

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE
TOWNELEY CYCLE

by

Theodore R. DeWelles

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THEODORE DEWELLES

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THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

OF THE TOWNELEY CYCLE

Committee in Charge:

Professor A. Franceschetti, Chairman
Professor A.H. de Quehen
Professor A.F. Johnston, Supervisor
Professor S.J. Kahrl, External Examiner
Professor K.O. Kee
Professor I. Lancashire, Internal Appraiser
Professor M.M. Sheehan

Abstract

Modern scholarship has long ignored the fact that medieval religious drama, especially the mystery plays, contains a great deal of highly specific social and political commentary. This dissertation attempts to discover, by analyzing a number of plays in the Towneley cycle, what the particular topics are which make up that commentary, how relevant they are to the concerns and problems of late medieval English society and in what manner they are articulated dramatically by the Towneley playwrights themselves, particularly the Wakefield Master.

The first two chapters of this study establish the topical and intellectual background that will form the basis for the later discussion of three of the Wakefield Master's most important works--the Mactacio Abel, Processus Noe Cum Filiis and Prima Pastorum. Chapter One, paying special attention to conditions and attitudes at work in late fourteenth and fifteenth-century Yorkshire, examines various events (the Black Death, the Peasants' Revolt) and developments (the growing prosperity and enterprise of the lower classes) which made so many late medieval Englishmen economically aggressive individualistic, materialistic and self-assertive, and which promoted so many values antagonistic to the traditional social assumptions of the age.

Chapter Two studies some of these assumptions in detail--the belief that society was a hierarchical and corporate organism whose members had to work in unison, that labor was a selfless act designed to benefit the community more than the individual, that rebellion was always unjustifiable, that worldliness endangered the soul, that excessive self-reliance led to spiritual alienation and ruin--and, furthermore, shows how these assumptions increasingly found their way into the writings of such men as Gower, Langland, Chaucer and Lydgate. The repeated reaffirmation of traditional social ideals by these and other orthodox writers indicates that there existed a fairly large body of opinion opposed to the changes that had plagued English society since 1350.

The Wakefield Master was among those alarmed by the current trend toward materialism, individualism and rebellion. In the Mactacio Abel and Processus Noe he both attacks the new attitudes of his age and defends the older values of charity, cooperation and obedience. The Wakefield Cain, for instance, is portrayed as a hard working, enterprising and prosperous yeoman farmer whose immoderate devotion to a specious, mercantile philosophy and to an especially reckless brand of self-centeredness causes him to be banished from the community of men and the presence of God. Noah, on the other hand, is characterized as an ideal medieval

laborer, a man whose humility, charity and commitment to communal endeavor stand in sharp contrast to Cain's greed and selfishness and whose conception of work as an act of worship differs substantially from Cain's rather blasphemous and mundane approach. Cain's personality reflects the sordid realities of late medieval social and economic life: acquisitiveness, defiance, industriousness, self-absorption; Noah's stands for the forgotten ideals of partnership and prayer, ideals that needed constant reassertion in a world grown crass and uncaring.

In Chapter Four certain intellectual traditions such as egalitarianism, communism and the Golden Age are discussed in terms of their possible influence on the apocalyptic and millenarian aspirations of the late medieval peasantry, aspirations that were partly responsible for the 'Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Since the Prima Pastorum exploits both primitivistic and messianic traditions, it is argued here that the play may be critical of the late medieval peasantry's revolutionary urges. In other words, it is maintained that the Prima Pastorum attacks its age's infatuation with apocalyptic visions and Utopian fantasies of social reform and argues instead for a return to the simple virtues of charity, faith and humility as symbolized by Christ, the true Messiah.

The Magnus Herodes (Chapter Five), on the other

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hand, denounces the lawless activities of the English nobility and questions the system that did so much to encourage aristocratic violence in general--bastard feudalism. Herod and his soldiers are thus examined in their role as fifteenth-century knights whose disruptive and bloody behavior was not that far removed from what was happening in northern England--particularly Yorkshire--at the time.

Finally, Chapter Six analyzes the whole Towneley Passion sequence and concludes that it is dominated by one major political issue--Lollardy. An examination of orthodox and heterodox controversial literature reveals that the prejudices and assumptions of both the anti-heretical party and the heretics themselves have been exploited by the dramatists in such a way as to make it appear as though Christ himself is a fifteenth-century schismatic. Virtually all the charges that the Jews bring against Christ in these plays--treason, magic, false prophecy, lying, deceit, demagoguery--are identical to those which were commonly levelled against Lollards in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Such a bold form of characterization has a definite purpose. The playwrights, in depicting Jesus as a man falsely charged with and condemned for heresy, want to caution their contemporaries against the indiscriminate and irrational pursuit of apostasy--something which had become a real problem in late medieval England.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Theodore R. DeWelles

Date and Place of Birth: 5 August 1946 in Rochester, New York

Previous Degrees: B.A., St. John Fisher College, Rochester
Conferred June, 1968

M.A., State University of New York: College
at Brockport
Conferred August, 1973

Period of Registration in School of Graduate
Studies, University of Toronto: September, 1973 to September,
1981

Graduate Courses Taken at the
University of Toronto:

The York Cycle (audit): A. F. Johnston

Middle English Romance: K. Kee

The English Morality Play (audit):
I. Lancashire

Comedy and Tragedy Before Shakespeare:
J. M. R. Margeson

Eighteenth-Century Novel: J. Carroll

Bibliography II, Medieval Period:
P. L. Heyworth

Bibliography II, Renaissance Period:
I. Lancashire

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Introduction

The following study attempts, above all, to put into practice a rarely used literary approach--rarely used, that is, insofar as medieval drama is concerned. The approach involves examining the way in which the English cycle play, particularly the Towneley cycle, addresses itself to the problems and issues--economic, social, political--of the age in which it was produced. Outside of a small handful of scholars, however, few students of the drama have taken the time to adopt this line of inquiry. This is unfortunate, for the plays are a rich storehouse of contemporary matter.

But such neglect of the plays' contemporaneity is somewhat understandable in a field which has had more than its fair share of critical approaches and theories. For example, scholars have tended for years to define medieval drama in evolutionary terms. That is, they assumed that the vernacular cycles had grown out of the earlier liturgical drama of the Church and, furthermore, could be distinguished from the older drama by their more secular tone and appeal. This whole Darwinian process was persuasively propounded by E. K. Chambers in his two volume work, The Medieval Stage (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903):

From ecclesiastical the drama had become popular. Out of the hands of the clergy in their naves and choirs, it had passed to those of the laity in their market-places and guild-halls. And to this formal change corresponded a spiritual or literary one, in the reaction of the temper of the folk upon the handling of the plays, the broadening of their human as distinct from their religious aspect. In their origin officia for devotion and edification, they came, by an irony familiar to the psychologist, to be primarily spectacula for mirth, wonder, and delight.

(II, p. 69)

Thirty years later Karl Young's The Drama of the Medieval Church, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933) supported many of Chambers' conclusions about the evolutionary development of English drama.¹ In fact, the evolutionary theory proved so durable that it was reaffirmed by Hardin Craig in his English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), a work that appeared half a century after the publication of Chambers' book.

Scholars today, however, no longer consider the evolutionary interpretation valid, mainly because O. B. Hardison convincingly demolished it in his Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965).² Hardison maintained that in applying Darwinian criteria to medieval works, Chambers, Young and Craig had given people a distorted picture of the genesis of vernacular drama:

the standard historians of medieval drama have followed the procedure used by early evolutionary anthropologists in connection with the study of myth. They have attributed present concepts and attitudes to a culture of the past. They have assumed that medieval man thought like nineteenth-century man, or ought to have done so. The result has been serious distortion. History has become teleological, interpreted both intentionally and unconsciously in terms of what texts anticipate rather than what they are. The texts themselves have been read as though they were intended for production under conditions vaguely foreshadowing Covent Garden and for audiences vaguely like the rowdies in the Victorian gallery.³

Soon after Hardison's views were published, V. A. Kolve's The Play Called Corpus Christi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966) appeared, and it too attacked the older tradition, maintaining that the cycle plays owed their existence not to liturgical drama but to the feast of Corpus Christi, which had been officially adopted by the Church in 1311.⁴ Accordingly, Kolve noted that the English cycles developed independently of the Latin plays,⁵ and were not a product of the kind of evolutionary process outlined by Chambers, Young and Craig.⁶

Even before the authority of the evolutionary tradition had been completely discredited, alternative approaches to medieval drama--more concerned with the literary and aesthetic meaning of the plays than with their origin and growth--were being developed. Probably the most well known and influential of these alternatives is the so-called typological approach, which attempts to

interpret the plays, especially the Old Testament pieces, in terms of their figural significance or their association with some future event. Thus the play of Abraham and Isaac, for instance, is seen--at least on one level--to look forward to Christ's passion and death. Abraham becomes a "type" for God the Father, a man who must sacrifice--as God must later sacrifice--his only begotten son; Isaac, on the other hand, functions as a "type" for Christ, an obedient though at times reluctant victim who ultimately submits to his father's will. Both men reenact the roles their divine counterparts will play at the time of the Redemption.⁷

Rosemary Woolf and V. A. Kolve are probably the two most familiar proponents of the typological method. Woolf has used it extensively in many of her studies, two of the more important being "The Effect of Typology on the English Mediaeval Plays of Abraham and Isaac," Speculum, 32 (1957), 805-25 and The English Mystery Plays (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972). Kolve, for his part, sees typology as the main principle behind the selection of Old Testament episodes for dramatization in the cycles.⁸ And lately, Walter E. Meyers has applied the method to the Towneley plays in A Figure Given: Typology in the Wakefield Plays (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1970).

The typological approach has greatly advanced our

knowledge of medieval drama in general and of certain plays in particular: the plays of Noah, Abraham and Isaac, Moses, The Slaughter of the Innocents. It has, moreover, provided real insights into the overall structure of the cycles themselves, enriching our appreciation of them as works of art. It remains, despite some recent attempts to call its validity into question,⁹ a relatively popular and useful interpretive method.

Yet another approach is that which analyzes the plays' effectiveness as drama. This method has in recent years come to dominate the field of medieval dramatic scholarship and shows no sign of faltering. Essentially, it accepts the plays for what they are, stage presentations, and evaluates them accordingly-- in terms of plot, action, dialogue, character and motivation. The studies which fall into this category are far too numerous to mention, but a few of the more outstanding examples are Waldo F. McNeir's seminal article, "The Corpus Christi Passion Plays as Dramatic Art," Studies in Philology, 48 (1951), 601-28, Eleanor Prosser's Drama and Religion in the English Mystery Plays (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961) and Stanley J. Kahrl's Traditions of Medieval English Drama (London: Hutchinson, 1974).

A real boom also seems to have taken place in articles devoted to one aspect of medieval drama in

particular--the physical details of its production and staging. Here again even a partial list of studies would prove too long, but one should at least name the following works: Glynne Wickham, Early English Stages, 1300 to 1660, vol. 1, 1300-1576 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959) and The Medieval Theatre (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), Martial Rose's introduction in his edition of The Wakefield Mystery Plays (London: Evans Brothers, 1961) and William Tydeman, The Theatre in the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).¹⁰

Finally, two editions of dramatic records, part of an extensive and ambitious series of texts-- Alexandra F. Johnston's and Margaret Rogerson's York, 2 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979) and Lawrence M. Clopper's Chester (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979)--have just been published by the Records of Early English Drama (REED), an organization whose aim is "to locate, transcribe and publish systematically all surviving external evidence of dramatic, ceremonial and minstrel activity in Great Britain before 1642."¹¹ By the time this monumental project is completed,¹² we shall all have a better understanding of the everyday features of medieval theatrical production: costuming, scenery, costs and fees, logistics, staging and the particulars of civic involvement in the mechanics of production.

All the approaches, however, which have so far been mentioned--and some which have not, like textual and thematic studies--make little or no attempt to show how medieval drama is socially and politically relevant to its time. And we really should not expect them to, for this is not their objective. On the other hand, those studies which do make such an attempt are few and far between. At present, there have appeared no more than half a dozen works exploring the plays' treatment of contemporary issues: Arnold Williams, The Characterization of Pilate in the Towneley Plays (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State College Press, 1950), Bennett A. Brockman, "The Law of Man and the Peace of God: Judicial Process as Satiric Theme in the Wakefield Mactacio Abel," Speculum, 49 (1974), 699-707, Lynn Squires, "Law and Disorder in Ludus Coventriae," Comparative Drama, 12 (1978), 200-13 and three unpublished dissertations, Harold P. Brent, "Authority and Heresy in the Towneley Cycle--Structure as Reflection of Theme," University of Wisconsin, 1973, Dorrel T. Hanks, "Social Satire in Medieval English Cycle Plays," University of Minnesota, 1976 and Lynn Squires, "Legal and Political Aspects of Late Medieval English Drama," University of Washington, 1977.¹³ As this list indicates, the past decade has witnessed an increase in works that approach the plays from a social and political point of view. Nevertheless, the overall number of

studies devoted to this particular method remains comparatively small.

Fewer still are those studies which have made a conscious effort to examine carefully the social and political character of the particular locales in which the cycles were produced. Medieval English society was extremely parochial, and each geographical region had its own peculiar structure and identity which may or may not have matched those of other parts of the country. Therefore, some knowledge of specific regions is imperative if we are to have more than a superficial understanding of the plays' topicality. But of the published studies just mentioned only one--Brockman's article on judicial satire in the Mactacio Abel, which sees the play as an attack on the abuse of sanctuary rights and on the free granting of pardons to felons--makes any real attempt to unearth fresh, detailed information about the area in which the play was probably performed, the West Riding.

The present study takes up where Brockman's left off and minutely explores certain key features not only of late medieval England, but of late medieval Yorkshire as well--its social order, economic structure, religious organization, the aspirations and fears of its populace--and, furthermore, tries to show how these things are reflected in one of that shire's two surviving Corpus Christi plays--the Towneley cycle.

The Towneley cycle has been selected for a number of reasons. For one thing, it possesses, as has generally been acknowledged, an unusually large percentage of what some scholars like to call "social satire." Secondly, it contains plays written by that most talented of medieval dramatists, the so-called Wakefield Master. Moreover, because so much of the cycle's satire is a product of the Master's genius, it provides us with social and political commentary that is of a high quality indeed. Finally, the range of issues treated in Towneley, along with the boldness of their presentation, is in a word astonishing. For the plays deal with virtually every important development that affected late medieval life.

Some of these developments, such as the disturbing tendency among growing numbers of commoners--especially peasants--to be increasingly assertive, materialistic and self-reliant, and the way orthodox opinion responded to these developments, form the subject of the first two chapters of this study, which act as a kind of introduction to the discussion (Chapters III and IV) of the Mactacio Abel, the Processus Noe Cum Filiis and the Prima Pastorum. The Mactacio and the Processus, for instance, both address themselves to the issues of greed and individualism and try to demonstrate, dramatically, how these two vices threaten the altruistic and corporate principles upon which so much of the

social life of the medieval world depended; the Prima Pastorum, meanwhile, devotes itself to the problem of lower class self-assertiveness, attacking in the process the millenarian aspirations and Utopian visions of the age--forces which were partly responsible for the Peasants' Revolt of 1381--and arguing instead for a return to the simple virtues of charity and faith. The Magnus Herodes, which I discuss in Chapter V, savagely ridicules, on the other hand, the lawless retinues of the great and the institution which sustained them--bastard feudalism. And finally, by audaciously portraying Christ himself as an innocent victim falsely accused of England's most notorious heresy--Lollardy--the Passion sequence (Chapter VI) warns its viewers that they may have become overzealous and irrational in their pursuit and persecution of apostasy.¹⁴

Materialism and individualism, Utopian dreams for a new social order, aristocratic violence and religious paranoia: these are the contemporary issues which the Towneley cycle chooses to analyze and discuss. These issues, furthermore, are not just casually and hazardedly alluded to in the works in which they appear; nor are they to be dismissed condescendingly as mere "anachronisms" designed to make the drama more "true-to-life."¹⁵ On the contrary, they are deeply embedded in the thematic texture of the plays themselves and

have been incorporated into the playwrights' complete aesthetic design. The parts of the Towneley cycle that I will be considering, therefore, are not going to be treated simply as though they were so many historical documents. Rather, they will be evaluated, whenever possible, as works of art in their own right--works of art which just happen to contain some of the best social criticism to have come out of late medieval England.

NOTES

- ¹ Young, I, p. 12.
- ² See especially, "Essay I: Darwin, Mutations, and the Origin of Medieval Drama," pp. 1-34.
- ³ Hardison, p. 33.
- ⁴ Kolve, pp. 42-50.
- ⁵ Kolve, pp. 33-42.
- ⁶ See Kolve, p. 50, where he asserts the following:

The old literary-history account of how this drama began in Latin inside the church and then moved out through the porch and churchyard to its final home in the marketplace, meanwhile undergoing translation into the vernacular and displaying an increasing 'secularization' of matter and manner will no longer stand.

Another attack on Chambers' theory of secularization, predating both Hardison's and Kolve's studies, is Alexandra F. Johnston's unpublished dissertation, "The Christ Figure in the Ministry Plays of the Four English Cycles," Diss. University of Toronto 1964.

⁷ For an exhaustive analysis of the term "figure" and of its use in the Middle Ages see Erich Auerbach's important essay, "Figura," in his Scenes from the Drama of European Literature (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), pp. 11-76.

⁸ Kolve, pp. 57-100.

⁹ See, for example, Arnold Williams, "Typology and the Cycle Plays: Some Criteria," Speculum, 43 (1968), 677-84 and D. W. Robertson, "The Question of Typology and the Wakefield Mactacio Abel," American Benedictine Review, 25 (1974), 157-73.

¹⁰ See also Kenneth Cameron and Stanley Kahrl, "Staging the N-Town Cycle," Theatre Notebook, 21 (1966), 122-65; Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Dorrell,

"The Doomsday Pageant of the York Mercers, 1433," Leeds Studies in English, 5 (1971), 29-34 and Alan H. Nelson, The Medieval English Stage: Corpus Christi Pageants and Plays (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974)--but see also Alexandra F. Johnston's important review of Nelson's book in University of Toronto Quarterly, 44 (1975), 238-48.

11 Johnston and Rogerson, ed., York, I, p. vi.

12 For a complete list of contributors to the projected series along with the names of the regions they have chosen to investigate, see "REED Publications and Research," Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama, 21 (1978), 117.

13 One could extend this list somewhat by including articles which link the plays to certain, rather refined, intellectual movements such as Nominalism; see Kathleen M. Ashley, "Divine Power in Chester Cycle and Late Medieval Thought," Journal of the History of Ideas, 39 (1978), 387-404.

14 Harold Brent's unpublished dissertation, "Authority and Heresy in the Towneley Cycle--Structure as Reflection of Theme," Diss. The University of Wisconsin 1973, a synopsis of which may be found in DAI, 35A (1974), 394A-95A, treats some of the same issues I will be discussing, but draws different conclusions from them. For instance, he deals with the topic of heresy, but it is heresy having "a long tradition" and not one specific kind, like Lollardy. Furthermore, he maintains that the Towneley cycle's anti-authoritarian perspective is largely caused by this tradition of heresy, implying that the plays are sympathetic to various types of heretical ideas that had been in circulation in Christianity for quite some time. My position is different from this. I assert, in Chapter VI, that the plays are concerned about only one heresy--Lollardy--and that they are more sympathetic to the plight of those who find themselves falsely accused of it than they are to the heretics themselves and their radical ideas.

Brent also considers, as I do, certain "millenarian movements and movements for socio-economic change." But again, he sees them as contributing to the cycle's anti-authoritarian stance. I adopt a different view, maintaining that the millenarianism reflected in the Prima Pastorum is part of the play's criticism of the Utopian visions and apocalyptic expectations of the common people; I do not see the play's millenarian allusions as manifestations of some kind of sympathy for the downtrodden masses.

Finally, Brent, in exploring the cycle's social and political features, focusses upon changes and developments that took place in the fourteenth century. My study deals with the fourteenth century too, but it also sees the events of the fifteenth century as being vitally important for an understanding of the cycle's contemporaneity.

In summary, let me say that Brent's study, while valid and important, seems to concentrate only on a limited aspect of the Towneley cycle's topicality--its "anti-authoritarian social criticism." My thesis, on the other hand, sees the cycle as a reaffirmation of the traditional medieval ideals of social harmony and political order. The cycle does not oppose authority per se, but rather the abuse of authority. Nor does it ever uncritically align itself with any movement which could possibly undermine the basic social principles of the body politic. Its social and political message is essentially a conservative one, advocating caution and restraint in the face of perplexing and pervasive change.

Unfortunately, I have been unable to examine personally Brent's thesis, and have had to rely instead on his précis in DAI. I hope I have adequately and fairly traced the broader outlines of his argument.

¹⁵ David Bevington, in his Tudor Drama and Politics (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), is perhaps guilty of this very attitude. At any rate, he certainly reveals a tendency to play down the topical nature of religious drama in the Middle Ages, as the following remarks appear to indicate (p. 27):

medieval drama reveals few traces of political activity. In part this is because most religious drama concerned itself simply with the soul of the ordinary man or priest. Biblical drama did comment anachronistically on contemporary life, as in the Second Shepherds' Play, but only to stress the timelessness of regeneration.

Materialism and Individualism in Late
Medieval England

In the late Middle Ages English society underwent a radical and extensive transformation. On the surface this might not seem too apparent. Society was still organized, as it had been since the Norman Conquest, along fairly rigid feudal principles. Men still saw themselves as either vassals of one man or the lords of others. (Sometimes they were both.) The commonwealth continued to be perceived as a hierarchically arranged organism, consisting of three separate yet interdependent estates: church, nobility, commons. And the values to which everyone paid homage remained the traditional ones of obedience, rank, order, cooperation and religion.

But within this rather calm and seemingly stable framework real changes which threatened to crack the very structure of medieval society were taking place. For one thing most people, especially rural dwellers, were no longer as poor as they once had been. As members of a population that had been reduced to at least two-thirds (some say one-half) of its former size by famine and plague, peasants in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries suddenly had access to larger and more fertile holdings than ever before. Along with

prosperity came a new awareness of and desire for temporal commodities: land, livestock, money. But the peasants were not the only ones smitten with the urge to thrive. Other segments of society such as urban craftsmen, rural artisans and merchants, inspired by the belief that material betterment was no longer a hopeless dream but an attainable reality, also devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the pursuit of wealth. A brash, aggressive spirit of enterprise and acquisitiveness, not unlike that which took hold of nineteenth-century America and in direct opposition to the non-worldly focus of medieval life, seemed to have overrun English society.

In addition to their improved material prospects and growing temporal aspirations, there was also a change in the way many members of the lower class saw themselves in relation to the rest of society. No longer content to accept the conventional view that they must toil patiently, meekly and without reward in order to equip the rest of the commonwealth with the necessities of life, they began to develop a decidedly less communal, more self-assertive posture in their dealings with the other estates (i.e., their superiors) and with each other. This restless individualism manifested itself in a variety of ways and on a variety of levels--from collective rebellions against oppressive authority in general, like the Peasants' Revolt, or rent strikes by

tenants upset over a particular lord's manorial policy to more singular acts of defiance, such as one peasant's attempt to appropriate to himself a portion of the common which by custom belonged to the whole village. These deeds and others like them were all part of a growing self-centeredness which went completely against the medieval ideal of a corporate, cooperative society. Small wonder, then, that for some of the age's more concerned traditionalists, individualism signified a powerful, socially disruptive urge.

In three plays--the Mactacio Abel, the Processus Noe Cum Filiis and the Prima Pastorum--the Wakefield Master attacks his contemporaries' commitment to the forces of materialism and individualism. Cain, for instance, is portrayed as an economically aggressive, relentlessly industrious yeoman farmer so caught up with himself and his greed that he cuts himself off from God, man and society. Noah, on the other hand, is the exact opposite. A generous and humble craftsman, devoted to the ideals of cooperation and service, he represents the proper way in which medieval man should order his work and life--along the lines of selflessness and prayer. The shepherds in the Prima Pastorum move between both these worlds, beginning their dramatic careers in a Cain-like state of egotism and avarice only to be transformed by the Nativity into men joyously free from such anti-communal evils, dedicated instead to a vision

that cherishes corporate and charitable endeavor. The miraculous transformation of the herdsmen, moreover, is accomplished all within a highly topical context--namely, that of the Peasants' Revolt and the messianic ideas which, in part, spawned it.

By castigating perverse, contemporary attitudes these plays align themselves with the more conservative opinion of the times which saw any kind of change as being bad for the kingdom. But their traditionalism in no way controverts their vitality or their merit. On the contrary, these plays are highly wrought artistic pieces whose penetrating criticism of society and convincing depiction of the malign forces which threaten it raise issues of the utmost relevance.

Historical Background: Prosperity

Recently, a distinguished historian termed the late Middle Ages in England an "age of ambition."¹ Indeed it was. People were consumed by a desire to get ahead politically, socially and economically. Barons amassed huge retinues of armed men in order to increase their power over their neighbors and to enhance their influence at court; merchants, after a lifetime spent acquiring wealth, avidly bought or married their way into the nobility. Most important of all, for our purposes, was what transpired in the countryside. There

significant numbers of peasants who had once been landless and poor were buying up plots at an unprecedented rate, while those who already held land were busy enlarging the size of their holdings.² For the first time in centuries, the rustic's craving for land was, partly because of the demographic havoc wreaked by the Black Death, matched by an abundant supply. No wonder he was ambitious. The relative comfort in which his colleagues lived, along with the cheap price of land, not only fed his desire to succeed but put the realization of that desire within reach. To the average English peasant it seemed as though prosperity were just around the corner, and he was prepared to do all in his power to obtain his share.

That late medieval England was, by the standards of the time, a place of wealth and plenty is virtually beyond dispute. One economic historian, in commenting on this very subject, has stated emphatically that both "the middle classes and the peasantry, during the later Middle Ages, entered upon a period of domestic comfort so astonishing . . . as to rouse passionate expressions of enthusiasm and disgust."³ Among those contemporaries who registered enthusiasm over the nation's material abundance was Sir John Fortescue who, in his De Laudibus Legum Anglie (1468-70), nostalgically (the author was in exile at the time) describes his homeland's bounty as if it were part of some long lost, prelapsarian landscape:

England is indeed so fertile that, compared area to area, it surpasses almost all other lands in the abundance of its produce; it is productive of its own accord, scarcely aided by man's labour. For its fields, plains, glades, and groves abound in vegetation with such richness that they often yield more fruits to their owners uncultivated than ploughed lands, though those are very fertile in crops and corn. Moreover, in that land, pastures are enclosed with ditches and hedges planted over with trees, by which the flocks and herds are protected from the wind and the sun's heat; most of them are irrigated so that the animals, shut in their pens, do not need watching by day or by night. For in that land there are neither wolves, bears, nor lions, so sheep lie by night in the fields without guard in their cotes and folds, whereby their lands are fertilised. Hence, the men of that land are not very much burdened with the sweat of labour, so that they live with more spirit, as the ancient fathers did, who preferred to tend flocks rather than to distract their peace of mind with the cares of agriculture.⁴

Elsewhere Fortescue adopts a less rhapsodic, more empirical tone, as in his Commodityes of England (written before 1451)⁵ where he scientifically itemizes the principal resources of the realm (land, wool, cloth, minerals, grain) and concludes that "of all other comodytes that are in all crysten londys God hathe sentt us parte in thys reame growynge for the moost substaunce."⁶ A generation later, in 1496, a visiting Italian diplomat was making similar observations about the island's prosperity:

. . . the riches of England are greater than those of any other country in Europe, as I have been told by the oldest and most experienced merchants, and also as I myself can vouch, from what I have seen. This is owing, in the first place, to the great fertility of the soil . . . Next, the sale of their valuable

tin brings in a large sum of money to the kingdom; but still more do they derive from their extraordinary abundance of wool, which bears such a high price and reputation throughout Europe.⁷

Setting the bourgeoisie aside for the moment, the people who profited the most from this surge of wealth were the lower classes--especially the peasants.⁸ Contemporary records confirm that the typical rural inhabitant had indeed fallen upon good times. Fortescue, writing in The Governace of England (1471-76), points out that although French peasants are too poor to give their king anything voluntarily, their counterparts in England "be riche, and perfore thai give to thair kynge, at somme tymes quinsimes and dessimes, and ofte tymes oper grete subsidies, as he hath nede ffor þe gode and defence off his reaume."⁹ The same point is made again in The Commodityes of England where it is maintained that "the comune peple of thys londe are the beste fedde, and also the best cledde of any natyon crystyn or hethen."¹⁰ Even as early as the 1380's writers expressed amazement, and sometimes alarm, at the English peasant's high standard of living. Froissart, for one, thought it an inducement to rebellion and maintained that the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 had been caused by "the abundance and prosperity in which the common people then lived."¹¹

The Causes of Prosperity

Briefly, the story behind the rise of the rural

population to this unparalleled position of material ease goes something like this. In the thirteenth century the English peasantry was in an unenviable economic position. The problem was mainly a demographic one: there was simply not enough land to meet the needs of a large, growing population. This imbalance had a devastating effect on the life of the medieval village. In the first place, it made the peasantry extremely vulnerable to exploitation by the landlord class. Knowing that tenants would do little to jeopardize what land they held, especially at a time when a vast pool of landless^{men} were ready to replace them should they falter in their tenurial duties, a lord was often tempted to increase labor services and money payments on his manor.¹² In other words, landlords used the threat of eviction as a means of exacting more revenue (in labor, cash or kind) from tenants who, given the difficulty of finding new holdings during a period of acute land scarcity, had little choice but to capitulate.¹³

The lot of the landless agricultural laborer was no better. Despite the fact that the lord relied more on his labor than on that of the landed tenants to cultivate the demesne (the land held personally by the lord), the rural worker still found it difficult to make ends meet. The glut of available labor kept wages low in the countryside while overpopulation drove up the demand for and hence the price of food--a situation

that effectively blocked any kind of economic advancement. Agrarian workers had to be more or less content with this state of affairs. Since they lacked the relative fiscal stability enjoyed by those who owned even a small piece of land, they were at the mercy of employers who could, at the slightest sign of dissatisfaction, replace them with more pliant individuals.¹⁴

Besides inhibiting economic progress, overpopulation also brought real physical hardship to the peasantry. As the strain of numbers became more critical the average rural dweller found himself becoming increasingly susceptible to the impersonal forces of weather, pestilence and famine. By the end of the thirteenth century the land could, if harvests went well, just barely sustain the population at a subsistence level.¹⁵ If, however, harvests were bad--as they were in 1290 and again in 1315-17¹⁶--then appalling losses of life would follow, a clear indication that the population had outstripped the soil's capacity to feed it.

Thus by the close of the high Middle Ages the bulk of the peasantry was in pretty dire economic straits: land was scarce, competition for work was intense, wages were low and prices high, feudal burdens excessive and nature, always unpredictable, could at a moment's notice wreak havoc on a swollen population which even in times of plenty struggled for survival at the subsistence level. The whole situation, while probably not

intolerable, was certainly frustrating for many. Fortunately, it would not last much longer.

Probably the single most important factor responsible for the improved lot of the lower classes in the later Middle Ages was the drastic decline in population--a decline that began as a trickle and ended as a deluge. It was heralded by the great famine of 1315-17, a European catastrophe that carried off thousands of souls in England alone. Within thirty years of this event, however, an even greater disaster overwhelmed the country, diminishing its population by one third to one half and bringing about a reduction in the birth-rate that was to last almost one hundred and fifty years.¹⁷ The Black Death of 1348 and its repeated visitations must be reckoned among the great calamities of all time. Enormous as its effect was, however, it did not so much initiate as accelerate developments already underway which were to transform utterly the life of the late medieval peasant.¹⁸

These developments were widespread and substantial, and they "improved out of all recognition the lot of the mass of the inhabitants of England."¹⁹ The most important change was in the ratio between men and land. By the last quarter of the fourteenth century the population, which had been falling for about fifty years, was so reduced that it was now possible for most people to satisfy their craving for land. For the first time

in centuries the supply of arable exceeded the supply of men needed to work it--a situation that was to endure up to the end of the fifteenth century.²⁰ The peasants were quick to seize the opportunities inherent in this new state of affairs. If landless, they often bought up leases and entered the ranks of the landed; if they held land already, they eagerly added more to their existing stock of holdings. Two factors were responsible for this startling display of entrepreneurial energy: the rise in wage-rates and the cheap price of land.

The landless wage-earner lucky enough to have survived the plague found his prospects for material success greatly enhanced. No longer an insignificant and dispensable member of a huge rural proletariat, he was now a much sought after individual, mainly because famine and pestilence had made labor in general a very scarce commodity. Consequently, he charged his employers as much as the market would bear, forcing wages up to record levels. Prior to the plague, for example, mowers in the West Riding were receiving only 5d. for a day's work; soon after its first visitation, however, they were charging a full shilling. Reapers who had once been paid only 2.5d. a day now received 8d., and women obtained 2.5d. for services that in previous years had only fetched them 0.5d.²¹ The government tried its best to control the situation through periodic reissuings of

the Statute of Labourers (first enacted in 1349), but never succeeded in rolling back pay-rates to their pre-plague levels.²² Real wages remained high throughout the fifteenth century, a phenomenon that prompted Thorold Rogers to designate the period "the golden age of the English labourer."²³ As a result of all this, rural workers now had the wherewithal to buy up inexpensive holdings made vacant by the plague or released by the lord of the manor from direct cultivation.²⁴

This brings us to the second factor that contributed to peasant prosperity--declining land values. Depopulation had drastically curtailed the land hunger of the thirteenth century and had sent prices plummeting by the end of the fourteenth. Within the town of Wakefield alone land worth 10d. an acre in 1336 was worth 8d. in 1380 and only 4.5d. in 1415.²⁵ Desperate to attract new tenants to replace those killed off by famine and disease, landlords began offering better terms of tenure: lower rents, longer leases, fewer servile burdens.²⁶ Unfortunately, these measures failed in the long run to offset the aristocracy's losses, especially after 1375 when low food prices combined with high wage-rates to make direct demesne exploitation economically impractical.²⁷ The lords were consequently forced to lease more and more of their holdings at increasingly cheaper prices in an effort to stave off financial ruin. This whole process had been underway as early as 1315,²⁸

but it really gained momentum after the plague.²⁹ Evidence from Yorkshire substantiates this latter point. By the fifteenth century, for instance, direct demesne cultivation had ceased on all Duchy of Lancaster estates in the county;³⁰ farmland and pasture which had once been exploited by the dukes of Lancaster were now in the hands of individual tenants. The same process was at work on the Percy estates. Between 1352 and 1405 the number of Percy manors in Yorkshire which the lord still actively worked had dropped from five to two, and by 1416 all former demesne lands had been leased out.³¹ Furthermore, the farming out of the demesne was often accompanied by a corresponding decline in the lords' revenue as land values continued to fall.³² All of this means that the peasants who leased these lands got a tremendous bargain for their money, obtaining good arable or pasture (the lord's land was usually the best on the manor) at cut-rate prices and easy tenure conditions. For those husbandmen and herdsmen³³ intent on buying and accumulating land, it was indeed a period of heady economic opportunity.

Agricultural change was not the only force operating to improve the quality of life for the lower orders. In those districts well-suited to its development, the cloth industry proved a particularly potent stimulant to prosperity. The West Riding was especially fortunate in this respect, having exactly the right

kind of conditions necessary for the growth of an efficient textile manufacturing system.

The West Riding's "take-off" into industrialization was accomplished by a combination of technology and terrain. The technology took the form of the mechanical fulling mill, a water-powered device which greatly speeded up the process of cleaning and thickening the cloth.³⁴ South-west Yorkshire, with its many swift-flowing streams, provided an ideal location for these mills and by 1327 at least ten towns in the district had them in operation.³⁵

The proliferation of fulling mills in the countryside sparked a significant shift in the geographical location of the cloth industry itself.³⁶ Hitherto, cloth production was almost exclusively centered in the old chartered boroughs, places like York, Lincoln and Beverley. Throughout the thirteenth century, however, more and more craftsmen left the cities for the hinterland in order to be closer to the mills themselves and to take advantage of the countryside's less restrictive industrial policies.³⁷ Such steady migration eventually took its toll and the older towns began to lose much of their former wealth. This was especially true for York where by the beginning of the fourteenth century cloth production was "at a low ebb."³⁸ Admittedly, this depression was short-lived, for by the second quarter of the same century York had revived its faltering

economy and entered a period of growth which lasted up to 1400.³⁹ This renewed prosperity was not, however, accomplished at the expense of the rural industries. Rather, it was the result of a national expansion of textile production so "spectacular"⁴⁰ that both town and country reaped impressive economic rewards.⁴¹

That Yorkshire in general participated in this expansion is well attested to by the fact that Hull, the county's principal seaport, had quadrupled its cloth exports between the 1360's and the end of the century.⁴² Not all parts of the shire, however, benefited equally from the boom. York's prosperity, for instance, had run its course by the beginning of the fifteenth century, and the city now started to deteriorate economically.⁴³ The West Riding, on the other hand, continued to flourish as a cloth-making region, challenging the provincial capital's status as an industrial center.⁴⁴ Some rural areas, moreover, thrived more than others. According to tax returns for 1334, the wealthiest parts of the Riding were the wapentakes of Strafforth and Tickhill, Staincross and Osgoldcross, fertile lowland regions which combined to contribute over 42 per cent of the area's aggregate tax for that year. In contrast, the poorer upland wapentakes of Agbrigg and Morley (the territories in which Leeds, Wakefield and Halifax were situated) accounted for only 11.1 per cent of the total tax yield. By the mid-sixteenth century, however, the

distribution of wealth had changed considerably. Whereas in 1334 Staincross and Osgoldcross had between them paid 21.3 per cent of the Riding's taxes, by 1543-47 their contribution had dwindled to only 12.7 per cent. (Osgoldcross, where Pontefract was located, alone had paid 16 per cent of the 1334 tax while in possession of only 6.5 per cent of the district's total arable acreage--a significant reminder of just how far its economic fortunes had fallen in the later Middle Ages.) The upland regions of Agbrigg and Morley, meanwhile, were responsible for an impressive 34 per cent of the taxes levied in 1534-37, a 23 per cent increase over the 1334 level.⁴⁵

These statistics indicate that during the late Middle Ages a tremendous relocation of both wealth and people away from the arable lowlands and toward the less fertile highland regions took place. And it took place at almost exactly the same time as the cloth industry was going through its period of rapid expansion in these same highland districts.⁴⁶ Hence, it seems reasonable to assume that the textile industry brought a fair measure of prosperity to hitherto impoverished sections of Yorkshire⁴⁷ and played a central role in upgrading the lives of its inhabitants.

The Beneficiaries of Prosperity: the Yeomen

While most peasants and industrial workers benefited

from economic change, one group in particular--the relatively wealthy rural farmers or "yeomen"--found its numbers significantly enlarged as more people acquired the money and land (usually two or more virgates) to be included in its ranks.⁴⁸ Not that the status of yeoman was, like knighthood, ever conferred formally. On the contrary, the only requirement for membership was a certain amount of property which some writers, such as Fortescue, liked to value at one hundred shillings "off fee or rente"⁴⁹ but which normally was left unspecified. Suffice it to say that yeomen in general were men of comparative wealth within the agricultural community--the upper strata of village society. The term itself, flexible and vague in meaning, was always more of an economic designation than a social one. Thus a yeoman could be a freeholder, a copy holder or a bondman; it really did not matter what he was as long as he was relatively well off.⁵⁰

But how well off is a difficult question to determine. Some yeomen, like Chaucer's Franklin, were so affluent that their households virtually "snewed . . . of mete and drynke."⁵¹ This is the type of person Fortescue has in mind when he talks about the prosperity of the English countryside:

Again, that land is so well stocked and replete with possessors of land and fields that in it no hamlet, however small, can be found in which there is no knight, esquire,

or householder of the sort commonly called a franklin, well-off in possessions; nor numerous other free tenants, and many yeomen, sufficient in patrimony. . . . Furthermore, there are various yeomen in that country who can spend more than £100 a year. . . .⁵²

Others lived in more humble circumstances, like Bishop Latimer's father, a Leicestershire yeoman whose condition at the close of the fifteenth century the bishop referred to in a sermon before Edward VI:

My father was a Yoman, and had no landes of his owne, onlye he had a farme of iiii or iiiii pound by yere at the vttermost, and here vpon he tilled so much as kepte halfe a dosen men. He had walke for a hundred shepe, and my mother mylked xxx. kyne. . . . He kept me to schole, or elles I had not bene able to haue preached before the kinges maiestie nowe. He marryed my systers with v. pounde or xx. nobles a pece. . . .⁵³

Within this second category, too, falls one William de Menston, a modestly successful peasant in Leeds, who in 1425 not only held lands under cottar and villein tenure but also had acquired 44.5 acres of demesne.⁵⁴ But regardless of the degree of their prosperity, all yeomen were part of an economic elite, a group of men set apart from their neighbors by virtue of the quantity of their possessions and the quality of their lives.⁵⁵

Unlike the more nobly-born members of his society, the late medieval yeoman had to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow--something which he was usually eager to do. In fact, in addition to wealth, the hallmark of

the successful yeoman was enterprise and hard work. These energies were released in full force when the lords began farming out their demesnes in earnest toward the end of the fourteenth century. From that point on peasants in general, but particularly yeomen,⁵⁶ started buying up and accumulating land at an astonishing rate. In fact, it was by this very means that many poor husbandmen earned yeoman status for themselves⁵⁷--a development that was taking place all over England, including Yorkshire.⁵⁸

More land usually meant more work, and the new demesne farmers soon found that they had to toil harder than ever before to ensure the smooth running of their enlarged households. Their industriousness impressed contemporaries, even if for the wrong reasons. Around the middle of the fifteenth century an anonymous writer described the routine of Clement Paston, the founder of the Paston family and a late-fourteenth century yeoman of some means. The writer wants to discredit the Pastons by pointing out their lowly origins, but in doing so he inadvertantly pays tribute to the diligence and success of their ancestor:

There was one Clement Paston dwelling in Paston, and he was a good, plain husband (i.e., husbandman), and lived upon his land he had in Paston, and kept thereon a plough all times in the year, and sometimes in barlysell two ploughs. The said Clement yede at one plough both winter and summer, and he rode to mill on the bare horseback with his

corn under him, and brought home meal again under him, and also drove his cart with divers corns to Wynterton to sell, as a good husband[man] ought to do. Also he had in Paston a five score or a six score acres of land at the most, and much thereof bond land to Gemyngham Hall, with a little poor water-mill running by a little river there. . . .⁵⁹

Indeed, the respectable prosperity and industriousness of the English yeoman were becoming almost proverbial, and it was not long before he had taken his place in contemporary literature beside such other lower class types as the greedy, cunning, lazy peasant and the virtuous, hard-working (but poor) ploughman. Thus, in the poem "How the Ploughman Learned His Paternoster," we learn of a wealthy rustic who through enterprise and "Good skylle . . . in husbandry" gets "his lyvyng full merely" (ll. 3-4):

He cowde eke sowe and holde a plowe,
Both dyke, hedge, and mylke a cowe,
Thresshe, fane, and gelde a swyne,
In every season and in tyme;
To mowe and repe both grasse and corne
A better labourer was never borne;
He coude go to plowe with oxe and hors,
With whiche it were, he dyde not fors;
Of shepe the wolle of for to shere,
His better was founde no where;
Strype hempe he coude to cloute his shone,
And set gese abrode in season of the mone.
Of fruytte he graffed many a tre,
Fell wode, and make it as it sholde be.
He coude theche a hous, and daube a wall;
With all thinge that to husbandry dyde fall.
By these to ryches he was brought.⁶⁰

(ll. 5-21)

Finally, as new lands became available and

demands on their time steadily grew, more and more yeomen found themselves in need of extra help. It should not surprise us, therefore, to discover that many of them, like Bishop Latimer's father, began hiring servants to aid them in the management of their farms.⁶¹ More often than not, then, the typical English "kulak" was an employer in his own right.

We have, therefore, in the wealthy peasant a remarkably modern figure. While he may not have been a capitalist in the strict sense of the word, he was very close to being one in spirit. Acquisitive, enterprising, market-oriented, industrious and uncommonly self-reliant⁶²--qualities which that other "good yoman" (1.15), the Wakefield Cain, possesses in abundance--he may have been something of an anomaly in an age dedicated to more communal and less worldly ends. Nevertheless, the attitudes which he and the rest of the third estate embodied were not about to go away. Nurtured by the peculiar economic conditions of late medieval England, they soon captured the minds of not a few commoners.

The Fruits of Prosperity: Materialism

Men were always materialistic in the Middle Ages, but they seemed to become more so as the period advanced. The reason for this growing preoccupation with commodities is basically a psychological one: people desire all the more strongly that which there is a

reasonable hope of acquiring. Thus, a country like the United States is one of the most flamboyantly materialistic societies in the world precisely because the mass of its citizenry have or think they have the opportunity to achieve a high degree of comfort and wealth. During the early Middle Ages, however, the hope for material success was absent from the lives of just about everybody; European society was simply not yet sufficiently commercialized to instill in people the belief that they could thrive in the world. The commercial revolution of the twelfth century altered this situation somewhat. As towns sprung up, trade grew and new markets emerged, people's economic vistas widened. Material success, for at least growing numbers of the middle class, was now definitely in the realm of the possible.

The change in society's economic aspirations was matched by certain changes in religious thought. In the early Middle Ages, for example, pride was held to be, indisputably, the worst of the seven deadly sins. After the twelfth century, however, and particularly from 1300 onwards, avarice increasingly came to be seen as a vice very much the equal of pride in its ability to lead man to moral ruin.⁶³ And as more and more people after the Black Death gave themselves over to the conspicuous pursuit of wealth and ease, cupidity loomed

all the larger before men's minds. It certainly figured prominently in the homiletic literature of the period, sometimes even replacing pride as the most lethal sin, as it does in the English morality, The Castle of Perseverance (c. 1400-25).

The new worldliness manifested itself in a variety of ways, two of which were particularly galling to late medieval moralists. The first of these was greed or the passionate drive to acquire; the second was luxury or conspicuous consumption. Both vices, but especially the former, seemed to contemporaries to exemplify the materialism of the English lower classes. The Italian diplomat who visited England in the 1490's observed that the central objective of virtually all apprentices on the island was to "open a house" (i.e., start a business) and "strive dilligently by this means to make some fortune for themselves." Furthermore, because so few of them expect to be left any inheritance by their equally avaricious parents "They all become so greedy of gain that they feel no shame in asking . . . for the smallest sums of money; and to this it may be attributed, that there is no injury that can be committed against the lower orders of the English, that may not be atoned for by money." 64

The mania to accumulate was also at work among the big urban merchants and ecclesiastical officials. The municipal historian, Maud Sellers, tells us that

the whole ethos of a city like York was based on making money:

The keynote in the fifteenth century in York . . . was practicality. The merchants devoted themselves to amassing wealth with a whole-hearted zeal. . . . Industrial artisans, the big merchants and even the ecclesiastical members of the city all had a common goal--to consolidate or acquire wealth.⁶⁵

While this assessment may be a bit exaggerated (the guilds, for instance, did try to discourage unfettered and unfair competition among their members) it is, judging from the historical evidence, basically sound. Not only were most merchants enthusiastically committed to the principle of gain, but they also sometimes allowed that principle to override their better judgment and lead them into unethical or illegal activities. This is what happened in Yorkshire in the 1390's when certain local merchants were charged with conspiring to defraud the wool producers of the county by refusing to buy any raw wool. As a result wool rotted for lack of buyers, and the producers were forced to lower their prices "at the merchants' will."⁶⁶

Similar acquisitive urges influenced the conduct and thinking of the rural populace. Most medieval peasants were, by virtue of their rather unrewarding occupation, an avaricious lot. That is, they had an unquenchable craving for land. This is true even in

modern peasant societies where land is valued not only as a source of income but also as a status symbol.⁶⁷ During the high Middle Ages, when land was scarce and population dense, the average peasant could not easily or profitably gratify this primal urge. All the good holdings were already occupied and sub-divided. Consequently, if he wanted to extend his possessions he was compelled to cultivate the waste land of the manor. But with the decline in population and land values that accompanied the Black Death, along with the subsequent decision of the lords to lease their demesnes, peasants were given a chance at last to satisfy their most acquisitive yearnings. And they seized it. Leasing parts of the demesne either as arable or pasture, they capitalized on what was now a thriving land-market and accumulated extensive holdings in the process.⁶⁸ What is more, they not only bought or leased additional holdings, they began consolidating them as well. In other words, they conducted their transactions in such a way so as to ensure the formation of a single large block of land which, in effect, took the place of the scattered strips they had held under the old manorial system.⁶⁹ For all practical purposes, therefore, the English peasantry were just as greedy as their urban countrymen. An economically aggressive group, they bought, sold, leased, sub-let and bartered land in an effort to exploit current trends in the market place

and attain a level of prosperity their forebears had only dreamed of.⁷⁰ They must have alarmed some of their more conservative contemporaries who, unlike the modern historian, would not have been amazed at their enterprise but only at what seemed to be their avarice.

Aside from a keen thirst for property in general, the materialism of the period revealed itself in the more specific form of conspicuous consumption. This vice, particularly as it applied to clothing, was eagerly seized upon by the moralists, probably because it lent itself so easily to their satiric barbs; a fool or churl dressed in finery is always ridiculous. At any rate, roughly the same time that England was undergoing the aforementioned economic and social changes, complaints about the extravagant dress of the lower orders began to proliferate. Henry Knighton, for example, bemoans the common people's delight in sumptuous clothing and the social disruption that ensues from it. He talks in his Chronicon of

. . . the elation of the inferior people in dress and accoutrements in these days, so that one person cannot be discerned from another in splendour or dress or belongings, neither poor from rich, nor servant from master, nor priest from layman, but everybody [trying] to imitate the other, till the magnates had to decide on a remedy.⁷¹

Elsewhere, an anonymous preacher, writing between 1380 and 1440, ridicules the sumptuous attire of the peasants

in particular and the outrageous wages that enable them to purchase such luxury:

7
 Now also the comyn peple is hie stied into the synne of pride. For now a wrecchid crave, that goth to the plouȝ and to carte, that hath no more good but serveth fro ȝer to ȝer for his liflode, there-as sumtyme a white curtel and a russet gowne wolde have served suchon ful wel; now he muste have a fresch doublet of fyve schillynges or more the price; and above, a costli gowne with bagges hangynge to his kne, and iridelid undir his girdil as a newe ryven roket, and an hood on his heved, with a thousande ragges on his tipet; and gaili hosid an schood as thowȝ it were a squyer of cuntre; a dagger harneisid with selver bi his gurdel, or ellis it were not worth a pese. This pride schulle ther maistirs a-buye, whanne that thei schul paie his wages. For, ther-as thei weren wont to serve for x or xii schillingis in a ȝer, now thei musten have xx oor thritti and his lyverei also therto; not for he wol do more werk, but for to meynten with that pride.⁷²

Examples like those just cited could be multiplied indefinitely,⁷³ for excessive array was a familiar topic in medieval satire. It was not necessarily, however, an ancient convention having no social relevance at all. One notices, for instance, that most of the criticism dates from after the Black Death, the period in which the lower classes began to experience a fair measure of personal prosperity. It was also around this time (1363) that legislation regulating dress was first introduced to suppress the more visible signs of social change.⁷⁴ Obviously, the commons were spending much of their newly acquired wealth on clothes--clothes which

the government and the moralists thought ill-suited to their low social position.⁷⁵ Thus, the numerous works deploring the extravagance of the people can be seen as a kind of reaction to the era's growing infatuation with material things.

By the middle of the fifteenth century, however, the social changes which had been at work for nearly a hundred years were beginning to influence (some would have said undermine) the orthodox conception of wealth. At least some people seemed to be willing to put forth an opinion on the subject that was more in tune with the times. Peter Idley, for instance, an Oxfordshire gentleman and royal servant, in his Instructions to his Son (1445-50), advocates an approach to wealth that is decidedly more practical and less ascetic than that which had traditionally dominated men's minds. Idley eschews the older attitude that all wealth represents a potential threat to man's soul and that an individual should possess no more than is necessary to maintain him with dignity in his allotted place in life.⁷⁶ Instead he affirms what certain Italian scholastics had been teaching since the thirteenth century--that there could be a connection between wealth and morality, that the two need not be mutually antagonistic.⁷⁷ Thus, unlike the vast majority of English moralists, he refuses to admit that being poor is necessarily better than being rich.⁷⁸ On the contrary, poverty, he says, can easily

bring man to misery and mischief--an idea Thomas More would later develop in Utopia--while wealth can encourage men to do good. As stated before, these ideas were not all that revolutionary; they had been discussed in European scholastic circles for some time. They were, however, rather new to England, especially when they were articulated by a member of the establishment. But what makes Idley's work so original, so adjusted to the materialistic temper of his age, is his practical assumption that temporal commodities guarantee, in large measure, worldly success. In this respect he is astonishingly modern for a mid-fifteenth century Englishman--a man closer by far in spirit to Bacon than to Bromyard:

By vetaille and vesture mannes lyffe is ladde;
 Who wanteth this, his lyffe may not laste;
 Without goodis temporall þis may not be hadde;
 Also honour, worship, and frenship is past.
 ffor as a shippe in the see without rother or
 mast
 Ys ouerthrow and turned with waves and flodes,
 So is a man for lak of temporall goodis.

Many that to youthe be couples lusty and Ioly,
 Yf fortune hem faile that shold be frende,
 ffor lak of goodis temporall falle they to folie,
 In miserie and myscheif make they her ende.
 Who hath godis temporall hath a noble frende;
 He is dressed fro disease and derke desolacion,
 In bonchief and blisse is his inhabitation.⁷⁹

(Book I, ll. 673-86)

Enterprise

The greater the number who benefit from an improved

standard of living and the higher that standard rises, the more incentive there is to work. During the later Middle Ages this formula was in operation all over England, inspiring people everywhere to work as they never had before. For the first time in years men and women had something to toil for.⁸⁰ If they were agricultural workers high pay rates and cheap land made it easy for them to become members of the land-holding class; if they held land already, the availability of newly released demesnes motivated them to accumulate more; and if they wanted to ply a trade or start a business, industrial regions like the West Riding, free from the constricting regulations of the towns and enriched by the rising demand for cloth, offered ample opportunities for them to do so.⁸¹ Even the low price of corn--a periodic occurrence at this time--acted as an incentive to work, for it compelled those who cultivated the land to step up production in order to offset falling produce values.⁸² All these factors, in short, brought about "a release of energy and enterprise so prodigious" that England became "something of a cynosure of foreign eyes."⁸³

What all this means is that the English reacted neither with complacency nor passivity to economic change. On the contrary, they made the most of it. As a result, the country's output, which because of the population decline was lower in aggregate terms than it had

been earlier, actually rose on a per capita basis⁸⁴--a phenomenon that can only be attributed to the higher productivity and greater initiative of its inhabitants.

Nowhere was this astounding outburst of enterprise more evident than among the peasantry in general and among the yeomen in particular--a fact often noted by modern social historians. Today's scholars, frankly, seem to be as impressed with the peasant's devotion to work as his contemporaries were, for they frequently comment on his energy, his commercial sense, his practicality and the scale of his enterprise.⁸⁵ G.M. Trevelyan's remarks provide us with a nice summary of the many forms a yeoman's industriousness could assume:

In a number of different ways, therefore, new classes of substantial yeomen came into existence. Some of them farmed the lord's demesne, others the new lands lately enclosed, others took over strips in the old open field. Some dealt in corn, others in sheep and wool, others in mixed husbandry. The increase in their numbers and prosperity set the tone of the new England for centuries to come.⁸⁶

This "new England" that Trevelyan speaks of here was a place where the idea of toil, like that of property, was beginning to take on a new meaning. No longer considered an evil, a curse or a consequence of sin--man's inescapable lot since the Fall--work was now looked upon, if the behavior of the peasantry is any indication, as a means of material betterment, a way of cashing in on prosperity. Such a concept, as we shall

soon see, was poles apart from the Church's position. But this did not seem to bother too many people. Englishmen continued to work hard, not because they wanted to support their superiors or give glory to God, but because they wanted to thrive. By the end of the fifteenth century this utilitarian approach was so common that it even overrode, at least in the commercial sector, the Church's ban on loaning money out at interest. Certainly this is the impression one receives from the Italian ambassador's observation that the "common people," aside from assiduously devoting themselves to "trade . . . fishing, or . . . navigation," are also "so diligent in mercantile pursuits, that they do not fear to make contracts on usury."⁸⁷ Therefore, the new attitudes toward work, while responsible for England's remarkable rate of production, at the same time were eroding some of medieval society's most durable traditions.

Self-Assertion

The later Middle Ages saw the lower orders as a whole become increasingly bold and insubordinate in their dealings with their superiors. Speaking of the period from 1350 to 1450, Rodney Hilton finds it a time of "considerable self-confidence, even assertiveness among tenants and labourers alike which was not checked by the defeat of the 1381 rising." In fact, the whole late medieval era was characterized by a "loss of respect

for the traditional elites."⁸⁸ This emerging contempt for authority was usually directed against the lord of the manor and took a variety of forms: unauthorized abandonment of holdings, refusal to perform feudal services or pay feudal dues, rent strikes and law suits. But it could also be aimed at the Church, which more and more was being vexed by the faithful's stubborn refusal to pay tithes. It could even erupt into armed rebellion, as was the case during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and the Cade rising of 1450.

Peasants, it should be pointed out, had always been assertive. As early as the thirteenth century they were audaciously resisting the nobility's attempts to exploit them.⁸⁹ Unfortunately, because the lords at this time were in such an advantageous economic position and their tenants in such a poor one, the latter were often the losers in any showdown that might ensue.⁹⁰ It was a discouraging situation for the average rustic.

As the population started its decline and economic change got underway, however, opposition to landlord pressure intensified.⁹¹ But this time the peasants were the ones in a commanding role and the lords--beset by vacant holdings and scarce labor--the ones in trouble. Consequently, not only were more cases of resistance initiated, more of them were won by the tenants themselves.⁹² A conflict between the peasants and the lord of Methley, a West Riding parish five miles north-east

of Wakefield, provides an interesting example of how much the situation had changed by the post-plague era. Like many of his colleagues, the lord of Methley responded in a reactionary manner to the new social realities--that is, he tried to turn the clock back to the days when tenants had to do more or less what their master told them. In adopting this stance, he was merely following the example of others who, in their anxiety to arrest the trend toward higher wages, cheaper land and easier terms of tenure, reimposed feudal services, raised rents and passed legislation to hold down wages and restrict peasant mobility.⁹³ At any rate, between 1352 and 1354 a struggle broke out between this lord and his tenants over what appears to have been an attempt to intensify boon works, those supposedly "voluntary" duties performed by tenants at harvest time. At first the peasants were fined for their insolence, but eventually they forced the lord to back down and partially commute the boon works.⁹⁴ Earlier, on the same manor, in 1351, a tenant whom the lord refused to allow to change his holding actually sued him in manorial court and won.⁹⁵ Both these instances show not only how ready peasants were to defy their betters, but how successful they could be when they chose to do so. The success rate grew as the period wore on.

Unfortunately, the efforts of the aristocracy to retard social and economic progress, plus the peasantry's

own growing impatience with anything that stood in the way of their quest for wealth and freedom, combined to precipitate the greatest proletarian uprising of the Middle Ages--the Peasants' Revolt.⁹⁶ The character of the rebellion in Yorkshire, surprisingly, was urban instead of rural. In fact, the riots that took place in the county towns of York and Beverley in 1381 bore little relation to what was happening elsewhere.⁹⁷ What we can say about the Yorkshire risings, however, is that they were, like the events in the south, manifestations of that almost universal drive toward self-assertion and self-determination which had so taken over the common people.

Disorder broke out in York months before it did in Kent or Essex, the shires where the rebels were the most active. For some time two factions of the city's wealthy mercantile community had been struggling for control of the municipal government. Somehow (the details are very obscure) the commons of the city, that is the non-mercantile artisans, became embroiled in the conflict and rioted: first on 25 November 1380, and again on 1 July 1381. During the initial phase of violence "various malefactors belonging to the commons of the city of York" drove the mayor, John Gisburne (the leader of one of the contending factions) out of town and forced one Simon Quixley "against his will and that of the good men of the city" to take his place. They

then proceeded to demolish "by means of their axes and other arms the doors and windows of their Guildhall."⁹⁸ The following year Gisburne and his supporters attacked, on 1 July, Bootham Bar, broke into the city and established a secret society whose members wore "caps and liveries of one colour."⁹⁹ As this seige was in progress, meanwhile, it appears as though "the rebellious commons of the city"¹⁰⁰ took the opportunity to riot a second time and storm St. Leonard's Hospital.

The particulars of this whole affair remain hopelessly muddled.¹⁰¹ But it is proper to assume that we are dealing with two separate struggles here: on the one hand, a contest between two opposing sectors of the city's merchant community, led by Gisburne and Quixley respectively; on the other hand, a general revolt by the urban masses themselves, who wanted a greater role in the city's power structure.¹⁰² That the commons were indeed challenging York's traditional oligarchic system is hinted at in a parliamentary petition for November, 1380, which states that the artisans, had they been successful, had planned to formulate their own laws:

The malefactors also made a new ordinance declaring that whenever the bells on the Bridge sounded "aukeward," whether by day or night, all the commons of the city should rise together and have proclaimed various ordinances newly composed by them in opposition to the law and the established good customs of the city.¹⁰³

The self-assertion of the commons in Beverley was as virulent as that of their fellows in York. As was the case with the provincial capital, the violence at Beverley was more a consequence of local antagonisms than of any single national event¹⁰⁴--although the Great Revolt may have played a very minor and indirect role in determining some of the events that took place. In 1380 representatives of the lesser tradesmen and artisans of the city, led by Richard de Midelton, were elected to the council and immediately proceeded to reorganize it along what appears to be more democratic lines, appointing twenty-four guardians to participate in the civic government. The previous ruling party or "probi homines," an oligarchy made up of rich merchants and led by Adam Coppandale and Thomas de Beverley, declared this action unconstitutional (which it was) and demanded that the town be returned to its former system of rule--a twelve-man patrician council. The incumbents responded by charging Coppandale and de Beverley with misappropriation of public funds, an offense for which the two men were subsequently tried and convicted.

In June, 1381, Midelton and his party, emboldened by the rebellion in the south,¹⁰⁵ pursued a more open policy of intimidation against the "probi homines" of the city. Throughout the month Midelton's people periodically assembled armed bands of supporters (presumably recruited from the artisan class) who besieged the

houses of the leading oligarchs and "threatened to kill them and throw down or burn their dwellings" if they refused to sign "various bonds requiring large sums of money to be paid at a specified time and under certain forms and conditions."¹⁰⁶ Coppandale, de Beverley and others eventually signed the documents, but rather than pay the specified amount, fled town. While in exile, they petitioned the king for redress, had the bonds annulled and by 1382 were back in power. Nevertheless, despite their ultimate failure, the small shopkeepers and craftsmen had, if only for a moment, effectively asserted themselves, as their colleagues in York had done, against a restrictive civic oligarchy.

The putting down of the Peasants' Revolt did nothing to prevent the lower classes from continuing to challenge authority whenever the occasion arose. In Yorkshire much of this post-rebellion defiance originated in the countryside--the towns being relatively quiet in the fifteenth century. Opposition to authority could be either collective or individual. The former approach was naturally more common if only because protest is always more effective coming from a group rather than from a single person. We therefore find at this time not only much self-assertion among the peasantry, but also a fair amount of solidarity as well.

A case in point is the insurrection that took place at Doncaster, Cottingham and their environs in

1392.¹⁰⁷ On 27 January about three hundred armed men marched from John of Gaunt's manor of Hatfield to Doncaster where they issued a proclamation declaring that they would no longer pay tolls, customs or pannage to any townsman. Four days later another rising occurred in the East Riding villages of Cottingham, Buttercrambe and Hessle whence a large number of malefactors travelled to the town of Benningholme in search of one Robert Whithose, an unpopular public official. Later in the same year Cottingham was again the scene of violence when certain individuals there, nearly all of whom were base born, assaulted the former escheator of Yorkshire, William Holme.

The tenants of Cottingham seem to have been a particularly close knit and unruly lot, determined not to take abuse from any man regardless of his rank. By 1393 they had become notorious in the county. One document tells us that since 1387 it had been the custom of some of them to dress

in one livery of a single company by corrupt allegiance and confederacy, each of them in maintaining the other in all plaints, true or false, against whosoever should wish to complain against them or any one of them. . . . And they say that no sheriff of the county of York, escheator or any other royal minister of whatsoever rank he is can at any time do anything that it is his duty to do within the domain of Cottingham. . . .¹⁰⁸

So loyal, in fact, were the men of Cottingham to each

other and so united in their opposition to authority in general, that they even went so far as to commemorate their solidarity in verse, producing one of the few genuine literary expressions we have of lower class self-assertion:

In the contre herd was we
That in oure soken schrewes shuld be
with al for to bake.

Among this frers it is so
And other ordres many mo
whether yei slepe or wake,

And thet wil ilkan hel vp other
And meynteyn him als his brother
bothe in wronge and righte.

And also wil in stond and stoure
Meynteyn owre negheboure
with al oure myghte.

Ilk man may come and goo
Among vs bothe to and froo
I say yow sikyrly.

But hethyng wil we suffre non
Neither of hobbe ne of Iohan
with what man he be.

For vnkynde we ware
Yif we suffred of lesse or mare
any ~~ylane~~ hethyng.

But it were quit double agayn
And acorde and be fulfayn
to byde oure dressyng.

