

Stefanie Weisman  
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## **The Rebels of 1381: The Construction of Identity in the Chronicles of the Peasants' Revolt**

### **Introduction**

For about a week in June of 1381, Damocles' sword, that ancient symbol of the fragility of kingship, seemed suspended above the head of the English monarchy. The first signs of danger had appeared on May 30, when several justices of the peace were fired upon with arrows while they tried to collect a poll tax in Essex.<sup>1</sup> The justices fled to the safety of London and for a few days things were relatively quiet. But then, on June 7, thousands of men from Essex and Kent began to gather together and cause disturbances throughout the countryside. They attacked the houses of royal and manorial officials, burned legal documents, and demanded allegiance from the towns and villages they passed through. On June 12, two bands of rebels -- one from Kent and one from Essex -- arrived outside London and conveyed a set of demands to King Richard II; their principal desires were an end to serfdom and the removal of certain men whom they identified as traitors. For reasons that are not entirely clear, the gates of London were lowered a short time later, allowing the rebels to enter the city.

Once in London, the rebels were joined by many of the commoners who lived in the city. Together they burned the Savoy, the palatial residence of John of Gaunt, and the

homes of other officials; they attacked foreigners, particularly Flemish weavers and merchants who resided in London; and they surrounded the Tower of London, which the king and many noblemen had fled to for safety, and demanded that the 'traitors' who resided there be handed over to them. On June 14, when the king left the Tower to negotiate with a band of rebels at Mile End, outside of London, a mob made its way into the Tower and seized the 'traitors': Simon Sudbury, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury and Chancellor of England; Robert Hales, the king's treasurer; and several other royal officials. These men were promptly executed by the rebels on Tower Hill.

On June 15, the king, the mayor of London, William Walworth, and a group of noblemen met the insurgents outside of London at Smithfield. Wat Tyler, one of the leaders of the revolt, spoke with the king and demanded an end to serfdom, the distribution of church property among the commons, and equality of status. As tension between the rebels and the king's group mounted, Walworth and his men attacked and mortally wounded Tyler. After Tyler's death, the rebels were quickly subdued by armed men who had come from London to help King Richard. The king ordered the rebels to return home, which they did, and the uprisings in London and in the countryside soon came to a halt. For the next few months, the king and his officials traveled throughout the kingdom, punishing those who helped lead the rebellion. Most of the rebels, however, received a general amnesty from the king.

The men who chronicled events in England in the late-fourteenth century left little doubt as to whose side they were on when describing the rebellion of 1381, known today

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 1.

as the Peasants' Revolt.<sup>2</sup> According to one of these chroniclers, Henry Knighton, the rebels were "servants of Satan" who committed "unheard-of-evils" during their occupation of London.<sup>3</sup> Another chronicler, Jean Froissart, described them as "malicious and evyll"<sup>4</sup> men who behaved as though "all the devylles of hell had bene among them."<sup>5</sup> Thomas Walsingham called them "whores of the devil"<sup>6</sup> whose shouts "exceeded all human noise and which could only be compared to the wailings of the inhabitants of hell."<sup>7</sup> By contrast, King Richard and the nobility were generally portrayed by the chroniclers as innocent victims of the rebellion.<sup>8</sup>

Historians of the Peasants' Revolt have struggled with the issue of how to extract useful information about the rebellion of 1381 from such obviously biased works. Indeed, the problem of interpreting medieval chronicles is not limited to studies of the Peasants' Revolt.<sup>9</sup> These texts are not quite histories, but neither are they works of fiction. Chroniclers of the later Middle Ages did not strive to be objective historians, but they based their writings on real events and people. They often presented these events in a form that accorded with their own ideological vision of the world and felt little or no obligation to give an unbiased account of the past. Many medieval chroniclers, believing that history should be used to teach a moral or religious lesson, would omit or distort

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<sup>2</sup> Although the term 'Peasants' Revolt' is commonly used to identify the events of 1381, the inaccuracy of this term is widely recognized by historians. As the following chapters will show, many of the rebels were not peasants but craftsmen, tradesmen, city-dwellers, and so on.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Knighton, *Knighton's Chronicle, 1337-1396*, trans. G.H. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 215.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Froissart, *The Chronicle of Froissart*, trans. Berners (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 242.

