Reference: English Society c. 1340-1400

English Society c. 1340-1400: Reform and Resistance

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Chaucer's life, from his birth circa 1343 to his death on October 25, 1400, spans one of the more tempestuous and transformative eras in English history. However, it was not just the key historical events that made the late fourteenth century so significant in England's political and social development; it was how those events emerged out of, reflected, or birthed more elusive social and literary phenomena. These phenomena contributed to the development of England's self-identity as a nation – as "English" – and, in doing so, also reconfigured social hierarchies. Chaucer may have been famously crowned the Father of English Literature by John Dryden and others, but this could not have occurred without the cultural acceptance of English literature more widely. While Chaucer certainly had a powerful influence on the increased respect English writings received in the late Middle Ages and beyond, there were many additional historic and social developments that also contributed to this change in the cultural tide. In turn, Chaucer and his contemporary writers provide a valuable lens through which to understand the "anxieties emerging from a society becoming governed by those who buy and sell rather than those who fight or pray" (Bertolet 2). This was a society becoming increasingly structured by the class fluidity of nascent capitalism and less by traditional, immobile social hierarchies determined by birth and codified in law. The following chapter will highlight how the major historical events of fourteenth-century England – namely, England's war with France, the bubonic plague and its consequences, and emerging religious conflicts—intertwined with the country's rapid social, political, economic, and religious changes.

War

Just as the language of Middle English was deeply infused with elements of French language and culture, England as a nation was, in many ways, shaped by its relationship to France. In 1066, Duke William of Normandy sailed across the channel to claim England, asserting that England's King Edward the Confessor had promised him the throne. Since that historic milestone, England and France would stake competing claims for one another's lands. These conflicts were significantly heightened in 1337, when France attempted to reassert control of Guyenne, a French Duchy that England's King Edward III had claimed for himself. This event began a series of battles between the two countries that would continue until 1453. This period of 116 years became known as the Hundred Years' War, a conflict that lasted through the reigns of Edward III, Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI.

Early on in the war, particularly through the 1346 Battle of Crecy, England established its reputation as a country of skilled, deadly longbowmen. The country's strength was in its force of archers rather than in the individual knightly prowess that was lauded in the popular medieval romances. In order to link his martial activity as closely as possible to the idealized reflection of masculinity and knighthood modeled in English chivalric romances, Edward III cultivated a sense of national pride in English citizens by aligning himself and his court with the legendary King Arthur. He commissioned a Round Table and hosted celebratory events, such as the 1344 feast at Windsor, which found echoes in Arthurian texts. He even used this Arthurian model (rather loosely, albeit) in battle tactics; for example, in the Crecy campaign he directed that no soldiers should sack holy places, harm women or children, threaten people, or do any kind of wrong – a directive much like Arthur's in the poet Wace's literary history of Britain, *Roman de Brut*. In appropriating Arthur as his political and martial model, Edward was also asserting an additional kind of symbolic control over France, a country that produced and circulated Arthurian texts.

However, Edward's Arthurian chivalry was impractical to enforce during an actual battle, since there was not much concern for the well-being of the French population. It became increasingly clear that the realities of war were far from the idealized chivalric ethos reflected in the Arthurian legends and reinforced by bonds of loyalty and oaths of fealty (Berard 2012, 4). Rather than sworn knights marching into battle on behalf of the king, there were now armies of soldiers (not all of which were adequately trained) who were paid for their services. As Göller notes, "[t]he feudal system was no longer suitable for the recruitment of armed forces for the military campaigns of the king" (55). Edward began to engage less in the Arthur myth – he eventually stopped construction on his Round Table – and instead established the prestigious Order of the Garter, which was associated with St. George (the patron saint of England) and the Virgin Mary. Christopher Berard argues that this turn from Arthur to the Order of the Garter reflected Edward's awareness of how the "knightly individualism" prized in Arthurian tales was not particularly valuable in an actual martial campaign. The Godly devotion inherent to the Order of the Garter and St. George could imbue the Arthurian ethos with similarly spiritual values – values that would reinforce mass obedience more than the knight-errant quests of the earlier Arthurian tales (Berard 2012, 4-5). However, as Berard's most recent research indicates, even though Edward's targeted appropriation of Arthur and his knights diminished as he focused on the Order of the Garter, it did not fully disappear. The Order was infused with the incipient English nationalism that was very much rooted in the Arthurian foundation tales – stories about how England came to be. The Order became "an outlet for Arthurianism" (Berard 2016, 108) and was used to exert ideological pressure against France, whose king also admired Arthur but who resisted Edward's claims to the French throne.

