Chaucer and the Economic and Social Consequences of the Plague

D. W. Robertson, Jr.

I hope you will pardon me if in this lecture I devote more attention to background than to the work of Chaucer, which I should much prefer to discuss. Again, you may notice a certain skepticism on my part concerning the topic announced in the title. The series of plagues that struck England during Chaucer’s lifetime undoubtedly contributed to social change and to social unrest, but the effects of disease are difficult to isolate from those of other kinds of hardship, and it is also true that they might have been very different in a differently structured society with other means of response and other attitudes. Moreover, a change in ways of doing things in one area of human activity is likely to have repercussions in other areas and to produce situations that are in themselves, regardless of their origins, productive of further changes and developments. It may help to remind ourselves of what some of the “other kinds of hardship” were, and we are fortunately able to do so from a fourteenth-century point of view. In the jubilee address Edward III prepared to be read in Parliament, for he was too ill to attend himself, in the fiftieth year of his reign (1377), the king, who was about to announce a comprehensive pardon for various offenses and debts, spoke of “the great charges and losses which the said people [his subjects] have had and suffered in times past, as well as by the wars, and otherwise by the pestilence of the people, murrain of beasts, and the fruits of the land commonly failed by evil years in times past, whereof our Sovereign Lord the King hath great compassion…”1 It is noteworthy that the king mentioned “the wars” first, before going on to mention what might be called in modern legal parlance “acts of God,” although it is true that a great many people, including King Edward, regarded all of the things he mentioned as being the providential consequences
of sin. Warfare was something for which Edward as king exercised primary responsibility, and after the resumption of the war with France in 1368 England did not fare very well. In addition to human losses in the field through military action or disease, war entailed onerous taxation, purveyance on a large scale, sometimes extortionate, the activation of commissioners of array who were not always honest, and widespread subjection to the misbehavior of troops either moving toward ports of departure or awaiting departure in the areas of ports. Again, returned soldiers often became robbers instead of settling down to honest labor. In fact, it was one of the first duties of justices of the peace when they were established to seize and arrest such all persons who could be found. In some coastal regions and in the Scottish border area many persons suffered from the ravages of enemy raiders, and commercial shipping was frequently impeded. During the following reign under Richard, England's fortunes in warfare steadily declined. Partly as a result of taxation that seemed ineffectual, partly as a result of coastal raids, and partly as a result of other factors, for some of which the government was responsible, a revolt broke out in 1381. By 1386 the country was faced by an enormous hostile invasion fleet and by simultaneous threats from the north and the south. The court had been disrupted into factions, the king was threatened with deposition, and a civil uprising led to the drastic actions of the Merciless Parliament. When it was not waged effectively war could lead to attacks on English ports and severe disruptions in trade necessary to the welfare of all social ranks.

During the last years of his reign Edward did not exercise very firm control of his government either in war or in matters of routine administration, although he did not mention this fact in the preamble to his jubilee pardon. But corruption or highhanded action could and did give rise to unrest. The king had been warned about these matters early in his reign, first by Archbishop Mepham, who observed that the illegal and extortionate behavior of household purveyors might lead to rebellion, and then by Archbishop Stratford who threatened to excommunicate royal officers who at Edward's behest had imprisoned a number of persons without due process in violation of the Great Charter. However, Edward issued a series of statutes to control purveyors for royal or baronial households, the most comprehensive of which in 1362 would have solved the problem if it had been faithfully enforced. The failure of his early efforts to buy allies abroad also taught him the dangers of excessive taxation. It must be said (in his favor) that he sought to control the actions of sheriffs and bailiffs. A statute of 1340 (14 Ed III 1.7) demanded that sheriffs be appointed for only one year, and that each have only one bailiff errant or "outrider"; for "outriders," it was said, had "notoriously destroyed the people." When Chaucer called his monk, probably an external cellarer, an "outrider" he was using pejorative language suggestive of extortion.

In 1354 (28 Ed III 7) it was stipulated that no sheriff could succeed himself. And in 1368 (42 Ed III 9) it was decreed that escheaters (or extracts from exchequer rolls sent to the sheriff so that he could collect fines and amercements) be clearly marked to identify their purposes and that they be sealed and totted in the presence of the debtor upon payment so that they could not be used twice for the same fine. Finally in 1372 sheriffs were forbidden to act as members of Parliament, along with lawyers doing business for the king. In addition to extortionate sheriffs and bailiffs the men of the shires had to contend with unscrupulous and greedy escheators. A statute of 1360 (34 Ed III 12) stipulated that escheators who seized land for alleged treason in deceased ancestors should warn their victims first with writs of scire facias so that they might present an answer on a given day, that the inquests held by escheaters should be made before "good people of good fame," in the counties, and that inquests be indented between the escheaters and the juries so that the presentations of escheaters could be verified. Further, tenants whose lands were seized because they had alienated without royal license, or were said to be heirs within age, could be heard at King's Bench if they objected. The abuses indicated are clear enough.

Perhaps more important were the remedies Edward decreed for abuses in the administration of justice, especially his great Ordinance for the Justices of 1346, designed to prevent maintenance and procurement. If it had been enforced a great many miseries might have been avoided. The king, calling attention to the abuses just mentioned, said that he was "greatly moved of conscience in this matter," so that as much "for the pleasure of God and the ease and quietness of our subjects, as to save our conscience, and to save and keep our said oath, we have ordained the things following." I shall summarize them briefly:

1. All justices should treat rich and poor alike with no regard
to persons (a scriptural principle, incidentally\(^7\)) and should disregard “any letters or commandment” either from the king or anyone else that might impede equal right, and should report any such letters to the king and Council.

2. Justices should take no fees or robes from anyone except the king, and no gifts beyond food and drink of small value.

3. They should give no counsel to anyone, great or small, in matters involving the king (or actions contra pacem, felonies, or cases involving lands held by tenants in chief).

4. The barons of the exchequer should treat rich and poor alike and avoid delays.

5. Justices of assize and jail delivery should take an oath to observe the ordinance.

6. No one in the royal household should maintain the cause of another, and each should keep the ordinance.

7. All great men should eliminate from their households fees and robes for “bearers and maintainers,” who were to be brought before the king and his council.

8. The justices of assize were instructed to “inquire of sheriffs, escheators, bailiffs of franchises, and of their under ministers, and also of maintainers, common embacers, and jurors in the country” concerning the “gifts, rewards, and other profits which the said ministers do take of the people to execute their office, and that which pertaineth to their office, and of making array of panels [one of the chief duties of the sheriff], putting in the same suspect jurors, and of evil fame; and of the fact that maintainers, embacers, and jurors do take rewards against the parties,\(^8\) whereby losses do come daily to the people....”

