



The Writing Lesson of 1381

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Chaucer's England

LITERATURE IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT



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At the beginning of his 1789 tract *What Is the Third Estate?* Emmanuel Sieyès summarizes that estate's prerevolutionary history in two questions and responses: "What has [the third estate] been until now in the political order? Nothing. What does it seek? To become something."¹ The conceptual space between that nothing and that desired something is the concern of this paper. One of the many fields that constitute "the third estate" as a historical category is writing. We know the rebels of England's 1381 rising through chronicles, court records, charters, poems, and so on. Yet the rebels remain outside representation in that they do not represent themselves for the written record. They are reimagined by those who write. Maintaining a largely oral culture alongside an increasingly literate higher culture, England's lower strata appear in written records as incoherent and irrational creatures or as models of submission and faith, variously constructed by various writers' own positions and preoccupations.

The distortion of records does not render them useless. Historians have striven to recover the rebels' actions and motives by reading chronicle accounts against one another, searching court rolls for proceedings earlier brought on behalf of villeins against lords, interrogating the records of perhaps spurious accusations and confessions subsequent to the revolt, and recognizing in other ways that all histories are interpretive and incomplete accounts. From my own partial position—partial, that is, in being both disposed toward literary analysis and limited by a professional training in literature—I would like to examine the written absences that historians work to overcome and to propose that absence is an important feature of the rebels' cultural status.

One privilege of my literary perspective on this question is that I am not primarily concerned with the accuracy of the record to the events. Recently Derek Pearsall has elegantly expressed the irrecoverability of events in a short article on the rising of 1381, using as an example the old chair on which a knight climbs to read King Richard's pardon to the rebels in the *Anonimale Chronicle*: "This has the air of something seen, not invented: the arbitrariness of the old chair carries authenticity. Yet is it entirely arbitrary? Does not the old chair carry some impression of impropriety and indignity which enhances the image of the reversal of order?"² Granted that events and written accounts are tenuously con-

nected, my concern is with how writers imagine the rebels and interpret the actions they impute to the rebels, rather than with the more difficult problems of whether and when writing can represent events.

I will begin to consider the relation of the 1381 rebels to writing by treating their illiteracy as a context for their destruction of documents, their demands for new documents, and their superiors' responses to these acts. Limitations in the literate/illiterate dichotomy will then lead me to consider ways in which fourteenth-century writing represents the rebels as altogether outside articulation, relegated to the nothingness of Sieyes's formula. This holds true for narrative accounts of the rising as well as for responses to it in works of William Langland and Geoffrey Chaucer. Whether hostile or sympathetic in tone, writers attribute inarticulateness to the rebels and impute political inefficacy to that inarticulateness. Excluded as a group, if not in every individual case, from participation in literate culture, the rebels of 1381 appear in our records as the "nothing" in contrast to which "something" else exists.

Modern historians note that the participants in the rising of 1381 were of diverse social origins, despite the chroniclers' tendency to use categorical terms such as *servi*, *rustici*, and *comunes*. With regard to writing, the disparate groups involved in the rising had perhaps more in common than with regard to occupations and degrees of bondedness. Yet R. B. Dobson has recently reemphasized the common interests and interconnected situations of different rebel groups, particularly of the rural peasantry and the townspeople of York, Beverley, and Scarborough, "themselves so often first- or second-generation immigrants from the surrounding countryside."³ Resisting "a false dichotomy between town and countryside" in studies of the rising, A. F. Butcher argues that in Canterbury "the so-called alliance between townsmen and villagers in 1381 was not . . . a temporary phenomenon but a natural expression of a regional social structure in which town and countryside were inextricably entwined."⁴ More relevant than the difference in status between villein, sokeman, artisan, and apprentice was the common position of the rebels outside the circles of power. Rodney Hilton summarizes the groups involved in the rising as "below the ranks of those who exercised lordship in the countryside and established authority in the towns."⁵ This common position "below" also characterizes the rebels' relation to literate structures, despite the frequently noted difference between literacy levels in town and country.⁶

The groups rebelling in 1381 were by some measures perhaps partly literate. Estimates of the ability to read or to sign vary for the whole population of the period from 15 percent to 5 or 10 percent. Jo Ann Hoepfner Moran concludes that in the later Middle Ages literacy "was not altogether absent even among the very poor," yet for 1500 she estimates a literacy rate in northern England of only 15 percent. David Cressy's more conservative estimates for 1500 are 90 percent illiteracy for men and 99 percent for women.⁷ Since education was almost entirely restricted in the

fourteenth century to those of gentle and clerical status, neither Moran's nor Cressy's estimates for the total population allow for a significantly literate commons.⁸ M. T. Clanchy's argument that the possession of a seal counts as participation in written culture makes the most positive case possible for the relation between literate culture and the commons. Noting that "the statute of Exeter of 1285 actually required 'bondsmen' to have seals to authenticate their written evidence, when they served on inquests for which there were insufficient freemen," Clanchy comments that "the possessor of a seal was necessarily a person familiar with documents and entitled to participate in their use."⁹

But the place in literate culture that the seal conferred, like the place in law conferred by bonded status, functioned broadly to restrict rather than to liberate the illiterate individual. The institutional use of texts was in the fourteenth century no longer a new phenomenon, but the distinctions this use perpetuated between "literate" and "illiterate" and between "learned" and "popular"—distinctions, Brian Stock has shown, that "were themselves the byproducts of literate sensibilities"—continued to reinforce social stratification.¹⁰ Particularly for considering the role of texts in the 1381 rising, it is significant that literacy in medieval culture disadvantaged the illiterate as well as serving them. Literate culture did not develop in a vacuum but interacted with and contested a prior, nonliterate culture now labeled deficient. Supplementing the church's increasing emphasis on clerical education and the instruction of the laity through canonical texts, the Inquisition and other branches of the church strove to eradicate popular beliefs. It is a curious irony that the records of the Inquisition provide historians today with much of their information about suppressed popular culture. One such record, the interrogation of a sixteenth-century miller whose beliefs about the cosmos are the subject of Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, attests to the popular awareness that institutions deploy literacy to the disadvantage of the unlettered: the miller begins his testimony by objecting to the use of Latin in the courts, "a betrayal of the poor because in lawsuits the poor do not know what is being said and are crushed; and if they want to say four words they need a lawyer."¹¹ Despite the ways traced by Stock and Clanchy in which the unlettered were able to participate in literate culture, stratification was not thereby eradicated. Indeed, literacy provided a further measure of social differentiation and a new site of friction between social groups.

