jealous of their privileges.

Beverley affords a good example of a large agricultural town, in this instance dependent on the raising of oxen, cows, pigs, horses, and sheep, supported in common pastures, although sheep were allowed to wander about the town. It was governed by twelve “keepers” (juratores, custodes, gubernatores) selected from among the more substantial citizens. They were granted the power to collect amercements of the green wax (from the exchequer) by Edward III, thus depriving the Sheriff of York of this privilege—one, incidentally, that sheriffs often abused in spite of King Edward’s reforming statute of 1368 (42 Ed. III 9), which was widely disregarded, as a parliamentary complaint of 1393 (RP, 3.222) reveals. Such abuses are reflected in the Wakefield Last Judgment (line 281). The keepers of Beverley were also responsible for the assize of bread and ale, the amercements from which were delivered to the bailiff of the Archbishop of York, and by themselves heard cases of fraud. The town had a merchant guild and other craft guilds, but here the merchant guild was not the government of the town, as it was at Southampton, where the alderman of the guild was called the “mayor” in the fourteenth century. Among the ancient customs of the town was one in which if a burgess begat offspring upon a concubine, no such offspring could become a citizen of Beverley, even though the father later married the concubine. Beverley Minster, noted for its magnificent Percy tomb (c. 1335–1340), celebrated the feast of “The King of Fools” near the manor house and the church. These tenants owed biennial attendance at the manorial court and elected a bailiff, but did not acquire a charter until the sixteenth century. Generally, most boroughs included tenements and adjacent agricultural lands which could be held independently of the tenements themselves. Some boroughs were dominated by prominent noblemen. Thus the lord of Leicester was the Earl of Derby (or later the Duke of Lancaster), although the town itself was governed by a mayor and twenty-four “jurats,” or wealthy members of the merchants’ guild. In 1375 John of Gaunt leased the bailiwick to this government for £80 a year for a period of ten years, the sum being a substitute for the profits from the fair court (which sat for a week at Michaelmas), the piepowder (i.e., “dusty-foot”) or merchants’ court, and the portmannoot (presided over by the mayor and the twenty-four), granting at the same time relief from toll and tallage. But the duke kept his rents of mills and ovens, rents collected by the porter of the castle, and his right to the escheat of free tenements. The lease expired in 1385 and was not renewed until 1402. The town had its own elected coroner and chamberlain. There were a number of social guilds (neither craft guilds nor parish guilds), the oldest of which was the guild of Corpus Christi. Members of such guilds attended the funerals of deceased brethren, provided chaplains, held ceremonial dinners, and supported impoverished members. They also sought to supervise the moral behavior of their members, some of whom might be women. Here as elsewhere guilds proliferated after the great plague. Guilds of various kinds, like that of St. Mary at Boston, supported plays, and some parish guilds supported dancing. A guild like that of the Holy Trinity at Louth might also maintain in connection with its chantry a chaplain to instruct boys in manners and “polite letters.”

Although Winchester was not a royal manor, the king held the soil of the city, which paid an annual rent of 100 marks to the exchequer in the fourteenth century. It boasted the first mayor in England, legendary in 1184 and actual in 1200. He had twenty-four jurats or “peers” who made up his council, and he presided over a city court that recorded property transfers, and that dealt with breach of contract or warranty, debt, and
trespass. He also held a merchants’ court mostly concerned with debts involving foreigners (or noncitizens from elsewhere). When the bishop held his fair at St. Giles, he received the keys to the city from the mayor for sixteen days, since all trade had to be carried out at the fair. The city’s two bailiffs, selected from among four nominated by the jurats, were royal officers who acted as property custodians upon the death of a tenant, kept records of property transfers, collected rents and amendements, made presentments at royal courts, and supervised standards of workmanship. The city had a chamberlain, two coroners, whose records were checked against those of the bailiffs, and a cofferer, who kept records but not treasure. There were six wards, each with a chief tithingman (without the judicial powers of London aldermen) who supervised the bedels. Weaving was the chief trade, the products being blankets and burl cloth, so that the chief import was wool.