9. Such persons were to be punished “as law and reason requires” both at the suit of the king and the suit of the parties, and the chancellor and the treasurer should be alerted to hear complaints.

This Ordinance was repeated as a statute in 1384 (3 R II 3),\(^9\) with the stipulation that those justices found guilty lose their offices, but it was repealed in the following year as being “too severe.” An effort to revive it in 1386 when Chaucer was attending Parliament failed.

Edward reinforced his Ordinance in 1357 in a statute against chancery (31 Ed III 4.10).\(^10\) In effect this pointed out that servants of the law and even court clerks act as maintainers, conniving with third persons to bring false suits against landholders to gain their lands, thus acquiring such lands at little or no cost to themselves. And in 1360 (34 Ed III 7–8)\(^21\) a statute made it possible for even the poor, who could not pay a fine, to obtain a writ of attaint against a juror alleged to have taken anything to reach his verdict. In the same year the king established the justices of the peace in the counties\(^22\) to “determine at the king’s suit all manner of felonies and trespasses,” stipulating that the justices assigned “be named by the court and not by the party,” thus seeking to eliminate in part the evil of allowing those who brought suit to name their own justices whose actions they might control. These justices became responsible for enforcing the Statute of Laborers, to which I shall return in a moment, in 1368. Finally, Edward issued a series of statutes seeking to control the easy granting of pardons for felonies.\(^23\)

Unfortunately, this considerable body of legislation in so far as it was designed to control corruption and maintenance was largely disregarded. If anything, maintenance of one kind or another increased, and the situation did not improve during the reign of Richard II, who seemed considerably less concerned about corruption than his predecessor, especially when he could use it to further his own ends. Sheriffs were sometimes almost forced to use extortion to collect the farm of the counties, impoverished by war or pestilence, or by the granting of hundreds to private parties; and officials of all kinds, both lay and ecclesiastic, enriched themselves through their offices. Extortion among coroners,\(^24\) bailiffs of hundreds, and archdeacons,\(^25\) became commonplace. As organizations, both lay and ecclesiastic, became more efficient and centralized, they tended at the same time to become more corrupt. Centralization also produced what has been called “bastard feudalism,” although I do not think that “feudalism,” much less “bastard feudalism,” is a very useful term.\(^26\) In this connection some historians like to dwell on the evil consequences of the statute quia emptores issued by Edward I in 1290,\(^27\) which in effect put an end to subinfeudation in fee simple, even though its purpose was to maintain ties between lord and tenant. The popularity of final concords, which gave free tenants of all kinds some of the convenience associated with transactions in borough courts, for transfers of land, rents, leases, and other holdings that were recorded as “feet of fines” and kept as central records, contributed further to centralization. It was quite natural that legal manipula-
tion of one kind or another should have been used to supplement force. 28

In the first Parliament of Richard II, memorable for John of Gaunt's spirited defense of his integrity, further statutes, for which the boy king was of course not responsible, were issued against maintenance. After a preliminary general decree on the subject, widespread discontent among serfs was attributed to maintainers who had "taken hire and profit of the said villeins and landtenants" to provide them with "certain exemplifications made out of the Book of Domeday" to prove that they did not owe their "services and customs" (1 R II 6). 29 As a result of their activities tenants were said to have formed confederacies to resist their lords, setting "an evil example to others to begin such riots." It is clear that what is known rather inaccurately 30 as "The Peasants' Revolt" was already getting under way in agricultural communities, and that it was being stimulated by unscrupulous persons with some literate competence for their own profit. The commons expressed a justified fear of "greater mischiefs, which God forbid, throughout the realm." Judicial inquiries were instituted to imprison the rebels and "their counsellors, procurers, maintainers, and abettors." This was followed by a statute (c. 7) against "persons of small revenue of land" who made confederacies with liveries of hats or other liveries and agreed to maintain one another in quarrels "reasonable or unreasonable." Another decree forbade enfeoffments of disputed land or other tenures to great men for maintenance. Other reform measures included one against clerks of the exchequer who conpired to issue second writs for debts already paid (c. 5), and (c. 11) against the reinstatement of sheriffs within three years. 31 The commons had complained that sheriffs arrested people for homicide in their tours without due process and held them in prison for high ransoms. 32 For their part some sheriffs complained that they could not collect the farm of the counties. The sheriff of Exeter and Hertford said that he had lost £100 a year, and that since the last pestilence the loss had been even greater. 33 Temporary remedies were supplied in the form of allowances granted to some sheriffs in succeeding years, but a solution to the problem did not appear until the first year of Henry IV, who realized that sheriffs could not pay the long-established farms "without doing extortion" (1 H IV 11). 34

In their convocation the clergy in this first year of Richard's reign drew up complaints against the extravagances of the royal household, a traditional difficulty that was to become worse in the future, against the illegal seizure of clergymen by the officers of the Marshalsea, and against buyers and purveyors who, in spite of the warnings of Archbishop Mepham and King Edward's subsequent legislation, continued to seize goods. They were also burdened, they said, by the visits of sheriffs and their families to monasteries and priories, which caused heavy expense. 35 Again, they complained that laymen were forcibly oppressing ecclesiastical courts and preventing their functioning. For their part the commons asked that no "dean, official, archdeacon, or other curates" take money for the correction of sin but instead administer spiritual penances, that cures of souls are let to farm like lands and tenements in lay fee "for the increase from year to year," and complained further that curates take exorbitant fees for wills. 36 The contribution of corruption in ecclesiastical courts together with the effects of impoverishment of the clergy in many parishes and the abandonment of many chapels as a result of pestilence have often been neglected as causes of social unrest. It is quite obvious that King Edward, who had for some years left governmental responsibilities to others, died at a time when his realm was in considerable disarray, harassed by enemies abroad, and demoralized in its domestic functions by greed among both laymen and ecclesiastics. What the author of Piers Plowman called "Lady Meed," or what Chaucer in the Pardoner's Tale called cupiditas, seemed to be the true queen of the commonwealth.