<sup>5</sup> Froissart, 234.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. Dobson (London: St. Martin's Press, 1970), 172.

<sup>7</sup> Walsingham, 173.

<sup>8</sup> Knighton, 213-5, 235; Walsingham, 174-5; Froissart, 237-8.

<sup>9</sup> See Robert Albano, *Middle English Historiography* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 5-7, for an analysis of the difficulties of interpreting medieval chronicles.

events in their writings to make them more spiritually edifying.<sup>10</sup> Their works abound with symbolism, rhetorical devices, and other elements which today would be more commonly associated with literature.<sup>11</sup> How can sources such as these be used to reveal objective information about the people and events that are being represented?

A number of medieval chronicles contain descriptions of the Peasants' Revolt. Four of them will be discussed in this paper: the *Anonimalle Chronicle*, Jean Froissart's *Chroniques*, Henry Knighton's *Chronicon*, and Thomas Walsingham's *Historia Anglicana*.<sup>12</sup> All of these chronicles were written within a few years of the revolt. The chroniclers were well-educated men and belonged to the elite sectors of society, but their backgrounds were far from identical. Knighton was a canon at St. Mary's abbey in Leicester, which was patronized by the earls and dukes of Lancaster.<sup>13</sup> Walsingham was a monk at St. Alban's monastery, where he chronicled events in England from 1376 until 1420.<sup>14</sup> Froissart, like Knighton and Walsingham, was a cleric; but unlike the other two, he spent much of his time in the secular world of the aristocracy, and served in both the French and English courts. Froissart was also a foreigner, while Knighton and Walsingham were native-born.<sup>15</sup> The *Anonimalle Chronicle*, which is the most objective

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<sup>10</sup> Albano, 21-2.

<sup>11</sup> For more information about the writing of medieval chronicles, see Albano, *Middle English Historiography*, 17-33; Antonia Gransden, "The Chronicles of Medieval England and Scotland," in *Legends, Traditions and History in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon Press, 1992), 199-238; and Peter Ainsworth, "Froissardian Perspectives on Late-Fourteenth-Century Society," in *Orders and Hierarchies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, ed. Jeffrey Denton (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), 56-73.

<sup>12</sup> There are other contemporary chronicles which mention the revolt, such as the *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden* and the Kirkenstall chronicle. The four which this paper will focus on, however, provide the most detailed and comprehensive accounts of the uprising.

<sup>13</sup> Gransden, 216.

<sup>14</sup> Anil de Silva-Vigier, *This Moste Highe Prince...John of Gaunt: 1340-1399* (Edinburgh: The Pentland Press, 1992), 198.

<sup>15</sup> Ainsworth, 59.

of the four accounts, was written not by a churchman but by “a man of the world.”<sup>16</sup> The anonymous chronicler is thought to have been a high government official during the reigns of Edward III and Richard II.<sup>17</sup> It is difficult to know precisely whom the chroniclers were writing for, but it seems safe to say that their audience, like the chroniclers themselves, would have been well-educated and relatively high up in the social hierarchy.

In recent years, Paul Strohm and Steven Justice have combined the tools of literary and historical analysis to examine the chronicles of the Peasants’ Revolt. The works of both historians focus on *how* the insurgents are presented in the chronicles. They agree that the chroniclers’ descriptions of the rebels tend to be unrealistic and damaging to the rebels’ reputation. But they do not adequately explain *why* the chroniclers portrayed them in this way. Strohm believes that the authors misrepresented the rebels in order to condemn them and discredit their actions.<sup>18</sup> However, he does not sufficiently consider what reasons or motivations the chroniclers had for condemning the rebels. Justice, disagreeing with Strohm, states that the chroniclers would not have purposely distorted the rebels’ image because “the insurgency was so obviously and unquestionably evil” to them.<sup>19</sup> The authors did not need to discredit the rebels because their actions would have been automatically condemned by elite society. Justice’s claim is not entirely convincing, however, because it assumes that the chroniclers and the social elite were completely disconnected from the community of the rebels. According to

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<sup>16</sup> Janet Coleman, *Medieval Readers and Writers: 1350-1400* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 49.