Other towns might house prosperous merchants engaged in overseas trade. Southampton, for example, was granted freedom from the jurisdiction of the sheriff by Henry III, long before the larger and more prosperous cloth-exporting town of Bristol achieved “county status” in 1373. Southampton did not acquire freedom from tolls, passage, and pontage throughout the realm until the time of Edward III, although that freedom had been bestowed on Bristol by Henry II. The city was dominated by the merchants’ guild, which met at prime on the Sunday after Saint John’s Day (June 24) and on the Sunday after Saint Hilary (Jan. 13). Such meetings lasted all day and might, indeed, extend for several days. The guild forbade quarrels among its members, punished swearing (without, incidentally, any taint of Lollardy), attended the sick, participated in funerals, and relieved the poor among its members. Members, either by heredity or purchase (not unlike the citizens of London in this respect, although some franchised citizens were here not members), shared purchased merchandise, and enjoyed freedom from local tolls and customs. The alderman of the guild held courts, supervised officers, kept the peace, summoned meetings, and kept records. His seneschal (steward) oversaw the maintenance of guild and town property, and he was assisted by a council of twelve and four “discreets” or echevins, who were respected older citizens. Two of the twelve were elected bailiffs; there were four jurats of the markets who maintained the quality of fish, meat, poultry, and bread; and twelve guardians kept the peace in five wards. Brokers supervised sales, and there were some sergeants and a clerk. Although local patriotism was intense, heirs of wealthy merchants often abandoned the town to become wealthy freeholders or “franklins.”

Like many other towns, Southampton welcomed the Franciscans, providing stone buildings for them (contrary to the rule of the order). A visiting provincial had them destroyed, but his timber and plaster houses were replaced by a stone church and other structures in the late thirteenth century. The church, like many other churches elsewhere, was used for business deals, and the Franciscans were widely respected in the town, for which they provided water systems, as they also did in Bridgeport, Bristol, Chichester, Coventry, Lichfield, Lincoln, London, Richmond, Carmarthen, Newcastle, Oxford, Scarborough, and Exeter. Friars’ churches became popular burial sites, to the disgust of writers like Jean de Meun and, later, Erasmus, and the burgesses often remembered the friars in their wills. It is quite probable, however, that the friars stimulated the growth of lay spirituality, and that their influence included the popularization of devotional literature and penitential treatises, and the conversion of popular lyrics and carols into more obviously devotional songs, however innocent of anything except a certain amount of figurative language the originals may have been. Their sermons, with the literary adornments characteristic of Franciscan preaching, evidently captured the attention and sympathy of their local benefactors and their wives, and it is likely that they sponsored pageantry of one kind or another on high feast days.

The wealth of the friars, which sometimes contrasted sharply with their professed ideals, especially where Franciscans were concerned, and their rivalry with parish priests in preaching, hearing confessions, and burying the dead, promoted controversy not only among the learned but among lesser folk as well. The friars were sometimes accused of seducing women, and it is quite possible that some popular lyrics are counteraccusations in kind inspired by the friars themselves. A historian of the manor of Winton in Sussex wrote, “It is curious that in the fifty years during which clergy are mentioned (1356–1408) only one name of a rector occurs, but it can hardly have been the same person throughout.” The name in question was “Sir John,” which was indeed a common epithet for a rector. The songs “A Betrayed Maiden’s Lament,” “Our Sir John,” and “Jolly Jankyn,” where “Jankyn” is a contemptuous diminutive of “Sir John,” may have been inspired by friars, although it is true that others besides friars, like Chaucer’s Parson, for example, Bishop Brinton, complained about lecherous priests; and the peace rolls afford many specific examples. Antifratal songs are not always obvious at first glance. Thus the equation of fox with friar was a common enough bit of iconographic humor. In the lyric “The False Fox” the predator “assails” the geese before seizing his chosen victim,
thus revealing his identity. At times, as in the Vernon Lyrics, praise and blame of the friars may appear in the same collection. It is true also that oppressive ecclesiastics like the Summoner at the Trial of Mary in the *Ludus Coventriae* are often ridiculed in popular writings.

Southern coastal towns suffered especially from the wars. In 1360 Southampton, like Winchester and Plymouth, was exempted from war taxes on account of poverty. And in 1376 the town asked the king to take it into his own hands (a considerable sacrifice) and to prepare its defenses. After the coastal raids of 1377, the great architect Henry Yevele was asked to build a new keep for the castle, the construction of which was carried out during the anxious years 1382–1388. The same kind of danger affected towns elsewhere. On 30 November 1377 a writ was addressed to Leicester, as well as to other towns, to prepare a balinger for use in defense “at the cost of only the most honorable and richest men of the town aforesaid.” The wine trade, important especially to merchants who exported cloth to Gascony, was often threatened. Thus in 1377 the king commanded that the vintage fleet be accompanied by the royal fleet, and orders were issued in 1384, 1385, 1386, and 1388 for the wine fleet to proceed in convoys.