This impression is strengthened if we glance briefly at parliamentary activity during the years immediately preceding the outbreak of large-scale revolt. In the second year of Richard's reign there was a complaint about extortionate summoners, a kind of anticipation of Chaucer's Friar's Tale. They were said to make summons out of malice, extorting money from the poor, or summoning them to distant places, making them pay fines they called "the bishop's alms." 37 There was also a complaint that agricultural workers had gone to vills, boroughs, and towns to become artificers, mariners, or clerks, so that husbandry was difficult to maintain. 38 This difficulty, which may be attributed in part to the effects of pestilence, and in part to the growth of industries, 39 was one that persisted throughout the century, as the rolls of the justices of the peace reveal. A statute was passed against mariners, who after having been
arrested and retained for the king's service, fled with their wages, sometimes having bribed sergeants at arms or masters of ships.\textsuperscript{40} Another sought to punish those who spread false news and "horrible false lies" about prelates, dukes, earls, barons, and great men of the realm;\textsuperscript{41} many such tales were spread about in the revolt soon to come, and it is quite probable that the process had already begun. Finally, it was agreed that no sheriff could be a justice of the peace.\textsuperscript{42}

In the following year the commons of Norfolk, Suffolk, Kent, Surrey, Hampshire, Dorset, Devonshire, and Cornwall complained "that they and their houses are robbed and destroyed and wasted by armed men, archers and others passing in the service of the king and remaining a long time."\textsuperscript{43} The commons of Northumberland were troubled by "mischief and damages" not only from the pestilence but from the Scots, so that they asked for wardens and garrisons to protect them.\textsuperscript{44} The men of Staffordshire, Shropshire, Warwickshire, Hereford, and York asked relief from "devastation, rape, and mayhem" committed by bands of men from Chester, where a large area was a securum sanctuary protecting violent men.\textsuperscript{45} Meanwhile, royal officers were still impeding justice. A petition complained that escheators suddenly disinherit and oust men from their lands and tenements who are delayed in their pursuit of justice either by force, by protection, or by other delays.\textsuperscript{46} There was a strong complaint about benefices granted to aliens, sometimes "utter enemies of the king," who neglected to keep churches in repair, neglected divine service, and diminished reverence for the Church.\textsuperscript{47} In response justices of the peace were given power to hear and determine concerning homicide, extortion, riding armed or in routs, lying in wait to commit mayhem or murder, and wearing livery of hats and other livers for maintenance. The justices themselves were to be elected by the most sufficient knights and squires from each county, or by those then in Parliament, and to be paid in proportion to their rank. They were to meet four times a year or more often if necessary, and each justice was to take an oath "to do full right to all, to the poor as well as to the rich," and to avoid delays for benefit, promises, or "any artificie or strata gem whatsoever."\textsuperscript{48} All this was perhaps a little late. In the following year there was a petition for better protection of the coasts, for the balingers of Normandy and other enemies were making great damages on the coasts, both in the north and in the south.\textsuperscript{49}

It is obvious that there was considerable unrest throughout the realm before the revolt of 1381. The poll tax of 1380, as Sir Gor wony Edwards has recently explained, was a reasonable effort to avoid the inequities of the traditional tax of a fifteenth and a tenth, which was based on quotas established for each township and borough in 1344. During the intervening years some townships and boroughs had prospered while others had become impoverished. A tax to be collected in two installments based on an average of three groats per person, with the weak paying less and the strong more, seemed equitable and bearable.\textsuperscript{50} However, when the initial proceeds collected in January seemed inadequate, the government ordered an inspection in March to check on the first collection, and this was sometimes regarded as a new tax without parliamentary consent. In any event, it precipitated riotous revolt.\textsuperscript{51} by no means confined to peasants. The famous address to Parliament on the causes of the revolt by Sir Richard Waldgrave becomes much more understandable, I believe, in the light of the situation we have just been considering. He attributed the outbreak to "the government of the realm" which, he said, would be "lost and destroyed forever" if suitable remedies were not applied. Specifically, he called attention to the "outrages of the numbers of familiaris" in the royal household, in the chancery, king's bench, common bench, and exchequer. The implication of this statement was that there was widespread extravagance and corruption in the administration of justice, the chief function of the medieval king. He went on to elaborate by saying that there were "outrages of numbers" of embracers and maintainers "who are like kings in the country, so that right and loyalty are hardly made to anyone." Returning to the household, he said that the commons are "pillaged and destroyed" by purveyors for the household of the king and of others. They are distressed by "subsidies and tallages," and oppressed by "the ministers of the king and the lords of the realm," and especially by maintainers. Moreover, great treasures are levied for defense, but the commons, far from being defended, are "burned, robbed, and pillaged" by land and sea by enemies. These outrages and others, he concluded, had caused the lesser commons to revolt.\textsuperscript{52}

Unfortunately, this address did not result in widespread reforms. In 1382 the commons said that there was not a bailiff in the counties who did not summon many good men for extortion.\textsuperscript{53} There
were complaints about rioters from Chester in 1382, 1384, 1390, and 1393. A demand that justices of both benches treat rich and poor alike, and that the justices of the peace apprehend vagrants, thieves, and robbers was made in 1383, and a statute was issued against riding armed. As one reads the parliamentary petitions of Richard's reign it becomes evident that Richard did little to enforce the reforming legislation of his predecessor, or even that of the early years of his own reign. In 1385 his chancellor failed to implement a series of reforms endorsed in Parliament, and in 1397 Richard accused a member of Parliament of treason for criticizing the extravagances of his household. Sir Richard Waldgrave's concern for the future was realized in 1386, when the king was threatened with deposition, and in the acts of the Merciless Parliament. The domestic grievances of which Waldgrave spoke, especially that concerning "the outrageous numbers of familiars" in the government, were grievous to the lords as well as to the commons, and it is not surprising that Richard, who became fearful of his own people, was ultimately deposed.

II

Sir Richard said nothing about "the pestilence of the people, murrain of beasts, and the fruits of the land commonly failed in evil years." I shall not dwell on the subjects of murrains or bad years, but both probably stimulated corruption among officials. Mercifully, there were no direct taxes between 1361 and 1370, during years of peace, but this respite was spoiled not only by pestilence in 1360 and 1361, but by murrain, drought, and by a devastating storm in Cornwall. As Barbara Hanawalt has shown, there was a correlation between crime and high wheat prices during the years before the great pestilence, and there is no reason to suppose that this correlation did not continue. The early sixties, when prices were high, certainly witnessed a rise in crime generally. Again, in 1389 there were devastating floods that moved the king to forbid exports of grain and to forgive the customs on imported grain in 1391. But these moves brought prices so low in 1394 that the poor could not pay their rents. Similar dislocations resulted from pestilence. However, I shall not pursue here the chronology of fourteenth-century pestilences, nor discuss the controversial question of the various diseases involved or the mortality rates from each. Nor shall I describe in detail their effects on agricultural communities that have been described so well by Father Raftis and his students especially.