And on that purpos yet we stand
Who so dose vs any wrang
in what place it falle,

Yet he myght als wele
Als haue i hap and hele
do again vs alle. 109

Aside from its forthright celebration of collective

action, the poem is also remarkable for its advocacy of a vindictive, quid-pro-quo approach to human relationships. The message is quite clear: anyone who abuses members of the confederacy will be maltreated in return (ll. 19-24). It is this essentially uncharitable, anti-social attitude (anti-social because it breeds class antagonisms and thus disrupts the harmony of the commonweal) which is repeatedly alluded to in the plays of the Wakefield Master: first, when Garcio strikes Cain in retaliation for being struck by his master (" . . . with the same mesure and weght/That I boro will I qwite," ll. 51-2),¹¹⁰ next, when Mrs. Noah decides to pay back her husband for the blows he has given her ("Thou shal thre for two, I swere bi Godys pyne," l. 227) while he, in turn, plans to do the same ("And I shall qwyte the tho, in fayth, or syne," l. 228) and finally when Daw in the Secunda Pastorum declares to his employers that henceforth the quality of his work will be determined solely by his rate of pay (ll. 163-64). In any event, the Cottingham poem, its sentiments and the insurrection were probably all products of the kind of landlord-tenant conflict that was becoming so common during the period and proving to be so helpful in forging peasant self-esteem.¹¹¹

Elsewhere in the shire similar acts of self-assertion and solidarity were taking place. On 17 June 1407, for instance, a commission of oyer and terminer

was set up to hear information that the tenants and bondmen of John Langton, lord of Moulthorpe, had "leagued together at the manor and refused their due customs and services."¹¹² And in 1426 another commission investigated charges that certain villeins at Burton Fleming had "withdrawn the customs and services for their holdings from John, prior of Bridlyngton, at the procurement of certain of their maintainers and abettors, and have bound themselves by oath to resist the said prior and his ministers."¹¹³

In disobeying their superiors, however, peasants did not always act in concert; many chose to act alone. This more private kind of insubordination took on many forms, of which the most common was probably desertion--either of one's holding and lord or of one's job and master.¹¹⁴ This gesture was usually prompted by purely economic considerations. The opportunity to get better land or higher wages caused people simply to leave a place or position they thought unsuitable. When we first meet Daw, the downtrodden and disgruntled servant in the Secunda Pastorum, he is contemplating just such a plan:

Bot here my trowth, master: for the fayr that
ye make,
I shall do thereafter - wyrk as I take.
I shall do a lytyll, syr, and emang euer lake,
For yit lay my soper neuer on my stomake
In feyldys.
Wherto shuld I threpe?
With my staf can I lepe;
And men say, 'Lyght chepe
Letherly foryeldys.'

By threatening to leave His master Daw is merely voicing the self-confidence of the lower classes in general, who knew how much their labor was in demand and who felt no qualms about abandoning one lord for another if it proved profitable to do so.

Even more flagrant acts of individual defiance, aside from that of desertion, were sometimes committed by the rural populace. One example should suffice. A fifteenth-century Yorkshire "yoman," Richard atte Wode of Aldburgh, refused to render thirty quarters of corn valued at ten marks to the abbot of St. Mary's in York. Whether or not the corn represented some sort of tithe-payment cannot be ascertained. But what is certain is that Richard stubbornly resisted the abbot's demands even to the point of ignoring an order to appear before the king's justices. Eventually he received a pardon, but it is not known if St. Mary's ever received its grain.¹¹⁵

Richard atte Wode's behavior, so reminiscent of that of the Wakefield Cain, typifies that spirit of the late medieval common man. Whether he lived in town or country, the low-born Englishman was becoming more aggressive and assertive in his relationships with those above him, less ready to take abuse from anyone and more determined than ever to be master of his own economic destiny. He was cooperating with his fellows in a more effective manner, joining with them to form

potent and successful fronts against the forces of exploitation. This last method, moreover, was not only directed at secular lords; it was also used against the Church, especially in tithe disputes. The tithe controversy, however, is a complex matter and requires rather careful consideration. For this reason, and because tithes themselves so often were an occasion of lower class defiance, I have decided to treat the whole issue separately.

Opposition to Tithes

Open resistance to tithes arose during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹¹⁶ Prior to this, particularly before the thirteenth century, people seemed to have paid them without recorded complaint.¹¹⁷ A number of factors contributed to this growing opposition. In the first place, as we have just seen, the commons-- upon whom fell much of the burden of supporting the Church-- were neither as docile nor as pliant as they had been in the past. Determined to withstand the lords' efforts to reimpose feudal restrictions and anxious to be free of those which still remained, they were in no mood to heed the prelates' annual demand for a tenth of their hard won goods.

Another reason why so many people were reluctant to pay tithes had to do with the fact that many English parishes were vicarages. A vicarage was ordained whenever

a larger ecclesiastical corporation like a monastery or a secular cathedral received permission to appropriate or take control of a parish church. Once the church in question had been taken over, the appropriating institution claimed the bulk of its income, revenue that derived largely from tithes. In return for this privilege the appropriating body had to appoint someone responsible for the parishioners' spiritual needs. This person was called a vicar, and he was given a portion of the parish revenue (usually one-third) as his livelihood; the rest went to the controlling institution or rector.¹¹⁸ The parishioners themselves were therefore put in the particularly galling position of having over 66 per cent of their tithes siphoned off by some distant, impersonal organization. (The rector, or appropriator, was entitled to a parish's "great tithes"--a tenth of its corn, hay or wood; the "small tithes" went to the vicar.)¹¹⁹

This problem was compounded by the types of people chosen to be vicars and the conditions under which they were expected to work. Theoretically, a vicar was supposed to be a secular priest and was to enjoy stability of tenure and income.¹²⁰ In practice the reverse was very often the norm. Appropriating bodies commonly appointed vicars who had neither the power nor the interest to cure souls and paid them the lowest wages possible.¹²¹ Moreover many of these appointees, drawn

from an ill-educated, destitute clerical proletariat, had the reputation of being men of lax moral character, people whom one would scarcely expect to be an inspiration to their congregations let alone people to whom one would cheerfully hand over his produce.¹²²

The problems and abuses of the vicarage system were especially acute in Yorkshire where on the eve of the Réformation almost 63 per cent of its churches (392 out of 622) were under appropriation--the largest number by far of any shire in England. Of these, over 100 were served by curates who could at any time and for any reason be removed by their rectors,¹²³ a clear denial of the incumbent's right to a secure tenure. Some parishes, furthermore, had no vicars at all. Of the 17 county parishes controlled by the North Riding priory of Guisbrough, at least 10 were left entirely without vicars.¹²⁴ I would suppose that the hapless members of these parishes were required to tithe directly to their absentee rector--that is, if they still felt bound to do so. The parish church at Wakefield, by the way, was also a vicarage, belonging since 1348 to the Collegiate Chapel of St. Stephen at Westminster and, before that, to the priory of Lewes.¹²⁵ But there is no evidence that it was subjected to the same abuses as the aforementioned churches.

One other force, aside from growing lower class resentment and the evils of absenteeism in general,¹²⁶

was responsible for people's extreme reluctance to pay tithes. This was Lollardy. The followers of Wyclif, never wholly absent from the English scene from the 1380's to the Reformation, repeatedly preached that tithes could be lawfully withheld from sinful priests¹²⁷-- a doctrine which did not fall on deaf ears:

cristenmen of þis ground þenken þat
 pariȝschens shulden drawe fro persouns
 offeringis & dymes & opere godis whanne þey
 faylen opynly in þe offiss, for siche assent
 is to blame þat nurship persouns in siche
 synne . . . & bi þe same skile [they are]
 foolis þat ȝyuen þer godis as almes to siche
 prelatiȝ; for siche ȝifte is not almes but
 ȝifte of helle to strengþe þe fend.¹²⁸

In fact, not only were immoral churchmen to be denied revenue, so too were those religious corporations which controlled the parish churches. To the Lollards these appropriating institutions were nothing more than "Cain's castles," and they were not to be subsidized. It was therefore imperative that all tithes and alms be withheld from such "plasis þat han chirchis appropriid; as ben munkis & chanouns & seculer collegies. . . . For all acorden in þis, þat þey han almes of pariȝschens & ȝit dwellen not on þe pariȝs as herdis for to teche hem. . . ." ¹²⁹ On the other hand, "trewe prestis"--that is, good and pious clergymen who performed their pastoral duties honestly and well--deserved a secure living, and the faithful were bound to contribute their goods toward that goal.¹³⁰

The Lollards' views on tithes accorded well with the prevailing mood of the era,¹³¹ and may have influenced people who had little sympathy for the rest of their ideas. It is almost certain, for instance, that anti-tithe sentiment ran high among the rebels who took part in the Peasants' Revolt. Whether or not the Lollards were the sole force behind this feeling is beside the point. What is important is that it had a major place among the insurgents' list of grievances. The English chronicler, Walsingham (who, incidentally, believed that the Lollards were behind the rising) tells us that for over twenty years John Ball, a renegade cleric and ring-leader of the revolt, had been preaching against tithes throughout the realm--including, perhaps, even Yorkshire:¹³²

For he instructed the people that tithes ought not to be paid to an incumbent unless he who should give them were richer than the rector or vicar who received them; and that tithes and offerings ought to be withheld if the parishioner were known to be a man of better life than his priest.¹³³

Having sketched a bit of the historical background to the controversy surrounding tithes, let us now look at a few specific cases. We have already mentioned Richard atte Wode's refusal to hand over ten marks worth of grain to the abbot of St. Mary's, York, speculating that his defiance may have had something to do with tithing--a possibility that becomes more credible

when it is revealed that St. Mary's had appropriated a substantial number of churches throughout the shire, particularly in the north-west.¹³⁴

Another incident, more prolonged than Richard atte Wode's lone act of bravado, involved St. Leonard's Hospital in York and its right, since time immemorial, to a "thrive of corn yearly from every plough ploughing in the counties of York, Lancaster, Westmorland and Cumberland."¹³⁵ Since at least 1380, however, the people of these shires had failed to follow ancient custom and had been keeping the corn for themselves. The hospital responded by periodically petitioning the government for assistance, and the government replied by periodically empowering commissions to investigate the problem.¹³⁶ But none of this seems to have done any good, for the local residents continued to withhold tithes for the next fifty years. The matter came to a head in 1431 when William Babyngton, chief justice of the Common Bench, "hearing on his journey to the assizes at York the importunate clamour of people flocking thither in multitudes not easy to number," agreed to act as judge in a suit brought by St. Leonard's against the men of the West Riding for unlawfully withholding "traves commonly called 'Petircorn'" from the hospital.¹³⁷ The master and brethren of St. Leonard's produced incontestable evidence that the tithe was theirs by right and ought not to be withdrawn for any reason whatsoever. The judge

agreed and ordered that henceforth the corn was to be dutifully paid to the monks in two installments: one, on the Saturday before Palm Sunday and the other on the Saturday before Trinity Sunday. As for the West Riding towns of Doncaster, Wotthwayte, Shereleston, Billynglay, Leeds, Shirburne, Knottingly and Carleton (whose inhabitants the hospital had presumably sued in the first place), they were to contribute annually £64 worth of grain toward the total tithes.¹³⁸

It is uncertain how effective Justice Babyngton's action really was. Although the decision of the court was awarded to St. Leonard's, it may very well have gone unenforced and ignored. At any rate, the whole affair shows how unpopular tithes were among the people of Yorkshire, especially when they had to be paid to far off and aloof institutions whose only claim to a people's produce was some vague custom originating in a long forgotten past. No wonder the Wakefield Cain refuses to tithe his goods. He is simply expressing an opinion shared by many of those watching the play. To men of the West Riding, Cain's decision not to sacrifice his corn to God, however irrational and perverse that decision might be, probably articulated a real grievance and reminded them of their own struggles with St. Leonard's and other absentee corporations.

The opposition to tithes, therefore, provides us with yet one more instance of the tendency of the lower

classes to band together for the protection of their mutual interests--a practice that greatly bolstered their self-confidence when dealing with their social superiors. Confidence and cooperation, however, did not always go hand in hand. As a matter of fact, the drive toward self-assertion often made people, if anything, more individualistic. This was bound to happen. For in the very process of becoming assertive, of achieving greater control over the means and fruits of production and of acquiring more wealth, men paradoxically grew less dependent on others and more reliant on themselves. The particulars of both this phenomenon and this attitude form the subject of our next section.

Individualism

The medieval social edifice rested firmly on communal principles which formed a part of the very fabric of daily life. In both town and country the values that mattered were cooperative ones. Urban life was particularly conducive to these ideals, for it was organized along lines that placed the community above the individual, the institution over its members.¹³⁹ Borough and guild regulations, for example, instilled and promoted cooperative attitudes among the citizenry in a variety of ways: by regulating food prices in times of dearth to prevent profiteering, by standardizing weights and measures to ensure honest trade, by prohi-

biting such unethical practices as "engrossing" (getting more than one's share of business) and "fore-stalling" (buying up items ahead of other tradesmen) as a means of discouraging unfair competition.¹⁴⁰ The guilds themselves, moreover, applied the collective ethic toward less mercantile and more private ends, broadening the scope of their activities to include such benevolent enterprises as establishing loan funds and providing relief for needy members and their families.¹⁴¹ These and other measures were designed specifically to encourage collective endeavor over individual initiative, fair play and plain dealing over cleverness and deceit, and charity over greed.¹⁴²

The same was true in the countryside where age-old methods of farming nurtured powerful corporate feelings among the peasantry. The open field system with its scattered collection of disconnected strips of land demanded and guaranteed cooperative effort on the part of the entire community if that community expected to survive.¹⁴³ This kind of teamwork was essential at ploughing and harvest time since it was literally impossible for one man to work adequately and quickly all his dispersed holdings. In fact, the whole tenor of village life was based on mutual dependence and collective action,¹⁴⁴ not only in matters of agriculture but also in relations with outsiders, in dealings with the lord,

and in the very way the villagers themselves treated each other.¹⁴⁵

This last item is especially important because it shows how integral to rural society in general and how significant to the rural mind in particular the communal urge had become. Medieval peasants, like medieval townsmen, assumed that the community had priority over the individual in most matters. Consequently, they took great pains to ensure that no one in the village had undue economic advantage over his neighbors. The best way to maintain equal economic opportunity was to restrict, according to one's status in the village, the quantity and quality of land men might hold and penalize those who exceeded or ignored these limits.¹⁴⁶ Just such a policy seems to have been behind Robert Naney's complaint, made in 1297 at the Wakefield manor court, that William Attebarre had given him the worst part of two bovates of land while keeping the best part for himself; Attebarre, according to the custom of the manor, should have made an equal distribution of the land.¹⁴⁷

Another way of assuring the primacy of the community over the person was to prohibit villagers from enclosing common land for their own use. One Roger, son of Anabel, was fined 12d. at the Wakefield manor court for doing this very thing.¹⁴⁸ And a year later the same court ordered destroyed the obstructions which Robert

Carpenter had set up to enclose a certain meadow which by right belonged to the entire village.¹⁴⁹

The cooperative spirit can also be seen at work in the custom of personal pledging--a system whereby one peasant would agree to be legally responsible for the future good conduct of a village wrongdoer.¹⁵⁰ This practice was common in many parts of England, and its prevalence is an indication of how mutually dependent peasant relationships could be, even in cases where those relationships were not immediately linked to an agricultural context.

But as social change gathered momentum in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the corporate foundations of society began to crumble. This is not to say that communal principles ceased altogether to inform people's lives. What happened, rather, was that new, more self-centered attitudes sprung up along side the older values and strove with them for ascendancy in men's minds. These new notions, although not confined to any specific locale, seemed to have flourished more in the countryside than elsewhere--especially in the industrial countryside.

Why this was so may have had something to do with the way industry was organized there. Unlike the cities, a rural region such as the West Riding placed few restrictions on its cloth producing populace. With little or no municipal interference, people were at liberty to

operate their businesses as they saw fit, hampered only by the forces of the market place. Competition was freer, conditions of employment and techniques of production were less regulated, taxes lower and economic opportunity greater than anything the older boroughs had to offer. In short, it was a situation where "laissez-faire reigned supreme"¹⁵¹ and where the community exercised far less control over the actions and initiative of the individual.

Secondly, the very physical character of the rural-industrial landscape--a landscape which blossomed into prosperity only as the Middle Ages drew to a close--fostered in its inhabitants a sense of identity radically different from that experienced by those living in the cities--one which bred feelings of self-reliance, individuality and perhaps even alienation. Consider for a moment what these manufacturing hamlets (Leeds, Halifax, Bradford, Wakefield and so forth) must have looked like. They have been described as "straggling," unwalled settlements which "stood seldom in isolation but merged almost imperceptibly into neighbouring townships; a dozen lay within a radius of seven miles."¹⁵² Like some relentless, undisciplined growth they sprawled across the countryside in a rowdy and crowded manner. Many of them, furthermore, were strictly "ad hoc" communities, boom towns established on the spur of the moment to reap the golden benefits of cloth.

Now compare these boisterous little textile centers to a city such as York. Could anything be less similar to the lone majesty of the provincial capital than these jumbled settlements were? The great walled city, with its churches and cathedrals, its colleges and priories, its guild halls and other civic structures, its spires, turrets and towers, must have filled the onlooker with sensations of stability, permanence and tradition. Here was an ecclesiastical, military, commercial and industrial center second only to London in importance, with a history and institutions stretching far back into the past. Its citizens surely must have been imbued with a sense of heritage, continuity and community as they walked about its streets.¹⁵³

But what kind of a sense of place did the people of Leeds, Halifax or Wakefield have? Well, for one thing, they probably were not overpowered by impressions of civic history and tradition. Many of these rural hamlets just could not compete with the big cities in matters of age, grandeur and significance. They were relatively new or newly expanded places, populated by families who in many cases had only recently come into the area¹⁵⁴ and who were thus less apt to feel the pull of cooperation and community--forces which operated more powerfully in less demographically unstable regions. Their sprawling, apparently formless topography, furthermore, contrasted sharply with the well-defined, well-

regulated, walled personality of York. Given the additional fact that the rural-industrial complex was dotted with towns which merged into one another to the point of blurring municipal boundaries and civic identities, one cannot avoid concluding that perhaps the inhabitants of these villages, particularly the many newcomers, had a scantier awareness of their municipal heritage and a less well-developed sense of community than did their forebears and even their urban contemporaries. In other words, the very physical layout of these settlements, along with more fluid population patterns and less restrictive industrial policies, promoted a kind of free-wheeling, pugnacious individualism that went against the most cherished communal beliefs of medieval society.

Anti-corporate feeling at this time was also running high among the peasantry, mainly because of the rapid, post-plague break-up of the demesne. As more and more landlords farmed out their holdings, releasing huge tracts of new land into the market place, opportunistic tenants found it relatively easy to consolidate their scattered strips by sale or transfer into larger, more compact units.¹⁵⁵ This process radically altered the old open field system and seriously compromised the communal values inherent in it. For example, those enterprising yeomen who did so much of the consolidation we have been talking about no longer had to rely on the

labor of their friends and neighbors; with all or most of their land located in one place, they now cultivated it themselves or paid people to assist them. As a result, they grew to be less dependent on and consequently less concerned about their fellow villagers. Whether consolidating a holding, leasing a portion of demesne, enclosing a bit of common, producing cash-crops for the market or even accumulating capital, the yeomen and those who followed their lead were, by virtue of their very enterprise and success, weakening the corporate base of rural society and restructuring it along more non-cooperative principles.¹⁵⁶

The enclosure movement provides us with a good example of just how individualistic the countryside was becoming. As opportunities for consolidation and accumulation multiplied there was a corresponding increase in cases involving individuals trying to section off parts of the common land for their own use. Illegal enclosures of this type were quite ordinary occurrences throughout the late medieval period but were especially widespread in the fifteenth century.¹⁵⁷ Thus, the more assiduous and self-reliant people became, the more frequently they scorned the rights and customs of their communities.

The growing individualism of the age, however, revealed itself in other ways besides the self-centered enterprise of economically ambitious yeomen. Peasants as a whole, for instance, were becoming less willing to

take risks on behalf of their colleagues. On many manors the custom of personal pledging fell into almost total disuse after 1350.¹⁵⁸ At Holywell-Cum-Needingworth, a small Huntingdonshire hamlet, the number of instances where people voluntarily assumed responsibility for a wrongdoer dropped from 367 for the years 1288-1339 to 63 for the years 1353-1405. By the start of the fifteenth century the institution was virtually non-existent.¹⁵⁹ At the same time there was a definite rise in the levels of violence and trespass committed by peasants against each other.¹⁶⁰ Another Huntingdonshire village, Warboys, recorded only two assaults for 1350; ten years later it had nine cases on record.¹⁶¹ And at Holywell the number of trespasses rose from 170 between 1288 and 1339 to 305 between 1353 and 1398.¹⁶²

Peasant attitudes on property, ownership and tenure were also undergoing considerable transformation. Before the Black Death most peasants looked upon property--especially land--as something which they held on trust. It was not theirs to do with as they pleased; rather it was theirs to preserve for the use of future generations. The peasant therefore was considered more of a custodian than an owner, one charged with the responsibility of passing on property intact to his descendants.¹⁶³ Such a conception accorded well with social realities. With land scarce and good holdings generally expensive and hard to come by a householder would be careful not to

take any risks that might jeopardize his family's chances of inheriting its birthright. Consequently, the same holding would remain relatively unaltered in the hands of a single family generation after generation.¹⁶⁴

This essentially conservative approach to property had lost much of its *raison d'être* by the second half of the fourteenth century. Land was now cheap and plentiful, while holdings were decaying for want of tenants to work them. A peasant no longer had to be so cautious about the way in which he looked after his land; he no longer had to be so mindful of preserving it for future residents or even for the members of his own family.¹⁶⁵ There was enough to go around for everybody. Land suddenly became a much more elastic item, a commodity which could be freely bought, sold, exchanged or added to--in short, something one could do with as one pleased. Consequently, the idea that land should be held in trust was eventually superseded by the more modern concept of land as the exclusive possession of a single individual. This shift away from the concept of stewardship toward that of ownership as we know it today removed yet one more link from the corporate chain binding medieval men to each other. Now people thought of property as something over which they had total power and the use of which was accountable to no one but themselves. This new view was, of course, a manifestly anti-communal, individualistic attitude. It is the same view

that determines so much of the action of the Mactacio Abel. There Cain rejects the older notion, put forth by his brother, that property is "bot a lone" (l. 117) from God and replaces it with the more self-centered, contemporary belief that it exists solely for one's personal use:

The dwill me spede if I haue hast,
 As long as I may lif,
 To dele my good or gif,
 Ather to God or yit to man,
 Of any good that euer I wan.

(ll. 135-39)

The late Middle Ages, therefore, witnessed the progressive deterioration of the communal ethic in both town and country.¹⁶⁶ In its place there arose a new social spirit that prized individual initiative over cooperation, self-sufficiency over interdependence and the individual over the group.¹⁶⁷ Not that any of these newer values were ever publically expounded or officially condoned. They were not. As a matter of fact, they were, insofar as they were perceived by contemporaries, vigorously attacked and condemned by those who still believed in the essentially corporate nature of the commonwealth. But this is really beside the point, for the forces of individualism, however inarticulate, were indeed turning England into a country remarkably different from other European nations. By the end of the fifteenth century England was considered to be in many

ways a unique place. On the one hand, men marvelled at its riches and the prosperity of its inhabitants. On the other hand, they observed--almost as if they had discovered some dark and sinister reality lurking behind all that glitter--that the people of the island lacked a sense of fellowship and community. So thought, at any rate, the Italian ambassador who remarked that not only had the English a marked "want of affection . . . towards their children" but also that they had

an antipathy to foreigners, and imagine that they never come into their island, but to make themselves masters of it, and to usurp their goods; neither have they any sincere and solid friendships amongst themselves, in-
somuch that they do not trust each other to discuss either public or private affairs together, in the confidential manner we do in Italy.¹⁶⁸

Herein lies the irony of the late medieval English experience--that by becoming more prosperous, productive and self-reliant, the English themselves grew more acquisitive, selfish, suspicious, isolated and impersonal, not only in their relations with outsiders but in their dealings with each other as well. It was a high price to pay.

NOTES

¹ F. R. H. Du Boulay, An Age of Ambition: English Society in the Late Middle Ages (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1970).

² M. M. Postan, The Medieval Economy and Society (1972; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1976), p. 156, (hereafter abbreviated as MES).

³ A. R. Bridbury, Economic Growth: England in the Later Middle Ages (1962; rpt. Nr. Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1975), p. 103; see also Bridbury, "The Black Death," The Economic History Review, 26 (1973), 577-78.

⁴ John Fortescue, De Laudibus Legum Anglie, ed. S. B. Chrimes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1942), pp. 67-69.

⁵ Thomas, Lord Clermont, ed., The Works of Sir John Fortescue, I (London: 1869), pp. 551-52. Clermont attributes this work to Fortescue, but there exists no real evidence that proves he was its author. See Chrimes, p. lxxvii.

⁶ Clermont, p. 552.

⁷ A Relation or Rather a True Account, of the Island of England, trans. Charlotte A. Sneyd, Camden Society, 37 (London: 1847), p. 28, (hereafter cited as A Relation).

⁸ Many modern historians have commented upon the prosperous state of late medieval English society in general and have particularly noted the increased economic advantages enjoyed by the English peasantry. See, for example, Rodney Hilton, The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 37-38; J. R. Lander, Conflict and Stability in Fifteenth-Century England, 3rd ed. (London: Hutchinson & Co., Ltd., 1977), pp. 23-26, 44; Brian Murphy, A History of the British Economy, 1086-1970 (London: Longman, 1973), p. 69; A. R. Myers, England in the Late Middle Ages, 8th ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1971), pp. 152-53; M. M. Postan, "Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England," in The Cambridge

Economic History of Europe, I, 2nd ed., ed. M. M. Postan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 628-32; Thorold Rogers, Six Centuries of Work and Wages (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1903), pp. 240-42, 326, 367-68 and "Introduction," Loci E Libro Veritatum: Passages Selected from Gascoigne's Theological Dictionary (Oxford: 1881), p. xxxiv.

⁹ John Fortescue, The Governance of England, ed. Charles Plummer (Oxford: 1885), p. 139.

¹⁰ Clermont, p. 552; see also De Laudibus, pp. 87-89, where Fortescue pays the following tribute to his countrymen's wealth:

. . . the inhabitants of that land are rich, abounding in gold and silver and all the necessaries of life. They do not drink water except those who sometimes abstain from other drinks by way of devotional or penitential zeal. They eat every kind of flesh and fish in abundance, with which their land is not meanly stocked. They are clothed with good woollens throughout their garments; they have abundant bedding, woollen like the rest of their furnishings, in all their houses, and are rich in all household goods and agricultural equipment, and in all that is requisite for a quiet and happy life, according to their estate.

¹¹ Froissart, Chronicles, ed. Geoffrey Brereton (1968; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1978), p. 211.

¹² John Saltmarsh, "Plague and Economic Decline in England in the Later Middle Ages," Cambridge Historical Journal, 7 (1941), 28-29; Bridbury, Economic Growth, p. 54.

Efforts by the lords to reimpose feudal services were limited in many areas by manorial custom. Still, this did not prevent clever landlords from taking advantage of loopholes in order to get their way; see Postan, MES, pp. 168-69.

¹³ The economic prospects of a landholding tenant, especially if he were a villein, were pretty bleak. Most medieval bondmen, of course, had always had a fairly rough life, but from the end of the twelfth century to the beginning of the fourteenth things were harsh indeed. Professor Postan estimates that during this period over fifty per cent of a villein's gross output

went toward paying off such feudal duties as entry fees, marriage fines, heriots, tallages, miscellaneous amer-
cements, church tithes, royal taxes and money payments
for commuted labor services. See Postan, "Medieval
Agrarian Society," Camb. Econ. Hist., I, p. 603.

- 14 Bridbury, Economic Growth, p. 83; Postan, MES,
p. 138.
- 15 Postan, MES, pp. 37-38.
- 16 See Henry S. Lucas, "The Great European Famine
of 1315, 1316 and 1317," Speculum, 5 (1930), 343-77.
- 17 Postan, MES, pp. 41-43.
- 18 Postan, MES, p. 42.
- 19 Bridbury, Economic Growth, pp. 84-85.
- 20 Postan, MES, pp. 116-21; Saltmarsh, 29-30.
- 21 J. W. Walker, Wakefield: Its History and People,
3rd ed. (1967; rpt. Wakefield: EP Publishing Limited,
1972), I, p. 98.
- 22 Lander, p. 23, says the following about the lack
of success of the crown's efforts to control wages:

The generations following the Black Death saw
remarkable changes which greatly improved the
lot of the working population. The plague had
wiped out a large part of the pool of surplus
labour and in spite of attempts at rigid en-
forcement of legislation real wages doubled
in the generations between the Black Death
(1349) and the battle of Agincourt (1415).
With such an increase labourers and artisans
enjoyed remarkable prosperity as compared with
earlier times.

- 23 Rogers, Six Centuries, p. 326.
- 24 Postan, MES, pp. 156-58.
- 25 Walker, p. 99.
- 26 Bridbury, Economic Growth, p. 90.
- 27 Bridbury, "The Black Death," 585.
- 28 Postan, MES, p. 116.

- 29 Bridbury, "The Black Death," 585-86.
- 30 Robert Somerville, History of the Duchy of Lancaster, I (London: The Chancellor and Council of the Duchy of Lancaster, 1953), p. 95.
- 31 J. M. W. Bean, The Estates of the Percy Family, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 12-13.
- 32 Postan, MES, p. 118; Bridbury, Economic Growth, p. 36-40.
- 33 Shepherds as well as farmers took advantage of the increased economic opportunities offered by demesne leasing. By the end of the fourteenth century almost all sheep farming on the Duchy of Lancaster estates was controlled by tenants. In nearby Lincolnshire enterprising shepherds had, by 1368, not only leased the whole demesne of Long Sutton manor but had paid cash for its entire flock of sheep; see Eileen Power, The Wool Trade in English Medieval History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), pp. 38-39.
- 34 E. M. Carus-Wilson, Medieval Merchant Venturers, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1967), p. 190. The first fulling mill ever recorded in England was set up in the West Riding, at Temple Newsam, near Leeds.
- 35 Carus-Wilson, p. 195. The towns in question were Almonbury, Alverthorpe, Castleford, Kirkstall, Knaresborough, Leeds, Newsam, Rothwell, Thorpe Arch and Wakefield.
- 36 Carus-Wilson, p. 198.
- 37 Carus-Wilson, pp. 203-04. The older municipalities did not try to encourage individual enterprise. All members of the business community were expected to compete on an equal footing, and success was not to be achieved at the expense of one's colleagues. Guilds, furthermore, went out of their way to limit membership. As a result the chartered boroughs, with their high taxes, restrictive admission policies and expensive entry fines, did not offer many economic incentives to those not part of its mercantile oligarchy.
- 38 J. N. Bartlett, "The Expansion and Decline of York in the Later Middle Ages," The Economic History Review, 12 (1959), 21.
An interesting piece of evidence on the decline of York in the thirteenth century is provided by the problems experienced by the city's weavers. In the twelfth

century they were paying £10 annually to the crown for their charter. By the thirteenth century they were so poor that they could no longer meet this obligation, complaining that "divers men in divers places in the country, elsewhere than in the city or in other towns and demesne boroughs - make dyed and rayed cloths;" the Petition of 1304, as quoted by Carus-Wilson, p. 205.

39 Bartlett, 23-25.

40 E. M. Carus-Wilson, "The Woollen Industry," in The Cambridge Economic History of Europe, II, ed. M. M. Postan and E. E. Rich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p. 416.

41 The statistics behind the rise of the textile industry in England are quite astounding. Cloth exports alone went from 4,422 broadcloths sent out during a twelve-month period between 1347 and 1348 to an annual average of 43,000 cloths for the years 1392-1395. As more cloth was produced, more raw wool was kept in the island as raw material. Thus, in the middle of the fourteenth century 30,000 sacks were still being exported yearly; but this number had fallen to only 19,000 sacks per annum by the last decades of the same century. Furthermore, the entire industry was employing between 23,000 and 26,000 more people at the end of the century than it had at the beginning despite the fact that the plague had carried off at least one third of the nation's total population. See Carus-Wilson, "The Woollen Industry," pp. 414-16 and Medieval Merchant Venturers, p. 261; see also Bartlett, 23-29.

42 Carus-Wilson, Medieval Merchant Venturers, pp. 258-59; see also Bartlett, 24.

43 E. Miller, "Medieval York," in A History of Yorkshire: The City of York, ed. P. M. Tillott (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 86; see also Bartlett, 27-33.

44 Bartlett, 27-28.

45 R. B. Smith, Land and Politics in the England of Henry VIII: The West Riding of Yorkshire, 1530-46 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 29-32.

46 Smith, p. 31.

47 The vibrant economic life of the upland wapentakes is confirmed by other kinds of evidence too. Manorial records, for example, show that Leeds had only

one fulling mill in 1322, which was leased for 10s. per annum. By 1357 the same mill had more than doubled in value and was being leased at a yearly rate of 24s.; meanwhile, a second mill, worth 13s.4d. was already in operation. In 1374 the two mills were rented respectively for 30s. and 17s.; and in 1384, although the first mill was still valued at 30s., the second was now worth 26s.8d. Modest as these returns might seem, they nonetheless reflect a definite growth in the cloth-making capacity of Leeds at a time when similar growth was occurring in other parts of the Riding. See John Le Patourel, "Medieval Leeds: Kirkstall Abbey, the Parish Church, the Medieval Borough," Publications of the Thoresby Society, 46 (1957), 18.

48 Postan, MES, p. 156.

49 Fortescue, The Governance of England, p. 151.

50. R. H. Tawney, The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century (London, 1912; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, n.d.), p. 28. In describing how the term "yeoman" was used in the late Middle Ages Tawney states:

But the word yeoman was used, in speaking of agricultural conditions, to describe any well-to-do farmer beneath the rank of gentleman, even though he was not a freeholder. . . . not only copyholders but even villeins by blood were sometimes described as yeomen.

See also the definition supplied by the OED: "A man holding a small landed estate; hence, vaguely, a commoner or countryman of respectable standing, especially one who cultivates his own land."

51 Geoffrey Chaucer, General Prologue, l. 345, in The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed., ed. F. N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), p. 20. All future references to Chaucer's poetry and prose will be taken from this edition.

52 Fortescue, De Laudibus, p. 69. Another interesting description of a wealthy yeoman can be found in the poem "How the Ploughman Learned His Paternoster," in Reliquiae Antiquae, I, ed. Thomas Wright and James O. Halliwell (London: 1845), p. 43:

That golde ne sylver he lacked nought;
His hall rofe was full of bakon flytches,

The chambre charged was with wyches
 Full of egges, butter, and chese,
 Men that were hungry for to ease;
 To make good ale, malte had he plentye;
 And Martylmas befe to hym was not deyntye;
 Onyons and garlyke he had inowe;
 And good creme, and mylke of the cowe.

(11. 22-30)

53 Hugh Latimer, Seven Sermons before Edward VI, ed. Edward Arber (London: 1869), pp. 40-41.

54 W. T. Lancaster, "A Fifteenth Century Rental of Leeds," Publications of the Thoresby Society, 24 (1915-18), 9.

55 Modern historians generally agree with medieval writers that yeomen by and large were the richest members of the peasant community. See C. S. L. Davies, Peace, Print and Protestantism: 1450-1558 (St. Albans: Granada Publishing Limited, 1977), pp. 26-27; Hilton, The English Peasantry, p. 27; Myers, England in the Late Middle Ages, p. 151; Rogers, Loci E Libro, p. xxxiv.

56 R. B. Dobson, Durham Priory: 1400-1450 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 282. Of the men who leased the priory's demesne lands, Dobson says that the yeomen were the most numerous.

57 William Cunningham, The Growth of English Industry and Commerce, 5th ed., I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), pp. 398-401; E. Lipson, The Economic History of England, 5th ed., I (London: A. & C. Black, Ltd., 1929), p. 103; Postan, "Medieval Agrarian Society," 632.

58 See Somerville, p. 95 and Bean, pp. 12-13, 36-40.

59 Quoted in James Gairdner, ed., The Paston Letters, I (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904), p. 28. Clement Paston's status as a yeoman is clearly indicated by the writer's reference to his being in possession of between 100 and 120 acres of land. Postan (MES, p. 156) estimates that a peasant had to have about two virgates of land (60 acres) to be considered well off. Clement Paston has twice this amount. See also Hilton, The English Peasantry, p. 39.

60 Reliquiae Antiquae, I, p. 43.

61 Postan, MES, p. 151.

62 William Stubbs, The Constitutional History of

England, III (Oxford: 1878), pp. 552-53. Commenting on the self-sufficiency of the fifteenth-century yeomen, Stubbs says that they "had their own capital, such as it was, and, when the rent was paid, were accountable to no one."

63 J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, trans. F. Hopman (London, 1924; rpt. Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), pp. 27-28; see also Morton W. Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1952), pp. 74, 95 and Lester K. Little, "Pride Goes before Avarice: Social Change and the Vices in Latin Christendom," American Historical Review, 76 (1971), 16.

64 A Relation, pp. 25-26.

65 Maud Sellers, ed., The York Mercers and Merchant Adventurers, Surtees Society, 129 (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1918), pp. xix-xx.

66 Calendar of the Close Rolls, Richard II, VI, 1396-99 (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1927), p. 218, (hereafter abbreviated as CCR). See also "An Account of the Proceedings in a Remarkable Case of Adulteration at York," in A Volume of English Miscellanies, ed. James Raine, Surtees Society, 85 (Durham: 1890), pp. 1-10.

67 Postan, MES, p. 151.

68 For further information about late medieval land markets see: Tawney, pp. 59-60; Hilton, The English Peasantry, pp. 40-49; Cunningham, p. 401; F. R. H. Du Boulay, "Who Were Farming the English Demesnes at the End of the Middle Ages," The Economic History Review, 17 (1965), 444-45.

69 Tawney, pp. 161-65.

70 The men who leased the demesnes and took an active part in the free land market of the period were of diverse economic background. But most of them were lesser men described in the Paston letters variously as "gentlemen and thrifty and substantial yeomen and thrifty husbandmen," "gentlemen, franklins and good men" and "gentlemen and thrifty men of the country;" quoted in Du Boulay, "Who Were Farming the English Demesnes," 444-45.

71 Quoted in Du Boulay, An Age of Ambition, p. 67.

72 Additional MS 41321, fols. 101b-102, quoted in G. R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), p. 369.

73 See, for example, Middle English Sermons, ed. Woodburn O. Ross, EETS, o.s. 209 (1940; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 311; Chaucer, The Parson's Tale, ll. 408-30, p. 240; Hoccleve, Regement of Princes, ed. F. J. Furnivall, EETS, e.s. 72 (London: 1899), ll. 421-553, pp. 16-20.

74 Frances E. Baldwin, Sumptuary Legislation and Personal Legislation in England, Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, 44 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1926), pp. 34-35. The government periodically renewed its sumptuary legislation but never succeeded in preventing people from dressing above their station.

75 John Hatcher, Plague, Population and the English Economy: 1348-1530 (London: The Macmillan Press, 1977), pp. 33-34. Hatcher maintains that the survivors of the plague "inherited the property of those who had perished and, when presented with a sudden increase in wealth at a time of recurrent plague and considerable uncertainty . . . chose to spend on a greater scale than their predecessors. Demand was further stimulated by the increasing earnings of labourers and peasants; and there is also the possibility that these groups had a greater propensity to consume than landlords and others who suffered a relative reduction in income."

76 See John A. Yunck, The Lineage of Lady Meed (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), pp. 235-36; Frank Grace, The Concept of Property in Modern Christian Thought, Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences, 34 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1953), pp. 19-24.

77 John McGovern, "The Rise of New Economic Attitudes--Economic Humanism, Economic Nationalism--During the Later Middle Ages and Renaissance; A.D. 1200-1500," Traditio, 26 (1970), 231-33.

78 For the traditional medieval view on this subject see Dives and Pauper, I, part 1, ed. Priscilla H. Barnum, EETS, 275 (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 51-80, especially p. 77 where Pauper explains to Dives the significance of Matthew, 19, 16-26:

as it is impossible a camel to passe porouz

a neddis iye, so it is inpossible a man
pat settip his trust & his blisse in richessis
to entre into pe rewme of heuenes but if he
caste from hym such inordynat loue & trustinge
in richessis.

- 79 Charlotte D'Evelyn, ed., Peter Idley's Instructions to His Son (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., 1935), p. 92.
- 80 Bridbury, Economic Growth, pp. 53, 91-92.
- 81 There is some controversy as to how much the towns benefited from the changing economic scene. But, as Rodney Hilton observes, "not even the strictest stagnationist denies the growth of the craft industry in the countryside" (The English Peasantry, pp. 37-38).
- 82 Bridbury, Economic Growth, pp. 53-54.
- 83 Bridbury, Economic Growth, p. 91.
- 84 Hatcher, p. 33; Lander, pp. 20-21.
- 85 R. H. Hilton, The Economic Development of Some Leicestershire Estates in the 14th and 15th Centuries (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 94; E. F. Jacob, The Fifteenth Century (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 370; Tawney, pp. 72-75, 97; A. R. Myers, ed., English Historical Documents: 1327-1485 (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1969), p. 929; Du Boulay, "Who Were Farming the English Demesnes," 443-55.
- 86 G. M. Trevelyan, English Social History (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943), p. 10.
- 87 A Relation, p. 23.
- 88 Hilton, The English Peasantry, p. 18.
- 89 Hilton, "Peasant Movements in England before 1381," The Economic History Review, 2 (1949), 117-36; rpt. in Essays in Economic History, II, ed. E. M. Carus-Wilson (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1962), pp. 73, 78-79.
- 90 Christopher Dyer, "A Redistribution of Incomes in Fifteenth-Century England," Past & Present, 39 (1968), 33.
- 91 Hilton, "Peasant Movements," p. 87.
- 92 Dyer, 33.

93 R. H. Hilton, The Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England (London: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 40-43. The legislation referred to is, of course, the Statute of Labourers, which was issued in 1349 and reenacted periodically after that. In the final analysis it failed to prevent wages from rising.

94 Hilton, The Decline of Serfdom, p. 40.

95 Hilton, The Decline of Serfdom, p. 42.

96 Hilton, The Decline of Serfdom, p. 36. Hilton sees the Peasants' Revolt as the product of "a general intensification of exploitation" by the landlords of their tenants. Postan (MES, p. 172), however, disagrees with this view and puts forth what he calls a more "sophisticated" explanation--namely, that the rising might be seen "not as a reaction to poverty returned or to serfdom revived but as a demonstration that men were now so far advanced on their road to freedom and prosperity as to resent more than ever the surviving vestiges of old oppressions." See also Myers, England in the Late Middle Ages, p. 30.

97 Charles Oman, The Great Revolt of 1381 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1906), p. 146.

98 Rotuli Parliamentorum, III (London: 1783), pp. 96-97 (hereafter abbreviated as Rot. Parl.), rpt. and trans. in R. B. Dobson, ed., The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 285.

99 Coram Rege Roll, Michaelmas, 5 Richard II K.B. 27/482, Rex, memb. 11, rpt. and trans. in Dobson, pp. 288-89.

100 York Memorandum Book, II, ed. Maud Sellers, Surtees Society (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1912-15), pp. 69-70, rpt. in Dobson, p. 287.

101 Dobson, p. 285.

102 Tillott, pp. 81-82 and Dobson, p. 284.

103 Rot. Parl., III, pp. 96-97, rpt. and trans. in Dobson, p. 286.

104 The following details of the Beverley riots have been derived from Cyril T. Flower, "The Beverley Town Riots, 1381-2," Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 19 (1905), 79-91.

105 Dobson, pp. 294-95.

- 106 Public Record Office, Ancient Petitions, no. 11205, printed and trans. in Dobson, pp. 295-96.
- 107 The following details of this uprising have been derived from J. G. Bellamy, "The Northern Rebellions in the Later Years of Richard II," Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, 47 (1965), 258-60.
- 108 Coram Rege Roll, no. 528 (Easter, 1393), m. 37d (crown), printed and trans. in G. O. Sayles, ed., Select Cases in the Court of King's Bench under Richard II, Henry IV and Henry V, VII, Selden Society, 88 (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1971), pp. 83-84.
- 109 Printed in Sayles, pp. 84-85; the poem can also be found in Rossell Hope Robbins, ed., Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 60-61.
- 110 A. C. Cawley, ed., The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle (1958; rpt. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), p. 2; all future references to the work of the Wakefield Master will be taken from this edition.
- 111 Bellamy, 260.
- 112 Calendar of the Patent Rolls, Henry IV, III, 1405-08 (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1907), pp. 355-56, (hereafter abbreviated as CPR).
- 113 CPR, Henry VI, I, p. 402; see also p. 328.
- 114 For a few examples from Yorkshire see CPR, Henry VI, I, p. 31; III, pp. 338, 367.
- 115 CPR, Henry VI, I, p. 310.
- 116 Giles Constable, "Resistance to Tithes in the Middle Ages," Journal of Ecclesiastical History, 13 (1962), 185.
- 117 Constable, 184.
- 118 May McKisack, The Fourteenth Century: 1307-1399 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 303.
- 119 Myers, English Historical Documents, p. 608.
- 120 A. Hamilton Thompson, The English Clergy and their Organisation in the Later Middle Ages (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1947), pp. 119-20; Myers, English Historical Documents, p. 608.

- 121 Myers, English Historical Documents, p. 608.
- 122 In The English Parish Clergy on the Eve of the Reformation (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), p. 149, Peter Heath tells us about the parson of Swaunsthorne who "rode round the parish to collect tithes with his reputed mistress riding pillion on his horse."
- 123 Thompson, p. 115.
- 124 Thompson, p. 116.
- 125 Walker, p. 180.
- 126 G. M. Trevelyan, in England in the Age of Wycliffe (1899; rpt. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1948), p. 112, maintains that anti-tithe feelings were often inflamed "by the objection that the laity often felt towards making payments to non-resident rectors or to monasteries and Bishops who had appropriated the tithe of a parish. The movement for refusal of such dues was at this period a marked thing. It was a means of giving expression to general discontent with the Church."
- 127 Norman P. Tanner, ed., Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich, 1428-31, Camden Society, 4th series, 20 (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1977), p. 11. As proof of the popularity of anti-tithe sentiment among Lollards Tanner records over thirty cases where it figured among the charges brought against them.
- 128 The English Works of Wyclif hitherto Unprinted, ed. F. D. Matthew, EETS, o.s. 74 (London: 1880), p. 418; see also p. 435. Hereafter this work will be referred to as The English Works of Wyclif.
- 129 The English Works of Wyclif, p. 419.
- 130 The English Works of Wyclif, p. 431.
- 131 Norma Adams, in her article "The Judicial Conflict over Tithes," English Historical Review, 52 (1937), 22, states that the popular complaints about tithes "reflect the growing anti-clericalism of the fourteenth century." By the same token Tanner, p. 16, asserts that the topic of tithes itself was "an issue much discussed outside Lollard circles" in the fifteenth century.
- 132 There is a real possibility that Ball did indeed

preach in Yorkshire. In a letter to the people of Essex, reported by Walsingham in his Historia Anglicana, II, ed. H. T. Riley (London: 1864), pp. 33-34, rpt. in Dobson, p. 381, he refers to himself as a "som tyme Seynte Marie prest of York." If Ball were a priest at York he might very well have spoken out against tithes in that city and elsewhere in the county.

133 Walsingham, Historia Anglicana, II, pp. 32-33, rpt. and trans. in Dobson, p. 374.

134 Thompson, p. 116.

135 CPR, Richard II, I, p. 465.

136 CPR, Richard II, III, p. 471; VI, p. 584; Henry IV, I, p. 268; II, p. 434; IV, p. 473; Henry VI, I, pp. 494-95.

137 CCR, Henry VI, II, p. 165.

138 CCR, Henry VI, II, pp. 166-67.

139 Sylvia L. Thrupp, "Social Control in the Medieval Town," The Journal of Economic History, 1, supplement (1941), 39-52; rpt. in Society and History: Essays by Sylvia L. Thrupp, ed. Raymond Grew and Nicholas H. Steneck (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), p. 9.

140 Postan, MES, p. 243.

141 Sylvia L. Thrupp, "Medieval Guilds Reconsidered," The Journal of Economic History, 2 (1942), 164-73; rpt. in Society and History, p. 232.

142 See Dennis Romano's article, "Borough Regulation of Economic and Social Activity in Late Medieval England," Rice University Studies, 62 (1976), 89-98. Romano, at the end of his study (p. 96), concludes that civic trade regulations "were intended to promote the needs of the community as a whole. Promotion of the general welfare rather than of special interests was the primary concern."

143 Peter Laslett, The World We Have Lost, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 12. See also J. Ambrose Raftis, Tenure and Mobility (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1964), p. 206 and George C. Homans, English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942), p. 105.

Homans is particularly eloquent on the subject of

peasant cooperation and dependence. All aspects of village life, he says, were "in a state of mutual dependence," especially in an open-field village where "all the arrangements and dispositions: the fields, the rotation of crops, the herd, the hedges, the holdings, and the cluster of houses which was the town proper--all were intricately interdependent."

144 Homans, p. 106. "A village formed what we call a community not only because all its members were submitted to the same set of customs--because the land of every villager lay in the form of strips intermingled with those of his neighbors, because every villager followed the same traditional rotation of crops and sent his cattle to run in a common herd. A village formed a community chiefly because all its members were brought up to consent and act together as a group."

145 Homans, pp. 328-37.

146 Homans, p. 90.

147 William Paley Baildon, ed., Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield, I, The Yorkshire Archaeological Society: Record Series, 29 (n.p.: The Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 1901), pp. 261-62; cited by Homans, pp. 90-91.

148 John Lister, ed., Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield, IV, The Yorkshire Archaeological Society: Record Series, 78 (n.p.: The Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 1930), p. 14.

149 Court Rolls, IV, p. 96.

150 Edwin B. DeWindt, Land and People in Holywell-Cum-Needingworth (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1972), pp. 243-43.

151 Carus-Wilson, "The Woollen Industry," p. 426.

152 Carus-Wilson, "The Woollen Industry," p. 422.

153 R. H. Tawney, Religion and the Rise of Capitalism (1926; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1977), p. 39.

154 For evidence of migration within the West Riding see the following studies: G. G. Gamble, "A History of Hunslet in the Later Middle Ages," Publications of the Thoresby Society, 41 (1947), 249; J. K. Walker, "Almonbury in Feudal Times," Yorkshire Archaeological Journal, 2 (1873), 13, 17; James B. Place,

"Woodhouse in the Manor of Leeds," Publications of the Thoresby Society, 37 (1942), 353.

155 Tawney, The Agrarian Problem, pp. 150-51.

156 Tawney, The Agrarian Problem, p. 139. Tawney states that when "there is much buying and selling of land among the peasantry, much colonising of new plots taken from waste and demesne, we should expect to see the influence of competition beginning to override that of custom; we should expect to see the paring away of communal restrictions to make room for individual arrangements of a more elastic nature."

Ironically, says Tawney (p. 137), the enterprise and individualism of the late medieval peasant eventually brought about his ruin at the hands of an even more selfish and acquisitive group--the sixteenth-century capitalistic landlords:

The enterprise which [the prosperous peasants] show in their dealings with land and in encroaching on the routine of manorial cultivation cannot fail to have a powerful influence in preparing the way for the individualistic movement which sweeps over agriculture in the sixteenth century, and from which the peasants, as a class, suffer so severely.

157 Tawney, The Agrarian Problem, p. 161.

158 J. Ambrose Raftis, Warboys: Two Hundred Years in the Life of an English Mediaeval Village (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), pp. 216-17 and De Windt, pp. 242-45.

159 De Windt, pp. 244-45.

160 De Windt, pp. 264-67; Raftis, Warboys, pp. 217-222; see also Raftis, "Changes in an English Village after the Black Death," Mediaeval Studies 29 (1967), 163-65.

161 Raftis, Warboys, p. 200.

162 De Windt, pp. 267-68.

163 Cicely Howell, "Stability and Change 1300-1700: The Socio-Economic Context of the Self-perpetuating Family Farm in England," The Journal of Peasant Studies, 2 (1975), 472.

164 Rosamond J. Faith, "Peasant Families and Inheritance Customs in Medieval England," The Agricultural History Review, 14 (1966), 86.

165 Barbara Harvey, Westminster Abbey and its Estates in the Middle Ages (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 318-19.

166 On the whole matter of the growing spirit of individualism in society see De Windt, pp. 263, 270, 274-75. De Windt confines his remarks to a specific village in a specific shire, but they can be applied in a broader context as well. Describing the changes that occurred in village society he asserts (pp. 274-75) that in the later Middle Ages

the old cohesiveness and deeply inter-personal and inter-dependent aspect of village life was fading, as private and independent interests and activities took precedence over those of groups. . . . Something was missing from the picture after the 1350's that had been very much in evidence before. It was a kind of commitment--almost a 'family' commitment--to the community as a whole, where the individual members of the society were bound together by several and far-reaching ties of responsibility which they strove to honour. From the middle of the fourteenth century, that commitment steadily weakened--just as the commitment of individual peasants to their own families with regard to tenurial practices weakened. . . . The stagnation and then collapse of the demesne economy brought forth a different economic life for the peasant--dominated by impermanent tenurial commitments and the ready exploitation of properties for quick profit--and the fading away of the old manorial-related type of society, where behavior was strikingly particularistic, independent and even impersonal.

167 In a recent and somewhat controversial study, Alan Macfarlane, in The Origins of English Individualism (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), has maintained that as far back as the thirteenth century English society was decidedly more individualistic and less communal than the rest of Europe:

. . . the majority of ordinary people in England from at least the thirteenth century were rampant individualists, highly mobile both geographically and socially, economically 'rational', market-oriented and acquisitive,

ego-centred in kinship and social life (p. 163).

Macfarlane's thesis has not been generally accepted by most historians, who object to his over-reliance on the concept of ownership as a criterion for determining when individualism appeared. Whether it appeared in the thirteenth century or not, however, I would maintain that it certainly mushroomed after the Black Death.

168 A Relation, pp. 23-24.

II

The Ethical Outlook

Every social development that we have so far studied ran counter in one way or another to some major tenet of medieval moral thought. This was inevitable in a culture that saw itself in primarily static terms. Men resolutely clung to a doctrine that defined society as an unchanging and unchangeable entity, a divinely ordained and therefore perfectly designed mechanism. The whole idea of change as a social good was utterly foreign to the medieval mind. Alterations of any kind, it was felt, only introduced discord and imperfection into a system which, if left undisturbed so that people could perform their respective duties, would operate indefinitely and harmoniously. It was precisely because the welfare of society seemed to depend so much on forestalling change that so many writers and preachers attacked contemporary trends. The orthodox reply to innovation and variation should not, therefore, be viewed as some perverse attempt on the part of a group of shrill traditionalists to halt the forces of history. Rather, it must be seen for what it really was: a reaffirmation, at a time of tremendous transition and flux, of both a social order and a moral vision that for many seemed to offer man

his best chance of earthly contentment and spiritual salvation.

Wealth and Property

The medieval doctrines of wealth and property are so closely related that they can safely be treated as a single topic. Together they provide us with a valuable yardstick against which we can measure the burgeoning materialism and possessiveness of the period.

In formulating its views on property, the Middle Ages relied heavily on the teachings of the Church Fathers, who claimed that as an institution private ownership was unnatural or evil and hence subject to certain restrictions regarding its use. Property was considered evil insofar as it was a result of sin, an unfortunate product of the Fall. Before the Fall, it was maintained, all goods had been owned jointly, shared communally and distributed equally.¹ Only afterwards were they possessed by individuals. Thus St. Ambrose speaks of a time, presumably man's sojourn in Eden, when there was no distinction between public and private ownership:

. . . for nature has poured forth all things for all men for common use. God has ordered all things to be produced so that there should be food in common to all, and that the earth should be common to all.²

Once man had been expelled from the Garden, however,

private property became the norm, a kind of necessary evil: "necessary," because it established an orderly system of ownership for commodities once held in common, controlling the blind forces of avarice and ambition unleashed by the Fall; and "evil," because it was an offshoot of Adam's disobedience³ and represented a falling away from a spiritually superior, more communistic state of existence. Thus the general consensus among the Fathers was that private property, while a valid institution for a world that had lost the lustre of its initial innocence, was nevertheless tainted in its origins and therefore somehow dangerous to man's moral well-being.

Perhaps because of its corrupting capabilities, the Fathers also insisted on limiting and defining the extent to which a man could make use of his property. Citing the defunct communism of the Garden of Eden as justification for these restraints, they argued that since all goods were once held in common it was only fitting that those who now had much should share some of their superfluous bounty with those who had little. Gregory the Great sees it all as a simple matter of justice:

Vainly, then, do those suppose themselves innocent, who claim to their own private use the common gift of God. . . . For, when we administer necessities of any kind to the indigent, we do not bestow our own, but render them what is theirs; we rather pay a debt of

justice than accomplish works of mercy. . . .⁴

John Chrysostom goes even further. So emphatically does he argue for a non-exclusive, communal approach to property and wealth, so strong is his belief that goods should be held in trust, that, in effect, he denies the validity of private ownership altogether:⁵

And all this about "mine," and "thine," is bare words only, and doth not stand for things. For if thou do but say the house is thine, it is a word without a reality: since the very air, earth, matter are the Creator's; and so art thou too thyself, who hast framed it; and all other things also. . . . If you enjoy it [i.e., wealth] alone, you too have lost it: for you will not reap its reward. But if you possess it jointly with the rest, then will it be more your own, and then will you reap the benefit of it. . . . whatsoever thou hast been entrusted withal, keep it not to thyself alone, since thou art doing harm to the whole and to thyself more than all.⁶

According to Patristic tradition, then, the possession of property--especially property in excess--carries with it an obligation to distribute alms. Charity is not asked of the property owner; it is demanded, because no man has a right to the sole possession of his goods. In fact, strictly speaking they are not even his goods in the first place; they belong to God who merely allows them to be used temporarily.

The Patristic conception of property as a tainted commodity the possession of which compelled one to share with others held sway all through the Middle Ages,

manifesting itself in a variety of ways. One of these was, of course, the wholesale condemnation of avarice, a sin which, as we have already had occasion to note in the previous chapter, fell under an increasing barrage of criticism in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. However, it is not my intention to review the whole range of late medieval thinking on this topic; the literature dealing with cupidity is simply too vast.⁷ But I would like to focus upon a few significant features of the anti-acquisitive attitude which I feel are relevant to this study, particularly since they form a backdrop to some of the Towneley plays. For instance, we continually encounter at this time the Patristic notion that charity is an antidote to wealth. Writing between 1378 and 1417, an anonymous homilist prescribes generosity as the only possible remedy for the moral maladies that accompany riches:

Now þe ij grace þat God haþ sente azeyns þe synne of couetise is charite and ryght-wisnes. . . . For riches is likened to cheynes. For þou seest well, and cheynes be aboute a mans necke and holden streyt and sore, but ziff þei be sone broken he must nedis die. So and a man be bondon with þe cheynes of couetise, þat is to sey to kepe is good harde and not departe with þe poure men ne fulfill þe vij dedis of mercy, I sey þat same cheyne of couetyse shall slee hym and brynge hym vn-to þe pyne of hell with-owten ende.⁸

A few years after the Peasants' Revolt, Master Thomas Wimbledon was preaching an even stronger message, de-

claring that avarice led men not merely to ignore the poor but actively to exploit them as well:

And covetise maketh, also, that rich men eat the poore, as beastes done their lesous, holding them lowe. This may we see all day in deed, I dread. For if a ritch man have a field, and a poore man have in the midst, or in the side thereof, one acre; and a rich man have all a streete saveth o house that some poore brother of his owneth, he ceaseth never till hee get it out of the poore mans hand, either by praier, or by bying, or by pursuing of disceit.⁹

It is interesting to note that Wimbledon's "ritch man" bears more than a passing resemblance to those enterprising yeomen who were so intent at this time on consolidating and accumulating land. The association of wealth and avarice with the peasantry--especially the substantial peasantry--was fast becoming one of the commonplaces of homiletic literature. The Wakefield Master will make use of this association in the Mactacio Abel.

Wimbledon then goes on to maintain that the exploitation of the poor by the rich is all the more absurd and unnatural because the two groups share a common origin and destiny. For, just as at the beginning of the world there were no distinctions between the wealthy and the destitute, so too at the end, through death, will all men once again be equal.¹⁰

Apart from insisting that riches posed a spiritual threat to the individual and that charity was necessary

to overcome that threat, moralists were also fond of depicting what they saw as the harried, busy existence of the acquisitive man--a relatively accurate observation in light of what we already know about the general level of enterprise in England at this time. One moralist says that the covetous individual is at once both committed to the ceaseless pursuit of material possessions and doomed, like Tantalus, never to have his acquisitive desires satiated.¹¹ Another draws us a picture of a man so greedy he cannot stop himself from meddling in the affairs of others:

You may see also what the covetous man is and what likynge that he hath in is wikkednes. For he is every besie to gadere to--poure myche good and to ley vp, and be-benke hym full narrowly how that he may begyle is euencristen, and to oppresse is poure neyrbors, and will be an entermettour in every mans cause. And per-by he hopes with-in processe to lede and rewell all the countrey. Jitt itt is now the i-nough to hym but jiff he be a grett purchaser.¹²

The common denominator in both these portrayals is restlessness. The avaricious man is in a constant state of mental and physical disequilibrium. Driven by acquisitive demons of his own making, he finds himself incapable of sustained joy or contentment, unable to experience even fleeting moments of peace. This is the burden that greed forces one to bear, and it is one that is carried by Cain throughout the course of the Mactacio Abel.¹³

Despite the medieval tendency to be suspicious of all wealth, it did not necessarily follow that riches were looked upon as evil per se. It was admitted, for example, that a man could justifiably possess a certain amount of wealth needed to sustain him in his vocation and social rank.¹⁴ Anything beyond this, however, had to be distributed to the poor. Under this system it was obvious that a lord was theoretically allowed more wealth than a merchant who, in turn, was allowed more than a ploughman--which is one reason why so many moralists got so upset at the thought of rich peasants and very rich tradesmen.

The rich man could likewise avoid the pangs of a guilty conscience if he acknowledged God as the ultimate source of his wealth, one who not only confers material prosperity but one who has the power to take it away as well. Dives and Pauper expresses the idea in the following manner:

If richessis and welþe fallen to þee, sette
not þin herte too mych þeron. Loue hem not to
mych. Be redi to þanke God whanne he sente
hem þee and as redi to þanke him pacientli if
he take hem fro þee. . . .¹⁵

This, of course, is simply another variation on the concept of the stewardship of wealth, which held that man is ultimately not the sole possessor of material goods. He may have exclusive ownership of them, but he may never claim exclusive power and use.

Unlike today, the Middle Ages placed property and wealth in a moral context.¹⁶ One could legitimately pursue riches up to a point--a point determined by one's social status; but after that point had been reached one had an ethical duty to share one's earnings with the rest of society. This was only fair, since property was originally held collectively by all men. Besides, people reasoned, it all ultimately belonged to God anyway and was only granted to man on loan, a loan that could be revoked at any time. In order to justify private ownership, therefore, one was obliged to practice charity, the great corrective to the evils of wealth.

In view of all these restrictions on the use and status of property, the man who unashamedly sought to accumulate it and failed to acknowledge its ultimate source in the process was thought to be something of a social outcast and moral maverick, someone so imprisoned by his own frantic materialistic yearnings that he disregarded the welfare of his fellows and the rights of his God. Unfortunately, this was the very kind of person who was beginning to dominate the economic and social life of the Middle Ages, a person whose character in more ways than one matched that of the Wakefield Cain. He was not ignored by the moralists.

Work

The medieval idea of work, like that of property,

was grounded in a hierarchical and communal view of society. Work was hierarchically arranged insofar as it was assigned on the basis of class and status. The more important the class, the more prestigious the work. Thus the clergy were considered the most valuable members of the commonwealth because of their position as custodians of man's spiritual welfare; they therefore were expected to guide, protect and pray for people's souls. The most crucial duties of the nobility were to rule men in temporal matters and to shield the nation and the Church from their enemies. Next came the merchants, whose value lay in their ability to provide the realm with the goods necessary for its survival. Finally, the laborers--husbandmen, craftsmen, servants of all kinds-- were responsible for equipping the other classes with the basic commodities of life: food, clothing, shelter.¹⁷

The kind of work performed, moreover, influenced what was expected of one ethically. The clergy, for instance, were not just supposed to pray; they were to be men of holiness in their own right, leading the laity by their example toward virtue. Knights, for their part, were to be more than good fighters; they were to defend the poor, the weak and the helpless. Merchants were to be honest and just in their dealings and transactions. Servants and bondmen had to be humble and obedient, while laborers in general were constantly exhorted to do their work honestly and well.¹⁸ Labor, therefore, in

order to be worthwhile, had to have a moral as well as a utilitarian dimension. The individual who concentrated all his energies on the latter to the exclusion of the former was perverting the purpose of toil.

Work was also seen in corporate terms. In spite of the fact that society was made up of rigidly defined classes, it was never maintained that these divisions were autonomous units functioning in isolation from one another. On the contrary, they were thought of as interdependent parts whose collective activity sustained the whole body-politic. Each individual within a class, furthermore, was supposed to be conscious of the fact that his exertions did not simply contribute to his own peculiar advantage or even to the general aggrandizement of his class, but rather benefited everyone in the kingdom.¹⁹ This communal ideal was so tied up with the idea of work in general that John Lydgate, in his translation (1426) of the French Pelerinage de la Vie Humaine (1330, 1355), puts the whole corporate doctrine of society into the mouth of a character named "Labour and Occupacioun," a man whose very trade--that of net-maker--highlights the reciprocal nature of human endeavor.²⁰ Ideally then the medieval social system was bound together by impulses of selflessness, brotherhood and mutual reliance. Only when these forces were brought into play could the commonwealth operate undisturbed and uncorrupted.

While work was obviously of immense importance to the country as a whole, it also was believed to confer vital spiritual blessings on the individual who performed it in the proper manner. To be correctly discharged, work first of all had to be done in a spirit of charity. It was never to be performed solely for one's own enrichment but rather for the enrichment of others. In other words, it was to equip one with the wherewithal for almsgiving. Both the Church Fathers and later medieval writers insist on this point.²¹ Therefore work, far from being looked upon as an avenue to wealth, was primarily considered--because of the opportunities it gave for the exercise of charity--something that could actually liberate man from materialistic preoccupations.²²

Secondly, work was held up as a form of prayer, a perfectly valid way of worshipping God.²³ These two activities--labor and prayer--had long been linked with one another. Augustine, for instance, claims that work provides one of the most effortless and valuable ways of acknowledging the Creator's power and glory:

Persons who are engaged in manual labor can easily sing divine canticles and lighten the labor itself, at the divine call (similar to the leader's call to the oarsmen). . . . What, therefore, hinders the servant of God from meditating on the law of God and from singing to the name of the Lord most high while he performs manual labor? ²⁴

Centuries later a fifteenth-century homilist is expressing the same thought in one of his sermons:

Man should labour for the honour of God. He should labour in order to gain for himself and his family the necessaries of life and what will contribute to Christian joy, and moreover to assist the poor and the sick by his labours. He who acting otherwise seeks only pecuniary recompense of his work does ill, and his labours are but usury.²⁵

Again, what we have here is that distinctive attitude toward labor which so distinguishes the Middle Ages from modern society--an attitude that defines all human performance in altruistic and devotional, not purely economic, terms.

