THE CURSE OF THE PLOWMAN

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Despite Chaucer's reputation as an acute social observer, he did not have much to say about the vast majority of English people in his time—that is, the peasants who lived and worked in England's villages, hamlets, and isolated farms. Among the pilgrims in the *Canterbury Tales* is only one bona fide peasant — the Plowman, who merits one of Chaucer's briefest and most idealized portraits and whose tale Chaucer never wrote.[1] In the tales of other pilgrims, we get *glimpses* of peasants — the old widow harassed by the summoner in the *Friar's Tale*, another poor widow whose farmyard is the home of Chanticleer in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, and, of course, Griselda, who began life in the most humble of circumstances in the *Clerk's Tale*. But these are glimpses only, background figures or settings that allow a main tale — one unassociated with peasants or their lives — to unfold. All told, I think it is fair to say that the *Canterbury Tales* (and Chaucer's other works, too) offer us rich and subtle commentaries on elite courtly culture; on the gritty mores that governed life in the streets, lanes, and workshops of England's towns and cities; and on various religious livings and professionals … and remarkably little about the roughly 90 per cent of English people who, in

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This essay reproduces virtually unchanged a talk in a plenary session on the peasantry at the New Chaucer Society meeting in New York City in July 2006. I thank Maryanne Kowaleski for her comments on an early draft.

[1] As Daniel F. Pigg has noted, 'the Plowman stands out to readers perhaps most markedly by his silence; he does not tell a tale, has no verbal interaction with other pilgrims, and has no reference made to his presence by other pilgrims' ('With Hym Ther Was a Plowman, Was His Brother', in *Chaucer's Pilgrims: An Historical Guide to the Pilgrims in 'The Canterbury Tales'*, ed. by Laura C. Lambdin and Robert T. Lambdin (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), p. 263).

Chaucer's time, lived and worked on the land.[2] Thus, taking the *Canterbury Tales* as a sort of portrait of English life in the late fourteenth century would be roughly equivalent to taking Manhattan as a portrait of the United States today. In both cases, the portrait is rich and full, but very, very partial.

Although Chaucer's depictions of peasants are few and brief, they are remarkably sympathetic. Paul Freedman has shown us in his book on *Images of the Medieval Peasant* how ambivalently medieval elites viewed peasants, seeing them *both* as justly subjugated people who were beneath contempt *and* as simple, good folk whose hard labour brought them closer to God.[3] Chaucer fell on the 'good folk' end of this spectrum, and his perfect plowman — who worked hard, loved God, helped his neighbours, paid all his tithes fully, and dressed and rode as appropriate to his humble station — was an ideal representative of 'those who work', a good third player to Chaucer's seemingly perfect (or perhaps all-too-perfect) parson and knight.[4] But the figure of the plowman resonates in medieval literature far beyond Chaucer's prologue, and, indeed, plowmen so proliferate in late-medieval poetry that there is even a sort of plowman's genre — *Piers Plowman*, of course, but also the *Complaint of the Plowman*, *Pierce the Ploughman's Crede*, and the plowmen celebrated in such poetry as *God Spede the Plough*, the *Song of the Husbandman*, and *I-blessyd Be Christes Sonde*.[5]

As Stephen Barney has particularly shown, plowmen proliferated in late-medieval poetry because their character could perform allegorical and metaphorical work that extended far beyond the labour of actual plowmen.[6] One reason William Langland chose a plowman to be the centre of his poem was a longstanding Christian tradition (that drew much of its authority from Gregory the Great) that a preacher's tongue is a sort of plowshare that cultivates the souls of listeners. Given the phenomenal popularity of Langland's poem and the ability of the plowman character to serve other authors as both a representative of simple virtue and a critic of corrupt privilege, a Middle English literary tradition was born — so much so that Elizabeth Kirk has described Langland's plowman as a lit match that fell onto a sort of literary powder keg.[7] I will focus here neither on the literary history of these many scripted plowmen nor on their meanings for late-medieval readers and listeners, but instead on the effect of all these plowmen on how modern literary scholars and historians have approached the late-medieval peasantry. For the curse of the plowman is that, because of his dominance in late-medieval literary portrayals of the peasantry, he has come to stand, in our modern imaginations, as the archetypical peasant, and we therefore have often understood peasants less fully than we might.