The response of the government to the great pestilence was to issue the Ordinance of Laborers, soon to be followed by the Statute (25 Ed III 2,3). The Ordinance began by calling attention to the fact that after the pestilence servants took advantage of the scarcity of labor and demanded "excessive wages," or even decided to beg in idleness. It was decreed that anyone under the age of 60, free or bond, without employment could be made to serve at the rate usual in 1346 and 1347, or in the five or six "common years" previously, on pain of imprisonment. Agricultural workers who left service were to be imprisoned, as well as those who hired them. Employers who transgressed were to pay double to those aggrieved. Lords of towns or manors were to be "pursued" for triple the amount they offered. Artificers were to accept only their customary prices, and victuallers were to charge moderately. No one was to give anything to an able beggar. In the subsequent statute it was stipulated that agricultural workers were to be hired by the year, and wages for various services were specified. Such workmen wishing to be hired were to bring their implements to town and be hired publicly where everyone could see and hear. Wages of various trades were specified and prison terms set for offenders. To make these provisions more attractive it was stipulated that amercements were to be used in relief of the fifteenths and the tenths, the surplus, if any, being turned over to the nearest poor town. Measurements of cloths were specified and lax unhangs were to be punished. There were regulations concerning victuals, a clause against forestalling (a common practice in towns, especially among women), and one against the installation of mills, weirs, or kiddles in rivers where they might impede traffic. Sheriffs were forbidden, once more, to take fees from those entering or leaving prison, and justices were required to sit four times a year. The statute was supplemented in 1360–1361 (34 Ed III 9), specifying terms of imprisonment and stipulating that carpenters and masons were to work by the day rather than by the week. Fugitive laborers were to be outlawed and might be branded on the forehead with an F for falsity. Mayors and bailiffs of towns who refused to deliver fugitives might be fined £10. As we have seen, there was a complaint in Parliament in 1378 that agricultural laborers fled to towns so that husbandry
was difficult. Efforts to enforce these statutes, especially after 1368 when the justices of the peace were given jurisdiction, were often assiduous, and these labors may have done much to stimulate the revolt of 1381. However, the problem being addressed was not means solved, as the petitions and statutes of Richard’s reign reveal.

There was, for example, a series of complaints about improperly measured cloths, to one of which I shall return in a moment. Although the great revolt itself was brought under control, it evidently stimulated a great deal of criminal activity, and a statute was passed in 1383 (7 R II 6) against robbery, theft, and manslaughter by men riding in packs. Two years later another was issued against villeins who fled to cities and were brought suit against their lords for freedom (9 R II 2). There was an outbreak of pestilence in 1383 that may have intensified the demand for higher agricultural wages, for it was decreed in 1388 (12 R II 3) that servants and apprentices of artificers might be conscripted to help at harvest time. This was followed by a series of new labor statutes (12 R II 4–7) concerning manorial servants. The preamble is instructive: “Because that servants and laborers will not, nor by a long season would, serve and labor without outrageous and excessive hire, and much more than hath been given to such laborers and servants in any time past, so that for scarcity of the said laborers and servants, the husbands and landtenants may not pay their rents, nor scarcely live upon their lands ... it is accorded and assented that the bailiff for husbandry shall take by the year 13s 4d, and his clothing once a year at the most.” The master hine was to have 10s, the shepherd 10s, the oxherd 6s 8d, the swineherd 6s, a woman laborer 6s, a deye 6s, a driver of the plow 7s at the most, and every other laborer or servant according to his degree. Similar stipulations were made concerning servants of artisans in towns. As Nora Ritchie has shown, workers were often demanding double or treble the amounts stipulated. It was further decreed (c. 5) that those who labor at husbandry under the age of twelve should “abide at the same labor, without being put to any mystery or handicraft.” Moreover (c. 60), that “no servant of husbandry, nor laborer, nor servant of artificer, nor of victualler, shall from henceforth bear any buckler, sword, nor dagger” except in the company of their masters or when going on message for them. They should instead have bows and arrows and “leave all playing at tenis or football, and other games called coits, dice, or casting the stone, or kailes [skittles] and other such importune games.” No servant was to leave his hundred, rape, or wapentake at the end of his term, except in some areas where it was customary, and none was to go on pilgrimage without a letter patent indicating the dates of departure and return. The justices of the peace (c. 10) were ordered to inquire whether “mayors, bailiffs, stewards, constables, and jurers have done execution of the said ordinance,” and offenders were to be fined 100s. Moreover, the justices were now to receive their wages from the sheriff, no steward was to be assigned to commissions of the peace (a provision almost immediately repealed), and no association was to be made after the first appointment. The provision regarding town officials was evidently ineffective, for in 1391 the commons complained (15 R II 11) that many villeins who fled from franchised towns could neither be approached nor apprehended, much less judged by their lords. Town governments were generally sensitive about their jurisdictions. Complaints about liveries were expanded in 1388, for the commons wished to abolish not only liveries of temporal and spiritual lords, but also liveries of guilds and fraternities, which evidently gave them the appearance of being covins, or conspiracies. In 1389–1390 the justices of the peace were cautioned to use discretion concerning wages because of fluctuations in the price of grain (13 R II 1.8). And a statute was issued against inferior west-country cloths (13 R II 1.11), which were tacked and folded for sale, concealing the fact that the cloth inside might be bruised, unevenly dyed, of inconsistent width, or made from various grades of wool. When merchants sold these cloths abroad they were “many times in danger to be slain, and sometimes imprisoned, and put to fine and ransom.” This may lead us to wonder about the Wife of Bath, who was a west-country clothier.