In times of peace, however, life, especially for the wives of well-to-do merchants, must have been rather pleasant, anticipating the situation discovered among wives of English merchants by Van Meteren during his visit to England in the sixteenth century. There are at least hints of this sort of thing in the song “On the Follies of Fashion,” in Chaucer’s description of the wives of his fraternal craftsmen in the General Prologue to his *Tales*, and in the Prologue to the Wife of Bath’s Tale, all, of course, disapproving. The Wife likes to dress in her best clothes and go to vigils, processions, and sermons, to go on pilgrimages, and to attend marriages. She also likes to see “pleyes of myracles,” which must have appealed to persons of all degrees. Finally, like Van Meteren’s wife, she liked to spend a great deal of time with her “gooseys,” although in Chaucer’s time she might well have qualified as a “scold” because of the calumny she heaped on her old husbands. Guilds and fraternities held processions on the days of their patron saints, or on Corpus Christi, and members of town governments and guildsmen paraded through the streets with carols and minstrelsy on festive occasions dressed in colorful costumes. In London, Saint John’s Eve (Midsummer) was just such an occasion, and in view of the antiquity of the custom and its widespread and enduring practice—probably in celebration of the transformation of the Old Law into the New, for witches, elves, and fairies held sway until midnight—we can assume that leafy boughs and flowers were draped over houses and shops in towns and villages throughout England, that bonfires were lit in the streets about which the inhabitants sang and danced, and that officials paraded through the streets with minstrelsy, all singing and dancing processional carols. The night’s revels might bedangerous for girls, as the song “A Midsummer Day’s Dance” reveals, for not all of them enjoyed the supervising wisdom of Shakespeare’s Theseus. Meetings of merchant guilds and fraternities were probably also graced with song or the reading of poetical narratives like *Havelok the Dane*, which offered an appealing combination of slapstick humor and outrageously stated but ultimately genuine civic patriotism to the fishermen of Grimsby, or later the more obviously comic *Tournament at Tottenham*, probably composed for a civic celebration of some kind. It seems quite likely that much literature of this kind has been lost, and, further, that some of the other surviving “vernacular romances” (a contradiction in terms where English narratives are concerned), the humor of which has been often overlooked, were used for town festivities.

Monastic towns, like monastic manors, enjoyed less freedom of self-government than other towns. Thus at Bury St. Edmunds (a cloth center), except in those areas subject to the manor of Clare or tenements held by the Hastings family, the sacrist was lord of the town and the obedientiaries held the town property and rented it to the tenants. The manor of Bury, consisting of some 212 acres of arable land in addition to heath, wood, and pasture, was controlled by the cellarer, who had the View of Prankplede, market rights, the right to forestall, the right to dig clay, fishing rights, the profits of mills, and miscellaneous rents. The sacrist appointed the town bailiffs, held the View there (which was extended in 1383–1384 to all residents), presided over the assizes of weights and measures and bread and ale, acted as archdeacon in the ecclesiastical court, collected tolls, and had the right of tronage. It seems obvious that the sacrist and the cellarer were busy men, deeply involved in worldly affairs. But the monastery was also active in providing plays and pageantry for the entertainment and instruction of the citizens and their rural neighbors. At Chester both the Abbey of St. Wearnouth and the nuns of St. Mary’s held franchises in the town, so that part of it was under monastic jurisdiction, a fact that gave rise to some friction. The town itself had two courts, the “Prentice” court, which was the sheriff’s court, and the Portmoot, or mayor’s court, which entertained pleas of land, cases of forestalling, purpuratres and encroachment, and trespass, which was, in fact, considered in both courts.