In the seignorial courts of the fourteenth century, the lord's authority is overwhelmingly perpetuated against the claims of subordinates. Legislation, custom, and court cases forbid or restrict suits by villeins against lords and impose taxes, fines, and amercements arbitrarily in addition to the familiar merchet, death duty, and similar levies. Where the lower orders have legal contact with writing, it is not evident that the contact works to their advantage. Regulations stipulating that vagrants carry documents testifying to their trustworthiness and that warrants of lawful pur-

chase accompany sales of livestock seem designed to facilitate seigniorial control rather than to protect the parties concerned. The Peterborough *Cartae Nativorum*, copies of charters conveying small amounts of land or property, reflect, according to Clanchy, not the right of peasants to legal instruments but the abbey's seizure of documents to which its serfs have no right.¹² The remarkable series of forty attempts by villages in 1377 to prove freedom from customary services on the basis of exemplifications from Domesday Book meets with a parliamentary statute from lords and commons condemning "their malicious interpretation" of Domesday and ordering that the landlords concerned may themselves receive exemplifications demonstrating their rights, "letters patent under the Great Seal, as many and such as they may need, if they wish to ask for them."¹³ Even the rudimentally symbolic tally stick was so often a means of fleecing peasants in the lord's name rather than striking an agreement with them that its coercive use becomes a literary commonplace.¹⁴ If it can be said that the lower orders are acting within literate structures in cases such as these, their slight participation in literacy may have operated on their consciousness as historians argue their slightly increasing prosperity operated—to make the exclusions and restrictions that characterized their condition more visible than previously, and less tolerable.

This possibility is sustained by the role writing plays in the revolt of 1381. Although records note that rebel actions differ by region, George M. Trevelyan concluded long ago that the burning of charters, court rolls, and other documents was "the most universal feature of the Rising."¹⁵ Christopher Dyer has identified 107 separate instances of destruction of documents, "including the burning of central estate archives such as those of the archbishopric of Canterbury, Stratford Abbey and Waltham Abbey that affected the records of many manors."¹⁶ So salient was this feature of the rising to Thomas Walsingham that he subsumed the murder of various officials under the broader hostility to writing: "They strove to burn all old records; and they butchered anyone who might know or be able to commit to memory the contents of old or new documents. It was dangerous enough to be known as a clerk, but especially dangerous if an ink-pot should be found at one's elbow: such men scarcely or ever escaped from the hands of the rebels."¹⁷ Walsingham's perception that the rebels were hostile primarily to documents and only derivatively to the writers of documents might illuminate why relatively few landlords, and relatively more lawyers and clerks, were killed in the 1381 rising.

The *Anonimale Chronicle* similarly attributes violence against writers to animosity against writing in its account of Richard's attempt to disperse the rebels by having a pardon read aloud to them by the knight who stood on the old chair: Richard tries to disperse the rebels by having "a clerk write a bill in their presence" that he then seals in their presence, pardoning them "all manner of trespasses and misprisions and felonies done up to this hour" and requesting that everyone go home and "put his grie-

vances in writing, and have them sent to him." Hilton quite reasonably attributes the commons' rejection of the bill to its status as a pardon rather than a manumission such as those provided the following day at Mile End. Yet the chronicler emphasizes writing so persistently, in the clerk called to inscribe, the knight to read aloud, and the commons to reply in writing, that some connection between the commons' anger and the emphasis on literate exchange is implied. Indeed, the chronicler proposes a cause-and-effect relation between this episode and the next that can only be understood as predicated on the commons' hostility to literate exchange: "And when the commons had heard the bill, they said it was nothing but a trifle and a mockery. Therefore [purceo] they returned to London and had it cried around the city that all lawyers, all the men of the Chancery and the Exchequer and everyone who could write a writ or a letter should be beheaded, wherever they could be found."¹⁸ As in the passage cited above from Thomas Walsingham, the *Anonimale Chronicle* here subsumes violence against writers under a generalized hostility to documents.

How might we read these attacks on writing? They contribute to historians' analyses of popular attitudes toward judicial institutions, corruption, or tenure of land. From a more generalized perspective, the rebels' attacks on writing together with their demand for new charters perceive writing to be an instrument of control. Claude Lévi-Strauss concludes in his "Writing Lesson" that control of others is the dominant function of writing in a culture where some are literate and others are not. When Lévi-Strauss gives pencils and paper to the illiterate Nambikwara of Brazil, they imitate the writing he does to record data by making wavy lines; soon thereafter the leader of the group uses such a piece of "writing" at a gift exchange with an unfriendly group "to amaze his companions and persuade them that his intermediacy was responsible for the exchanges" by "enhancing the prestige and authority of one individual—or one function—at the expense of the rest of the party."¹⁹ At first angry at the ignorant misuse of a skill designed to promote understanding, remembering, and knowing, the anthropologist proposes on reflection that from the earliest to modern times, the appearance of writing in cultures correlates not with an increase in knowledge but with the development of complex social hierarchies. "If my hypothesis is correct, the primary function of writing, as a means of communication, is to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings."²⁰ The Nambikwara leader, Lévi-Strauss concludes, has in fact apprehended the essence of writing in using his imitation document to establish control over the distribution of gifts.

Several features of Lévi-Strauss's account find echoes in the events of 1381. The widespread burning of documents suggests that to the rebels writing appeared innately to be an instrument of oppression. Manorial and court rolls having to do directly with rebel grievances were not the only targets of the revolt. Miscellaneous papers and books were also seized and burned at manor houses, as well as papers belonging to small households.

The rebels who sacked Edmund de la Mare's manor impaled a bundle of Admiralty papers on a pitchfork to carry before them when they marched on to London.²¹ Various private animosities and local hostilities could account for the range of papers destroyed in 1381, but only if the rebels had already a global perception of the power of writing that would channel particular animosities into this most characteristic act of the rising.

A second parallel between the rebels and the Nambikwara of Lévi-Strauss's "Writing Lesson" is their attempt to appropriate writing as a means of control. To the Nambikwara leader's paper marked with his own wavy lines we might compare the rebels' new charters dictated to their own specifications. According to the *Anonimale Chronicle*, King Richard's clerks spent a full day writing out "chartres et patentes et protectiones" to the rebels' requirements. Walsingham reports that in Bury St. Edmunds the rebels exacted a promise from the monks that they would seal a charter to be drawn up by the rebels themselves, and that in St. Albans the charter the abbot was compelled to write proved inadequate to the rebels' wishes, so that a clerk was called forth to attempt to take down the words of the assembled crowd.²² Both chroniclers and modern historians have called the faith of the rebels in their new charters naive: Jean Froissart describes those who are pleased with Richard's charters at Mile End as "the simple, ignorant, plain men who had come there without knowing what they wanted."²³ But insofar as they have at least imitated the act of writing as an act of control, the rebels have grasped the functional authority of writing in their culture.