Finally, work was considered a cure for idleness, that proverbial spawning-ground of wickedness.²⁶ Only through vigorous physical activity, so the theory went, could an individual overcome the constant blandishments of the Devil. Mirk's Festial, an early fifteenth-century anthology of sermons, argues that if Adam and Eve had been more conscientious about their duties in Paradise the Fall might never have taken place:

By þys ensampull 3e schull take hede forto labour bysyly; for 3f Adam and Eve had bysyede hom yn labour, þe fende schuld not haue ouercomen hom so sone. For þe fend kepyth no more when he woll tempte a man, but fynd hym ydull. Wherfor 3e schull know well þat hit ys a ryche salve to hele synne: labour bysyly.²⁷

A similar message is set forth in the moral play Mankind

where the hero successfully resists temptation only while he remains engaged in manual labor and prayer. (The two acts go together.) Once he forsakes the industrious life, however, he quickly degenerates into a frivolous sinner.²⁸

—On the other hand, medieval man had to be careful not to become too industrious lest he begin to labor exclusively for his own profit and thus lose sight of the more spiritual and corporate ends of toil. Augustine therefore suggested (and his position on the subject was the most authoritative in the Middle Ages) that work, in order to be meaningful, had to steer clear of the twin extremes of frantic, acquisitive busyness and dull, unproductive sloth:

Such then ought to be the action of the soul, as may tend to a quiet security, not one that may increase restless toil . . . Meek therefore and humble, following so to speak, Christ as its path,²⁹ . . . nevertheless, not slothful and supine.

The medieval worker, whether artisan or peasant, townsman or rustic, cleric or layman, thus had to do his job in a certain manner and with certain ends in mind: as a means of allowing him to dispense charity, as a communal endeavor, as a devotional act and as a cure for accidia. Once all these provisions had been met then work could actually be turned into a source of holiness in a person's life, an activity that not only

furnished him with earthly necessities but sanctified him as well.³⁰

The idea that labor in general, and especially manual labor, bestowed spiritual blessings was a time-honored commonplace in the Middle Ages, having been formulated as early as the fifth century by St. Jerome.³¹ It underwent little change through the years. By the late mediæval period we find Master Ralph of Acton using it in one of his sermons: "Labour of the hands confers four benefits. It destroys vices, it nourishes virtues, it provides necessaries, it gives alms."³² Langland makes the canonizing power of labor one of the salient themes of his great poem Piers Plowman, where the central character, a hard-working, conscientious peasant, is symbolically transformed into the very epitome of virtue and goodness--Christ himself.³³ The Wakefield Master, moreover, employs the theme in the Processus Noë and, like Langland, apotheosizes his protagonist in the process. But instead of using a husbandman, he chooses an assiduous craftsman to be the object of this spectacular metamorphosis.³⁴ Whatever the differences between these two figures, the works in which they appear both exploit the traditional identification of well-performed labor with spiritual perfection and grace.

It is no accident that we encounter at this time two great mediæval writers, along with countless others

of lesser stature, reaffirming the orthodox view of work as a charitable, corporate, sanctifying activity. For it was exactly at this time that this very idea was beginning to break down. In the early Middle Ages, before the rise of a money and a market economy, people still subscribed to a more or less traditional view of labor. But as society began to be infiltrated by change, men abandoned the older approach in favor of one more suited to the era--one which encouraged individuals to work hard, not because doing so would make them holy, but because it would make them rich. The Black Death accelerated these changes and indirectly helped spread the new attitudes which had followed in their wake.³⁵ By the end of the fifteenth century, therefore, large numbers of people were working harder, more productively and more autonomously than ever before, mainly because material success was at last an attainable goal.³⁶ It was in reaction to this anti-social, materialistic ethic that so many moralists reiterated the conventional doctrines of toil.

Self-Assertion and Individualism

The corporate view of society to which so many moralists were devoted guaranteed that the growing determination of the lower orders to have at least some control over their destiny would be met with suspicion and hostility. One of the central assumptions of this

view demanded that the masses be humble, content and obedient throughout their earthly careers. Anything less than total acceptance of one's place in society was interpreted as a potential threat to the principles of cooperation and degree upon which the commonwealth was built. Thomas Wimbledon, in a sermon delivered at Paul's Cross, summarizes the position as follows:

Herfore everich man see to what state God hath cleped him, and dwell he therein by travile according to his degree. Thou that art a laborer or a crafty man, do this truely. If thou art a servant or a bondman; be suget and lowe, in drede of displeasing of thy Lord.³⁷

Another homilist, writing on the duty of the base-born to support by their labor the other two estates, points out that "this [duty] schulde be do iustli and for a good ende, withoute feyntise or falshede or grucchyng of hire estaat."³⁸ A kind of stoic resignation to one's lot in life, however unpleasant or bitter, was thus seen as a desirable trait in men far down the social ladder.

Needless to say, the defiant individualism and general spirit of discontent that characterized so many areas of late medieval life shocked and dismayed those who maintained that peasants and artisans, like children, should be seen and not heard. Langland, for example, though generally sympathetic to the plight of the down-trodden, was too much of a conservative not to be dis-

gusted by the insubordinate antics of some of his contemporaries. In recording Wastour's vigorous defiance of both Piers' and the Knight's command to work, he voices his disapproval of that distinctively late-medieval phenomenon, the self-assertive, disobedient, aggressive peasant:

[Th]anne gan wastour to wrapen hym and
 wolde haue yfouzte;
 To Piers þe Plowman he profrede his gloue.
 A Bretoner, a braggere, [he h]osted Piers als
 And bad hym go pissen with his plowz:
 'pyuysshe] sherewe!
 Wiltow, neltow, we wol haue oure wille
 Of þi flour and þi flessh; fecche whanne vs
 And maken vs murye þer [wip] maugree þi likeþ,
 chekes.'
 Curteisly þe knyzt þanne, as his kynde wolde,
 Warnede wastour and wissed hym bettre:
 'Or þow shalt abigge by þe lawe, by þe ordre
 þat I bere!
 'I was nozt wont to werche', quod Wastour,
 'now wol I nozt bigynne!
 And leet lizt of þe lawe and lasse of þe
 knyzte,
 And sette Piers at a pese and his plowz boþe,
 And manaced [hym] and his men if þei mette
 eftsoone.

(B-text, VI, ll. 152-58, 164-70).

Elsewhere in the same Passus Langland attacks the cocky individualism and grasping materialism of those landless laborers who, knowing their services are in demand, hold out for better food and higher wages--a course of action which, according to the prevailing orthodoxy, perverts the whole communal make-up of society:

Laborers þat haue no land to lyue on but hire
 handes

Deyne[þ] noȝt to dyne a day nyȝt olde wortes.
 May no peny ale hem paie, ne no pece of bacoun,
 But if it be fressh flessch ouper fissh
 And þat chaud and plus chaud for chyllinge of
 [y]fryed,
 hir mawe.
 But he be heizliche hyred ellis wole he chide;
 [That] he was werkman wroȝt [warie] þe tyme.
 Ayeins Catons counseil comseþ he to Iangle:
Paupertatis onus pacienter ferre memento;
 He greueþ hym ageyn god and gruccheþ ageyn
 Reson,
 And þanne corseþ þe kyng and al [þe] counseil
 after
 Swiche lawes to loke laborers to [chaste].

(B-text, VI, ll. 307-18)

Finally, the poet reveals that this disruptive self-
 absorption is at work not only among the peasantry but
 among townsmen too, inspiring them to put their own
 petty interests ahead of those of the kingdom. Thus the
 Brewer, in Passus XIX, defiantly bellows that he, for
 one, will not be subject to the rule of Conscience since
 it will conflict with his laissez-faire philosophy and
 inhibit his economic opportunities:

'Ye? baw!' quod a Brewere, 'I wol noȝt be
 ruled,
 By Iesu! for al youre Ianglynge, wiþ Spiritus
Iusticie,
 Ne after Conscience, by crist! while I kan
 selle
 Boþe dregges and draf and drawe at oon hole.
 Thikke ale and þynne ale; þat is my kynde,
 And noȝt hakke after holynesse; hold þi tonge,
 Conscience!
 Of Spiritus Iusticie þow spekest muche on
 ydel.'³⁹

(B-text, XIX, ll. 396-402)

John Gower shares Langland's dislike of the audacious,

self-interested commoner. In that part of the Vox Clamantis written on the eve of the Peasants' Revolt, he denounces the lower classes for their greed, disrespect for authority and social ambition:

An evil disposition is widespread among the common people, and I suspect that the servants of the plow are often responsible for it. For they are sluggish, they are scarce, and they are grasping. For the very little they do they demand the highest pay. Now that this practice has come about, see how one peasant insists upon more than two demanded in days gone by. Yet a short time ago one performed more service than three do now. . . . [The peasants] desire the leisure of great men, but they have nothing to feed themselves with, nor will they be servants. God and Nature have ordained that they shall serve, but neither knows how to keep them within bounds. . . . The peasants of old did not scorn God with impunity or usurp a noble worldly rank. Rather, God imposed servile work upon them, so that the peasantry might subdue its proud feelings. . . .40

(Vox Clamantis, V, 9)

Orthodox writers like Langland and Gower, in condemning lower-class defiance, materialism and self-centeredness, seem to imply that if these forces are permitted to flourish unchecked society may one day find itself in the throes of anarchy.⁴¹ The outbreak of the Peasants' Revolt led many people to believe that that day had arrived sooner than expected. Homilists and chroniclers are almost unanimous in attributing the rising to the new attitudes and life-styles of the third estate. Froissart, as we have already noted, asserted

that the revolt had been caused by the inordinate ease and wealth of the English commonalty. Walsingham reports that some people were convinced that the commons' own anarchic tendencies, along with their petty class jealousies, were ultimately responsible for the outburst.⁴² Gower's assessment of the whole affair is even more strident and uncompromising. First, he sees the materialism, arrogance and social ambition of the peasantry as the primary cause of the rebellion. The insurgents, he tells us, are like dumb beasts (mules, oxen, swine) who suddenly profess an obstinate unwillingness to perform their assigned tasks:

They refused to carry sacks to the city any more and were unwilling to bend their backs under a heavy load. They did not care for the field grasses on the hillsides, but instead they now wanted greater delicacies. They drove others from their homes and wrongfully wanted to get the horses' [i.e., the nobility's] rightful place for themselves. . . . Thus did the fatuous asses, whom arrogance aroused, refuse their appointed duties. . . .

(Vox Clamantis, I, 2, p. 55)

Most of all, however, Gower interprets the rising as a product of the peasants' proverbial urge to upset all order and degree. He declares that they planned to refashion the realm along egalitarian and communistic (that is, anarchic) lines. In fact, as often as not, we are told, they wanted something more than a classless society; they wished to be rulers themselves,

the lords and masters of a topsy-turvy world.⁴³ This, Gower predicts, would spell disaster for the kingdom; for it would mean nothing less, as his imaginative reconstruction of Wat Tyler's address to the rebel mob makes clear, than the complete annihilation of the moral, legal and political ideals of society:

. . . now the day has come when the peasantry will triumph and will force the freemen to get off their lands. Let all honor come to an end, let justice perish, and let no virtue that once existed endure further in the world. Let the law give over which used to hold us in check with its justice, and from here on let our court rule.

(Vox Clamantis, I, 9, p.65)

More than any other single event, then, the Peasants' Revolt focussed people's attention on the dangers posed by a restive, aggressive, assertive commons. It also made people more aware of what the moralists had been saying all along--namely, that while the lower orders were indeed victimized at times by their superiors,⁴⁴ they were also, more than ever before, pressing against the traditional restraints that had held them in their place. From now on those cautionary catalogues of lower-class follies--greed, arrogance, ambition, violence, misrule--would be invested with new meaning as men recalled the terrible events of 1381.

If only because the revolt impressed on people's minds how easily the realm could lapse into chaos, there began to be a growing emphasis in a number of writings

on the need for all members of the commonwealth, particularly peasants and artisans, to obey those above them. The doctrine of obedience was not a novel idea in the late Middle Ages; it had been in circulation for quite some time. In his Epistle to the Romans, for instance, St. Paul had advised the faithful never to resist authority since doing so would be tantamount to resisting God himself.⁴⁵ John of Salisbury echoes this idea in the twelfth century, although he admits that under certain circumstances tyrannicide is permissible.⁴⁶ But by the late fourteenth century and especially after the Peasants' Revolt the doctrine of non-resistance was becoming positively fashionable. Even the Lollards, anxious to avoid the stigma of being held responsible for the rising, paid tribute to it in a tract entitled "Of Servants and Lords":

First, seruantis schullen trewely & gladly serue to here lordis or maistris & not be fals ne idel ne grucchyng ne heuey in here seruyce doynge, but holde hem paied of pe staat of seruauntis, in whiche god hap ordeyned hem for here beste to holde hem in mekenesse azenst pride, & besi traueile azenst ydelnesse & sloupe.⁴⁷

These sentiments did not fade; if anything, they grew more uncompromising with the passage of time, preparing the way for those great political homilies of the Tudor period which forbade opposition of any kind to the king or his magistrates. Thus, in the fifteenth century

John Lydgate bluntly admonishes the third estate to "avoyde rebellyon" and "obey yovr kynge and lorde."⁴⁸ While in the Fall of Princes, his description of the revolt of Spartacus leaves us with little doubt as to what his thoughts are on the whole subject:

What thyng mor cruel in comparisoun
 Or mor vengable of will & nat of riht,
 Than whan a cherl hath domynacioun!
 Lak of discrecioun bleendith so the siht
 Of comouneres, for diffaute of liht,
 Whan thei haue poweer contrees to gouerne
 Fare lik a beeste [that] can nothyng disserne⁴⁹

(VI, ll. 778-84)

It should be noted here that medieval writers used words like "rebellion" and "obedience" in the broadest possible sense. The orderly running of society was seen to depend not only upon subordination of subject to king, but also upon less political relationships such as those between lord and vassal, master and servant, husband and wife, parent and child--even the Church and the faithful. The slightest disruption in any of these microcosmic relationships could easily send shock waves all through the rest of society, up-ending the delicate balance of the commonwealth itself. For this reason alone the local outbreaks of popular violence that bedeviled Yorkshire in the late Middle Ages, petty though they may have been in comparison to the Great Revolt, certainly must have alarmed and outraged contemporaries who had no way of knowing at the time that the horrors

of 1381 were not to recur for another one hundred and fifty years, until the time of the Pilgrimage of Grace.

Finally, that other expression of rowdy individualism--the refusal to pay tithes--was savagely attacked by the moralists. And with good reason, since it endangered the very institution most of them had devoted their lives to. But it did more than this; it violated the principle of the stewardship of wealth, one of the cornerstones of the corporate conception of society.

Formal justification of tithing consisted of three parts. First, it was argued that since all goods ultimately belong to God, justice demands that a portion of those goods be given back, via the Church, in grateful recognition of his goodness and power. Tithing, therefore, was not a favor or an act of charity; it was a solemn obligation dictated to the believer by the requirements of justice. Man owed God a debt which had to be paid.⁵⁰

Secondly, the act of tithing itself was not really performed for God's benefit. After all, he was an omnipotent and perfect being. Rather, it was designed to help the tither himself who, by giving a part of his possessions to the Church, was giving honor and glory to his Maker.⁵¹ The conscientious tither, moreover, did not reap just spiritual rewards from his deed; it was taught that he received material blessings as well. Both types of benefits are described in the fifteenth-

century sermon collection known as the Speculum

Sacerdotale:

He that yeueþ trewely his teþynge, he is rewardid of God in foure thyngis. The first remuneracion is habundaunce of fruytes, the secund helpe of body, the þridde foryeuenes of synnes, the fourthe is the kyngdom of heuene.⁵²

Finally tithing, while sustaining the Church, also gave succor to the poor and needy, who were theoretically entitled to a portion of the Church's revenue.⁵³ In this respect it took its place among those other communal gestures which contributed to the well-being of everyone in society. This corporate dimension is well set forth in Dives and Pauper:

For the tithes of hooly churche been the auowes of cristen people, raunsome of synnes, and patrimonie, helpe and heritage of the pore people, and tributes of the nedy soules. . . . Where the lawe saith that tithes be dett to god. And alle that withholden them falsly they doo sacrilege & robbe the pore folke of their godes.⁵⁴

As the last few lines in the above passage imply, false tithers--like the recalcitrant Yorkshiremen whose careers we have earlier glanced at--were considered both unholy and ungenerous, men reluctant to acknowledge either their Creator's power over their goods or their own responsibilities to their fellow men. The impiety and selfishness of the false tither are especially prominent in Jacob's Well (c. 1425):

3yf þou tythest falsly, þou worschepyst noȝt god, for þou sleest hym & betrayist hym as iudas. . . . þou doost vnworschipe to man, þat is to hem þat schulde lyue be þat tythe, for þou sleest him in þat þou wythdrawyst fro him his lyving. . . . Also in þi fals tythyng þou louyst noȝt god, for þou berkyst goddys comaundment, "Qui non diligit me, sermones meos non seruat." 55

The reluctant or disobedient tither, a character becoming more and more noticeable as the Middle Ages drew to a close, was therefore considered an enemy to God, man and, not least of all, society. Consequently, he was given a punishment appropriate to the nature of his crime. Because he ignored the demands of both heavenly and earthly communities, choosing instead to follow his own acquisitive and individualistic instincts, he was to be deprived of his spiritual inheritance, his material possessions and the company of his fellow men. At any rate, this is what the author of Dives and Pauper proposes. He says that anyone who refuses to tithe shall "mysspede" along with his goods, be banished and "haue sekenesse and sodeyne pouert."⁵⁶ This, of course, is exactly the fate that befalls that most famous of false tithers--the Wakefield Cain.

Peasants and Ploughmen

There were two kinds of peasants in medieval English literature: lazy, arrogant, selfish, ambitious ones and therefore bad; and industrious, humble, generous, con-

tented ones and therefore good. The first type more or less conformed to what the homilists thought rustics were like in reality (and they were not too far off the mark here); the second was an ideal that existed in men's minds only. Elements of both traditions can be detected in the Wakefield Master's dramatic creations.

John Gower is probably the best known proponent of the "bad" peasant tradition. In the Vox Clamantis he complains that now-a-days the typical peasant is "sluggish . . . scarce, and . . . grasping," and that rather than work for the good of the commonwealth "instead he wickedly loaf[s] everywhere" (V, 8, p. 208). Langland's portrait of Wastour in Passus VI of Piers Plowman is part of the same convention.

Gower develops yet another side of the peasant's wicked nature--his unruliness. This feature was extremely popular among courtly writers, who loved to depict the rustic as a hot-headed buffoon ready to start a fight at the slightest provocation.⁵⁷ Gower also liked the figure, for it finds its way into the Vox Clamantis:

Unless it is struck down first, the peasant race strikes against the freemen, no matter what nobility or worth they possess. Its actions outwardly show that the peasantry is base, and it esteems the nobles the less because of their very virtues. Just as lopsided ships begin to sink without the right load, so does the wild peasantry, unless it is held in check.

(V, 9, p. 209)

The view of the peasant as a violent, churlish ruffian may even have influenced the way the chronicles reported certain episodes of the Peasants' Revolt--especially the murder of Archbishop Sudbury.⁵⁸ Anyway, it certainly was not uncommon, particularly after 1381, for the rural dweller to find himself maligned as a slothful, greedy, inordinately proud and almost savage fellow.

On the other hand, the "good" peasant tradition at least gave the moralists an ideal they could, however wistfully, admire and yearn for. Like his negative counterpart, the good peasant probably grew in popularity with the passing of time--that is, as social change widened the gap between real and ideal, between the actual peasantry and their theoretical models, it became all the more necessary and relevant to reaffirm the rustic's traditional positive qualities if only to point out how rare they had become.

The convention itself had been around for some time. Even those utilitarian, thirteenth-century treatises on estate management, like Fleta and Walter of Henley's Seneschaucy make use of it. Fleta, for instance, demands that ploughmen be not only knowledgeable in their craft but also mild-mannered, happy and loving:

The skill of the drivers lies in knowing how to drive a team of oxen level, without beating, goading or ill-treating them. They should not be mournful men or wrathful, but cheerful, singing and joyous, so that by their tunes and songs the oxen may in some measure

be heartened in their work. They must bring them forage and fodder and tend them devoutly and lie down beside them at night . . . and look after them well in every way, taking precautions that their forage and fodder are not stolen.⁵⁹

Walter of Henley has similar thoughts on the subject of shepherds, maintaining that they should never leave the flocks in their care unattended--a lesson some of the Towneley herdsmen could learn with profit:

Each shepherd . . . ought to pasture and feed his sheep well and watch over them well. . . . No shepherd ought to leave his sheep to go to fairs, markets, and wrestling matches or to spend the evenings with friends or go to the tavern without asking leave and putting a good keeper in his place to look after the sheep, that no harm or loss occurs through his fault. ⁶⁰

Both passages suggest that peasants, aside from being conscientious and hard-working, must also be men of tenderness and care.

By the time we come to Langland the moral as well as the practical side of the ideal peasant had been well defined. The figure Piers Plowman is the culmination of this development: he is responsible, industrious, fearful of and loving toward God, charitable and so virtuous in general that the poet identifies him with Christ himself. But Piers' admirable ethical qualities are scattered throughout a very long poem. More helpful for our purposes, if only because of their brevity and concision, are Chaucer's remarks on the Plowman in the

General Prologue:

. . . ther was a Plowman . . .
 That hadde ylad of dong ful many a fother;
 A trewe swynkere and a good was he,
 Lyvyng in pees and parfit charitee.
 God loved he best with al his hoole herte
 At alle tymes, thogh him gamed or smerte,
 And thanne his neighebor right as hymselfe.
 He wolde thresshe, and therto dyke and delve,
 For Cristes sake, for every povre wight,
 Withouten hire, if it lay in his myght.
 His tithes payde he ful faire and wel,
 Bothe of his propre swynk and his catel. 61

(11. 529-40)

Here in a nutshell are all the ideals of the good peasant tradition: hard work, selflessness, faith in God, respect for the laws of the Church and above all an unshakable commitment to the communal principles of society. Taken together, these attributes constituted a yardstick against which the contemporary villager was measured and usually found wanting. These same standards, with some variations, form the background for the Wakefield Master's brilliant analysis of his own environment.

The self-assertive, self-centered individual, the materialist, the fledgling capitalist, the malcontent, the parvenu: none of these characters had a recognized place in medieval society. And yet these were the very types that were emerging from the lower and middle classes in greater and greater numbers as the Middle Ages neared their end. The moralists reacted to the

situation in the only way they knew how--by reasserting the fundamental truths of the social gospel. There was little else that they could do. Unlike modern man, medieval man lacked the capacity to attribute change to economic or demographic factors; instead, he traced all disruption in the realm directly to its ultimate source--sin,⁶² particularly the sins of avarice and pride. Sin, not the plague or the economy, was the great begetter of social evil for medieval man, and only after its power had been significantly curtailed could the body politic hope to regain its former health and harmony.

A social vision such as this, which equated change with sin and saw all human relationships as reciprocal, was bound to be at odds with what was happening in Yorkshire in the late Middle Ages. There, as elsewhere, peasants were responding with vigor to the break-up of the old feudal manor: amassing holdings and pasture, deserting old lords for new, working hard, accumulating wealth. Landless laborers were equally self-assertive and individualistic. They ignored legislation which tried to limit how much they could earn and refused to work for those who failed to pay them the going rate. Small industrialists and clothiers, moreover, shared the opportunities and attitudes of their agrarian brothers. Freed from the regulations and restraints of the guild-dominated boroughs, they operated under con-

ditions that permitted far more commercial latitude and economic liberty--conditions which bred feelings of self-confidence and autonomy. To even the most casual observer of such a scene it must have appeared as if the ancient feudal ideals of loyalty, dependence and cooperation had suddenly been overwhelmed by purely egocentric and acquisitive considerations. How much more alarming it must have seemed to those who had a passionate devotion to the communal ethic and to the social mechanism it powered.

From a twentieth-century point of view the moralists' response to change seems irretrievably dull. All they did was repeat, albeit with increasing frequency and gusto, the dusty formulas of the past.⁶³ Merchants were once again told to be honest; peasants were exhorted to work hard, be humble and avoid ambition. Workmen of all kinds were taught to receive only those wages which they had earned for doing a fair day's labor. The ethical message seldom varied: be satisfied with your lot and work in a spirit of charity; make sure that your actions do nothing to alter the hierarchical or corporate nature of society. Variety, wit and imagination, however, if they existed at all, manifested themselves not so much in what was said as in the way the moralists said it. In this respect manner counted far more than matter. Thus, if the moralist were a preacher, he could thunder forth his pronouncements, interspersed with

copious exempla, from pulpit, churchyard or roadway. If he were a verse-poet like Langland, he could graphically detail the diseases and cures of the realm through the filter of his own peculiar apocalyptic vision. If he were like Gower, a man in obvious sympathy with the aristocracy, he could savagely ridicule the lower orders in thinly veiled topical allegories. And if he lived near a town which mounted a Corpus Christi drama, as perhaps the Wakefield Master did, he could write plays.

NOTES

¹ A. J. Carlyle, "The Theory of Property in Medieval Theology," in Property: Its Duties and Rights (London: Macmillan and Co., 1915), p. 121; Richard Schlatter, Private Property: The History of an Idea (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1951), p. 39.

² St. Ambrose, On the Duties of the Clergy, trans. Rev. H. De Romestin, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: St. Ambrose, 10 (New York: 1896), p. 23.

³ Carlyle, p. 122.

⁴ St. Gregory, The Book of Pastoral Care, trans. Rev. James Barmby, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: St. Gregory, 12 (New York: 1895), p. 47.

⁵ Grace, p. 21.

⁶ St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: St. John Chrysostom, 12, ed. Philip Schaff, (New York: 1889), pp. 56-57.

⁷ A list of late medieval writings denouncing avarice would fill pages. A few outstanding examples, however, are: Piers Plowman, B-text, III and V and Chaucer's Parson's Tale.

An excellent book on the whole subject of medieval hostility to wealth is John A. Yunk's The Lineage of Lady Meed (Notre Dame: 1963).

⁸ Middle English Sermons, p. 213.

⁹ Quoted in Owst, p. 305.

¹⁰ Owst, pp. 305-06.

¹¹ Owst, p. 318.

¹² Middle English Sermons, p. 203.

¹³ The Wakefield Cain's turbulent personality (he relentlessly devotes himself to his work and on more than one occasion explodes into a fit of irrational

rage) is based, in part, on the idea that greed promoted inner turmoil as well as outer restiveness. This concept is an old one. Ambrose had in the fourth century developed it in his Cain and Abel, and it is to this work as much as to any other that we owe Cain's characterization. Ambrose describes avarice as

that insatiable longing, that very lust for gold which is ever desirous for more--no matter what accumulated treasure is stored away. An object of envy to all, but to himself despicable, the avaricious man is poor in the midst of riches, slighting the fact that his bank balance is large. His desire for gain is as limitless as are his opportunities for making a profit. . . . The avaricious man does violence to the elements by ploughing the earth and cleaving the sea. He importunes the very heavens with his vows. He ever gives expression to his displeasure whether the skies are severe or cloudy, and is censorious no matter what his annual returns are from land or sea.

The passage cited above was taken from St. Ambrose, Hexameron, Paradise and Cain and Abel, trans. John J. Savage, The Fathers of the Church, 42 (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1961), p. 379.

¹⁴ Tawney, Religion and the Rise of Capitalism, p. 44; see also Jacob's Well, ed. Arthur Brandeis, EETS, o.s. 115 (London: Oxford University Press, 1900), p. 306, where an anonymous preacher has the following to say about the amount of wealth a person could rightfully own:

Swiche godys as þou hast abouyn þi necessarye clothyng & fedyng arn poore mennys good. 3if þou wyth-holde þe godys fro þe poure folke, & spende hem in oþer vse in excesse, þat is wast.

The key word here is "necessarye;" it is a relative term. What would be a necessity for a baron would, of course, be a luxury for a bondman.

¹⁵ Dives and Pauper, p. 76.

¹⁶ Tawney, Religion and the Rise of Capitalism, p. 44.

- 17 Owst, p. 555.
- 18 Owst, p. 551.
- 19 Owst, p. 559.
- 20 John Lydgate, The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man, ed. F. J. Furnivall, EETS, e.s. 77, 83, 92 (London: 1899, 1901, 1904), p. 311; see also Owst, pp. 550-51.
- 21 Edwin Kaiser, Theology of Work (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1966), pp. 105, 112, 129-30; Owst, p. 569. See also Adriano Tilgher, Work: What It Has Meant to Men Through the Ages, trans. Dorothy Canfield Fisher (1930; rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1977), p. 29.
- 22 Kaiser, p. 115.
- 23 George O'Brien, An Essay on Mediaeval Economic Teaching (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1920), pp. 153-54.
- 24 Quoted in Kaiser, p. 113.
- 25 Quoted in O'Brien, p. 153; see also pp. 139-40.
- 26 R. W. Southern, Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1970), pp. 346-47.
- 27 Mirk's Festial, ed. Theodor Erbe, EETS, e.s. 96 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1905), pp. 66-7.
- 28 Mankind, ll. 310-611, in Four Tudor Interludes, ed. J. A. B. Somerset (London: The Athlone Press, 1974), pp. 34-42.
- 29 St. Augustine, Expositions on the Book of Psalms, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: St. Augustine, 8, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: 1888), p. 555; also quoted in Kaiser, p. 111.
- 30 O'Brien, p. 139.
- 31 Kaiser, p. 105.
- 32 Quoted in Owst, p. 569.
- 33 William Langland, Piers Plowman: The B Version, ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London: The Athlone Press, 1975), XV, l. 212, p. 547; see also VI. All future references to Piers Plowman will be

taken from this edition.

34 Processus Noe Cum Filiis, ll. 244-88.

35 P. D. Anthony, The Ideology of Work, (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), pp. 30-32.

36 Barbara Harvey, in "Work and 'Festa Ferianda' in Medieval England," Journal of Ecclesiastical History, 23 (1972), 306, tells us that after 1350 the pressure to work even on feast days was very strong among all peasants but especially among self-employed farmers. Both Langland and Gower, furthermore, complain that merchants also were prone to doing business on Sundays and holydays. See Piers Plowman, B-text, VII, ll. 18-22 and Vox Clamantis, V, ll. 680-700.

37 Quoted in Owst, p. 551.

38 MS. Add. 41321, fol. 65b., quoted in Owst, p. 553.

39 An excellent discussion of how Piers Plowman reflects as well as attacks the materialism, self-assertion and individualism of late fourteenth-century English life is presented by David Aers in "Imagination and Ideology in Piers Plowman," Literature and History, 7 (1978), 2-19. Aers sees the Brewer's defiant response as typical of the self-centeredness of so many contemporary Englishmen and maintains that Langland records the base attitudes of his society at the same moment that he condemns them. Talking about the Brewer-passage in general, Aers says (p. 15):

In its concreteness and strenuous rhythms the poetic mode once more reflects the shift from ideological generalisation to an imaginative grasp of those tremendous cultural energies so alien to Langland's received world-view but so important in the history of the later Middle Ages and Renaissance. Like the values of most groups in Piers Plowman, the brewer's are so deeply individualistic and market oriented that Langland shows social practices transforming human nature. . .).

40 John Gower, Vox Clamantis, V, 9, in The Major Latin Works of John Gower, ed. and trans. Eric Stockton (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962), pp. 208-09. All future references to the Vox Clamantis will be taken from this edition.

Gower also agrees with Langland's views on the

subject of the insubordination and insolence of landless laborers:

There is scarcely one worker in a thousand of them who wants to remain faithful to his bargain with you.

These are the people who behave basely within a house, as long as your food and drink last. Because such a man is hired as a member of your household, he scorns all ordinary food. He grumbles steadily that everything salted is harmful, and that he doesn't like cooked foods much unless you give him some roast. Neither weak beer nor cider is of any use to him, and he will not return tomorrow unless you provide something better. O why should a man whom water drawn from a well has nourished ever since birth demand such delicious drink? Born of poor man's stock and a poor man himself, he demands things for his belly like a lord.

(Vox Clamantis, V, 10, p. 210)

⁴¹ Gower, in his Mirour de l'omme (c. 1376-78), ll. 26,482-26,496, printed and translated in Dobson, pp. 97-98, actually foretold this very thing:

But it is certainly a great error
to see the higher estate
in danger from the villein class.

It seems to me that lethargy
has put the lords to sleep
so that they do not guard against
the folly of the common people,
but they allow that nettle to grow
which is too violent in its nature.
He who observes the present time
is likely to fear that soon,
if God does not provide his help,
this impatient nettle
will very suddenly sting us,
before it can be brought to justice.

Gower's French original can be found in The Complete Works of John Gower, I, ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford: 1899), p. 293.

⁴² According to Walsingham, in his Historia Anglicana, II, pp. 8-13, printed and translated in Dobson, p. 368, some people

attributed the disaster to the crimes of the common people and alleged that because they lived in peace they wasted the benefits of peace. They poured scorn on the actions of the lords and spent sleepless nights in drinking, revelling and evil-doing. They lived without peace in a land of peace, brawling and disputing with their neighbours.

- 43 Vox Clamantis, I, 8, p. 64.
- 44 See Owst, pp. 287-307.
- 45 Romans, 13, 1-7.
- 46 John of Salisbury, The Statesman's Book of John Salisbury, trans. John Dickinson (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), pp. 367-74.
- 47 The English Works of Wyclif, p. 227.
- 48 John Lydgate, "Advice to the Several Estates, II," ll. 1-3, in Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries, ed. Roswell Hope Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 233.
- 49 Lydgate's Fall of Princes, Part III, ed. Henry Bergen, EETS, e.s. 123 (1924; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 695-96.
- 50 Giles Constable, Monastic Tithes: From their Origins to the Twelfth Century. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), pp. 18-19. Constable (p. 19) concludes that the Middle Ages saw man as "a sort of share-cropper with God, who had, as it were, a proprietary interest in the works of man and was entitled to a tenth of his proceeds."
- 51 Constable, p. 13; see also Dives and Pauper, A Facsimile Reproduction of the Pynson Edition of 1493, introd. Francis J. Sheeran (Delmar, N.Y.: Scholars Facsimiles & Reprints, 1973), p. 371.
- 52 Speculum Sacerdotale, ed. Edward H. Weatherly, EETS, o.s. 200 (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 96.
- 53 Constable, p. 18.
- 54 Dives and Pauper (1973), p. 370.
- 55 Jacob's Well, pp. 46-47.

56 Dives and Pauper (1973), p. 371.

57 See, for example, the satirical poem The Tournament of Tottenham, in Middle English Verse Romances, ed. Donald B. Sands (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1966), pp. 313-22. See also two articles by George F. Jones: "The tournaments of Tottenham and Lappenhhausen," PMLA, 66 (1951), 1123-40 and "'Christis Kirk,' 'Plebis to the Play,' and the German Peasant-Brawl," PMLA, 68 (1953), 1101-25.

58 See Dobson, pp. 173-74, 184-85.

59 Fleta, II, ed. H. G. Richardson and G. O. Sayles, Selden Society, 72 (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1955), p. 251. Fleta's remarks on the duties of ploughmen are especially illuminating in light of the Wakefield Master's characterization of Cain. It almost seems as though the dramatist had Fleta in mind when he wrote the play, for Cain is literally the perfect antithesis of that work's conception of the ideal ploughman. Thus Cain is angry and gloomy when he should be joyous, blasphemous when he should be singing to his animals, cruel when he should be kind. He even fails to guard his plough-team's fodder, an error that allows Garcio to fill the grain-sacks with rocks.

60 Walter of Henley and Other Treatises on Estate Management and Accounting, ed. Dorothea Oschinsky (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 287.

61 In 1939 two studies appeared that dealt with the Ploughman: Joe Horrell's "Chaucer's Symbolic Plowman," Speculum, 14 (1939), 82-92 and Gardiner Stillwell's "Chaucer's Plowman and the Contemporary English Peasant," ELH, 6 (1939), 285-90. Stillwell maintains, and quite correctly, that Chaucer idealizes his peasant in order to establish him as a virtuous foil to the rebellious rustics of his own era, who were "against everything that Chaucer stood for" (285).

See also Jill Mann's Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 67-74.

62 Arthur B. Ferguson, The Articulate Citizen and the English Renaissance (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1965) pp. 42-69 and especially pp. 47-48.

63 Thomas L. Kinney, "The Temper of Fourteenth-Century English Verse of Complaint," Annuaire Mediaevale, 7 (1966), 89. Kinney asserts the following about the moralists' reaction to change:

The verse of complaint reflects the basic bewilderment of fourteenth-century man in the face of change. He is puzzled by the society he sees emerging from plagues, wars and a changing economy. He sees the increasing importance of money in the process of change, but his conception of that change is unclear. The history of the fourteenth century records the growth of a feudal society into a mercantile one, of a barter into a monetary economy. . . . And so Piers [the Plowman] . . . advocates a return to the feudal barter services economy when that economy is changing into a cash and credit economy. The temper of the verse of complaint, its lamentation, denunciation, its attempts at disinterested criticism, its exhortation, and other turbulent emotions reflect the insecurity of a changing world.

III

Materialism and Individualism in Some Towneley Plays

There is nothing in religious drama that is inherently antagonistic to the treatment of social issues. Quite the contrary. The very structure of the Corpus Christi play provided dramatists with a form marvelously well suited to the discussion of contemporary problems. Beginning as it does with the Fall and continuing in subsequent episodes to detail the effects of that Fall, cycle drama furnishes a particularly apt context for satire, complaint and topical allusion. We have already seen, for instance, how readily the medieval mind attributed all aberrations in society to human sin, the introduction of which into the world was universally acknowledged to have been caused by Adam's disobedience. If, therefore, a medieval writer chose to analyze social evil, what better point to start from than that period which immediately followed the incident traditionally believed to have engendered that evil in the first place--namely, the period right after the Fall. Thus the incorporation of socio-economic material into Corpus Christi drama in no way violates the theological integrity, tone or purpose of the plays; rather, whoever used these plays as platforms for the discussion and con-

denmation of social evil was actually fulfilling one of the basic requirements of religious drama--that is, pointing out the immediate consequences of the Fall and showing how they continue to operate in the contemporary world. Furthermore, by treating current social movements and attitudes within the framework of those age-old biblical events that led up to the Redemption--events carefully selected to show the historical progression of salvation history¹--dramatists could impart a universality to the more pressing problems of the day, disclosing how they are ultimately grounded in man's first disobedience. The many contemporary references in these plays, therefore, have more than a superficial, temporary relevance. Rather, they draw attention to both the ultimate cause of mankind's moral collapse and to those more immediate obstacles threatening the spiritual welfare of the human soul.

The next two chapters will concentrate on three of the Wakefield Master's most famous creations: the Mactacio Abel, the Processus Noe Cum Filiis and the Prima Pastorum. These works have been selected primarily because they deal most directly with those attitudes and forces which so transformed the tenor and substance of late medieval English life: acquisitiveness, self-assertion, individualism, neo-capitalism and the messianic spirit of the Peasants' Revolt. The characters in these plays--husbandmen, shepherds, agricultural workers,

artisans--all belong, moreover, to the group most noticeably affected by all this change--the third estate. Finally, the plays themselves are highly wrought artistic expressions in their own right, the brilliant creations of a man who, more than any other playwright prior to Ben Jonson, has left us the most thorough-going, perceptive analysis of a greedy and selfish society.

Mactacio Abel: A Study of the
Anti-Communal Character

The Wakefield Cain symbolizes a culture which, in the eyes of the dramatist at least, has long ago ceased to function as a corporate unit. All those things so responsible for the erosion of communal values in society--self-sufficiency, materialism, assertiveness, violence and egocentric assiduity--reappear in the person of Cain himself. Like so many of his real-life contemporaries he has either ignored or perverted ideals essential to the smooth running of medieval life. He is, for instance, immoderately individualistic, priding himself on his ability to survive and prosper on his own--an attitude which isolates him spiritually from both God and man and ultimately leads to his physical banishment from the human community. Excessively enterprising and industrious, he furthermore distorts the ideal of work--an ideal that prized manual labor for its ability to give men a chance to worship and share--into a per-

verse, personal ethic and strives solely for his own aggrandizement, never once allowing himself to part with even the dregs of his earnings. He is also a gross materialist, as his whole approach to the issue of tithes makes evident: he will not give God anything because God has never given anything to him. This kind of reasoning betrays something more than mere greed, however. It is part of an utterly specious utilitarian philosophy which not only tries to justify materialism but also tends to view all personal relationships--human as well as divine-- in narrow, quid-pro-quo terms. Naturally, such a disposition can only lead to a denial of the ties binding people together. But it does more. It destroys trust itself by making one unable to believe in the capacity of others to be selfless or merciful. This is a particularly deadly outlook since it encourages Cain to abandon all hope of forgiveness after he has slain his brother. Cain's corrupt attitudes--the attitudes of his age--eventually, therefore, drive him headlong into exile, poverty and despair. By the end of the play he has been cut off from the fellowship of others, reduced to a state of vagabondage and convinced of his damnation--an ironic victim of his own individualism, materialism and utilitarian point of view. A somewhat similar fate, we cannot help thinking, may await those who adore the same anti-communal idols. Therein, of course, lies a large part of the moral message of the Mactacio

Abel.

Our first indication that the issues raised in the play are to have a contemporary significance occurs in the prologue when Garcio makes an unprecedented allusion (unprecedented insofar as no other dramatic version of the Cain-story does so) to Cain's socio-economic status. He calls him a "good yoman" (l. 15), a designation that places his master squarely in the ranks of the prosperous peasantry--the era's most important agrarian group. The title is an appropriate one. It is apparent quite early in the play that Cain, despite his many protestations to the contrary,² is indeed a relatively wealthy farmer possessing all the accoutrements of rural substance. For one thing, he seems to have his own plough-team (consisting of four horses and four oxen),³ a sure sign that he is a man of some standing in the village--at least from a material point of view.⁴ He also seems to earn enough to allow him to hire a servant, something not every peasant could afford to do. Abel himself, moreover, tells us that Cain has goods in abundance ("in wone," l. 116), thus giving the lie to the latter's lament that his "wynnyngs ar bot meyn" (l. 111). Finally, the very area in which he lives--assuming that Cain's holding is located somewhere near Wakefield, an assumption somewhat justified by the local allusion to "Gudeboure at the quarell hede" (l. 367)⁵--may contribute to his thriving condition, for it re-

putedly had the best arable in Yorkshire.⁶ All the evidence, therefore, seems to point toward one conclusion--namely, that Cain, while probably not the equal of Chaucer's Franklin, is still a rather well-off rural dweller.

Besides possessing social and economic significance, Cain's status as a yeoman is also charged with deep moral meaning. This ethical dimension is implicit in the secondary signification of the word "yeoman," which stands for "retainer" or one who gives "honorable service."⁷ It is this secondary meaning that forges the link between external social developments and personal moral values. For Cain is simultaneously in this play both an aggressively industrious yeoman-farmer and an evil yeoman-retainer, a devoted servant of the plough and an equally loyal servant of Satan himself.⁸

Cain's affiliation with the Devil (and hence with Evil itself) had long been part of medieval lore. In 1 John 3, 12, for instance, there is a reference to Cain being not the child of Adam but that of the "evil one." St. Augustine makes a similar claim in his In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos Tractatus, V, 3.⁹ The Mactacio Abel contains no overt allusion to Cain's demonic parentage, but it nevertheless makes it quite apparent that he is at the very least a charter member of Satan's retinue. The hellish smoke that billows forth from Cain's rejected offering (ll. 275-84), along with his numerous

invocations of Satan's name ("We! ryn on, in the dwills nayme, before," l. 147; "the dwill me spede," l. 234; "A! what dwill of hell is it?" l. 289; "com downe in twenty dwill way," l. 440), invests his character with distinctively fiendish overtones and convinces us that here indeed is the Devil's own man.

The point of all this seems fairly clear. We are being asked to entertain at least the possibility that there may be a connection between a certain kind of yeoman and the values for which he stands--individualism, materialism, ambition, busyness-- and moral evil. In other words, the play appears to imply that if one adopts the worldly, economically aggressive mentality of the prosperous peasant (so many of whom were making their mark on late medieval society) one may, like Cain, find oneself Satan's servant and a citizen of the City of Man. Social change can endanger one morally.

The implication that those who share Cain's social status and, more important, his perverted ideals may themselves unwittingly become partakers in his moral corruption is reinforced by Garcio's ironic observation that at one time or another all the spectators have made his master's acquaintance ("Full well ye all hym ken," l. 16) and that some of them are even "his man" (l. 20)--that is, his followers or servants. Again, the multiple connotations of "yeoman" are being exploited. In one sense, some of the people watching the play are

indeed familiar with Cain insofar as they recognize him as belonging to the same economic group as themselves--the yeomanry. In another sense, however, even more people acknowledge him because they have embraced his perverse anti-communal ideology. This latter group may or may not be yeomen in the strict sense of the word. Anyway, that is beside the point. What matters is that in adopting Cain's vices, which are also the vices of their own era-- ceaseless striving, egotism, greed-- they too have become yeomen, but in the secondary and figurative sense of being retainers. In short, they have jeopardized their souls by allowing themselves to become servants of the servant of Satan, and thus part of the Devil's entourage. Not all of this, of course, is apparent during Garcio's prologue. The audience may feel some vague stirrings of unease as they hear themselves likened to Cain, but the full significance of the comparison will only dawn on them as the play unfolds.

Having suggested that current social developments and attitudes operate in an ethical context, the dramatist now proceeds to explore them in detail through the person of Cain himself. The first anti-communal quality that we find lodged in Cain's being is his astonishing devotion to the self. This incorrigible individualism manifests itself in everything he says or does, poisoning every important personal relationship in the play. It is at once the cause of his own isolation from others and

a force which runs roughshod over the corporate precepts of feudal society.

One of the most vital social virtues debased by Cain's individualism is that of work. Cain's conception of physical toil, in all respects save one, is diametrically opposed to the medieval ideal. Whereas it was taught that labor should be a stimulus to charity and prayer, we discover that in Cain's case it only promotes greed and blasphemy. Since the drive to acquire and retain motivates all his efforts, the concept of sharing is something completely foreign to him. Thus in his argument with Abel over the question of tithing, he sullenly declares that as long as he lives he will not "dele my good or gif, /Ather to God or yit to man, /Of any good that euer I wan" (ll. 137-39). A few lines later he reaffirms this position by demanding "What nede had I my trauell to lqse" (l. 152) by giving "away my warldys aght" (l. 150). Here is a man who obviously works exclusively for himself and who cares not one iota for the broader needs of the community.

Cain's egocentric individualism, his selfishness if you will, also perverts work by turning it into an occasion for cursing and ridiculing the divine. Blasphemy, not spiritual devotion, characterizes all his exertions. He starts swearing the moment he arrives on stage (ll. 26, 34) and does not stop until the play is over. No part of creation is spared. He curses everybody

and everything: his oxen, his servant, his brother, his God. The verbal abuse he heaps upon his Creator is especially revealing, for it indicates just how far he has strayed from a belief in the sanctifying power of work. Simply by contemplating work, by thinking about the time and trouble he has put into his crops (ll. 234-244), Cain can churn himself into a frenzy of vituperation, coarsely bellowing that God shall get no more of his grain. The motive behind this decision is an essentially selfish one, and it contradicts the charitable purpose of labor. But the decision not to give God his due is expressed in such vulgar terminology that there can be little doubt that we are meant to see it as an anti-devotional gesture as well:

Now, and he get more, the dwill me spede! -
 As mych as oone reepe -
 For that cam hym full light chepe;
 Not as mekill, grete ne small,
 As he myght wipe his ars withall.

(ll. 234-38)

The closing utterance in this passage is a jarring verbal reminder of the sacrilegious direction Cain's labor has taken. In fact, the profane language that punctuates so much of his toil in general would go far toward convincing a contemporary audience of the depraved nature of his work-ethic. Far from providing a setting for the worship of God, work, for Cain, represents merely one more way in which he can insult his Maker; instead of making

him holy, it only makes him more reprobate.

Cain's corrupt vision of work, therefore, is decidedly anti-social and self-centered, recognizing neither the needs of man nor the claims of God. Now if the Wakefield Master were to stop here, we would be left with a thoroughly conventional portrait of the selfish, grasping, coarse medieval peasant. But this is not the case. The playwright goes beyond mere convention and turns his protagonist into something quite unique in medieval literature--a hard-working, not a lazy, "bad" peasant.¹⁰ This is an original and daring move. What the Master has done here is bring together for the first time two separate literary traditions. On the one hand, he has exploited the "bad" peasant convention in his characterization of Cain as a greedy, vulgar rustic, but he has scrupulously avoided that same convention's emphasis on the peasant's slothful disposition. On the other hand, he has followed the "good" peasant tradition in making his hero an enterprising, industrious yeoman. Of course, the playwright knows exactly what he is doing. He is simply shaping his material to conform to existing trends and developments in society. For by depicting Cain as both a feverish worker and a morally disreputable fellow, he implies that there may exist a subtle link between the intense industriousness of his age and spiritual corruption. In other words, he is saying that in their desire to succeed materially and take advantage

of the economic opportunities that change has thrown their way, men, like Cain, may be working so hard that they are in danger of losing sight of both God and their fellow creatures.

Cain's incessant bustle, his almost Calvinistic approach to work, is in evidence throughout the play and binds him to not a few of his late medieval contemporaries. Our first glimpse of him, for instance, shows him vigorously driving his plough-team across the stage-- certainly not the act of a laggard. Moreover, he repeatedly expresses his frustration at being kept from his chores. Once, after Garcio has impishly placed stones in the fodder-sacks of his draught-team and thus delayed the ploughing, he impatiently orders the boy back to work so that "we had ployde this land" (1. 54). Another time he tries to press Abel into service by telling him, upon the latter's arrival on stage, either to hold the plough or drive the beasts pulling it (1. 62). Later, when Abel suggests that they both go to the tithing place, Cain again complains about the delay, protesting that he cannot spare the time away from his work:

Shuld I leife my plogh and all thyng,
And go with the to make offerynge?
Nay, thou fyndys me not so mad!

(11. 91-93)

Even as he goes through the ritual of preparing his paltry offering, Cain continues to refer to his many

labors and to the toll they have taken on him. While selecting the sheaves for sacrifice, he points out that each one has "cost me full dere" (l. 240) and represents "many a very bak" (l. 242).

Cain's capacity for manual labor is indeed impressive; yet as we have just seen, it is ultimately worthless because it benefits no one but himself. And even then, because he deliberately rejects its sanctifying potential, it is beneficial only in the most superficial and material of ways. Robbed of its ability to bestow charity and confer grace, Cain's brand of toil is both socially and spiritually arid, the meaningless act of a self-enclosed, alienated man.

Aside from perverting the whole medieval notion of work, Cain's runaway individualism and anti-communalism also infect a number of important personal relationships in the play. Medieval society depended on a hierarchy of contracts--king and subject, lord and vassal, master and servant, God and man--for its stability and harmony. It should therefore come as no surprise for us to discover that Cain's self-enclosure causes him not only to corrupt these relationships but to deny their existence altogether.¹¹ We can see this, to cite just one example for the moment, in his whole approach to tithing. The tithe was not a one-sided act. Rather, it was man's acknowledgment of a contract between himself and God: God gave the earth's bounty to man on "lone" (l. 117)

and man was to give a part of that bounty back as a token of his gratitude. But Cain refuses to live up to his part of the bargain. In fact, he refuses to admit that such a bargain has ever been struck, citing as his reason the fact that God has sent him "nought bot soro and wo" (l. 96). Hence he vows to give God nothing in return, a gesture that effectively severs the tie between heaven and himself.

An even better indication of Cain's antagonism toward the communal and reciprocal values of society is provided by his twisted view of human relationships. Simply put, he considers them unproductive and worthless. At any rate, this is certainly the impression one receives from such actions as his decision not to share his possessions with anyone (l. 138) and his defiant proclamation that "Bi all men set I not a fart" (l. 369). But above all, it is his attitude toward his family, specifically his brother, that ultimately discloses the depth and intensity of his own self-absorption and which, by the way, unites him with anti-familial trends in the real peasant community.¹²

Abel stands for all the corporate, humane and selfless values that his brother so steadfastly scorns. He believes, for instance, in the harmonious nature of the master-servant relationship (the peace of which Cain and Garcio repeatedly disrupt by their violent quarrels) and sincerely cares for the welfare of others, praying

that God "spede" or assist both "the, brother, and thi man" (l. 58). He is likewise aware of the reciprocal character of his relationship with God, referring to the "seruyce" (l. 82) of tithing as if it were a kind of feudal contract or obligation. Just as a grateful vassal willingly carries out the requests of a bounteous lord, so too should men freely give something back to God, the heavenly lord who "giffys the all thi lifyng" (l. 98).

The very way in which Abel uses language, furthermore, underscores his commitment to the ideals of brotherhood and cooperation. For example, right up to the moment of his death he continues to speak endearingly to Cain, addressing him in such affectionate terms as "lief brother," "good brother" and "dere brother." In fact, he uses the word "brother" at least seventeen times in the play.¹³ Even his pronouns evoke a sense of comradeship. Words like "us," "we" and "our" constantly find their way into his vocabulary.¹⁴ When he wants to coax Cain to the place of sacrifice he will say such things as "let vs weynd" (l. 78), "let vs be walkand" (l. 106) and "go we furth togeder" (l. 168). Abel speaks about everything collectively and by doing so proclaims himself the representative of the social ideals of partnership and participation.

Cain's reckless individualism stands in sharp relief to his brother's selflessness. Whereas Abel sees himself as part of some greater whole and as someone

responsible for others (especially his brother),¹⁵ Cain concentrates solely on his own needs, desiring nothing more than to be left alone. He is very insistent on this last point, telling Abel on at least two different occasions to stay out of his affairs (ll. 247, 268). This craving for privacy and isolation (a logical outcome of his extreme individualism) carries over into his speech as well. In marked contrast to his brother's reliance on collective pronouns, Cain uses words that refer only to himself--words like "I" and "me," which he utters like charms to ward off the spirits of responsibility and cooperation. Seldom, too, does Cain ever employ the word "brother," preferring instead the more impersonal terms "thee" and "thou"--designations which clearly convey feelings of distance and disregard. The only time he does use this word is when he is being sarcastic (l. 108) or when he is venting his anger (l. 442).

This total devotion to the self, this repudiation of the basic bonds of fellowship tying him to others, forces Cain to deny--first in word, then in deed--that he even has a brother. Cain's verbal rejection of Abel is made relatively early in the play and prepares us for the murder itself. The scene unfolds in the following manner. Abel has been trying to convince him to offer some of his produce to God, but Cain resolutely refuses to do so. Abel, afraid that they are on the

verge of a serious rift, appeals to the familial and communal bonds between them in an effort to heal the breach:

Dere brother, hit were grete wonder
That I and thou shuld go in sonder;
Then wold oure fader haue grete ferly.
Ar we not brether, thou and I?

(ll. 154-57)

To which Cain replies: "No, bot cry on, cry, whyle the thynk good!/Here my trowth, I hold the woode" (ll. 158-159). These lines amount to nothing less than a formal manifesto declaring Cain's independence from all human relationships, particularly from that most cherished of feudal bonds--kinship.

Having renounced the familial ties between them, Cain now feels free to treat Abel as if he were some stranger or, worse, some social inferior. Thus, even after he has been persuaded to go and submit an offering, he persists in his refusal to acknowledge his brother as his brother. Instead, in a cruel gesture of non-cooperation and contempt, he forces Abel to walk ahead of him like an underling (l. 165).¹⁶ Upon reaching the tithing place, moreover, Cain continues to play the role of master and ignores the fact that in reality he and Abel are equals. His speech now grows increasingly haughty and abrupt as he commands his brother to "Lay downe thi trussell" (l. 170), "tend first" (l. 173) and

"Ryse!" (l. 183). At this point Abel has become so unimportant to Cain that the latter rejects not merely the former's fraternal status but his humanity as well. At this stage Cain's insults cease to be just vulgar and grow progressively more violent and sinister as he threatens Abel with hanging (l. 267) and suffocation (ll. 289-90).

What the Wakefield Master has done here is to guide us very carefully through the various phases of Cain's thought leading up to the decision to murder Abel and to his famous remark about not being his brother's keeper (l. 349). In other words, he has made the archetypal murder psychologically realistic. Thus Cain, in his anxiety to be autonomous and accountable to no one but himself, first renounces his kinship with his brother, then proceeds to treat him as a social inferior and finally, in an effort to be entirely free of the restraining bonds of fellowship, threatens him with death.

By the time the actual murder takes place, therefore, we have been well briefed. But before it happens the playwright, ever conscious of the antithesis between individualism and cooperation, furnishes us with a nice bit of irony that serves to accentuate Cain's alienation even further. In an interesting reversal of roles Cain, after his offering has been rejected by God, seems to adopt a more communal view of things while Abel appears to have suddenly grown cold and uncaring. Thus Cain

bitterly complains (as if it were Abel's fault) that so much smoke has come forth from his spurned offering that it almost choked "vs both" (l. 319)--a surprising allusion (note the collective pronoun) to the corporate ethic. Abel, on the other hand, in a startling departure from his usual manner, smugly asks in return: "If thyne smoked am I to wite?" (l. 322). For a moment it looks as though both brothers have changed sides, each taking the other's earlier point of view. But the apparent transformation is only temporary, for no sooner does Abel complete his taunt than Cain strikes him down with a jaw-bone. Aside from a brief declaration of innocence and a demand for vengeance (ll. 328-29), these derisive words are his last.

The whole episode is a bit puzzling, but, if anything, it does serve a function in the overall design of the play by ironically highlighting the inadequacy and hypocrisy of Cain's brand of individualism. As long as it suits his purpose, Cain feels at liberty to proclaim his independence from God and man; but as soon as events turn against him--as soon, for instance, as God openly shows him disfavor--he suddenly blames others, not himself, for his misfortunes and refuses to accept the consequences of his own actions. Thus it somehow becomes Abel's fault that his offering has not been accepted. By the same token, he cannot bear to receive from others the diffidence he nurtures within himself.

Cain is the first to avow his independence and individualism; but when others express disinterest in him, as Abel does (and justifiably so in light of Cain's repeated failure to listen to his advice) by refusing to take the blame for his failed offering, he resorts to violence and bloodshed. It all boils down, ironically, to a matter of simply not being able to take what one has so freely "dished out" in the past.

The final irony, however, resides in Cain's ultimate fate. Because he has chosen to cut himself off from all earthly and divine relationships, repudiating just about every personal bond that feudal society had to offer, he is doomed to a life of aimless solitude and exile (ll. 361, 470). No punishment could be more poetic. Cain's misanthropic individualism has, in a spiritual sense, already alienated him from others so thoroughly that it is only fitting that God complete the process by ordaining his physical isolation as well. Cain's banishment--the fate of all false tithers, according to Dives and Pauper¹⁷--therefore is simply the external equivalent of a pre-existing interior state. His final destiny serves as a grim reminder to those in the audience who have allowed their lives to be similarly blighted by the self-centered, self-reliant and enterprising impulses of the age.

Cain's individualism is only, however, one aspect of his corrupted character. Equally dangerous both to

the individual and society is his single-minded dedication to a crass materialistic ethic. This ethic operates on a multitude of levels. To call Cain greedy, for instance, is merely to draw attention to the most obvious facet of his materialism. His repeated refusal to "dele my good or gif, /Ather to God or yit to man" (ll. 137-38), along with his constant unwillingness to "departe . . . lightly fro my goode" (l. 217), designates him as nothing more than a miser, a common enough figure in the satirical literature of the time.¹⁸

A far more interesting side to Cain's materialism, if only because it seems less conventional, is his absolute horror of being poor. Of course, Cain himself is the first to tell us that he really is poor ("For I am ich yere wars then othere - /Here my trouth, it is none othere./My wynnyngys ar bot meyn:/No wonder if that I be leyn," ll. 109-12); but this is a sham claim, as Abel's reference to his brother's copious possessions ("the good thou has in wone," l. 116) makes clear. In reality, Cain is at least comfortably well-off and wants to stay that way. Hence, his fear of poverty, which surfaces whenever he suspects that his goods may be in jeopardy--such as when he is asked to tithe:

For had I giffen away my gode,
Then myght I go with a ryffen hood;
And it is better hold that I haue
Then go from doore to doore and craue.

(ll. 140-43)

(The mere fact, by the way, that Cain wants to avoid a life of beggary significantly qualifies his earlier remarks about his destitute condition.)

But the most notable--and most sinister--feature of Cain's materialism presents itself not under the guise of greed or the fear of poverty but rather as a philosophy of life, a whole way of interpreting reality. For Cain, above all, insists upon looking at things, particularly personal relationships, in practical and commercial terms. He is unable, given his materialistic ideals, to conceive of any activity that is not dictated by quid-pro-quo considerations. This perverse utilitarianism poisons just about every contractual relationship in society and threatens, in the same way that individualism threatened, to topple the whole medieval corporate edifice.

The most basic relationship shattered by Cain's utilitarianism is that between God and man. It is destroyed precisely because Cain, whose gross and mundane values render him incapable of comprehending the fact that supernatural rather than worldly benefits accrue to the human party, insists upon setting up an economic, not a spiritual, affiliation between himself and his Creator. As a result, he completely misconstrues the purpose behind the God-man partnership, rejecting the premise that a sacrifice signifies man's desire to give thanks and praise to God who, in return, rewards the

worshipper with grace.

In order to realize just how destructive and deficient this practical creed is, we have only to examine it in operation during Cain's debate with Abel over the whole question of tithing. In the first place, it compels Cain to adopt an unimaginative and literal approach to experience. For instance, Abel, in trying to persuade his brother to tithe, puts forth as a reason the traditional position that "God giffys the all thi lifyng" (l. 98)--an argument to which Cain stupidly replies, "Yit boroed I neuer a farthyng/of hym - here my hand" (ll. 99-100). Of course, Abel is speaking metaphorically and in ultimate, not immediate, terms. But Cain misses the point. With his quid-pro-quo approach to relationships and his predisposition to view all contracts as mere commercial transactions, he fails to grasp Abel's distinction and therefore fails to avail himself of divine favor. Since God has not actually appeared to him in person and physically given him something--like a farthing--Cain sees no reason to concede indebtedness.

Cain's ability to reduce everything to literal and material terms--a "talent" that lets him employ his "tit-for-tat" philosophy more easily--subverts the God-man relationship in yet another way, for it helps sustain one of his most precious delusions--namely, that God is his personal enemy. Unable to grasp the concept of a transcendent spiritual Being, he automatically

translates God into terms he can understand. God thus becomes a kind of rival farmer who actively endeavors to bankrupt him by denying him grain. Such a crude conception of divinity gives Cain the chance to bring his practical ethic into play. Since God has given him nothing--nay, less than nothing--he will give him nothing in return:

Lenys he me? As com thrift apou the so!
 For he has euer yit beyn my fo;
 For had he my freynd beyn,
 Othergatys it had beyn seyn.
 When all mens corn was fayre in feld,
 Then was myne not worth a neld.
 When I shuld saw, and wantyd seyde,
 And of corn had full grete neyde,
 Then gaf he me none of his;
 No more will I gif hym of this.
 Hardely hold me to blame
 Bot if I serve hym of the same.


(11. 118-29)

Needless to say this kind of spiteful pragmatism and legalistic quid pro quo makes a mockery out of a relationship that is essentially a spiritual, not a material, contract.

Finally, Cain's practical mentality corrupts his relationship with heaven by turning that relationship into, for all intents and purposes, a business venture. Cain thus tells Abel that he would have been more inclined to "dele" his goods with God had there been "som prow" (l. 163) or profit in it for him. Unfortunately, a contract with God offers no visible sign of revenue. So Cain, like any sharp-witted capitalist, has

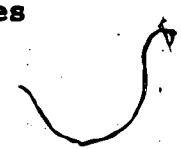
no choice but to repudiate it, forgetting, of course, that the primary purpose of tithing is to provide the individual with grace not money. Cain's commercial pragmatism and quid-pro-quo philosophy, qualities by no means uncommon among the increasingly market-conscious populace of late medieval England, therefore, transform what should be a selfless act of devotion into a kind of financial bargain in which God, if he expects to be properly honored, has to ensure man a suitable return on his investment. Such an approach to tithing, or for that matter to any spiritual relationship, can only lessen the soul's chances of survival--a warning that, given Cain's punishment at the end of the play, must have made more than one recalcitrant tither or worldly yeoman in the audience think twice.

Human relationships, as well as divine ones, also fall prey to Cain's utilitarian system. Of these, the most important is that between master and man. We discover, for example, that the same practical principles that perverted Cain's association with God also ironically pervert his association with his own servant. This point is developed at the very beginning of the play when Cain strikes Garcio for tampering with the plough-team's grain sacks. This is a churlish act, for it violates the ancient feudal sanction against a lord striking his vassal and cheapens a relationship whose very survival depends largely on the mutual respect the con-



tracting parties bear toward one another.¹⁹ But the really amazing thing about this episode is that after Cain has struck Garcio, Garcio strikes him back and justifies his action by maintaining that he had only returned that which his master had given him in the first place: "Yai, with the same mesure and weght/That I boro will I qwite" (ll. 51-52). This kind of reasoning is worthy of Cain himself. And that is the whole point. For the entire scene is much more than an exercise in comic horseplay. Rather, it shows how the bond between master and servant, lord and vassal, deteriorates when mercantile modes of thought like Cain's (note Garcio's commercial diction: "mesure," "weght," "boro," "qwite") are applied to it. Cain beats Garcio; Garcio beats Cain. And as a result the whole medieval principle of order, degree and subordination--the principle upon which all of society rested--is not only violated but threatened with annihilation by a silly "tit-for-tat" philosophy--the same philosophy, it may be recalled, that motivated the men of Cottingham to disrupt the countryside by their rowdy behavior.

Furthermore, it is this same philosophy which is at least partially responsible for Cain's repudiation and murder of his brother. Certainly this is the impression one receives while examining what is said immediately before the killing itself. Cain, for instance, invokes



against Abel the same mercantile principles of debt and repayment that Garcio had earlier invoked against him and which he, in turn, had used against God. He tells his brother that since "I aght the a fowll dispyte, / . . . now is tyme that I hit qwite" (ll. 314-315)--a promise fulfilled a few lines later by Abel's murder. Apparently, what Cain "owes" Abel is somehow tied up with the psychological injury he received when his sacrifice was rejected; consequently, he must "repay" his brother by inflicting an injury on him--death.

Clearly then the quid-pro-quo mentality--a mentality that perceives all personal relationships in petty legalistic, pragmatic, commercial and utterly selfish terms--has the capacity not only to sever the ties between heaven and earth, but to devastate social bonds as well, especially those of a feudal and familial character. Again a warning has been sounded to those watching the play: avoid applying the utilitarian precepts of the market place--profit and loss, debt and repayment-- to too many areas of experience or risk turning society into something that resembles the world of the Mactacio Abel-- a place where the most basic social institutions have been swept away by the unruly forces of pragmatism and personal interest.