<sup>17</sup> He may have been William Pakington, who became Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1381 (Coleman, 49).

<sup>18</sup> Paul Strohm, “‘A Revelle!’: Chronicle Evidence and the Rebel Voice,” in *Hochon’s Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 34-5.

<sup>19</sup> Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 200.

Justice, those at the top of the social hierarchy were incapable of sympathizing with or even understanding the rebels' cause.<sup>20</sup> This paper, however, will not assume that the chroniclers "could not know" the motivations of the rebels merely because they were at different ends of the social spectrum.<sup>21</sup> The goal of this work is to determine *why* the chroniclers portrayed the rebels as they did.

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<sup>20</sup> Justice, 5, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Justice, 5.

## Chapter 1

### *The Images of the Rebels*

To understand the rebellion of 1381, the flaws in its representation must first be identified. The chronicles of the Middle Ages are notoriously biased, but they do have the advantage of displaying their prejudices in a relatively open manner. Identifying the misleading elements and determining what is false in their descriptions will make it easier to distinguish the true nature of the revolt. As this chapter will show, the chroniclers use stereotypes, rhetorical devices, and cultural references to portray the rebels in an unflattering light and condemn their actions. The techniques they use to form the image of the insurgents can be grouped into three categories: attributing negative qualities to the rebels, glorifying the rebels' victims and opponents, and presenting the story of the rebellion within the context of well-known narratives. The overall effect of these techniques is to distance the rebels from the chroniclers' own social milieu and to relegate them to the position of the 'Other'.

The first technique includes the portrayal of the rebels as the lowest of the low, the dregs of society. Thomas Walsingham, in his chronicle *Historia Anglicana*, declares that the rebels of 1381 were "most inferior rustics"<sup>22</sup> who "belonged to the most lowly condition of serf."<sup>23</sup> According to Paul Freedman, the term *rusticus* was often used in the Middle Ages to refer to the "lowest order of agricultural workers," those who remained bound to the land under the control of a lord,<sup>24</sup> and "carried pejorative connotations of

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<sup>22</sup> Walsingham, 171.

<sup>23</sup> Walsingham, 172.

<sup>24</sup> Strohm, 36.

stupidity and barbarism.”<sup>25</sup> However, as studies of the social composition of the revolt have shown, those who participated in the uprising generally did not fit into this category. The peasantry was not a monolithic entity, but a hierarchy of economic and social levels; peasants could be rich or poor, free or serfs, and anything in between.<sup>26</sup> Prosperous peasants may have had more in common with minor lords than with poor serfs.<sup>27</sup> Most of the peasants who participated in the rebellion were not serfs but customary tenants. Serfdom did not even exist in Kent, one of the hot-beds of the rebellion. The peasants there had a unique kind of land tenure, known as gavelkind tenure, which gave them a significant degree of independence and allowed many of them to prosper financially.<sup>28</sup>

Some historians, such as Rodney Hilton, have used public records, court rolls, and other official documents from the period to establish the social composition of the revolt.<sup>29</sup> Their studies have shown that many non-peasants participated in the rebellion as well.<sup>30</sup> Roughly a third of the rebels were involved in crafts and trade rather than agriculture.<sup>31</sup> The rebel community included members of the village elite such as reeves, constables, bailiffs and landowners. It also contained a significant number of artisans,

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 10.

<sup>26</sup> See Dobson, 17; Strohm, 36-38; Rodney Hilton, *The Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1983), 44-7, and *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1985), 114-121, 139-151, 216-226; J.A. Raftis, *Peasant Economic Development within the English Manorial System* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 11-47; and the following essays in *Medieval Society and the Manor Court* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), ed. Razi and Smith: Peter Franklin, "Politics in Manorial Court Rolls: The Tactics, Social Composition, and Aims of a pre-1381 Movement," 162-198; Ralph Evans, "Merton College's Control of its Tenants at Thorncroft, 1270-1349," 235-46; L.R. Poos, Zvi Razi, and R. Smith, "The Population History of Medieval English Villages," 298-314; and H.S.A. Fox, "Exploitation of the Landless by Lords and Tenants in Early Medieval England," 539-568.