The general situation revealed in the parliamentary records is confirmed when we consult manorial or town records. For example, the court records for John of Gaunt’s Ingoldmells manor reveal eleven instances of tenants leaving the manor for excessive wages elsewhere between 1386 and 1389. In an effort to maintain their incomes many manorial lords leased their demesnes, often to a single tenant, who could afford to pay the higher wages being demanded, and there was a widespread tendency to commute labor services for rents. Especially after the pestilence of 1360
many traditional peasant families disappeared, and their holdings, often consolidated into larger units, were taken over by rent-paying tenants without family ties to the land and interested chiefly in profits. Naturally, they were often employers of hired labor. At the same time workers in towns were demanding and receiving higher pay, and merchants and tradesmen were not only asking higher prices but selling defective goods, ranging from putrid meat or old fish to poorly tanned leather, candles without wicks, or the defective cloths just mentioned. It is significant, I believe, that the word commonly used for excessive wages or prices was extortion. That is, workers and merchants from the point of view of contemporaries were doing exactly the same kind of thing that corrupt archdeacons, summoners, sheriffs, bailiffs, coroners, lawyers, or royal purveyors were doing. They were, at the same time, showing little interest in “the common profit” either of their own manors, towns, or shires, or of the realm as a whole. It must have seemed that the old ideals of fidelity and truth were rapidly vanishing from the face of the earth.

III.

Indeed, this is the theme of Chaucer’s “Lak of Stedfastnesse,” a balade addressed to King Richard, perhaps on his assumption of power in May, 1389. It begins with a complaint that although a man’s word was once an obligation, word and deed now bear little resemblance, for the world is now turned upside-down for meed and willfulness. A man is considered able if he can wrong or oppress his neighbor; covetousness has blinded discretion and “all is lost for lack of steadfastness.” Chaucer urges the king to “hate extortion,” to show his sword of castigation, to fear God, do law, love truth and worthiness, and to wed his people to steadfastness. Under the circumstances this was a large order. But the ideals are traditional, reflecting the kind of moral doctrines that Chaucer might well have found in John of Salisbury. The later fourteenth century was in many ways out of tune with them. It has been called an “age of ambition” characterized by a widespread desire for self-aggrandizement and by a spirit of enterprise. The enterprise was not by any means always illegal, but even when it was not it seemed inconsistent with long-cherished ideals. A very brief glance at the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* will show, I believe, that Chaucer used that work as a humorously exaggerated attack on the lack of “steadfastness” in the hierarchy of the realm. However, I think that we should consider the characters not as being “realistic,” or even as “personalities,” but instead as presentations of the ideals or the weaknesses of the groups presented.

Leaving aside for a moment the “idealized” characters, including the Knight with his modest entourage and his less worthy son, we encounter first the Prioress of the fashionable Benedictine nunnery of St. Leonard at Stratford at Bow. Her studied but actually rather inept courtly manners, in part derived from the worldly advice of the Old Whore in the *Roman de la rose*, her false sentimental sensitivity that offers a poor substitute for true charity, her extravagant care for her little dogs, and her very expensive rosary with its dubious motto combine to form a picture of worldliness entirely inconsistent with traditional notions of what a nun should be. Steadfastness is even less evident in the Monk, who holds not only his rule but monastic ideals generally in contempt, caring nothing for either work or study. In other words, he is from a monastic point of view “lawless.” He loves “venery,” probably of both kinds, is an “outrider” or bailiff errant, whose “dainty” horses are ostentatiously caparisoned as he is himself with expensively furred sleeves. He is well-fed, a lover of roast swan, the most expensive poultry available. Clearly, his wealth is not consistent with the usual monastic ideals. The Friar has no interest whatsoever in spiritual penances, but only in money, which he accepts as a substitute for true repentance. He is himself lecherous, a great singer who frequents taverns where he is familiar with barmaids. He likes especially the company of franklins, or wealthy landholders not of noble rank, of wealthy victuallers, or of any persons who can furnish him profit. In fact, he can even get a farthing from a poor widow. At “love-days” offering opportunities for maintenance he dresses like a master or a pope. The contemplative orders are obviously subject to the same kinds of weaknesses we have seen among other groups.

Chaucer turns next to the Merchant, a dealer in wool, who although in debt always talks about his profits. He makes money in the exchange in violation of a statute of 1351 (25 Ed III 5.12) and practices illegal usury, or what Chaucer calls “chevasuance,” against which there was a parliamentary petition in 1390.
Sergeant of the Law, who often served as a justice in assize, had many “fees and robes,” which means that he was a “maintainer” and was a great purchaser of land in fee simple, probably through champerty. He knew all the cases and judgments since the time of King William, or before the time of legal memory, an impossible achievement the implication of which is that he could readily cite fictitious precedents for his own purposes. With him was his friend the Franklin, who had been a sheriff and justice of the peace, offices he found to be extremely profitable and through which he became a wealthy vavasour or subtenant so that he could serve day-long feasts of costly fowl and fish with fine wines and rare sauces to the great men of the shire during sessions. Chaucer has these legal gentlemen, both of whom attended Parliament, ride along together, clearly suggesting cooperation in maintenance.

The so-called “guildsmen,” actually members of a parish fraternity, ostentatiously dressed in liveries with expensive knives (illegal in the City of London), girdles, and pouches, seem to their wives (who would like to be treated like ladies) worthy to become aldermen. For they have gained through their “wisdom” sufficient property and income. But no carpenter, weaver, dyer, or tapicer became a London alderman. These are small artificers who have clearly profited from high prices. To keep their appetites satisfied they have brought with them their own cook, who, appropriately, prepares dubious white sauce.

There is also a Shipman who steals wine from sleeping merchants on his return from Bordeaux, makes his enemies walk the plank, and knows all the creeks in Brittany and Spain, where he can readily engage in smuggling. A Physician was there who could impress his patients with references to famous authorities much in the same way that the Sergeant of Law could cite cases and judgments. He connives with his friend the apothecary to their mutual profit. He is generally penurious, but extravagant in his dress to make a good impression. Pestilences are especially profitable to him, and he is very fond of gold.

One of the most striking of Chaucer’s figures is the Wife of Bath who probably owes her prominence to the fact that the cloth industry was flourishing in rural areas away from the control of the guilds and attracting many agricultural workers. She has become such a prominent member of her community that she proudly insists on being first at the offering in church, where she is expensively decked out in coverchefs. Her hose are of the most expensive woolens, scarlet in grain (closely sheared wool dyed in kermes). She has been profitably married to five husbands, has accumulated enough wealth to make expensive pilgrimages, although she “wanders from the way” a great deal, and is expert in the “old dance” of love. We can be justly suspicious of the quality of her west-country clothes. But the pilgrims are led out of town by a drunken Miller playing a bagpipe, a foul-mouthed character who practices both theft and extortion, especially oppressive to the poor who depend on his services for the preparation of their bread and gruel. The rear of the procession is occupied by the Reeve, a kind of competitor in extortion among the rural workers. He has risen to his office from his position as a manorial carpenter. His accounts are never in arrears, but he keeps his superior, the bailiff, and his fellow-servants on the manor in fear of him through his knowledge of their little conspiracies, which he fails to report as he should to the manorial court. Meanwhile, he steals from his lord but subtly pleases him by giving or lending him his own goods. He carries a rusty blade at his side in violation of the Statute of 1388. There is a Manciple of a temple who can profit greatly from his sales of victuals in spite of the legal astuteness of his masters. The last two pilgrims, except for the host, are again ecclesiastics: a corrupt Summoner who would allow a man to have his concubine for a quart of wine, and an extortionate Pardoner, who with false relics earned more money in a day than the local parson gained in two months. And the Host himself, a worthy burges, and exactly the kind of man the Friar likes to keep company with, turns out in the course of the journey to be amusingly deaf to the implications of the tales he hears.