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[2] Firm population figures are, of course, impossible. For the best recent estimate of the rural-urban distribution of English population, see Bruce M. S. Campbell, 'England: Land and People', in *A Companion to Britain in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. by S. H. Rigby (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 3–25, especially p. 19.

[3] Paul Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[4] Criticism of the peasantry might lurk beneath Chaucer's idealized portrait of the Plowman. Gardiner Stillwell has argued that Chaucer's 'affection for the ideal peasant suggests an antagonism toward the actual peasant' ('Chaucer's Plowman and the Contemporary English Peasant', *English Literary History*, 6 (1939), 285). Jill Mann has similarly suggested that Chaucer's idealized and conventional portrait was critical of actual peasants; see her *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the 'General Prologue' to the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), especially pp. 67–74.

[5] Most of the relevant texts are available in *Medieval English Political Writings*, ed. by James M. Dean (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 1996), pp. 243–65.

[6] Stephen A. Barney, 'The Plowshare of the Tongue: The Progress of a Symbol from the Bible to *Piers Plowman*', *Mediaeval Studies*, 35 (1973), 261–93.

Peasant is not a Middle English word. Borrowed from the French, it first occurred in English in two fifteenth-century texts derived from French traditions, and it did not come into common English use until a full century later. In Chaucer's time, people spoke most often of peasants in terms that emphasized the unfree status of some of them and the low status of them all — calling them *villeins*, *bondmen* and *bondwomen*, *naifs*, and (in Latin) *rustici, agricolae, cultores*. *Husbandman*, derived from *bondman* but freed of the term's unfree associations, was also coming into use.

Even in modern times, *peasant* has been a troubled word for medievalists. In the late 1970s, historians were briefly transfixed by a controversy over whether there were any peasants at all in late-medieval England. We did not worry about the absence of the term in Middle English, but we did worry about whether medieval rural dwellers adequately fit modern definitions of *peasantry* — that is, whether they lived off the land, relied largely on family labour, and were dependent on 'superior' classes who had more wealth, more social clout, and more cultural power.[8] This controversy was eventually resolved in favour of the peasant status of medieval English rural dwellers, but its categorizations are useful to keep in mind even today, because by modern understandings of *peasant*, some Chaucerian characters often read as 'peasants' were more rural dwellers than peasants. Chaucer's Miller is one example; yes, he lived in the countryside, but he made his living from trade, not the land. Chaucer's Reeve is another; trained in one trade (carpentry), he worked primarily in another (administration). 'Peasants' — true-blue peasants — lived in the countryside; they worked the land; they relied heavily on family and household labour; and they owed rents to various sorts of privileged landowners, whether lay or clerical.[9]

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[7] Elizabeth D. Kirk, 'Langland's Plowman and the Recreation of Fourteenth-Century Religious Metaphor', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 2 (1988), 1–21; see especially p. 11. Almost two hundred years after Langland, Hugh Latimer still found the plowman-preacher analogy to be useful in his 1548 'Sermon of the Plough'.

[8] The controversy was ignited by Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property and Social Transition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), and its temporary effects can

These general characteristics aside, peasants were not all the same. Some were free and others were serfs, tied to the land, subject to labour rents and special fees, and unable to pursue grievances in common law courts. Some peasants were long-timers, living in places where their parents and grandparents had lived before them, and others were more mobile, moving about the countryside in search of marriage, work, or land. Some peasants made their living predominantly by cultivating crops, and others relied more on animal husbandry or fishing than on arable farming. And some peasants were better off than others, with smallholders (those holding ten acres or less) usually more plentiful than those with sufficient land (often thirty acres or more) to run a plow on their own.[10]

Among these many sorts of peasants, plowmen were not as prominent as their place in medieval literature suggests.[11] The character of the plowman was an important resource for many late-medieval authors, but plowmen were less important on the ground. To begin with, most land in medieval England was not

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be traced in the decisions of some authors to avoid the term *peasant* and use instead such terms as *agriculturalists*. See, for example, L. R. Poos, *A Rural Society after the Black Death: Essex, 1350–1525* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[9] Some medieval millers and reeves certainly qualified as peasants, because they also held tenancies and worked the land. My point here is that Chaucer's miller and reeve are not depicted as relying on agricultural labour. Lee Patterson, while acknowledging that millers 'cannot technically be considered peasants', nevertheless has cast Chaucer's miller as a peasant voice oppositional to the status quo ('The *Miller's Tale* and the Politics of Laughter', Chapter 5 of *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 254).