Finally, the personal as opposed to the social cost of materialism and its attendant vices is powerfully illustrated by Cain's pitiful condition at the end

of the play. Just as his self-centered individualism eventually led to permanent physical exile, so also do his greed and practicality bring about similarly ironic effects. For one thing, Cain's materialistic vision fails in the long run to provide him with the very economic security he so desperately longs for. As the play moves to a close the man who once refused to offer his goods to God on the grounds that such an action would impoverish him and force him to "craue" from "doore to doore" has turned into the very vagabond-beggar he has striven so hard to avoid becoming.²⁰

Secondly, the same quid-pro-quo philosophy which Cain so openly espouses all through the play becomes the instrument of his own damnation. He has, for such a long time now, looked upon personal relationships as mere business transactions that he has lost the capacity to understand the concepts of selflessness and mercy. Because he cannot act generously toward anyone, he cannot bring himself to believe that anyone can act generously toward him. Thus, as soon as he murders his brother he immediately gives up all hope of forgiveness and salvation because these things simply do not exist in his universe. The result, as can be seen from his defiant replies to God, is despair:

Syn I haue done so mekill syn
That I may not thi mercy wyn,
And thou thus dos me from thi grace,
I shall hyde me fro thi face. . . .
It is no boyte mercy to craue,

For if I do I mon none haue.

(ll. 356-61, 376-77)

An incurable spiritual pessimism which beguiles the heart into assuming that God operates along utilitarian principles too thus seems to be the inevitable outcome of the quid-pro-quo ethic.²¹ And those who follow its insidious logic may at some point in their careers end up like Cain--cut off from God, spurned by their fellow men, convinced of their own damnation.

A few concluding observations. While the Mactacio Abel devotes most of its time toward exposing the pitfalls and fallacies inherent in the individualistic and materialistic approaches to life, it does not neglect other important social issues. It is possible, for example, to interpret much of the incidental detail in the play as a comment on the growing self-assertiveness of the medieval peasantry.

The most common form which the self-assertion of the lower classes took was that of defiance--defiance of everyone in authority. Cain's attitude toward tithes falls within this category; it stands for a repudiation of God's, and by implication the Church's, power over man. Garcio's verbal and physical insubordination is also a gesture of defiance in that it denies the order, degree and authority implicit in the master-servant relationship. The contemporary lack of respect for authority is further underscored by Cain's flippant

reaction to divine correction. When God's voice accuses him of being a "rebell" (l. 291)--quite an apt term for one as defiant as Cain--he recoils in mock terror and sarcastically replies:

Whi, who is that hob ouer the wall?
 We! who was that that piped so small?
 Com, go we hens, for parels all;
 God is out of hys wit!

(ll. 297-300)

Cain's bravado here, while comically exaggerated, nonetheless demonstrates a real problem in late medieval society--the growing tendency of the third estate to defy, or at the very least to fail to take seriously, those placed above them in power.

According to the playwright this kind of endemic insolence can only be remedied by making sure men feel terror and awe when in the presence of authority. Abel therefore rebukes Cain at least twice for his lack of "drede" (ll. 233, 246) before God and suggests that his brother's irreverent behavior will bring down the wrath of heaven. And of course this is exactly what happens. Cain ends up utterly defeated and chastised by the power he had so impudently opposed. The same fate, it is implied, also awaits those whose lack of "drede" urges them to contravene the real-life dominion of Church and State, bishop and lord.

Lastly, there is the whole matter of violence. We have already noted that medieval literature loved to

portray the peasant as a rather turbulent fellow, one who readily resorted to force and bloodshed. This stereotype, moreover, may have found confirmation in the many cases of individual and mass disorder that plagued the period. At any rate, if the peasant's world was indeed a violent and lawless place, it certainly is reflected in the Mactacio Abel. Leaving the murder of Abel aside for the moment, one still is struck by the amount of physical abuse that remains in the play. If the ferocity of his language is any indication, there seems to be good evidence for assuming that Cain opens the action by beating his animals. Within ten lines of this incident he and Garcio are engaged in a full-scale brawl. After this there is a relatively long hiatus where the only violence that occurs is of the linguistic variety: Cain hoping that Abel will hang "bi the nek" (l. 266) and wishing that the smoldering faggots of his rejected offering could be crammed down his brother's pious throat (ll. 289-90). Then comes the murder itself, followed by Cain's irrational and unmotivated assault on Garcio ("Peas man! I did it bot to vse my hand," l. 393). Finally, the play ends with still another threat of hanging as Cain promises to suspend his saucy boy-servant "apon this plo, With this rope. . . ." (ll. 460-61). All in all, the Wakefield Master's decision to turn the dramatic landscape into a place of brutality and bloodshed might very well signify a bitter attack on society's

inability to restrain the forces of plebian violence.

An examination of the murder episode reveals that this could very well be what the author had in mind. A few years ago Bennett A. Brockman wrote a fascinating article in which he discussed the Wakefield Master's treatment of Abel's murder.²² Brockman discovered that the play's famous pardon scene (ll. 407-38) is actually a satirical denunciation of one of the period's most serious social problems--the excessive granting of pardons to admitted felons. He also found that Cain's decision, following the commission of his crime, to "lig this fourty dayes" (l. 340) could be construed as a veiled and slightly critical reference to the ancient privilege of sanctuary, a privilege which was repeatedly abused by notorious and common criminals in the late Middle Ages. Cain therefore makes use of two infamously corrupt institutions to guarantee his immunity from temporal prosecution.

There may be, however, another topical allusion in the play, the significance of which Brockman failed to note. It concerns Cain's desperate efforts to get his brother's body buried:

Bot this cors I wold were hid,
 For som man myght com at vngayn:
 'Fle, fals shrew!' wold he bid,
 And weyn I had my brother slayn.
 Bot were Pikeharnes, my knafe here,
 We shuld bery hym both in fere.

(ll. 378-83)

Like any intelligent criminal, Cain wants simply to dispose of the evidence and thus lessen his chances of detection. But there is more going on here than meets the eye. For Cain is proposing the very same thing that a number of Yorkshire villagers were accused of doing in the 1390's. In a memorandum addressed to the justices and sheriff of the East Riding and dated 1 April 1398²³ we find a reference to "divers murders and manslaughter" which have been committed lately in the area "many times . . . these days more than usual." The reason for this sudden rash of homicides appears to have been linked to the hasty burial of the victims by their murderers who then, along with their "accomplices and favourers . . . escape unpunished and are rendered the bolder to commit like crimes." The proclamation declares that henceforth no one in the Riding shall remove any body "from the place of death" without first summoning a coroner to examine it.

Suddenly, Cain's effort to hide Abel's body is charged with exciting contemporary relevance.²⁴ Could this action be meant to refer to what was going on in the East Riding? Is Cain's modus operandi patterned after that of some regional gang of cutthroats? Or is his behavior here simply an allusion to the growing problem of violence in the shire? In any event, one thing remains certain. The archetypal murder has been transformed into a vehicle for trenchant social

satire and intelligent social commentary. This in itself is no mean achievement.

Processus Noe Cum Filiis:

The Plea for Cooperation

The Processus Noe affirms those values so vigorously denied by Cain in the Mactacio Abel. The central character of the Mactacio permitted his individualistic and materialistic impulses to corrupt his associations with God and man; the hero of the Processus Noe, on the other hand, exhibits none of these anti-social flaws. Throughout the play Noah remains true to the ideals of charity, humility and selfless endeavor--virtues which Cain has purged from his heart. In effect, the play of Noah, clearly the ideological obverse of its predecessor, represents an attempt to show the correct way in which medieval man must order his life if he is to be allowed membership in the spiritual and secular communities. Yet at the same time both the Mactacio and the Processus are remarkably kindred works, sharing similar dramatic structures and addressing themselves to the same moral and social problems. Together, they comprise an artistic, thematic and structural whole which sets them apart from their dramatic equivalents in other cycles.

The contrasting principles of the protagonists of each play are heightened by the parallel structures of the plays themselves. Both works, for instance, begin

with a servant introducing an angry master: Garcio's speech bears adequate witness to Cain's explosive and irrational temper ("Begyn he with you for to stryfe/ Certys then mon ye neuer thryfe," ll. 17-18), while Noah's remarks point toward a similar, albeit more justifiable, emotion on the part of his lord ("Therfor I drede lest God on vs will take veniance/For syn is now alod, without any repentance," ll. 55-56). The servants' prologues are followed by the appearance of the masters themselves who immediately confirm what has been said about them. Cain's language and behavior soon prove him to be as wrathful and violent as Garcio had intimated. In the space of only thirty-four lines he swears at his animals, assaults his boy-servant and flings a barrage of obscenities at Abel. Likewise, in the Processus, God himself reveals that what Noah has said about him is also true. He too is angry, but with good reason:

Me thought I shewed man luf when I made hym to
 be
 All angels abuf, like to the Trynyté;
 And now in grete reprove full low ligys he,
 In erth hymself to stuf with syn that displease
 me

Most of all.
 Veniance will I take
 In erth for syn sake;
 My grame thus will I wake
 Both of grete and small.

(ll. 82-90)

Once Cain and God have made their initial entrances,

the playwright alters slightly the structural details of the two plays without, however, doing violence to their overall formal correspondence. Cain, the bad master, remains the central character of the Mactacio. But Noah, the good servant, emerges as the hero of the Processus while his divine master withdraws from the action. We thus have a bad master as the protagonist in one play and a good servant as the protagonist in the other. But the difference here is more apparent than real, for Cain and Noah function as both masters and servants in their respective worlds. As we shall see later, Cain is at once a bad master to Garcio and a bad servant to God, while Noah is a good master to the members of his family and a good servant to God. That Noah initially has a dramatic purpose similar to that of Garcio and only later emerges as the protagonist should in no way prevent us from seeing him as a kind of virtuous replica of the first murderer. Both he and Cain live in a hierarchical society and operate in that society as lords and vassals, masters and men.

Returning to the plays themselves we discover further evidence of structural similarity in the events that follow the introductory pronouncements. Both Cain and Noah, for instance, are called upon to do God's will, although they respond to that call differently: the former must tithe his goods and the latter must build an ark. Cain, of course, discharges his duty with

the utmost reluctance; Noah, on the other hand, despite his advanced age and ignorance of carpentry, readily accepts the task imposed on him. Both characters, moreover, are paired off with companions who act as foils to their respective moral qualities. Abel's humility, obedience and spirit of brotherhood throw Cain's self-centeredness into sharper relief and at the same time anticipate Noah's steadfast devotion to God and loving concern for his fellow man; Mrs. Noah's shrewish disposition and peevish recalcitrance accentuate the prompt and uncomplaining compliance of her husband and simultaneously remind us of Cain's anti-communal nature. The presence of these secondary characters thus binds the two plays more closely together.

Furthermore, the playwright has obviously expanded and suppressed certain types of characters in both plays in order to emphasize his moral and social points. Cain's free-wheeling individualism is developed at the expense of Abel's milder, more communal sensibilities so that the disastrous effects of that individualism upon society can be better illustrated. By the same token, Mrs. Noah's individualistic and materialistic values are eventually expelled from the world of the Processus and she herself is transformed into a model of obedience and humility once she enters the ark. Unlike Cain, she never dominates the spirit of the play in which she appears. Nor does her character loom as large.

over the play's action as does Cain's. All this is done so that the values which were denied and overwhelmed in the Mactacio may be amplified here.

The accentuation of positive values over negative ones in the Processus also explains why the ending of that play, so different in tone from that of the preceding work, nevertheless invites comparison. Noah and his family gather around the ark and offer a prayer of thanksgiving and praise which appropriately ends with the words "Amen, for charité" (l. 558). The whole scene is carefully constructed so as to highlight the virtues of brotherhood, gratitude and love--corporate principles which were the cornerstones of medieval society. Now let us compare this conclusion to the ending of the Mactacio Abel. Cain stands defiantly alone on stage, an outcast, a murderer and a victim of his own perverse egotism, cavalierly resigned to the idea of his own damnation and cursing the God who has dared to punish him ("Euer ill myght hym befall that theder me commend/This tyde," ll. 466-67). The differences between the two scenes are striking, yet it is these very differences that make the episodes so congruent. The conclusion of the Noah play, asserting as it does the importance of corporate activity and selflessness, forces us to recall the completely antithetical ending of the Mactacio. The two endings complement one another superbly. And this same complementary quality characterizes the entire organi-

zation of both plays.

These then are the broad structural properties shared by the two works: identical types of openings, similar kinds of dramatic action (the unwillingness or willingness of the major characters to do God's will is a primary cause of subsequent dramatic developments), the presence of subsidiary personages acting as foils to the protagonists and complementary conclusions.

Formal resemblances, however, constitute only one of the ways in which the two plays are related. Common themes and issues also unify these works, contributing to their unique, interconnected texture. The most important of these is the theme of work. Both plays explore in detail the attitudes their central characters have toward physical labor. We have seen how Cain was depicted as an industrious husbandman who, while being a very hard worker, nonetheless considered manual labor an onerous burden--something which was more of an occasion to sin than a way toward sanctification. More than any other activity, work gave him an opportunity to display the ugliest aspects of his personality--his greed, self-centeredness, vulgarity and blasphemy.

The idea of toil is treated in a radically different manner in the Processus Noe. Here it does not provide, to take just one example, the setting for profanity and sacrilege that it did in the Mactacio. Instead, it becomes a devotional exercise. Noah sees work and prayer

as one, identical activities which signify ways in which one can testify to the power and glory of God. Work is, furthermore, defined as an essentially charitable operation, earning for its practitioner spiritual profit instead of material reward. This, of course, is exactly the same position espoused by medieval moralists in their treatises on labor.

In fact, the traditional doctrine of labor runs throughout the play and governs much of the dramatic action. Noah's opening address is presented, for example, in the form of a prayer, a technique which, given the "industrial" subject matter of the play, goes a long way toward establishing a doctrinally sound definition of labor. In other words, the playwright immediately sets up a reverent, supplicating tone which reinforces the theme of work-as-prayer and which pervades a number of later episodes where the theme is prominent.

Noah's prologue also provides an ideal upon whom the medieval workman can pattern his behavior. God himself is represented as a kind of benevolent craftsman, a "maker of all that is" (l. 1) who has "maide both nyght and day, beest, fowle, and fysh" (l. 3) and who has "wrought" all creatures "that lif may" (l. 4). (In all, the word "maide" is applied to God six times in the prologue.)²⁵ God's own words, moreover, contribute to the metaphor, disclosing that he too looks upon himself as an omnipotent artisan. Thus, he tells us how he

has "maide all thyng that is liffand" (l. 73), including man (l. 78), "with myne awne hand" (l. 74).

This God-as-craftsman motif is carried over into the scene where Noah receives directions on how to build the ark. Like a guild master instructing an inexperienced apprentice, God carefully and with great attention to detail, teaches Noah the fine points of ship-building. The particularized instructions all come from Scripture, but the emphasis on accurate and refined workmanship is the Wakefield Master's own contribution to the story and accords well with his rather contemporary depiction of God as a skilled worker. Noah is told to construct the vessel "ful wele" (l. 119) and "with sleyght" (l. 136), and is advised to make sure that "all is doyne thus right" (l. 139). The finished product is proudly termed a "noble gyn" (l. 128) by its divine inventor, a phrase suggestive of the sense of satisfaction and accomplishment felt by an artisan after the successful planning and execution of a design.

But if the playwright intends for us to see God as a craftsman and worker, he also makes certain that we are aware of the ends toward which the divine labor is directed. Those ends are selfless and altruistic, conforming to medieval man's conception of physical toil as a beneficial activity. Thus we find that God has made the angels not merely for his own pleasure but to give them "the blis of heuen" (l. 11). And when some of them fall through their own "vnkyndness" (l. 12), he does not

hesitate to fill their places with a new creature--man. The ark itself also acts as a symbol of God's benevolence. Individual men, of course, have followed evil so wholeheartedly that they have brought about their own destruction. Mankind as a species (here represented by Noah and his family), however, is earmarked for salvation, and the ark is to be the means whereby this is achieved.²⁶ The time and trouble God takes in explaining the intricacies of ship-building to Noah signify, then, a real love for humanity and not some kind of capricious favoritism.

Throughout the play, therefore, God's character is patterned just as much after that of a skilled artisan as it is after that of the angry Old Testament deity. Furthermore, his character as an artisan reveals that benevolent motives as much as retributive ones are behind his decision to punish mankind. God is simply acting like any good craftsman would who, finding imperfections in the design of something he has manufactured, seeks to correct those defects by repairing the original.²⁷ He has discovered that the mechanism that he had constructed--the world--is riddled with sin and insubordination. Consequently, he painstakingly refashions another design (a "noble gyn") to rectify the deficiencies of the first. All this tinkering is meant to be ultimately advantageous to man; it is intended to make him more responsive to God's laws, more grateful

for his kindness and more deserving of his love. The sheer labor that God expends on his design is thus in the long run a benevolent rather than a punitive exercise..

God is thus created in the image of a medieval craftsman, a technique obviously intended to make the audience more aware of the ultimately spiritual ends of work. Noah, another medieval worker (God's apprentice, in fact), shares the selfless attitudes of his master, never straying from the doctrine which taught that labor ought to benefit others as much as it does oneself. His view of work, moreover, remains diametrically opposed to the one held by that other "apprentice"--Cain, the Devil's yeoman. Both these views--Noah's conception of toil as a charitable, holy act and Cain's more practical and materialistic outlook--are represented in the Processus, each attitude being embodied in either Noah or his wife. By therefore studying the interaction of these characters we can perhaps arrive at a better understanding of how the play delivers its message on the nature of toil.

The selfless principles of work, already mentioned in conjunction with God's instructions to Noah, receive additional emphasis in the scene where Noah first greets his wife (ll. 182-245). Noah, having completed his interview with God, decides to tell his spouse what has just transpired. He approaches her with no small

amount of trepidation, "for she is full tethee" and "litill oft angré" (ll. 186-87). Upon meeting her, he salutes her in a kind enough fashion ("God spede, dere wife! How fayre ye?", l. 190) only to have his greeting angrily thrown back in his face ("Now, as euer myght I thryfe, the wars I the see," l. 191). It seems that Mrs. Noah considers her husband somewhat lax and irresponsible in his familial duties, and this accounts for her rather ungracious response. But the worst is yet to come. She now launches into a lengthy condemnation of his alleged faults, indicting him for his failure to provide for the material needs of their household:

Do tell me belife, where has thou thus long be?
 To dede may we dryfe, or lif, for the,
 For want.
 When we swete or swynk,
 Thou dos what thou thynk,
 Yit of mete and of drynke
 Haue we veray skant.

(ll. 192-98)

She also ridicules him for his excessive timidity. When Noah tells her that they all "ar hard sted with tythyngys new" (l. 199), she contemptuously replies: "thou art alway adred, be it fals or trew" (l. 201). The couple then begin a verbal quarrel which rapidly degenerates into a physical brawl. Noah, exasperated beyond endurance by his wife's ill temper, finally strikes her (ll. 219-20), and she, not to be outdone ("I shal not in thi det/Flyt of this flett," ll. 223-34), strikes him

back while proclaiming: "Thou shal thre [blows] for two, I 'swere bi Godys pyne!" (l. 227). The domestic battle soon dies down, however, when Noah decides to break off the conflict by resolving to "kepe charyté" (l. 235). Besides, he tells us that he has been kept "full, lang fro my warke" (l. 244) already. For her part, Mrs. Noah plans to sit down and tend to her spinning, refusing her husband's request that she pray for him while he is away:

Noe: Bot, wife,
Pray for me besele
To eft I com vnto the.
Vxor: Euen as thou prays for me,
As euer myght I thrive.

(ll. 239-43)

This scene marks the beginning of a conflict between two antithetical philosophies of work, with Noah on the side of truth and righteousness and Mrs. Noah on the side of falsehood and error. For Mrs. Noah is far from being just a shrewish housewife in this play. She stands for a view that is utterly wrong and foolish, one which, as we have seen, was rapidly pushing its way into the forefront of medieval life. This rather sinister side of her personality is underscored by the fact that much of her character and many of her actions have been modelled upon those of Cain and Garcio. This is no accident. The identification of Mrs. Noah with these rascals represents a deliberate attempt to undermine her.

point of view and the validity of what she signifies.

The similarities between Mrs. Noah, Cain and Garcio are both numerous and illuminating. She responds to her husband's polite salutation, for instance, in almost exactly the same manner in which the first murderer reacted to his brother's courteous greeting--with anger and contempt (cf. Mactacio, ll. 57-59; Processus, ll. 190-91). She displays, moreover, the same kind of quid-pro-quo mentality that is so typical of the thinking of Cain and Garcio. When the latter was attacked by Cain, he immediately retaliated in kind, stating that he would "boro" and "qwife" with the "same mesure and weght" (ll. 51-52) that his master had meted out to him. So too with Mrs. Noah. She also returns her husband's blows and makes use of the same commercial diction we saw employed in the Mactacio, announcing that she will not be in anyone's "det" (l. 222). She even outmatches Cain's and Garcio's retaliatory philosophy by declaring that henceforth she will exchange three hits for every two that Noah gives her (l. 227). Her sullen defiance, furthermore, cannot help but remind us of Cain's earlier behavior in particular. Both characters have an aura of bravado about them that betrays a cavalier outlook on reality--a tendency to dismiss too lightly matters of supreme spiritual import. In the Mactacio, for example, Cain's blasphemous disrespect for God was a major facet of his personality and on at least

one occasion earned Abel's rebuke: "Came, of God me thynke thou has no drede". (l. 233). Lack of "drede," especially in matters involving the Creator, was thus branded as a sure sign of one's isolation from God. The very same motif is present in the Processus, performing the same function with regard to Mrs. Noah as it did with regard to Cain. Earlier in the play Noah expressed anxiety about the lack of "dred". (l. 47) men felt towards God and lamented humanity's bold commitment to sin (ll. 48-54). God himself, furthermore, revealed that one of the primary factors influencing his decision to chastise the world was man's persistent defiance of his will (" . . . for me no man is ferd," l. 102). These references appear early in the play and if they remind us of anyone they remind us of Cain, indicating that the rebellious spirit of the first murderer--and, by extension, the rebellious spirit of the fifteenth-century English commons--has infected the whole of creation. But as the play progresses we find that Mrs. Noah is also without "drede." Her own words place her in the same camp as those other "fear-less" individuals (of whom Cain is the most prominent) who ignore at their peril the commands of their divine Lord. On more than one occasion we encounter her mocking Noah's fears and poking fun at his quite valid preoccupation with his family's safety (cf. ll. 201, 205-06). She is incapable of realizing at this point that fear and dread mark one

as a follower of God, not a coward, and that by ridiculing her husband she betrays her own alignment with those whose lack of awe--like the defiant masses of late medieval England--places their souls in jeopardy.

All the attributes which Mrs. Noah shares with Cain have a purpose in that they prevent us from dismissing her outright as merely comic or farcical. Her beliefs and attitudes constitute real spiritual threats. And she is deliberately associated with the first murderer in the hope that we will thus pay stricter attention to what she says and does. This qualified point of view comes in handy when we start to examine Mrs. Noah's conception of physical toil--that is, because her opinions in this matter are so similar to Cain's, we become more inclined to scrutinize her assumptions rather than simply laugh at them.

As with other aspects of her character, Mrs. Noah's utilitarian vision of work is almost identical to Cain's. Like him she is a hard worker, assiduously performing her household duties in a manner that is both single-minded and responsible. (She points out to Noah that she often must "swete or swynk" at home while he is off somewhere doing God-knows-what.) And like him she expects to be rewarded for her efforts with material things. In her eyes the sole aim of labor is to provide "mete" and "drynk" for the table; it has little, if any, spiritual purpose. She thus cannot understand how Noah's

work can have any relevance or meaning in her limited system of values. She is so imprisoned by the practical and quotidian mechanics of running a household that she refuses to concede that work also has a selfless and spiritually enriching side. Such moral shortsightedness, although rendered here in domestic terms, rests on the same principles as Cain's pragmatic philosophy. And that philosophy probably appealed to more than just housewives, given the peculiar economic atmosphere of late medieval England.

At any rate, this utilitarian frame of mind colors Mrs. Noah's perception of her husband and accounts for her hostile reaction to his labors. Because Noah's work does not superficially contribute to the economy of the household and because he has been absent from that household for so long, she assumes that he has not been meeting his familial obligations and has instead been frittering away his time on useless projects. She will not even allow him to offer an explanation as to his whereabouts, but attributes his excited desire to tell her "tythyngys new" to his timid disposition. Her myopic view of work restricts her spiritual vision, preventing her from seeing that her husband's task may perhaps provide for the welfare of her family in a way that she has not foreseen--namely, by securing for it both a physical and spiritual salvation denied to the rest of humanity. Her angry reaction, then, is not to be inter-

preted as mere shrewishness, but rather as a pathetic inability to grasp the full significance of the meaning of toil.

If Mrs. Noah blinds herself to the spiritual aim of labor, she certainly cannot be expected to see it as a form of worship. Work for her is what it was for Cain: tedious drudgery, not prayer. Her refusal to pray for Noah (ll. 239-43) before he sets out to do God's bidding powerfully illustrates just how incapable she is of placing labor in a devotional context. This applies to her own duties as well as those of others; for Mrs. Noah denies her husband's request while occupied in an act of labor herself--spinning (l. 238). She absolutely refuses to pray while she works. Moreover, given the issues of the play and what is at stake in the dramatic action--the salvation of mankind in the face of universal destruction--her decision to apply herself to her distaff strikes us as especially petty and meaningless. This, of course, is precisely what the play wants to emphasize. Labor is indeed meaningless when divorced from prayer and palls in significance when it does not contribute (as do Noah's endeavors) to the soul's ultimate interest. This labor, of course, does not necessarily have to be evangelical, but it should, no matter how humble or mundane, be at least made into an occasion for worshipping God. This Mrs. Noah fails to do. Her work lacks ultimate significance

and purpose--a point nicely brought out by the aimless whirling of her spinning-wheel--because she uses it not to glorify her Creator but to assuage her own anger and frustration over her husband's behavior and to reassert her belief in the "practicality" of work in the face of Noah's "impractical" undertaking.

Noah's project, on the other hand, meets all the requirements necessary for meaningful and rewarding occupation. In contrast to the utilitarian activities of his wife, his work is in harmony with the medieval doctrine of toil. First of all, he never forgets that work is above all a form of worship. This idea, aside from being a well-known commonplace, accords well with the play's overall emphasis on prayer in general. It will be recalled that Noah's opening speech (ll. 1-72) was one long prayer of humble supplication, radically dissimilar to Garcio's vulgar and defiant prologue in the Mactacio Abel. Prayer, furthermore, is very much in evidence on board the ark where on a number of occasions the characters recite short orisons (ll. 431, 467-68, 494-95). And at the end of the play Noah and his family offer up a prayer of thanks to the Almighty. But nowhere does the idea of prayer operate so effectively as it does in the episode where Noah actually starts to build the vessel with his own hands. For here the twin themes of work and prayer merge into one another and are made part of the stage action itself.

That labor and prayer are one and the same activity is a point made at the very beginning of the scene when Noah inaugurates his project by reciting the words which traditionally preceded any prayer whatsoever: "In nomine patris, et filii, / Et spiritus sancti. Amen." (ll. 251-52). Noah, therefore, by uttering the words to and probably performing the necessary gestures that normally went with the Sign of the Cross, explicitly communicates to the audience his belief that work should be a devotional exercise above all else. This idea continues to be reinforced whenever Noah, during the subsequent action, takes the time in the midst of his exertions to formulate a little prayer to God (ll. 254, 256, 287-88). Taken in its totality, then, the entire ship-building episode shows us work in the process of literally becoming an act of worship.

Another feature of Noah's philosophy of work, one that sets it apart from the philosophies of his wife and Cain, is selflessness. Cain toils only so that he can accumulate goods for himself. Mrs. Noah, to a certain extent, works for the benefit of others, but those others are members of her immediate family and the things that she labors for are merely temporal and transitory commodities like meat and drink; her view of work still remains unsatisfactory because she restricts her efforts to a narrow, material world. This is not the case with Noah, though on the surface it

would appear to be so. True, he does build the ark to save his family from the Flood; but he also builds it to save, as the audience would well know, humanity itself from extinction. In this respect, his travails are unselfish in the extreme.

The playwright has prepared us well for this concept by making the virtue of charity a recurring motif in the play. During his interview with God, for instance, Noah twice refers to charity by name: the first time in order to induce God to reveal his identity (l. 165); the second time to persuade him to confer his blessing (l. 174). Noah mentions charity a third time when he has just completed the first quarrel with his wife. Finding himself about to launch into a full-blown tirade on her shrewishness, he abruptly checks himself and resolves to "kepe charyté, for I haue at do" (l. 235). The three references to charity (a word which did not appear once in the Mactacio) may seem odd in a play that is about God's vengeance on sinful man; but in reality they capture perfectly the play's central thesis--namely, that work must be performed for the spiritual and physical benefit of others if it is ever to have any meaning. In short, work must be first and foremost a charitable activity--a message that needed constant retelling at a time when the traditional meaning of work was rapidly losing its hold on men's minds.

Noah's endeavors are thus to be considered expressions of charity because they are designed to allow mankind to survive God's terrible wrath. In this respect, Noah is doing humanity an immense favor by taking on the responsibility of constructing the ark. But the ark stands for far more than just God's or Noah's desire to save man from the Deluge. Augustine tells us that it represents the person of Christ himself at the moment of his passion and death.²⁸ When approached from this angle the building of the ark takes on a whole new set of associations. It now represents the supreme act of charity itself--the decision of the Son of God to undergo the shame and pain of death for the redemption of fallen man.

The Wakefield Master capitalizes on Augustine's interpretation and makes it conform to his own idea of what work should be like. By equating the labor of the ark with the labor of the cross he transforms the concept of physical toil into the highest of ideals and raises the status of Noah himself in the process. No longer a mere apprentice, Noah suddenly is portrayed as a master craftsman in his own right, the earthly agent of the Omnipotent Artisan and the human instrument for the divine plan of salvation. In other words, he has ceased for the moment to be just Noah and has become Christ, the carpenter of Galilee, as well.²⁹

That Noah represents Christ--specifically Christ at

the moment of his crucifixion--and that each stage of the ark's fabrication corresponds to events that transpired on Calvary cannot be doubted. The allusions are too obvious and suggestive to mean otherwise. For example, immediately prior to the onset of his labor, Noah refers to his raw materials as "this tree" (l. 253), a clear reference to the Tree upon which the Savior bought man's redemption. This tree, moreover, is to be the object on which Noah is to "bend" his "bonys" (l. 253) as he applies himself to the task of ship-building. Once the actual construction gets underway, Noah, in an action reminiscent of the stripping of Christ's garments at the foot of the cross, takes off his outer cloak, presumably to give him more freedom of movement ("Now my gowne will I cast, and wyrk in my cote," l. 262). Meanwhile, exclamations such as "A! my bak, I traw, will brast" (l. 264) and "My bonys ar so stark" (l. 268) emphasize the pain and suffering of the whole ordeal. Noah also tells us that he will not forget to "drife ich a nayll" (l. 273) into its proper place--again, an open allusion to the agony of the cross. Once his work is finished, Noah, in language that suggests both the completion of the ark and the perpetual presence and power of the cross,³⁰ proudly examines his handiwork and exclaims:

This is a nobull gyn:

These nayles so thay ryn
 Thoro more and myn,
 These bordys ichon.

Wyndow and doore, euen as he saide;
 Thre ches chambre, thay ar well maide;
 Pyk and tar full sure therapon laide.
 This will euer endure, therof am I paide,
 Forwhy
 It is better wrought
 Then I coude haif thoght.
 Hym that maide all of noght
 I thank oonly.

(ll. 276-88)

What "will euer endure" here is, of course, the cross of Jesus Christ, not the makeshift structure which Noah has just erected.

The medieval workman is thus simultaneously presented with two models whose ideas about work he can emulate: Noah himself, whose attitude toward labor forms a crucial part of the play's literal meaning; and Christ, whose presence is prefigured in the person of Noah and who "toils" in his own special way for mankind's betterment. At the literal level, the ark-building scene makes us aware of just how wide a gulf separates the assumptions of Noah from those of other characters. First of all, Noah is never personally corrupted by work as are his wife and Cain. These individuals have allowed themselves to become perverted in varying degrees by physical labor: Cain adopts a philosophy of individualism which encourages him to see himself as the sole cause of his prosperity; Mrs. Noah considers herself to be the real

bread-winner of the family, the only one upon whom its survival depends. Both are dyed-in-the-wool egoists. Noah, on the other hand, gives credit where credit is due. He is rightly proud of his accomplishment, as any conscientious craftsman would be, yet he attributes his skill and success to "hym that made all of noht"

(l. 287). Unlike some of the people in the Mactacio Abel or even his own spouse, he recognizes that the fruits of toil are made possible only through the aid of a Superior Being. Work is therefore an endeavor that makes Noah more humble and unassuming, not more self-centered and self-reliant. This is the first lesson the play has to teach the fifteenth-century worker.

Secondly, Noah's industry is essentially an act of worship and as such differs markedly from the activities of those who see it only as a distasteful way of acquiring more and more material possessions. Noah fuses work and prayer into a holy offering to God. No such motive impels Cain or Mrs. Noah. The latter categorically refuses to unite prayer to her labor, and the former actively twists the devotional aims of work into anti-prayer--that is, into an excuse to complain, ridicule and blaspheme.

Finally, the medieval worker is enjoined to pattern himself on Noah's unselfish qualities. His actions all spring from a charitable source insofar as they all ultimately promote the welfare of the whole of mankind. Mrs. Noah and Cain have much narrower conceptions of what

constitutes work and base their beliefs and actions on materialistic and anti-communal principles.

The charitable impulses which should be at the root of all physical labors, however, emerge more clearly when we examine the ship-building scene from a typological perspective, for the identification of Noah with Christ and the ark with the cross elevates the idea of work into a kind of transcendental ideal. The spectators are now asked to base their actions not merely on those of Noah but to take Christ himself as their model and adopt his approach to work. The attitude which the medieval workman is to have toward his trade or occupation thus is to be akin to that which guided Christ as he embarked upon the labor of the cross. That is, he is to make the communal virtues of self-sacrifice, generosity and love the principles around which his activity is to be organized. When viewed in this light, an individual's vocation, no matter how inconsequential or mundane, takes on immense spiritual significance; for it enables him, when pursued correctly, to express the same feelings and share in the same values and motives that prompted Christ's decision to work for the salvation of mankind. All labor therefore, regardless of its type, becomes an occasion for the manifestation of love, tracing its pedigree back to that ultimate and perfect manifestation of love--the crucifixion.

At this point it should be apparent that the Wake-

field Master has considerably varied his treatment of the theme of work, emphasizing certain ideas that were muted in or absent entirely from the Mactacio Abel. That play concerned itself mostly with negative views: Cain was portrayed as a bad worker whose idea of labor was wholly opposed to the medieval ideal. The Processus Noe is a different play by far, stressing the positive, spiritually rewarding aspects of toil. Together both plays give us a complete picture of what the medieval worker should and should not do with regard to his craft or calling. This preoccupation with the positive continues into the second half of the play where Mrs. Noah is finally incorporated into the society of the ark. The process of her conversion and incorporation, something that never happened to Cain, is important to our study because it resolves a number of key issues in the play.

We have already noted that Mrs. Noah shares Cain's corrupt outlook on work, her approach to it being mainly dictated by practical, materialistic and individualistic considerations. Such an attitude would be perfectly suited to the world of the Mactacio. But here, in a world where corporate and spiritual values prevail, it is drastically out of place. And subsequent events in the play are deliberately designed to show precisely how incompatible her secular outlook is with the more communal values espoused by the rest of the characters.

The folly and meaninglessness of Mrs. Noah's idea

of work is reiterated in the scene where she is approached by her husband for the second time. We have just watched Noah engage in an action that is of the utmost importance for the physical welfare of his family and the spiritual benefit of humanity in general. Now we are confronted with an image of labor that is of an entirely different sort. Noah, fresh from the significant labor of the ark, arrives home to find his wife still occupied with her frivolous spinning! Two kinds of work and two approaches to labor are juxtaposed in this scene: the important and the trivial, the spiritual and the worldly, the communal and the self-centered. It is not so much a question of spinning per se being a futile occupation as it is a question of Mrs. Noah making it so. She is so caught up in her daily domestic routine that she fails to exploit the huge spiritual potential of toil; she cannot and will not see that work can easily be a liberating experience, a means of achieving spiritual renewal and salvation.

Mrs. Noah also lacks the ability to perceive that adherence to a selfish, materialistic and practical work-ethic will eventually destroy her. Noah recognizes the danger and tries to tell her that there are more important things than spinning ("Ther is garn on the reyll other, my dame," l. 298), which means that given the imminent destruction of the world, her determination to continue spinning constitutes a particularly absurd

kind of gesture. Yet Noah's attempt to lure his wife away from her distaff has more subtle import. His desire to have her leave off her spinning can also be interpreted as a comment on the folly of laboring only for the transitory rewards of this world, an objective dear to Mrs. Noah's heart. By having Noah coax her into the ark, away from her spinning, the playwright implies that the path to personal sanctification and spiritual renewal does not lie in the direction taken up to this point by Mrs. Noah--the direction of pragmatic striving for meat and drink, for food, clothing and shelter--but lies instead along the way to the ark, the path of selfless endeavor and prayer.

Eventually Mrs. Noah does pack up her belongings and advances toward the ark only to balk again, this time at the prospect of entering the confined quarters of the vessel:

I was neuer bard ere, as euer myght I the,
 In sich an oostre as this!
 In fath, I can not fynd
 Which is before, which is behynd.
 Bot shall we here be pynd,
 Noe, as haue thou blis?

(ll. 328-33)

Once again she resumes her spinning, stubbornly ignoring her husband's protestations and peevishly oblivious to her own best interests (ll. 336-40). In justifying her decision, moreover, she reveals that she remains an essentially anti-communal, undisciplined being. Her

tendency to look upon the ark as a prison instead of a refuge ("I was neuer bard ere. . . .; "Bot shall we here be pynd. . . .") attests to a deep-seated lack of restraint in her character, a quality that so often accompanies self-reliance in an individual. In fact, Mrs. Noah is almost as defiant an individualist as Cain. Many of the reasons she gives for not entering the ark (that act in itself is an anti-communal gesture) sound very much like those used by Cain to escape his duty to tithe (also an anti-communal action). She tells her husband, for instance, to leave her alone and tend to his own affairs ("Yei, Noe, go cloute thi shone! The better will thai last," l. 353), echoing one of Cain's favorite retorts ("How that I tend, rek the neuer a deill,/Bot tend thi skabbid shepe wele;" "How that I teynd, neuer thou rek," ll. 247-48, 268). And like Cain she also considers the efforts of others to persuade her to do God's will to be so much "vayn carpyng" ("In fayth, yit will I spyn; All in vayn ye carp," ll. 359-60).

Verbal parallels aside, Mrs. Noah also shares with Cain an individualistic, anti-social set of values (again, symbolized by her stubborn persistence in spinning) which effectively isolates her from her fellow men. Noah pleads with her in the name of "frenship" (l. 362) to enter the ark, but she seems content to scorn all corporate ties that exist between herself and others, choosing instead what amounts to a life of isolated self-reliance and

petulant individualism:

Wheder I lose or I wyn, in fayth, thi felow-
ship,
Set I not at a pyn. This spyndill will I slip
Apon this hill
Or I styr oone fote.

(ll. 363-66)

Again the urge to spin is coupled with a reluctance to enter the ark (the sole means of human salvation), an identification which provides further proof that there is something very much wrong with Mrs. Noah's approach to work. Far from enabling her to be reincorporated into human society, it acts as a powerful instrument of alienation and separation.

Many critics have interpreted Mrs. Noah's aversion to the ark as an allegory on sinful man's initial disinclination to become a member of the mystical community of the Church and hence be saved.³¹ This analysis is entirely correct. But there is more at work here than just Christian allegory. The whole episode has a contemporary relevance similar to that found in the Mactacio Abel. For the playwright seems to be again exploring, this time through the characters of Noah and his wife, the problem of how work can best be made into an instrument of human sanctification and salvation. This was a real concern for the late medieval moralist, especially given the recent industrial and agricultural developments taking place in such areas as the West Riding. How can the average inhabitant of Yorkshire participate in the

buoyant economic life of his region, or for that matter simply try to earn a living, without being corrupted by individualism and materialism? In the Mactacio Abel this question was answered in a negative fashion, through the unveiling of the horrible consequences of Cain's commitment to a perverse, anti-communal work-ethic. The message there was straightforward and harsh: if people followed Cain's example they too could find themselves isolated from their brethren and alienated from their God.

The same warning is sounded in the Processus Noe, yet a different kind of rural dweller appears to be the recipient of the message. Whereas Cain was a husbandman, Mrs. Noah is a spinster. At first, this may seem like a rather trivial observation. After all, the playwright is merely trying to make his character more realistic and what better way to do so than by giving her an occupation that was commonly practiced by just about every housewife in England since time immemorial. Such reasoning is true up to a point. But we have seen in our discussion of the Mactacio that the Wakefield Master seldom draws upon homely details just because he likes being true-to-life. There are more subtle factors involved. Just as the decision to make Cain a yeoman farmer was probably dictated by specific economic and social phenomena, so too the decision to portray Noah's wife as an assiduous spinner of yarn may have been

prompted by similar contemporary developments. The West Riding's single most important manufactured article at this time was cloth, and the textile industry itself was organized largely around a domestic system of production. Women, furthermore, played a key role in the various phases of the industry, especially in those areas involving the transformation of raw wool into yarn.³² By therefore making Mrs. Noah a spinster and emphasizing her occupation again and again (cf. ll. 238, 298, 336-38, 359-66), the dramatist may very well have been trying to place her in the ranks of a distinct industrial class--that of the rural textile worker.³³ Like yeomen farmers, this group grew in numbers and importance during the late Middle Ages, its presence being particularly noticeable in the West Riding. Its members were, furthermore, blessed with a fair measure of economic freedom, compared to their colleagues in the older boroughs, which in turn encouraged feelings of self-reliance, independence of spirit and self-assertiveness.³⁴ By therefore making Mrs. Noah, herself a cloth-worker of sorts, so materialistic, practical, unregulated and individualistic the playwright calls attention to certain attitudes he sees as prevalent among some segments of the industry--attitudes which pervert the traditional notion of work, weaken the bonds of community and threaten their proponents with moral corrosion and spiritual ruin.

Adherence to these corrupt standards culminates, as

in the case of Cain, in banishment from the company of men and eventual damnation. The same fate awaits Mrs. Noah as long as she remains on land, zealously and aimlessly working her spinning-wheel and loudly proclaiming an irrelevant autonomy from others. Her attitude toward work, based as it is on practical and worldly principles, makes it impossible for her destiny to be otherwise. The same applies to all other cloth workers (and non-cloth workers too) who sympathize with her views. They too will one day find themselves spiritually marooned from society because they have refused to approach their labor in a way that will make them humble, charitable and reverent.

That work does indeed possess the power to renew man in this way is evident from the ending of the play. It is here that the playwright again sets forth positive guidelines on how the medieval laborer can derive the utmost spiritual revenue from his calling. Mrs. Noah finally and with some reluctance--her husband literally has to beat her aboard--enters the ark. Almost immediately her behavior and disposition undergo a miraculous transformation. She suddenly becomes very much like Noah, the ideal worker, laboring no longer as an individual but as part of a collective body. With this change to a more cooperative kind of work (she takes the tiller at one point to allow her husband to plumb the "depnes of the see," l. 434) come other transformations

as well. She now utters a prayer for the first time in the play (ll. 431-32) and becomes progressively more humble and compliant in her dealings with others, willingly obeying Noah's commands (l. 435). Finally, she shows that she is now capable of the same fear ("We ar in grete drede;/Thise wawghes ar so wode," ll. 425-26) that she earlier, in a more defiant mood, had seen as a sign of weakness in her husband. She still remains a worker, only now her labor is performed devoutly, humbly, with fear and reverence toward God and generosity toward her companions. And she is sanctified by the change. The play ends as it had begun, on a note of prayer and with a word that has come to signify the sole end toward which all human endeavor should be directed-- "charité."

The metamorphosis that Mrs. Noah experiences³⁵ can be the lot of anyone who, like her, is willing to re-direct his thinking and approach to work in a radically different way. This, at least, comprises the message that the playwright has aimed at his audience. He is, in effect, telling the spectators that they too must abandon their selfish, acquisitive instincts, must labor for the betterment of others and for their own personal salvation, must use work as a means for attaining individual sanctification, must forego their feelings of self-reliance and independence and replace them with feelings of corporate responsibility. In short, they must

be more Christ-like. Only when this has taken place will both the urban and rural inhabitants of the West Riding be truly able to cope with a changing economic and social environment. Only then will they be finally able to live their lives not in tragic isolation from but in happy accord with the lives of others.

NOTES

- ¹ For a full discussion of the principles governing the selection of certain biblical stories for inclusion in the cycles see V. A. Kolve's The Play Called Corpus Christi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), pp. 57-100.
- ² Ambrose, in his Cain and Abel describes the avaricious man as one who "is poor in the midst of riches, slighting the fact that his bank balance is large." See Chapter II, note 13 of the present study.
- ³ Cawley, p. 91, note to ll. 25-42.
- ⁴ George C. Homans, "Man and the Land in the Middle Ages," Speculum, 11 (1936), 344-45.
- ⁵ Cawley, pp. 93-94, note to l. 367.
- ⁶ T. A. M. Bishop, "The Norman Settlement of Yorkshire," in Studies in Medieval History Presented to Frederick Maurice Powicke, ed. R. W. Hunt, W. A. Pantin and R. W. Southern (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1948), p. 6; Smith, Land and Politics, pp. 3, 12, 119.
See also The Itinerary of John Leland, I, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith (1907; rpt. London: Centaur Press, 1964), pp. 35-36, 39, 42-44. Writing in the mid-sixteenth century Leland said the following (p. 42) about Wakefield: "There be few townes yn the inwarde partes of Yorkshire that hath a fairer site or soile about it."
- ⁷ Mildred Campbell, The English Yeoman Under Elizabeth and the Early Stuarts (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1942), p. 389.
See also the morality Wisdom, ll. 696-98. Mind, a faculty of the soul, has been corrupted by the world and declares that his new name will henceforth be Mayntennance. He then introduces six of his retainers, referring to them as "a yomandrye with loweday to dres." The reference may be found in The Macro Plays, ed. Mark Eccles, EETS, o.s. 262 (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 137.
- ⁸ John Gardner, The Construction of the Wakefield Cycle (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), p. 25.

⁹ Oliver F. Emerson, "Legends of Cain, especially in Old and Middle English," PMLA, 21 (1906), 836.

¹⁰ The Mactacio Abel is quite original in its representation of Cain as an industrious and responsible worker--responsible insofar as the business of farming is concerned. Most medieval writings, when they addressed themselves to the issue of work, held up the assiduous husbandman or some other similar figure as the ideal to be imitated (as in Piers Plowman) or castigated the shiftless worker as a type deserving censure. The morality play, for instance, frequently dealt with the problem of idleness, both from a moral and a social point of view, and showed how spiritual and temporal ruin fell upon those who were lax in performing their physical, intellectual and religious duties. The hero of Mankind, as we have already seen, is a case in point. As long as he is engaged in prayer and manual labor he possesses the power to resist temptation; he quickly degenerates, however, once he abandons the industrious life his agricultural calling demands.

The association of moral corruption with indolence is also evident in the two other complete dramatic versions of the Cain story. (The York play is not considered here because it exists only in fragmentary form.) The N-Town version (Ludus Coventriae or The Plaie called Corpus Christi, ed. K. S. Block, EETS, e.s. 120 (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), p. 29; all future references to the N-Town cycle will be taken from this edition) portrays Cain initially as a merry, devil-may-care fellow who would prefer to stay at home eating and drinking rather than be bothered with having to offer some of his produce. When reminded by Adam of his duty to tithe, he wonders at the pointlessness of it all, betraying in the process his essentially shiftless character:

Ffor if I haue good a-now plente
I kan be mery so moty the
thow my fader I nevyr se
I 3yf not per of. An hawe.

(ll. 19-22)

Clearly, this Cain is the typical lazy peasant, that loutish clown so familiar to those acquainted with the "bad" peasant tradition.

The Chester Cain (The Chester Mystery Cycle, eds. R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, EETS, .s.s. 3 (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 34; all future references to the Chester cycle will be taken from this

edition) is less nonchalant in his approach to tithing, but still retains the slothful tendencies of his counterpart in N-Town. He considers the act of sacrifice to be a kind of short-cut to wealth, a way of getting more by doing less. He thus sees his offering as a bribe, a payment made to God on the assumption that great material favors will follow:

Of corne I have great plentee;
sacrifice to God sonne shall yee see.
I will make too looke if hee
will sende mee any more.

(ll. 517-20)

In these plays a less than enthusiastic approach to one's work is treated as a sign of spiritual delinquency. This was the standard opinion in the Middle Ages. The Wakefield Cain, however, is the exception to this pattern. For he is at once an extremely hard worker and a thoroughly reprehensible person. John Gardner, in The Construction of the Wakefield Cycle, p. 28, has tried to account for this uncommon method of characterization by suggesting that the author intended Cain to be a parody of the type of virtuous and assiduous husbandman found in Piers Plowman. While not denying the validity of this interpretation, I nonetheless feel that Cain's character is patterned just as much on the activities of real people as it is dependent on literary analogues. In other words, his character is drawn in such a way so as to mirror specific conditions and attitudes prevalent in late medieval England.

¹¹ John Gardner, p. 25 ff., has located a number of feudal relationships in the play, all of which are seriously threatened by Cain's anti-communal philosophy.

¹² Familial bonds, especially those among the peasantry, were disintegrating in the later Middle Ages at an alarming rate. See Hilton, The English Peasantry, p. 29. See also the sermon exemplum, printed in Middle English Sermons, pp. 89-90, which tells the story of an elder son who upon inheriting the family holding drove his aged grandfather out of the house and forced him to live in a small hut. Hilton observes that the tale "illustrates the breakdown of the customary practice by which grandparents were properly supported even when they had handed over the conduct of the holding to the next generation."

¹³ Cf. ll. 58, 66, 68, 74, 78, 101, 106, 130, 132, 144, 154, 157, 167, 170, 211, 304, 308.

14 Abel uses collective words on at least twenty-four different occasions, sometimes twice in one line: ll. 69, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 78, 79, 80, 82, 83, 106, 107, 131, 132, 133, 145, 146, 156, 168, 309.

15 Cf. ll. 77-83, 245-46.

16 Gardner, pp. 30-31.

17 See above, in the text of the present study, p. 121.

18 John Peter, Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 96.

19 Gardner, p. 27.

20 Gardner, p. 35.

21 Gardner, p. 25-26.

22 Bennett A. Brockman, "The Law of Man and the Peace of God: Judicial Process as Satiric Theme in the Wakefield Mactacio Abel," Speculum, 49 (1974), 699-707.

23 CCR, Richard II, VI, p. 294.

24 A recognized source of the cycle plays, the Cursor Mundi, also refers to Cain's desire to hide the body (see Cursor Mundi, ed. Richard Morris, EETS, o.s. 57, 99, 101, (London: 1874, 1893), pp. 70-71) but only does so in a cursory fashion. The Wakefield Master's more extensive treatment may represent an attempt to fit a traditional element of the Cain story into a contemporary context.

25 Cf. ll. 3, 7, 9, 10, 19, 28.

26 The ark, of course, was also a traditional emblem of the Church itself, outside of which there was no hope of spiritual salvation. See Rosemary Woolf, The English Mystery Plays (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), p. 133.

27 The idea of repair is treated even more explicitly in the York version, ll. 1-36, in The York Plays, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith, (Oxford: 1885).

28 St. Augustine, The City of God, trans. Henry Bettenson, ed., David Knowles (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1972), pp. 643-44.

29 Gardner, pp. 43-44.

30 Augustine, City of God, pp. 643-44.

31 Gardner, pp. 46-48; Kolve, pp. 146-51.

32 Herbert Heaton, The Yorkshire Woollen and Worsted Industries, 2nd ed., (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 23.

33 Part of the Wakefield Master's decision to make Mrs. Noah into a spinster may have been dictated by the traditional medieval association of her with Eve (see Woolf, pp. 144-45) who, for her part, was also commonly portrayed as a yarn-spinner (see Adam's comment to Eve in the N-Town Fall of Man, ll. 408-09, where he tells her that henceforth it will be her job "to spynne" and to "ffonde/oure nakyd bodyes in cloth to wynde"). Mrs. Noah's stubborn refusal to give up her spinning may therefore be seen as symbolic of fallen man's reluctance to give up the sinful effects of the Fall.

As was the case with his treatment of Cain's desire to hide Abel's body, however, the playwright may be amplifying his material here to conform to certain local and topical conditions and not just repeating a medieval commonplace.

34 Heaton, pp. 91-95.

35 The abrupt change Mrs. Noah undergoes once on board the ark represents the moral transformation any sinner experiences once he has entered the bosom of the Church either by conversion and baptism or by repentance and confession. Again, it should be pointed out that the play is exploiting here the traditional identification of Noah's ark with the Church of Christ. See Kolve, pp. 69-70.

IV

Millenarianism, Property and the Peasants' Revolt: The Theme of the Golden Age in the Prima Pastorum

Both the Mactacio Abel and the Processus Noe base much of their analysis of contemporary society on the medieval doctrine of work. That is, the orthodox view of toil provides a convenient point of departure for the explication of such socially important themes as cooperation and individualism, selflessness and greed, contentment and ambition, obedience and defiance. The Prima Pastorum, on the other hand, approaches these and other social issues via a somewhat different route--namely, through what the Middle Ages thought about the Golden Age, that prelapsarian period of peace, happiness and plenty.

The idea of a Golden Age had tremendous relevance in the late Middle Ages. For the first time in centuries people actually thought that a new, more equitable social order--a second Golden Age--could be brought about in the immediate future. This belief was especially strong in England where the bulk of the population, having obtained a taste--however slight--of prosperity and freedom, grew increasingly dissatisfied and impatient with a status quo that seemed intent on impeding change and returning people to a subservient position. The tradition

of the Golden Age, which held that unfallen man had never known want or dearth, never privately owned property, never experienced the stigma of the caste system, accorded quite well, therefore, with the economic aspirations and millenarian mentality of the lower classes. It accorded so well, in fact, that one of its central features--egalitarianism--found itself expressed in a proverb that was soon to become one of the slogans of the Peasants' Revolt: "When Adam delved and Eve span/ Who was then a gentleman?"

At least three episodes in the Prima Pastorum--the shepherds' opening laments over their poverty and over the fallen condition of the world in general, the gargantuan or "grotesque" feast, and the allusion to Virgil's Messianic Eclogue with its implication of a return to a pristine State of Nature--are either directly or indirectly affiliated with key aspects of the Golden Age myth and, by extension, with the seething social and political discontent of the era. This is not to say that the play advocates rebellion. It most emphatically does not. What it does try to do, however, is diffuse the volatile issues of the day by accommodating them to Christian doctrine. The play thus holds out the possibility of a return to the Golden Age--but a Golden Age inaugurated by Christ, not discontented man. At the same time it espouses a new social order: not one based on gross material abundance or superficial social equality,

but rather on the lasting principles of charity and faith. By the end of the play we realize that only the desire for grace--not a craving for property or precedence, plenty or pagan legends--can regenerate society in the long run.

The Golden Age: Intellectual Background ¹

The concept of a Golden Age (or State of Nature, or Age of Saturn) where all men were socially equal, property was owned jointly and brotherly love reigned supreme, was first propounded by the Greek Stoic philosophers. Zeno, for instance, utilizing the pastoral metaphor which would later become so strongly associated with the myth, described in his writings "an ideal world-society in which men would live like a vast flock of sheep in a single, communal pasturage." ²

The Roman Stoics patterned their view of the Golden Age on that of the Greeks. Of the former, the most influential was Seneca who in his Epistola XC contrasted the evil inequities of the present with the uncorrupted joys of the past:

. . . there came the fortune-favoured period when the bounties of nature lay open to all, for men's indiscriminate use, before avarice and luxury had broken the bonds which held mortals together, and they, abandoning their communal existence, had separated and turned to plunder. . . . What race of men was ever more blest than that race? They enjoyed all nature in partnership. Nature sufficed for them, now the guardian, as before she was the parent

of all; and this her gift consisted of the assured possession by each man of the common resources. Why should I not even call that race the richest among mortals, since you could not find a poor person among them? . . . The very soil was more productive when untilled, and yielded more than enough for peoples who refrained from despoiling one another. What ever gift nature had produced, men found as much pleasure in revealing it to another as in having discovered it. It was possible for no man either to surpass another or fall short of him; what there was, was divided among unquarrelling friends. Not yet had the stronger begun to lay hands upon the weaker; nor yet had the miser, by hiding away what lay before him, begun to shut off his neighbour from even the necessities of life; each cared as much for his neighbour as for himself. ³

In poetry the most famous classical description of the prelapsarian condition was found in Ovid's Metamorphoses where the poet characterizes man's pre-history as an era of peace, leisure, moral innocence and pastoral simplicity. Unlike the present, says Ovid, that fortunate time had no need for such enterprising activities as cultivation and trade. The earth's bounty was unlimited, and she profusely showered it upon all her inhabitants:

And Earth, untroubled,
Unharried by hoe or plowshare, brought forth
all
That men had need for, and those men were happy,
Gathering berries from the mountain sides,
Cherries, or blackdrops, and the edible acorns.
Spring was forever, with a west wind blowing
Softly across the flowers no man had planted,
And Earth, unplowed, brought forth rich grain;
the field,
Unfallowed, whitened with wheat, and there were
rivers
Of milk, and rivers of honey, and golden nectar
Dripped from the dark-green oak-trees. ⁴

Especially important for our purposes is the fact that these passages concentrate on those three features of the Golden Age that were to capture the imagination of disgruntled Englishmen in the late fourteenth century--communal ownership, social equality and a Utopian vision of plenty. These same motifs figure prominently in the Prima Pastorum.

While Seneca's version of what the former period was like relied heavily on Greek accounts, his interpretation of that period's significance took a rather original turn. Most noteworthy was his insistence that the Age of Saturn was not merely lost forever but that the corrupt institutions introduced by its passing--private property, social inequality, coercive rule--were necessary to keep mankind (now grown vicious) in check.⁵ This constituted an important addition to Golden Age lore, and it soon found itself incorporated into the Patristic view of the Fall.

When the Church Fathers came to write on the subject of man's primal condition they simply replaced the pagan notion of a Golden Age and its subsequent deterioration with the Christian concept of Paradise and the Fall. According to the Fathers, man's material happiness and spiritual innocence were lost not because Jupiter overthrew Saturn or because Pandora opened her box, but because Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating from the Tree of Knowledge. This new interpretation, however, did

not result in any major alteration in the characteristic details of the prelapsarian tradition. The Fathers still maintained, as had their classical predecessors, that man's original state had been one of social equality, communal ownership, freedom and plenty.⁶ But like Seneca, most of them declared that the "evil" institutions that had arisen after the Fall--private property, government, slavery--were, even though imperfect, nonetheless indispensable; for they effectively restrained the acquisitive and anarchic instincts of men perverted by sin.⁷

While the Church Fathers argued that institutions like private property were needed to prevent society from falling into chaos, they nevertheless tried, as has been noted in Chapter Two, to recapture some of the communal spirit of the Golden Age by teaching that men were not free to do with their property anything they pleased. On the contrary, it was asserted that one should keep only so much wealth as was necessary to support oneself and one's family; the rest had to be distributed among the less fortunate members of the community. This was only just, since at one time all men had held things collectively. Thus the Fathers were the first to develop the idea that property was something held in trust. While man had a perfect right to own a commodity, he did not always enjoy exclusive and unrestricted use of it. It was by means of this doctrine that a little piece of the Golden Age was preserved in a tainted world.

Classical and Patristic accounts of the prelapsarian world continued to exercise an influence on people all through the Middle Ages, but for most of that period this influence was confined to only those few who could read. By the fourteenth century, however, the myth was beginning to attract growing numbers of laymen previously unfamiliar with it--a development probably brought on by the appearance of vernacular works that dealt specifically with the legend. An examination of these works, especially those written in English, will be our next task.

The Golden-Age Theme in Medieval
English Literature and Society

Jean de Meun's continuation of the Roman de la Rose (1270), that enormously popular verse romance, brought the topic of the Golden Age back into vernacular literature for the first time since the classical era.⁸ The French poet added nothing new to the tradition; he simply restated its central tenets before a larger popular audience. Accordingly, de Meun portrayed the first age as a time when men had been surrounded by abundance, had lived communally and had enjoyed perfect social equality. They were

Void of all care except to lead their lives
In frank and joyous amiability.
Nor yet had king or prince brought despotism
To pinch and rob the folk. All equals were.

Nor yet for private property they strove.⁹

(ll. 8,446-51)

But Jean de Meun's audience, however large, still remained essentially an aristocratic one. It might feel a twinge of nostalgia for the lost age, but it never saw it as offering a program of social reform. By the fourteenth century, however, as the legend gained wider currency among the masses, the latter view became the dominant one--particularly in England where the whole Golden-Age story took on the character of a "revolutionary myth."¹⁰

Even the most cursory examination of the sources reveals that the fable of the Golden Age was extremely popular with late medieval Englishmen. Of course, it had never really been unpopular. As early as the eighth century the Anglo Saxon poem, "The Phoenix," had talked about a land where there was neither "struggle of poverty" nor "lack of wealth" and where "winter and summer alike the forset . . . hung with fruits."¹¹ But by the second half of the fourteenth century references to the former age and allusions to its attributes had multiplied dramatically. For example, in 1374 John Wyclif referred to one of the tradition's most well-known features--communal ownership--in the Latin treatise De Civili Dominio. Admitting that one must learn to accept the inequities and injustices of the real world, he nevertheless argued that from a theoretical point of view "all things ought

to be in common."¹² Chaucer wrote about the Golden Age on at least two different occasions: once, when he translated Boethius' The Consolation of Philosophy (1380) and again, when he devoted a whole poem to the subject, entitled "The Former Age" (1380-1400). The latter work is particularly noteworthy for its pastoral depiction of the prelapsarian state and its emphasis on charity and brotherhood, virtues that receive considerable attention in the Prima Pastorum:

[Men's] hertes were al oon, without galles;
Everich of hem his feith to other kepte.

Unforged was the hauberk and the plate;
The lambish peple, voyd of alle vyce,
Hadden no fantasye to debate,
But ech of hem wolde other wel cheryce;
No pryde, non envye, non avaryce,
No lord, no taylage by no tyrannye;
Humblesse and pees, good feith, the emperice.

(ll. 47-55)

Even homilists liked to allude now and then to various aspects of the tradition. In the late 1380's Thomas Wimbledon delivered a sermon on avarice in which he quoted St. Ambrose on the subject of communal ownership.¹³ And in the early fifteenth century we find Dives and Pauper declaring that "by þe lawe of kynde thynges been comoun."¹⁴ One should be able to see, even from these few literary fragments, that the myth of the Golden Age in general and the doctrine of common property in particular had by the end of the fourteenth century clearly captured the imagination of a number of people, among

them that of the age's most illustrious poet.

At the same time that popular interest in a pre-lapsarian world was becoming more and more pronounced another closely related development was taking place. This was the growing appeal of those Utopian fantasies that spoke of an earthly paradise whose central feature was gross material abundance. Traditional descriptions of the Golden Age had always included the idea of plenty, but it was always a certain kind of plenty--one involving the simple necessities of life, not its luxuries. Thus Jean de Meun asserts that in the first age men ate fruit, nuts and berries instead of fish and meat, wore animal skins instead of ornately designed clothes and lived in simple cottages or caves.¹⁵ The Utopian vision, on the other hand, while advocating many of the joys associated with the Golden Age, differed from that tradition in its preoccupation with luxury--particularly gastronomic luxury.

The most famous literary expression of medieval Utopian sentiment is the poem known as "The Land of Cokaygne" (1308-1325). The work is at once a satirical attack on the worldliness and wealth of contemporary monks and also a vivid record of the materialistic aspirations of the English lower classes. The satire need not concern us; but the poem's infatuation with opulence is of immense importance, for we shall encounter it again in the Prima Pastorum.

The poem begins by repudiating the conventional notion of an earthly paradise and asserts that the place it will be describing, "a lond ihote Cokaygne,"¹⁶ is far superior. It is superior precisely because it possesses the luxuries Paradise lacks. The latter may be "miri and brizt" (l. 5), but it only offers "grasse and flure and grene ris" (l. 8), some "frute" (l. 10) and water. Cokaygne, on the other hand, is "of fairir sizt" (l. 6) because of its great store of "real" food:

In Cokaigne is met and drink.
 Wipvte care, how, and swink;
 Þe met is trie, þe drink is clere,
 To none, russin, and sopper. . . .
 Þer beþ riuers gret and fine
 Of oile, melk, honi, and wine;
 Watir seruiþ þer to nobing
 Bot to sizt and to waiissing.

(ll. 17-20, 45-48)

This is not to say that Cokaygne has none of the conventional attributes of the Golden Age. On the contrary, it contains most of the things commonly associated with a prelapsarian state of existence--peace, harmony, happiness and health:

Þer is mani swete sizte;
 Al is dai, nis þer no nizte.
 Þer nis baret noþer strif,
 Nis þer no deþ, ac euer lif;
 Þer nis lak of met no cloþ,
 Þer nis man no womman wroþ. . . .
 Þe lond is ful of oþer gode.
 Nis þer flei, fle, no lowse
 In cloþ, in toune, bed, no house;
 Þer nis dunnir, slete, no hawle,
 No non vile worme no snawile,

No non storme, rein, no winde.
 Per nis man no womman blinde,
 Ok al is game, joi, and gle.
 Wel is him pat per mai be!

(ll. 25-30, 36-44)

Cokaygne's prelapsarian qualities, however, are simply part of a larger materialistic vision that grows more exotic and outlandish as the poem unfolds. We are told, for example, the Cokaygne has a fine abbey (a feature of the poem's anti-clerical satire) with "pilers . . . iturned of cristale" (ll. 67-68). This abbey is full of marvelous things: a fabulous tree capable of producing a variety of rare spices (ll. 71-77), flowers which never fade (ll. 78-82) and four springs along whose banks all sorts of precious jewels are to be found (ll. 83-94). But the most fantastic aspect of the abbey is that it is literally made of food. This obsession with food, especially rich and showy food, dominates the spirit of the poem and sets it apart from other, more traditional, literary versions of the Golden Age:

Per bep bowris and halles:
 Al of pasteis bep pe walles,
 Of fleis, of fisse, and rich met,
 Pe likfullist pat man mai et.
 Fluren cakes bep pe schingles alle
 Of cherch, cloister, boure, and halle.
 Pe pinnes bep fat podinges--
 Rich met to princez and kinges.
 Man mai perof et inoz,
 Al wip rikt and nozt wip woz.
 Al is commune to jung and old,
 To stoute and sterne, mek and bold.

(ll. 51-64)

Even nature, not to be outdone by the world of artifice, caters to man's gastronomic dreams. We are told that geese, in their desire to be consumed, fly "irostid on þe spitte" (l. 102), encouraging people to eat them by crying "'Gees, al hote, al hot!'" (l. 104). And larks are so obliging that they willingly fly right into one's mouth:

þe leuerokes, þat heþ cup,
Liztip adun to manis muþ
Idizt in stu ful swiþe wel,
Pudrid wiþ gilofre and canel.
Nis no spech of no drink,
Ak take inoz wiþvte swink.