As Edward aged, his campaigns against France continued and expenses escalated. Taxes increased accordingly, to the anger of English citizens. During the last five to seven years of his life, Edward became heavily reliant upon his mistress, Alice Perrers, whose influence over the king was notorious and detested. Perrers became the *femme fatale* upon whom the peers of the realm could hoist blame for problems that would otherwise be attributed to Edward directly. This distrust of the monarch's capabilities did not improve after Edward died in 1377, leaving ten-year-old Richard, son of Edward's deceased son the Black Prince, as King Richard II of England. As this article will discuss below, Richard's youth and inexperience meant that his reign was not

a particularly strong one. His advisors' influence over him, as well as his own lack of strength and assertiveness, led to public resistance to, and skepticism of, his authority. Eventually, in 1399, the throne was taken from him by force by his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, and Richard died soon after in prison. Because Richard had invested so much time and energy during his reign simply trying to quell resistance, he accomplished little against France. However, as the Hundred Years' War continued in the first half of the fifteenth century, England rallied under Henry V to achieve astounding success at the Battle of Agincourt and, to a smaller extent, in other conflicts. Richard's reign, ending on the cusp of the fifteenth century, became known for internal strife and overtaxation, rather than martial success overseas.

Plague

In the late 1340s, approximately a decade into the Hundred Years' War, England felt the downside of increased contact with the continent: plague. In 1348, two years after what became known as the Black Death[1] swept through continental Europe, the plague reached England and decimated its population. The population of England, together with Wales, had settled at just under six million after the early fourteenth-century famines, which had reduced numbers by 10-15% (Routt 475; Cantor 21). Medieval English chronicler Ranulf Higden, who lived through the first wave of the plague in 1348-50, contended that "scarce a tenth of mankind was left alive", although "virtually none of the lords and great men died in this pestilence" (quoted in Horrox 63). While Higden's account is somewhat hyperbolic, the plague did indeed ravage England. For peasants and middling to lower-class urban dwellers, who lived where plague-carrying vermin were plenteous, the mortality rate was a staggering 40-50%. Since the wealthy had access to safer areas and the ability to isolate themselves, they fared better; however, they still faced a mortality rate of about 25% (Cantor 21-22). While the plague returned to England several more times before the end of the fourteenth century, its most devastating impact was felt in its first wave, between 1348 and 1350.

With the high mortality rate among agrarian workers, England became starved for labour. There were simply not enough people to work the land and sustain the economy, and therefore the labourers that did survive found that they had become a valuable human commodity. As the value of labour drastically increased in the wake of the plague, with so few workers and such high demand for them, the system of feudal ties between vassal and landholder began to dissipate. The 1349 Ordinance of Labourers and the 1351 Statute of Labourers, with their constraints on the mobility and behavior of non-land-holding citizens, revealed landholders' anxieties about their position and their control, or lack of it. The effects of these laws were felt throughout the fourteenth century.

The 1349 Ordinance, in response to what it termed the "grave disadvantages which might arise from the dearth especially of tillers and workmen" (quoted in Middleton 219), restricted wages for servants and labourers to the levels of 1346. It also legally required those who did not own land to serve landholders, specifying that villeins were bound to serve on their lord's own land or, in some instances, in a particular village that required their labour (Poos 29-31). Much of the wording of the Ordinance was not sufficiently specific, and therefore a great deal of discretion was given to constables, bailiffs, lords, and other figures of authority to enforce these rules and imprison offenders. To rectify the vague spots in the Ordinance, Edward III's 1351 Parliament

enacted the Statute of Labourers. The Statute was intended to address the "malice of servants, who were idle and refused to serve after the pestilence," and in doing so, expanded the parameters of the Ordinance and reinforced or clarified some of its weaker points (quoted in Poos 30). Labourers were made to swear oaths that they would uphold this legislation by fulfilling their required duties and remaining in the village or property to which they were obligated.