[10] For a recent introduction to the late-medieval peasantry, see Phillipp Schofield, *Peasant and Community in Medieval England, 1200–1500* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). See also Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England, c. 1200–1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 109–87.

[11] Of course, in some genres of Middle English literature — romances and hagiography are two examples — plowmen are not very prominent.

under the plow; even during the height of the 'medieval ploughing-up campaign', around 1300, grassland predominated; there was always more pasture than arable in the English countryside.[12] Moreover, anyone who plowed worked at much more than plowing per se, so much so that the term *plowman* rarely surfaces as an *occupational identity* in the documentary record; there are, for example, precious few 'plowmen' recorded as an occupational category in the poll taxes of 1379 and 1381, and 'plowman' appears just as infrequently as an occupational surname among medieval villagers. Plowing was perhaps not very productive of identity because it was such common, everyday work, done throughout the year: peasants plowed some acreage for sowing wheat and rye in the autumn; they plowed other acres for sowing barley, oats, and legumes in the spring; and they plowed land left fallow, sometimes repeatedly, in the summer. Plowing was so commonplace that plowmen per se were less common. As Christopher Dyer has shown, there were two sorts of men (a term I will qualify in a moment) who did most of the plowing in the medieval countryside — on the one hand, manorial servants who were employed year-round to work the demesne and on the other hand, tenants who either were well-off enough to plow their own acres or plowed in cooperation with a group of tenants.[13] These servants and tenants had the skill and strength to manoeuvre the plow and control the draught animals, but plowing was just one of the many farming tasks they undertook. Chaucer speaks of his plowman carrying dung, digging ditches, and threshing grain; the documentary record tells us that plowmen also sowed grain at the beginning of a growing season and harvested it at its end. Fertilizing, digging, plowing, sowing, harvesting, threshing — the 'plowman' of medieval England was really a generic toiler-in-the-fields. The servant-plowman derived his identity primarily as a *famulus*, a manorial servant who did whatever work on the demesne was required. The proprietor-plowman was primarily a husbandman.

Not only was the plowman an uncertain occupational identity in the countryside, he was also less common by Chaucer's time than he had been before. Because of the importance of sheep-raising for the expanding wool and cloth trades of the late fourteenth century, arable was then giving way even more to pasture, plowmen giving way to shepherds. And because of the changed labour market after the Great Plague of 1348–49, fewer and fewer men were willing to take on year-long contracts as servant-plowmen. In breach-of-contract cases brought under the Statutes of Labourers in the late fourteenth century, plowman were remarkably prominent, accused of leaving their work to find better employment as mowers, threshers, carpenters, weavers, fullers, butchers, fishermen, thatchers, mariners, and shipwrights. These cases are so numerous that they give 'the impression that almost anything was preferable' to year-long employment as a servant-plowman.[14] All told, I think it is fair to say that the literary record with its many plowmen overstates what we find in the documentary record, both in terms of the place of plowing in the medieval rural economy and in terms of plowing as an occupational identity in the medieval countryside.

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[12] Campbell, 'Land and People', p. 10.

[13] Christopher Dyer, 'Piers Plowman and Plowmen: A Historical Perspective', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 8 (1995), 162. This article describes definitively what is known about historical plowmen, and I rely on it in my comments here.

Nevertheless, both literary scholars and historians have been beguiled by these fictional plowmen, beguiled in different ways but with similar effect. From my outsider perspective, it seems that the 'plowman genre' thoroughly dominates literary approaches to the medieval peasantry. For most critics, the texts relevant to the lives of the medieval peasantry consist of canonical texts, usually *Piers Plowman*, Chaucer's Plowman, and perhaps some other minor plowman poems.[15] Yet for all their literary merit, these texts were produced by non-peasants and their production was driven, in large part, by a set of creative imperatives far removed from peasant life. Scholars such as Susan Crane, Richard Firth Green, Steven Justice, and Paul Strohm have recently expanded beyond this plowman genre to approach peasants by way of the written artefacts of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.[16] Yet these artefacts — even those snippets that survive in Middle

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[14] Simon A. C. Penn and Christopher Dyer, 'Wages and Earnings in Late Medieval England: Evidence from the Enforcement of the Labour Laws', *Economic History Review*, ser. 2, 43 (1990), 362.