(ll. 107-12)

The ending of the poem, furthermore, leaves little doubt that all the opulence we have been reading about constitutes a proletarian, not an aristocratic, fantasy. In fact, the nobility are specifically excluded from Cokaygne unless they first perform a difficult and degrading penance--the kind of penance which, we are led to believe, the exploited peasantry undergo daily:

Whose wl com þat lond to,
Ful grete penance he mot do:
Seue zere in swineis dritte
He mote wade, wol ze iwitte,
Al anon vp to þe chynne--
So he schal þe lond winne.

Lordinges gode and hend,
Mot ze neuer of world wend
Fort ze stond to zure cheance
And fulfille þat penance,
þat ze mote þat lond ise. . . .

(ll. 177-87)

The popularity of the Utopian vision of plenty was a by-product of the growing restlessness of the lower classes. Life had never been easy for the peasantry, but by the fourteenth century it seemed particularly burdensome not, as one might imagine, because exploitation was on the rise but because, paradoxically, conditions of existence were gradually improving.¹⁷ Consequently, what hardships remained were all the more keenly felt if only because they no longer seemed to be as inevitable as they once had been. Out of this situation sprang not only the hope that a better world could be brought about but also a sharp sense of frustration over the fact that such a transformation had not yet taken place. These two feelings--anticipation of reform and impatience over its delay--became all the more intense as the fourteenth century wore on.¹⁸ Together they explain a large part of the appeal sentiments like those contained in "The Land of Cokaygne," with its prelapsarian setting and materialistic preoccupations, had for the lower orders.

By the same token, the Golden Age motif owed its allure to similar sociological forces. At some point in the fourteenth century a number of people actually began to maintain that a Golden Age was not, as was conventionally believed, an irretrievably lost state of existence; rather, they argued, it was a truly attainable goal, one capable of realization in the immediate future.¹⁹

This kind of millenarian thinking, which may have played a part in the Peasants' Revolt, accounts at least partially for the tremendous attraction prelapsarian legends had among lower-class Englishmen--a group whose growing prosperity and steadily improving lot in life made it all the more frustrated with an unresponsive status quo and all the more susceptible to the blandishments of apocalyptic visionaries and reformers.

Immediately before, during and for some time after the Great Revolt, England was virtually buzzing with Utopian rhetoric and rumors of an impending Golden Age. This is not to say that the majority of the rebels who had joined the uprising did so in order to gratify some idealistic longing for a prelapsarian world. Quite the opposite. Their demands were usually highly specific and practical, involving such "bread-and-butter" issues as wage-rates and feudal services.²⁰ On the other hand, the primitivistic and Utopian urge definitely motivated some of the insurgents and certainly contributed to the overall momentum of the revolt. Otherwise, how does one account for the great deal of attention the leaders of the rebellion gave to two of the most important elements of the Golden Age myth--social equality and communal ownership?

The egalitarian spirit was strong even before the insurrection. Langland, for instance, writing on the eve of the revolt, tells us how the heads of the common folk

were being turned by the communistic doctrines of radical preachers:

Enuye herde þis and heet freres go to scole
 And lerne logyk and lawe and ek contemplacion,
 And preche men of Plato, and preue it by Seneca
 That alle þynges vnder heuene ouzte to ben in
 comune.

He lyeþ, as I leue, þat to þe lewed so preche,
 For god made to men a lawe and Moyses it
 tauzte:

Non concupisces rem proximi tui.

(B-text, XX, ll. 273-79)

By the time the rebellion broke out, therefore, a number of people were already familiar with some of the more outstanding features of prelapsarian mythology. How could it be otherwise? Those same features had been observed again and again in the vernacular literature of the period. And now, it seems, they were being publicized far and wide by certain university-trained itinerant friars. The Golden Age for many was no longer a vague and silly ideal but a palpable reality.

Just how much of a reality it was can be gauged from an examination of the speeches of John Ball, the renegade cleric who was one of the leaders of the Peasants' Revolt. Froissart tells us that a principal cause of the rising was the peasants' hatred of villeinage and their determination to abolish it at all costs, a determination that derived from a belief that "in the beginning of the world . . . there were no bondmen."²¹ Ball exploited this primitivistic sentiment and gained a following by appeal-

ing to the people's yearning for a golden world of equality, ease and material abundance. These are the very themes he developed in a speech before the people of Kent. Froissart reports it as follows:

Ah, ye good people, the matters goeth not well to pass in England, nor shall do till every-thing be common, and that there be no vil-lains nor gentlemen, but that we may all be united together, and that the lords be no greater masters than we be. What have we deserved, or why should we be kept thus in servage? We be all come from one father and one mother, Adam and Eve: whereby can they say or shew that they be greater lords than we be, saving that they cause us to win and labour for that they dispend? They are clothed in vel-vet and camlet furred with grise, and we be vested with poor cloth: they have their wines, spices and good bread, and we have the drawing out of the chaff and drink water: they dwell in fair houses, and we have the pain and tra-vail, rain and wind in the fields. . . .²²

Ball's address is nothing more than an amalgamation of two familiar traditions: the Golden Age and the Utopian vision of plenty. To the former belongs the demand for social equality and the allusion to communal ownership; to the latter, the thinly veiled suggestion, at work throughout the speech, that the riches of the nobility might one day be enjoyed by the masses. The dramatic power of the entire oration, furthermore, arises at least in part from the audience's awareness of the contrast that exists between the fallen world they live in and the golden one they have the potential to create. This belief in the capacity of man himself to bring about

a new era was expressed by Ball in yet another sermon, delivered this time, according to Walsingham, before a throng of two hundred thousand at Blackheath:

And continuing his sermon [Ball said] they must be prudent, hastening to act after the manner of a good husbandman, tilling his field and uprooting the tares that are accustomed to destroy the grain; first killing the great lords of the realm, then slaying the lawyers, justices and jurors, and finally rooting out everyone whom they knew to be harmful to the community in the future. So at last they would obtain peace and security; if, when the great ones had been removed, they maintained among themselves equality of liberty and nobility, as well as dignity and power.²³

The egalitarian doctrines and millenarian ideas that formed part of the inspiration of the Peasants' Revolt continued to circulate after the rising had been suppressed. For example, both Thomas Wimbeldon and the author of Dives and Pauper, whose writings appeared after the events of 1381, make references to communal ownership and social equality and pay tribute to the part these institutions played in the original scheme of things. By the fifteenth century, however, a reaction of sorts had set in in some quarters. Alarmed at the importance accorded in the recent revolt to certain primitivistic ideas, people began to view these ideas with growing suspicion, associating them with rebellion and chaos. As a result, some of the more commonplace values of the Golden Age--for instance, communism and egalitarianism--fell into disrepute, and in their place we find only a reaffirmation

of the traditional hierarchies of medieval society. Nowhere is this reactionary process better illustrated than in John Lydgate's description of the "olde world, whan Saturn was first kyng," an account of the Golden Age that appears in his Fall of Princes (1431-39).²⁴ Lydgate's version of the Golden Age has very little in common with earlier writings on the same topic. True, he does portray the prelapsarian world as a place of peace, harmony and virtue (ll. 1160-73). But these blessings abide in a very unfamiliar setting. For Lydgate's uncorrupted world is not a place of social equality, common property, simple plenty and leisure. On the contrary, it is a place of power, order and degree, manual labor and gross material inequity. It is, in short, the orthodox medieval conception of a static, class-oriented society pushed back to the dawn of time and made to resemble the State of Nature. Thus, in place of a classless, primeval brotherhood of men we encounter a hierarchically arranged community of estates, each performing its respective duties for the good of the whole: priests pray, knights protect widows, orphans and the clergy, merchants are honest, craftsmen upright and laborers industrious and uncomplaining (ll. 1174-1208)--the very kind of society the millenium-minded rebels of 1381 had tried so hard to topple:

Lordshipe that tyme auoided meyntenaunce,
 Hoolichirch lyued in parfitnesse;
 Knythod tho daies for trouthe whet his launce,

And fals extorsioun hadde non interesse;
 Marchantis wynnyng cam al off rihtwisnesse,
 Artificers the werk dai wer nat idill,
 And bisynesse off labour held the bridill.²⁵

(III, ll. 3151-57)

Whatever Lydgate is talking about here, he is certainly not talking about the traditional Golden Age.

Judging from his description of the Golden World it seems quite safe to say that Lydgate cared little for the egalitarian sentiments of his day. Aware, in all probability, of the part they had played in the great rebellion, he may very well have deliberately refrained from mentioning them in his text. Consequently, his Golden Age is one of the few where there exists no equality of any kind. "When Adam delved and Eve span" still evoked too many bad memories among too many people. Neither did he believe, unlike some of his contemporaries, that man was capable of recapturing his prelapsarian past. Men should devote their energies instead, he thought, toward making the existing social system work, not dream about some imaginary and unrealizable state of being. And, as if to drive this particular point home, he took it upon himself to turn the Golden Age into an anachronistic replica of the medieval res publica.

The Wakefield Master shares many of Lydgate's assumptions about the nature of society. He is also aware of the folly of paying too much attention to Utopian

ideas in general. The dramatist, furthermore, seems rather skeptical about man's ability to fashion on his own a new, more equitable society, mainly because all of his efforts in that direction appear to be based on a somewhat immature infatuation with material goods. A naive faith in commodities certainly was behind at least some of the peasants' proposals in 1381. They assumed that a kind of Golden Age could be established merely by making everyone equal--especially financially equal. Removing the inequities of wealth was looked upon in many quarters as a panacea of sorts. The same materialistic assumptions lay behind the Utopian vision of plenty: men will be happy if only they could live in a land of luxury. In the Prima Pastorum the Wakefield Master sets out to expose the fallacies inherent in these bogus beliefs. Unlike Lydgate, however, he does not suppress issues or opinions he does not like; rather he grapples with them head on, exhibiting their flaws and inconsistencies for all to see. At the same time he avoids Lydgate's rather rigid affirmation of the status quo. The Prima Pastorum declares that a new Golden Age is not necessarily an impossibility; it can be achieved in the here and now. Only instead of owing its existence to human effort and initiative, it will be a product of divine intervention. And instead of radically altering the external structure of society, it will transform the human heart.

The Prima Pastorum

The moment the play starts one is aware of being in a fallen world--especially a world obsessed with material goods in general and the idea of private property in particular. A sense of decay, of a decline from a now lost ideal condition, hovers over the stage like a phantom and is evoked by the very style of the first shepherd's lament. Gyb catalogues the very ills whose absence is considered necessary for the establishment of a state of uncontaminated happiness, forcing us to realize just how far man has moved away from his prelapsarian state. Gyb's technique is exactly the reverse of that used by poets who wrote in the Golden Age tradition. According to Howard Patch, classical and Christian writers frequently made use of what he calls a "negative formula"²⁶ to illustrate both the glories of the former age and to stress the miseries of the present. Thus Ovid, by telling us what the Golden Age was not ("no punishment," "no law," "no judges," "no towns," "no . . . soldiers"),²⁷ compels us to see how bad our own age is. Chaucer uses the same device in "The Former Age:"

No mader, welde, or wood no litestere
 No knew; the flees was of his former hewe;
 No flesh ne wiste offence of egge or spere;
 No coyn ne knew man which was fals or trewe;
 No ship yit karf the wawes grene and blewe;
 No marchaunt yit ne fette outlandish ware;
 No trompes for the werres folk ne knewe,
 No toures heye and walles rounde or square.²⁸

(ll. 17-24)

instance, it was traditionally assumed that the Golden Age was blessed with a mild, stable climate. Ovid says that it was a time when "spring was forever," the extremes of heat and cold being unknown. The author of "The Phoenix" draws on the tradition too, as does Jean de Meun. But Gyb goes out of his way to describe a far different setting, for his world is one beset by cruel and unpredictable climatic change--a place often "in weytt," "in blast" and "in rane."²⁹ We thus cannot help but longingly recollect the golden paradise man has lost because Gyb insists on using both a style and a diction deliberately designed to evoke it.

Having established a post-lapsarian tone, the playwright is now free to introduce the features of the fallen world that have become so prevalent in his own society--namely, the desire for private property and the craving for material success. These two evils, of course, were not exclusively confined to late medieval England. Avarice of all sorts was considered one of the central characteristics of the fallen world in general and was a commonplace in all the writings that dealt with the Golden Age. Ovid himself devoted a good deal of space to it in his depiction of the Iron Age (i.e., the historical present), a period he claimed had been corrupted by trade, commerce, exploitation of land, technological innovation and out-and-out greed.³⁰ Now Gyb is no entrepreneur. Unlike Chaucer's "marchaunt" in "The Former

Age," he does not "fette outlandish ware" from across the seas in order to live in luxury. He nevertheless most assuredly has what Ovid called that "damned desire of having,"³¹ which certainly would not have made him unique in fifteenth-century England.

Gyb quickly betrays his love of worldly possessions if only by complaining that he does not have any. His long discourse (ll. 1-18) on Fortune's fickleness (yet one more penalty those in a fallen world must endure)³² seems largely inspired by his own personal poverty. He has lost all his sheep to the "rott" (l. 26) and "moren" (l. 39) and has no money to pay his "fermes" (l. 30) or rent. In short, he is on the threshold of personal bankruptcy. So bleak, in fact, are his prospects that he even contemplates fleeing the country:

My handys may I wryng and mowrnyng make,
 Bot if good will spryng, the countre forsake;
 Fermes thyk ar comyng, my purs is bot wake,
 I haue nerehand nothyng to pay nor to take.
 I may syng
 With purs penneles,
 That makys this heuynes,
 "Wo is me this dystres!"
 And has no helpyng.

(ll. 28-36)

At this point one might think that Gyb would derive some stoic consolation from his plight, resigning himself to the mutable forces controlling his universe. In fact, the first half of his lament, dealing as it does with the haphazard way the world fluctuates between

immoderate extremes--poverty and wealth, joy and sorrow, fair weather and foul--leads us to expect just such a development. But this is not the case. Instead, he reaffirms his commitment to the pursuit of material commodities, resolving to go to the "fare" (l. 42) of all places--the one spot where, by virtue of the unique opportunity it affords for commercial speculation, we can expect Fortune's power to be strongest. Once there, Gyb hopes to better his financial situation by buying more sheep: "And yit may I multyplicé,/For all this hard case" (ll. 44-45).

Gyb, of course, is only deceiving himself here. He sees himself as a man whose "wytt" (l. 40) will enable him to make a quick killing in the market place. His determination to acquire property, however, is nothing short of utter folly, especially when we recall that by his own admission he has absolutely no capital with which to accomplish his design. His faith in materialism is exposed for what it really is--the foolish chimera of a manifestly unwise individual.

What we have here is the first stirring of what is to be a major theme in the Prima Pastorum. The playwright, by revealing the lack of substance behind the shepherd's scheme, suggests that in many cases the belief in sudden prosperity, like the belief in a second Golden Age or a Utopian land of plenty, is nothing more than a pipe-dream. Secondly, he implies--and this is of the utmost

importance--that Gyb, like so many of his contemporaries, may be relying too much on the power of commodities to solve problems indigenous to a fallen world. Such facile solutions simply are not possible, and the very structure of Gyb's opening address proves it. He spends over thirty lines describing a world riddled with by-products of the Fall, and then at the very end of the speech blithely dismisses the whole vast reality of post-lapsarian life by announcing his intention to go to the fair and "multyplé"--an action that is somehow supposed to make everything in his world right again. This kind of thinking is, to say the least, unrealistic. As the grotesque feast episode will reveal, no sudden change in man's material circumstances, even if it were to happen, can remove all the effects of the Fall. The world will still remain a less than perfect place primarily because the transformation that occurs is merely external and material, not internal and spiritual. Gyb therefore pledges his allegiance to a fallacious and deficient set of beliefs--the same beliefs that the rebellious peasants of 1381 had devoted themselves to.

Whereas Gyb is obsessed with the idea or hope of acquiring property, the second shepherd, John Horne, is preoccupied by the thought of holding on to it. Horne's affliction is merely the other side of the acquisitive coin. As befits a man of his possessive sensibility, he enters complaining of "robers and thefys" (l. 52) and

greedy retainers who, with their lord's permission and under his protection, confiscate the property ("both ploghe and wane," l. 62) of poor tenants.³³ Once again, a fallen world is being evoked. Lydgate, for instance, in the Fall of Princes, saw the presence of "robboours" (l. 3133) and "mayntenaunce" (l. 3151) as a prerequisite of post-lapsarian life. At any rate, all these rascals are involved in taking away that which belongs to someone else, and this alone is enough to make the rather possessive Horne both fear and hate them.

In keeping with his possessive nature, Horne also has a strong sense of territory which he displays in his dealings with his fellow shepherd. He no sooner sees Gyb but he must rebuke him for walking all over the grain in the field ("Thou goys ouer the corne! Gyb, I say, how!" l. 83). And a bit later we find him stridently opposing his companion's plans to pasture his imaginary sheep (Gyb's dream of thriving at the fair has made him lose touch with reality) in the area:

Nay, not so!
 What, dreme ye or slepe? Where shuld thay go?
 Here shall thou none kepe.

(ll. 101-03)

Gyb stubbornly refuses to take his non-existent flock elsewhere. A quarrel ensues, and the two almost come to blows over the whole absurd affair.

The dispute over the imaginary sheep is vitally

important for two reasons. First, because it is a dispute, it reminds us that these characters are indeed prisoners in a fallen, disorderly world--a world of violence, precedence, property and territorial struggle. That a strong territorial sense was a precondition of a fallen world is something Virgil himself implied in his Georgics. There he wrote that during the Golden Age "it was not even right to mark off or divide the land with boundaries" (I, ll. 126-27).³⁴ The present age, as the actions of the second shepherd demonstrate so well, no longer bears the slightest resemblance to that idyllic time. Now people fight over the very land which had once been free from the surveyor's measurements.

Secondly, the dispute underscores the folly of putting one's faith in commodities and exposes the stupidity of those who do. Gyb has become so obsessed with the hope of getting sheep that he actually believes that they are already in his possession. Horne, meanwhile, is so caught up in his sense of territory and so fearful of trespassers in general that he too blinds himself to the fact of their non-existence. Both men, in short, are so devoted to the "damned desire of having" that they delude themselves into accepting illusion as reality and almost resort to violence to resolve their ridiculous differences. The entire episode is designed to show us the folly and danger of acquisitive aspirations as well as the visionary foundations upon which they rest.

At this point in the action the third shepherd, Slawpase, arrives on the scene and immediately begins to lay bare his colleagues' foolishness by comparing their "wyttys" to the meal in his sack, which he then proceeds to empty. This little object lesson is quite enlightening. The two shepherds' wits have indeed trickled out, leaving their heads as empty as the grain-sack. But Slawpase's lecture is effective for yet another reason in that it makes use of concrete, real objects to drive home its message. Up to now the characters have been dealing primarily in illusions; but here, for the first time in the play, something physical is actually introduced. And it is introduced for a specific purpose--to illustrate, ironically, the stupidity of believing one's own dreams, an apt lesson for an age engrossed with apocalyptic yearnings of all kinds.

Slawpase's telling application of real objects also acts as a bridge between the two worlds of the play: the realm of poverty, possessiveness and illusion on the one hand, and that of communal ownership and extravagant abundance on the other. The first quarter of the play (ll. 1-126) dealt with how the mere hope for commodities and sudden wealth--a hope very much alive among the late medieval peasantry--is ultimately of no more substance than a mirage, no more real than Gyb's imaginary sheep. Such a hope, furthermore, is not even wholly innocent or harmless. (Neither, for that matter, were the millen-

no more satisfying: the evils of a fallen world would endure. This is the whole point of the scene where Gyb and Iohn Horne, who had earlier complained about their poverty (ll. 91-100), suddenly, along with Slawpase, find themselves in a world of material profusion. I am referring, of course, to the famous rural banquet scene.

This grotesque feast, so called because of its gargantuan assemblage of food, has for some time now been regarded as a burlesque of upper class banquets of the period, the burlesque itself being achieved by the humorous combination of aristocratic and peasant dishes.³⁵ But it is so much more than this. The feast, in short, is nothing less than the dramatic equivalent of the land-of-plenty tradition made so popular by "The Land of Cokaygne" and sustained by the materialistic and egalitarian yearnings of the people themselves. The whole episode represents a kind of realization of the archetypal peasant vision: an earthly paradise where luxury, leisure and equality constitute the normal conditions of existence.³⁶ That this vision is based on false, mundane principles becomes apparent as events transpire.

The parallels between the shepherds' feast and the Utopian vision of plenty can be quickly pointed out. A certain egalitarian spirit is present in both. Thus in "The Land of Cokaygne" we learn that "al is commune to jung and old" (l. 63). Communal ownership is also in evidence at the grotesque banquet, for each shepherd

obviously shares the food he has brought with his companions. A levelling of social distinctions may also be symbolized by the merging of aristocratic and plebian meals. Both the shepherds' banquet and the Utopian vision, furthermore, exhibit a preoccupation with material abundance and luxury, especially when it comes to food. "The Land of Cokaygne" recorded such delicacies as "pasteis . . . Of fleis, of fisse, and rich met" (ll. 54-55), "fat podinges" (l. 59), "gees irostid on þe spitte" (l. 102) and "leuerokes . . . Idizt in stuful swiþe wel, / Pudrid wiþ gilofre and canel" (ll. 107, 109-10). The Prima Pastorum catalogues a similar array of items of which the following list is only a sample: "a foote of a cowe well sawsed" (l. 215), the "pestell of a sowe that powderd has bene" (l. 216). "Two blod-yngys" (l. 216), "two swyne-gronys" (l. 229), "All a hare bot the lonys" (l. 230), "the leg of a goys, / With chekyns endorde, pork, partryk to roys" (l. 234) and a "calf-lyuer / skorde with the veryose" (l. 236).

Social equality, communal ownership, gross material abundance: all the features which so mesmerized the late medieval peasantry and which were so identified in the popular mind with the golden and Utopian states of existence, make an appearance in this episode. Yet nothing is really changed by their presence. Disputes over possession and precedence continue as before even though the shepherds now have a superfluity of the world's

trash (cf. ll. 198-216, 276-80).³⁷ The reason for this is that the herdsmen, including the more acute Slawpase,³⁸ have all chosen, like so many of their real-life contemporaries, to pin their hopes on earthly things rather than on heavenly values, to gratify physical instead of spiritual needs. This was true earlier in the play and it is true now. While in a state of deprivation, the first shepherd had his values so distorted that he confused the mutable objectives of this world with the eternal benefits of the next, imploring God to "from his heuen/Send grace" (ll. 40-41) not, as one might expect, so that he could lead a more spiritually enriching life, but so that he could have better "hap" (l. 40) at the fair. Now that he finds himself in more affluent surroundings he again makes the same mistake, referring to the "good holsom ayll" (l. 248) being passed about as "boyte of oure bayll" (l. 247)--a phrase that throughout the cycle and throughout the devotional literature of the period is constantly applied to Christ himself. Apparently Gyb cannot bring himself to realize the error of replacing spiritual and eternal goals with transitory and specious ones. And the same can be said for the others. The second shepherd is so anxious to "cryb" (l. 208) or eat, that he remains blissfully ignorant of that other very special crib that awaits him at Bethlehem. The third shepherd sees "good sawse" as his "restorité" (ll. 237-38), unaware that a radically different kind of

restoration is promised to those who can learn to divest themselves of their dependence on material things. Even the one act of charity that the shepherds supposedly perform--the distribution of leftovers to the poor (ll. 282-286)--is really, if we are to believe the Church Fathers, no sure indication of their disengagement from the world. It certainly requires no huge sacrifice on their part to give away food after they have gorged themselves. And besides, the action is really not a matter of charity at all but rather one of justice. As an act it simply reminds us that, despite the communal, Utopian atmosphere of the feast itself, wealth still remains unequally distributed in a world that has yet to be renewed.

An overflow of worldly abundance, therefore, has produced no measurable improvement in society. The shepherds still fight among themselves and still retain an immoderate affection for temporal commodities, quarreling over such petty issues as whose turn it is to drink out of a wine-cup and blaming each other for taking more than his share. The inequities and frustrations of the Iron Age persist in a world where the egalitarian ideal, because it is essentially a materialistic ideal, offers no hope of reform. All this, of course, is precisely what is so wrong (according to the play) with the period's millenarian and Utopian visions. In placing so much emphasis on the need for temporal and material change, they totally disregard the necessity to change

the human heart. This is a fatal oversight. For only the individual heart has the power to effect a real transformation of society.

For all its conviviality, therefore, the grotesque feast offers essentially a pessimistic, cautionary view of the world--namely, that the Golden Age will never be brought back as long as men's hearts remain rooted in that which is worldly and insubstantial. This bleak message, however, is utterly transformed by the angel's announcement of the birth of the Christ-child. The shepherds awake metamorphosed by the heavenly news. Before, they had been dull, dim-witted men, "bare of wysdom" (l. 161) and "thyn" (l. 171) in intelligence. Now they behave like biblical scholars, citing David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Moses and others in an effort to locate the significance of the child's birth. They have miraculously been changed into wise men.

Such a dramatic alteration in character obviously signifies Christ's power to modify substantially the hearts and minds of men no matter how simple and uncouth they happen to be. As Gyb says, "Nothyng is inpossybyll, / Sothly, that God wyll" (ll. 373-74). This interior reformation is precisely what society needs to be truly revitalized. The change that comes over the herdsmen after the angel's appearance, therefore, heralds a genuine return to the Golden Age itself.

There is much in the play to indicate that the dawn

of the new era really has broken. The scholarly colloquium that the shepherds conduct, for instance, suggests the human condition prior to the Fall. It was a Christian commonplace that Adam and Eve, while still in the Garden, possessed infused or innate knowledge of all things. The ease with which the shepherds now cite scripture and the classics (and in Latin!) signals a return to a similar state of bliss. Like the first parents, they too have a depth of learning that is clearly beyond their normal capacities.

But the reappearance of the Golden Age suggests itself in even more striking and incontestable ways. For the first shepherd actually cites a passage from Virgil's famous Fourth or Messianic Eclogue that predicts the birth of a child who shall restore that bygone era to man once again:

Virgill in his poëtre sayde in his verse,
 Euen thus by gramere, as I shall reherse:
Iam noua progenies celo demittitur alto;
Iam rediet Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna. . . .
 He sayde from heuen a new kynde is send,
 Whom a vyrgyn to neuen, oure mys to amend,
 Shall conceyue full euen, thus make I an end;
 And yit more to neuen, that Saturne shall bend
 Vnto vs,
 With peasse and plente,
 With ryches and menee,
 Good luf and charyté
 Blendyd amanges vs,

(ll. 386-89, 395-401)

This amazing passage constitutes the culmination of the play's messianic message. Gyb's identification of

Virgil's babe with the child at Bethlehem corresponds to medieval religious doctrine which saw in the poet's lines an inspired allusion to the Nativity.³⁹ But here Christ's birth, the event which is to inaugurate a second Eden, is also linked to the pagan concept of the Golden Age, a time when Saturn benevolently ruled the world and brought "peasse and plenté" to mankind. Two separate traditions (perhaps three, if we count the Utopian vision of plenty) are thus brought together in the person of the Savior. The point of all this is obvious. The play seems to be saying that only through Christ, not through human effort, will a second State of Nature ever be instituted--a message clearly meant to diffuse, or at least to redirect, to its proper end, whatever millenarian fervor still existed in the land.

At the same time that Christ is applauded as the sole agent of change, we are given a glimpse of the kind of change he will effect. It is, above all, an internal and spiritual one. The shepherds, as their intellectual transformation shows, have been the first to benefit from it. But aside from their intellectual metamorphosis, the herdsmen also go through a moral alteration that likewise harkens back to the Golden Age. Gone, for instance, are their earlier quarrels over precedence and property. Gyb and Iohn Horne now humbly defer to each other's wishes where before they had been all too ready to

assault one another at the slightest provocation. Upon arriving at the stable, the third shepherd asks: "Who shall go in before?" (l. 454). Gyb responds, "I ne rek, by my hore" (l. 455), revealing a refreshing lack of pride and stubbornness. Then Horne, in a complete reversal of his earlier territorial paranoia, kindly allows Gyb to enter first because "Ye ar of the old store;/It semys you, iwys" (ll. 456-57). They all vie with each other over who shall be the most considerate, whereas in the past they would have been at each other's throats had a similar situation presented itself.

As the shepherds' sense of territory and precedence fades, so too does their sense of property. Once inside the stable they freely divest themselves of their homely goods, generously proffering them in a true spirit of charity that bears little resemblance to the rather casual and mechanical way in which they distributed alms after their banquet. Their gifts moreover--a box, a ball and a bottle--are not leftovers or surplus commodities but unique tokens of devotion. They leave the manger utterly "restorde" (l. 496) by a far more potent kind of "restorité" (l. 238) than an overabundance of food, vowing to "recorde" (l. 495) the birth of their Savior where in the past they had been content to "recorde the leg of a goys" (l. 233). They have finally replaced worldly values with spiritual ones. Consequently, the shepherds now find themselves the recipients of a

very different kind of "grace" (l. 490) than the type Gyb had asked for in his opening lament (l. 41). They have become followers of a "lam" (l. 501) far more real and enduring than the invisible ones which had once taken up so much of their attention. The Golden Age has finally come to the West Riding.

The Prima Pastorum thus represents the Wakefield Master's attempt to accommodate to religion and to exercise through art the subversive and acquisitive aspirations of his countrymen--feelings responsible for so much of the social unrest of the period.⁴⁰ If the millenarian, revolutionary urge is ever to be successful, so the play argues, it must first sever its connection with the temporal and human and attach itself exclusively to the spiritual and divine. Otherwise it will never exert an influence on society. As the grotesque feast shows, the mere alteration of the physical conditions of existence does nothing to bring about the kind of change necessary to sustain a Golden Age. By the same token, material considerations suddenly become irrelevant once God inspires man's moral transformation. Presumably the shepherds are just as poor at the end of the play as they were at its beginning. But the Golden Age has nonetheless become a reality. Therefore only when man learns to exchange illusory ideals and visionary social programs for a real desire to reform his own soul, only when he is willing to place his love for his neighbor

above his love for things, only when he replaces his belief in himself with a belief and trust in Christ will he be capable of achieving the "blys full euen/Contynuyng" (ll. 488-89) promised at the end of the play. Then will he be truly wealthy in the spiritual sense, forging his own private Utopia out of an inner holiness and grace and blessed, both in this world and the next, with "ryches and menee,/Good luf and charyté."

NOTES

¹ Much of the following discussion is based on the findings of Norman Cohn as set forth in his masterful study of mass millenarian movements, The Pursuit of the Millennium (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957), pp. 195-208.

² Cohn, p. 197.

³ Seneca, Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, II, trans. Richard M. Gummere (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1930), pp. 423-25.

⁴ Ovid, Metamorphoses, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1964), pp. 5-6.

⁵ Cohn, p. 200.

⁶ Cohn, p. 201.

⁷ Cohn, p. 201.

⁸ Guy Fourquin, The Anatomy of Popular Rebellion in the Middle Ages, trans. Anne Chesters (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1978), p. 99; see also Cohn, p. 205.

⁹ Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, The Romance of the Rose, trans. Harry W. Robbins, ed. Charles W. Dunn (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1962), p. 171; see also Dante's Purgatorio, XXVIII.

¹⁰ Cohn, p. 208.

¹¹ R. K. Gordon, ed. Anglo-Saxon Poetry (1926; rpt. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1977), p. 240.

¹² Quoted in Cohn, p. 211.

¹³ See Owst, p. 305.

¹⁴ Dives and Pauper, ed. Barnum (London: 1976), p. 43.

¹⁵ The Romance of the Rose, pp. 169-70.

16 "The Land of Cokaygne," l. 2, in Early Middle English Verse and Prose, eds. J. A. W. Bennett and G. V. Smithers (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 138. All future references to "The Land of Cokaygne," will be taken from this edition.

17 A. L. Morton, The English Utopia (London: Lawrence & Wishart. Ltd., 1952), p. 15.

18 Morton, p. 15.

19 Cohn, p. 209; see also Fourquin, pp. 101-02.

20 Cohn, p. 210.

21 Froissart, Chroniques, X, pp. 94-97, rpt. and trans. in Dobson, p. 370.

22 In Dobson, p. 371.

23 Walsingham, Historia Anglicana, II, pp. 32-33, rpt. and trans. in Dobson, p. 375.

24 Lydgate's Fall of Princes, Part III, p. 807.

25 Lydgate's Fall of Princes, Part II, ed. Henry Bergen, EETS, e.s. 122 (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), p. 417.

26 Howard Patch, The Other World According to Descriptions in Medieval Literature (1950; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, 1970), p. 12.

27 Metamorphoses, pp. 5-6.

28 See also "The Phoenix" in Anglo-Saxon Poetry, p. 240.

29 Bad weather is given an even more prominent place in the first shepherd's lament in the Secunda Pastorum, ll. 1-9.

30 See also Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy, trans. Richard Green (Indianapolis, Ind.: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1962), pp. 33-34 and Chaucer's "The Former Age," ll. 17-32.

31 Metamorphoses, p. 7.

32 Lydgate, for example, in his Fall of Princes, (in Lydgate's Fall of Princes, Part III, p. 809) tells us that as soon as the Golden Age had been replaced by the

Age of Iron the world became a place of mutability:

The goldene world was gouerned be Resoun,
The world of iren was furious cruelte;
The moone is mutable, ful of duplicite,
Lik to this world, because attemp[e]raunce
Is set aside and hath no gouernaunce.

(VII, ll. 1232-36)

³³ John Horne is referring to purveyance, "the seizure or purchase at an arbitrary price of the animals and farm equipment of the husbandman" (Cawley, p. 99, note to ll. 62-63 and p. 105, note to l. 33). It was a common abuse of the period, theoretically the prerogative of the king but practiced by the nobility and their retainers as well.

³⁴ Quoted by Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas in Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity (1935; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, 1965), p. 370.

³⁵ A. C. Cawley, "The 'Grotèsque' Feast in the Prima Pastorum," Speculum, 30 (1955), 213-17 and "The Wakefield First Shepherds' Play," Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, 7 (1953), 115-16.

³⁶ The Prima Pastorum is not the only piece of medieval drama to stage a gargantuan feast. The Chester Shepherds' Play also has a rustic banquet scene (cf. ll. 101-48). Rosemary Woolf, in her English Mystery Plays, p. 187, has noted a number of correspondences between this work and the Towneley play, particularly in their similar treatment of the banquet-motif. As far as I can determine, furthermore, she is the only scholar to have commented on the dramatic handling of this motif and its relation to the Land of Cokaygne tradition; she confines her discussion, however, only to Breughel's famous painting and makes no attempt to explore in detail the literary aspects of this tradition. Her remarks are brief and worth quoting:

The mood of the Towneley and Chester shepherds' scenes reminds one of Breughel's Land of Cokayne, in which the peasants are stretched out in lazy sleep around a table laden with food. Breughel has imposed an atmosphere of coarse repulsiveness upon the traditional never-never-land of abundant food.

37 Cawley, in "The Wakefield First Shepherds' Play," 116-19, draws our attention to the worldliness of the shepherds and maintains that the play's affirmation of the insubstantiality of worldly things is reinforced by the feast itself, which he sees as being imaginary and make-believe. See also David Lyle Jeffrey, "Pastoral Care in the Wakefield Shepherd Plays," American Benedictine Review, 22 (1971), 214.

38 I am here following A. C. Cawley's suggestion that the third shepherd and Iak Garcio, the puzzling character who makes a brief appearance in the play, are one and the same person. See A. C. Cawley, "Iak Garcio of the Prima Pastorum," Modern Language Notes, 68 (1953), 169-72; see also Helen Cooper, "A Note on the Wakefield 'Prima Pastorum!'," Notes and Queries, 218 (1973), 326.

39 Harry Levin, The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 18.

40 Like the Prima Pastorum, the Chester Shepherds' Play also deals with subversive issues. V. A. Kolve maintains that the latter play's famous wrestling scene (ll. 258-99), where the boy Trowle defeats the other herdsmen one by one, has affinities with such anarchic customs as the Boy Bishop festival when "during the Christmas season at the feast of the Innocents . . . the custom grew up of electing from the choir a Boy Bishop for the day and allowing the boys to sit in the seats of their elders and superiors and to conduct certain divine offices" (The Play Called Corpus Christi, p. 156). Furthermore, he tells us that behind this whole tradition lay the scriptural pronouncement that Christ "hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble" (Luke, 1; 52). It was on the basis of this statement that one of the most popular themes of the Middle Ages was developed--the "notion of youth overcoming age, of the servant overcoming the master" (Kolve, p. 156).

During the late medieval period, however, this theme acquired revolutionary overtones as more and more people, familiar with the countless sermons which used just such a theme in their descriptions of the Last Judgment (see Owst, pp. 287-307), began to interpret it as a justification of radical social change. Needless to say, the whole idea of the weak and the humble defeating the mighty exercised a powerful influence on those who took part in the Peasants' Revolt. The scene where Trowle literally overthrows his masters, therefore, may represent the playwright's attempt to capitalize on the popular sentiments of his age. If so, it certainly must have been well received by the more disgruntled members of the audience.

The Unchivalric Knight: Aristocratic Violence in
Medieval Life and Drama

In the slaughter scene of the Magnus Herodes there is an illuminating episode involving a Bethlehem mother and one of Herod's knights. The woman, desperately trying to protect her infant, attacks her assailant both verbally and physically, calling him a "harlot" and a "holard" (l. 358)--a rascal and a fornicator--and striking his "tabard" (l. 357) or insignia. She is no match for an armed and trained warrior, however, and her baby soon lies dead at her feet, a victim of the knight's so-called prowess. The murder of her child drives the poor woman into a frenzy, and she now hurls more abuse at the knight, denouncing him as a "morderman," a "tratoure" and a "theft" (l. 361)--terms one hardly associates with the chivalric calling.

But the mother's accusations are not that far from the truth. Apart from the fact that the victim of the knight's brutality here is a mere infant, the entire incident accurately reflects both the character and conduct of not a few English knights who in the later Middle Ages often really were murderers, thugs and thieves. In addition, they commonly wore, like Herod's brutal followers, the "tabard" or livery of their lord,

using it both as a sign of their affiliation and as a shield protecting them from prosecution. One should not be surprized, therefore, to find these disreputable characters perhaps being used by the Wakefield Master as models for his own creations--specifically, those emotionless killers who perpetrate the most ghastly crime in the cycle next to the crucifixion itself.

This chapter will therefore devote itself to two issues. First, it will investigate the violent world of the English nobility in the late Middle Ages, paying particular attention along the way to the problem of lawlessness in the northern counties--especially Yorkshire. Secondly, it will explore the way in which contemporary literature, above all the Magnus Merodes, reflects, ridicules and ultimately evaluates that world.

Aristocratic Violence: The Historical Record

In an age when all but the lowest members of society carried some sort of weapon, when legal redress often depended more on the power of one's lord than on the rightness of one's cause, and when martial skill was still a cherished ideal, both public and private crimes were more prevalent than they are today. This was especially true in northern England, where distance from the central government in London, a large proportion of overnight subjects and a strong military tradition nurtured by years of war with Scotland and Wales made it

the most turbulent place in the kingdom.¹ Deeds of individual violence, feuds among rival nobles and instances of outright mayhem were far from uncommon here. Many of these misdeeds, moreover, were not instigated by those on the fringes of society--vagabonds, beggars, disgruntled peasants--but by those entrusted with maintaining order and justice in their communities--the barons, knights and esquires.²

Much of the blame for this disruptive state of affairs has been attributed to that late medieval phenomenon known as "bastard feudalism."³ Bastard feudalism differed from the earlier system of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in that it relied on money payments rather than hereditary land grants to cement the relationship between vassal and lord.⁴ A man (usually a knight or an esquire) would sign a written contract called an indenture, agreeing to serve a lord for a specified period of time (often for life); in return, he would receive his lord's badge or livery, a cash annuity and the promise of that lord's "good lordship"--in other words, his patronage and protection. He then took his place among the lord's retinue as his "man" or retainer.

There were various kinds of retainers. Some were permanently attached to a magnate's household and performed services ranging from the menial to the highly skilled, from cleaning stables to administering lands

and balancing accounts. Others did not reside with the lord at all, but rather lived on their own manors, serving him whenever the need arose--often in such ceremonial capacities as accompanying him to parliament or riding in his entourage. These retainers were frequently--but not always--men of gentle blood.

The whole system seems harmless enough. But further investigation reveals that it was largely responsible for much of the disorder that plagued England in the late Middle Ages. For instance, to maintain his position in society, a great lord felt compelled to assemble a large retinue; the more men he had in his "affinity," the greater his prestige before his peers and among the people at large.⁵ The size of these affinities varied, but it was not unusual for some of them to grow into small armies, which the barons were not above using to further their own local interests. This was especially true towards the end of the fourteenth century and throughout much of the fifteenth, when the instability, weakness or partiality of the royal government both required and encouraged the peers to take the law into their own hands.⁶ Knowing that the crown was seldom strong enough or confident enough either to protect or stop them, the lords sometimes committed themselves to policies of violence in an effort to safeguard or expand their authority, engaging their followers in such disruptive actions as extortion, coercion, murder, assault

and private war. Furthermore, they began to recruit into their companies non-indentured men who were not required to sign a contract at all but who nonetheless received a cash stipend for their services. These fellows were more often than not men of tawdry character, casual hangers-on or "well-willers," and after 1390 it was illegal for lords to retain them,⁷ mainly because of the difficulties involved in keeping their lawlessness under control. Legal or not, many peers continued to hire non-indentured persons and on occasion even went so far as to make use of the talents of certain notorious criminal gangs.⁸

For their part the retainers, indentured or otherwise, were prepared to follow their master's lead. Pledged to attend him "in peace," they had the additional responsibility of assisting him "in war"--an obligation which included, of course, military service. Hence, in times of trouble a lord had at his beck and call a body of adherents ready to support his cause by force of arms and willing to give him their sometimes fickle allegiance.⁹ The lord, on the other hand, was expected to support his men should they be arrested while employed in his affairs. And it did not seem to matter whether these affairs were of a legal or a criminal nature. The lord was honor bound to maintain his followers and maintain them he did, often by bribing sheriffs and judges, coercing juries and intimidating

witnesses (although it must be admitted that he might use more traditional methods of maintenance, such as petitioning the king for a pardon).

The men whom the lord worked so assiduously to protect were largely aristocrats themselves (though some were admitted felons as well), local gentry forced by the rapid breakdown in law and order to get themselves a "good lord" or face being dominated, harassed or ruined by some other powerful magnate. Some of them, aping the customs of their superiors, even had affinities of their own whose services they likewise placed at the lord's disposal.¹⁰ When not upholding a peer's cause, however, his clients were busy prosecuting their own, which only compounded the growing problem of disorder. Made bold by the conferral of livery,¹¹ retainers would often initiate their own crimes, sometimes without their master's knowledge or consent. Whenever this happened and the culprit was apprehended and brought to trial, it was still assumed that the lord would exercise his good lordship and procure by fair means or foul the release or pardon of the accused party, regardless of guilt or innocence.¹² Escape from the rigors of justice was thus virtually guaranteed to those who attached themselves to a powerful magnate.

The lawlessness brought on by bastard feudalism cast a shadow over the whole realm, but no region was more beclouded than the northern shires, where "violence

was endemic¹³ and discord a way of life. What was true for the north in general was true for Yorkshire as well; it too had its fair share of "gentlemen thugs"¹⁴ who, like the outlaws of the American West, ranged about the countryside committing an assortment of misdeeds: trespass, assault, armed robbery, manslaughter. Needless to say, few of these misdoers were ever successfully prosecuted and fewer still were punished.

Probably the least heinous (and most common) offense in terms of physical injury to people was that of forced entry or simple trespass. Misdemeanors like this were most often perpetrated by noblemen out on a hunting expedition or engaged in some act of private vengeance, and seldom involved the ruin of more than a few crops and fences--a serious enough matter if the injured party happened to be a poor tenant, but of no great consequence to a lord. Nevertheless, damage could at times be quite extensive, as was the case when the Duke of York complained in the 1390's that certain "evildoers" had broken his closes at Wakefield, Sandal, Conesburgh and Haitfeld and had taken away game valued at £300, or when the Archbishop of York claimed on 3 April 1386 to have sustained losses worth £1,000 when his manors at Bishopthorpe and Cawood were plundered by armed men. Sandal was again the scene of a disturbance in May, 1413, when a commission of oyer and terminer was impanelled to investigate Henry Lescrope's charge that

John Boteler and John de Neuwerk along with other malefactors broke into his close and houses at Faxflete, carried off his wife, forcibly entered and occupied his castle at Sandal and carried away goods assessed at over £5,000!¹⁵

More alarming were those cases of forced entry that led to physical assault. In 1397 another commission of oyer and terminer was set up to inquire into a complaint made by the abbot of St. Mary's, York, that Thomas Ughtred, knight, along with other "malefactors with armed men and archers" forced their way into his manors around the city, damaged or destroyed crops, trees, a bridge and a "mill-stank" and assaulted his servants and tenants.¹⁶ Similarly, during the aforementioned commotion at the Archbishop of York's manors at Bishopthorpe and Cawood, his tenants were so severely beaten and threatened that they refused to serve him out of fear for their lives.

Serious as these disturbances are, they represent only one kind of lawless behavior, and the least dangerous kind at that. Far more hazardous to both life and limb were those crimes which by their very nature were intended to inflict personal injury on their victims: ambush, assault, murder. Again we find that it is the nobility who are among the foremost offenders,¹⁷ either directly involved in violent acts themselves or indirectly maintaining those who were. An instance of the

latter is supplied by Henry, earl of Derby (later, Henry IV) who in 1388 alone obtained pardons for seven of his more unruly followers¹⁸ all of whom had been charged with murder.¹⁹ Derby was the son and heir of John of Gaunt, the greatest landholder in England, and his "good lordship" was at work in many parts of the kingdom, one of these being the Honour of Pontefract in the West Riding. In 1391 he secured a pardon for yet another known felon, Thomas Mauncell, who had been pardoned earlier that same year for the murder of one John Musard.²⁰ Mauncell is in many ways typical of the kind of person a great lord had in his retinue. An avowed murderer, he was at the same time a man of some standing in the area (probably a member of the local gentry), active in regional government and serving on at least one commission which in 1390 was ordered to investigate violations in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire of the second Statute of Westminster.²¹ Yet in one way Mauncell was not the average "gentleman thug." A criminal himself, he also appears to have been a professional maintainer of other lawbreakers, a man who, like the Towneley Pilate, made a nice living for himself out of manipulating and hindering the machinery of justice. The pardon which Derby secured, an unusually lengthy document (see appendix) dated 12 July 1391, accuses Mauncell of the following crimes: (1) sheltering a known murderer, accused of killing a man at Wombewell, Yorkshire, in

return for certain "lands and tenements . . . goods and chattels;" (2) deliberately employing "false and common jurors" to procure the release of two more murderers "indicted at Pountfrayt and before the Justices released for a bribe;" (3) being a maintainer and supporter of the aforesaid false jurors, having them at "fee and livery" and being a "common oppressor of the people and of the duke's [John of Gaunt] tenants within the honor of Pontefract, to the duke's damage of £1,000;" (4) harboring four men who had raped a woman and in so doing killed a man.²²

Mauncell is a spectacular example of the felonious retainer. His obvious organizational ability, of course, makes him rather atypical, but his gangster-like character was not so different from that of many of his colleagues who, because they enjoyed the patronage of their lords, felt free to do just about anything they pleased.²³

Other cases of hooliganism reveal a less "behind-the-scenes" approach to crime on the part of contemporary knights. There is the career, for example, of Sir Thomas Ughtred (the same person who attacked the lands of the abbot of St. Mary's in 1397?) who was accused before the justices of Yorkshire of being responsible for three highway robberies between 1352 and 1366.²⁴ Or there is the case of John de Rilleston, "chivaler," who was pardoned in Henry IV's reign

(6 March 1403) for killing the vicar of Skipton church, West Riding, with a barbed arrow and for having, with others, on the same day

lain in ambush on the highway at Kateralligate . . . to murder Richard de Wyntrynham . . . and shot at him with a catapult and struck him in the back from which he died on the Tuesday following.²⁵

A shocking example of mutilation took place in 1410 at Walkington Wod, Yorkshire, when William Goldyngton, warden of the Hospital of St. Margaret by Huntingdon, and others, fell upon John Carter, cutting off his ears and nose and pulling out his tongue with an iron instrument. (A jury later found Goldyngton guilty and sentenced him to be hanged, but he was pardoned in 1415.)²⁶ Even Henry IV, who once he became king proved to be a conscientious and able monarch, had trouble curbing the lawless excesses of his subordinates. After the suppression of Hotspur's revolt in 1403, it appears that some of the king's knights used the insurrection as an excuse to roam about Yorkshire falsely accusing the local inhabitants of treason and confiscating their property for their own use.²⁷

Aristocratic violence could manifest itself on a larger scale too, disrupting the life of whole communities. The history of the powerful Percy family is a case in point. The Percies had always been a thorn in the side of the north, especially during the middle

decades of the fifteenth century when the throne was occupied by the weak and feeble-minded Henry VI. A writ, dated 26 May 1444 and addressed to the sheriff of York accuses two members of the clan, Thomas and Henry Percy, of assembling and leading a host of "evildoers and disturbers of the peace armed and arrayed in manner of war" who "for no small time" had been terrorizing the king's subjects by

assaulting, beating and wounding some of them, questioning some who were flocking to cities, towns, fairs and markets and travelling through the country whose adherents, partisans and servants they be, searching their saddle bags, wallets and other harness, taking by violence and carrying away what letters and money were found upon them and threatening them with death and mutilation . . . insomuch that they dare not travail nor ride in pursuit of business or profit.²⁸

A similar incident recorded for nearby Lincolnshire shows that the kind of violence we have been examining was not confined only to Yorkshire. In 1411 a local nobleman, Walter Tailboys, (whose son, William, would later achieve notoriety in 1449 for his deadly assault on Lord Cromwell at a council meeting in Westminster)²⁹ led about 160 horsemen into Lincoln for the purpose of killing Sir Thomas Chaworth. When met by the sheriff, a small battle broke out between Tailboys' men on the one side and the sheriff's on the other resulting in the death of two citizens. Thereafter Tailboys and his companions rode through the county, ambushing, beating and

wounding a number of people.³⁰ All these disorders seem to have gone unpunished or were pardoned--presumably because their perpetrators were themselves powerful men or the clients of great lords.

Upheavals such as those incited by the Percies and Tailboys were doubtless part of some larger regional dispute. Feuding had always been a time-honored practice in medieval England, but what had once only been a dangerous pastime was rapidly becoming a lethal tradition in the fifteenth century--one upheld by esquire and baron alike. A feud assumed various forms. It could be a relatively small and private affair, involving only the local gentry, or it could, when waged by the big peers, turn into a full-scale war, engulfing whole shires and demolishing public order in the process.

An instance of the former took place in 1350 when John de Eland, "one of the king's justices appointed to hear and determine trespasses in the West Riding,"³¹ was ambushed and killed by a Yorkshire gang "identified by tradition as scions of local gentry."³² Apparently, Eland had in some way angered the local aristocracy who, as a result, promptly had him murdered in spite of the fact that he was a royal officer--and a highly placed one at that. Eland's death touched off a feud of sorts between his murderers on the one hand and his family and friends on the other. The latter group adopted a more or less non-violent approach by trying to settle the

matter legally instead of by force. For instance, Eland's son, John, personally petitioned the king to bring his father's killers to justice. Unfortunately, such moderation turned out to be not only ineffective but positively disastrous for the Eland party. One year later, in 1351, the same noblemen responsible for the murder of the senior Eland killed his son "because he was suing the king to punish them for his father's death."³³ Furthermore, they killed and maimed a number of John II's supporters and even assaulted "the king's justices appointed to hear and determine such homicides, felonies, trespasses and misdeeds," killing "some of their men and servants" and hindering "those who indict them, the justices, the sheriff and other ministers of the king from executing his mandates and their offices, openly threatening them, and so to hinder if they can the king from ruling and doing justice to his people."³⁴

Later, towards the end of the century, a minor but nonetheless violent fray again erupted in the West Riding--this time in Leeds--between two locally prominent families, the Ledes and the Passelews. Few facts have survived, but we do know that the quarrel resulted in at least one death. A pardon dated 1401 reveals that William de Ledes, abetted by his father Sir Roger de Ledes, murdered John Passelew and seriously injured another man in a nighttime ambush that took place in 1399.³⁵

Far more devastating, however, were the power struggles waged by the magnates themselves, whose periodic brawls transformed the outlying counties into little more than private battlegrounds for the peerage. Yorkshire particularly was afflicted with this kind of strife. In the late 1430's, for example, it was the scene of a clash between two factions of the mighty Neville household. The dispute was over inheritance rights to certain northern manors, and both sides were quick in using violence to achieve a settlement, assembling "by manere of werre and insurreccion . . . grete rowtes & compaignies upon þe felde" and doing "other grete and horrible offenses aswele in slaughter and distruccion of oure people."³⁶ One of the Nevilles, Sir John, was later involved in yet another feud, for in 1443 he was implicated in a riot that broke out at Fountains Abbey and was ordered on pain of being fined £1,000 to bring those responsible before the council.³⁷

The most notorious northern feud, however, was the one which arose in the 1450's between the two great rival families of Yorkshire--the Percies and the Nevilles. The details of this complex conflict have been brilliantly discussed elsewhere, and it is not my intention to reproduce them here.³⁸ Suffice it to say that the tentacles of strife reached into just about every district where the two houses had an interest.³⁹ For well over seventy years (c. 1380-c. 1450) the

chronic antagonism and distrust existing between these two titans, both of whom were intent on making their house the preeminent one in the north, had bred a smoldering resentment among their supporters and tenants which made "mutual hostility a way of life"⁴⁰ for many in the shire. By mid-century the time was right for a confrontation. The spark that ignited the outburst was Thomas Percy, Lord Egremont, a younger son of the earl of Northumberland and probably the same individual who had caused the disorders of 1444.⁴¹ "Quarrelsome, violent and contemptuous of all authority, he possessed all the worst characteristics of a Percy for which his grandfather Hotspur is still a byword."⁴² On 24 August 1453 at Heworth, near York, Egremont and reportedly over five thousand Percy followers ambushed noteworthy members of the Neville family as they were returning from a wedding.⁴³ Unbelievably, no one was killed, but the entire episode was serious enough to prompt one contemporary to write that it marked "the beginning of England's sorrows"⁴⁴--that is, the start of the Wars of the Roses. Immediately after this encounter, Percy retainers were reported to be harassing various parts of the county. In September, 1453 some of them even attacked the bailiff of Staincliff while he was hearing mass at Gargrave church, Craven.⁴⁵ The feud raged on for the next year or so, and was not resolved until Egremont was finally captured by the Nevilles on 31 October 1454.

at the "battle" of Stamford Bridge.

As for the Percy adherents themselves, we know that many were recruited from the family's estates in Yorkshire. The West Riding manors of Tadcaster, Healaugh, Spofforth, Leathley and Lenton alone provided at least forty-two of the men present at Heworth.⁴⁶ Typically, these individuals, along with their colleagues from the other two ridings, were not a rag-tag collection of malcontents and ne'er-do-wells but respectable and prosperous tenant-farmers, artisans and merchants, united in their hostility to the Nevilles (whose lands intermingled with their own and thus gave rise to local conflicts) and led by the cream of Yorkshire's aristocracy.⁴⁷ The same can probably be said of the Neville faction as well.

Other sections of the country experienced their own disorders too at this time. In 1434 at Chesterfield, Derbyshire (forty miles south of Wakefield), a local esquire named Thomas Foljambe and others murdered Henry Longford and William Bradshaw and mutilated Sir Henry Pierpoint while he was at his prayers in church--a deed meant to repay Pierpoint's assault on Foljambe two years earlier.⁴⁸ Twenty years later the same county witnessed a violent quarrel between the Blounts and the Longfords, two of Derbyshire's most illustrious families.⁴⁹ Similar agitations were also common in Westmorland.⁵⁰ Even Norfolk, whose relative proximity to London might lead one

to believe that baronial strife was less rampant there than elsewhere, was the setting for the Pastons' famous struggles against Lord Moleyns and the duke of Suffolk.⁵¹

Meanwhile, far in the south-west, in Devonshire, a feud between Thomas Courtenay, the earl of Devon and Lord Bonville,⁵² triggered what has been called "the most notorious private crime of the century."⁵³ On 23 October 1455 Sir Thomas Courtenay, son of the earl of Devon, rode up with sixty armed men to the house of Nicholas Radford, an eminent, semi-retired local lawyer, and demanded entrance. Radford, a trusted advisor of the earl's mortal enemy, Lord Bonville, was at first reluctant to let them in, but Sir Thomas assured him "as I am a true knight and gentleman" that he would come to no harm. Once inside, however, Courtenay and his ruffians ransacked the house for valuables, carrying off over £300 in cash plus "other goods, and jewels, bedding, gowns, furs, books and ornaments of his chapel, to the value of 1,000 marks and more." They even tossed Radford's ailing wife out of her sickbed and "took away the sheets that she lay in." Courtenay then told the aged Radford that he would have to walk the distance from his own house to the earl's residence at Tiverton. As soon as they were all outside, Courtenay whispered something to his men who, upon their master's riding off, fell upon the hapless victim in the following manner:

And the said Nicholas Philip, Thomas Philip, and John Amore, and others forthwith turned upon the said Nicholas Radford and then and there the said Nicholas Philip with a glaive smote the said Nicholas Radford a hideous deadly stroke across the face, and felled him to the ground, and then the said Nicholas Philip gave him another stroke behind his head so that his brains fell out. And the said Thomas Philip . . . with a long dagger feloniously cut the throat of the said Nicholas Radford, and the said John Amore . . . with a long dagger smote the said Nicholas Radford behind on his back to the heart. . . . And forthwith after the said horrible murder and felony was thus done, the said Sir Thomas Courtenay with all the said misdoers rode to Tiverton in the said shire of Devonshire where the said Earl . . . feloniously received, comforted, and harboured the said Sir Thomas Courtenay and his followers, with the said remnant of misdoers with the said goods, knowing them to have done the said murder, robbery, and felony in the form aforesaid.⁵⁴

What happened next is even more astounding. On the Monday following the murder, the earl sent a party of men to the chapel where Radford's body was lying in state. There they held a mock coroner's inquest, returning a verdict of suicide, after which they forced Radford's servants to carry the corpse to the churchyard where it was then thrown into the open grave. Finally, as a way of insuring that the body could not be identified as Radford's, they hurled stones into the grave and crushed the corpse beyond recognition.⁵⁵

Radford's murder was one of those rare crimes which captivate and electrify an age. It thrilled contemporaries in much the same way that Thomas Becket's death thrilled men of his era or the Manson murders fascinate

some people today. Within five days of its commission it was being reported to John Paston by his agent in London.⁵⁶ The crime acquired widespread notoriety not only because of the victim's advanced age or the sensational circumstances of his murder and "burial," but also, one cannot help imagining, because of the casual and craven way in which Sir Thomas deliberately broke his promise as a knight and a gentleman not to harm the deceased.⁵⁷ The chronic feuding of the era, therefore, aside from undermining political stability and social order, also seems to have played a significant part in unravelling the moral fabric of aristocratic society, encouraging the nobility openly to disavow the very values which set them apart as a class. Chivalry, as an ethical institution, was in serious jeopardy indeed when its tenets could be held so cheaply as this.⁵⁸

The historical record would indicate, then, that the characters of many lords and knights were a far cry from the professed ideals of the age. Whereas the nobility and gentry were supposed to be enforcers and supporters of the law, as often as not we find that they were its most flagrant violators. Whereas they were expected to uphold such highly regarded chivalric virtues as honor, pity, fair play and courage, we see them increasingly doing just the opposite--conducting their private quarrels in the most shameless and cruel manner. With some justification, therefore, could J. Whetley,

writing to John Paston in 1478, compare the duke of Suffolk's wrathful bearing at a local manor court to the extravagant antics of medieval drama's most famous tyrant:

for at hys [Suffolk's] beyng ther þat daye ther was neuer no man þat playd Herrod in Corpus Crysty play better and more agreable to hys pageaunt then he dud. But ye [Paston] shall understond þat it was after none, and the weder hot, and he so feble for sekeneþ þat hys legges wold not bere hyme, but ther was ij men had gret payn to kepe hym on hys fete. And þer ye were juged. Som sayd 'Sley'; som sayd 'Put hym in preson'. And forth com my lord [Suffolk], and he wold met you with a spere and have non other mendes for þat troble at ye have put hym to but your hart blod, and þat will [he gayt] with hys owen handes. 59

There was obviously something about the Herod play that suggested Suffolk to Whetley. It may have been Herod's outrageous anger or pride, his broad gestures or his bloody language.⁶⁰ Or perhaps it was the fact that Herod and his gangster knights reminded him of lords who, like Suffolk, represented all that was wrong with late medieval nobility--a class whose members were all too often petty Herods in their own right, sheltering and employing well-born thugs and ruffians to aid them in their vindictive squabbles.⁶¹ If this latter possibility is indeed true--and we have seen that the careers of men like Suffolk do nothing to imply the contrary--⁶² then we have one more reason for studying the cycle plays not so much as historical documents, but as artistic

indices of their times.

Contemporary Opinion

The lawlessness of the nobility did not go unnoticed in the late Middle Ages. In fact, it inspired a good deal of official and popular protest. Parliamentary petitions, for example, regularly complained about the violent evils of livery and maintenance.⁶³ And parliament itself tried on more than one occasion to abolish or at least curtail these evils by statute.⁶⁴ Legislation, however, proved to be ineffective because the very people who were supposed to enforce these laws--the lords and gentry--were the same ones who broke them. Consequently, the government could do little more than cajole, chide and threaten--courses of action that it found itself increasingly taking as the fifteenth century wore on.

Much of the official protest of the period dates from the time of Henry VI, under whose incompetent rule England experienced its worst disorders.⁶⁵ Actually, "protest" may be too strong a word here, for government records rarely do much more than set down facts. Nonetheless, one can discern in some documents traces of alarm, desperation and even anger over the rising rate of violence. For instance, in 1426 a proclamation, read throughout the country, complained of "open and notorious robberies, routs, riots and unlawful assemblies" and

ordered the people to keep the peace.⁶⁶ The language here is dull and matter-of-fact. But three years later in 1429 another proclamation listing almost the same abuses contains the additional piece of information that they are now being committed "more than used to be in times past."⁶⁷ This is no profound observation, but it betrays the government's growing concern over the state of the kingdom. Nor did this concern diminish with time, for we again encounter it in a letter, sent by Henry VI to his sheriffs in 1437, lamenting the "divers and greet robberies, ravissement of women, brennynges of houses, manslaughteres and many oþer greet ryotes and inconveniencz" that had "of late tyme falle and ensewed and ar lykely to falle here aftir withoute þat we put þerto oure hand remediable."⁶⁸ The note of alarm here is unmistakable.

It is certain that the nobility had a great deal to do with many of these disorders. The government, at any rate, thought so judging from parliamentary complaints and the crown's command in 1434 that all members of the peerage and gentry take an oath not to maintain peace-breakers.⁶⁹ The council thought so too when it sent in the king's name a letter, dated 8 October 1453, to the earls of Salisbury (Neville) and Northumberland (Percy) reminding them that their high offices and titles made them all the more responsible for the actions of their underlings (this was in reference to the great mid-

century feud in Yorkshire, already noted, between the Percy and Neville households, of whom Northumberland and Salisbury respectively were the heads) and warning them that if any more blood were shed they both would "be so chastised that bothe ye and thay and al otheroure subgittes shal have matier and cause to eschewe to attempte any thing like herafter."⁷⁰ This is indeed a strongly worded document. It had to be, for words were one of the few weapons the government had left in its arsenal. Defied and ignored by the barons at just about every turn and without a standing army to enforce its authority, the crown had to rely more and more on persuasion in its struggle to maintain order. Few people took the time to listen.

Contemporary literature, like some government papers, also expresses alarm over the causes of these and similar disruptions. Anti-aristocratic sentiment, of course, was not new to medieval writing. As early as 1303, for example, Robert of Brunne in his Handlyng Synne had referred to the nobility ("Erles, knyghtes, and barouns, / And ouper lordynges of tounes," ll. 6791-92) as "robbers . . . þat þe pore pepyl pelyn ful bare."⁷¹ A few years later, in 1307, an anonymous poet criticized the retinues of the great for their ceaseless consumption of food and drink, concluding with the wish that such children of Satan (l. 15) be "hongen & herbarewen in helle!" (l. 40).⁷² And at the onset of the reign of

Edward III (c. 1327) another nameless writer in a work entitled "Poem on the Evil Times of Edward II" devoted almost fifty lines to citing the follies of contemporary knights--their extravagant dress, their pride, their swearing and boasting, their lack of prowess.⁷³ These works, however, are all rather general and conventional in their criticisms, either attacking knights for oppressing, in some vague manner, the poor or castigating them for having fallen away from an ideal set of standards. True, the "Satire on the Retinues of the Great" is a bit more topical in that it mentions the practice of retaining and considers retainers themselves to be a nuisance. But these retainers seem to be household servants and attendants rather than non-resident personnel. Besides, they are annoying not because of their violent or warlike behavior, but because, like Lear's raucous followers, they impose a heavy economic burden on whomever has the misfortune of being their host.