<sup>27</sup> Justice, 191.

<sup>28</sup> Justice, 45. Also see Hilton, *The Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England*, 24, for an analysis of gavelkind tenure in Kent.

<sup>29</sup> See Hilton, "Social Composition," in *Bond Men Made Free*, (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 176-86.

<sup>30</sup> As Hilton says, "The rising is often referred to as a 'peasants' revolt' but it should be emphasized that it was a plebeian rather than exclusively a peasant uprising, or, as it was put at the time, a rising of the 'commons' (Hilton, "Social Concepts in the English Rising of 1381," in *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism*, 216).

laborers, and burgesses from the towns.<sup>32</sup> In certain regions, townsmen allied with the peasantry in order to throw off the domination of local lords. Such alliances took place at Canterbury, Norwich, Yarmouth, Bury St. Edmunds, Ipswich, St. Albans, York and Beverley.<sup>33</sup> City-dwellers, particularly the commons of London, also played a large role in the rebellion. Thus, Walsingham's claim that the rebels were lowly serfs is inaccurate.

While the other chroniclers do not speak as explicitly as Walsingham about the insurgents' social standing, they do give other indications that the rebels were of a low social stratum. As Paul Freedman has shown in his book *Images of the Medieval Peasant*, there were a variety of ways in which medieval writers could identify someone as a peasant. Instead of openly describing a person as such, they could draw on "a lexicon of negative images" to make this connection clear.<sup>34</sup> There were a number of qualities and characteristics that were commonly associated with the peasantry in the Middle Ages.<sup>35</sup> In the chronicles of the Peasants' Revolt, the authors use some of these traits -- such as drunkenness, stupidity, and bestiality -- to portray the insurgents as rustics.

Drinking excessively and having an insatiable appetite were qualities attributed to peasants.<sup>36</sup> The chroniclers refer to the rebels' propensity to eat, drink, and make merry many times throughout their accounts. Knighton, for example, writes that during the destruction of the Savoy, a group of rebels broke into the building's cellar and drank so

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<sup>31</sup> Strohm, 55. Also see Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 176-85.

<sup>32</sup> Strohm, 55.

<sup>33</sup> Dobson, Introduction to *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 13-14. Also see Hilton, "Social Concepts of the English Rising of 1381," in *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism*, 217.

<sup>34</sup> Freedman, 136.

<sup>35</sup> According to Freedman, "Several major axes of pejorative discourse occur" in medieval writing: "the peasant as object of ridicule versus the peasant as dangerous; the lowly but useful peasant versus the completely base and useless; peasants as representative of human nature versus peasants as grotesque, semihuman, or bestial figures" (136).

much wine “that they could not crawl out, but passed their time with songs and catches, and other drunken inanities.”<sup>37</sup> The cellar door was soon blocked by flames and rubble, and the rebels, “having come to drink wine, . . . in wine they perished.”<sup>38</sup> Knighton also complains that while the rebels stayed in London, they drank “immoderate quantities of wine” and lay sprawled out on the ground “like so many slaughtered swine.”<sup>39</sup> Froissart, too, describes the drunkenness and gluttony of the rebels in great detail. As soon as the rebels gained access to London, he writes, they went into houses and demanded food and drink from the inhabitants.<sup>40</sup> And they continued “drynkynge and makynge mery in the tavernes,” without paying for anything, for the duration of their stay.<sup>41</sup>

Walsingham also refers to the rebels’ excessive love of food and drink. Some of the rebels who were surrounding the Tower, he writes, were “so disrespectful and insolent” that they seized the food that was being brought to the Tower for the king.<sup>42</sup> The chronicler indicates that the rebels’ drunkenness was what motivated their actions. Having “tasted various wines and expensive drinks” from the cellars of wealthy men in London, the rebels became “less drunk than mad” and “began to debate at length about the traitors with the more simple men of the city.”<sup>43</sup> It was this madness, brought on by the wine, that made the rebels plan the murder of these high officials.