Town court rolls usually present us with more or less routine business,
including land transactions; violations of the assize of ale (mostly by women, who often appear after year after this offense, apparently paying fines as a sort of license), or bread (mostly by men); cases of debt or covenant; cases of negligence, like leaving dung in the streets; or the punishment of scolds (technically by means of the cucking-stool, but more frequently by the more profitable means of amercements). They nevertheless sometimes afford us interesting glimpses of the people and their behavior. According to the Court Rolls of the Borough of Colchester, in that city (as in London) a man might be fined for carrying a knife, victimizing Flemings by summoning them and punishing them (2:171), or eavesdropping, a widely recognized trespass (3:162). A woman might receive a very heavy fine for adultery (13s. 4d.; 3:110), a fact that should dispel the notion that such fines were imposed only on manorial bondwomen. Receiving or maintaining harlots could bring either a man or a woman before the court (2:24; 3:49, 104). Harlots in Colchester were supposed to stay in Berislane, just as they were supposed to stay in Cock Lane outside the wall in London, and could be fined for seeking business elsewhere (3:177, 186). Women consistently outnumbered men brought before the court for forestalling (2:4, 13, 39, 76, 105, 130, 142).

The rolls sometimes reveal interesting characters, among whom at Colchester was one John Stanstede, appearing on the rolls first as a chaplain and later on one occasion as a rector. In 1372 the rector of St. Michaels of La Mylende, Colchester, was alleged to have wagered John Stanstede, chaplain, that if he could throw him he would give the spectators a gallon of wine and John two quarters of grain at Michaelmas. John threw him, but the rector refused the grain and denied the covenant. The rector failed to appear and was in mercy (3:11). Two years later it was agreed at Colchester market that if Master Nicholas, a doctor, could solve a question put to him by William Dentone, John Stanstede would pay a cordwainer a pair of boots worth 2s. But when Master Nicholas solved the question, Stanstede refused to pay the cordwainer (3:59). These last cases illustrate the validity of verbal covenants before witnesses in local courts, not to mention a taste for playful humor among townsfolk. To get a hearing before the royal justices concerning contract or covenant without a written record, it was necessary to allege a breach of the peace, *vi et armis*, an expression often followed by the formula “to wit, with swords and bows and arrows,” although no such weapons might be involved. An entry in the court roll for 1377 mentions a death’s-head mask, a tunic with tails, and other apparatus for playing

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**miracles** (3:140). We can assume, therefore, that this form of entertainment was available at Colchester as elsewhere.

A few more cases from the *Records of the Borough of Nottingham* will illustrate the kind of justice administered as well as something of the mores of the people. In 1360 one John Shakespere alleged that a servant of John de Spondon “vi et armis insultum fecit, et ipsum vulneravit, verberavit, maltractavit, et sanguinavit et alia enormia ei intenti... contra pacem,” committing 100s. damages. The court awarded him 40d.

In 1364 Thomas Hutton complained that on a day he was sitting in a tavern when Richard de Cobley, sheepman, “vi et armis ipsum Thomam insultum fecit, et ipsum verberavit, et quemdam cipum plenum cervisie in facie ejus jacitat... contra pacem,” committing 20s. damages. For this enormity the court awarded him a ha’penny (pp. 183–85).

In Nottingham a chaplain might be hired to educate boys. Thus in 1395 a chaplain complained to the court that one William Tole had neglected to pay him 8s. 4d. for teaching his boy for five terms (p. 263). Other chaplains might engage in less commendable activities. Thus in 1389 John de Bilby complained that Roger de Hampton, chaplain, broke into his close and entered his chamber, where John found him under the curtains of a bed. When John asked what he did there, Roger replied that he did not come in any evil way. He promised not to enter John’s premises again nor to be found with John’s wife. Nevertheless, on a certain night, Roger broke John’s wall and was with John’s wife a long time “ubi secreta sua fuerunt.” And so he did continually for a year to John’s loss of two pairs of sheets, tablecloths, towels, a brass pot worth 13s. 4d., and the profit of four quarters of malt lost through Roger’s coming and going to the damage of £100. Roger replied that he was simply making his rounds with holy water, a defense that may have produced laughter but won him small sympathy from the court (pp. 241–43). The peace rolls, incidentally, record many similar offenses on the part of chaplains.

The case reminds us of a little of “A Midsummer Day’s Dance,” mentioned above, where the seducer is a holy-water clerk.