As the fourteenth century wore on, however, satirical writings began increasingly to focus on the problem of liveried retainers and their relation to the growth of lawlessness in the realm. One such work is Mum and the Sothsegger (1399), a poem critical of Richard II's ruling methods. In it the poet spends a great deal of time condemning the king himself for granting liveries (Richard's badge was the white hart) to his followers

who, in turn, do little else but intimidate the poor
by their violent ways:

þey plucked þe plomayle from þe pore skynnes,
And schewed her signes for men shulde drede
To axe ony mendis for her mys-dedis.
Thus leuereþ ouere-loked youre leigis ichonne;
For þo þat had hertis on hie on her brestis,
For þe more partie I may well avowe,
þey bare hem þe bolder for her gay broches,
And busshid with her bréstitis and bare adoun
þe pouere.⁷⁴

(II, ll. 32-39)

Other royal partisans such as the Cheshire archers,
Richard's elite bodyguard, are denounced for violently
interfering with judicial procedure in order to secure
for themselves or their royal patron favorable legal
decisions. They enter the courts, so we are told, clad
in sallets instead of lawyers' caps and do their plead-
ing "with pollaxis and poyntes of swerdis" (III, l. 328).
And if anyone should criticize or complain about them,
they are soon "y-mummyd on þe mouthe and menaced to þe
deth" (III, l. 337). It is not just the king, however,
who maintains disorderly retinues; many "myghty lordis
. . . meyneteyne mysdoers more þan oþer peple" (III,
ll. 310-11)--an action that prompts the poet to declare
that liveries should henceforth be granted only to men
of good character:

Now for to telle trouthe þus þan me thynketh,
That no manere meyntenour shulde merkis bere,
Ne haue lordis leuere þe lawe to apeire,
Neþer bragger ne boster for no brems wordis.⁷⁵

(II, ll. 77-80)

Preachers were equally severe in censuring both unruly retainers and the lords who subsidized them. One sermon collection, MS Royal 18 B (c. 1378-1417), condemns those "officers of gret men þat wereþ her lyuere-thes" who "by colour of lawe and azens lawe robbeþ and dispoyleþ þe poure peple, now betynge, now sleyinge, now puttynge hem from hous and land."⁷⁶ The famous moralist, John Bromyard, uses more colorful terms to express a similar sentiment in his popular Summa Predicantium (c. 1350):

no hounds were ever readier for the chase,
no hungry falcon for the bird it has spied
than are these to do whatever their great
lord bids them, if he should want to beat or
spoil or kill anyone.⁷⁷

In the fifteenth century Thomas Hoccleve continued the moralists' campaign against fractious retainers in his Regement of Princes (1411-12). There he asserts that "Lawe is nye flemed out of þis cuntre" because "fewe be þat dreden it offende" (ll. 2788-89).⁷⁸ Assemblies of "armed folk" (l. 2792) gather throughout the realm and in almost every shire "Partye is made to venge her cruel ire" (l. 2793). All this "mayntenance," moreover, is countenanced "naght by persones lowe" but by great men ("Cobbes grete") who "þis ryot sustene" (ll. 2804-05). Hoccleve therefore advises the future king (Henry V) to "punysse hem by lawful riztwysenesse,/And suffre naght ich othir þus to oppresse" (ll. 2813-14).

A work resembling Hoccleve's, George Ashby's Active Policy of a Prince (written for another Prince of Wales, Edward, son of Henry VI) reveals that as late as 1470 the problem had still not been fully solved.

Ashby warns the prince that

. . . gentilmen shuld nat yeve clothynge
 But to their howshold meyne, for surance
 That no man be their power excedyng,
 Ne maynteine no people, by youre puissance,
 Ner false quarels take thorough maintenance,
 But every man lyve of his owne in rest. . . . 79

(ll. 548-53)

One can therefore see, even from this limited selection of works, that there existed a considerable body of material in the late Middle Ages that dealt specifically with the question of lawless retainers. Furthermore, retaining as a literary topic never became, as did so many other subjects of medieval complaint, simply a convention or topos of the De Contemptu Mundi variety. Rather it was firmly rooted in contemporary incident and has been verified by historical fact, passing from the literary scene only when it had been abolished as a practice in real life. Whenever a moralist, then, deploras the rapacity of lords or the unruliness of their followers, the odds are that he is referring to a real, not a contrived, social problem--one that was symptomatic of his age and with which he probably had more than just a passing acquaintance.

The Violated Ideal: Social Satire
in the Magnus Herodes

At the very end of the tale of "Torre and Pellinor" in Malory's Morte Darthur (1469-70) there is a passage--one of the most succinct expressions of the chivalric code in late medieval literature--that recounts the oath Arthur's knights must take upon being inducted into the fellowship of Camelot:

than the kynge stablysshed all the knyghtes and gaff them rychesse and londys; and charged them never to do outeraige nothir morthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfeiture [of their] worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [socour:] strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them uppon payne of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongefull quarrel for no love ne for no worldis goodis. So unto thys were all knyghtis sworne of the Table Rounde. . . .80

Virtually every important article of chivalry is present in this passage: the lord's duty to dispense largess, the knight's obligation to shun the criminal misuse of his prowess, to grant mercy to an opponent when asked, to be courteous to ladies, to protect the weak and to fight selflessly for a just cause.

Ever since their formulation, of course, these ideals had been violated all too often by real knights. As one scholar has put it, if the moral values of chivalry "had ever been extensively practiced, one would

expect to find a time when knights refrained from rapine and casual manslaughter, protected the church and its clergy, and respected the rights of helpless non-combatants in war. I can find no evidence that there ever was such a period."⁸¹ Moralists from the twelfth century on never tired of pointing out the discrepancies between the high ideals of knighthood and the ugly realities of contemporary practice.⁸² In short, the chivalric ideal was just that--a goal far too distant and elevated for any mere mortal to attain.

Medieval social critics may have had, however, good reason to believe that the years between the reigns of Richard II and Edward IV were more unchivalric than most. True, all moralists like to gaze back upon a time when men seemed more virtuous; the past is always in this respect more attractive than the present. But we have seen that there is some evidence supporting the contention that England in the late Middle Ages really may have been worse off than it had been before. It certainly seemed that way to contemporaries.⁸³ The distant shires especially were prone to aristocratic violence--a problem compounded by periods of weak central rule. Meanwhile, the headlong expansion of bastard feudalism did as much to institutionalize as restrain knightly misbehavior. The times therefore demanded a thoroughgoing examination of the anti-chivalric character of contemporary society, and it came from what at first

glance might seem an unusual quarter--the religious play.

The remarkable thing about the cycle plays' chivalric satire is its viciousness. Other northern and midland literary pieces such as The Tournament of Tottenham and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight poke fun at knightly ceremonies or gently rebuke chivalric pretensions and follies. But the religious drama stands virtually alone among imaginative works in portraying knights as a pack of remorseless cutthroats who confuse wanton cruelty with prowess, cowardice with courage, and fear with loyalty.⁸⁴

Herod's massacre of the Innocents became the vehicle for much of this satire with Herod himself cast in the role of a medieval lord and his soldiers appearing as knights or retainers. Each cycle has its own particular version of the event, and the satiric effectiveness of the individual plays varies. The York and N-Town plays, for example, are the most subdued in their denunciations and consequently the least successful in their satire. Both works touch upon the fact that the knights themselves see the slaughter as some grand military venture, but little effort is made to exploit or amplify the absurdities inherent in such a grotesque delusion. Both plays also devote little time to the actual massacre and even less to the scene where the mothers confront their assailants. These are serious flaws, for they

deprive the plays of much of the irony generated by the mothers' accusations. N-Town is more restrained than York in this respect, for its knights maintain a strict silence as they go about--all in a rather stylized way--their grisly task. The two cycles are careful to portray the biblical murderers as medieval knights who ostensibly follow the ideals of chivalry, but they fail to move beyond this basic ironic situation and formulate a detailed indictment of the hypocrisy and brutality of the late medieval warrior-knight.

The Digby play of the Slaughter makes more explicit the connection between knighthood and barbarism, yet in doing so it relies too much on farce. Its burlesque of knightly cruelty is mainly accomplished through the antics of Herod's servant, Watkyn--a cowardly page who aspires to the chivalric life. To prove himself worthy, Watkyn assures Herod that he will fight manfully against the children ("with my sharpe sworde ther ribbes I shall shake,/evyn thurgh the guttes for anger & despight," ll. 143-44),⁸⁵ yet trembles at the thought of having to face their mothers ("but yitt I drede no thyng more than a woman with a Rokke," l. 159). Watkyn's fears prove prophetic, for during the "bataile" (l. 308) he is beaten with distaffs by the women and has to be rescued by his comrades. The point here seems to be that knightly cruelty is based on cowardice. But the play chooses to dramatize the idea by exposing Watkyn and his colleagues

to the fierce yet slightly comic resistance of the women. This is basically a farcical situation, and it goes a long way toward mitigating the bite and force of the satire.

A more sober treatment of the same theme occurs in the Chester cycle. Here the knights, appropriately dubbed Sir Waradrake (l. 202) and Sir Grymbald Lancher-deepe (l. 226), take themselves seriously and in turn seem to be taken more seriously by the dramatist. Their initial reaction to Herod's cruel command is one of shocked outrage. They appear genuinely distraught that their chivalric honor will be compromised if they participate in such an ignoble affair as killing helpless infants. The first knight even declares that it would be a "villanye" (l. 115) to slay such a "shitten-arsed shrowe" (l. 157) as the Christ-child. The knights' objections are a bit coarsely put but seem to be at least made on moral grounds. The playwright, however, has cleverly fooled us. For we soon find the knights enthusiastically accepting Herod's specious contention that the forthcoming enterprise will enhance, not tarnish, their renown:

Nay, nay, it is neyther on nor two
that you shall sley, as mott I goo,
but a thousand and yett moo,
takes this in your mind.

(ll. 169-72)

In other words, honor is to be measured in quantitative

rather than qualitative terms--a perverse philosophy, which the mercenaries take with them to Bethlehem. There they go about their vile task with relish, impaling their victims on spears and holding them aloft as if they were so many trophies of war. They even allow themselves a bit of gruesome humor by addressing the terrified mothers in a polite, almost courtly, manner:

Dame, thy sonne, in good faye,
 hee must of me learne a playe:
 hee must hopp, or I goe awaye,
 upon my speare ende.

(11. 321-24)

The point of all this is plain enough: just as the knights decorate the most churlish intentions with the trappings of courteous discourse, so do they justify the grossest atrocities in the name of honor and prowess. The Chester playwright thus is not only criticizing the violence of contemporary knighthood here, he is also attempting to reveal the frame of mind which breeds that violence.⁸⁶

The Magnus Herodes at least equals the Chester version of the Slaughter in the blackness of its humor and the harshness of its satire. And it is certainly the superior in terms of its overall artistry. Its issues are the same as those of the other slaughter-plays: the megalomania and greediness of lords, the coarse brutality of their retainers and the wholesale corruption

of chivalric values. However, it explores those issues in a much more detailed and sophisticated way.

The play opens with Herod's messenger announcing the arrival of his lord--a lord who apparently is supposed to symbolize the ideals of courtesy and prowess.⁸⁷ Thus Herod is described as being both courteous ("heynd," l. 10) and valiant ("doughty," l. 16), one who graciously ("Gracyus" l. 13) greets his subjects and whose followers, in turn, "watys on his wyngys" (a phrase from falconry).⁸⁸ to do his bidding. These terms are chosen carefully, for they are meant to establish a chivalric context in which characters can operate and future events unfold.

The courtly atmosphere continues as Herod himself appears on stage. We discover that he considers himself normally a man of "mekenes" (l. 100), whose "myrthes" (l. 100) have all turned to sorrows since the news of Christ's birth was made known to him. He also fancies himself "the doughtyest . . . That euer ran with spere" (ll. 109-10)--an allusion to the world of jousting and one which betrays his predisposition to see himself as a character in a romance. But the chivalric manner here is only a cultivated pose--an elaborate exercise meant to camouflage an otherwise vile nature. For Herod is no man of prowess, no courteous knight-errant pursuing a noble quest. Rather, he is the embodiment of churlish brutality.⁸⁹ More a man of wanton

cruelty than disciplined power, he relishes the thought of inflicting pain on others, gleefully promising to hang, break, flay, brain and dismember (ll. 81, 84-85, 93, 97-99) all who oppose him.

Like most sadists, Herod is a coward at heart, yet he tries to cover up that cowardice by calling it prowess (something his knights will do later on). He has, for instance, one overriding ambition--to murder a baby. But he insists upon viewing his victim as a kind of rival warrior, proclaiming his desire "to fyght/For anger" (ll. 238-39) and to "kyll hym downe stryght" (l. 237). Earlier, he had announced that if he had "that lad in hand,/As I am kyng in land,/I shuld with this steyll brand/Brykyn all his bonys" (ll. 105-08). Thus he colors a churlish and cowardly intention with a chivalric gloss, making it appear as though the Christ-child were some powerful opponent. The man who calls himself the "doughtyest . . . that euer ran with spere" would ironically prove his strength upon a mere "lad" and in so doing have it appear as though he had performed a deed of great valor.

Herod perverts the ideals of chivalry in yet another way. Whatever his reasons are for wanting to do away with the Christ-child, he makes it clear that his chief motive is "veniance." The word is constantly on his lips.⁹⁰ He demands "vengeance" against the Magi when he learns of their escape (ll. 166-68); he says he must

have "a vengyng" on Christ or die (ll. 242-43) and he calls out to his knights to take "Veniance" as they prepare themselves for the slaughter (ll. 302-04). Once again, Herod is posing, trying to give an essentially villainous undertaking the status it so desperately lacks. But he is mistaken if he thinks he can elevate his tainted cause simply by making himself out to be the injured party (which he is not) and hence justified in taking revenge. For revenge of and by itself, if we are to take the literature and not the history of the Middle Ages as our guide, was not acknowledged as a valid motive in disputes. Not only was it forbidden by Scripture,⁹¹ it was also denounced by certain authorities on the subject of military etiquette. Christine de Pisan, for example, in her chivalric handbook Livre des fais d'armes et de chevalerie (1410; translated by Caxton in 1489) condemns as illegal all quarrels begun "for vengeance of somme grief receyued by power & myght of another."⁹² So even from a purely chivalric point of view (a view which seems to matter to him) Herod's absurd desire to wreak vengeance on his "enemies" cannot be justified and brands him for the ignorant and unmannerly churl he really is.

Finally, in addition to his being a bad knight, Herod is also a fraudulent lord who disregards or corrupts all the important ideals of his calling. On at least one occasion, for example, he violates the ancient

feudal sanction prohibiting a lord from harming his vassals by indecorously beating his own knights (l. 160).⁹³ By the same token, his willingness to make war on innocent women and children is as much a denial of the lord's duty to maintain peace and order in his domain as it is a rejection of the knight's obligation to protect the weak and the helpless.⁹⁴ Lastly, he distorts one of the basic principles of lordship--largess⁹⁵--into a perverse system of patronage that rewards and encourages evil. Thus he showers his counsellors with "Markys, rentys, and powndys,/Greatt castels and groundys" (ll. 267-68) in generous recognition of their service--a service which has consisted of devising the plan to slaughter the infants. And he bestows similar wealth upon his knights after they have completed their gruesome mission. In another context, such actions might be construed as munificent and noble, befitting the high dignity of a great magnate. Here, however, they only represent one more way in which Herod bastardizes feudal values.

Sadist, coward, churl, tyrant: all these terms apply to Herod, yet none of them really do him justice. They are simply the exterior manifestations of an essentially chaotic personality. For Herod, above all else, is the very soul of discord, a flamboyantly anarchic force responsible for every evil in the play.⁹⁶ Nowhere is this role brought out more powerfully than

in those scenes where he displays his famous wrath.

Here indeed is chaos personified:⁹⁷

My myrthes ar turned to teyn, my mekenes into
ire,
And all for oone, I weyn, within I fare as
fyre.

(11. 100-01)

I anger:
I wote not what dewill me alys.
Thay teyn me so with talys
That, by Gottys dere nalys,
I will peasse no langer.

(11. 113-17)

I wote not where I may sytt for anger and for
teyn.

(1. 172)

War! I say, lett me pant, Now thynk I to fyght
For anger.
My guttys will outt thryng
Bot I this lad hyng.

(11. 238-41)

Herod's relentless rages are not so much expressions of anger--"a great disturbance of the mind, but not thoroughly divorced from reason"--as they are manifestations of that irrational quality the Middle Ages termed furor--"the mental disturbance that is wholly without reason"⁹⁸ and hence wholly without order. His rantings, of course, are intended to be humorous, exposing him as a supremely ridiculous figure. But they are sinister too. For Herod

does not keep his extravagant turmoil to himself; he imposes it on the world around him, transforming that world into his own irrational image. He admits it himself. Thus he resolves, after learning of the Wise Men's flight, to "set all on sex and seuen" (l. 127) and, true to his word, we soon find him doing exactly that when he exhorts his knights before they depart for Bethlehem to "Spare no kyns bloode, / Lett all ryn on floode" (ll. 312-13). These are the words of a totally unrestrained individual, a kind of medieval Aeolus imprisoned by his own swirling passions yet undisciplined by the normal bonds of civilized conduct. Herod, therefore, is more than a buffoon in this play. He is a deadly power whose anarchic tendencies play havoc with everything and everybody--a particularly appropriate representative of a culture that was itself set upside-down by the unruly deeds of its own high-born members.

By the time the knights come on stage, then, Herod has been firmly enthroned as a symbol of crime, churlishness and chaos. Himself the antithesis of chivalry, he infects his retinue, as the thirteenth-century theorist Raymón Lull tells us, with a similar distemper:

the euyl kyng or prynce that diffeateth in
hym self thordre of chyualry he diffeateth it
not only in hym self but he diffeateth it in
þe knyȝtes þat ben put vnder hym.⁹⁹

As mirrors of their lord, Herod's retainers are destined to carry his iniquity and his turbulence out into

society at large. But the Wakefield Master makes this role convincing and credible by having them look upon the slaughter as an opportunity to vindicate their tarnished reputations. No other dramatic version of the slaughter introduces such subtle and psychologically sophisticated motivation.

When we first see them the knights are on the defensive because they have, in their master's eyes, forfeited their titles in allowing the Magi to escape. Herod interprets this as a serious lapse in chivalric conduct. Angrily denouncing them as "thefys" (l. 154), "losels," "lyars," "lurdans" (l. 163) and "knafys, bot knyghtys none" (l. 164), he asserts that "Had ye bene woth youre eres, thus had thay not gone" (l. 165). (Such abusive terminology, by the way, ironically pinpoints the knights' own latent criminality.) The insinuations hit home, and the knights are quick to rebut them, assuring Herod that the kings, fearful of manfully meeting them in the field, "went sodonly or any man wylt" (l. 181). "What," they ask, "couth we more do to saue youre honoure?" (l. 190). The subtle appeal to his vanity seems to work, for Herod soon regains his composure and restores them to his "favoure" (l. 192). However, the brusque manner of his dismissal ("Go where ye wyll, by towne and by towre./Goys hens!" ll. 193-94) reveals that their arguments have not fully dispelled his resentment. We are thus left with the distinct

impression that the knights as yet have to prove their worthiness and will, at the next possible opportunity, do everything in their power to restore their sullied honors.

That opportunity arrives with the order to kill the children of Bethlehem. The knights, still under the cloud of their lord's displeasure and eager to reaffirm their reputations, readily accept the vile assignment. But what they do not know is that in seeking to cleanse themselves of shame--chivalry's most indelible sin--they will only succeed in disgracing themselves beyond recall. This is first-rate dramatic irony.

In fact, as the knights appear before Herod a second time, all sorts of ironies surface and gather momentum. Take, for instance, the scene where they are labelled "the flowre of knyghthede" (l. 272) and enter "in armoure full sheyn" (l. 292). The spectacle of knights going off in their "best aray" (l. 282) to murder babies is, to say the least, highly ironic. It is doubly so when we recall that a warrior's harness had tremendous symbolic significance in the Middle Ages. It was commonly believed, for example, that the knight's sword signified his role as upholder of justice, while his spear stood for truth, his helmet, fear of shame, his breastplate, protection against vice, his spurs, speed and diligence, and so forth.¹⁰⁰ Herod's knights, of course, stand for none of these things. Their bril-

liant armor symbolizes only their own absurd pretensions--a mocking reminder of the gap that exists between the lofty ideals of chivalry and their own base characters.

As for Herod himself, he continues to adopt the pose of the chivalric warlord.¹⁰¹ Prior to their departure, he addresses his knights in much the same way a commander might lecture his troops on the eve of some great battle, urging them to be "stoute" (l. 308) and promising to make them men of substance if they are victorious. The irony here would be obvious to all. Herod is no Henry V, nor is Bethlehem to be another Agincourt. And the knights are not participants in a glorious enterprise. On the contrary, they are remorseless murderers who merely use the externals of chivalry as a blind for their own wicked delinquency.

This unfettered savagery proceeds, as we have seen, from Herod himself, and he now ardently confers it upon the knights by admonishing them to "Spare no kyns bloode,/Lett all ryn on floode" (ll. 312-13)--a directive that both sanctions and liberates their brutal urges. The knights boast that they will follow their master's instructions to the letter, vowing to "make a dulfull lake" (a sorrowful game, l. 322) once they get to Bethlehem. One of them even compares himself to an enraged boar (l. 318), revealing by his very choice of images the extent to which they all have given themselves

over to animalistic instincts. Meanwhile, the third knight correctly sums up the spirit of the group when he observes that he is starting to "reyll" (l. 326). In other words, he is beginning to run amok. That admission alone is sufficient to convince us that Herod has succeeded admirably in making his retainers conform to his own anarchic principles.

The slaughter scene itself exposes not only the coarse inhumanity of the knights, but also depicts, in a devastatingly ironic manner, the very process of their dehumanization. In a series of carefully constructed encounters between the knights and the mothers, the playwright charts the progressive deterioration of both the courtly and the martial ideals of chivalry, leaving us at last face to face with a naked, professional cruelty.

The first knight to confront one of the women is a man who at least is familiar with courtly procedures, judging from his mock-courteous manner. He addresses the woman as if she were his lady and he some gallant imploring to be of service:

Dame, thynk it not yll,
Thy knafe if I kyll.

(ll. 330-31)

Of course, the knight is being cruelly sarcastic here, and the clash between courtly tone and churlish intention underscores just how far he has strayed from the

real values of courtesy. But his action betrays at least a nodding familiarity with courtly forms, showing him to be, at this point, tenuously attached to a few chivalric ideals.

That attachment is soon severed and the knight's uncouth character disclosed when the woman begins to resist. She assures the "thefe" (l. 332) that she will do all in her power to protect her infant, provoking him into revealing his true nature. He rudely tells her she is a "hoore" (l. 340), snatches the child from her arms and kills it. The action is that of a cad and a coward, and it sharply exposes the knight's lack of true courtesy. Far from protecting and aiding women in distress, he has only shown contempt for their honor, indifference to their plight and disregard for their rights as human beings.

The next encounter reveals a further debasement of knightly ideals. The second retainer, more unmannerly than his predecessor, does not even pretend to be courteous to his victim. On the contrary, he goes out of his way to be ill-bred, curtly ordering the frightened woman to "Com hedyr" and disdainfully calling her an "old stry" (l. 348). Furthermore, he deliberately violates the purely military values of his profession by refusing to give an "enemy" mercy when asked:

2 Mulier. Mercy, lord, I cry!
It is myn awne dere son.

2 Miles. No mercy thou mefe; it mendys the
not, Mawd.

(ll. 350-52)

The absence of both courtesy and pity in the second knight represents a rise in the level of cruelty in the play and prepares us for the mechanical brutality of the third retainer. This man is truly a professional, an efficient and unemotional killing machine who goes about his gruesome job with as little fuss as possible. He wastes no time in toying with the woman in a mock-courtly manner or in explaining why he cannot give her mercy. Nor does he address her as "dame" or "Mawd," preferring instead the impersonal "ye"--a form of discourse that emphasizes his lack of humanity. To his victim's terrified query "Wyll ye do any dere to my chyld and me?" (l. 372), he coldly replies, "He shall dy, I the swere, his hart-blood shall thou se" (l. 373). The entire murder takes place in only four lines (ll. 371-74), and throughout that time the knight has remained the consummate professional. He even goes so far, being the craftsman that he is, to comment favorably on the good workmanship of his fellows, praising their atrocities as "well-wroght" (l. 370).

Thus the slaughter scene is not simply a depiction of aristocratic violence. It is an attempt to show, symbolically, the stages through which a knight must pass on his way toward becoming a professional killer

or "morder-man" (l. 361). It details a journey that all criminal knights must have taken, regardless of how much they might have deluded themselves to the contrary--a journey that involves the laying aside of all the humane virtues of chivalry: pity, courtesy, even courage. The Wakefield "Massacre" represents, therefore, the ultimate stage in the spiritual disintegration of the knight. As such, it functions as both a brilliant recreation of the lawlessness of contemporary retainers and a masterful exploration into the interior workings of the criminal mind.

All that remains now is for the knights, like so many bastard feudatories, to collect their wages. Returning to Herod as victorious conquerors, they proudly exclaim that they have "morderd . . . Many thowsandys" (ll. 418-19) on their "rydyng throughtt Iure" (l. 417). The reference to murder obviously renders their demand for praise and honor absurd. Yet the term "rydyng," as it is used here, serves much the same function in that it refers to a specific criminal activity--namely, to take part in a raid.¹⁰² The knights remain oblivious to these and other ironies, however, and press forward their claim for reward. For instance the third knight, appropriately the most professional and unemotional of the group, believes that he deserves to be distinguished for having "no pyté" (l. 427) and speaks for the others in asking for a cash remuneration:

Ye myght hold you well payde oure lust to
 fulfyll,
 Thus thynk me,
 With tresure vntold,
 If it lyke that ye wold
 Both syluer and gold
 To gyf vs greatt plente.

(11. 436-41)

Herod gladly complies to these requests. Declaring that "A hundreth thowsand pownde is good wage for a knight" (l. 444), he magnificently unlocks the coffers of his largess:

Of pennys good and rownde, now may ye go light
 With store;
 And ye knyghtys of oures
 Shall haue castels and towres,
 Both to you and youres,
 Now and euermore.

(11. 445-50)

The knights are delighted. They praise Herod's generosity and depart, gleefully enumerating their acquisitions: "We haue castels and corne, mych gold in oure malys" (l. 453).

The whole scene, on one level, repeats the satirization, made earlier, of Herod's misuse of largess: he dedicates his treasure to the cause of lawlessness when he should be employing it to advance the forces of peace and order. But the episode does more. It casts a cold light on the abuses brought about by bastard feudalism itself. For like Herod, many magnates harbored unscrupulous knights and known criminals in their

retinues and periodically used them in violent enterprises. And like Herod's knights, the retainers themselves were hired on a cash basis, ready--for a price--to carry out orders regardless of the moral consequences. Hence the concentration on money towards the end of the play, with Herod and his knights taking part in a relationship which has more in common with what goes on between an employer and employed than between a lord and his vassals. It is almost as if the playwright were intent on ridiculing the late medieval practice of paying retainers with money instead of land. True, Herod's thugs do receive "castels and towres," but these gifts are overshadowed by more liquid forms of capital. The knights make it clear that above all else they want cold, hard cash. And Herod, who believes that a "hundreth thousand pownde is good wage for a knight" is more than willing to submit to their demand for "syluer and gold" in "greatt plenté" by giving them "pennys good and rownde"--a gesture that leaves them with "mych gold" in their "malys." Clearly, the whole system of commercial retaining is being attacked here. And so too are the people who participated in that system. Knights in name only--like those who followed Sir Thomas Courtenay to the home of Nicholas Radford--these liveried gangsters commonly denied their chivalric heritage and, like Herod's men, were pardoned or rewarded for doing so. The inevitable result of such a system--a system that

purchased loyalty with cash and encouraged the creation of mob-like arrays--was violence and anarchy. This pretty well describes many parts of England, especially the north, through much of the later Middle Ages. It describes the world of the Magnus Herodes too. Like the real world, the play's world is a place of blood and chaos, institutionalized violence and officially condoned crime--a hellish landscape where chivalry has been all but banished as a meaningful guide to human conduct, where killers masquerading as knights are hired to do evil and where man's basest passions, like Herod himself, "rokyn" (l. 508) unrestrained across the land.

NOTES

¹ John Bellamy, Crime and Public Order in England in the Later Middle Ages (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 47-48; R. L. Storey, "Liveries and Commissions of the Peace: 1388-90," in The Reign of Richard II, ed. F. R. H. Du Boulay and Caroline M. Barron (London: The Athlone Press, 1971), p. 133; Lander, Conflict and Stability, p. 179.

² Aristocratic crime, especially in the northern shires, has been well documented in recent years, as the following selection of studies will indicate: Bellamy, Crime and Public Order, pp. 2, 7, 22-27, "The Cotterel Gang: an Anatomy of a Band of Fourteenth-century Criminals," English Historical Review, 79 (1964), 715-716 and "The Northern Rebellions in the Later Years of Richard II," Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, 47 (1965), 261-74; Ralph A. Griffiths, "Local Rivalries and National Politics: The Percies, the Nevilles and the Duke of Exeter, 1452-55," Speculum, 43 (1968), 589-632; R. L. Storey, "Disorders in Lancastrian Westmorland: some Early Chancery Proceedings," Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian & Archaeological Society, 53 (1954), 69-80 and "The north of England," in Fifteenth-century England: 1399-1509, ed. S. B. Chrimes, C. D. Ross and R. A. Griffiths (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), pp. 129-44; J. A. Tuck, "Richard II and the Border Magnates," Northern History, 3 (1968), 27-52 and "Northumbrian Society in the Fourteenth Century," Northern History, 6 (1971), 22-39.

For studies dealing with cases of knightly violence outside the northern counties, see E. L. G. Stones, "The Folvilles of Ashby-Folville, Leicestershire, And Their Associates in Crime, 1326-1347," Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 5th series, 7 (1957), 132; R. L. Storey, The End of the House of Lancaster, (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1966), pp. 84-104, 165-75; Roger Virgoe, "William Tailboys and Lord Cromwell: Crime and Politics in Lancastrian England," Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, 55 (1973), 459-82.

For more general explorations into the subject of aristocratic lawlessness see the following works: Barbara A. Hanawalt, "Fur-Collar Crime: The Patterns of Crime Among the Fourteenth-Century English Nobility," Journal of Social History, 8 (1975), 1-17 and Crime and Conflict in English Communities: 1300-1348 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 138-44; Richard W. Kaeuper, "Law and Order in Fourteenth-Century England: The Evidence of Special Commissions of Oyer and

Terminer," Speculum, 54 (1979), 734-84; Charles Ross, Edward IV (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 388-413.

³ The term "bastard feudalism" was coined by Charles Plummer in his "Introduction" to Sir John Fortescue's The Governance of England (Oxford: 1885), pp. 15-16, and was resurrected in the twentieth century by K. B. McFarlane in his two pioneering articles, "Bastard Feudalism," Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research, 20 (1943-45), 161-80 and "Parliament and 'Bastard Feudalism,'" Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 4th series, 26 (1944), 53-79. Since then the term has been the subject of much controversy, with historians divided over the question of whether or not its pejorative connotations accurately reflect social realities in late medieval England. On the one hand, there are those who argue that the term "bastard feudalism" is unfair, a relic from an earlier and more unsympathetic period which saw the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries solely in terms of anarchy, violence and petty factionalism. Others maintain that the institution itself was actually an agency of stability and social control. Both these opinions are set forth in the following studies: William H. Dunham, Lord Hastings' Indentured Retainers: 1461-1483, Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 39 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), pp. 7-14; G. A. Holmes, The Estates of the Higher Nobility in Fourteenth-Century England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), p. 83 and N. B. Lewis, "The Organization of Indentured Retinues in Fourteenth-Century England," Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 4th series, 27 (1945), 29-39.

On the other hand, there are a number of specialists who agree with Plummer's negative assessment of the institution and see bastard feudalism both as a corruption of the older feudal system, which was based on land instead of money, and as a promoter of violence, disorder and disloyalty. See Bellamy, Crime and Public Order, pp. 2-7, 22-28; Helen Cam, Law-Finders and Law-Makers in Medieval England (London: Merlin Press, 1962), pp. 52-58 and Liberties & Communities in Medieval England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1944), pp. 206-14; E. F. Jacob, The Fifteenth Century, pp. 338-45; M. H. Keen, England in the Later Middle Ages (London: Methuen, 1973), p. 21; A. R. Myers, England in the Late Middle Ages, pp. 155-56; R. L. Storey, House of Lancaster, pp. 8-18, 150.

I am generally in agreement with this latter group of scholars and throughout this chapter will be utilizing many of their conclusions.

⁴ McFarlane, "Bastard Feudalism," 162-66.

⁵ Storey, House of Lancaster, p. 10. Even some religious institutions hired retainers; see E. D. Jones, "The Church and 'Bastard Feudalism': the Case of Crowland Abbey from the 1320's to the 1350's," The Journal of Religious History, 10 (1978), 142-50.

⁶ Bellamy, Crime and Public Order, pp. 7-10; Bellamy claims that baronial crime ebbed and flowed under the waxing or waning of the king's authority. Periods of high crime usually coincided with periods of low royal profile and power: 1388-91, 1409-13, 1426-29, the late 1430's and 1440's. See also Lander, p. 177.

⁷ Lewis, 30. Lewis is careful to draw a distinction between those retainers who signed a written agreement with their lord and those who merely attached themselves to some powerful magnate without bothering to sign anything. He labels this second group "liveried retainers" (as opposed to the first group, which he terms "indentured retainers") and says that they were the ones most often the subject of contemporary complaint and most often accused of being a "menace to ordered society." Dunham, in his Lord Hastings' Indentured Retainers, pp. 27, 69-71, essentially agrees with this distinction.

Be that as it may, one can hardly assume that indentured retainers were more law-abiding just because they were legal. In all probability they were neither more nor less respectful of the law than their non-indentured brethren.

⁸ A number of these gangs were actually led by men of noble blood. See Bellamy, Crime and Public Order, pp. 71, n. 6; 79.

A famous example of a criminal band being retained by a member of the nobility is found in the Paston Letters, which recount how the duke of Norfolk relied on the services of the Charles Nowell gang in the 1450's; see Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century, part 1, ed. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 58-68. All future references to the Paston Letters will be taken from either this edition or its companion volume, Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century, part 2, ed. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

⁹ A retainer's loyalty could be a fragile and unpredictable thing, often shifting from one lord to another. A retainer would transfer his allegiance, for instance, in order to obtain more money or better protection. Some retainers even served more than one lord. See Myers, England in the Late Middle Ages, pp. 155-56, McFarlane, "Bastard Feudalism,"

176-77 and A. J. Pollard, "The Richmondshire Community of Gentry during the Wars of the Roses," in Patronage, Pedigree and Power in Later Medieval England, ed. Charles Ross (Gloucester, GL.: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1979), pp. 52-56.

The Paston Letters, I, pp. 147-48, contain an illuminating example of one retainer's rather cynical approach to the whole matter of loyalty to one's lord. Edmond Paston writes in July, 1447 that one Steward, the chief constable, had lately asked him who he thought "schuld rewle" in Norfolk--Thomas Daniel or William de la Pole, marquis (later duke) of Suffolk. At the time Paston gave a non-committal answer, but later he remarked that he feared Steward

wold forsake his master and gette him a newh yf he wyste he schuld rewle. And so wene I meche of all þe contré is so disposyd.

(I, p. 148)

¹⁰ Storey, House of Lancaster, pp. 150-58.

¹¹ Dunham, pp. 69-70; see also the Statute against Livery and Maintenance, 13 Richard II, St. 3 (1390), in Statutes of the Realm, II (London: 1816), pp. 74-75. The statute condemns the following:

divers Maintainours, Instigators, Barretors, Procurours, and Embraceours of Quarrels and Inquests in the Country, whereof many are the more encouraged and bold in their Maintenance and evil Deeds aforesaid, because that they be of the Retinue of Lords and others of our said realm, with fees, Robes, and other Liveries called Liveries of Company. . . .

¹² This, of course, is what contemporaries referred to as maintenance--that perverse form of good lordship which deliberately interfered with the workings of justice in order to protect a retainer from punishment.

¹³ Storey, "Liveries and Commissions," p. 133.

¹⁴ Lander, p. 161.

¹⁵ CPR, Richard II, V, p. 86; III, p. 172; Henry V, I, p. 65.

For further instances of trespass in Yorkshire and especially in the West Riding see CPR, Richard II, I, pp. 299, 357, 469; II, p. 136; VI, p. 365; Henry IV,

IV, pp. 312-13; Henry VI, I, p. 465; III, p. 201.

16 CPR, Richard II, VI, p. 241; see also V, p. 444; Henry VI, II, pp. 275, 302-03.

17 I do not mean to imply that the lower classes refrained from violent acts. On the contrary, they were just about as unruly as their leaders--if not more so. But that is another topic altogether and one outside the bounds of the present chapter.

18 Storey, "Liveries and Commissions," p. 135.

19 CPR, Richard II, III, pp. 406, 409, 439, 452, 461, 510, 531 (cited by Storey in "Liveries and Commissions," p. 135, n. 13). Storey, in the same article, also cites other examples of lords protecting and maintaining criminal supporters: CPR, Richard II, III, pp. 233, 241, 243, 354, 376-77, 408, 413, 434, 518, 521, 524, 540; IV, p. 3 (Storey, p. 135, n. 13).

20 CPR, Richard II, IV, p. 391.

21 CPR, Richard II, IV, p. 216.

22 CPR, Richard II, IV, p. 463.

23 Derby was not the only member of the nobility to go out of his way to secure pardons for his adherents. Many others did exactly the same thing. What follows is a select list of pardons obtained by the nobility and gentry for assaults and murders committed in the West Riding alone. Numerous other examples can undoubtedly be found for the rest of Yorkshire too: CPR, Richard II, I, p. 442; II, p. 470; III, pp. 25, 354, 424-25; IV, pp. 17, 18, 129, 336, 513; V, pp. 189, 688; VI, p. 67.

24 I. S. Leadam and J. F. Baldwin, ed. Select Cases Before the King's Council, 1243-1482, Selden Society, 35 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1918), pp. lxxxviii-lxxxix.

25 CPR, Henry IV, II, p. 215.

For examples of knightly violence in Yorkshire during the reign of Henry VI, see CPR, Henry VI, IV, pp. 225, 297; V, p. 306.

26 CPR, Henry V, I, pp. 181, 189-90.

27 CCR, Henry IV, II, pp. 104-06.

28 CCR, Henry VI, IV, p. 217.

- 29 Virgoe, 459-82.
- 30 CPR, Henry IV, IV, pp. 316-17.
- 31 CPR, Edward III, IX, p. 156.
- 32 J. M. Kaye, "The Early History of Murder and Manslaughter, Part I," The Law Quarterly Review, 83 (1967), 380.
- 33 CPR, Edward III, IX, p. 156.
- 34 CPR, Edward III, IX, p. 156. For a more detailed examination of the Eland murders see C. T. Clay, "The Family of Eland," Yorkshire Archaeological Journal, 27 (1911), 241-47; I have been unable personally to consult this article.
- 35 CPR, Richard II, VI, p. 465; see also Henry IV, I, p. 472 and II, pp. 189-90. The feud is also mentioned in W. T. Lancaster's "Birstall, Gomersal and Heckmond-wike," Publications of the Thoresby Society, 26 (1919), 24.
- 36 Excerpta Historica, ed. Samuel Bentley (London: 1831), pp. 2-3. See also Proceedings of the Privy Council, V, ed. N. H. Nicolas (London: 1834), pp. 90, 92, 282, (hereafter this work will be abbreviated as PPC); CPR, Henry VI, II, pp. 346-47; III, pp. 56-57, 276-77, 279-80; James Tait, "Neville, Richard, Earl of Salisbury," DNB (1894), p. 280.
Griffiths, in "Local Rivalries," 591, n. 9, says the feud was more like "a state of war" and lasted for almost ten years (1430-39).
- 37 PPC, V, p. 241.
- 38 Storey, House of Lancaster, pp. 124-32, 142-49 and Griffiths, 589-632; see also PPC, VI, pp. 130, 140-41, 147-49, 154-55, 158-63, 178, 189-97, 234, 245-46.
- 39 The Nevilles' Yorkshire estates were located primarily in the northern and central regions of the county and included the manors of Middleham, Wensleydale, Sheriff Hutton and Cleveland. The family also had an interest in the West Riding, for Richard Neville, the earl of Salisbury, had, since 1425, held the post of steward of Pontefract Castle.
The Percies had numerous holdings in all three ridings: in the East Riding, the manors of Leconfield, Scarborough, Arras, Wressell, Nafferton, Wansford, Waplington, Gembling and Pocklington; in the North Riding,

Seamer, Topcliffe, Asenby, Gristhwaite, Kirk Leavington, Throxenby and Catton; in the West Riding, Tadcaster, Healaugh, Spofforth, Leathley and Lenton. In addition, they held lands in Craven and possessed a messuage in the city of York. See Jacob, p. 337, n. 3; Griffiths, 590-91, 598; Storey, House of Lancaster, p. 115 and Bean, pp. 36-42.

40 Griffiths, 629.

41 See pp. 265-66 of the present study.

42 Storey, House of Lancaster, p. 125.

43 Storey, House of Lancaster, p. 131.

44 Wars of the English in France during the Reign of Henry VI, ed. J. Stevenson (London: 1861-64), II, p. 770, cited by Storey in House of Lancaster, pp. 131, 252, n. 28 for Chapter VIII.

45 Griffiths, 602.

46 Griffiths, 598.

47 Griffiths, 599-600, 604. Representatives of the local gentry were at Heworth in full force. In all, six knights, thirty-two esquires, twenty-six gentlemen and twenty-four clerks took part in the encounter.

48 Storey, House of Lancaster, p. 151.

49 Storey, House of Lancaster, pp. 150-58. In May, 1454, Sir Nicholas Longford assembled an army of over a thousand men, marched to Walter Blount's manor at Elvaston and pillaged it.

50 Storey, "Disorders in Lancastrian Westmorland," 69-80.

51 Paston Letters, I, pp. 322-33; II, pp. 50-57.

52 Storey, House of Lancaster, pp. 84-104, 165-75.

53 Quotation by an unnamed source, cited by Bellamy, Crime and Public Order, p. 56.

54 This passage is from a petition to parliament (Duke of Northumberland's MSS, vol. 475, 39, collection of Sir Robert Catlyn) presented by John Radford, the victim's cousin. It is printed in English Historical Documents, 1327-1485, ed. A. R. Meyers, p. 1232. Other quotations from the petition which appear in the text

have also been taken from this work (pp. 1231-33).

55 Storey, House of Lancaster, p. 168.

56 Paston Letters, II, pp. 126-27.

57 The three known accounts of the murder--the parliamentary petition quoted in the text, the Paston letter and a Latin indictment for the court of King's Bench (K. B. 9/16/50; cited by Storey in House of Lancaster, pp. 168, 256, n. 11 to Chapter XIII)--all mention Courtenay's failure to keep his promise.

58 Michael Stroud, in "Chivalric Terminology in Late Medieval Literature," Journal of the History of Ideas, 37 (1976), 323-34, begins his essay by recounting the details of Radford's murder and asserts that this "violent episode characterizes chivalry in England during the Wars of the Roses." I would maintain that similar, though less sensational, acts of knightly violence had been going on for some time prior to the Wars of the Roses and that chivalry itself had been in a pretty poor state since at least the second half of the fourteenth century.

59 Paston Letters, II, p. 426.

60 Compare Suffolk's desire to meet Paston "with a spere" and to have his "hart blod . . . with hys owen handes" with the Wakefield Herod's boast that if he had the Christ-child "in hand . . . /I shuld with this steyll brand/Byrkyn all his bonys" (ll. 105-08). Like Suffolk too, Herod also considers himself good with a lance, proclaiming that men say he is "the doughtyest . . . /That euer ran with spere . . ." (ll. 109-11). Whetley almost certainly did not have the Magnus Herodes in mind when he wrote to Paston but was referring instead to the now lost Herod play in the Norwich cycle. (See Alan H. Nelson, "On Recovering the Lost Norwich Corpus Christi Cycle," Comparative Drama, 4 (1970-71), 241-52.) Nevertheless, the parallels between his remarks and the Wakefield play are worth noting.

61 In concentrating on the violent predisposition of some lords, one must not overlook the fact that some, if not most, of the nobility took their high positions in society seriously and strove their best to maintain public order. But the system often worked against them. A baron needed a large retinue to announce his status to the world and to protect himself from powerful rivals; a lesser knight or esquire needed a big lord's patronage to defend his interests against the encroachments of yet some other overbearing magnate. Thus the very way in

which society was organized created the potential for lawless behavior--especially in times of feeble central rule when men could more freely settle their disputes by force. In addition, it must be remembered that men had a greater capacity for violence than they do now: "unlike today, a man might break the law quite seriously when an opportunity for profit or revenge offered itself but then revert back to obedience to the law, even upholding it, for the rest of the year, the decade, or even a lifetime" (Bellamy, Crime and Public Order, pp. 29-30). Without therefore exaggerating the lawlessness of the period, we can safely argue that the late Middle Ages probably did witness a rise in the level of aristocratic crime, most noticeably in the north, where even the most prominent peers (like Henry, earl of Derby) numbered murderers and professional criminals among their followers.

⁶² For a good account of Suffolk's actions against the Pastons see Henry S. Bennett, The Pastons and their England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), pp. 63-66.

⁶³ Rot. Parl., IV, pp. 329, 344, 348, 421-24, 435; V, pp. 487, 633; VI, p. 8.

⁶⁴ Statutes restricting livery and maintenance were enacted in 1390, 1401, 1406 and 1429. It was not until 1468, however, that Edward IV forbade entirely the granting of liveries to all but household servants. Prior to this date lords had been allowed to retain men who did not reside with them. See Dunham, pp. 67-89.

⁶⁵ There were, of course, earlier complaints. In October, 1411, a commission was established by Henry IV "to inquire about all riots, offenses, trespasses, misprisons . . . rides of evildoers, maintenances of quarrels . . . gifts and receipts of liveries" that had been reported for the counties of York, Nottingham and Derby. See CPR, Henry IV, IV, p. 374.

⁶⁶ CCR, Henry VI, I, pp. 316-17.

⁶⁷ CCR, Henry VI, I, p. 469.

⁶⁸ PPC, V, p. 83.

⁶⁹ CPR, Henry VI, II, pp. 378-79. (These pages list only those who signed the oath from Yorkshire.)

⁷⁰ PPC, VI, pp. 159-61.

⁷¹ Robert of Brunne's "Handlyng Synne", part 1,

ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, EETS, o.s. 119 (London: Oxford University Press, 1901), p. 218.

72 "Satire on the Retinues of the Great," in Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries, ed. R. H. Robbins, pp. 27-29.

73 "Poem on the Evil Times of Edward II," in The Political Songs of England, ed. Thomas Wright (London: 1839; rpt. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1968), pp. 334-36.

74 Mum and the Sothsegger, ed. Mabel Day and Robert Steele, EETS, o.s. 199 (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), pp. 7-8. All future references to this poem will be taken from this edition.

75 See also Mum, LII, ll. 182-89. For more information about the problems caused by Richard's Cheshire retainers see R. R. Davis, "Richard II and the Principality of Chester, 1397-9," in The Reign of Richard II, ed. Du Boulay and Barron, pp. 256-79 and J. L. Gillespie's two articles: "Richard II's Archers of the Crown," The Journal of British Studies, 18 (1979), 14-29 and "Richard II's Cheshire Archers," Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, 125 (1975), 1-39. I have not been able personally to consult the last article.

76 Middle English Sermons, p. 266.

77 Quoted in Owst, p. 325.

78 Thomas Hoccleve, The Regement of Princes, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, EETS, e.s. 72 (London: 1897), p. 101. All future references to this work will be taken from this edition.

79 George Ashby, Active Policy of a Prince, in George Ashby's Poems, ed. Mary Bateson, EETS, e.s. 76 (London: 1899), p. 30.

80 The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, 2nd ed., I, ed. Eugene Vinaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 120.

81 Sidney Painter, French Chivalry (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1940), p. 92.

82 Raymond L. Kilgour, The Decline of Chivalry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937), pp. 3-7; see also Owst, pp. 331-38.

83 There exists among historians considerable disagreement over the question of lawlessness in late

medieval England. But recent studies seem to follow J. R. Lander's lead in seeing the kingdom as "no more war-ridden in the fifteenth than in earlier centuries" (Crown and Nobility: 1450-1509 (London: Edward Arnold, 1976), p. 61). Be that as it may, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries appeared far more disorderly to those who had to live through them. Both official and popular literature repeatedly convey an increasing sense of alarm, dismay and frustration over what is perceived to be a general rise in the level of lawlessness in the realm. This growing concern on the part of contemporaries over the problem of disorder has recently led one historian to maintain that while it may be difficult to determine "whether or not crime was increasing on some absolute scale," it is virtually certain that people were becoming less tolerant of violence and discord in general: "We must be sensitive to a changing social threshold for the perception of violence and toleration of disorder" (Kaeuper, 737). Thus whether or not England really was a more chaotic and violent place in the later Middle Ages--and I am inclined to think that it probably was--is beside the point. The important thing is that people believed it to be so.

⁸⁴ The Coventry Shearmen and Taylors' Play, in Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays, 2nd ed., ed. Hardin Craig, EETS, e.s. 87 (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 1-32, is the least critical of contemporary knights. The play portrays Herod's soldiers as reluctant accomplices who obey their lord more out of fear than out of a desire to gain glory, prove their prowess or give vent to their brutal urges. Even after the slaughter has been accomplished, the knights continue to be ashamed of their role in the whole affair (cf. ll. 870-883). The playwright places the blame for the crime squarely on Herod's shoulders and exonerates the knights as much as is artistically possible.

For an interesting study of how the play's issues may have been shaped by the political beliefs of the townspeople of Coventry, see Lynn B. Squires, "Legal and Political Aspects of Late Medieval Drama," Diss. University of Washington 1977, pp. 111-23.

⁸⁵ The Digby Plays, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, EETS, e.s. 70 (London: 1896), p. 7. All future references to the Digby Slaughter will be taken from this edition.

⁸⁶ The intensity of the Chester cycle's attack on contemporary knights is not surprising when we consider that Chester had a long standing and somewhat infamous reputation as a recruiting ground for soldiers. Both Richard II and his father, the Black Prince, drew heavily

on Cheshire's plentiful supply of fighting men in forming their retinues and armies. The men of Cheshire had also been prominent among Hotspur's followers during the Percy uprising of 1403. Both Henry V and Henry VI, furthermore, made use of their services in the French wars. Cheshire men, moreover, fought on both sides during the Wars of the Roses.

A number of the county's soldiers had rather unsavory characters and some of them were outright felons--a situation that has been attributed to the shire's notorious avowry system, "an institution peculiar to the palatinate, whereby an escaped felon or bondman would, with permission, 'avow' himself the man of some Cheshire lord and live in protection on his lands thenceforth" (Myers, ed., English Historical Documents, IV, p. 540). Once safely ensconced in a lord's affinity these ruffians could more easily and securely gratify their criminal longings. At any rate, they were "an obvious source of military manpower" during the late Middle Ages (see Anthony Tuck, Richard II and the English Nobility (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), p. 166). Chester's notorious military traditions, therefore, may have influenced the Chester dramatist's characterization of Herod and his Knights. See also note 75, above.

87 Prowess was foremost a military virtue and had two aspects: rashness and indomitability in battle, and skill in the use of arms. Courtesy was considered both a social refinement (good manners, polite discourse, a graceful bearing) and a moral quality (the disposition to be generous, humble, charitable). For a detailed analysis of these and other chivalric values see the following works: Gervase Mathew, The Court of Richard II (London: J. Murray, 1968), pp. 114-44 and "Ideals of Knighthood in Late Fourteenth Century England," in Studies in Medieval History Presented to Frederick Maurice Powicke, ed. Hunt, Pantin and Southern, pp. 354-62; F. J. C. Hearnshaw, "Chivalry and its Place in History," in Chivalry, ed. Edgar Prestage (1928; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1974), pp. 1-33; Richard Barber, The Knight and Chivalry (1970; rpt. London: Sphere Books, Ltd., 1974), pp. 71-143.

88 Cawley, ed., The Wakefield Pageants, p. 114; note to l. 39.

89 Of course, this is just one interpretation of Herod's role in the play. Others include Herod as an anti-type to Christ, an earthly tyrant opposed to the spiritual sovereignty of Jesus, and Herod as "mad sinner," one whose character is shaped by medieval ideas about insanity. This latter view has most recently been put forth by Penelope Doob in Nebuchadnezzar's Children

(New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 95-133.

90 In all, Herod uses a form of the word "vengeance" or its equivalent, "wrake," six times in the play (cf. ll. 167, 242, 271, 303, 323, 493).

91 Romans, 12, 19 and Hebrews, 10, 30; see also Middle English Sermons, pp. 233-34.

92 Christine de Pisan, The Book of Fayttes of Armes and of Chyualrye, trans. William Caxton, ed. A. T. P. Byles, EETS, o.s. 189 (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), pp. 11-12.

93 J. S. Critchley, Feudalism (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978), pp. 43-44; Thomas Craig, The Jus Feudale, I, trans. James A. Clyde (Edinburgh: William Hodge & Company, Ltd., 1934), pp. 607-08.

94 Ramón Lull, The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry, trans. William Caxton, ed. A. T. P. Byles, EETS, o.s. 168 (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 38-40; Honore Bonet, The Tree of Battles, ed. and trans. G. W. Coopland (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1949), pp. 184-85.

Aside from their chivalric role as protectors of the weak, knights also had a political role as maintainers of public order. Thus Raymón Lull (pp. 41-42) states that members of the nobility are bound to protect society and promote good governance. For an excellent discussion of the knight's civil role see Arthur B. Ferguson, The Indian Summer of English Chivalry (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1960), pp. 104-08.

95 Diane Bornstein, Mirrors of Courtesy (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1975), p. 212.

96 As a symbol of anarchy Herod is the antithesis of courtesy, if we take courtesy to mean restrained and dignified conduct. That this was indeed one of the meanings attached to the term is apparent from Arthur's ungracious behavior in the first part of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, where the poet makes it quite clear that the king, in becoming angry at Bercilak, has acted in an unmannerly fashion:

þe blod schot for scham into his schyre face
and here;
He wex as wroth as wynde,
So did alle þat þer were.

þe kyng as kene bi kynde
þen stod þat stif mon nere. . . .

(ll. 317-22)

(See Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed. rev. by Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 9-10). Unbridled anger, then, was frequently looked upon as a sign of churlishness and ill-breeding (see Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1965), pp. 217-18). Consequently, Herod's own extravagant rages can only be interpreted as the actions of a supremely boorish as well as a manifestly chaotic personality.

97 Herod's role as a symbol of anarchy is underlined by the number of times he uses words denoting anger: cf. ll. 100, 113, 118, 140, 172, 227, 239.

98 Richard of Saint Victor, De eruditione, in Patrologiae cursus completus: Patrologia Latina, 196, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: 1844-64), p. 1241; quoted and trans. in Doob, p. 65.

99 Lull, pp. 33-34.

100 Lull, pp. 76-89. The symbolic importance of a knight's armor was an idea that the Middle Ages borrowed from St. Paul, who in his Epistle to the Ephesians, 6, 13-20, stressed the Christian's duty to fight against the forces of evil with the armor of God, the breastplate of justice, the sword of the spirit and the shield of faith. See also Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ll. 566-669.

101 Herod's pose as a man of courtesy is enhanced (and perhaps ironically punctured) by his halting attempts to speak French (cf. ll. 171, 273, 512-13).

102 OED, VIII, p. 654.

VI

The Towneley Passion Sequence: A Study in
Medieval Religious Paranoia

At least three out of the four extant dramatic versions of the Passion portray Christ as a dangerous spiritual leader, a somewhat eccentric yet nonetheless influential demagogue whose very existence is seen by his accusers as a threat to their most hallowed institutions and traditions. All three of these versions, furthermore, go to unusual lengths to develop this theme. The Towneley plays--which are to be the central topic of discussion in this chapter--suggest, for example, that Christ's subversive power proceeds largely from his skill as a preacher. At least this is what his enemies think, for they are forever complaining about his "Many wordys," his "steuen" and his "fals talkyng." Pilate himself asserts that one of the reasons why Christ deserves to die is that he "has prechyd and puplyshed so playn." The accusers in York, on the other hand, attribute the Savior's popularity to his familiarity with the occult. Time and time again they call him a magician or "warlowe," alleging that through witchcraft and sorcery he charms the people away from "oure lawe." Finally, the N-Town cycle depicts Christ specifically as "an eretyk and a tretour bolde" who must

"fyrst be hangyn and drawe,/And thanne in fyre be brent" lest his heterodox and seditious doctrines infect others.

The roles assigned to Christ in these cycles--preacher, sorcerer and traitor--are looked upon by his antagonists as being detrimental to the stability of society. Their subversive character is further enhanced by the fact that they were all firmly associated with England's only important pre-Reformation heresy--Lollardy, a movement which throughout its history, and especially after Sir John Oldcastle's revolt in 1414, was considered by ecclesiastical and civil authorities alike to be a menace to both Church and State. When viewed from this perspective, then, the absurd accusations which Christ's opponents level against him suddenly become charged with a new--and hitherto unnoticed¹-- contemporary relevance: the Son of God is falsely charged, tried and executed as a heretic by a society obsessed with Lollards and Lollard-hunting.

This chapter will therefore try to examine Lollardy itself and the society in which it flourished. How widespread was it and where? What measures were taken to suppress it? What did the orthodox think about it? How did the Lollards themselves view their situation? Once these and similar questions have been answered we will be better able to assess the Towneley cycle's own contribution to and evaluation of one of the great contro-

versies of the late medieval world.²

Intellectual Background

The basic tenets of Lollard doctrine were formulated by John Wyclif roughly between the years 1378 and 1382. Only the briefest possible discussion of his ideas and those of his followers, however, will be attempted here since I am not so much concerned about the specifics of Lollard belief as much as I am about the way people responded to it.³ Some commentary, nevertheless, will be necessary if only to provide us with a general grasp of what the heresy stood for.

Wyclif's heretical teachings embraced three major topics: the Bible, the Church and the Eucharist. His views on the Bible were not in themselves unorthodox but his application of them certainly was. Wyclif asserted that Scripture was an immutable ideal which had existed in the mind of God prior to creation. The physical Bible, so familiar to men on earth, was nothing less than a visible and perfect replica of this ideal.⁴ Everything in Scripture was therefore utterly and timelessly true.

By the same token the Church was also seen as a universal archetype, conceived by the mind of God before the dawn of time. Unlike the Bible, however, its earthly equivalent, because of worldliness and corruption, failed to measure up to the metaphysical ori-

ginal. Consequently Wyclif rejected the visible, earthly Church in favor of its archetypal reality and increasingly used Scripture as a moral yardstick against which the imperfections of the former were measured and denounced.⁵ Scripture, therefore, while not considered superior to the eternal Church, definitely took precedence over the visible ecclesia. "In comparison with this eternal Church, the visible Church steadily lost authority in Wyclif's writings till it became in the end simply the dwelling of Antichrist."⁶ This position, of course, represented a radical departure from conventional fourteenth-century theology which had always looked upon the Bible and the tradition of the visible Church as being complementary, not antagonistic, to one another.⁷

But the heretical implications of Wyclif's doctrine did not stop here. Having repudiated the visible Church on the grounds that its wealth, pride and worldliness contradicted the poverty and humility of Christ as set forth in the Bible, Wyclif went on to maintain that the only way it could return to its original pristine state was through complete renunciation of all its material possessions. This policy of disendowment was viewed by him as a kind of panacea for the Church's ills and eventually became his "most explosive legacy to his disciples."⁸

It was explosive because it meant nothing less than

the total material destruction of the Church itself. And what made it a doubly volatile doctrine was the fact that Wyclif had a practical plan for its achievement. He simply proposed that the king and the nobility were to be the agents of dispossession. The state was therefore to be the means whereby the Church was forcibly reformed. By appropriating the source of clerical corruption--excessive property and money--the secular arm would merely be making the earthly Church conform more to its archetypal model.⁹

Unfortunately, the logic of Wyclif's arguments propelled him headlong into heterodoxy. Unlike other exponents of clerical reform, who called for renewal within the existing structure of the Church, Wyclif actually rejected the structure itself because of its failure and refusal to follow biblical precept.¹⁰ This was heresy and Wyclif soon found himself being denounced as a schismatic.

If Wyclif's plan of disendowment threatened the Church's material foundation, his doctrine of dominion--upon which the argument for dispossession rested--had a similar effect on its moral and sacramental functions. According to Wyclif the contemporary clergy, secular and religious alike, had no right to either temporal or ethical power because they had by their sinfulness allowed themselves to fall from a state of grace. This lack of grace, Wyclif argued, made them unfit as holders

of property and, more important, as custodians of men's souls. It was therefore permissible--nay, obligatory--for men both to disendow and disobey them. Henceforth no sinful priest could claim temporal or spiritual dominion over the laity.¹¹

But what about the virtuous priest? Did not he have some kind of authority over his flock? Not according to the implications inherent in Wyclif's theory of predestination. Wyclif insisted that the earthly Church was split into two camps: the predestinati (those marked by God for salvation) and the presciti (those marked for damnation).¹² Now since only God knew for sure which group one belonged to, it followed that the true moral state of any individual remained a mystery to men. Even the most saintly cleric might conceivably be a member of the presciti, and, if so, his ministrations of the sacraments would be as worthless as those of his most corrupt colleagues.¹³ Wyclif's doctrine of predestination, along with that of dominion, therefore, called into question the whole sacerdotal function of the clergy and challenged the spiritual validity of the sacraments themselves.¹⁴

In a world where the true Church--the community of the elect--remained unknown and where the efficacy of the clergy as mediators between God and man was subject to serious doubt, the only certainty that remained according to Wyclif's system was God's word as set forth

in Scripture. This is why the Bible looms so large in Wyclif's writings: it offers stability and assurance in a universe where flux and doubt seem to be the norm. The certainty of the Bible also accounts for Wyclif's insistence on the need for preaching the gospel. Only by hearing and understanding the Word could a true believer come to know the Creator; and only by preaching that Word was the priest fulfilling his function as a disciple of Christ.¹⁵ In effect, Wyclif was, by his emphasis on Scripture, denying to the visible Church its traditional role as go-between for God and man and conferring that role instead upon the Bible and the Church Fathers--a position that was to have heretical as well as revolutionary reverberations.¹⁶

Oddly enough, none of the aforementioned teachings or their implications was responsible for turning all leading segments of society against Wyclif. That honor was reserved for his views on the Eucharist. In two works, both written in 1379--the De apostasia and De eucharistica--Wyclif declared that both the substance and accidents of bread and wine remained after consecration had taken place--a position that contradicted the Church's official stand maintaining that only the accidents (taste, color, texture, shape) remained while the substance of these materials was transformed into the body and blood of Christ. It is interesting to note that Wyclif did not deny the fact that Christ was really

present in the sacrament; he merely asserted that the substance of bread and wine coexisted with Christ.¹⁷ But such theological niceties did not matter much to his contemporaries. They roundly condemned the doctrine on all points and savagely attacked its originator. Wyclif, now finding himself abandoned by such former supporters as the friars and the nobility, was forced in 1381 to leave Oxford, where he had taught for most of his life, for his benefice in Lutterworth, where for the next three years he continued to assail the abuses and structure of the Church. He died of a stroke on 31 December 1384.

Wyclif's death did nothing to stop the promulgation of his more radical ideas. In his last years at Oxford and Lutterworth he had attracted a small following of university trained supporters--Philip Repingdon, John Aston, Nicholas Hereford and John Purvey--who busied themselves preaching his doctrines in and around Oxford and Leicester.¹⁸ These early evangelists were important to the beginnings of Lollardy for two reasons: they aired Wyclif's ideas before a wider and more popular audience than had hitherto been the case, and they provided an important link between the movement itself and the university world.¹⁹ This academic connection, however, was short lived. In 1382 Archbishop Courtenay launched a full-scale purge of Oxford that resulted in the virtual annihilation of Lollard sentiment at the

university. At the same time he called a council at Black Friars in London (the "Earthquake Council") and got twenty-four of Wyclif's propositions declared either heretical or erroneous.²⁰ Courtenay's purge was so complete and his methods so thorough that even some of Wyclif's staunchest adherents, including Repingdon and Aston, ultimately abjured their master's doctrines.²¹

With the loss of Oxford Lollardy lost its intellectual base and henceforth became largely a popular movement made up of half-educated and semi-literate clerks and laymen.²² A similar change occurred in some of its doctrines too. Gone now were many of Wyclif's subtle theological arguments; in their place we find merely the bold assertion of his more controversial conclusions.²³ Furthermore, popular Lollardy increasingly emphasized the moral and practical features of Wyclif's teaching over its theological and speculative aspects. For example, nowhere in Wycliffite literature is there any discussion of the concepts of dominion and grace--two key principles in Wyclif's own canon. Instead, there is simply the commonly held assumption that clerical lordship is evil per se and that secular lordship is justified if it accords with God's law.²⁴ The same process of simplification was applied to Wyclif's views on the Church. Little if any discussion was given by the later Lollards to the complex system of universals which allowed Wyclif to draw his distinc-

tions between the archetypal and visible Churches.

Rather we encounter just the repeated accusation that the earthly Church in its present state is the abode of Antichrist and therefore must be forcibly reformed--that is, disendowed--by the secular authorities.

This tendency to simplify Wyclif's doctrine and seize upon its more ethical and practical qualities is best exemplified by the document known as the Twelve Conclusions, a Lollard bill that was nailed to the doors of Westminster and St. Paul's in 1395.²⁵ Here are Wyclif's basic beliefs boldly and succinctly outlined and formulated for quick and easy comprehension. The English Church, for instance, is denounced because it has allowed itself "to dote in temperalte aftir hir stepmodir þe grete chirche of Rome" thereby causing the virtues of faith, hope and charity "for to fle out of oure chirche."²⁶ Likewise, the priesthood is condemned for not being "þe presthod þe qwich Cryst ordeynede to his apostelis," while the Eucharist is bluntly termed a "feynid miracle" which "inducith alle men but a fewe to ydolatrie." Finally, the religious hierarchy is taken to task for its intrusion into secular affairs. The two realms are separate, the document states, and "he þat hath takin him to þe ton schulde nout medlin with þe toþir;" therefore, "alle manere of curatis boþe heye and lowe ben fulli excusid of temperel office, and occupie hem with here cure and nout ellis." These and

similar points found in the manifesto show how Wyclif's views on the Church and the priesthood, while being continuously promoted, were expressed in a form better suited to the understanding of the general public--a form that was at once less sophisticated and complex and, at times, more radical than its original.

Lollardy thus soon became a much less intellectual movement than it had been when Wyclif was alive or in the years immediately after his death. It developed a more simplified and practical outlook, devoting itself toward achieving the spiritual renewal of the individual through the radical reorganization of the visible Church. Consequently, it opposed inner, personal holiness to the Church's excessive reliance on the sacraments as the sole conduits of grace; it stressed the humility and poverty of Christ over the worldly extravagance of contemporary prelates; it elevated the Bible to a position of unquestioned and exclusive authority; and it called for an end, through disendowment, to ecclesiastical influence and power in temporal matters.²⁷ These were bold and revolutionary proposals and, as we have seen, they threatened the very essence and existence of the medieval Church. It was not long before the Church began to react--first slowly, and then with gathering intensity and resolve until by the early fifteenth century it, along with the State, had established an efficient system of persecution and suppression.

The History of Repression

By the late fourteenth century Lollardy had become well entrenched in a number of areas--most notably Leicester and its environs, Bristol, Coventry, Northampton, Herefordshire, the diocese of Lincoln and parts of the north.²⁸ Its rapid rate of growth as well as the breadth of its geographical distribution was sufficient to cause grave alarm among churchmen. We have already seen that Courtenay's purge effectively stifled the movement at Oxford by 1382. Now other prelates began to follow the archbishop's lead and initiate investigations on their own. But the Church could do little by itself; it desperately needed the help of the government in its crusade against heresy. There were still, however, a number of prominent noblemen who sympathized with the movement and even offered protection to its leaders.²⁹ Until these men were won over or brought under control the Church's chances of mounting an effective campaign of persecution appeared pretty slim.