Subsequent pieces of legislation reinforced the social restrictions of the 1349 and 1351 acts. In 1363, Edward III passed England's second Sumptuary Law. This legislation linked clothing and fabric to social class, specifying a hierarchy of fashion that prohibited the lower classes from dressing above their station (even if they could afford it). A second Statute of Labourers was passed in 1388, during the vexed reign of Richard II, and further extended the constraints on non-landholding citizens. Anne Middleton sees in the extremes of this Statute evidence of deep-seated fear in the upper ranks of society. She argues that this legislation, in its rigidity and unenforceability, "was a bold act of projective imagination rather than an achievable regulation" (216). These pieces of post-plague legislation unsuccessfully attempted to control what were, in many ways, natural socioeconomic developments borne out of traumatic change.[2]

Rebellion

The 1388 Statute was, however, enacted within a somewhat different political and social environment than the first two labour laws. Edward III died in 1377, leaving his grandson Richard II as a child king responsible for maintaining the martial campaigns against France and keeping the commons under control. With significant increases in wartime taxation under both Edward and Richard, England's large population of peasants and vassals was becoming both impoverished and furious (Aers 433-4). In 1381, resistance developed into rebellion with what became known as the Great Rising, or the Peasants' Revolt.[3]

Angry citizens of Kent and Essex, spurred on by their minor rebellions against the tax collection officials and led by Wat Tyler and John Ball, marched on London in June of 1381. They broke open prisons and freed the inmates, killed the Flemish merchants who plied their trade in London, burned legal documents, destroyed the palace of John of Gaunt (uncle to King Richard II), and publically executed the Archbishop of Canterbury and the king's Treasurer and Chancellor. Richard, then only 14 years old, met with the rebel leaders twice during the events of the rising, first at Mile End and then at Smithfield, in the hope of controlling the violence and pacifying the angry crowds. During both meetings, Tyler laid before the king the rebels' demands: namely, the abolition of serfdom (to be certified by charters of manumission, which are legal documents granting freedom to a lord's villeins), and the standardization of land rents. During the second meeting, Tyler increased his demands, and Richard conceded to nearly all of them. This meeting ended with violence, however; the accounts are not clear or consistent, but a conflict erupted, Tyler was killed, and Richard escaped.

As per his agreement, Richard signed and sealed a proclamation promising the rebels pardon if they would return to their homes. The charters of manumission that he had pledged were, however, revoked. There is some debate about whether Richard was dealing with the rebels in good faith (he was young and possibly hopeful) and how much he was actually under the control

of his uncle and other royal administrators (Saul 69-77). Regardless of Richard's intentions, however, the rebels' belief in the legitimacy of documents reveals that English attitudes towards writing and literacy were shifting among the lower classes as well as the upper. Documents were power; writing could effect change. The rebels' growing literacy was beyond the simple acts of reading and writing, as Steven Justice has shown in his discussion of the Rising's "insurgent literacy":

The scope of the literacy the rebels claimed had more to do with their claims to familiarity with and investment in the documentary culture by which a realm was governed than clerical bookishness; more to do with the place of writing in their collective lives (*Writing and Rebellion* 52)

The rebels' knowledge of documentary power was part of their own literacy. In other words, literacy increased as a wider range of people recognized its social and political significance, even if not all of those people could themselves read or write.

It was not just peasant literacy that was insurgent, however; it was English itself (Lerer 2007, 83). English texts allowed the lower classes access to documentary and literary culture in new and sometimes radical ways. Access to texts meant access to power, and with the increase in lower-class literacy and the increase in English texts, a subversion of traditional hierarchies was in progress. Contemporary English authors were, at the time of the Rising, responding to long-held beliefs in the authority of French and Latin over English. They reacted to the Rising and its "insurgent literacy" differently. Chaucer, ever politically cautious, made no explicit comment upon the Rising in his poetry, although critics have seen oblique allusions to it in such texts as the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale* (Lerer 2006, 6; Astell 53; Wolfe 6). John Gower's lengthy poem *Vox Clamantis,* written pointedly in Latin even though Gower wrote poetry in English as well, decried the actions of the rebels and aligned them with the Antichrist. William Langland's poem *Piers Plowman*, written and rewritten from 1360 to the 1380s, explored the complexities of such concepts as labor, poverty, true Christianity, and social justice thoroughly in its final, post-1381 version (its "C text"). Since the final revision made key adjustments in favour of orthodoxy, many critics see it as responsive to the fact that letters written by the rebels used the poem's main character, Piers Plowman, as a political symbol. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton describes the C text as "an effort to clarify and streamline the chaotic intensity of [the earlier version]; there is a new sense of moral responsibility and a new awareness, especially since the rising of 1381, of injudicious readers who must be set straight" (521). In a somewhat different vein, Anne Middleton argues that the C text, with its increased focus on poverty and wandering, was a response to the restrictive 1388 Statute of Labourers.