Like the Nambikwara leader's piece of paper, however, the rebels' charters do not carry authority with the literate. Lévi-Strauss's initial outrage at having his superior function of writer usurped by those he believes ignorant of that function stresses again the hierarchizing potential of literacy and the low esteem in which those who are comparatively unlettered can easily come to be held. "So the Nambikwara had learnt what it meant to write!" Lévi-Strauss exclaims to himself, "But not at all, as one might have supposed, as the result of a laborious apprenticeship." The anthropologist is at first angered that the tribal leader can use spurious writing to signify falsely that "he had allied himself with the white man, as equal with equal, and could now share in his secrets."²⁴ If the usurpation of writing by the Nambikwara can so raise the specter of race prejudice within anthropological discourse, it is hardly surprising that the forces of order in 1381 responded with dismissive scorn to the rebels' new documents. In Ospringe as in other towns, according to Froissart, the king and council held inquiries and executed rebel leaders, "and the letters that had been given and accorded to them were requested, and they were brought and surrendered to the king's men, who tore them and cast them to the ground in the presence of all the people." Henry Knighton writes that charters of manumission were "broken, annulled, and judged void and invalid" by the Westminster Parliament of 1381. Burned rentals, titles, and other docu-

ments were gradually recreated and assigned the value of the originals.²⁵ In Walsingham's version, the particular imagery of Richard's repudiation of the liberties given at Mile End substitutes for the rebels' written charters the text of their bodies, on which will be inscribed the dangers of rebellion: "Rustics you were and rustics you remain. . . . For as long as we live . . . we will strive to trample on you so that your slavery may be an example to posterity, and so that those like you may now and in future have always before their eyes as if in a book [*tanquam pro speculo*] your misery and reasons for cursing you and for fearing to do such things as you have done."²⁶ The rebellious rustics are made an instructive *speculum* for rustics; they are not themselves writers but the ground on which Richard and his magnates will record the necessity of servitude for all to read.

The substitution of the rebels' bodies for their charters raises a limitation in Lévi-Strauss's model, suggestive as it is for the relation of the rebels to documents in 1381. By making instructive texts of his subjects, Richard illustrates that conventional writing is not the only means of authoritative articulation: speeches, gestures, and punishments are further communications that can carry authority. Thus the validity of Lévi-Strauss's distinction between literacy and illiteracy is called into question in Jacques Derrida's response to "A Writing Lesson," and a revision is proposed that can, I believe, better describe the situation of the rebels in relation to writing and to their larger culture.

Derrida accepts as evident the association between literacy and stratification. "It has long been known that the power of writing in the hands of a small number, caste, or class, is always contemporaneous with hierarchization," he agrees, although he questions whether hierarchization must always imply domination.²⁷ For Derrida a particular weakness of Lévi-Strauss's formulation lies in the claim that writing—"linear and phonetic notation"—can be considered separately from speaking. Writing and speech are both symbolic systems based on the perception of differences between symbols, sounds, and concepts that represent rather than reproduce the world. If writing and speech are understood as two aspects of a global "arche-writing," then "it should be possible to say that all societies capable of . . . bringing classificatory difference into play, practice writing in general. No reality or concept would therefore correspond to the expression 'society without writing.'"²⁸ The Nambikwara can "write" in this larger sense, as can their anthropologist, as can England's peasants, lords, and clerics alike, in knowing the world through systems of classificatory difference.

This analysis leads me to consider the speaking as well as the writing situation of the rebels. What does it matter if they are unlettered, so long as they can practice arche-writing? The link between speech and writing provided by the Derridean concept of arche-writing critiques the hierarchical social distinction between literacy and illiteracy, but it does not better the representational status of the rebels in their own time. Rather,

the spuriousness of the distinction between speaking and writing clarifies the degree to which literate culture silences the lower social strata in medieval texts generally. As I noted at the outset, the rebels of 1381 are beyond our apprehension insofar as they do not represent themselves for the written record. To that extent, they are beyond the apprehension of their contemporaries as well. The lower social strata become for those who write an alien, incoherent Other in contradistinction to whom writers can lay claim to reasoned articulation and discursive meaningfulness. I believe this familiar point calls for only brief discussion, after which I will move on to qualify the point by looking to some writing that seems outside its limits: the letters said to have been written by the rebels themselves and passages in works of Langland and Chaucer that may respond to the revolt. My conclusion will be that inarticulateness remains a defining characteristic of the lower orders even in writing that recognizes their sorry condition and the mechanisms of suppression that silence them.

That the chronicles of 1381 relegate the rebels to the status of beasts, monstrosities, or misguided fools is a well-known function of the writers' attempts to condemn the revolt and make good sense of its repression. Noting how oddly the chroniclers' narration of acts that illustrate planning and self-discipline among the rebels collides with assertions that those same rebels are mindless and bestial, Paul Strohm concludes that the "total strategy" of the chronicles is "to discredit the social standing, judgment, and objectives of the rebels at every level of representation."²⁹ In his penetrating analysis Strohm retrieves some indications of rebel ideology and demands from the chronicles' distortions. For my focus on the chronicles' overt strategies of silencing, it is particularly relevant that those who write about the rising tend to discount the rebel demands they report and to emphasize the raw vocalization of rebels. John Gower's experience of the revolt becomes a dream-vision in which the rebels' moral corruption is made evident in their transformations into wild animals. A "jackdaw well-trained in the art of speaking" addresses the crowd, "O miserable servile race, whom the world has subjected for a long time by its law, now behold, the day has come when the serfs will triumph and force the free men to leave their lands. May all honor cease, may justice perish, and may no virtue that existed heretofore persist any longer on earth." This morally twisted speech is an exception to the utter wordlessness characteristic of the mob: "They cried over and over in the great voices of monsters and in various ways made a variety of noises."³⁰ For Froissart and Knighton, too, the rebels' cries express most tellingly the error of their cause: on first seeing King Richard the crowd "gave such a huge cry that it truly seemed as if all the devils of hell were among them"; once inside London, "neither fearing God nor revering the honour of mother church, they pursued and executed all those against whom they raised their noisy cry."³¹ Walsingham also represents the rebels' desires through his conviction of their irrationality: they "hoped to subject all things to their own stupidity"; when

committing violence "words could not be heard among their horrible shrieks but rather their throats sounded with the bleating of sheep, or, to be more accurate, with the devilish voices of peacocks."³² Noise replaces speech. The chroniclers guarantee the lucidity of their own accounts in part by repudiating the rebels' senseless racket. The rebels of the chronicles have nothing meaningful to communicate; the meaning of the revolt lies beyond their agency, whether in God's decision to punish the world's sins or in faults within the administration of government.