It is not surprising, actually, that the majority of the characters on the road to Canterbury are singularly lacking in what Chaucer called “steadfastness.” They not only deviate from the standards of behavior accepted as norms for their groups, but are frequently lawless, either explicitly or by implication. They illustrate very well the kinds of things concerning which the men of the shire courts, boroughs, and clerical convocations were deeply troubled, and which they hoped those they sent to Parliament would seek to remedy. Since Chaucer was a courtier, associated with the chamber, whose duties brought him into close contact with the exchequer and the courts, and whose friends at court were lords of manors, while some
of his acquaintances were members of Parliament or sheriffs like Sir Arnold Savage, or bishops and other ecclesiastics, this fact is hardly surprising. The ideal characters in his General Prologue, who are steadfast in their offices, are reminders of goals to be desired. The lack of success of English chivalry either in maintaining England's traditional holdings and allies abroad or in protecting the realm from foreign incursions, which became an acute problem in 1386, was often attributed to the lack of virtue among chivalric leaders, especially with regard to sexual conduct. Chaucer's Knight, however, is worthy, wise, and humble; he loves chivalry, truth, honor, generosity, and courtesy, and has fought gloriously against the heathen. His son the Squire has been fighting Christians in areas reminiscent of Bishop Despencer's disgraceful crusade, not "in his lord's war," but in hopes to stand in the grace of his lady. The contrast between the humble Knight and the fashionably dressed Squire with his devotion to the seductive arts, reminiscent of John of Salisbury's Terentian braggart soldiers, is an obvious comment on chivalric decay. The Knight, unlike many of his degree who rode with ostentatious retinue, is attended only by his son and one servant, his forester, who rides armed in the company of his lord but carries the bow and arrows appropriate to his station. The Clerk, who holds neither ecclesiastic nor secular office, studies hard and prays for those who have supported him at school. He speaks without verbosity of moral virtue. The Parson works tirelessly in his parish, which he does not desert for an easy position in London. He is content with a meager sufficiency, refrains from excommunicating the poor who cannot pay their tithes, and generally sets a good example in his own conduct for the ideals and virtues he preaches. Finally, his brother the Plowman follows the precepts of charity, works willingly to help his poor neighbors without pay, and faithfully pays his tithes.

As I indicated at the outset it would be difficult to ascribe the social changes that disturbed Chaucer to the effects of pestilence alone. His first long poem, The Book of the Duchess, celebrates the virtues of Blanche of Lancaster, who died of pestilence. He undoubtedly knew that the change in King Edward came after his queen died of pestilence. Pestilence plays a large part in only one of the Canterbury Tales, the Pardoner's Tale, and there it leads to an irrational abandonment of brotherly obligations in a deadly quest for gold. Chaucer was undoubtedly aware that its effect on the realm as a whole, which had long been susceptible to this weakness, might be very similar.

In conclusion, I should like to say that modern cynicism and sentimentality, reinforced by romantic or post-romantic political sensibilities, have often led to a denigration of Chaucer's ideal characters and to an elevation of his rogues. But the picture of Chaucer that results would have made him a mere trifler in his own time, unworthy of the respect as a "philosopher" he achieved among his contemporaries and the more discerning of his admirers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. I do not think we shall understand him very well unless we can become better acquainted with the issues and attitudes of his own time, as well as with the intellectual and literary traditions he inherited.

Notes


3. SR, 1. 364-65. Returned military leaders with distinguished careers were also difficult to control. For example, Sir Matthew Gurney fought in France and Spain after 1340, and with the companies after the treaty of Bretigny. He was at Aurey in 1364. In 1388, at age eighty, he acted as constable for Edmund of York, who went to Spain to aid Gaunt. He and his lawyer, John Janet, engaged in very dubious activities at home. Sir Matthew was indicted for trespass in 1380, but obtained a writ supersedes. In 1381 he was pardoned for contempts, trespasses, and extortion. In 1385 he was in trouble for mayhem, but obtained another supersedes. Nevertheless, he served as JP in 1381-1385, as well as being named in commissions of oyer and terminer, and, in addition, was constable for the court of chivalry. He was sued by a London weaver in 1388, who alleged that he and John Janet had imprisoned him un-
til he promised to pay Sir Matthew, who alleged that he was his serf, 1000 for manumission. Sir Matthew was named on peace commissions in 1388-1392 and became a member of the royal council under Henry IV. He died finally at the age of 97. See Isabel D. Thorley and T. F. T. Plucknett, *Year Books of Richard II: 11 R II* (Ames Foundation, 1937), pp. xiii-xvi and 170-74. Another example is afforded by Richard de Aske of Aughton, who, although he received various pardons for felonies because of his service in France, frequently served on commissions, includingoyer and terminer and seizers. See Bertha Haven Putnam, *Yorkshire Sessions of the Peace, Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Record Series*, vol. 100 (1939), pp. xxxix-xl.

4. For the effects on Southampton, for example, see Colin Platt, *Medieval Southampton* (London and Boston, 1973), pp. 125-28.


7. The events surrounding this action are described in detail by G. L. Harris, *King, Parliament, and Public Finance in 1369* (Oxford, 1975), chapters twelve and thirteen.


10. Traditionally the manorial bailiff of a monastery was a cellarer. At St. Peter, Westminster, there were two cellers, one "external" who oversaw the manors, and the other "internal." When the external cellarer spent several days in the monastery he took over the duties of the internal cellarer, who remained in the cloister. See Edward Maunde Thompson, ed., *Customary of the Benedictine Monasteries of Saint Augustine, Canterbury and Saint Peter, Westminster*, 2 vols., Henry Bradshaw Society vol. 28 (1904), 2:69. At St. Albans Abbey the cellarer acted as a kind of itinerant judge at the biennial Halimote. See A. E. Levett, "The Court and Court Rolls of St. Albans Abbey," *TRHS*, 4th ser. 8 (1924): 60. The Benedictine Rule specifies that the cellarer should be "wise, mature in conduct, temperate, not an excessive eater, not proud, excitable, offensive, dilatory, or wasteful, but God fearing, and like a father to the whole community." He should, moreover, be above all humble. See *The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Collegeville, Minn., 1981), pp. 227, 229. Chaucer's monk hardly resided in these virtues.