It is impossible to include “lords of manors” in a single social category, for they might include the king, the queen, greater and lesser noblemen or noble ladies, bishops, cathedral canons, abbots, priors, monastic obedientiaries, clerks, lawyers, merchants, tradesmen, parsons, self-perpetuating groups of trustees, colleges, town governments, or, in fact, almost any person or group of persons with sufficient wealth. The word *manor* is, moreover, a rather vague term, since a group of tenements in a
town held by a single lord might be called a manor, and manors that were partly urban and partly rural were not unusual. Even in the countryside a manor might be chiefly residential, in some instances a place for monks to take their vacations from the routine of monastic life, and some agricultural manors were highly specialized. The modern historical vocabulary is here as elsewhere somewhat simplistic, especially where discussions of “the manorial system” are involved.

We do have some descriptions of manor houses and their furnishings. An especially fine one was the home of the distinguished warrior Sir Nigel de Loring, who had been knighted at Sluys, became a Garter Knight in 1344, and served as chamberlain to Prince Edward. In his later years he retired to Chalgrave manor, although as a man of substantial wealth, he held other manors elsewhere. The house at Chalgrave contained first a great hall, where Sir Nigel, his wife, his two daughters, the chaplain, his steward (when he was not on his rounds), and visitors took their meals on a dais, while the household servants and perhaps the local reeve ate at a hall below. Conventionally, there would have been a gallery built on the wall above the dais for minstrels or reading clerks, who might furnish entertainment or instruction at dinner, and somewhere in the hall was a large fireplace. In all probability the walls were decorated with Sir Nigel’s arms and armor and perhaps some tapestries or decorative hangings. At the western end, where the dais was set up, there were the usual pantry, buttery, wine cellar, larder, a chamber for wood, three upper chambers, one with a latrine, and a basement below, perhaps containing a kitchen. An outer court enclosed a garden for vegetables and herbs. Adjacent to the hall at the eastern end was a chapel with an enclosed rose garden on the outside. There was a guesthouse with a garden and a gatehouse at the entry. Other buildings included a dairy house, a bakery, a malt house, a kiln house, an alehouse, a well house, a cart house, a stable, and several barns, including a large barn with seven bays, a hay barn, a straw barn, a peasharn, and a granary. There were, in addition, two sheepcotes, a pigsty, a boarsty, a cowhouse, an oxhouse, a dovecote, and facilities for poultry, including geese. Within the grounds there were two orchards, one with two fishponds and one with three, as well as a nursery and a vivarium. A nearby field contained another pond. Altogether, Sir Nigel and his family must have lived in considerable comfort. We can assume a Bible and service books for the chapel, and probably prayer books, meditations, and devotional works, including a manual of penance, some of which were used when the family and their guests assembled in the chapel for evening prayers.

Many manor houses were, of course, far less elaborate than this one, which resembles the larger “inns” or residences in London except that it had more extensive grounds. Many lords among the nobility, like Thomas IV Lord Berkeley (1368–1417), were much given to the chase, hunting hares, deer, foxes, and badgers,88 and some abbots maintained hunting dogs for the entertainment of their noble friends and benefactors, lesser monks being restrained from such pursuits. A bishop might have similar facilities.89 Whether noblemen generally had literary interests has been the subject of some discussion. It was not necessary for a nobleman to be very literate to enjoy narratives, whether pious, historical, or jocular, read to him by a clerk or minstrel, or plays presented in a nearby town. It is quite likely also that active military men enjoyed songs and stories on festive occasions or at tournaments. Some of them had collections of books. Thus Guy de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, gave Bordesley Abbey some forty books, including some books of the Bible, meditations, saints’ lives, romances and histories, a book of physic, one on surgery, a primer for children, an encyclopedia, and a miscellaneous anthology, all in French.90 Clanchy has pointed out that by 1300 “an educated layman” was “probably familiar with three literary languages (Latin, French, and English).”91 We do not know how many noblemen were “educated,” but the proliferation of government documents of all kinds and the necessity for written records acted as a profound stimulus to learning. Chaucer, who was addressing a noble and clerical audience, employs frequent references (not all of which are obvious at first glance) to the Bible, the Latin classics, and to medieval works in both Latin and French. We must assume that he did so because his audience appreciated them.