[15] See, for example, David Aers, '*Vox Populi* and the Literature of 1381', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. by David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 432–53; Aers focuses on texts by Chaucer, Langland, and Gower. The assumption seems to be, as Robin Lister has put it, that because 'peasants did not after all produce literature [...] we are therefore deprived of any direct idea of the medieval English peasants' self-image' ('The Peasants of Piers Plowman and Its Audience', in *Peasants and Countrymen in Literature*, ed. by Kathleen Parkinson and Martin Priestman (London: English Department of Roehampton Institute of Higher Education, 1982), p. 72).

[16] Susan Crane, 'The Writing Lesson of 1381', and Richard Firth Green, 'John Ball's Letters: Literary History and Historical Literature', in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. by Barbara A. Hanawalt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 201–21 and 176–200, respectively; Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Paul Strohm, '"A Revelle!": Chronicle Evidence and the

English — are also at considerable remove from actual peasants, for they survive embedded in hostile Latin chronicles or recorded in hostile Latin legal proceedings. Idealized plowmen in Middle English poetry on the one hand, hostile Latin reports on the other; are there no other sources through which literary scholars can more directly approach the medieval peasantry? I am confident that there are more answers to this question than I can provide here, but let me suggest a few.

David Benson has recently begun to explore one likely source — that is, the paintings that covered the walls of most parish churches in the Middle Ages.[17] Although executed by itinerant artisans, these paintings were commissioned, paid for, and viewed by the parishioners themselves; they survive, in other words, as fairly authentic pieces of peasant culture. Benson has analysed surviving wall paintings to explore the public context that shaped how late-medieval people understood *Piers Plowman*; but these wall paintings are also cultural artefacts in their own right that can tell us much else, if properly read, about medieval villagers and their world. If we follow Benson's lead away from canonical texts and toward cultural artefacts that were produced more directly by peasants themselves, we can find still more sources — and *textual* ones, at that — that belie the common plaint that ordinary medieval people survive in the written record 'only as they affect the perceptions, needs, and goals of those who sought to govern them, to rule their bodies and souls'.[18] Proverbs are one productive source of peasant voices; so, too, are wills; and perhaps most important are the lyrical songs, carols, and ballads that survive in the hundreds for late-medieval England.[19] We know that some of these songs were written by clerks and collected by minstrels, but the authors of most are entirely unknown, and many songs are what Richard Leighton Greene has called 'popular in origin' — that is, they were sung, danced, and enjoyed long

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Rebel Voice', *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 33–56.

[17] C. David Benson, *Public 'Piers Plowman': Modern Scholarship and Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2003), pp. 157–201.

[18] Aers, '*Vox Populi*', p. 432.

[19] For an example of the possibilities presented by reading wills as literary texts, see Katherine J. Lewis, 'Women, Testamentary Discourse and Life-Writing in Later Medieval England', in *Medieval Women and the Law*, ed. by Noël James Menuge (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000), pp. 57–76.

before any version happened to be copied into a manuscript that has survived to this day.[20]

None of these sources is unproblematic, but each offers new possibilities for trying to hear what James Scott has called 'hidden transcripts', the everyday ways in which ordinary people have sought to make sense of their lives and resist the worldviews of those who dominate them.[21] I have done enough work with songs and carols to know that I, as a historian, lack the skills to read them on my own; in a seminar several years ago, Kate Crassons (then a graduate student at Duke, now on the faculty at Lehigh) taught me to see one such song in entirely new ways, with just a few quiet observations about nuances of voice, grammar, and performance. I think it was an effortlessly obvious reading for her; it was simply breathtaking for me.[22] I would be happy if more literary critics would not leave such songs, carols, ballads, and proverbs to historians like myself (or to folklorists either). As Richard Firth Green noted in 1997, ballads 'have fallen out of favour among present-day scholars of medieval literature'. They might be making a slow comeback, thanks to the recent work of such scholars as Green and Stephen Knight, but the comeback is tentative and truly slow.[23] I find it telling that Richard Leighton Greene's masterful edition of medieval English carols is not even mentioned in the source bibliography of the 1999 *Cambridge History of Medieval Literature.* And perhaps even more telling, as best I could ascertain, not a single paper in the 2006 meeting of the New Chaucer Society drew on these sorts of less canonical and more humble texts. Papers were presented on many non-Chaucerian texts and topics — from such medieval authors as Julian of Norwich, Thomas Usk, and William Langland to such modern ones as Jacques Derrida and Annie Dillard — but late-medieval songs, carols, ballads, and proverbs seem to have slipped off the literary radar screen. I hope this will change. It is true that peasants rarely left written records, but they sometimes did, and the cultural artefacts of the late-medieval peasantry are certainly not exhausted by *Piers Plowman*, Chaucer's Plowman, the other more minor plowman poems, and a few other mentions in other canonical texts.