The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 gave the Church a golden opportunity to win the nobility and the crown over to its side (although it must be admitted that many aristocrats had already abandoned their tacit support of the heretics once Wyclif's ideas on transubstantiation were more widely known).³⁰ As early as 1377 papal letters were sent to the archbishop of Canterbury

and other prelates imploring them to warn the king, the magnates and the gentry that Wyclif's opinions not only endangered the Church but, if carried to their logical conclusions, presaged the ruin of the entire realm.³¹ After the upheaval of 1381 the pope's words seemed prophetic indeed, and the English Church was quick to play upon the nobility's fear of anarchy by attributing the rebellion to the seditious teachings of Lollard preachers.³² An anonymous Latin poem, written immediately after the revolt,³³ strongly implies that the renegade priest, John Ball, a ringleader of the rising, was an adherent of Wyclif and that the Lollards themselves were "the primary cause of the strife which had terrified the whole kingdom."³⁴ The chronicler Walsingham, describing the same event, asserts that prior to the disturbance Ball had gone about the countryside preaching "the perverse doctrines of the perfidious John Wycliffe."³⁵ And the translator of Higden's Polychronicon abruptly designates the treasonous cleric Wyclif's "disciple."³⁶

Armed with these and other accusations, the bishops asked the government for assistance in curbing the missionary activities of the many unauthorized preachers whom they believed had been instrumental in fomenting the recent rising. The crown responded favorably and in June, 1382, enacted a statute ordering its sheriffs to arrest anyone cited by a bishop who "under Dissimulation

of great Holiness, and without the Licence of the Ordinaries" roams from county to county preaching "heresies and notorious Errors, to the great emblemish- ing of the Christian Faith, and Destruction of the Laws, and of the Estate of Holy Church, to the great Peril of the Souls of the People, and of all the Realm of Eng- land."³⁷ The wording here is particularly illuminating, for it shows that as early as 1382 people were beginning to see Lollardy and Lollard preachers in a political as well as a religious context. In other words, the followers of Wyclif were considered not merely heretics but potential traitors and rebels too. Henceforth the government would view them much more suspiciously than had hitherto been the case. The 1382 statute thus marks the first step in what was to be a long and fruitful period of Church-State cooperation in matters of hetero- doxy.

In the years following the passage of the statute the authorities spent a good deal of time trying to silence the voices of the many itinerant, unlicensed preachers who had surfaced in the wake of Wyclif's polemic.³⁸ This was a perfectly logical course of action since the Lollards themselves saw preaching as an essen- tial activity, designed not only to gain converts but to make known to the faithful the word of God. They further- more insisted that it was the right and duty of each believer, whether he be clerk or layman, to expound the

gospel anywhere he pleased.³⁹ As a result there was a proliferation of unregulated evangelists who went from shire to town preaching what they termed "God's law." It was imperative, therefore, that the Church strike at these individuals first.

This was easier said than done. Lollard preachers were notoriously hard to catch and hold, primarily because so many sympathizers were willing to hide them from the authorities. In the vast diocese of Lincoln, a region where Lollardy was rampant, Bishop Buckingham ordered the excommunication of one William Whytsyde, a probable heretic, on 19 September 1385. Whytsyde was quickly imprisoned at Leicester, but it seems as though his jailer allowed him free range of the town. At any rate, the suspect appears never to have recanted, for as late as 1 January 1386 he still had not made his peace with the Church.⁴⁰ A few years later, in March 1392, the bishop of Hereford complained that he was unable to bring William Swinderby and Stephen Belle, two known heretics and false teachers ("informatores"), to justice because they had "betaken themselves with their abettors and accomplices to the nearest parts of Wales" where the king's writ did not run.⁴¹ But despite these and other setbacks, the prelates doggedly continued their search for unauthorized preachers and for the most part were successful in forcing many of them to renounce their beliefs.⁴²

Aside from preaching, another activity which the bishops focussed their inquiries upon was that of book-ownership and book-production.⁴³ The Lollards, because they believed that the Bible, not the Church, was the only reliable source of truth, came to look upon religious books almost as sacred objects in their own right. Vernacular versions of Scripture, two of which were in circulation by 1396,⁴⁴ were especially prized by the sect. Thus the Church reasoned--and rightly--that if a suspect were found with unauthorized English devotional works in his possession there was a good chance that he was a Lollard. Parliament felt the same way. In 1388 it ordered that all books written by Wyclif, Hereford, Aston and Purvey were to be seized and their owners arrested. At York this job was given to the sheriff and two knights, John Godard and John Hothom. They were to seek out "certain books, booklets, schedules and quires . . . containing divers heresies and errors" and proclaim that "any persons henceforth buying or claiming such books" would be arrested and imprisoned.⁴⁵ The hunt for Lollard books was on, and it would not relent until the Reformation.

But in spite of the success of some of its efforts and the increasing cooperation of secular officials, the Church still felt that sterner measures were needed against the heretics. So in 1395 it asked the crown for more government involvement in the task of suppression.

And in 1397 it petitioned parliament to create legislation making heresy a capital offense. Both requests, however, were turned down.⁴⁶ But with the accession of Henry IV things began to change, and the government became more cooperative. Henry's position as king in 1399 was still rather unsteady, and he was eager to gather support from as many quarters as possible--not the least of these being the prelates and clergy.⁴⁷ He therefore let it be known that he was no friend to heretics, sending out in his first year of office writs to all his sheriffs notifying them to imprison all "faithless subverters of the christian people" who illegally "preach in divers churches, chapels and public and privy places, and in their sermons do sow divers heresies, errors and other nefarious innovations."⁴⁸ Thus when the clergy pointed out in yet another parliamentary petition that Lollardy not only "basely instructs and informs the people" but "incites them to sedition and insurrection as far as they are able, and makes great dissensions and divisions in the people,"⁴⁹ the king was quick to respond. In 1401 he approved the statute De Heretico Comburendo (On the Burning of Heretics), a piece of legislation that, as its title implies, gave the government the right to burn obstinate and relapsed heretics.⁵⁰

As Gordon Leff observes, "De heretico comburendo marked a new stage in the official attitude towards

Lollardy."⁵¹ Before, government officials had merely aided the Church in capturing and handing over heretics; final correction, however, remained the business of the ecclesiastical authorities. Now the State itself took on the responsibility of punishment and in so doing turned Lollardy, hitherto only a religious offense, into a civil crime.⁵²

Meanwhile, Henry's commissioners continued to perform their more normal duties of locating and incarcerating people suspected of holding unorthodox opinions. On 28 April 1407, for instance, the prior of St. Mary's, Coventry, along with the mayor and bailiffs of the city were ordered to arrest and detain any men or women found "preaching, publishing or maintaining or holding schools of any sect or doctrine contrary to the Catholic faith and the sacraments of the church." A similar commission was impanelled about a year later to proclaim that anyone in Norwich who preached or taught "new and unheard of opinions" would be jailed.⁵³ Earlier in the same decade (1402-03), the bishop of Durham launched proceedings against at least four and possibly more itinerant preachers who had been spreading heresy in his diocese.⁵⁴ It is clear from these and other cases that neither the crown nor the Church had lessened its resolve to squash Lollardy. On the contrary, the new statute may very well have sparked officials to re-double their efforts in this direction.

While investigations like the ones just cited were going on, a new charge was being levelled against Lollards--that of false prophecy. Ever since Henry IV had deposed Richard II there had been tales in circulation asserting that the former king was alive and well in Scotland. Naturally the crown did not take too kindly to these rumors, seeing them as possible sources of sedition. In fact, John Bernard of Offeley, Hereford, was forced to obtain a pardon in 1402 merely for repeating one.⁵⁵ At any rate, it was not long before Lollards themselves were being accused of instigating all sorts of spurious prophecies and tales--including those involving the "false Richard"--which purportedly predicted the king's overthrow. In 1406 a parliamentary petition specifically charged them with spreading "diverses fauxes pretenses Prophecies" that foretold Henry's destruction and that of "voz Filz, & de toutz Seignrs Espirituelx & Temporelx."⁵⁶ Whether or not any of this was true is difficult to determine. But what does seem certain is that Lollards were beginning to be looked upon as convenient scapegoats by an increasingly paranoid society--people upon whom any charge, no matter how ill-grounded, could be safely pinned.

Lollards had always hoped that the secular arm would be their ally in the struggle to reform the structure of the existing Church. But as time went on and the government's collusion with the hierarchy became

more apparent, this dream quickly evaporated. Consequently, many heretics started to entertain more radical and subversive ideas on how they best might be able to bring about a new religious order,⁵⁷ unmindful of the fact that the implementation of their ideas would bring them into direct confrontation with the State.

The revolt of Sir John Oldcastle, a desperate and foredoomed attempt by the heretics to make society conform to their conception of God's law, represents the ultimate radicalization of Lollardy as a political movement.⁵⁸ Sir John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham, was a member of the Herefordshire gentry and a close personal friend of Henry V. Unfortunately, he was also a staunch Lollard who, because of his rank and reputation, was the foremost leader of the heretical party. The ecclesiastical authorities had long suspected him of unsound opinions but refrained from accusing him outright--partially out of respect for his friendship with the king--until sufficient proof could be obtained. That proof was soon forthcoming in the form of certain heretical texts found in the shop of a London illuminator who admitted that Oldcastle was the owner.⁵⁹ When confronted with the fact of his companion's guilt Henry, an exceptionally pious individual,⁶⁰ tried personally to persuade the knight to give up his beliefs; but when this failed he wasted no time in ordering Oldcastle's arrest. Oldcastle was thereupon tried before Archbishop

Arundel at St. Paul's chapter-house and sentenced to death. Both the king and Arundel, however, were intent on sparing his life, and so he was given a forty-day period of grace in which to recant.

What happened next is so familiar as to need hardly any retelling. Oldcastle somehow escaped from the Tower (some said by sorcery)⁶¹ and immediately began scheming to overthrow the government. The coup, however, was detected well in advance, and the king was prepared.⁶² On the night of 10 January 1414 his forces ambushed between two and three hundred Lollards who, responding to their leader's call, had converged on St. Giles's Fields from all parts of the realm--some from as far north as York.⁶³ Within hours of its victory, the government had set up commissions to try the rebels, and by 12 January sixty-nine prisoners had been sentenced to death. Of these, thirty-eight were executed on the following day, seven of whom were both hanged and burnt as heretics and traitors.⁶⁴

Oldcastle himself, however, escaped and remained at large for nearly four more years. Rumors as to his whereabouts abounded. One of them had him meeting with William Douglas at Pontefract to arrange the details of a Scottish invasion in order to restore Richard II to the throne.⁶⁵ But his efforts to elude capture could not go on indefinitely. Towards the end of 1417 he was apprehended in the Welsh marches, brought to London and

summarily tried and convicted as a rebel and a heretic. On 14 December 1417 he was taken to St. Giles's Fields where he was "hanged and brent on the galowez for his fals oppinions."⁶⁶

The aftermath of Oldcastle's debacle had devastating consequences for Lollardy. In the first place, the crown became convinced more than ever that heresy and treason were inseparable activities, both equally capable of drawing the realm into anarchy. This attitude is expressed over and over in the official records of the period. A pardon, dated 23 January 1414 and granted to one of the conspirators, claims that the Lollards had planned the following:

to annul the royal estate and the office of prelates and the orders of religious, to kill the king and his brothers and prelates and other magnates, provoke religious men to mundane occupations, spoil cathedral and other churches and religious houses of relics and other ecclesiastical goods and level them to the ground, and to appoint John Oldecastell regent of the realm and ordain divers rules within the realm as it were a people without a head. . . .⁶⁷

Whether or not these charges are accurate is beside the point. The important thing is that the government and the people, driven by recent events to the verge of paranoia and irrationality, believed them to be so and acted accordingly.

The identification of Lollardy with treason was given statutory force on 30 April 1414 when parliament

passed a tough new law designed to give unprecedented powers to crown officers in pursuit of heretics.⁶⁸ From now on all royal servants, from the chancellor on down, were to include the suppression of heresy as part of their sworn duties.⁶⁹ That is, they were authorized to initiate investigations into any and all unorthodox religious conduct and accuse, indict and try the offenders in royal courts. The lay arm now had a heresy-hunting machine equal to and independent of that of the Church⁷⁰--something which meant that it was now possible for a civil official, like the Towneley Pilate, actually to take the lead in bringing suspected heretics to justice.

Lollardy suffered in other ways too. Deprived of its one political leader of any stature and caught between the "rock" of ecclesiastical inquisition and the "hard place" of secular law, it found itself increasingly being blamed for every conceivable crime--especially treason⁷¹--by an enraged and frightened populace. These pressures proved overwhelming. Lollardy soon began to withdraw into itself, becoming largely an underground movement split up into small, local cells scattered over town and countryside.⁷² If it had ever been a serious political and religious force, it certainly ceased to be one after 1414. But it survived as a sect, continuing to preserve and pass on its ideas and to enflame the passions of its enemies.

Lollard Activity and Anti-Lollard Feeling in Yorkshire

Compared to the rest of England, most notably the Midlands, the north appears to have been relatively untouched by heresy in the fifteenth century.⁷³ Nevertheless, some Lollard activity did take place. For instance, several heretical priests, as has already been noted, were summoned to appear before Bishop Skirlawe of Durham in 1402-03 on charges of unauthorized preaching. And we know that at least one man from Carlisle participated in the 1414 rising.⁷⁴ It also seems probable that the Lollard William Thorpe had preached periodically in the north for over twenty years--from 1387 to 1407.⁷⁵ But apart from these few shards of information, we have little additional evidence of Lollard activity in the shires north of York.

Upon turning to Yorkshire itself one finds a bit more data--but not much. Attention has already been drawn to the appointment of a commission in 1388 to confiscate all suspicious books in the county and to the cases of the individuals from York who were present at St. Giles's Fields on the day of the Oldcastle rebellion.⁷⁶ However, there exists other material as well. A York formulary (compiled after 1439 but dating perhaps from an earlier period), for example, contains a commission from an unidentified archbishop to investigate

and proceed against all Lollards in the diocese.⁷⁷ Likewise, a gaol delivery roll for 1416 shows that on 5 October of that year one John Derby was jailed for heresy at the order of the York ecclesiastical court.⁷⁸ On the basis of this kind of evidence, therefore, one can feel comparatively safe in maintaining that Lollards were certainly not unknown in the shire even if their numbers were not legion.

But this is really irrelevant. Numerous or not, Lollards, by their mere presence, made most people nervous, afraid and angry--particularly after 1414 when emotions were running high.⁷⁹ In this respect Yorkshire did not so much differ from the rest of the country. Like their neighbors in the south and Midlands, the inhabitants of the shire were prone to treat virtually any kind of eccentric or unorthodox behavior as heresy. The case of Thomas Richmond, a Franciscan friar in York, furnishes us with a good example of this kind of paranoia in action. In 1426 Richmond preached a sermon at St. Anne's Chapel that alarmed local churchmen. In it he said such things as "a preste beyng in dedely syn es no preste" and "a seculer juge puttyng handes violently upon a preste beyng in dedly syn putt nocht violent handes upon a preste."⁸⁰ These propositions, of course, were dangerously close to Wyclif's doctrine of dominion and grace, and the friar's superiors had every right to be concerned. Richmond, however, was not a Wycliffite,

for he went on to declare that the Eucharist, far from being a feigned miracle or false sacrament, was so important that its ministration ought to be the sole office of a priest.⁸¹ The fact that Richmond was innocent of Lollardy mattered little to his prosecutors. He was tried and found guilty of "errors and . . . heresy," forced to recant and stripped of his commission to preach.⁸² In short, he was treated, somewhat shabbily and unfairly, as though he were a common Lollard.⁸³

Even more enlightening is the career of the famous mystic, Margery Kempe. Margery was an authentic religious eccentric, prone to falling into emotionally extravagant fits while at church, preaching in public and making rather injudicious criticisms of clerics who swore. But she was no heretic; on the contrary, she was scrupulously orthodox in her beliefs. Her orthodoxy, however, carried little weight with certain zealous clerks who, upon her arrival in York, at once levelled accusations against her. In the Fall of 1417 she was brought to Archbishop Bowet's palace at Cawood where "per comyn many of þe Erchebisshopys meny, despisyng hir, callyng hir 'loller' & 'heretyke,' & sworyn many an horrybyl othe þat sche xuld be brent."⁸⁴ Bowet himself then examined her but found her free from false or heretical notions. His aides, on the other hand, demanded her expulsion from the diocese, claiming that her presence endangered the people:

we wil not suffyr hir to dwellyn a-mong
vs, for þe pepil hath gret feyth in
hir dalyawnce [conversation, speech], and
peraumentur sche myth peruertyn summe of hem.

(p. 125)

* One of her accusers even declared that she was possessed by evil spirits because she had in her preaching cited the gospels (p. 126). Despite these allegations, Bowet still maintained that she was innocent; but just to be on the safe side he ordered her out of the diocese anyway.

Margery then left Cawood for Hull where she was greeted by many "malicyows pepil" who "madyng gret thretynng," saying she "xulde be sett in preson" (p. 129). So vehement, in fact, was the reaction of the townsmen against her that it forced the one person who had befriended her to beg her to leave his house as soon as possible. Margery complied and left Hull the next day.

Unfortunately, Margery's experience at Hull turned out to be merely a prelude to more woe. Within hours of her departure she was again arrested--this time by two of the duke of Bedford's yeomen who were part of an expedition searching for Sir John Oldcastle. They apparently believed her to be one of his agents (it will be recalled that there were rumors going about at this time claiming that Oldcastle was plotting with the Scots at Pontefract) and even alleged, as they were escorting her to Beverley, that aside from being "þe grettest

loller in al þis cuntre er a-bowte London eythyr" she was also the fugitive knight's daughter! (p. 129). The trip to Beverley turned out to be a horror, with Margery the object of all sorts of abuse along the way. At Hessele, for example, it seems as though the whole town was waiting for her, for as she passed through "men callyd hir loller & women cam rennyng owt of her howsys wyth her rokkys, crying to þe pepil, 'Brennyth þis fals heretyk'" (p. 129).

Once at Beverley she was again arraigned before a somewhat startled Bowet who had to listen to the yeomen's charge that she was Oldcastle's "dowtyr . . . sent to beryn lettrys abowtyn þe cuntre" (p. 132). The archbishop expressed concern over these new accusations but stood firm in his previous decision. Repeating his decree that he had found her a "parfyte woman & a good woman," he once again ordered her out of the shire "for qwietyng of þe pepil" (p. 131), making sure before she left that she received letters attesting to her orthodoxy and ruefully commenting: "I leue þer was neuyr woman in Inglond so ferd wyth-þal as sche is & hath ben" (p. 134). Soon after this Margery departed for good, leaving an angry Yorkshire--and, it must be supposed, a rather relieved Archbishop Bowet--behind her.

Margery Kempe's experiences in Yorkshire convey better than any historical document the intensity of

feeling against Lollardy in the years following the 1414 rising. The slightest deviation from conventional standards of behavior or belief was enough to unleash not only the relentless machinery of ecclesiastical and civil justice but also the collective fury of an hysterical populace⁸⁵--a situation shockingly reminiscent of the anti-Communist fever prevalent in America during the 1950's. The mere fact that Margery did some of the things society associated with heresy, like preach the gospel, criticize the clergy and appear more pious than her neighbors, made people brand her a traitor and a heretic and demand her death--and this in a region that had a relatively low incidence of Lollardy. Imagine what it must have been like in other sections of the commonwealth where the movement was more vigorous.

The religious paranoia at work in Yorkshire and the rest of the nation must have alarmed some people. It certainly alarmed the Lollards, who after 1414 went underground and stayed there for the remainder of the century. But it also frightened men of impeccable orthodoxy who began to question where all this witch-hunting was leading. If harmless eccentrics like Margery Kempe could narrowly escape the stake or gibbet what would be the fate of those who, while opposed to Lollardy, nevertheless felt a need to speak out for spiritual reform? Might not they be tarred with the same

brush as the heretics? This was a real problem given the temper of the times and one which men were coming to recognize. Some of them even began to speculate about what might happen should Christ himself suddenly appear in England and start preaching his message. But I am anticipating myself here. Before we can explore this question we must first look more closely into what people actually thought about the Lollards and what the Lollards actually thought about themselves. Only after this has been done will we be able to distinguish more precisely the concern being felt over the growing tendency to confuse dissent with heresy and unconventionality with subversion.

Contemporary Opinion: The Anti-Lollard Faction

From the moment they first ventured forth onto the English scene Lollards were subjected to the bitterest kinds of denunciation. Viewed with distrust and malice by their contemporaries, they were considered capable of any outrage and responsible for just about every evil. No charge was thought to be too outlandish, no allegation too unfounded when it was applied to them.⁸⁶ So accustomed, in fact, were people to identifying Lollards with wickedness that the word itself became a general term of opprobrium used, as K. B. McFarlane points out, in much the same manner as words like "Fascist" or "Communist" are used today.⁸⁷

Granted the fact that any accusation would suffice, an examination of the evidence reveals that some accusations would suffice more than others. We therefore tend to find the same charges voiced over and over in government documents and contemporary literature: Lollards are babblers of false and novel doctrines, crafty manipulators of language, sorcerers, misleaders of the people, men of excessive pride and feigned holiness, traitors, rebels and anarchists. But the really astounding aspect of all these recriminations is that they are the same ones Christ's accusers repeatedly level against him in the cycle plays. For this reason alone they deserve careful attention.

Without question one of the most common complaints about Lollards was that they were hypocrites--specifically religious hypocrites who, under the guise of false piety, seduced unwary souls from the bosom of the Church. We find this charge uttered incessantly in both official and popular writings. Boniface IX, for instance, in a mandate sent to the archbishop of Canterbury on 15 October 1395, accuses Lollards of "pretended humility, devotion and abstinence," while the statute of 1401 (De Heretico) draws attention to their "dissembled Holiness."⁸⁸ The anonymous author of Friar Daw's Reply (c. 1419-20), a well known anti-Lollard tract, compares them to whitened sepulchres who by "Streching [their] faces to be holden holi" prevent their true corruption.

("Bla ~~(un)~~hid graues ful of dede bones," ll. 122-23)⁸⁹
 from being discovered. According to the Gesta Henrici Quinti (1417), a commemorative biography of Henry V, even Sir John Oldcastle was said to have conducted his evil plotting "under a cloak of sanctity."⁹⁰ And the compiler of the fifteenth-century sermon collection known as Jacob's Well is so sure that Lollards are hypocrites that he defines hypocrisy specifically in terms of their sect:

3if þou feyne þe holy, þat þou myzt þerby
 dysseyue þe peple be þi fals techyng as
 lollardys don, þanne synnest þou dedly. ⁹¹

The important thing to remember here is that all these works go out of their way to point out that Lollards do not so much practice hypocrisy for its own sake as they deviously use it as a means to appear holier than they really are and to win more followers to their cause.⁹²

Another favorite charge was that Lollards were guilty of overweening pride--an inordinate desire either to raise themselves above their proper station or to meddle intellectually in matters reserved only for God. In the former category we can place Henry V's biographer's remarks on Oldcastle:

The enemy and subverter of the Church, nature, indeed, had at first made humble in rank.

Then, slaughtering and pillaging the Welsh secured his promotion to knighthood, and, later still, flattering fortune called him through marriage to be Lord Cobham. And then, last of all, swollen with the lust to dominate, he desired, great as he was, to be made greater, rich as he was, to be made richer, and though but a subject, to become a ruler.

(Gesta, p. 11)

Writing about fifteen years later in 1431, Henry VI (or someone representing him, for at this point he was still quite young) makes almost the same observation about a pathetic little Lollard uprising in Berkshire and Wiltshire, saying that the rebels, had their coup been successful, planned to make lords out of "ladds and lurdains."⁹³ Meanwhile, writers like Hoccleve in "To Sir John Oldcastle" and the author of Friar Daw's Reply are content to render their invective in more general terms, broadly denouncing the heretics for their "presumpcioun" ("To Sir John Oldcastle," l. 323) and "arrogance" (FDR, l. 182).⁹⁴

Contemporaries also severely castigated what they thought was intellectual pride on the part of the Lollards--an attempt to substitute reason and common sense for faith and divine mystery. Thus the Beggar in Hoccleve's "Prologue" to the Regement of Princes, commenting on this very tendency, rebukes the heretics in the following manner:

The more ruth is: alas! what men ben þey
pat hem delyten in swiche surquidrie?

ffor mannes reson may not preue oure fay,
 pat þey wole it dispreuen or denye.
 To our lorde god þat sytte in heuenes hye,
 Schal þey desyre for to ben egal?
 Nay, þat was neuer, certes, ne be schal.

(ll. 330-36)

A similar sentiment is behind John Swetstock's warning to the faithful to "Be not to bold ne to besy . . . be not to curious" nor "go . . . to fer" in matters of doctrine--an injunction which he says the Lollards refuse to heed.⁹⁵

We have already observed how official records display the crown's predisposition to view Lollards as traitors and criminals.⁹⁶ The same attitude also is evident in popular literature, where the heretics are reproached for fomenting "sodeyn surreccion"⁹⁷ and trying "in forcible maneere/ . . . to slee folk, & assaille,/ . . . the King . . ." ("To Sir John Oldcastle," ll. 385-86, 388). In the same vein we find them being denounced because they excite the commons "to vice and stire hem, vertu to refuse" ("To Sir John Oldcastle," l. 399). Not satisfied, however, with depicting their enemies as mere traitors, anti-Lollard writers did their utmost to make them out to be rabid anarchists. Thus the author of Friar Daw's Reply predicts that should Lollardy ever engulf England, law and order will cease and society itself will regress to a jungle-like condition:

For if þou [i.e., Jack Upland and other Lollards] pursue þi purpos þou assentist
þi silf in tresoun,

Menusyng þe kyngis maieste, priuyng him of
his power.

For if we taken þe gospel aftir þe menyng,
Nepir [emperour] ne kyng may hongre ne drawe,
Heued ne enprisoun [ne] haunte no domes,

But al in fair manere shulen ben vndirnomen;
And who wil not amenden him zeue him þe brydil,
And [bope] robbers & reuers, mansleeris &

treytours,
And al maner mawfesours, shulden ben vnpoun-
ishid.

(ll. 561-69)

Of course, such dire forecasts were only so much stuff and nonsense; but no one at the time seemed to notice or care. To the average Englishman Lollardy meant mainly two things: sedition and chaos.⁹⁸ The sooner it was smashed, the sooner the realm would be released from the threat of mass turmoil.⁹⁹

It was partially this fear of discord that drove the anti-Lollard controversialists to become almost pathologically obsessed with one of the heretics' most powerful weapons--words, especially spoken words. This phobia motivates the great majority of those tracts bitterly condemning illegal and unauthorized preaching. For example, the legal records of the period never tire, it seems, of pointing out the perils of Lollard sermonizing. Royal writs sent out to various parts of the kingdom repeatedly emphasize how certain schismatics have "published and taught" or "published and preached" their nefarious doctrines to simple, half-educated

auditors.¹⁰⁰ Boniface IX, writing in 1395, follows the same line when he refers to the way in which the new "bold sect of pseudo-christians" preach their false views on the Eucharist with "polluted mouth."¹⁰¹ It may be recalled too that one of the principal complaints the clerks of York had against Margery Kempe was that her "dalyawnce"--her speech--perverted the people. In fact, so wary had the authorities become of vernacular preaching in general that in 1417 Bishop Repingdon, the former Wycliffite, actually forbade the townspeople of Lincoln from even listening to sermons delivered in English.¹⁰²

The preoccupation with the Lollard penchant for preaching carried over into the popular sphere as well, where a number of orthodox moralists savagely ridiculed members of the sect for their loquacity. Friar Daw, for one, sees his heretical opponent, Jack Upland, as a maker of irksome noises--a kind of shrill bird who "chaterist & crijst" (l. 727) and "jangelist as a jay" (l. 808) or who, like Balaam's ass, "blaberest" (l. 92) words whose meanings are beyond their speaker's grasp.¹⁰³

Other writers however, including the creator of Friar Daw's Reply, approach the question in a different manner. Far from claiming that the Lollards are inept with language, they assert the contrary--that the heretics are clever, skillful practitioners of the art of rhetoric, capable of manipulating words in such a way

so as to entice the unwary and ignorant away from the truth. Thus Friar Daw calls their speech "'honyed' venym" (l. 128) which poisons the minds of whomever it reaches. Hoccleve, in "To Sir John Oldcastle," repeats the charge by accusing them of corrupting that once loyal knight with "sly coloured argumentes" (l. 281) and "fals' conceites" (l. 367). The homilist John Swetstock follows suit by attesting to the Lollards' crafty ability to fashion painted words¹⁰⁴--a sentiment echoed by the author of the Gesta Henrici Quinti when he relates the story of how Oldcastle tried to convert the king by "cunning verbal deceptions" (p. 5).¹⁰⁵

Proceeding from this view was the more general conception of Lollards being men of devious, almost Machiavellian, character. Boniface IX terms them "crafty" and Henry VI abhors their "subtilite, fraude, and felnesse."¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile Friar Daw, never one to be outdone when it comes to invective, discloses that they snare simple souls through "cauteles & sleigtes" (l. 188). A number of writers also tell us that the average Lollard is an inveterate liar. Friar Daw especially loves to hammer home this point. To him Lollards are pedlars of "fals fablis" (l. 24) and shameless perverters of the truth:

But so longe, by my leute, þou hast lerned to
lyen,
þat þi tonge is lett'er'oun of lyes, þou
lettist for no shame.

(ll. 475-76)

Finally, the many prophecies which the Lollards were supposedly so fond of making (witness their alleged desire for Richard II's restoration) are labelled gross falsehoods and fabrications. Responding to Jack Upland's prediction that the friars will one day be destroyed, Daw, himself a friar, says: "þi lewid prophecie y preise not at a peese. . . . þou prophete of Baal, þi god is a slepe" (ll. 87, 89). Even Wyclif himself is censured by the author of the Gesta as "that false prophet of accursed memory" ("pseudo propheta et dampnate memorie," pp. 2-3).

It was only natural, in the face of such persistent attacks upon both the style and content of Lollard sermons and upon the character of the heretic-preachers themselves, that vernacular preaching as a profession should eventually fall into disrepute in some areas. This was certainly the case in the city of Lincoln where, as we have seen, preaching in English was for a while abolished altogether. And it was the case in other corners of the realm too, especially after Archbishop Arundel issued stricter licencing procedures for preachers after 1409.¹⁰⁷ The result of all this was that people began to be suspicious and fearful of the spoken word. Or, to put it more precisely, they began to be a bit more wary of those who went about proclaiming publically and without permission their opinions on religious matters. Con-

sequently, what had once been a vibrant tradition in the English Church--that of criticizing the abuses of the laity and clergy alike--suddenly became a very disreputable activity. Henceforth any preacher suspected of the slightest unorthodoxy, unconventionality or irregularity--and this usually meant anyone who was too critical of the shortcomings of the Church or too zealous in publicizing the word of God--was subject to repression or, at best, to rigorous examination of his views,¹⁰⁸ a situation which probably did as much to undo the innocent as it did the guilty. Ironically, the Lollards, in trying to reform the Church, had actually made it less tolerant of dissent and more suspicious of the idea of renewal than ever before.

Aside from those charges which attack Lollards for their hypocrisy, pride and false preaching, there exists an equally important body of accusations which are more miscellaneous in nature. Two in particular shall concern us here: the belief that Lollards were in league with occult forces and that Lollardy itself was a new-fangled, "modernist" movement out to supplant the cherished beliefs of the old order.

The identification of Lollardy with witchcraft seems to have been ubiquitous. Official records commonly call the heretics "satellites of Satan," while the homilist who organized Jacob's Well sees fit to lump "lollardys & alle pat beleuyn on here heresy" with

"wycches & heretykes" in general.¹⁰⁹ And Friar Daw (who else?) announces that what the Lollards call "grace" is not found anywhere in the gospels "but in Sathanas pistile, /Wher of sorowe & of [sorcerie] noon is to seken" (ll. 899-900). Additional historical evidence reiterates these charges. In 1431 we find Bishop Stafford of Bath and Wells issuing a mandate condemning all sorceries, Lollards and heretical and vernacular books in his diocese.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, it may be recalled that Sir John Oldcastle was believed to have made his escape from the Tower with the aid of magic.

There seems to have been a measure of substance behind these insinuations, for we know of at least a few Lollards who were apparently involved in necromancy.¹¹¹ This, at any rate, is what the records say. But regardless of whether or not this is true, one thing remains certain: people saw a connection between Lollardy and magic¹¹² and frequently brought forth one accusation to support the other. Thus it was not unusual for heretics to be marked out as sorcerers too, especially during the late Middle Ages when people were just as hysterical over witchcraft as they were over apostasy.

Secondly, contemporary sources place a good deal of stress on the newness of Lollardy. This in itself is not that surprising; the Middle Ages as a whole viewed any kind of innovation as a potential threat to the divinely ordained stability of society. But the charge

is made often enough to merit some consideration. A writ sent out by Henry IV to all parts of England in May, 1400 complains of Lollard preachers sowing among the people "nefarious innovations repugnant to the catholic faith," while one issued by his son thirteen years later names the heretics as members of "the new sect of . . . lollards."¹¹³ The statute of 1401 adopts the same phraseology in its description of Lollard teachings as "divers new Doctrines."¹¹⁴

On the popular front similar observations are made by writers such as Gower, who refers to "this newe tapinage/Of lollardie" (V, ll. 1810-11) in his Confessio Amantis. A bit later in the same work he gives his readers this piece of advice:

Such newe lore, I rede, eschiue,
And hold forth riht the weie and suie,
As thine Ancestres dede er this:
So schalt thou nocht believe amis.

(V, ll. 1821-24)¹¹⁵

The author of the Gesta, moreover, indicts Sir John Oldcastle for his "new-fangled ideas" (p. 9). All these examples betray a tendency on the part of popular writers to interpret Lollardy as a dangerous novelty, a "new lore" which, because of its very newness, poses a clear and present danger to traditional values. It is a common charge--and one which we shall see again in the slightly different context of the Towneley cycle.

Anti-Lollard literature is characterized to a large extent by its consistency and unanimity, with government papers and orthodox writings both agreeing on what the major faults and features of the heretics are: feigned holiness, social ambition, intellectual pride, treason, deceit, skillful manipulation of words, falsehood, witchcraft and new-fangledness. Most if not all these complaints, furthermore, recur in the trial scenes of the Corpus Christi plays--particularly those in Towneley--and are applied either implicitly or explicitly to Christ himself.

But the official and orthodox views, while vitally important to our understanding of the Passion sequence, cannot account for everything in that sequence. These views must be supplemented by other, less "correct," ideas--ones put forth by the Lollards themselves. For what they have to say about each other and their own predicament is equally necessary for a proper comprehension of the historical dimension of these plays. Let us then turn to the heretics and see how their opinions may have shaped some of the dramatic elements in the pageants.

The Lollard Mentality

Lollards identified themselves almost exclusively with the early Church, seeing the events surrounding the lives of Christ and his disciples as exact replicas

of their own experiences in fifteenth-century England. In addition, they believed that they themselves, not the bishops, religious or beneficed clerks, were the only true descendants of the apostles--a rather extravagant claim and one which infuriated their opponents.¹¹⁶ At any rate, given their peculiar conception of themselves, Lollards tended to seek out specific episodes in the gospels which both justified their beliefs and simultaneously proved their claim to be linear heirs of the Savior. Three basic propositions--all of which are exploited in one way or another by the Towneley cycle--emerged from this rather idiosyncratic form of exegesis: first, that Christ himself was a kind of proto-Lollard, a precursor whose sufferings at the hands of the Jews foreshadowed the Lollards' own persecution by contemporary prelates; second, that the temple of Jerusalem--the one whose destruction Christ predicts in the gospels--stood for the worldliness and corruption of the late medieval Church; and finally, that should Christ miraculously reappear on earth, his actions and those of the heretics would seem so similar that he would be undoubtedly tried and executed as a Lollard. In exploiting this material, however, the Towneley dramatists were in no way aligning themselves with the heretics or defending heresy; they were simply calling attention to the casual and irresponsible way in which charges of apostasy were being levelled by

their contemporaries against the innocent as well as the guilty. If making use of certain Lollard commonplaces could alert more people to the potential hazards of such a practice, then so much the better.

The heretics' transformation of Christ into a Lollard was largely accomplished by emphasizing to an inordinate degree his role as a preacher. This was a natural thing for them to do. Because the Lollards had elevated preaching to such a high position in their own teachings, making it virtually the sole function of a priest, they understandably focussed their attention on Christ in his capacity as a giver of sermons. Every Lollard writer develops this point at one time or another.¹¹⁷ The author of the heterodox tract De Officio Pastoralis (1378),¹¹⁸ for instance, maintains that the "ryt preching of goddis word is þe mooste worþy dede þat prestis don heere among men" precisely because "crist . . . vside moost þis werk heere & tauzte whanne he wente to heuene his apostlis to do þis werk."¹¹⁹ Another tract, this one part of a Lollard sermon collection compiled between 1376 and 1412, contends that Christ was anointed by the Holy Spirit expressly to preach and that preaching itself is the highest of human callings:

And þerfore þis Goost anyntide Crist wif
goddis of grace as fulli as ony man myzte
be anyntid. And þus Crist mut nedis preche
to make men þat wolden take it, for þis is

þe beste dede þat man doiþ here to his
 breþeren. And so Crist prechide, to prison-
 eris forzyvyng of þer synnes, and to men
 blinde in wit, for to knowe þe wille of God,
 and leeve broken men in forzyvenesse of þer
 travaile. And Crist prechide þe zeer of our
 Lord þat was acceptable bi him; for he made
 the zeer Jubile; and daie of zyvyng of mercy
 and of blis was prechid of Crist.¹²⁰

The constant repetition of the word "preached" in this passage effectively communicates what had become a Lollard convention--namely, the notion that Christ had by his actions conferred upon preaching the honor of being the primary means of making his message known¹²¹ and of fulfilling his Father's behests. Thus, by using Christ's personal commitment to preaching as a justification for their own emphasis on that activity, Lollard writers cleverly turned the Savior into one of their own number.

Other aspects of Christ's earthly career, most notably his persecution by his enemies and his subsequent Passion, are also pressed into serving the Lollard cause. Hounded by the authorities at every turn, the heretics were prone to identify Jesus' plight with their own. For example, they believed that just as Christ was at times hindered in his preaching by his foes, so too were his "poor priests" hindered now-a-days by overzealous church officials. Taking as his text Mark 9 and Matthew 21, 23, a Lollard homilist develops this idea in the following manner:

þis gospel telliþ how þat Crist stoppide his enemyes in þer questioun. Whanne Jesus was comen into þe temple, þer camen to him, as he tauȝte, pryncis of preestis, and eldre men, and axiden þis questioun of him; Tell us in what power þou doist þes þingis, and who ȝaf þee þis power. And þus axen princis of preestis to day, whanne men tellen bi þe gospel þe defautis þat ben in þes princis, who ȝaf þee leeve to preche? Y suspende þee, wip-
outen my leeve to preche in my diocese. 122

Turning to the events of the Passion itself, we find other Lollard writers drawing still more parallels between Christ's experiences and those of their heretical brethren. We learn, for instance, that the crimes for which Christ is blamed in Scripture are exactly the same ones his present day followers--the Lollards--are accused of committing.¹²³ The heretical treatise Of the Leaven of Pharisees laments the fact that "poor prestis" who preach "þe gospel as crist biddiþ" are, like Christ before them, falsely charged with sedition. Just as "þe heize prestis & pharisees in cristis tyme . . . pute on hym & his disciplis þat þei disturbeden þe lond of iude & wolden distroie it," so now do these latter-day pharisees--the prelates and friars--say that God's true believers "ben cause of alle þe perturbacion of þe rewme."¹²⁴

By the same token Christ is said to have been just as much a heretic in his time as the Lollards are in theirs. In both cases, affirms one heterodox sermonizer, the charge is a trumped-up one and those who make it are

themselves guilty of heresy:

Crist was many weies accusid, but þe moste was heresfe. . . . For many putten heresy on oþer bi malis and fals maner. . . . And so, 3if men maken lawis not groundid on Goddis lawe, and dampne men as heretikes, for þei done azens þes lawes, þes dampneris ben heretikes. . . .¹²⁵

Elsewhere we are told that Christ's enemies even branded him as a sorcerer--a familiar enough accusation to those Lollards who had been charged with a similar offense. The author of The Danterne of Ligt, a Lollard work written before 1415, relates the story of how the scribes and pharisees, "enviouse settis," had it noised abroad that a certain miracle wrought by Christ had really been performed through the agency of "Belsabub þat was prince of deuelis" and "god of flizes." Even now, he goes on to say, prelates and friars, whenever they want to "sclaundren her symple breþeren þat casten yuel maners from her soule or prechen þe gospel to Cristis entent," simply assert that "þis man hap eten a flize þat 3yueþ him lore of Goddis lawe."¹²⁶ In other words, like the pharisees did to Christ long ago, they attribute the good man's knowledge of Scripture to witchcraft (i.e., "to eat a fly" signifies affiliation with Beelzebub, the god of flies)¹²⁷ and thus by their malice "sclaundir for Lollardis þat spoken of God." (The writer was evidently uneasy with the popular name given to his sect.) It may be recalled that a similar

charge was made against Margery Kempe by the clerks of York, who considered her ability to cite Scripture a sign of demonic possession.

While Christ himself was often portrayed in heretical literature as if he were a harassed and persecuted "poor priest," his accusers--especially the Jewish prelates--were likened to contemporary bishops and ecclesiastical officers. Lollard works delight in maintaining that modern, worldly churchmen were nothing more than reincarnated versions of the Hebrew leaders who had oppressed and falsely indicted the Son of God. Probably the most common comparison was the one that outrightly associated the late medieval hierarchy with men like Caiaphas.¹²⁸ So popular, in fact, was this particular identification that it even appears in the records of contemporary heresy trials. Between 1428 and 1431 one John Skilly of Bergh was charged before the bishop of Norwich with twenty-three counts of heresy and error, one of them being that he had asserted that the bishops and their officers, whom he termed "cursed Cayfaces," each year made new laws "to kille and brenne all trewe Cristis puple whiche wolde teche or preche the trewe lawe of Crist."¹²⁹

Elsewhere Lollard writers were claiming that not only did the anti-heretical churchmen of their own era resemble the Jewish priests in their hatred of Christ's people and Christ's law, but that they employed the same

kind of legal chicanery against contemporary dissenters that the Jews had used against Christ. Judicial corruption, of course, is one of the central causes of Christ's downfall in the Towneley cycle. At any rate, one pro-Lollard polemicist describes how the whole perverted process is brought to bear against the heretics of his own age:

3if a trewe man displese a worldly prelate for techynge & meynthyng of goddis lawe, he schal be sclaudrid for a cursed man. . . . for þei wolen seie þat siche a man techiþ heresie & brynge many false witnesses & notaries in his absence, & in presence speke no word, & þei feynen þis false lawe, 3if þre or four false witnesses hirid bi money seye sich a þing azenst a trewe man, þan he schal not be herd, þoug he wolde proue þe contrarie bi two hundrid or þre; & þes false men seye in here doynge þat crist was lafully don to þe dep. . . . for bi sich witnessis þei weren dampnyd . . . & bi þis false lawe þei may proue heretikis whom euere þei wolen; 3e, crist & alle his apostlis & alle his martirs & trewe men in þis world. . . .¹³⁰

So contemptuous of justice are these worldly churchmen (for example, they "hiren also iurrouris & oþer gentil men of contre to forswere hem wytyngly on þe bok & not to putten hem vp for extorsioneris & þeues")¹³¹ and so keen on prosecuting by hook or by crook God's simple disciples that one Lollard moralist calls them "pilatis not prelatis"¹³²--a clear allusion to the tradition which portrayed Pilate as a "corrupt and tyrannical official"¹³³ and which is so brilliantly exploited in the Towneley Passion.

A number of heretical documents, therefore, characterize Christ's enemies in ways remarkably similar to the way in which they are depicted in the cycles. The Towneley dramatist, like the Lollard critic just cited, sees Pilate as a graft-ridden doomsman. The York playwright adopts that same critic's opinion on the corruptability of worldly prelates.¹³⁴ And the Wakefield Master even goes so far as to employ the very language of Lollard polemic, describing Caiaphas as a man who "gettis more by purches/Then bi his fre rent" (Coliphizacio, ll. 161-62)--a remark that finds itself repeated almost verbatim in the earlier Lollard accusation that modern bishops are so materialistic that all they do is busy themselves "to geten worldly goodis bi purchase."¹³⁵ In fact, much of the Wakefield Master's characterization of Caiaphas seems to rely on the traditional Lollard portrait of the conspicuously wealthy and worldly primate. For instance, the Towneley Caiaphas is made to boast about his power early in the Coliphizacio during his interrogation of Jesus:

Lad, I am a prelate, a lord in degré:
 Syttys in myn astate, as thou may se,
 Knyghtys on me to wate in dyuerse degré.

(ll. 154-56)

Now compare these pompous remarks to the following profile of a wealthy churchman as set forth by a Lollard writer:

A lord! siþ prelatiſ comen in ſtede of apoſtliſ, hou may þei for ſchame lyue ſo contrariouſly azenſt here pore lif, in waſt ſeruauntis, in grete fatte hors & nedles, in ſhynynſ veſſel, in gret aray of cloþiſ; 3e, more þan many grete lordiſ. . . . O lord! what tokene of mekenesſe & forſakynge of worldly richesſes iſ þiſ; a prelat as an abott or a priour, þat iſ ded to þe world & pride & vanyte þer-of, to ride wiþ foure ſcore hors, wiþ harneis of ſiluer & gold, & many raggid & fittrid ſquyeriſ. . . .¹³⁶

The two passages are remarkably similar in their depiction of both Jewish high priest and Christian prelate as men who revel in the ostentatious display of temporal power. Clearly the Wakefield Master has been influenced at least in part by the Lollards' persistent identification of the Hebrew leaders with contemporary clerics. And in this instance he appears to have been particularly influenced by the heretics' abhorrence of the worldly ecclesiastic--an abhorrence so great that it led them to insist upon the disendowment of the medieval Church.

The reference to the worldliness of prelates brings us to the second major assumption in the Lollard interpretation of Christ's career--that the temple of Jerusalem symbolized the materialistic preoccupations of the contemporary Church. If Christ's personal commitment to preaching was used by the Lollards to justify their own devotion to that activity, his attitude toward the worldly uses to which the Jews put the temple was cited to support their views on disendowment.

Christ's purification of the temple and his prediction that it would one day be destroyed were seen as mandates to cleanse the modern Church of its temporal corruption, while the temple itself became representative of the materialistic ecclesia in all its gaudy glory. Commenting on Christ's own habit of preaching out in the open, one Lollard writer tells his readers that the next time some rich prelate argues that "grete churchen ben worschiful to god and lykyng for þe peple to serue god inne," they should ask him why "crist preied most in þe nyzt in hillis, as þe gospel seip, and tauzte mychel þe peple in desert and in þe wilde felde, and seide þat þe heize temple schulde be distroied for þe synne of prestis þat weren þer-inne."¹³⁷ And elsewhere we are told that the money-changers whom Christ drove from the temple were the greedy forebears of today's depraved clergy, who spend more time building elaborate "chirchis bi symonye" than they do in prayer.¹³⁸

In light of these and other angry outcries against ecclesiastical opulence and commercialism one can well understand the fanatical reaction of the Towneley high priests to Christ's alleged promise to destroy their temple--the epitome of worldliness according to the Lollards. Given the anachronistic context of the plays, the Jewish leaders are responding as any fifteenth-century bishop would before the dreaded spectre of dis-

possession. That is, they see any attempt to ruin or reform their temple as heresy and a threat to their very way of life--the same attitude medieval churchmen adopted toward suggestions that their Church be renewed.

In the same manner, the Jews' apprehension, voiced in the biblical account of the Conspiracy, that Christ's words might induce the Romans to "fordo prestis and phariseis,"¹³⁹ is explicitly interpreted by another Wycliffite as referring to the contemporary clergy's fear that unrestricted preaching of the gospel will cause the lay powers to confiscate their wealth:

As if bischoppis and abbotis spaken to-day to-gedre: "hyde we goddis lawe, lest þes beculer lordis comme and take oure lordeschippis and fordo oure statis." 140

We can thus see by these examples how the Lollards took specific material from Christ's life as recorded in Scripture and used it to justify their own programs--in this case ~~disendowment~~, an idea which, along with preaching, forms a large part of the background of the Towneley cycle itself.

The last Lollard commonplace that we shall look at is in many ways the most important, for it involves a way of perceiving both Christ and the anti-heretical movement in general which could very well have been exploited by medieval dramatists. We have already observed how the heretics themselves considered Christ

as one of their own--a zealous preacher who strenuously opposed ecclesiastical opulence and corruption. We have also seen how they tended to identify their own persecution with that of the Savior and equated Christ's enemies with their own tormentors. But what is most enlightening is their belief that should Christ reappear on earth, he would almost certainly find himself being denounced as a Lollard. This very development was alluded to in a previously cited passage where it was argued that contemporary prelates could so manipulate the law to their advantage that they were able to prove anyone a heretic--even "crist & alle his apostlis & alle his martirs."¹⁴¹ But this point is made even more forcefully in yet another Lollard work, an anonymous poem called The Complaint of the Ploughman (c. 1393-94).¹⁴² Here the poet openly asserts what had elsewhere only been suggested obliquely--namely, that if Jesus should come to England he would, given the hysteria of the age, be defamed and attainted as a schismatic by an overly fervent hierarchy and their misguided followers:

Were Christ on earth here eftsoone,
 These would damne him to die;
 All his hestes they han fordone,
 And saine his sawes ben heresie;
 And ayenst his commaundements they crie,
 And damne all his to be brend.
 For it liketh not hem such losengerie;
 God Almighty hem amend! 143

Here, then, is ample precedent for the anachronistic

portrayal of Christ as a fifteenth-century heretic. It was a precedent that did not go unnoticed by the Towneley playwrights.

There are doubtless other parallels that can be drawn between Christ's persecution and the Lollards' own experiences. I have chosen to concentrate, however, only on the ones which the heretics themselves thought important enough to reiterate and emphasize. At any rate, it is not so much the accumulation of these similarities that is so interesting; rather it is what they reveal about the Lollards as people. Here was a group of individuals who, as their own words testify, not only continually identified their eccentric and revolutionary doctrines with the teachings of Christ, but who also maintained with unremitting regularity and confidence that Christ's very Passion was being re-enacted on earth through their own sufferings at the hands of a zealous episcopacy. Needless to say, such an attitude both encouraged and consoled them in their time of trouble. But this was not all. Thanks in part to the Lollards' own assiduous missionary work and book-production habits, people were beginning to look upon Christ's Passion in ways somewhat akin to those of the heretics--that is, as an event whose details could be used to highlight disturbing trends in their own era. Now, many of these people had no sympathy for the Lollard cause; but they may have felt that the inquisi-

tion had gone too far and that more harm than good was being done by the Church in its effort to uproot unorthodox opinion. For them Christ was not so much a proto-Lollard (as the heretics themselves liked to think), but an innocent man charged with heterodoxy by a heresy-obsessed society. This is the approach adopted by the Towneley dramatists who, in fashioning the Passion Sequence, exploited the "Christ-as-Lollard" tradition not to defend heresy, but to caution against the irresponsible and haphazard way in which the charge was being flung about--a charge which, given the temper of the times, could very easily have been levelled against Christ himself.

Lollard propaganda, therefore, may have inadvertently predisposed people to see Christ in a radically different light. This is not to say that most people believed, as the heretics did, that Jesus was the first Lollard. They did not. But they may have found some truth in the contention that the Savior might not survive in fifteenth-century England. Current fears and prejudices being what they were, many individuals reasoned that Christ would indeed have a hard time proving his orthodoxy if he suddenly returned to earth. Or, more realistically, they began to wonder about the fate of those good and pious men and women who, while opposed to Lollardy, nevertheless unashamedly followed the precepts of Jesus. Might not they be falsely accused

of apostasy and condemned as heretics simply for advocating reform or maintaining unconventional but still dogmatically sound ideas? This possibility, as we have already noted, bothered the Towneley playwrights. But it bothered others too. And it is to this latter group and their concern that we must now turn before examining the plays themselves.

The Plea for Moderation

Men had good reason to be worried over the excesses of anti-Lollard fever, for these excesses were undoubtedly responsible for a considerable number of false and over-hasty accusations--the trial of Margery Kempe being just one example. There were others as well. After Oldcastle's revolt especially there appears to have been a rash of unfair and unsubstantiated heresy charges brought against innocent men and women. Some particularly opportunistic individuals actually capitalized on the confusion and panic generated by the rebellion and went about falsely accusing people of Lollardy simply in order to obtain their property. This kind of profiteering got so bad that the king himself had to intervene and issue a writ, dated 11 January 1414, ordering its immediate cessation.¹⁴⁴ A similar phenomenon occurred in Kent after Jack Cade's uprising when there appeared, according to J. A. Thomson, "a number of dubious accusations" where Lollardy "may well

have been little more than another charge added to blacken a suspect's character."¹⁴⁵

It should not surprise us to find the Lollards themselves complaining about such practices.¹⁴⁶ After all, they were the ones most affected by them. But it is noteworthy that a number of orthodox writers, many of them vehemently hostile to Lollard doctrine, were beginning to voice similar protests. That is, they were beginning to express alarm over the fact that far too often certain kinds of people--the unconventional, the outspoken, the manifestly pious--were becoming the objects of harassment and persecution simply because they happened to exhibit traits which people commonly identified with Lollardy.

Chaucer's Parson is a case in point. The man is a paragon of virtue, yet because he possesses qualities that had come to be equated with heresy--visible holiness, a dislike of swearing, a firm commitment to preaching--he is treated as a Wycliffite by the other pilgrims. Thus, when the upright cleric rebukes the Host for swearing by "Goddess bones" the latter immediately smells "a Lollere in the wynd" (The Epilogue of the Man of Law's Tale, ll. 1166, 1173) and tells the others to be on their guard, "For we schal han a predicacioun; This Lollere heer wil prechen us somewhat" (ll. 1176-77). Upon hearing this the Shipman, echoing the prejudices of his age, raises the following objection

to the Parson's presence:

Nay, by my fader soule, that schal he nat!
 . . . heer schal he nat preche;
 He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche.
 We leven alle in the grete God. . . .
 He wolde sowen som difficulte,
 Or springen cokkel in our clene corn.

(ll. 1178-83)

Clearly, the whole episode is Chaucer's way of telling his audience that the craze to find heretics could at times be carried to ridiculous extremes.

A more bitter complaint is uttered by the poet John Audelay (c. 1425), a Shrewsbury monk and a man of unimpeachable religious rectitude. Audelay finds a number of things wrong with his society's fear of Lollardy. For instance, he laments the current tendency to see any form of piety as a sign of heterodoxy, affirming that now-a-days even the most devout priests are considered suspect:

3if þer be a pore prest and spirituale in
 And be deuoute, with deuocion his seruyse
 þay likon hym to a lollere and to an epo-
 cryte; 147

(Poem 2, ll. 131-33)

Likewise, he is aghast at recent efforts by some to brand as a heretic anyone who criticizes the clergy-- a state of affairs, we are told, that leads to the suppression of truth and the flourishing of injustice:

daughters, immediately their lovers are enraged and call him heretic and lollard, destroyer of ecclesiastical liberty, reprover of honest behaviour and estate of temporal lords and a disturber of the whole populace" (IV, 12, p. 6). By the same token, he denounces, like Chaucer before him, the current trend toward equating the disapproval of swearing with heresy. So strong has this identification become, he says, that even good men feel obliged to use blasphemous language or, at best, refrain from correcting those who do "lest they be called lollards and heretics, or of the Lollard sect" (IV, 7, p. 6). Finally, Carpenter lashes out at those materialistic prelates whose pomposity encourages them to think they deserve to be treated "as if they were gods and not men" (p. 14) and who falsely persecute as heretics anyone having the temerity to criticize their worldliness:

so now, as experience teaches, if many voluptuous priests and prelates, blinded with the dust of worldly vanity, shall have heard any faithful preacher or any other faithful man barking against their sins, immediately they bark against such by slandering him with the teeth of detraction, gnawing him for errors and heresies, accusing him most falsely, cruelly imprisoning him and sometimes even persecuting him to death with a mighty malice. 149

(VI, 78, p. 8)

The only sure remedy for such patent abuses, the author continues, is the forcible reform of the Church

by the temporal powers--a procedure which he, like the Lollards themselves, compares to the cleansing of the temple.¹⁵⁰

Even the stern anti-Lollard John Capgrave, who in his Chronicle of England calls Wyclif "the orgon of the devil, the enemy of the Cherch, the confusion of men, the ydol of heresie, the meroure of ypocrisie, the norischer of scisme,"¹⁵¹ implies elsewhere that all this religious paranoia has gotten out of control. In his Life of St. Katherine Capgrave describes the Virgin Mary's attempt to prepare Adrian for his meeting with Katherine. She tells the suitor that Katherine will put some harsh questions to him, but he is not to be dismayed. And by way of encouragement she cites Christ's words to his apostles:

I shal enforce þe soo þou may not fayle

To yeue hir answeere to euery questyon.
Soo seyde my sone to his apostellis twelue:
'Whan ye stande,' he seyde, 'be-fore þe doom
Of many tyrantis, and ye allone your-selue,
Though thei you calle lollard, wytche or elue,
Beth not dismayed, I shal geue you answeere,
Ther can no man swiche langage now you lere.'¹⁵²

(ll. 323-29)

This is a remarkable passage. Here we have a self-proclaimed Lollard-hater (Capgrave had also referred to Oldcastle as "that satellite of the devil")¹⁵³ actually using one of the heretics' own favorite techniques-- associating their persecution with that of Christ and

his apostles. The mere fact that such a man as Capgrave has seen fit to place the sufferings of the early martyrs in such a topical context shows the extent of the reaction against arbitrary accusations of heresy; for apparently he seems to be suggesting that were the apostles on earth today they too would be marked men. At any rate, he certainly seems to be conscious of the fact that the good and the holy were very often prime suspects for the inquisitors.

When men of Chaucer's urbanity, Audelay's religious devotion, Carpenter's reformist spirit and Capgrave's anti-heretical zeal all make common cause of the issue, we can be relatively certain that there existed in medieval England a sizeable faction opposed to the indiscriminate pursuit of unconventionality and enthusiastic piety. Of the members of this faction not the least were the men who wrote or rewrote the Passion scenes in the Towneley cycle. Their efforts are our next concern.

The Towneley Passion¹⁵⁴

If we are to believe V. A. Kolve, the cycle plays, including Towneley, "came into existence in the last quarter of the fourteenth century."¹⁵⁵ From that point on they were periodically revised, most notably by the Wakefield Master and the York Realist. The former is credited with reworking either completely or in part

thirteen of his cycle's thirty-two pageants some time between 1400 and 1450.¹⁵⁶ Thus the dates commonly ascribed to the Towneley cycle, both for its original composition and its subsequent revision, fall into the period when Lollardy was well known and widely feared. We should therefore expect to find at least a few allusions to the heresy in the plays themselves, given medieval drama's love of anachronism.

While Lollardy is never overtly mentioned in the Towneley Passion sequence, it nevertheless forms the background against which events in that sequence take place. Take for instance the character Pilate-- certainly the most absorbing figure in the Passion and the chief architect of Christ's ordeal: Thirty years ago Arnold Williams first pointed out that the Towneley Pilate's evil personality had been shaped in part by historical factors. That is, the dramatists responsible for the cycle's Passion episodes invented a personage through whom they could satirize the legal abuses of their age. They therefore made Pilate into a cruel, corrupt medieval judge who practices and encourages every kind of judicial vice: bribery, maintenance, jury tampering, perjury, false indictment and false accusation.¹⁵⁷

What Williams failed to mention, however, was that Pilate is also portrayed as a repressor of heresy, a character whose personality has been fashioned to

conform to those real-life secular officials whose sworn duty it was to initiate on their own investigations of suspected heretics. Lollardy, we know, was opposed by both Church and State, and as time went on these two institutions worked closer and closer together against their common foe. This active collusion is evident throughout the Towneley Passion, the only series of extant mystery plays which shows Pilate aiding and abetting, not hampering, the prelates' efforts to destroy Christ. In fact, not only does he encourage these efforts, he actually instigates them himself--an action that after 1414 had become one of the sworn obligations of every royal officer in the realm, as the following excerpt from the statute for the same year makes abundantly clear:

the Justices of the King's Bench, and Justices of Peace, and Justices of Assise, have full Power to enquire of all them which hold any Errors or Heresies, as Lollards, and [which] be their Maintainers, Receivers, Favorers and Sustainers, common Writers of such Books, as well of [the] Sermons as of their Schools, Conyenticles, Congregations, and Confederacies; and that this Clause be put in Commissions of the Justices of the Peace; and if any Persons be indicted of any Points aforesaid, the said Justices shall have Power to award against them a Capias, and the Sheriff shall be bound to arrest the Person or Persons so indicted as soon as he may them find by him or by his Officers.¹⁵⁸

In one sense, therefore, Pilate can be considered to be merely doing his job by initiating proceedings

porary precedent if we are to believe the many references in historical records to unfair accusations of heresy and to legal corruption in general.¹⁶⁰ Lollard writers especially were annoyed at the wholesale abuse of justice that had become a commonplace in the English law courts, both civil and religious.¹⁶¹ Although the Lollards maintained that the clergy would frequently tamper with the law in order to secure a conviction against a suspected heretic,¹⁶² we may never know (or, rather, I have been unable to discover) whether any of these false accusations were ever sponsored by secular officials who, like the Towneley Pilate, were certain of their victim's innocence ("Though he [Christ] be neuer so trew both in dedys and in sawes/Therfor shall he suffre mekill myschefe,/And all the dyscypyls that vnto hym drawes," XXII, ll. 43-45). But on at least one occasion a lay officer did demonstrate an almost irrational determination to prosecute and condemn a suspected heretic. The suspect was none other than Margery Kempe, and her tormentor was the mayor of Leicester who, upon her arrival there in August, 1417, immediately had her brought before him and accused her of being "a fals strumpet, a fals loller, & a fals deceyuer of þe pepyl. . . ." (p. 112). The interrogation over, Margery was placed under arrest, and a few days later witnesses were called "to þe Gylde-halle þer to be examynynd be-for þe Meyr & þe worschepful men of the

town" in order to ascertain whether "sche was a good woman of þe ryth feyth & ryth beleue. . . ." (p. 114). No evidence could be found against her, but the mayor, relentless in his zeal, continued to hound her, forcing her to appear before the abbot of Leicester's ecclesiastical court where he himself acted as chief accuser.¹⁶³ Again Margery was found guiltless and ordered to be set free. But the mayor still refused to release her until she had obtained a letter from the bishop of Lincoln, Philip Repingdon, which affirmed her orthodoxy. (pp. 115-117).

In many ways the mayor showed the same kind of motiveless hatred and sly deceit toward his victim as Pilate shows toward Christ ("Bot or this day at nyght on crosse shall he be slayn,/Thus agans hym in my hart I bere great enmyte/ffull sore./ye men that vse bak-bytyngys,/and rasars of slanderyngys,/ye ar my dere darlyngys," XXII, ll. 33-38). Margery refers to him as her "dedly enmy" (p. 115) and is herself told that his animosity for her is so great that if he "myth han hys wil, he wolde don hir be brent" (p. 114). Likewise, his repeated refusal to release her, despite her obvious innocence, can only be seen as a crafty ploy to gain enough time to enable him to secure a conviction. Finally, during her trial before the abbot, Margery herself charges the mayor with misuse of his power, maintaining that he harasses those whose innocence is

beyond dispute and against whom he has not the slightest piece of evidence:

"Sir, 3e arn not worthy to ben a meyr, & þat xal I preuyn be Holy Writte, for owr Lord God seyde hym-self er he wolde takyn veniawnce on þe cyteys, 'I xal comyn down & seen,' & 3et he knew al thyng. & þat was not ellys, sir, but for to schewe men as 3e ben þat 3e schulde don non execucyon in ponisch- yng but 3yf 3e had knowyng be-forn þat it wer worthy for to be don. &, syr, 3e han do al þe contrary to me þis day, for syr, 3e han cawsyd me myche despite for thyng þat I am not gilty in. I pray God for-3eue 3ow it."

(p. 116)

Pilate's plan to use the law against Christ may thus be more topical than has hitherto been admitted. Not only does it point out the prevalence of judicial corruption in late medieval England, it also reflects--as evidenced by the actions of the mayor of Leicester--how relentlessly the law worked to root out heresy and to what lengths it might go, if controlled by some unscrupulous individual, to gain a conviction.

If Pilate sees Christ as a Lollard, it follows that Christ himself must in some way be made to appear heretical in action and intent. Not that the dramatists want us to think that Christ really is a Lollard. Far from it. Rather, they want to show us how a perfectly orthodox and innocent individual can be prosecuted and condemned for heresy by a paranoid society that sees heretics under every rock, behind every tree and around

every corner. In order to do this, therefore, they have Christ's accusers bring forth against him the familiar litany of anti-Lollard charges.

For instance, we find Christ, like so many other English heretics, accused of being a liar. His doctrines are termed "lyys" (XXI, l. 226), "lesyns" (XX, l. 67) and "fond talys" (XXI, l. 406), while he himself is believed to be such an incorrigible sower of falsehood that one of his tormentors even compares him to a whetstone (XXI, l. 30)--the traditional emblem of lying.¹⁶⁴ One has only to recall Friar Daw's claim that Wycliffites are particularly well versed in the art of telling untruths (FDR, ll. 475-76) and "fals fablis" (l. 24) in order to realize just how much this charge contributes to Christ's apparent Lollardy.

Closely related to this accusation is the one which brands the Savior as a false prophet. This charge, so popular with the anti-Lollards (the Gesta Henrici Quinti had called Wyclif "that false prophet of accursed memory"), has biblical precedent, but the Towneley plays seem to give it an unusual amount of attention. During the Conspiracio, for example, Christ is a number of times contemptuously referred to as simply that "profete" (ll. 202, 213, 604, 636), a form of address adopted by Pilate in the Fflagellacio (ll. 27, 152, 164) and in the Processus Crucis (l. 35). Christ's prophecies themselves, moreover, are likewise

singled out for censure and abuse in various other places (XXI, l. 411; XXII, l. 143; XXIII, l. 492). The playwrights, in stressing Christ's prophetic role and having the accusers view it in a negative light, may only be following their sources; but in their effort to portray Christ as a falsely accused heretic, they might also be exploiting the popular trend to associate Lollards with current seditious rumors maintaining the continued existence of Richard II and predicting the fall of the Lancastrian dynasty¹⁶⁵--tales that had wide currency in Yorkshire, especially during the period when Oldcastle was still at large.