Noblemen were naturally interested in historical writings, especially in writings, whether actually historical or fabulous, that concerned their ancestors. Indeed, those with long military careers might well acquire works that contained material about themselves. We sometimes forget that the Chronicles of Froissart were at one time “popular” reading for boys throughout England and that men with military experience or aspirations were likely to have been even more interested in them earlier. The subject of history appealed to abbots as well. Thus we learn that one abbot sought to borrow a book that “temporibus Godefridi de Bolon aliorumque nobilium conquistum continet terre sancte.”92 One rather notorious abbot, Thomas of Pipe, of the Cistercian abbey of Stoneleigh, became noted as a local historian, so that Dugdale was led to observe that “his memory will be of good esteem to all that are lovers of history.”93
His notoriety arises from the fact that during his administration the abbey—which, King Edward said, had been founded by his ancestors to provide chantries and other works of piety for his ancestors, himself, and his heirs—had neglected its chantries and had ceased both to give alms to the poor and to shelter pilgrims. He sent a commission to investigate in December of 1363. It was found that the abbot had alienated without any consideration or rent a messuage, a carucate of land, and ten marks in rents to his concubine, Isabella, and to their eldest son John, "de voluptuoso affeccione quam habuit predicte Isabelle et filio eorumdem." He had also alienated a grange to some servants so that its income was used for the exclusive support of himself, Isabella, and her children, said to be "in number of number than his monks." Thomas had also disseized a tenant wrongfully through a false deed and then, to avoid discovery, reenfeoffed the holding to him in fee simple "to the dishonor of the aforesaid abbey." The king seized the abbey until a new abbot was elected in 1365. Oddly, Pipe was abbot once more in 1381, but retired in 1382.94

Erring abbots like Thomas of Pipe or the unfortunate abbot of Missenden in Buckinghamshire who was drawn and hanged for forging and clipping the royal coinage—a treasonous offense—were rare, although others might be simply inefficient. More influential abbies did a great deal of entertaining, becoming in effect social centers for noblemen, merchants, or lawyers, who exchanged gossip concerning current affairs (a source of rumors) and enjoyed the food served to them. We may safely assume that at dinner some instructive and edifying material (like selections from Piers Plowman, for example) was often read before the company. Larger abbies, friaries, and cathedrals often maintained extensive libraries, which sometimes contained works that might be called "popular" in a restricted sense, like Holk's commentary on Wisdom, the De regimine principum of Aegidius Romanus, or even romances.

Generally, medieval people in all walks of life were alert to wit and humor, and, at the same time, thirsty for practical moral instruction, appreciating both the "solas" and the "sentence" that might be found in a great variety of works ranging from sermons (not always without humor), historical works, romances, songs and poems on the evils of the time, instructive works on law, medicine, or natural history, to mere fabliaux. No one thought that there was anything very odd about speaking the truth with a smile. Their assemblies, whether associated with meetings of parliament, court sessions in counties, hundreds, or manors and towns, festivals at churches, friaries, houses of canons, or monasteries, or fairs, markets, processions and town festivals, offered them opportunities to hear and enjoy what we might call "popular" literature.

Lords could sometimes enjoy it in their manor houses, and, as the works of Chaucer attest, there were opportunities for literary entertainment at the royal court, and it seems quite likely that similar opportunities were available at the courts of prominent noblemen. However, I think that we should remember that there was then nothing like the large homogeneous audience available for writers today, when tastes are largely Epicurean in nature and when reactions to song and story are predominantly emotional. As has often been observed, medieval people were practical rather than sentimental, an attitude made more or less natural by the fact that life was then more difficult, a great deal shorter, and not very rich in opportunities for leisure, which was not regarded then as something to be cultivated in any event but as an invitation to irrational behavior. It will repay us when considering medieval popular literature (or any other kind of literature) to consider the question of the audience to whom it was addressed and, where possible, the kind of occasion for which it might have been used.

NOTES

2. Governmental structures were for the most part customary and had nothing to do with "political theory," which was then ultimately moral theory.
3. See the parliamentary complaint in the third year of King Richard (3 R. II), Rotuli Parliamentorum (Record Commission, 1783, hereinafter RP), 3:80.
7. 1 R. I. c. 6, SR, 2:2; cf. RP, 3:21.
9. See, for example, the parliamentary complaint of 1391, RP, 3:296.
10. 12 R. II 4, SR, 2:57. Generally, "reform" statutes were passed in the first
year of Richard's reign, when he was too young to be responsible and there was, in any event, a generally conciliatory policy on the part of the government; and in 1388 when the Appellants were in control. Richard was much less concerned about abuses than Edward had been during his best years.