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[20] Richard Leighton Greene, *The Early English Carols* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), p. cxviii.

[21] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[22] I benefited from Crassons's suggestions in writing 'Ventriloquisms: When Maidens Speak in English Songs, c. 1300–1550', in *Cross Cultural Approaches to Medieval Woman's Song*, ed. by Anne Klinck and Anne Marie Rasmussen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), pp. 187–204.

[23] Richard Firth Green, 'The Ballad and the Middle Ages', in *The Long Fifteenth Century: Essays for Douglas Gray*, ed. by Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 164. See also his 'F. J. Child and Mikail Bakhtin', in *The Singer and the Scribe: European Ballad Traditions and European Ballad Cultures*, ed. by Philip E. Bennett and Richard Firth Green (New York: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 123–34, and Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

The effect of the plowman genre on historians is more subtle, but just as strong; with imaginations shaped by readings of *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer's Plowman, most historians — even today — see medieval peasants in somewhat flattened ways, especially in terms of class and gender. Peasants well-off enough to run plows of their own were a minority in any village, and a not-always-friendly minority at that, for they manipulated the customary institutions of their communities to their own advantage. They worked hard, for example, to close their villages to the wandering poor (except when they needed migrant labourers to help them bring in the harvest) and just as hard to punish with crippling fines, confiscation of land, and even expulsion poor women who found themselves pregnant outside of marriage.[24] This minority of peasants — those lucky enough to hold standard, undivided tenancies, usually of about thirty acres — dominates all studies of the medieval peasantry, so much so that they have even been given their own term — *kulaks*, a word borrowed from the Russian experience. Historians are certainly well aware of the fact that villages contained not only well-off peasants but also many more people who held only ten acres or six acres or none at all. But it is the kulaks around whom our histories revolve — they are so much the model medieval peasant that all others fade into the background. When we do turn away from this well-off minority, a different sort of rural society comes into view. For example, Harold Fox has recently examined the neglected subject of landless male labourers, finding that some villages in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries had as many landless men as tenants; that landlessness was a lifelong status for many men; and that parents readily condemned their own sons to this plight.[25] A landless labourer or a land-poor tenant lived a life very different from that evoked by most literary representations of plowmen. Chaucer's Plowman is suitably humble, wearing his rough tabard and riding a mare, but he has possessions on which he tithes, persons poorer than himself to whom he offers aid, even a beneficed priest for a brother, and he is, after all, able to afford a pilgrimage. All these advantages place him among the better-off of his village: a kulak, if you will.

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[24] See especially Elaine Clark, 'Mothers at Risk of Poverty in the Medieval English Countryside', in *Poor Women and Children in the European Past*, ed. by John Henderson and Richard Wall (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 139–59; Elaine Clark, 'Social Welfare and Mutual Aid in the Medieval Countryside', *Journal of British Studies*, 33 (1994), 381–406; Judith M. Bennett, 'Writing Fornication: Medieval *Leyrwite* and its Historians', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, ser. 6, 13 (2003), 131–62.