The anxieties about social mobility in the 1380s were in some ways connected to anxieties about King Richard II and his adequacy (or inadequacy) as a monarch. Richard, in contemporary as well as centuries-later accounts, had an unmanly reputation that likely weakened his royal efficacy; in these accounts, "he is habitually associated with an elaborate delight in clothing and courtly culture, sometimes contrasted with the martial 'masculinity' of earlier kings" (Fletcher 3). While England's aristocratic peers had always held concerns regarding the potential influence that could be wielded by a monarch's mistress or his favourites, Richard's youth made his susceptibility to such influence much more likely. In 1387, whether through antagonism against

Richard directly or just against his advisors, five lords moved together to accuse the king's favourites of treason. These five Lords Appellant – Thomas of Woodstock, Richard Fitzalan, Thomas Beauchamp, Thomas Mowbray, and Henry Bolingbroke (the future King Henry IV) – convened the Merciless Parliament in 1388. This spectacle humiliated Richard and resulted in the execution of eight of his friends and advisors.

As the preceding discussion has indicated, the ravages of the plague and the consequent fracturing of established social systems indirectly led to rebellion from the highest as well as the lowest echelons of society. Such destabilization was even more damaging because it largely occurred during the reign of Richard II, a child king. Kings under the age of majority relied upon stewards, advisors, and guardians either to guide the king's decisions or to make decisions on his behalf. The dissatisfaction with Richard was evident in the events of the Peasants' Revolt and the Merciless Parliament, but came to its ultimate fruition when Henry Bolingbroke, one of the Lords Appellant of the Merciless Parliament and son of Richard's uncle John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, asserted his right to the throne in 1399. When Richard was in Ireland, Henry allied himself with the exiled Thomas Arundel, former Archbishop of Canterbury, and laid claim to royal power. Richard was imprisoned and died, in unknown circumstances, shortly afterwards. By 1400 England was ruled by King Henry IV of House Lancaster. Henry's usurpation of Richard, which rested on Henry's claim to be Edward III's true heir, established the circumstances that would allow the Wars of the Roses to dominate the latter half of the fifteenth century. Both the Yorkists and the Lancastrians would attempt to show their genealogical connection to Edward III and the Plantagenet line, waging a long and drawn-out civil war that ended only with the powerful Tudor dynasty.

Religion and Reform

The increasing unrest and violence in England during the latter half of the fourteenth century was not limited to the social and political spheres; it extended to religion as well. In the 1360s and 1370s, a popular and respected theologian by the name of John Wyclif studied and taught at Oxford University, producing over the years a huge corpus of scholarly work that was influential in establishing the vernacular theology movement that became increasingly popular (and sometimes dangerous) in the fifteenth century.[4] Wyclif's theology was reformist in nature, insisting that the Church not accrue wealth and that individuals should be able to read the Bible in English and confess directly to God, but he was nevertheless initially supported by the royal court. His desire to disendow the Church – that is, to prevent the Church from receiving worldly goods and profiting from them – was "dazzlingly, brilliantly radical" (Justice 1999, 662) to Church leaders, who accused Wyclif of heresy, but was attractive to secular rulers who saw in such theology an opportunity for wealth to be redirected to themselves. John of Gaunt, for example, summoned Wyclif to the court in 1376 in order to present an argument for Church disendowment to Parliament. However, Wyclif's reformist theology did not end with disendowment; rather, disendowment "provoked a movement of religious dissent that extended beyond the university and Parliament and beyond his death in 1384" (Justice 1999, 662). This movement became known as Lollardy, and it influenced the broader vernacular theology movement that espoused an individual's personal connection to God and the legitimacy of English as a language to convey spiritual truths and God's word.

Although Lollardy grew out of Wyclif's theology, it was not contained therein. Lollardy became a widespread cultural current, its followers increasingly resistant to the Church's control over individual religious practice and its claims to special spiritual and theological knowledge unreachable to laypeople. Many of Wyclif's main complaints against the Church – the fact that it hoarded wealth rather than welcomed poverty, its use of Latin to exclude laypeople from Biblical knowledge, the mandatory practice of confession to a priest – formed the core beliefs common to many Lollards, but there were numerous variations among different Lollard groups.