Despite conceiving the rebels as an inarticulate mob, the chroniclers occasionally note a leader's eloquence and two even reproduce letters supposedly written by the rebels. These English letters invade the authoritative Latin of the narrative account with words as close as we can come to those of the rebels, yet the message of the letters is obscure. One way to understand (but not illuminate) their obscurity is to propose that they deliberately veil references to contemporary events. Dobson believes the letters may be coded: "these 'dark sayings' . . . have created more problems than they have solved. On this occasion we are confronted with evidence that is intentionally obscure"; Nick Ronan concludes that "these letters are anti-allegories, since their purpose is not to provide enlightenment, but disguise."³³ A contrary way to make sense of the letters is to align them with orthodox poetic topoi of their period. R. H. Robbins notes a particularly close similarity between Knighton's "prima epistola Johannis Balle" and conventional "abuses of the age" poetry:

*John Balle seynte Marye prist gretes wele alle maner men and byddes hem in the name of the Trinite, Fadur, and Sone and Holy Gost stonde manlyche togedyr in trewthe, and helpez trewthe, and trewthe schal helpe 3owe. Now regneth pride in pris, and covetys is hold wys, and lecherye withouten shame and glotonye withouten blame. Envye regnith with tresone, and slouth is take in grete sone. God do bote, for nowe is tyme amen.*³⁴

Now pride ys yn pris,
Now couetyse ys wyse,
Now lechery ys schameles,
Now gloteny ys lawles,
Now slewpe ys yn seson,
In envie & wrepe ys treson;
Now hap god enchesyn
to dystrie þys worle by reson.³⁵

Other rebel letters are similarly conventional in images and diction, as Richard Firth Green's essay in this volume amply demonstrates. If we are to read sedition in the letters, we must catch at a few words such as the closing "nowe is tyme" of Ball's first letter, echoed in other letters, the ex-

hortations to "stonde manlyche togedyr" and "be war," and the repeated emphasis on "trewthe" pointed out by Green. Even these sentiments would, however, be innocent in other contexts.³⁶

Context indeed provides the surest argument that the letters mean more than their words can convey, and the appeal to context originates with the chronicles themselves. Walsingham declares the letter he quotes to be "full of enigmas" but provides his own meaning by bracketing his citation of the letter with its discovery in the tunic of a hanged man and its role in the hanging of John Ball: however obscure, these are words deserving death.³⁷ Alternatively, Green proposes that the letters may be innocent of seditious intent but that in 1381 they came to be understood as veiled invitations to revolt. I believe it is possible that the letters meant more to the rebels as documents per se than as meaningful messages: whatever the writing said or failed to say, the letters would have provided those normally beyond the pale of literate culture with documents of their own to pass from hand to hand.

As to the content of the letters, my point is that whether the words are intentionally obscure or simply unstable in ways that permit contradictory interpretation, their meaning is lost to us. Are the chroniclers reimagining rebel letters they saw or heard at an earlier time, using the topoi of clerical poetry familiar to them? Or is written expression so fully the province of the privileged that the letters, even if genuine, say less about popular culture than about culture imposed on the populace from above? Whether, with Ronan, we attribute the letters' obscurity to a "shared masonic code of addresser and addressee" or, with John Scattergood, to an unfamiliarity with writing that gave the rebels "no more appropriate way of speaking in verse," the letters do not communicate to us successfully.³⁸ They illustrate again that the rebels are effectively voiceless within literate discourse. By including letters attributed to the rebels and yet asserting the rebels' inarticulateness, the chronicles further illustrate that to be accorded a voice within a dominant culture, it is not enough for a suppressed group to practice "arche-writing." Recognizing a voice is a political gesture. When the French revolutionary Sieyès elaborates his brief answer to what the third estate wants, "to become something" involves speaking, being heard, and achieving representation: the government should respond not to writers on human rights but to the many petitions of municipalities; the state should elect not defenders of the third estate's interests but members of the third estate itself.³⁹ From his position outside the third estate, Sieyès is engaged in the very advocacy he argues must be surpassed, but he moves beyond medieval chroniclers in his willingness to find meaning in the vocalizations of the commons.⁴⁰ In the fourteenth century the lower social strata are legally and ideologically inferior to such a degree that in the circles of power their own speech and writing cannot successfully represent them. They must be spoken for by other social groups rather than speaking for themselves.

Some writing treats the voicelessness of exploited groups not simply as a feature of their low status but as a constructed situation that might be questioned. Two passages from Langland and Chaucer can illustrate briefly how we might look to literary works for reactions to the rising of 1381.

The rebel letters invoke *Piers Plowman*, current in the B-text version before 1381, in urging that "Peres the Plowman my brother duelle at home and dy3t us come" and that followers "dop wele and ay bettur and bettur," referring to the visions of Dowel and Dobet; Hobbe the Robber, unless a proverbial name, may echo Langland's Robert the Robber. The *Dieulacres Abbey Chronicle* records names of the rebel leaders John B, Jack Straw, and Per Plowman, suggesting a wider currency for Piers's name than in the letters alone.⁴¹ Yet Langland's work does not advocate manumission or radical changes in existing social and political structures. Although Langland's sympathy for the oppressed is obvious, like many contemporaries he attributes oppression to wrongful distortions of fundamentally valid institutions. Moreover, Langland is not so much a political analyst as a religious thinker. His ideas and his audience are in many respects removed from the ferocious confrontations of 1381.⁴² In figuring Piers as their ally in rebellion, the authors (or author) of the letters were misappropriating a work they perhaps knew only slightly and imperfectly.

Some of Langland's revisions in the C-text of *Piers* seem to react against that misappropriation. In relation to the widespread destruction of documents in 1381, it is suggestive that Piers's angry tearing of the written pardon in the B-text is deleted from the C-text.⁴³ Langland's positions are sufficiently nuanced, however, that revisions apparently conservative and even hostile to the 1381 rebels bear close attention. The revision to the Prologue's account of the ideal state is a case in point:

Thanne come there a kyng, kny3thode hym ladde,
 Mi3t of the comunes made hym to regne.
 And thanne cam kynde wytte, and clerkes he made
 For to conselle the kyng and the comune saue.
 The kyng and kny3thode and clergie bothe
 Casten that the comune shulde hem-self fynde.
 The comune contreued of kynde witte craftes,
 And for profit of alle the poeple, plowmen ordeyngned,
 To tilie and trauaile as trewe lyf asketh.
 The kyng and the comune and kynde witte the thridde
 Shope lawe and lewte, eche man to knowe his owne.
 (B 112-22)⁴⁴

Thenne cam ther a kyng, knyghthede hym ladde,
 Myght of tho men made hym to regne.
 And thenne cam Kynde Wytt and clerkus he made
 And Conscience and Kynde Wit and knyghthed togedres

Caste þat þe comunes sholde here comunes fynde.
 Kynde Wytt and þe comune contreued alle craftes
 And for most profitable a plogh gonne þei make,
 With lele labour to lyue while lif on londe lasteth.
 (C 139-46)⁴⁵