11. SR, I. 346. This statute was not consistently enforced.

12. Ibid., I. 389.

13. Ibid., I. 394.


15. Ibid., I. 367-68.

16. Ibid., I. 303-6. The oath covering the points of the Ordinance is given at length.


20. SR, I. 360. For a definition, see SR, I. 145.

21. Ibid., I. 366.

22. Ibid., I. 364-65. These justices replaced the Keepers of the Peace.

23. 2 Ed III 2, SR, I. 257-58; 10 Ed III 1, 3, p. 275; 14 Ed III 1, 15, p. 286; 27 Ed III 1, 2, p. 330. However, felonies continued to be pardoned for a fee.


25. E.g., see the last will of William Donne, archdeacon of Leicester, as cited by A. H. Thompson, *The English Clergy and Their Organization in Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1947), pp. 60-61, who asked God's forgiveness for exactions and extortions, in which, he said, he merely followed the example of his brethren. On the specific activities of archdeacons, see Jean Scammell, "The Rural Chapter in England from the Eleventh to the Fourteenth Century," *EHR* 86 (1971): 1-21. The fact (pp. 17-18) that both the innocent and the guilty would pay to avoid citation partly explains the opportunity for extortion. Archdeacons sometimes also extorted money for wills. See Margaret Aston, *Thomas Arundel* (Oxford, 1967), pp. 93-94. The following pages contain evidence of extortion by archdeacons' officials. Summoners or apparitors were notorious. See Brian L. Woodcock, *Medieval Ecclesiastical Courts in the Diocese of Canterbury* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 49, 111. Rural Deans, with whom archdeacons were associated, were also tempted in the same way. For a specific example, see Elizabeth Gurnsey Kimball, *Rolls of the Gloucestershire Sessions of the Peace, 1361-1398* (Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society, vol. 62 (1942), p. 128.

26. The term "feudal system" was first used in England in the seventeenth century. *Feudalism* is an artificial construct originating in the minds of historians, who have "defined" it in various ways and who frequently employ it very loosely. Its "origins," "history," and "decline" depend entirely on the definition being used. That is, it can be said to have "ended" in the later thirteenth century, in the Renaissance, at the time of the French Revolution, or, in England, with the passage of the Agricultural Holding Act of 1923. Similarly, its "origins" can be located in different times and places. Like many other "isms" it is a convenient label that often carries emotional overtones,
although its concrete referents are vague. European societies called “feudal” were always complex with wide local variations and were always undergoing fairly rapid changes, a fact that the term tends to obscure.

27. SR, 1. 106. A. W. B. Simpson, *An Introduction to the History of the Land Law* (Oxford, 1961), p. 51, calls the statute “a striking illustration of the lack of importance which by this time was attached to the personal relationship of lord and tenant; lords were more interested in protecting their incidents than in selecting their tenants.” The statute effectively discouraged grants in fee farm. But it did not prevent the granting of lucrative sinecures to faithful retainers.

28. We may compare the career of Lord John Fitzwalter of Essex with that of Sir Matthew Gurney (above, n. 3). For Lord John Fitzwalter, see Elizabeth Chapin Furber, *Essays Sessions of the Peace 1351, 1377-79*, Essex Archaeological Society Occasional Publications, vol. 3 (1953), pp. 61-62. Lord John’s lands were seized by the king, whereas Sir Matthew, who had a good lawyer, continued in royal favor.


30. Cf. R. B. Dobson, *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381* (London, 1970), pp. 13-15; M. M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1972), pp. 153-54. The latter points out that the facts do not fit the theory that the revolt was “a typical instance of the working class revolt against oppression.” I might add that the latter view is a typical example of the tendency among historians to view the past in the light of current “isms” and their attendant prejudices.

31. An effort to revive this legislation, which had been neglected, failed in 1384, RP, 3. 201.

32. Ibid., 3. 21.

33. Ibid., 3. 19-20. This complaint was repeated in the following year and brought a temporary remedy.

34. SR. 2. 114. But this statute did not prevent extortion among sheriffs.


36. RP, 3. 25. Cf. SR, 1. 43. See n. 25, above. In 1392 John Lawrence, registrar of the bishop of Winchester, was indicted in Hampshire for having taken 13s 4d “by extortion” for probate of a will. 40s from another for the same service, and 10s and a silver seal worth 10s from two other executors. See G. O. Sayles, *Select Cases in the Court of King’s Bench*, Selden Society, vol. 7 (1971), pp. 82-83. Even a bishop might be extortionate. Thus Henry of Wakefield, bishop of Worcester, and his suffragan were indicted for extorting money for consecrating chapels and altars. See Elizabeth Gurney Kimball, *Some Warwickshire and Coventry Sessions of the Peace, 1377-1397*, Dugdale Society, vol. 16 (1939), pp. 105-6.