A more recurring accusation--and a very illuminating one considering that heretics at this time were also deemed traitors--is that which designates Christ a subversive. True, vernacular sources such as The Northern Passion repeat this charge,¹⁶⁶ but the Towneley Passion, always alert to the phobias of its society, seems to give it an undue amount of emphasis--almost as if the playwrights themselves were conscious of its frequent appearance in the heresy trials of the day. Thus, Pilate sees Christ as a "tratoure . . . that wold dystroy oure lawe" (XX, ll. 576-77), an opinion shared both by Caiaphas (XXI, l. 171) and the torturers (XXI, l. 61; XXII, l. 357). So dangerous, in fact, is Christ thought to be by some--especially Malcus in the Conspiracio--that they want to lynch him without delay

(XX, ll. 722-35). This is the same kind of thinking, of course, which provoked the Yorkshire mobs into demanding the immediate execution of Margery Kempe. The charge of treason, therefore, establishes a topical context for the dramatic action of the Passion, illustrating just how preoccupied the authorities in these plays are with sedition and revealing how that preoccupation could easily transform an alleged heretic into a notorious rebel--a scenario that was reenacted more than once in the courtrooms of the period.

Affiliated with the charge of sedition is the claim that Christ's doctrines are new-fangled notions which, if allowed to go unchecked, will destroy the orderly foundation upon which society is built. The opponents of Lollardy--most notably, Friar Daw and John Gower--loved to dwell upon this point, and it is repeated by the torturers in the Coliphizacio when they accuse Christ of formulating "lawes new" (l. 21) and teaching the people "a new law" (l. 66)--something they feel will "spill and fordo vs all" (l. 30). (It may be recalled that, according to at least one Lollard writer, contemporary prelates opposed the teaching of the heretics because they were afraid it would "fordo oure stasis.")¹⁶⁷ Elsewhere, Caiaphas implies that anarchy has already descended upon the land when he tells Annas that he is unable to remain

composed and dignified while questioning Christ because "all is out of har" (l. 210).

Present too is the charge that Jesus is a subtle and tricky fellow who beguiles a gullible populace into accepting his lethal teachings. Like his counterpart in York,¹⁶⁸ the Towneley Christ is denounced as a "fature" (XX, l. 37) or imposter whose "sotelytes" (XX, l. 79), "whaynt cantelys" (XX, l. 144), "gawdys" (XX, l. 153) and "craftys" (XX, l. 171) turn the people away from their rightful leaders. Orthodox writers said the same thing about the Lollards. For instance, Henry VI, in his letter condemning the sect for the uprising of 1431, accused its members of "subtilite,"¹⁶⁹ while Friar Daw, in language astonishingly similar to that of the Towneley plays, denounced the heretics for using "cauteles & sleiztes" to "snarre symple soules" (ll. 188-89).¹⁷⁰ At any rate, the claim that Christ's "wyles" (XXI, l. 15), "fals quantyse" (XXIII, l. 32) and "mawmentry" (XXIII, l. 78) or deceits pervert the realm and its people is one that is voiced so often that it would be tedious to cite any more examples.

Christ's alleged falsehood and deceit also indicate that he is looked upon by his foes as a hypocrite--but only in the general sense of the word. Unlike York, which refers to the Savior as "pat sawntrelle" (XXVIII, l. 190) or "pretended saint,"¹⁷¹ the Towneley Passion

makes no overt reference to that undeniable signature of a Lollard--feigned holiness.¹⁷² However, this quality may be hinted at in the Coliphizacio when the first torturer implies that, while some men are foolish enough to hold Christ a "sant" (l. 20), he knows him to be no such thing. This is as specific as the dramatist gets about the whole matter of religious hypocrisy.

On the other hand, Christ's enemies freely foist upon him the commonly held belief that all heretics were men of inordinate pride. The torturers in the Coliphizacio, for instance, admonish him that it is "better to syt still then rise vp and fall" (l. 28), a piece of advice that betrays their predisposition to see him as one who has usurped his place on Fortune's wheel. In the same play Caiaphas concentrates on Christ's pretentiousness, amazed that his victim, "nawder bowted ne spurd" (l. 147) and a mere "fundlyng" (l. 152), has the audacity to call himself "emperoure or kyng" (l. 130). Meanwhile, the executioners themselves constantly cite Christ's pride (XXIII, ll. 47, 54, 69) and "prowde wordes" (XXIII, l. 45) as the principal cause of his downfall and sufferings. Again, one has only to call to mind the remarks made by the author of the Gesta Henrici Quinti (p. 11) about Sir John Oldcastle--how God "suddenly struck the sinner down," casting him "from the heights to the lowest depths . . .

from lordship to bondage and from security of competent estate to the semblance of death, he whom arrogant presumption had so easily deformed into a beast"-- in order to grasp how close the sentiments of the accusers, commonplace though those sentiments may be, are to those of the anti-heretical polemicists who, almost to a man, saw the Lollards as individuals consumed by ambition.

Finally, Christ is accused of being a magician or sorcerer, another favorite charge of the anti-Lollard party. The accusation appears only once, in the Coliphizacio, where the first torturer attributes both Christ's miracles and his popularity to the "wychcraft he mase" (l. 103). Scholars, of course, have long been aware that The Gospel of Nicodemus is the source of this particular charge. That work, like the Coliphizacio, has Christ's enemies periodically cite his "fals charmeing" (l. 44) and his "fendes craft" (l. 48).¹⁷³ So normally, one could safely assume that the witchcraft charge in Towneley derives ultimately from The Gospel. This would be a logical assumption except for the fact that at this time Lollardy and sorcery were so intimately connected in the popular mind that one could hardly mention the one without evoking the other. (Remember the York clerks' belief that Margery Kempe was possessed by devils.) In view, therefore, of this rather common

cases not without cause.¹⁷⁶ The suggestion that Christ is a spurious healer who employs sorcery in his cures, then, represents just another way whereby the author establishes a link between his protagonist and the heretics.

Thus far we have limited our discussion only to the ways in which the Towneley playwrights imply Christ's Lollardy. Do they ever go beyond this stage? Yes, up to a point. Without ever specifying it outrightly, they furnish their dramatic episodes with enough detail so as to make it virtually impossible to ignore the importance of heresy as a major issue. Take for instance the manner in which Christ is interrogated in the Coliphizacio. It is stated at five different places that he is to be "examined" or "opposed" (ll. 120, 128, 190, 195, 235) by the high priests, terms which, according to the OED, refer directly to the process of judicial inquiry.¹⁷⁷ Now, in the late Middle Ages there was one judicial activity described in the above words which more than any other fell within the competence of churchmen like Annas and Caiaphas--namely, the "examination" or interrogation of suspected heretics. Clearly, these terms are intended to suggest the same procedure. By the same token, Annas' insincere hope that his prisoner "myght amende" (l. 262), a remark made immediately after Christ has "blasphemously" affirmed his divinity and thus proved

himself a heretic before the priests (ll. 251-54), is an ironic allusion to the major objective of any heresy trial--the recantation and reformation of the accused.¹⁷⁸ The Coliphizacio, therefore, does not merely show us Christ being questioned by biblical high priests; it shows us a suspected Lollard whose beliefs are being rigorously analyzed by fifteenth-century bishops.

Elsewhere in the plays we find the Lollard doctrine of disendowment being alluded to. Caiaphas complains to Pilate in the Conspiracio about Christ's "beleyf" (l. 63) and laments that unless measures are taken to suppress it, "all oure welthe" will be "in were" (l. 59). It is possible that Caiaphas is only using the word "welthe" here to mean "general well-being" or "prosperity." But he might also be referring specifically to the material accretions of the Church and its hierarchy ("oure welthe") and thus have disendowment in mind. The latter explanation becomes more credible when we turn to the Coliphizacio and see Caiaphas as the epitome of the corrupt clerical possessor:

Lad, I am a prelate, a lord in degré:
 Syttys in myn astate, as thou may se,
 Knyghtys on me to wate in dyuerse degré.
 I myght thole the abate, and knele on thi kne
 In my present.
 As euer syng I mes,
 Whoso kepis the law, I gess,
 He gettys more by purches

Then bi his fre rent.

(ll. 154-62)

Such a man as this would quite naturally feel threatened by Christ's further claim to "dystroewoure tempyll so gay" (XXI, l. 73), a temple whose construction he had himself supervised ("The masons I knew that hewed it, I say, / So wyse, / That hewed ilka stone," XXI, ll. 76-78) and which had come to symbolize, for the heretics at least, the flamboyant worldliness of late medieval religious life.

As we have already seen, the Lollards looked upon the temple itself as a symbol of the vulgar materialism of the contemporary Church and argued that Christ's purification of it (that is, his ejection of the money-changers) sanctioned their program of ecclesiastical reform. No wonder Caiaphas, as well as others, recoils with horror at the thought that it might one day be annihilated. The torturers especially seem to be disturbed by all this, angrily denouncing both in the Coliphizacio and in the Fflagellacio (XXII, ll. 182-83) Christ's plan to raze the temple and "sithen beld a new on the third day" (XXI, l. 74). On one level the soldiers are talking about the Jewish synagogue at Jerusalem (they are, of course, completely unaware of the fact that Christ is referring to his death and resurrection), but on another, more anachronistic, level they have in mind the medieval English

Church and the Lollards' plan to rebuild it according to their own austere specifications. In view, therefore, of the anachronistic setting in which these plays take place and because the playwrights themselves have been careful to exploit the symbolic meaning of the temple, it is perfectly fitting that Caiaphas and his henchmen react the way they do to Christ's alleged pronouncement. As members of the fifteenth-century Church (and according to the Lollards, the epitome of the contemporary hierarchy's worldliness)¹⁷⁹ they are simply responding to the implications of a principle that endangers their entire existence and are denouncing its most conspicuous advocate for the heretic he appears to be.

Finally, and in many ways most important, the age's tendency to define preaching as a potentially heretical and seditious activity is mirrored again and again in the way Christ's enemies attack him in his capacity as a speaker and orator. Foremost among those who view the Savior's sermons with alarm is Pilate, who at the beginning of the Conspiracio vows to silence Christ's voice ("he prechys the pepyll here that fature fals ihesus,/That if he lyf a yere dystroy oure law must vs," ll. 37-38) lest "his shech [speech] . . . spryng and sprede,/And ouer com euer ylkone" (ll. 52-53). Later, in the Fflagellacio, he again maintains that Christ must be quickly destroyed because he has

"prechyd and puplyshed so playn" (l. 27)--a phrase that turns up frequently in official records denouncing the activities of Lollard preachers.¹⁸⁰

As events begin to move forward, other characters make the same complaint and reveal the same fear--that Jesus' evangelical efforts threaten to undermine the status quo. In the Fflagellacio, for instance, the First Torturer draws upon a favorite charge of the anti-Lollards--that the heretics are clever manipulators of language--when he complains how Christ "has made many glose" with his "fals talkyng" (l. 225). The OED defines "gloze" or "glose" as "flattery," "deceit" or smooth talking,¹⁸¹ terms which reinforce the view that Christ, like the typical Wycliffite preacher, is a crafty rhetorician.

Elsewhere in the cycle we find still other references to Christ in his role as preacher. The torturers in the Processus Crucis, for example, attack him for his "prowde wordes" (l. 45), the "tales" he has "told" (l. 106) and "sayde" (l. 491) and advise him that if he had kept himself "styll" (l. 487)--that is, kept himself quiet--he would not be in the fix he is now in.

The two acknowledged sources of the Passion plays--the Northern Passion and The Gospel of Nicodemus--scarcely mention Christ in a preaching role: the Northern Passion not at all, The Gospel of Nicodemus only once, when it has the Jews belittle before Pilate Christ's

"tratilling" or chattering (MS Galba E IX, l. 563), his "Iangelyng" (Sion MS, l. 563) and his "saynge" (MS Additional 32,578, l. 563).¹⁸² The Towneley dramatists, on the other hand, take great pains to stress that which the sources hardly allude to. And they do this for a specific reason. For by having the accusers repeatedly indict Christ for sermonizing and repeatedly draw attention to his verbal cunning and loquacity, they make him the victim of one of the most notorious obsessions of late medieval England--the chronic identification of unauthorized preaching with heresy. In other words, Christ is unfairly persecuted and prosecuted in the cycle as if he were some fifteenth-century schismatic out to subvert, through his words, the ecclesiastical and social order. And the playwrights, in their plea for restraint, want to make sure their audience is aware of this point.

Nowhere is the preaching motif handled as skillfully as in the Coliphizació, where language itself becomes the play's most salient theme. Of course, Christ's accusers still allude to his sermons in a derogatory way; the Second Torturer, for instance, tells Caiaphas that their captive "has bene for to preche full many long yeris" (l. 65), a statement that betrays his predisposition to view preaching as a kind of crime. This attitude is supported by his companion's revelation that they "faunde hym in a yerde" (l. 69) or

garden--an obvious reference to the Garden of Gethsemane, but also a possible allusion to the Lollard habit of preaching in secret and unauthorized places.

But the preaching issue, though present, is subsidiary to the more general issue of language itself. For Christ is not only accused of subversive preaching in this play; he also seems to be denounced simply for speaking words out loud. Time and time again his enemies make this very point, as if they feared Christ's words more than they do Christ himself. Thus the Second Torturer, as he approaches Caiaphas' hall, reviles his prisoner for the "Many wordys" (l. 24) and "clater" (l. 27) he has "saide" (l. 24), promising to tell the high priest "of his talkyng" (l. 45). A few lines later his colleague says essentially the same thing when he denounces Christ for bringing "downe . . . oure lawes bi his steuen" (l. 92). And Caiaphas himself, in yet another passage, confesses that the "Great wordys" Christ has "spokyn" (l. 173) have done his "hãrf great dere" (l. 183).

It is not, however, words alone that provoke the ire and anxiety of the Jews. They also maintain that Christ is an artful manipulator of language--a common anti-Lollard charge and one which we already saw in operation in the Fflagellacio where he was attacked for his ability to make "many glose" with his "fals talkyng." The First Torturer seems to be the most

sensitive to this particular offense, for he not only accuses Jesus of painting "Fare wordys" (l. 21) but of being "renabyll" (l. 110)--that is, eloquent. The Jews, therefore, hate ~~Christ~~ not only because he uses words, but because he uses them well and in the service of truth. And their obsessive desire to destroy him springs from their belief that by killing him they will also somehow be able to kill his words. The irony of all this is that only ~~one~~ in the entire play does Christ say anything at all, and even then he delivers only a four-line reply to Annas' query as to whether or not he is God's son (ll. 251-54). Christ's deafening silence (the Towneley Christ is the least talkative of any Christ in the cycles) thus renders meaningless his enemies' claim that he is a clever and loquacious orator, and, more important, it underscores just how far those enemies have allowed themselves to be ruled by their dread of the spoken word--a fear so great that it blinds them to the absurdity of their own accusations and compels them to persecute an innocent man. The same scene, one imagines, must have occurred a number of times in late medieval England where, as we have already seen, the status of preaching had sunk to an all-time low.

For their part, the high priests are afraid of language not only because it can be used against them, but because they themselves are incapable of using it

correctly. Caiaphas, once he starts his interrogation of Christ, becomes the most inarticulate character in the play. For over fifty-three lines (ll. 127-80) he tries without success to get his prisoner to say something, even if it be only "oone worde" (l. 141). His failure to do so proceeds from his inability to grasp the persuasive function of language, a serious defect in an inquisitor. Seeing words only as tools of intimidation, he thinks that insult ("Where was thi syre at bord when he met with thi dame?/What, nawder bowted ne spurd, and a lord of name?" ll. 146-47) and threat ("Be it hole worde or brokyn; com owt with som,/Els on the I shal be wrokyn or thi ded com/All outt," ll. 174-176) will achieve their intended objective. But they do not. Christ remains silent, forcing the prelate to resort more and more to meaningless vituperation until he ultimately makes no sense at all:

I do fy the!

(l. 131)

Weme! the dwillys durt in thi berd,
Vyle fals tratur!

(ll. 170-71)

Aythere has thou no wytt,
Or els ar thyn eres dytt.
Why, bot herd thou not yit?
So, I cry and I showte!

(ll. 177-80)

Annas, on the other hand, is quite good with words. After all, he apparently accomplishes what his colleague was unable to do--persuade Christ to speak. But Annas abuses language in a more subtle and sinister way in that he applies it to unjust and fraudulent ends. He tries to make Christ talk, not out of a thirst for truth, but because he wants him to incriminate himself. Annas knows the persuasive power of words, but he deviously perverts that power for his own corrupt advantage. This essentially cynical approach to language is probably what makes him such a good lawyer and explains why he is so utterly confident in the concept of due process. He begs Caiaphas to "do as the law will" (l. 205), not because he wants to guarantee Christ a fair trial, but because he knows that the law, symbolized by Pilate and his gang of "fals indytars,/ Quest mangers and Iurers" (XX, ll. 24-25), abuses words the same way he does and thus makes possible the oppression of the guiltless. In this respect he is remarkably similar to those real-life bishops who, according to the Lollards, would turn the law upside down in order to convict a suspect heretic.

Thus the Wakefield Master has once again done what he does so well in other plays having a social or a political message. He takes a common motif, in this case the charge that Christ is a preacher, and then plays off that motif in a startling variety of ways. First

of all, he capitalizes on the tendency of his age to associate unregulated preaching with heresy and implies that Christ is being persecuted as a fifteenth-century schismatic. He then adds to the preaching charge the related accusation that Christ is an adroit rhetorician, an eloquent master of words, and thereby heightens the topical effect of his play. Finally, he elevates his basic motif into an overriding theme--language--which in one sense transcends the narrow contemporaneity of his subject matter. We thus are left with a play that addresses itself not only to the topic of preaching, but also explores the broader notion of the use and misuse of words in general. This larger theme, furthermore, the playwright weaves into the very fabric of his drama, producing in the process a number of ironic effects. We discover, for instance, that the linguistic crimes Christ is alleged to have committed--talking too much and cleverly manipulating words--are the very ones his accusers are most guilty of. During his cross-examination, Caiaphas babbles on incomprehensibly and without stopping for well over fifty lines, while Annas reveals that he himself, not Christ, is the one most adept in painting fair words and using language deceitfully. Meanwhile, as all this is going on, the victim himself remains almost completely silent--an ironic reminder of the ridiculous nature of these charges and a moving testament to the idea that truth and virtue

need not be uttered in order to be heard.

The Towneley dramatists in general and the Wakefield Master in particular, thus, appear to be doing all in their power to portray Christ as the hapless victim of a society obsessed with heretics--a bold move to say the least. While never openly stating that Christ is a Lollard, they nevertheless draw upon so many of the current assumptions and prejudices surrounding the heresy, some of them nurtured by the Lollards themselves, that even the most obtuse listener could not fail to grasp their point. And their point is basically this: that the community has allowed itself to become so intolerant of ecclesiastical criticism, so suspicious of unconventional behavior, so wary of preaching, so confused in general as to what constitutes orthodoxy and what does not, that it has created a climate of indiscriminate repression which fosters the persecution of the righteous as well as the reprobate. In such an environment even Christ himself could not survive.

NOTES

¹ Lynn B. Squires, in her unpublished dissertation entitled "Legal and Political Aspects of Late Medieval English Drama" (University of Washington, 1977), does maintain that "the religious, legal, and political aspects of the late fifteenth century town plays" cannot be completely understood "without remembering the persistence and significance of Lollard opinion throughout the 15th century" (p. 17). But while Ms. Squires does indeed discuss the Lollard heresy in her thesis (pp. 13-17), she never gets around to applying it satisfactorily and in detail to the cycle plays themselves. The closest she gets to a specific discussion of the relationship between Lollardy and drama is when she asserts that "scriptural fundamentalism and commonsense rationalism characterized this movement . . . and these characteristics are given full reign in the cycle plays" (p. 15). This statement implies that religious drama was at least partially a platform for the promotion of heretical, or Lollard, ideas, a position that I feel is unfounded and unrealistic. True, the plays do reveal a familiarity with Lollardy and even exploit some of its assumptions and doctrines; but, as the subsequent study will make clear, they never advocate any of the more revolutionary theories of the heresy. See also Squires, pp. 159-60.

² The three versions of the Passion which deal with the heresy issue--York, Towneley and N-Town--were all either composed or extensively revised after Lollardy had made its appearance on the English scene in the early 1380's. The York Realist reworked that cycle's Passion plays after 1415. The Wakefield Master, whose hand is present throughout the Towneley Passion, wrote some time between 1400 and 1450. And the N-Town cycle was developed between 1400 and the 1460's; by the 1470's it had a Passion sub-cycle "almost entirely rewritten for central staging." See J. W. Robinson, "The Art of the York Realist," in Medieval English Drama: Essays Critical and Contextual, ed. Jerome Taylor and Alan H. Nelson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 230-31, nn. 3 and 5; Cawley, The Wakefield Pageants, p. xxxi; Kenneth Cameron and Stanley J. Kahrl, "Staging the N-Town Cycle," Theatre Notebook, 21 (1966), 128.

Perhaps because of its brevity and concision, the Chester Passion does not exhibit any extensive treatment of the Lollard motif.

³ A good introduction to Wyclif's career and belief is supplied by the following works: K. B. McFarlane, John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity

(London: English Universities Press, 1952); Malcolm D. Lambert, Medieval Heresy (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), pp. 217-33; Gordon Leff, Heresy in the Later Middle Ages, II (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), pp. 494-558 and Herbert B. Workman, John Wyclif, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).

⁴ Lambert, p. 222; Leff, p. 511.

⁵ Lambert, p. 225; Leff, p. 511.

⁶ Lambert, p. 224.

⁷ Lambert, p. 225.

⁸ Leff, p. 542.

⁹ Leff, p. 538.

¹⁰ Leff, p. 538.

¹¹ Anne Hudson, ed., Selections From English Wycliffite Writings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 4-5.

¹² Hudson, p. 5.

¹³ Lambert, p. 224.

¹⁴ Leff, pp. 524-27; Leff is careful to point out that "although Wyclif never launched a general assault upon the sacramental system, nor denied the role of the priest, the doubt he cast upon them was inevitably a challenge to their efficacy and raison d'etre."

¹⁵ Leff, pp. 523-24.

¹⁶ Leff, pp. 523-24; Leff calls Wyclif's elevation of the Bible, "fittingly interpreted," to the status of "mediator between God and the faithful" a "real break with the past." Wyclif, he says, "appealed over the heads of pope and prelates direct to scripture and the apostolic tradition; and in turning to the latter he was disavowing the former. He therefore created an alliance between the individual and the apostolic tradition against the present church, with far-reaching results."

¹⁷ Leff, pp. 550-56.

¹⁸ McFarlane, John Wycliffe, pp. 103-05.

¹⁹ Lambert, p. 234.

- 20 McFarlane, John Wycliffe, pp. 107-08.
- 21 McFarlane, John Wycliffe, pp. 112-14.
- 22 Leff, p. 574.
- 23 Leff, p. 576.
- 24 Leff, pp. 576-77.
- 25 Leff, p. 585.
- 26 Hudson, p. 24; all future references to the Twelve Conclusions will be taken from the text printed in Hudson's Selections, pp. 24-29.
- 27 Leff, pp. 557-58, 584-85. See also Lambert, who claims (p. 246) that once Lollardy became separated from its academic roots it became more Donatist, anti-clerical and radical in its views.
- 28 Lambert, pp. 236-41.
- 29 Many lords and knights were intrigued by the Lollard doctrine of disendowment, which they saw as a welcome means of lessening the burden they had to bear in financing the Hundred Years' War. As early as 1371 or 1372 Wyclif himself was recruited by either the Black Prince or John of Gaunt to help argue the nobility's position in parliament--namely, that the Church should help underwrite the cost of the conflict. Later, in the early 1380's, a number of soldier-knights, all of whom were members of Richard II's inner, court-circle, were accused of being Lollard sympathizers and of harboring and protecting Lollard preachers. See McFarlane, John Wycliffe, pp. 58-60; Lambert, pp. 218, 222-23, 240-41.
- 30 McFarlane, John Wycliffe, p. 110.
- 31 Margaret Aston, "Lollardy and Sedition, 1381-1431," Past & Present, 17 (1960), 2.
- 32 Aston, 3-5.
- 33 Printed in Political Poems and Songs, I, ed. Thomas Wright, Rolls Series, 14 (London: 1859), pp. 231-49.
- 34 Political Poems and Songs, I, pp. 233-35; a partial translation is supplied by Wright on p. lxi.
- 35 Walsingham, Chronicon Angliae, pp. 320-21, quoted by Aston, p. 4.

36 Ranulph Higden, Polychronicon, VIII, ed. Joseph R. Lumby, Rolls Series, 41 (London: 1882), p. 459; see also Fasciculi Zizaniorum, ed. Walter W. Shirley, Rolls Series, 5 (London: 1858), pp. 272-73.

37 Statutes of the Realm, II, p. 25; see also McFarlane, John Wycliffe, p. 107. At first these measures only applied to the province of Canterbury, but in 1384 they were extended to the province of York; see Leff, p. 593 and CPR, Richard II, II, p. 487.

38 CCR, Richard II, III, pp. 519, 529, 550, 667-68.

39 Aston, 12.

40 A. K. McHardy, "Bishop Buckingham and the Lollards of Lincoln Diocese," in Schism, Heresy and Religious Protest, ed. Derek Baker, Studies in Church History, 9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 134.

41 CPR, Richard II, V, pp. 40-41.

42 McFarlane, John Wycliffe, pp. 121-49, passim; McHardy, pp. 131-33.

43 See, for example, Margaret Aston, "Lollardy and Literacy," History, n.s. 62 (1977), 347-71 and Anne Hudson, "Some Aspects of Lollard Book Production," in Schism, Heresy and Religious Protest, pp. 147-57.

44 McFarlane, John Wycliffe, pp. 188-89. The authoritative work on this subject is Margaret Deanesly's The Lollard Bible (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920).

45 CPR, Richard II, III, p. 427. Additional information on Lollardy in the diocese of York is provided by two York formularies (Ely Diocesan Records, F 5 [32], f. 14^r and Cambridge University Library, Add. MS. 3115, ff. 67^r-68^r) which refer to a "commission of the archbishop to inquire about Lollards and proceed against them;" cited by Margaret Aston in her Thomas Arundel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 326, n. 2.

46 Aston, "Lollardy and Sedition," 32-33.

47 Aston, "Lollardy and Sedition," 32-33.

48 CCR, Henry IV, I, p. 185.

49 Rot. Parl., III, pp. 466-67, quoted by Aston in "Lollardy and Sedition," 33.

50 Statutes of the Realm, II, pp. 125-28.

51 Leff, pp. 595-96.

52 Leff, p. 596. Lollards were indeed burned as a result of this legislation--and not too long after its passage. The first to go was William Sawtry of Norfolk, who was burned at the stake as a relapsed heretic in London on 23 February 1401; see McFarlane, John Wycliffe, pp. 150-52.

53 CPR, Henry IV, III, pp. 352, 476.

54 M. G. Snape, "Some Evidence of Lollard Activity in the Diocese of Durham in the Early Fifteenth Century," Archaeologia Aeliana, 4th series, 39 (1961), 355-61.

55 CPR, Henry IV, II, pp. 99-100.

56 Rot. Parl., III, p. 583. See also Aston, "Lollardy and Sedition," 34, Rupert Taylor, The Political Prophecy in England (New York: Columbia University Press, 1911), pp. 104-05 and Leff, p. 596.

57 Leff, p. 585.

58 McFarlane, John Wycliffe, pp. 160-88. McFarlane's account of the rising is one of the best available.

59 James Tait, "Oldcastle, Sir John," DNB (1895), p. 88. This and other details surrounding Oldcastle's trial and revolt have been obtained from this article.

60 One of Henry's first actions upon becoming king was to issue writs to all his sheriffs commanding them to imprison all Lollard preachers who "sow discord among the people under colour of preaching and the pestilent seed of lollardy and evil doctrine" and who cause people to assemble "in great multitude, whence have arisen and are likely to arise murmurings and seditious to the no small disturbance of the peace;" CCR, Henry V, I, p. 86. (Note how the very language of the document, written some time before Oldcastle's revolt, reveals the government's growing tendency to equate Lollardy with sedition; see also CPR, Henry V, I, p. 34.)

61 Frank Taylor and John S. Roskell, ed., Gesta Henrici Quinti (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975),

p. 184. The editors tell us that Thomas Elmham's Liber Metricus, a verse biography of Henry V, is the source of the sorcery charge.

62 CPR, Henry V, I, pp. 149, 157.

63 CPR, Henry V, I, p. 261; two men from York were involved in the rising: Richard Whit, a "plommer" and a chaplain named John Fraunk.

64 McFarlane, John Wycliffe, p. 171.

65 James H. Wylie and William T. Waugh, The Reign of Henry the Fifth, III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), p. 87. Wylie tells us that it "is certain that an understanding" between Scottish leaders and Oldcastle "did exist . . . and that Lollard emissaries were passing busily about inciting the dalesmen of Yorkshire and Northumberland to be ready to acclaim King Richard as soon as he should appear amongst them."

66 An English Chronicle of the Reigns of Richard II., Henry IV., Henry V., and Henry VI., ed. John S. Davies, Camden Society, 64 (London: 1856), p. 46; see also A Chronicle of London from 1089 to 1483, ed. Sir Harris Nicolas (London: 1827), p. 106, for yet another description of Oldcastle's execution: "and he was drawe thorgh the citee of London, which in his dayes was heed of heretykes and Lollers; and he was hanged be a cheyne of iren, and was brent up the galawes and alle."

67 CPR, Henry V, I, p. 162.

68 Statutes of the Realm, II, pp. 181-84; see also Aston, "Lollardy and Sedition," 34-35.

69 A copy of one such oath, dated 1431, is printed in Historiae Dunelmensis, ed. James Raine, Surtees Society, 9 (London: 1839), pp. ccxx-ccxxi. The document in question is an oath, addressed to the sheriff of Northumberland, which had to be taken by the incumbent. One of the promises which the sheriff had to make is described as follows:

Also ye shall doo all your payne and diligence to destroye and make to cese all maner of heresykes and erroures commonly called Lollardnes with in your baillifwyke frome

tyme to tyme to all your trewe power, and assiste and be helpeyng to the ordinaryes and commissaryes of holy chyrche, and favour and mayneteen hem as ofte tymes as ye shall be requyred by the sayd ordinaryes or commissaryes.

Even municipal officials had to swear to put down Lollardy. The mayor of Bristol, for instance, had to vow, according to a document written around 1479, that:

I shall do my entier payne and diligence to put away, cesse, and destruye, all maner heresies and errours, clepid openly lollardries, within my bailly, from tyme to tyme, with all my power.

The above passage is printed in English Gilds, ed. Toulmin Smith, Lucy Toulmin Smith and Lujo Brentano, EETS, o.s. 40 (London: 1870), p. 417.

70 Leff, p. 597.

71 According to Margaret Aston, in "Lollardy and Sedition," 36, from 1414 on, religious dissent and sedition were treated as one and the same thing.

72 Lambert, p. 253.

73 John A. F. Thomson, The Later Lollards: 1414-1520 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 192.

74 Thomson, p. 194.

75 Alfred W. Pollard, ed., Fifteenth Century Prose and Verse (Westminster: A. Constable, 1903), p. 107.

76 See note 63 for this chapter.

77 Thomson, p. 197; see also note 45 to this chapter.

78 P. R. O. Gaol Delivery Roll (J. I. 3), no. 195, m. 54; cited by Thomson, p. 195, n. 1.

79 Lambert, p. 254.

80 The Records of the Northern Convocation, Surtees Society, 113 (Durham: Andrews & Co., 1907), p. 161.

81 The Records of the Northern Convocation, pp. 163-64; see also Thomson, pp. 196-97.

82 The Records of the Northern Convocation, p. lvi.

83 Richmond's trial is the only heresy case recorded in Archbishop Kempe's register. But this kind of scanty evidence can be misleading--especially if it causes us to assume that the authorities were complacent, which they were not. As bishop of London Kempe himself had been an intrepid foe of Lollardy and continued to remain so once he became archbishop of York. Within three years of his translation he called a general convocation, in 1428, to consider the problem of heresy in the diocese; see Thomson, p. 196.

84 The Book of Margery Kempe, ed. S. B. Meech and H. E. Allen, EETS, o.s., 212 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 123-24. All future references to this work will be taken from this edition.

85 Commenting on Margery Kempe's experiences in Yorkshire, Thomson says that they "show clearly the success of the clergy in rousing popular opposition to religious eccentricity. Popular hostility was far more virulent than the criticisms of the clergy" (p. 195).

86 Scattergood, Politics and Poetry, p. 252.

87 McFarlane, John Wycliffe, p. 100.

88 Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers: Papal Letters, IV (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1902), p. 515; Statutes of the Realm, II, p. 126.

89 Jack Upland, Friar Daw's Reply and Upland's Rejoinder, ed. P. L. Heyworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 76; see also p. 85. All future references to Friar Daw's Reply will be taken from this edition.

90 Gesta Henrici Quinti, ed. Taylor and Roskell, p. 11; all future references to the Gesta will be taken from this edition.

91 Jacob's Well, pp. 164-65.

92 Additional works which mention the hypocrisy of the Lollards are the following: the anonymous poem, "Defend Us From All Lollardry" (ll. 77-78), in Historical Poems, ed. Robbins, p. 154 and Hoccleve's

"To Sir John Oldcastle" (ll. 369-70, 377-78) in Hoccleve's Works: The Minor Poems, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, EETS, e.s. 61 (London: 1892), p. 20. For the same charge mentioned in prose works see Roy M. Haines, "'Wilde Wittes and Wilfulnes': John Swetstock's Attack on those 'Poyswunmongeres', the Lollards," in Popular Belief and Practice, ed. G. J. Cuming and Derek Baker, Studies in Church History, 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 152.

About the charge of hypocrisy in general, G. R. Owst in his Preaching in Medieval England (1926; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), p. 138, states that probably "the commonest portrait of the ordinary Lollard preacher as drawn by orthodox hands with less restraint is that of the hypocrite, who feigns piety in order to indulge his secret pride or become the darling of the people."

⁹³ John Gage, ed., "Letters from King Henry VI," Archaeologia, 23 (1831), 342.

⁹⁴ The line reference to "To Sir John Oldcastle" is to be found in Hoccleve's Works: The Minor Poems, ed. Furnivall, EETS, e.s. 61, p. 18; all future references to this poem will be taken from this edition.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Haines, p. 151.

⁹⁶ By 1411 Lollards were commonly being cited along side murderers and other evildoers in official records. Being a Lollard was the same as being a criminal--pure and simple. See Rot. Parl., III, p. 651, where the following phrase occurs: "Hereticorum & Lollardorum ac Homicidarum & alior malefactorum. . . ." This passage is also cited by Aston in "Lollardy and Sedition," 6.

⁹⁷ "Defend Us From All Lollardry," l. 138, in Historical Poems, p. 156.

⁹⁸ The following excerpt from "Defend Us From All Lollardry" provides a nice illustration of how the identification of heresy and anarchy was treated in popular literature:

When beggers now neþer bake ne brewe,
ne haue wherwith to borrow ne bie,
þan mot riot robbe or reve,
Vnder þe colour of lollardie.

(ll. 61-64, in Historical Poems, p. 154)

99 Official records are not far behind more imaginative literature in sensationally playing up the horrific consequences of a Lollard take-over. The Statute of 1414, for instance, claims that Lollards were plotting to destroy not only the king but "all other Manner of Estates of . . . [England], as well Spiritual as Temporal, and also all Manner of Policy, and finally the Laws of the Land" (Statutes of the Realm, II, p. 181). And Henry VI writes in 1431 that the intention of the heretics in their recent rebellion was to "destroie alle politique rule and gouñails, spüel and temporel" (Gage, 341).

100 CCR, Richard II, V, p. 434; VI, p. 158.

101 Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers: Papal Letters, IV, p. 515.

102 Margaret Archer, ed., The Register of Bishop Philip Repingdon: 1405-1419, I, The Lincoln Record Society, 57 (Hereford: The Hereford Times Limited, 1963), p. xxxvii.

103 Anti-Lollard writers seemed to have enjoyed calling their enemies "babblers." Referring to Sir John Oldcastle, the anonymous author of "Defend Us From All Lollardry" (Historical Poems, p. 153) writes that the treacherous knight would often "babe, þe bibel day & nigt/In restyng tyme when he shuld slepe," ll. 27-28.

104 Haines, p. 151.

105 Official records testify to the Lollards' supposed skill with words. Following the abortive rebellion of 1431 we find Henry VI (Gage, 343) denouncing the rebels as "soweris of cedicious, disclaundrous, or trubulos langage or talys." A writ sent out to all sheriffs in the same year refers to them as men "who tell tales and spread seditious rumours which may stir up the people or disturb the peace;" see CCR, Henry VI, II, p. 123.

106 Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers: Papal Letters, IV, p. 515; Gage, 341.

107 Owst, Preaching, p. 140.

108 The repressive religious climate in England at this time is described by Owst in his Preaching in Medieval England, pp. 141-42, as follows:

Now . . . if popular rumour carried the news

of some too outspoken address to the ears of the bishop or his officers, there would be . . . some Official-Peculiar at the offender's heels. The suspicious prelate might even summon a synod in a neighbouring church, and have up the "pseudo-predicadores" at almost a moment's notice.

Thus, asserts Owst, by reacting the way they did to Lollardy, the bishops severely curtailed preaching in late medieval England; they both "harried the Lollard and tried to suppress the unconventional preachers of the day."

McFarlane, in John Wycliffe, p. 186, essentially agrees with Owst, saying that the excesses of Lollardy "made reform disreputable and prepared the way for the easy triumph of reaction."

109 Jacob's Well, p. 59.

110 Thomson, p. 30.

111 Thomson, pp. 67, 83, 179, 185, 197, 241.

112 Thomson, pp. 30-31; see also Heyworth, p. 14, n. 3 and Jeffrey B. Russell, Witchcraft in the Middle Ages (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 243-44.

113 CCR, Henry IV, I, p. 185; Henry V, I, p. 86.

114 Statutes of the Realm, II, p. 126.

115 The English Works of John Gower, I, p. 453.

116 See Archbishop Arundel's comments (Fifteenth Century Prose and Verse, p. 123) on this very matter, which were made during the course of his examination of the Lollard, William Thorpe: "For ye presume that the Lord hath chosen you only, for to preach as faithful disciples and special followers of Christ."

117 Anne Hudson, "A Lollard Sermon-Cycle and Its Implications," Medium Aevum, 40 (1971), 151.

118 This and other Lollard writings, particularly those written in English, to which I will be referring in the course of this study were once assumed to have been the work of Wyclif himself. Recent scholarship has shown, however, that they were mostly written by his followers after his death. See Lambert, p. 229.

- 135 The English Works of Wyclif, p. 87.
- 136 The English Works of Wyclif, p. 60; see also p. 23.
- 137 The English Works of Wyclif, pp. 14-15; see also pp. 321-23 and The Lanterne of Light, pp. 42-43.
- 138 Select English Works of John Wyclif, II, p. 50. In the same work, pp. 49-50, we find the following account of the worldliness of the Jewish temple and its relation to the worldliness of the contemporary Church:

þe synne of pride and coveitise was in preestis in Cristis tyme; and herfore þei ordeyneden in þe temple þat men shulden bigge and selle þerinne, for þus roos wynnyng of offringis to þe preestis in þe temple. And þus monyours hadden money to make chaungis, boþe more and lesse, þat men myzten redily have offring, of what staat þei weren. And to þis serveden dowves to pore men for to offre. And þus don men to daye. Preestis suffren hem to make þer chaffare in þe Chirche, for litil of hern, but wynnyng shal algatis come to hem, or ellis þei shal not be suffrid þere. And þus, ende wherfore þe Chirche was ordeyned is turned fro preier in to synne. þes men þat ben nye þe pope knowun of þes two oþer dedis, boþe of changing of money, and zyvyng of jewilis to bigge chirchis. And so þes men sellen dowves, þat sillen chirchis bi symonye. . . .

- 139 The English Works of Wyclif, p. 369.
- 140 The English Works of Wyclif, p. 369; see also Select English Works of John Wyclif, I, p. 128.
- 141 The English Works of Wyclif, p. 75.
- 142 For a full discussion of the origins and development of this work see Andrew N. Wawn, "The Genesis of The Plowman's Tale," The Yearbook of English Studies, 2 (1972), 21-40.
- 143 Political Poems and Songs, I, p. 322.
- 144 CCR, Henry V, I, pp. 109-10; see also CPR, Henry V, I, p. 261.

145 Thomson, p. 67.

146 The English Works of Wyclif, pp. 11-12, 29, 62-63, 74.

147 Ella K. Whiting, ed., The Poems of John Audelay, EETS, o.s. 184 (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 15. All future references to Audelay's poems will be taken from this edition.

148 G. R. Owst, The Destructorium Viciorum of Alexander Carpenter (London: S. P. C. K., 1952), p. 6. Owst describes Carpenter as belonging to "a significant group of clerical agitators for ecclesiastical reform" who were "ever coming more prominently into view" but who were not heretics. Carpenter especially, we are told, was free from the heterodox views of the Lollards: "on all such crucial matters as sacraments, tithes, images, and the like he is scrupulously correct. He avoids abuse of the papacy." All future references to the Destructorium Viciorum will be taken from the translations supplied in Owst's work.

149 See also Wawn, 29: "It is true that in the volatile atmosphere in the post-Wyclif years at the end of the fourteenth century and early into the fifteenth century even the most theologically sound critic of the clergy was likely to feel the cold wind of official disapproval. . . ."

150 Owst, The Destructorium Viciorum, p. 16. Owst translates the passage as follows:

The king with his faithful council, temporal as well as spiritual, at the command of the Lord (Ezech. 9. 6), must 'begin at the sanctuary' and make the clergy, higher and lower alike, cast forth all abominations from the temple, namely, covetousness, simony, pride, lust and other vices.

(IV, 14)

151 John Capgrave, The Chronicle of England, ed. Francis C. Hingeston, Rolls Series, I (London: 1858), p. 240.

152 John Capgrave, The Life of St. Katherine, ed. Carl Horstmann, EETS, o.s. 100 (London: 1893), pp. 189-91.

153 John Capgrave, The Book of the Illustrious

Henries, trans. Francis C. Hingeston (London: 1858), p. 141; quoted by F. J. Furnivall in his "Forewords" to Capgrave's The Life of St. Katherine, ed. Carl Horstmann, EETS, o.s. 100, p. xvii.

154 In concentrating on the Towneley plays here, I in no way mean to imply that the "Christ-as-Lollard" motif is absent from the other cycles. It most emphatically is not.

In York, for instance, many of the accusations traditionally levelled against Lollards reappear as charges brought against Christ by his enemies. Christ is thus denounced for both his preaching and for his use of words in general (XXVI, ll. 49-50, 113-14; XXIX, ll. 48, 240, 277; XXX, ll. 172, 198, 210, 484; XXXII, l. 69; XXXIII, l. 380; XXXV, ll. 265-66). His teachings are said to pervert the people and nurture rumor (XXVI, l. 34; XXX, l. 437; XXXIII, l. 98-100) as well as seduce the nobility away from the laws of established religion (XXX, ll. 329-32, 484-85)--a possible allusion to the Lollard program of disendowment and to the part the nobility was to play in its implementation. Christ is also, at various places, treated as a hypocrite (XXXV, ll. 70, 150), a clever trickster (XXIX, l. 31; XXXII, ll. 63-70; XXXIII, l. 194; XXXV, l. 278), a liar (XXIX, l. 390; XXX, ll. 198, 204, 210, 297; XXXII, l. 66; XXXIII, ll. 104, 401; XXXVI, l. 41), a traitor--a term that is applied to him either directly or indirectly at least seventeen times during the Passion--and a man of inordinate pride and ambition (XXVI, l. 33; XXIX, ll. 31, 51-54; XXX, ll. 212, 222; XXXIII, l. 414; XXXVI, l. 88). Furthermore, he is overwhelmingly denounced as a sorcerer or wizard, the charge appearing at twenty-five different points in the text. Finally, he is specifically condemned as an "apostita" (XXVI, l. 76) by Caiaphas, while his followers are said to live in a state of "arore" (XXX, l. 322)--technical designations which, considering the fact that Lollardy was England's only erroneous belief and apostate movement at this time, can only refer to the Wycliffite heresy. It is important to note, moreover, that the charge of apostasy is made immediately after the high priests have learned of Christ's ejection of the money-changers from the temple (XXVI, ll. 71-76) and thus may signify an attempt on the part of the dramatists to exploit one of the Lollards' own favorite teachings--namely, that Christ's cleansing of the temple sanctioned their policy of dispossession.

The N-Town cycle makes even bolder use of the Lollard motif. For one thing, it is the only cycle to refer specifically to Christ as an "eretyk" (PP I, l. 145) and to the precise mode of punishment to which heretics were commonly subjected--burning (PP I, ll. 416, 432-33).

But this is not all. Since Christ is also considered a traitor as well as a heretic (PP I, ll. 145-46, 1005-1006; the latter reference has Christ being condemned openly for "Bothe treson and eresye"), it is proposed that he first be "hangyn and drawe/and panne his body in fyre be brent" (PP I, ll. 155-56)--the exact method of execution meted out to Sir John Oldcastle and his followers after the 1414 rebellion. Moreover, N-Town is the only cycle which accuses Christ of going about barefoot (PP II, l. 488) and of dressing himself and his apostles in identical clothing so that "o dyscypil is lyche þi mayster in al parayl" (PP I, l. 643)--two favorite and highly specific charges brought against heretics by the anti-Lollard party (see Henry L. Cannon; "The Poor Priests: A Study in the Rise of English Lollardry," Annual Report of the American Historical Association, vol. 1 (1899), 472-74). Elsewhere in the cycle more familiar "heretical" charges are laid against Christ. His preaching and his "dottryne" (PP II, l. 111) are labelled subversive (PP I, ll. 54; II, ll. 107, 385-389), while he himself is called a "tretour" (PP II, ll. 438, 447) and a wizard (PP I, ll. 64, 161, 1023-24; II, ll. 251, 381-84) on numerous occasions.

Of course, we know that Christ is no Lollard. But the N-Town playwrights, as if aware that the boldness of their characterization might cause some confusion among the spectators, go out of their way to show how Christ and his followers are in reality the last people on earth one could accuse of being Lollards. Consequently, they show us Peter preaching a sermon to the audience on the necessity of oral confession or confession "Be Mowthe" (PP I, l. 247) and even stage a confession scene where Mary Magdalene tells Christ her sins (PP I, ll. 475-87); meanwhile, they devote well over a hundred lines (PP I, ll. 670-777) to the Last Supper, a scene where Christ institutes the Eucharist and, more important, explains in detail its spiritual and typological significance--all in a way that is scrupulously orthodox. Since the Lollards were notorious for their opposition to oral confession and for their denial of the Real Presence, one can only assume that the playwrights here are showing just how silly the heresy charges of the high priests really are.

Elsewhere, the close cooperative relationship between Church and State in matters of heresy is reflected in the cycle by the high priests' desire to have Rewfyn and Leyon, two "temperal jewgys" (PP I, l. 31), assist them in their plans to apprehend Christ--a task which the two justices eagerly and zealously perform. Caiaphas' own status as a repressor of heresy, moreover, is enhanced by the very language both he and others repeatedly use. He is, for instance, urged by some to administer "correxion" (PP I, l. 72) to Jesus

for his "fals oppynyon" (PP I, l. 75) and, as a result, vows to "correcte hym for his trespas" (PP I, l. 78). Both "correxion" and "correcte" as used here specifically refer to the process of chastizing heretics; they are part of the technical jargon of the heretic-hunters. The same is true for the phrase "fals oppynyon," which refers, of course, to heretical belief in general. It may be recalled that a contemporary chronicle reported how Oldcastle was "hanged and brent-on the galowez for his fals oppinions."

Finally, we find that most popular of anti-Lollard charges--hypocrisy--applied to Christ in the N-Town ministry play, The Woman Taken in Adultery. There Christ is unabashedly called a hypocrite on three different occasions (ll. 42, 49, 58) by the Jews, who fear that he will "turne his londe al to his lore" (l. 50) with his "prechyng" (l. 59). This is incontestable evidence. Both here and in the Passion plays the N-Town dramatists are determined to portray Christ's enemies as rabid Lollard hunters and Christ himself as the innocent victim of a heresy-obsessed society.

Of all the cycles, only Chester fails to develop extensively the Lollard motif. This is not so much due to the fact that Chester's relatively late date of revised composition, c. 1521-32 (see Lawrence W. Clopper, "The History and Development of the Chester Cycle," Modern Philology, 75 (1977-78), 219-46), makes the heresy issue outmoded or old fashioned; for Lollardy enjoyed a revival of sorts in the early sixteenth century. Rather, the absence of the heresy theme seems to derive from the fact that the brevity and concision of the Chester Passion itself preclude any thoroughgoing exploration of the Lollard issue.

In conclusion, let me say that the York and N-Town Passions, like the Towneley Passion, show Christ being unjustly accused of heresy in order to shock people into realizing that the pursuit of Lollards could at times be carried to absurd and dangerous lengths, and could, if not curtailed, lead to the ruin of countless individuals who, like Christ, were completely innocent of the crimes with which they were charged.

155 Kolve, p. 12.

156 The Wakefield Master is believed to have composed six complete plays for the Towneley cycle: Mactacio Abel (II), Processus Noe cum Filiis (III), Prima Pastorum (XII), Secunda Pastorum (XIII), Magnus Herodes (XVI) and Coliphizacio (XXI). His characteristic nine-line stanza can also be found in several other pageants in the cycle: Conspiracio (XX), stanzas 1-5; Fflagellacio (XXII), stanzas 5-27; Processus Crucis (XXIII), stanza 57; Processus Talentorum (XXIV),

stanzas 1-5, 56-59; Peregrini (XXVII), stanza 4; Ascencio Domini (XXIX), stanzas 57-58; Iudicium (XXX), stanzas 16-48, 68-76 (see Cawley, The Wakefield Pageants, pp. xvii-xviii).

The precise date of the Master's dramatic activity cannot readily be determined. In the late 1930's Mendal G. Frampton concluded that "the Wakefield Master did his work upon our cycle entirely within the reign of Henry VI--more specifically, within the second quarter of the fifteenth century" (see Mendal G. Frampton, "The Date of the Flourishing of the 'Wakefield Master'," PMLA, 50 (1935), 660). More recently, A. C. Cawley has suggested a broader time span, regarding the years 1400-1450 as the probable period in which the Master flourished, but with "no strong evidence for preferring one particular decade to another" (see Cawley, The Wakefield Pageants, p. xxxi).

157 Williams, The Characterization of Pilate, pp. 37-51.

158 Statutes of the Realm, II, p. 182.

159 The Towneley Plays, ed. George England, side-notes and introd. Alfred W. Pollard, EETS, e.s. 71 (1897; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 205. Except for quotations taken from the Coliphizacio, all future references to the Towneley Passion will be taken from this edition. References to the Coliphizacio will be taken from Cawley's edition of The Wakefield Pageants.

160 See above, in text, pp. 263-64; 375-76.

161 The English Works of Wyclif, pp. 182-85; 237-238.

162 See above, in text, p. 367.

163 Thomson, p. 221.

164 Cawley, The Wakefield Pageants, p. 119, note to ll. 80-81; for other references in Towneley to Christ as a liar see XXI, l. 412; XXII, l. 110; XXIII, ll. 43, 497-98.

165 Political prophecies were rampant in late medieval England, especially after the deposition of Richard II. V. J. Scattergood, in Politics and Poetry, p. 22, tells us that they "had reached such proportions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries" that a succession of English monarchs "all found it necessary to pass laws against their composition." In 1406 an act

against Lollards specifically mentions their complicity in spreading rumors and false prophecies predicting the overthrow of the realm.

Foreign contemporaries found the English penchant for political fortune-telling somewhat puzzling. In 1400 a Frenchman wrote that Englishmen "put perfect trust in prophecies and illusions and sorceries and willingly make use of them. . . . In my opinion . . . this is not well done, but is a great defect in their faith;" quoted by George L. Kittredge in his Witchcraft in Old and New England (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929), p. 58.

166 The Northern Passion, I, ed. Frances A. Foster, EETS, o.s. 145 (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), p. 174.

167 See above, in text, p. 371.

168 See York, XXIX, l. 31; XXXII, ll. 63-70; XXXIII, ll. 89-105, 194; XXXV, l. 277-78.

169 See above, in text, p. 355.

170 Friar Daw's Reply seems to have had a rather strong influence on the Towneley cycle. Two manifestations of that influence in particular strike me as being noteworthy. The first involves a not uncommon proverb. Friar Daw, in the midst of his attack on the Lollard, Jack Upland, asks his opponent if he has ever heard "how iudicare cam in to crede" (l. 227). This saying, interestingly enough, is the very same one the Wakefield Master puts in the mouth of the Second Torturer as he prepares to scourge Christ (XXII, l. 128). Perhaps the proverb was commonly applied to heretics by the anti-Lollards.

The second borrowing is even more interesting. Again, it involves one of Friar Daw's insults. Daw tells Jack to "Go grees a sheep vndir þe taile" (l. 280)--an expression identical to the one Cain uses against his brother in the Mactacio Abel ("Go grese thi shepe vnder the toute," l. 64). But the really amazing thing here is that these two works contain the only recorded allusion to this saying prior to 1550 (see Heyworth, p. 148, note to ll. 280-81). In other words, the Wakefield Master may have read Friar Daw's Reply, or the author of Friar Daw's Reply may have been familiar with the work of the Master. At any rate, there may very well be a connection between medieval drama and the work of the anti-Lollard polemicists which has up till now gone unnoticed.

For a discussion of the first proverb, see the following article: F. L. Utley, "How Judicare Came in

the Creed," Mediaeval Studies, 7 (1946), 303-09.

171 OED, VIII, part 2, pp. 132-33.

172 The N-Town Woman Taken in Adultery shows the Jews calling Christ "A fals Ypocryte" (l. 42) and "pat ypocryte" (ll. 49, 58). The contexts in which these terms appear do not immediately suggest pretended holiness, but in light of how often the word "hypocrite" did have this meaning in anti-Bollard literature, I am inclined to see the play's references to Christ's hypocrisy as signifying, at least in part, his alleged false piety. See note 154 to this chapter.

173 The Middle English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of Nicodemus, ed. William Henry Hulme, EETS, s.s. 100 (1907; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 25-26. In all, the charge of witchcraft is mentioned in The Gospel of Nicodemus four times: pp. 25-26, 27, 37, 41.

174 The York Passion, on the other hand, makes at least twenty-five references to Christ in his capacity as a wizard or warlock: XXIX, ll. 33, 57-58, 97-100, 187, 256; XXX, ll. 258, 291-93, 297-98, 317, 386, 441, 509, 525; XXXI, l. 59; XXXII, ll. 45, 65, 383; XXXIII, ll. 172, 191, 193-94, 286-96; XXXIV, l. 302; XXXV, l. 63; XXXVI, ll. 92-95, 278.

Although the witchcraft charge appears in The Gospel of Nicodemus, a recognized source of the York Passion, the tremendous reiteration that charge receives in that cycle cannot be explained by the narrative poem alone. We must look elsewhere for an answer. One possible reason--and a strong one at that--for York's fascination with the occult can be found in the apparent interest this subject generated among the city's religious community. An examination of the contents of the library of the Austin Friars of York reveals a surprising number of books on black magic. It seems that the convent's prior since 1385, John Erghome, was something of an expert in the field. At any rate, upon his death he bequeathed to the community his entire collection of two hundred and twenty volumes, many of which dealt with occult matters. (See Aubrey Gwynn, The English Austin Friars in the Time of Wyclif (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 130-34; among the works in question, Gwynn, on p. 134, lists the following: De Pentagono Salomonis, Vinculum Salomonis, De Inclusionone Spiritus in Speculo, Sapientia Nigromancie, Astrologia Marciiani.) If any of the York playwrights had access to these works--a possibility we should not casually rule out--it could very well account for the rather unusual degree of emphasis this topic receives

in the plays.

But there is, of course, yet another explanation--namely, the identification of sorcery with Lollardy. The constant assertion that Christ is a magician or a "warlow" can be interpreted as an attempt on the part of the dramatists to show how the Savior's enemies capitalize on every opportunity and make every possible attempt to demonstrate his heresy. In light of all their strenuous efforts in this direction (see note 154 to this chapter), I suggest that this is the more plausible alternative.

175 Kittredge, pp. 38, 145-46.

176 Thomson, p. 241. Thomson implies that it was a popularly held belief that Lollards were also false physicians who used magic to cure people of their ailments. He cites as one example the case of a "man who was tried for Lollardy" and who "had at an earlier date been charged with using spells to heal children who were ill." A great many other cases of this type, he goes on to say, "may be found in ecclesiastical court books and registers."

177 OED, III, p. 364; VII, p. 157.

178 Thomson, pp. 234-35.

179 Note the Lollard tendency to refer to bishops and other high Church officials as "cursed Caiaphases."

180 See, for example, CCR, Richard II, V, p. 434; VI, p. 158.

181 OED, IV, p. 236.

182 The Middle English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of Nicodemus, pp. 58-59.

Conclusion

This study, by focussing primarily but by no means exclusively on the Towneley cycle, has tried to dispel a number of incorrect assumptions about the nature of medieval religious drama. Probably, the most common misconception is that which presupposes that because the subject matter of the cycles is so timeless and scriptural, their tone so generally reverential and their purpose so devotional, that they cannot possibly have anything specific or significant to say about the problems, developments, events and controversies of their own age. This attitude is obviously erroneous. As the previous chapters have shown, the mystery plays did indeed address themselves to the topical issues of the day, and they did so in a very concrete, highly particularized manner. Thus the Mactacio Abel, Processus Noe and Prima Pastorum all attack, in their own way, certain attitudes and aspirations that had recently come to dominate the minds of so many lower class Englishmen. Both the Mactacio and the Processus Noe, for instance, assail the growing tendency among people made suddenly prosperous--especially the peasantry--to be more materialistic and self-absorbed, more aggressive and enterprising in their labor, more defiant of authority and

less attuned in general to the broader demands and needs of a corporate, hierarchical society. Similarly, the Prima Pastorum criticizes its age's infatuation with visionary social programs and Utopian dreams of material plenty, rebuking those who have allowed current millenarian sentiments and yearnings, such as those which spawned the Peasants' Revolt, to separate them from the true agent of renewal--Christ himself. The Magnus Herodes, on the other hand, exposes the reckless activities of the late-medieval English nobility. By depicting Herod as a powerful fifteenth-century magnate and his soldiers as a band of churlish, violent retainers, the play denounces both the lawlessness of contemporary knights and the institution which bred it--bastard feudalism. Finally, the Towneley Passion, in portraying Christ as a man falsely accused of Lollardy, eloquently pleads for restraint, common sense and fair play at a time when these values had all but vanished from a society grown obsessed with the pursuit of heresy.

Furthermore, all these issues--materialism, individualism, millenarianism, aristocratic violence and Lollardy--are not naive or quaint attempts on the part of the dramatists to furnish the plays with a bit of local color or make them more "realistic." On the contrary, the topical concerns that are voiced in these plays constitute part of a serious effort to examine intelligently and in detail important social and poli-

tical issues relevant to the lives of late medieval Englishmen. The Magnus Herodes, to take just one example, does not merely show us biblical characters dressed up to resemble Lancastrian or Yorkist knights. It defines and then condemns one of medieval England's most pressing contemporary problems--aristocratic lawlessness--and in the process calls into question a basic social institution, bastard feudalism. In other words, it encourages its audience to think as much about their own society as they do about past scriptural events. The topical allusions and contemporary references that are so often encountered in the mystery plays, therefore, must not be looked upon as mere "anachronisms." More often than not, they are part of a pervasive attempt to explore urgent social and political problems, sustaining themes which surely must have provoked the interest if not the wrath of more than one thoughtful spectator.

Unfortunately, the older view which maintains that these plays are at best only marginally relevant to the historical events and issues of their age still happens to be with us. Furthermore, this view assumes that the mystery cycles exercised little if any influence on the topical drama of the sixteenth century. For example, David Bevington, in his Tudor Drama and Politics, observes that the real "impulse" toward "political dramaturgy" was not supplied by the "Biblical cycles,"

which he believes had "evolved a non-political tradition," but rather arose from the morality plays, particularly those like the late fifteenth-century Wisdom Who Is Christ, perhaps "the first play to show this impulse in England."¹ Bevington's belief that the great political dramas of the Elizabethan Age can trace their pedigree back to the morality--a genre whose structure and "simple plot of soul-struggle and triumph could be localized in any setting, especially in retailing the contemporary abuses that drive the average man into sin"²--is one that is shared by most students of medieval drama today.

This standard position, however, possesses some serious inadequacies. For by emphasizing the influence of the morality upon the topical character of Elizabethan drama, it incorrectly presumes that the mystery plays dealt with few contemporary subjects and consequently had a "non-political tradition." But this is simply not true. As we have seen, cycle drama, especially the Towneley plays, addressed itself to a wide range of highly "political" issues--the threat of rebellion, the evils of maintenance and bastard feudalism, the problem of heresy and religious reform. All these issues, moreover, appear as central themes in the very works scholars have for so long cited as being the true ancestors of the late sixteenth-century history play--Wisdom, King John, Magnificence, Respublica and so forth. Clearly, if English

drama does indeed have a political tradition, it begins not with the morality but with the religious play.³

The generally conservative manner in which the mysteries approached current topics provides yet another link between the cycles and the Tudor political play. Sixteenth-century dramatists, as we all know, rarely deviated from the central political assumptions of their society--a society that feared change, hated rebellion and demanded complete obedience from all its members. A similar respect for traditional values informs many of the views set forth in the mystery plays. The Towneley cycle in particular adopts a conservative, not a radical, posture when dealing with contemporary issues. Contrary to what some have maintained, for example, the Magnus Herodes does not question all earthly authority but merely attacks the abuse of that authority by corrupt lords and their lawless adherents. By the same token, the melancholy laments of the poor shepherds in the Prima Pastorum should not mislead us into assuming that the play or its author champions the cause of a downtrodden and exploited peasantry; on the contrary, the very aspirations of that peasantry--its muddled dreams of an earthly paradise and its unrealistic apocalyptic expectations--are subjected to severe and penetrating criticism. Sentiments such as these were not that far removed from those of the sixteenth century.

Yet despite these similarities in subject matter and approach, religious drama still differs significantly from much Tudor drama in its handling of more controversial political issues. Whereas Renaissance "establishment" plays like Bale's King John or Respublica often take inflexible and immoderate stands on the volatile topics of their day and become highly doctrinaire as a result, the cycle plays somehow manage to retain, to an astonishing degree, their poise and equilibrium in the face of equally explosive material. Nowhere in the Towneley Passion, for instance, are we ever asked to condone heresy; but nowhere are we either asked to approve of a society which is so driven by anti-heretical fervor and fear that it denounces and then executes Christ himself as a Lollard. Such balance is all the more surprising when we consider that the cycle plays were often sponsored by such conservative and official organizations as the Church and the mercantile guilds--institutions that one would expect to be least receptive to the idea of curbing anti-heretical excesses. Many of the plays produced under similar auspices during the Reformation would follow a much less restrained course when grappling with equally controversial matters.

As our study of the Towneley cycle, therefore, has revealed, religious drama did indeed develop a political tradition--one which may, by its mere existence, have gone on to penetrate and influence the later drama

of the Renaissance. Specifically, the mysteries made available to the Tudor playwrights both a common stock of subjects--treason, rebellion, obedience, heresy--and a generally conservative way of evaluating them. What was not always followed, however, was that kind of balanced, restrained and fair-minded approach toward controversial issues which saved so many of the mysteries from becoming mere pieces of propaganda promoting the official views of the religious and political establishment--a fate not all the later drama was able to escape. Nevertheless, the general effect that religious drama probably had on the Tudor political play was powerful, profound and pervasive. Those who plan to study in the future the social and political features of drama, therefore, would do well to start with the cycle plays. For it is there, rather than in the morality, that the genuine beginnings of topical commentary in the English theatre are to be found.

NOTES

¹ Bevington, p. 28.

² Bevington, p. 28.

³ E. Catherine Dunn, in "The Medieval 'Cycle' as History Play: an Approach to the Wakefield Plays," Studies in the Renaissance, 7 (1960), 76-89, argues that the mystery plays influenced the Tudor history play of the 1530's by providing it with a ready-made way of interpreting English history. That is, playwrights like John Bale took the idea of "the Biblical destiny of the chosen people," which the cycles had for so long presented in dramatic terms, and transferred it to "the people of England" (88). God's plan of salvation for mankind was thus turned into an idea that could furnish dramatists with a new perspective on the events of English history.

While not denying the validity of this argument, I would add to it by saying that the mystery plays also influenced the political drama of the Renaissance by treating in a detailed and coherent way specific contemporary problems, topics and phenomena--and treating them under the guise of past events. In many respects the cycles were the political plays of their era.

APPENDIX I

The following is a copy of the pardon Henry, earl of Derby, procured for Thomas Mauncell on 12 July 1391 (CPR, Richard II, IV, p. 463).

Pardon, at the supplication of the king's cousin the earl of Derby, to Thomas Mauncell of divers offences, viz. for harbouring Adam Bate of Hilmyngfeld at Cridlyng on Sunday after the Epiphany 11 Richard II, well knowing he had killed a servant of Hugh de Wombewell at Wombewell the previous Christmas, and receiving for it lands and tenements of the said Adam, by his gift, as well as goods and chattels of his, viz. two horses, four oxen, wheat, barley, etc. to the value of £20 which should have been forfeited to the duke of Lancaster; also because when Robert de Prestcroft about the feast of St. Peter ad Vincula murdered John Diconson of Fisselake at Fissehelake, and when Thomas Drynkale about the feast of St. Margaret in the same year killed Thomas son of John de Birkyn of Beghall, a nief of the said duke's at Beghall, with his assent, false and common jurors, viz. William de Preston, convicted of conspiracy, Peter Baille of Pountfrayt, Robert Fang and others on Saturday after the Assumption in the same year procured the said Robert de Prestcroft and Thomas Drynkale to be indicted at Pountfrayt and before the justices released for a bribe (lucro); also because he, the said Thomas Mauncell, holds the said William de Preston and the rest at fee and livery for the cause aforesaid, and is a maintainer and supporter of them, and a common oppressor of the people and of the duke's tenants within the honor of Pontefract, to the duke's damage of £1,000; and further, for harbouring at Cridlyng Richard de Barton of Melton by Wath, William Trigot of Kirkeby by Helmeshale, John Raper of Northelmeshale and William de Buskeby of Kirkeby, well knowing that on Monday after the octaves of St. Martin in the same year at Kirksmethon they ravished Matilda, late wife of Walter de Rosseby, and in doing so killed Richard de Scargill.

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