The changes recorded in these lines invite us to consider the relevance of the 1381 rising that intervenes between them. E. Talbot Donaldson and others have associated the rising to the shift from the B-text's "miȝt of the comunes made hym to regne" to the C-text's "myght of tho men [i.e., the "knyghthede" of the preceding line] made hym to regne." According to Donaldson, Langland intended by "miȝt of the comunes" to indicate the whole commonwealth, which in constitutional theory is the source of the power to rule, but after the events of 1381 he subsumed the commonwealth into the might of the second estate so as to correct the misapprehension that by "comuness" he meant the third estate alone, the commons. Donaldson concludes that Langland's revision is still in line with current constitutional theory and avoids the potential misapprehension that the common people determine who rules: "The C-revision, though made at a certain sacrifice in breadth of conception, is unequivocal."⁴⁶

I am not convinced that the historical author's attempt to avoid misunderstanding can describe the range of revisions in this passage. Once the term "comuness" is removed and "knyghthede" substituted, it does not matter whether "comuness" referred to the whole commonwealth or just to the common people: in either case, commoners have been excluded from establishing the ideal state. Further revisions in the passage contribute to suppressing the agency of commoners. The B-text evokes the trifunctional model in which each estate's role contributes importantly to the general good: knights, clerics, and commoners have separate functions connected with rule, counsel, and production of food, respectively; each has an area of initiative in working "for profit of alle the poeple." The C-text effaces the trifunctional ideal by deleting roles for clerics in counseling the king and saving the commons, and by revising or deleting those passages where two estates cooperate (B 112-13, 116-17, 121-22). The shift from "for profit of alle the poeple" to "for most profitable" also shies away from the social ideal of estates that work separately to sustain one another. Further, the C-text's alterations attribute an inertness to the commons that contrasts with the B-text's images: a plow metonymically replaces plowmen, reducing the peasant's significance to that of an implement; a pun on "commons" and "food" similarly identifies the estate with its product only; and the closing ideal of "lele labour" replaces the B-text's closing emphasis on the active shaping of society by its members.

Although I am arguing that Langland's revisions suppress and enmarginate the common people more decisively than Donaldson, Bloomfield, and others would suggest, it does not necessarily follow that Langland's text

censures the rebels of 1381. The same revisions that, in ideological terms, restrict the commons also betray, in the very act of revision, that ideal systems are constructed rather than fixed truths. While the direction of the revisions validates suppression, the text's mobility simultaneously asserts the temporal contingency of the revised model under which the plowman is as silent and without agency as the plow.

Thus Langland's revisions can be read as a reconsideration of the conventional estates model in relation to the rising of 1381. The B-text passage is strikingly orthodox in its version of the separate functions of the interdependent estates. A contemporary account of Richard II's coronation presents the roles of the estates similarly. According to the *Anonimale Chronicle*, the lords of the realm lead Richard to Westminster Abbey for coronation. A host of clergy participate in the consecration; at a certain point the Archbishop of Canterbury "asked the commons [*communes*] if they wanted to assent and to take Prince Richard as their king." The question is clearly addressed to the common people attending the ceremony, not to representatives of the Parliamentary Commons or to all in attendance without respect to estate. The *Anonimale Chronicle* uses the term "poeple" to refer to undifferentiated groups of people—for example, the archbishop demands "before the people in a loud voice" if Richard will maintain the laws and customs of England—and uses "*communes*" to refer earlier to the lesser citizens in the streets of London, later to the rebels of 1381, and thus here to the common people at the coronation. The archaic and primarily theoretical model of the three estates is thus acted out ceremonially: the second estate presents Richard for coronation ("knyȝthode hym ladde"), the first estate anoints the king, and "miȝt of the comuness made hym to regne": in the *Anonimale Chronicle* ceremony "they answered with a great cry and noise: 'Yes, we want it.'"⁴⁷

The revised estates passage in Langland's C-text makes sense as an ideologically grounded repudiation of the rebels' actions and their citations of *Piers Plowman*, yet the passage also makes contrary sense as an acknowledgment of the gap between ideology and event that was made evident in both the rising of 1381 and its suppression. The passage cited above from the C-text, in constricting the role of the common people and reducing the interdependence of estates, tallies with the relations among estates as they appeared after the rising. From that perspective, the "yes" of the coronation ceremony, suggestively joined to the "great cry and noise" of the mob, does not appear to be a meaningful assent. Rather, it is a predetermined response that has been scripted for commoners: it would not be possible for them to answer "no." Spoken to and spoken for, the commons do not speak on their own terms.

Chaucer's works also express the limitations on the commons in terms of speaking and writing. Many instances are worthy of discussion, such as the comparison in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* between the noisy fox chase and the "shoutes half so shrille" of Jack Straw and his followers (VII.3395), the

Plowman's positioning as the only major figure from the *General Prologue* who is not assigned a tale to tell, the lower birds in the *Parliament of Fowls* crying "Kek kek! kokkow! quek quek!" so loudly "that thourgh myne eres the noyse wente tho" (lines 499-500), and the Miller interrupting the Host's ordered plan for the *Canterbury Tales* with drunken insistence that he may "mysspeke" (l.3139).⁴⁸ Each instance of the commons' racket, silence, or misspeaking remanipulates incoherence as a touchstone of low status. Critics have treated each in terms of Chaucer's depiction of social hierarchy and political tensions. For my focus on the rebels' relation to writing in 1381, the closing encounter of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* is the most intriguing passage in Chaucer's work. Here the physical destruction of Jankyn's book consummates a resistance to authority in which texts are persistently in evidence as constraints on behavior and identity.

In an important article on the historical situation of Chaucer's ideological allegiances, Lee Patterson argues that the *Miller's Tale* articulates a peasant consciousness that is opposed to "the tyrannical embrace of dominant ideology" in its parodic inversions of the *Knight's Tale*, its celebration of the natural world, and its narrator's wit and eloquence, which prove "that the peasant is not the inarticulate and brutal figure that hostile representations had depicted."⁴⁹ But, according to Patterson, "this embrace of peasant self-confidence is immediately registered as threatening, and the subsequent development of the *Tales* serves to contain this threat—a containment that is accomplished first by the *Wife of Bath*." For although she (as a clothmaker) and the Miller are both representatives of "the aggressive rural economy that was threatening seigneurial/mercantile dominance," the *Wife* claims a "socially undetermined subjectivity that stands apart from *all* forms of class consciousness," in contrast to the Miller whose "challenge is class-determined." For Patterson, the *Wife of Bath* sustains dominant ideology against "political or social change" by conceiving herself as a private subjectivity outside of social construction, internalizing class-based oppositions to the private realm of marriage and socially undetermined selfhood.⁵⁰

Patterson's argument is far more subtle than this summary can indicate, but with regard only to the *Wife's* ideological positioning I would argue that she is so visibly and powerfully constructed by estates ideology and clerical antifeminism that we cannot understand her as a private subjectivity, nor does she so understand herself. Patterson justly notes that, subsequent to her identification as a clothmaker in her *General Prologue* portrait, Alison of Bath expresses no consciousness of class identity or resistance to feudal institutions. Clothmaking is not, in fact, how she lives; rather, she wins money by marrying repeatedly and cajoling, browbeating, or outliving her husbands. But the suppression of her trade in favor of her identity as a wife does not at all entail that she perceive herself to have no place in social structures and no interests or antagonisms that are in-

stitutionally determined. She consistently speaks through and against clerical antifeminist literature, which assigns women social identity according to their relations with men and determines those relations to be always deleterious. As wives, despite their apparent differences in age and temperament, women will always make their husbands suffer:

. . . right as wormes shende a tree
Right so a wyf destroyeth hire housbonde;
This knowe they that been to wywes bonde.
(III.376-78)

Constructed herself from these literary antecedents, the *Wife* turns on them to attempt an argument against the position of inferiority they posit for women.