37. RP, 3. 43. Cf. n. 25, above.

38. Ibid., 3. 46.


40. SR, 2. 9.

41. Ibid.

42. RP, 3. 64.

43. Ibid., 3. 80.

44. Ibid., 3. 80-81.

45. Ibid., 3. 81.

46. Ibid., repeated in the following year, RP, 3. 94.

47. SR, 2. 14.


49. Ibid., 3. 94.


52. RP, 3. 100-101.

53. Ibid., 3. 140. We can understand why the devil in the *Friar’s Tale* should appear as a bailiff.

54. Ibid., 3. 201, 280, 308.

55. Ibid., 3. 138; SR, 2. 35.


60. SR, 1. 307-8.

61. Ibid., 1. 311-16.

62. For a case involving this provision, see Sayles, *Select Cases*, vol. 7, pp. 60-61.
63. SR, 1. 366.
65. E.g., RP, 3. 159.
66. SR, 2. 33; cf. c. 15, p. 35.
67. Ibid., 2. 38.
68. Ibid., 2. 56.
69. Ibid., 2. 57-58.
71. “Importune” or troublesome games had already come to the attention of local courts. For example, in 1373 six men at Chechester were accused of being common dice players, and one for being “a common player of chess.” All were said to stay awake at night and to frequent taverns. And in 1375 three men were fined 6d each for playing unlawful games, and agreed to pay 6s 8d each if they were caught again. See I. H. Jeayes, Court Rolls of the Borough of Colchester, vol. 3 (Colchester, 1941), pp. 17, 81. The tenants of the Durham vill of Hetheworths were forbidden to play at dice on pain of 20s. Football (“soccer”), which led (as it apparently still does) to “gravis contencio et contumelia” was forbidden in 1381. See W. H. Longstreet and John Booth, Halmota Prioratus Dunelmensis, Surtees Society, vol. 82 (1889), pp. 166, 171.
At Castle Combe such games were still being punished in the Renaissance. See J. Poulet Scrope, Castle Combe (London, 1852), pp. 330, 332, 335. The dice playing of Chaucer’s Franklin’s young son is reprehensible aside from the fact that it involves loss of money, which seems to disturb the Franklin. Ironically, many noblemen were fond of it.
72. SR, 2. 56-59.
73. Ibid., 2. 62-63.
74. RP, 3. 296.
75. This fact is amusingly illustrated by the treatment of approvers (or convicted felons who obtained temporary respite by identifying and offering to prove themselves upon unidentified accomplices) who came from outside the liberty of Fordwick, the old port of Canterbury. Such an approver should enter the liberty with his equipment (probably a battle-ax with a leather blade and a leather jerkin). The custom of the borough as recorded by Mary Bate son, Borough Customs, Selden Society, vol. 1 (1904), p. 33, ran as follows: “He shall be led to the running water called the Stour, and he shall stand in that water up to his navel, with his equipment, in the manner of an approver, ready, as aforesaid, to prove his appeal. And the said freeman thus appealed shall come in a rowboat of three benches in the same river opposite the said approver, and the freeman shall wear a garment called a skerp (leather jacket), and shall have a weapon called an oar three yards in length, and his boat shall be made fast by a rope to the quay, and in the said water he shall fight with the said approver until the duel between them is finished.” One can imagine the joy of the citizens if and when this custom was implemented.
76. RP, 3. 266.
78. SR, 2. 64.
82. See especially F. R. H. Du Boulay, An Age of Ambition: English Society in the Late Middle Ages (London, 1970). May McKisack, The Parliamentary Representation of the English Boroughs During the Late Middle Ages (Oxford, 1932), p. 43, said that “in spite of the Black Death and “the drain of the French war” the later fourteenth century was a time of “increasing municipal prosperity.” More recent studies are more likely to emphasize prosperity in both agriculture and trade as a result of the Black Death, which is said to have reduced overpopulation. See most recently John Hatcher, Plague, Population and the English Economy (Economic History Society, 1977), pp. 31-34, who calls attention to the fact (p. 34) that the prosperity of the lesser folk outraged moralists like the chronicler Knighton, who in 1388 wrote of “the elation of the inferior people in dress and accoutrements...so that one person cannot be distinguished from another either in splendor of dress or belongings, neither poor from rich nor servant from master.”
83. On the nunnery, see H. P. F. King, “The Priory of Stratford at Bow,” Victoria County History: Middlesex I (1969): 151-59. In 1380-1381 there were only fourteen nuns, one of whom was called “Argentyn.”
84. See most recently Chauncy Wood, Chaucer’s Portrait of the Priestess, in Signs and Symbols in Chaucer’s Poetry, ed. John P. Hermann and John J. Burke, Jr. (University, Alabama, 1981), pp. 81-100.
85. The Merchant is concerned about the safety of shipping “Bitwixe Middleburyge and Orwel.” After the French advance in Flanders in 1383 wool was sent to Middlesbrough, which became a compulsory staple in 1384. But in January 1387 convoys had to be employed between the two ports. The staple was restored to Calais in 1389. See T. H. Lloyd, The English Wool Trade in the Middle Ages (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 230-31. The Merchant’s concern thus identifies his trade for Chaucer’s audience and at the same time affords us an approximate date for the composition of the Prologue, or at least for this part of it.
86. SR, 1. 322.
87. RP, 3. 280-81. The commons petitioned that since both lay and spiritual lords practice “the abominable vice of usury” and call it “chevance” the old statutes concerning usury should be confirmed. Chevance is clearly a variant of the term Chaucer uses.
90. For an example of a tyrannical reeve, see P. D. A. Harvey, Monumental Records of Cuckham, Oxfordshire Record Society, vol. 50 (1976), p. 669. Here the whole homage was in mercy for concealing the transgressions of the reeve.
Chaucer and the Plague

for four years (clearly through fear). He had let his animals into the lord’s pasture, stolen a small ash tree, and abetted a miller who stole grain from the lord’s granary. For some light on Chaucer’s lines

Wel koute he kepe a gerner and a bynne;
Ther was noon auditour koute on him wynne,


91. I have discussed this point at length in an article now in preparation, “The Probable Date and Purpose of Chaucer’s Troilus.”

‘he hath a thousand slayn this pestilence’:
The Iconography of the Plague
in the late Middle ages

John B. Friedman

Perhaps the most striking feature of medieval art dealing with the plague is its indirection. That is, in an age when an estimated one-third of Europe’s population died of disease, surprisingly few manuscript miniatures and wall paintings depict the sick and dying. The scarcity of contemporary plague imagery is reflected in modern studies of the Black Death of 1348 and its aftermath, which have relied heavily upon Renaissance art for illustration. For example, Jean-Noël Biraben’s recent two-volume Les hommes et la peste has a 227-page bibliography, and some 200 pages of graphs, charts, and tables dealing with all manner of medical, demographic, and economic issues. And yet, of its twenty illustrations, only four are medieval, and of these, only two are from manuscript painting.

Those scholars who have concerned themselves specifically with the plague’s impact on medieval art have concentrated on two motifs—the Dance of Death and the Three Living and Three Dead—as well as on the development of the transi tomb. Unfortunately, the first two motifs have only an implied association with the disease, since their themes are mortality in general and not the cause of death, while funerary art never depicts plague victims during their illness.

The relatively small amount of what we might term direct “reportage” imagery is not, however, evidence of unconcern for the subject. Rather, it reflects the very slow development of an artistic vocabulary by which to describe the plague, in a period when painters preferred to copy or adapt earlier pictures. More important, painting and sculpture of the sick and dying comprises only a part of the broad range of medieval responses to the epidemic, in art as in literature. Such responses also include the explanations