11. The matter is actually somewhat complex. See, for example, Barbara F. Harvey, Westminster Abbey and Its Estates in the Middle Ages (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), chs. 9, 10.


15. For the Assize of Bread and Ale, see SR, 1: 199–200, 201–4.

16. For articles of the View, which might vary somewhat from place to place, see SR, 1:246–47.


24. Ibid., p. 166.

25. 12 R II 6, SR, 2:57.

26. For an illustration of a debt case on one medieval manor (Writtle), see Elaine Clark, "Debt Litigation in a Medieval English Vill," in Pathways to Medieval Peasants, pp. 247–79.

27. Halmota Prioratus Dunelmensis, p. 166.


29. Carleton Brown, ed., English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), no. 89. The speaker offers to get the hayward ("hedgeguard") drunk, take from him the "wed" or token payment the moon-man has given him, and with it placate the bailiff.


32. Ault, Court Rolls, p. 256.


34. Halmota Prioratus Dunelmensis, p. 42.

35. Ibid., pp. 33, 40, 40–41, 141.


37. E.g., see Halmota Prioratus Dunelmensis, pp. 144, 154, 169, 171.


40. Clanchy, From Memory to Written Record, p. 32.


42. Clanchy, From Memory to Written Record, pp. 34–35.


44. For a monastic school, see H.P.R. Finberg, Tarstocket Abbey: A Study in the Social and Economic History of Devon (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1951), p. 224. Some boys became priests; "others," Finberg tells us, "appear later as burgesses, portreeves, and members of parliament."


46. See Carleton Brown, ed., Religious Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), no. 28. This and related songs involving the Christ child are probably variants of a popular lullaby.

47. The peace rolls reveal that in Lincolnshire two men lurked in a churchyard covered with a white sheet, and then attacked one John Lockwood and his servant when they came to see who was there. See Elisabeth G. Kimball, Some Sessions of the Peace in Lincolnshire 1381–96, Lincoln Record Society, no. 56 (Hereford: Hereford Times 1962), p. 235.

48. For works dealing primarily with spiritual guidance, see P.S. Joliffe, A Check-List of Middle English Prose Writings of Spiritual Guidance (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1974).
volume of survivals would be impressive indeed. Some citizens of towns had sufficient training to appreciate similar books in French or Latin, and the same thing might be said of some noblemen.

49. The distinction between a sermon and a treatise, or what we should call a treatise (for the medieval term was looser), is a hazy one, for a lengthy exposition could readily be accepted for use as a sermon. The Parson's Tale itself omits the Commandments, a fact of which the Parson is clearly aware; see The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), lines 956–57. Some penitential treatises also included treatments of the Sacraments.

50. See, for example, Derek Pearsall, "The Troilus Frontispiece and Chaucer’s Audience," Yearbook of English Studies, 7 (1977): 73–74.


56. For the customs of Kent, see SR, 1:223–25, where they are described in terms of Kentish maxims.

57. Cirencester, a monastic town, had its own court until 1309, when the abbot outraged his tenants by forcing them to attend his manorial court. They eventually sought a remedy before the chancellor, but the abbot was able to purchase his privileges, and the town did not regain self-government until the nineteenth century. See H.P.R. Finberg, ed., Gloucestershire Studies (Leicester: Leicester Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 74–81.


60. For the relevant documents, see Alan H. Nelson, The Medieval English Stage: Corpus Christi Pageants and Plays (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 88–89.

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79. Robbins, Secular Lyric, no. 28.


89. For a "chace of deer" held by the Bishop of Chichester, see Peckam, "Thirteen Customs," p. 124.

90. Clanchy, From Memory to Written Record, p. 60.

91. Ibid., p. 86.


95. Sayles, Select Cases, 7:118.

96. For an example of humor in a law book, see the hypothetical case of a tenant who took a fish from his lord's pond in Maitland and Baildon, The Court Baron, pp. 54–55.

97. The mayor's accounts at Leicester for 1357–1358 include, among his expenses in London, 4d. paid to the King's fool. See Bateson, Records of the Borough of Leicester, 2:108. There is every reason to assume that diversions involving song and story were arranged by parliamentary representatives during their sojourns in London.