In so doing she identifies herself as the voice of a maligned group, a group outside literate culture and thus disadvantaged at countering literate culture's authority. To assert with Patterson that the *Wife*, in arguing for the worth of female sovereignty, does not want "political or social change" is to exile gender and gender relations to the realm of the depoliticized "self" as if they had no political or social implications. The *Wife of Bath's Prologue* resists this move by persistently referring Alison's identity, gestures, and voice to those of wives generally as they are represented in writings of the first estate. Alison presents herself as a "wys wif" among many whose confidantes resemble her: a gossip with her own name of Alison, "another worthy wyf" (III.536), her niece, and her mother. Her adversaries she also identifies as a social group—clerics, specifically in their capacity as writers. Their authoritative texts, she argues, are subjectively shaped by their peculiar way of life, and could be answered by women's texts if women could write (III.688-710). Although Chaucer's performance is highly literary, even a literary insiders' joke in that it invites the wife created by antifeminist writing to argue for her worthiness in the teeth of her constructed unworthiness, still the analogies between the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and the rising of 1381 are so striking as to deserve commentary. Alison shares with the rebels inferior status, exclusion from literate circles, a sense of undervaluation by the powerful, and a consequent hostility to writing as the instrument of these interrelated oppressions.

An account of the 1381 rising in MS Arundel 350 describes a scene particularly reminiscent of Alison's and Jankyn's final confrontation. In Cambridge, as in St. Albans and Bury St. Edmunds, the rebels' dispute with the powerful was inextricably bound up with anticlerical sentiment. The Cambridge scholars' extensive privileges and immunities were attacked in seizures of documents and books alike and in one large bonfire in the market square where "a certain old woman named Margaret Starre scattered the heap of ashes to the wind, crying 'Away with the knowledge of clerks, away with it.'"⁵¹ This account encapsulates several aspects of Alison's nar-

rative: a woman of low status is the site for conflating resistance to clerical authority with a wider hostility to clerical learning; the woman's words equate a concrete instance of book burning with the extinction of learned perspectives in general. Indeed, Alison even presents burning her clerical husband's book as part of their reconciliation, a mutual step toward a new order rather than an act of destruction:

And whan I saugh he wolde nevere fyne
 To reden on this cursed book al nyght,
 Al sodeynly thre leves have I plyght
 Out of his book, right as he radde. . . .

 But atte laste, with muchel care and wo,
 We fille acorded by us selven two.
 He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond,
 To han the governance of hous and lond,
 And of his tonge, and of his hond also;
 And made hym brenne his book anon right tho.
 (III.788-91, 811-16)

The two women's claims are radical, yet also suspect, in celebrating destruction and in suggesting that fundamental changes can arise from limited acts of destruction. The *Wife of Bath* and Margaret Starre are characteristically feminine by clerical antifeminist standards in their hostility to learning as well as to writing and in their irrational conviction that clerical learning can simply be done away with. In the wider narrative plan of the chronicles, such claims exemplify the outrageous unreason of the rebels and justify the punishments later meted out to them. In *Arundel 350*, Margaret Starre's act is the ultimate example of misbehavior before the concluding observation that "the aforesaid malefactors suffered a fitting punishment for their execrable wickedness."⁵² Chaucer's narrative is more complex. Alison's closing hyperboles communicate both the appeal of her vision and its status as romantic fantasy:

After that day we hadden never debaat.
 God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde
 As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde,
 And also trewe, and so was he to me.
 (III.822-25)

The otherworldly perfection of this vision contributes to its beauty while expressing its impossibility. It is not to be taken seriously as reportage, but as an expression of desire that takes no real shape. If the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* can be said to evoke the rising of 1381, the text's admixture of violence, illogic, and longing constitutes the most substantial response to the rising in Chaucer's works.

A final feature of Margaret Starre's and Alison of Bath's losing battle is that neither moves beyond condemnation to an articulated alternative. Alison's resort to the language of romance in the closing lines of her *Prologue* is one of many inadequate efforts to describe or defend a worthy female sovereignty. Her destruction of Jankyn's book expresses her opposition to clerical writing about women, but also expresses her inability to communicate to Jankyn, as to her pilgrim audience, a coherent argument in defense of women's authority over men. She is a notoriously self-contradictory and unreliable speaker, misusing her sources, lying to her husbands, and shifting her versions of what she wants throughout her prologue.⁵³ Her attempts at self-justification illustrate the clerical claim that women are by nature unreasonable yet verbose: as Chaucer's own Clerk puts it, "Ay clappeth as a mille, I yow consaille. . . . The arwes of thy crabbed eloquence / Shal perce his brest" (IV.1200, 1203-4). The topos of woman's incoherence, which R. Howard Bloch has recently termed "woman as riot," again resonates with literary representations of the rebels as self-contradictory, irrational, and noisy—which is to say effectively voiceless.⁵⁴

Yet Alison does not simply reiterate antifeminist topoi in her own contradictions as in her chosen citations. Incoherence itself bears a message in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. Here again I differ from Patterson's analysis of the *Miller's Tale* in relation to the rising of 1381 and the *Wife of Bath*. It is true that there is nothing "crabbed" about the Miller's eloquence: his is a virtuoso performance. But it is a performance within a recognized genre familiar in court literature, the fabliau of bumbling peasants and small-town manipulators who amuse the more sophisticated audience with their simple wit. The Miller respeaks a form already established in literary culture, albeit so brilliantly that some endorsement of lower-class capability may well be implicit in his narration. The *Wife of Bath* attempts to speak against an established discourse, and in so doing moves beyond cultural paradigms toward positions unprecedented in medieval literature. In staging the impossibility of speaking beyond literate paradigms, Chaucer makes the voicelessness of suppressed groups a subject rather than an unconsidered condition of his writing. He returns us to Sieyès's revolutionary formulation of what the third estate has been, "nothing," and what it wants, "to become something." Insubstantial as that expression of desire may be—desire for a "something" as yet unexperienced and unarticulated—its inscription in writing is a first recognition that those outside literate culture may indeed have something to say.