Despite the fact that from 1377 the Church increasingly tried to stifle Wyclif's voice, namely through papal bulls condemning him, Wyclif was still protected (somewhat cautiously) by the University of Oxford and remained generally accepted as a theologian. Where Wyclif became heretical rather than merely reformist was in his insistence that laypeople must read the Bible themselves without priestly interference and in his rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation, which stated that priests had the God-given power to transform the bread and wine of the Eucharist into Christ's actual flesh and blood. While Wyclif did not deny the real presence of God in the Eucharist, he did deny the priestly power inherent to transubstantiation. He began to lose his moderate supporters after this point (c.1380) and gain more extreme reformers as followers (Justice 1999, 664). In 1382, the Blackfriars Council in London condemned Wyclif's teachings as heretical (although they did not name him specifically), thus creating a new community of radicals who, by this shift in their political and religious definition, were now officially against the orthodoxy of the Church. Medieval chroniclers, along with Archbishop Courtney, wrote about the insidious spread of Wycliffism, making it appear as if these heretics had infiltrated every corner of the realm and must be halted (Cole 7). Oxford University broke ties with Wyclif and his doctrines, and Wyclif himself died in 1384, but Lollards continued to practice their religion devoutly, even in the face of persecution in the early fifteenth century.

Lollardy was not restricted to the academic environment. Richard II's chamber was known to include "Lollard knights," likely one reason why the Merciless Parliament of 1388 "ordered a search for Wycliffite writings ('written in English or in Latin')" (Justice 1999, 670). Lewis Clifford, a friend of Chaucer, was among these knights, and contemporary poet Sir John Clanvowe, also Chaucer's friend, apparently had Lollard sympathies (671-2). The power and influence of Lollardy was not just in its radical, reformist theology, but in its appropriation of English. It accepted English as a tool with which laypeople could communicate directly with God, whether through prayer, confession, or reading. By the early fifteenth century, when Henry IV's friend Archbishop Arundel had expanded the definition of heresy and increased the corresponding punishments, English had become potentially dangerous. Translating the Bible into English, for example, could (and often did) result in a painful, torturous death for the perpetrator. The openness to reformist ideas that was common in Oxford in the 1360s was long gone.

Conclusion

These fourteenth-century anxieties – about Lollardy, about England's claim to France, about royal authority, and about labourers becoming wealthy beyond their correct social position – were, at their core, very similar. In all of these situations, power was disrupted, removed from its purportedly true place in order to be wielded by someone else – someone who should not have it.

As the discussion above has indicated, much of this destabilization of power was connected to language use, particularly the increased use of English in literary, courtly, religious, and government circles. I do not mean to suggest that these social and political phenomena led to the increase in vernacular writing, or vice versa. There was no such simplistic cause-and-effect process. Instead, we must see the change in the status of English as part of a slow, often uncomfortable, development in English citizens' view of themselves as "of England." This was not flag-waving patriotism in our modern sense of the word, but rather a pride in belonging and in staying. England was a country repeatedly invaded and colonized by outsiders, and its population changed accordingly, resulting in a patchwork of cultures entering and leaving, with the indigenous peoples (now known as Celts) pushed to the borders. To belong in England, to be decidedly English, was relatively new in the fourteenth century, but it was an important development. Events such as the Black Death forced socioeconomic changes that redistributed power and reorganized hierarchies, and this happened when vernacular English literature was growing in popularity, to the extent that Chaucer became accepted as an authority on par with classical poets. The widening scope of the English language and the destabilized cultural landscape meant that England was ripe for change, and change happened – often with pain and fear, but it happened nonetheless.

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Notes:

[1] While the Black Death has historically been conflated with the bubonic plague, its etiology is still a subject of debate. See Pobst, "Should We Teach that the Cause of the Black Death was the Bubonic Plague?" for an overview of the issue.

[2] See Robert Palmer's *English Law in the Age of the Black Death* for a comprehensive treatment of English legislation in the decades following the plague.

[3] See Steven Justice's *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* for a comprehensive account of the Revolt's development, causes, and consequences. The terminology for this event is loose and often contingent upon modern readers' assumptions. For example, to label it with the term "Peasant" falsely suggests that only peasants participated. Additionally, some scholars suggest that the term "revolt" implicitly gives the event less credibility than "rising" or "uprising".

[4] See Nicholas Watson's "Censorship and Cultural Change" for an explication of vernacular theology in the fifteenth century and its connections to Wycliffism.