[25] H. S. A. Fox, 'Exploitation of the Landless by Lords and Tenants in Early Medieval England', in *Medieval Society and the Manor Court*, ed. by Zvi Razi and Richard Smith (Oxford:

The relatively prosperous plowman of literature has also encouraged historians (even those publishing today) to see medieval peasants as *male* peasants. Here, for example, is one historian of the medieval peasantry, writing in 1999: 'The medieval peasant was a tenant farmer who, at least in theory, could sustain *himself and his family*.'[26] Or another, writing in 2000: 'the typical tenant lived with *his wife* and three offspring.'[27] Or another in 2005: 'the more fortunate of the younger children of substantial villeins were settled *by their fathers* in cottages.'[28] Modern presumptions are at work in these male-centred formulations, but the shadows of medieval plowmen lurk here, too. It is as if historians continue to replicate in their work the gender dynamics of *Piers Plowman*, where Piers's wife is mentioned only in order to name her allegorically as 'Dame Werch-whan-tyme-is'. She never speaks; she never acts; and both she (and her just as briefly mentioned children) leave Piers to do his work in the poem largely unencumbered by family. Similarly unencumbered is Chaucer's Plowman, whose only kin is the Parson, a kinship that many critics interpret as more spiritual than blood. And so, too, are many others in the 'plowman genre' free-standing men who move, insofar as they interact with others, in a world of other men — of parsons, and bailiffs, and friars. A for-men-only countryside: what an odd fantasy.[29]

It is, of course, pure fantasy. Not even all plowmen were male. It took two people to move a medieval plow — two sorts of plowmen. The holder (*tenator*) held the plow and kept it cutting straight and true; and the driver (*fugator*)

Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 518–68. Fox was unable to locate much information about landless women, but my own work suggests that they were as numerous as landless men.

[26] Freedman, *Image*, p. 9.

[27] Harry Kitsikopoulos, 'Standards of Living and Capital Formation in Pre-plague England: A Peasant Budget Model', *Economic History Review*, ser. 2, 53 (2000), 238.

[28] Bruce M. S. Campbell, 'The Agrarian Problem in the Early Fourteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 188 (2005), 61.

[29] As the examples in my opening paragraph illustrate, peasant women *are* sometimes represented in medieval literature generally, but they are curiously absent from the plowman genre.

managed the draught animals which, if oxen, could be as many as four yoked pairs extending almost fifty feet in length.[30] In *Pierce the Plowman's Crede*, a wife is depicted as driving the plow, as one half of a husband-and-wife team tilling the soil. Perhaps the female plow-driver in this vignette was intended to stress the couple's impoverishment, but the documentary record also shows that women sometimes worked alongside men in plowing. In fact, in agrarian regions, women were in the fields all the time, not just helping with the plow but also breaking clods, harrowing, weeding, haymaking, and reaping at harvest-time. Moreover, women's additional work away from the arable fields — in farmstead and forest — was simply fundamental to the agrarian economy: the gathering of nuts, berries, and wood; the cultivation of vegetable gardens and fruit trees; the raising of poultry and pigs; the brewing of ale for sale; the working of flax or wool into thread, also for sale.[31] The economic productivity of peasant women seems to have thus far eluded most historians of the medieval rural economy whose attempts to estimate, for example, peasant budgets and living standards remain fundamentally flawed by their inability to credit properly the non-male, non-agrarian productivity of rural households.[32] For historians, the figure of the plowman still too often obscures the plowman's mother, sister, wife, and daughter.

MS 8009 in Chetham Library (Manchester) includes an incomplete Middle English song, copied out about 1500 and titled by its first modern editor 'Ballad of a Tyrannical Husband'. This song describes a vigorous argument between a goodman and goodwife about who works harder — the goodman who daily plows (helped by a lad who drives the oxen), or the goodwife who keeps the house, tends to the children, bakes and brews, spins, weaves, makes butter, raises poultry … and much else besides. Edited in 1841, this ballad languished — occasionally used by historians and largely ignored by literary scholars — until it was re-edited just a few years ago by Eve Salisbury.[33] I take this new edition as a good sign that the plowman's curse — a curse that has encouraged us to approach the medieval peasantry through canonical texts only and to take 'the plowman' as a sufficient representative of all peasants — is finally lifting. Good riddance. Let us search for peasant voices in *all* texts, not just canonical ones, and let us listen to both the poor peasant and the well-off, to the goodwife as well as the goodman.

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[30] Dyer, 'Plowman', p. 158.

[31] R. H. Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 95–110, and Judith M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 115–29.

[32] See, for example, the calculations of Kitsikopoulos, 'Standards', and Dyer, *Standards*.

[33] Eve Salisbury, *The Trials and Joys of Marriage* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 2002), pp. 85–93.

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