Notes

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1. Emmanuel Sieyes, *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers état!* ed. Roberto Zapperi (Geneva, 1970), p. 119.
2. Derek Pearsall, "Interpretative Models for the Peasants' Revolt," in *Hermeneutics and Medieval Culture*, ed. Patrick J. Gallacher and Helen Damico (Albany, N.Y., 1989), p. 67. Examples of historical essays that attend particularly to the problems of bias and influence are Andrew Prescott, "London in the Peasants' Revolt: A Portrait Gallery," *London Journal* 7 (1981), 125-43; and V. H. Galbraith, "Thoughts about the Peasants' Revolt," in *The Reign of Richard II: Essays in Honour of May McKisack*, ed. F. R. H. Du Boulay and Caroline Barron (London, 1971), pp. 46-57.
3. R. B. Dobson, "The Risings in York, Beverley and Scarborough, 1380-81," in *The English Rising of 1381*, ed. R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston (Cambridge, Eng., 1984), p. 141.
4. A. F. Butcher, "English Urban Society and the Revolt of 1381," in *The English Rising*, ed. Hilton and Aston, pp. 85, 110.
5. Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (London, 1973), p. 184.
6. Accounts of the disturbances in Bury St. Edmunds and St. Albans suggest that some rebels in those towns were literate; these are for Hilton exceptions to the generally lower social level of the rebels in other areas (*Bond Men*, p. 198). According to Thomas Walsingham, the rebelling tenants of Bury St. Edmunds asked the townspeople to verify the contents of documents the monks had surrendered (*Walsingham, Historia Anglicana*, ed. H. T. Riley, Rolls Series No. 28, pt. 1, 2 vols. [London, 1863, 1864], 2:4).
7. Jo Ann Hoepfner Moran, *The Growth of English Schooling, 1340-1548: Learning, Literacy, and Laicization in Pre-Reformation York Diocese* (Princeton, N.J., 1985), pp. 178, 181; David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge, Eng., 1980), p. 176. Cressy's percentages are for inability to sign; he comments that "writing skills were the preserve of a very small minority, although probably a somewhat greater proportion could read" (p. 176).
8. Moran notes that "sons of the poor had traditionally been denied access to a clerical education. Despite this, there are notices scattered throughout fourteenth-century memorial rolls of serfs paying fines for licenses to enable their sons to attend school and occasional examples of serfs refusing to pay at all" (*English Schooling*, p. 175). But these sons are receiving schooling by shifting from common to clerical status, whereas the rebels of 1381 were by and large commoners rather than clerics. In towns, some schooling seems to have been compatible with maintaining artisan status in the fourteenth century (p. 177).
9. M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), pp. 34-35; this enfranchisement is for Clanchy not dependent on the ability to read or write: "Neither the medieval seal nor the modern sign manual on a document indicates that the signatory has anything more than a minimal competence in the skills of literacy" (p. 184).
10. Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, N.J., 1983), p. 529.
11. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, Md., 1980), p. 9.
12. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, pp. 32-38; see also Christopher Dyer, "The Social and Economic Background to the Rural Revolt of 1381," in *The English Rising*, ed. Hilton and Aston, pp. 9-42.
13. *Statutes of the Realm*, vol. 2 (1816; reprint, London, 1963), pp. 2-3; Rosamond Faith, "The 'Great Rumour' of 1377 and Peasant Ideology," in *The English Rising*, ed. Hilton and Aston, pp. 43-73; J. H. Tillotson, "Peasant Unrest in the England of Richard II: Some Evidence from Royal Records," *Historical Studies* 16 (1974), 1-16. Of the twenty exemplifications requested in 1377, Tillotson finds one to have been successful (pp. 2-3).
14. E. g. John Wyclif, *The English Works of Wyclif*, ed. F. D. Matthew, EETS, OS 74 (London, 1880), pp. 233-34: "also lordis many tymes don wrongis to pore men . . . & taken pore mennus goodis & paien not perfore but white stickis, & dispisen hem & manasen hem & sumtyme beten hem whanne pei axen here peye." See also William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, rev. ed. (London, 1988), Passus IV, lines 57-58. Janet Coleman notes the importance of literacy to control in the fourteenth century: the middle strata grow in influence "by money and by the professions that required their practitioners to possess the skills of literacy that, in effect, made them England's legislators: in Parliament, in the market place, in the law courts" (*Medieval Readers and Writers, 1350-1400* [New York, 1981], p. 14).
15. G. M. Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe* (London, 1909), p. 218.
16. Dyer, "Social and Economic Background," p. 12.
17. Walsingham, *Historia* 2:9; trans. R. B. Dobson, ed., *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 2nd ed. (London, 1983), p. 364. For this essay I have used extensively Dobson's admirable collection of materials on the rising.
18. *Anonimale*, pp. 143-44; trans. Dobson, ed., *Peasants' Revolt*, pp. 159-60. For Hilton's analysis, see *Bond Men*, pp. 223-24.
19. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Russell (London, 1961), pp. 289-90.
20. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, p. 292; the passage continues, "The use of writing for disinterested ends, and with a view to satisfactions of the mind in the fields either of science or the arts, is a secondary result of its invention—and may even be no more than a way of reinforcing, justifying, or dissimulating its primary function."
21. Charles Petit-Dutaillis, in André Réville, *Le soulèvement des travailleurs d'Angleterre en 1381* (Paris, 1898), p. lxxii.
22. *Anonimale*, p. 146; Walsingham, *Historia* 2:3-4, 1:474-77. Barbara Harvey describes a document apparently drafted as part of a petition for manumission: "Draft Letters Patent of Manumission and Pardon for the Men of Somerset in 1381," *EngHR* 80 (1965), 89-91.
23. Jean Froissart, *Chroniques*, vol. 10, ed. Gaston Raynaud (Paris, 1897), p. 113.
24. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, pp. 289-90.
25. Froissart, *Chroniques*, 10:131; Knighton, *Chronicon* 2:133-34; on the repudiation of extorted documents and recreation of destroyed ones, see *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, 6 vols. [n.c., n.d. [London, 1767-77]], 3:99-100, 114, 116; *Statutes of the Realm*, 2:21, 27; and J. A. Tuck, "Nobles, Commons and the Great Revolt of 1381," in *The English Rising*, ed. Hilton and Aston, pp. 200-202.
26. Walsingham, *Historia* 2:18. I believe *speculum* has in this passage its metaphoric sense of an instructive text, since the terrible punishments are to distinguish the rebels from the onlooking *rustici*, who thus see in the rebels' suffering not their own reflection but a cautionary lesson on the dangers of revolt.
27. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Md., 1976), pp. 130-31.
28. Derrida, *Grammatology*, p. 109. I have drawn on only one aspect of Derrida's critique, which reads *Tristes Tropiques* against Lévi-Strauss's dissertation and other works and treats the relation of writing to morality ("The Violence of the Letter: From Lévi-Strauss to Rousseau," pp. 101-40). Anthropologists have also argued for the "inextricability of speaking and writing in even those modes of discourse that seem most exclusively a matter of writing and reading" (Wallace Chafe and Deborah Tannen, "The Relation between Written and Spoken Language," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 16 [1987], 383-407 [quotation at p. 398]).
29. Paul Strohm, "'A Revelle!': The Chronicles and Rebel Ideology in 1381," in *Huchon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton, N.J., forthcoming, 1992). Galbraith argues for the *Anonimale Chronicle's* lesser prejudice

against the rebels, though he notes the author shares with other chroniclers "the normal upper-class prejudices of his time" ("Thoughts about the Peasants' Revolt," p. 52).

30. John Gower, *Vox Clamantis*, in *The Latin Works* [vol. 4 of *The Complete Works of John Gower*], ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford, 1902), pp. 41, 44.

31. Froissart, *Chroniques* 10:106; cf. 10:109 ("chils mescheans peuples huoit si hault que il sambloit que tout li diable d'infer fuissent entre iaulx"); Knighton, *Chronicon*, 2:136; trans. Dobson, ed., *Peasants' Revolt*, p. 185.

32. Walsingham, *Historia* 1:454, 460; trans. Dobson, ed., *Peasants' Revolt*, pp. 132, 173.

33. Dobson, ed., *Peasants' Revolt*, p. 379; Nick Ronan, "1381: Writing in Revolt: Signs of Confederacy in the Chronicle Accounts of the English Rising," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 25 (1989), 307.

34. Knighton, *Chronicon* 2:140; see also the transcriptions of the letters in R. F. Green's appendix to chapter 9, "John Ball's Letters: Literary History and Historical Literature," in this volume.

35. *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. Rossell Hope Robbins (New York, 1959), p. xlii.

36. Caroline Barron has pointed out to me that "be war" and "nowe is tyme" are among the phrases cast on church bells in this period; an introduction to bell inscriptions is H. B. Walters, *Church Bells of England* (London, 1912), pp. 315-27.

37. Walsingham, *Historia* 2:33-34.

38. Ronan, "1381," p. 306; John Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1971), p. 355. Ronan concludes, despite their "uninterpretable word-play" (p. 313), that the letters are subversive because their indeterminate meaning is "in dialogic opposition" to the discursive meaning of official writing such as that of the chronicles (p. 311). I am not convinced that the allegorical technique of the letters attributed to the rebels differs significantly from that of conventional fourteenth-century allegory that is not seditious in content.

39. Sicyes, *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers état?*, pp. 134, 156.

40. On the limitations of the abbé Sicyes's sympathy for the third estate, see William H. Sewall, Jr., "Le Citoyen/la Citoyenne: Activity, Passivity, and the Revolutionary Concept of Citizenship," in *The Political Culture of the French Revolution* [vol. 2 of *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*], ed. Colin Lucas (New York, 1987), pp. 105-23.

41. Knighton, *Chronicon* 2:139; Walsingham, *Historia* 2:34; on these and further examples see Anne Hudson, "The Legacy of *Piers Plowman*," in *A Companion to "Piers Plowman"*, ed. John A. Alford (Berkeley, Calif., and Los Angeles, 1988), pp. 251-66.

42. For examples from the broad critical consensus summarized here, see Morton W. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (New Brunswick, N.J., n.d. [1962]); John Burrow, "The Audience of *Piers Plowman*," *Anglia* 75 (1957), 373-84; and A. C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry* (London, 1964), pp. 107-34.

43. *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, Passus VII, l. 119.

44. *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman*, ed. Walter W. Skeat, 2 vols. (1886; corr. ed. London, 1924), Prologue, B-text. I quote from Skeat's edition rather than Kane and Donaldson's because the latter revise line 117 to read "Casten pat þe commune sholde [hire communes] fynde." The editors explain that the emendation produces a "normatively alliterative line" and reintroduces the C-text's pun, perhaps omitted by copyists (pp. 92, 135-40); I argue that the unemended line as it stands in almost all B manuscripts is consistent in content with the rest of B's version of the political order, and that the C-text's pun is consistent with its other revisions of the B-text.

45. *Piers Plowman by William Langland: An Edition of the C-text*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Berkeley, Calif., and Los Angeles, 1978), Prologue; on the date of the C-text see pp. 9-10.

46. E. Talbot Donaldson, *Piers Plowman: The C-Text and Its Poet*, Yale Studies in En-

glish 113 (New Haven, Conn., 1949), p. 108. Anna Baldwin provides further background in political philosophy for the C revisions, which she relates to Langland's preference for absolutism (*The Theme of Government in Piers Plowman* [Cambridge, Eng., 1981], pp. 12-23).

47. *Anonimale*, quotations at pp. 109-10; for contrasting uses of the terms "poepel" and "communes," see also pp. 107, 114, 136-38.

48. All quotations of Chaucer's works are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson et al. (Boston, 1987). On the Plowman as the pilgrim without a tale, Paul Strohm comments that "the complicated excursions that render Chaucer's mixed commonwealth possible are epitomized in the silence of the Plowman, the single peasant participating in the pilgrimage" (*Social Chaucer* [Cambridge, Mass., 1989], p. 173).

49. Lee Patterson, "'No Man His Reson Herde': Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer's Miller, and the Structure of the *Canterbury Tales*," in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley, Calif., and Los Angeles, 1990), pp. 113-55 (quotations at pp. 137, 148-49). Patterson notes that millers are in some respects outside the peasantry; the 1381 rising, which encompassed other social groups along with peasants, included millers both as participants and as allegorical figures in Walsingham's and Knighton's rebel letters (pp. 125-29).

50. Patterson, "Peasant Consciousness," pp. 123-24, 150 (italics his).

51. London, British Library, MS Arundel 350, fols. 15v-17v (an account of the rising in Cambridge): "Et vetula quedam nomine Margareta Starre cineres collectos in ventum sparsit clamando abcedat clericorum pericia abcedat" (fol. 17v). The bonfire in the Cambridge market is also recounted in the *Rotuli Parliamentorum* 3:108.

52. Arundel 350, fol. 17v: "sed malefactores predicti penam suis nephandis sceleribus dignam subierunt. . . ."

53. I argue this point more fully in "Alison's Incapacity and Poetic Instability in the Wife of Bath's Tale," *PMLA* 102 (1987), 20-28.

54. Bloch, "Medieval Misogyny," *Representations*, no. 20 (Fall 1987), 1-24.