Stupidity is another trait which the chroniclers ascribe to the rebels to degrade their image. Knighton, for example, describes the insurgents as men who, “ignorant of themselves, . . . neither gave thought to their own condition, nor looked to the end of

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<sup>36</sup> Freedman, 150.

<sup>37</sup> Knighton, 215.

<sup>38</sup> Knighton, 217.

<sup>39</sup> Knighton, 219.

<sup>40</sup> Froissart, 233.

<sup>41</sup> Froissart, 239.

<sup>42</sup> Walsingham, 171.

what they had begun, but acted like fools who do not look before they leap.”<sup>44</sup> The rebels were apparently “ignorant of themselves” because they refused to stay within their place in society -- they thought that they were the equals of great lords. According to Walsingham, the rebels “hoped to subject all things to their own stupidity,”<sup>45</sup> and their desire to seize and execute the archbishop and other traitors was “insanely foolish.”<sup>46</sup> The rebels at St. Albans, too, were “fools” who, “agreeing to the suggestions of other fools, proved themselves completely mad by . . . breaking down folds [and] gates,” which were symbols of the monastery’s manorial authority.<sup>47</sup> The insurgents are also described as ill-mannered and poorly dressed, two qualities often attributed to rustics.<sup>48</sup> In the *Anonimale Chronicle*, for example, the rebels are “unreasonable men [who] did not know how to behave.”<sup>49</sup> And in Walsingham’s chronicle, they are called “bare-legged ruffians.”<sup>50</sup>

In addition to being serfs, drunkards, gluttons, and fools, the rebels were, according to the chroniclers, wicked creatures.<sup>51</sup> Some of the authors attribute supernatural abilities to the rebels and claim that they were aided by evil powers. According to Knighton, the rebels were “wicked commons”<sup>52</sup> who committed “unheard-of evils;”<sup>53</sup> he describes those who took part in the burning of the Savoy as “servants of

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<sup>43</sup> Walsingham, 169.

<sup>44</sup> Knighton, 227.

<sup>45</sup> Walsingham, 132.

<sup>46</sup> Walsingham, 171.

<sup>47</sup> Walsingham, 272.

<sup>48</sup> Freedman, 139.

<sup>49</sup> *Anonimale Chronicle*, in *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, ed. Dobson, 130.

<sup>50</sup> Walsingham, 134.

<sup>51</sup> Wickedness and bestiality were often attributed to peasants in medieval literature and art. See Freedman, 140; and Henrik Specht, *Poetry and the Iconography of the Peasant* (University of Copenhagen, 1983), 45-51.

<sup>52</sup> Knighton, 211.

<sup>53</sup> Knighton, 215.

Satan.”<sup>54</sup> Knighton claims that some of the rebels demonstrated unnatural powers -- during the destruction of houses of officials in London, for example, “even the old and decrepit clambered over [walls] as agilely as if they had been rats, or were borne aloft by spirits.”<sup>55</sup> It seemed to Knighton that “the Evil One, whom they followed and served, was guiding their steps.”<sup>56</sup> The rebels who went into the Tower to seize the archbishop were, according to Walsingham, “doomed ribalds and whores of the devil,”<sup>57</sup> who were even “worse than . . . demons.”<sup>58</sup> When they found the archbishop, he was in a chapel about to take communion; but “those limbs of Satan laid their impious hands on him, . . . paying no respect to the sanctity of the place,” and dragged him out to be executed.<sup>59</sup> These descriptions have the effect of completely dehumanizing the rebels.

Many of the chroniclers demonstrate the wickedness and bestiality of the rebels by describing the unnatural clamor that they made. Froissart, for example, writes that when the rebels encamped outside of London saw the king and his entourage approaching to speak with them, “they made suche a crye, as though all the devylles of hell had ben amonge them.”<sup>60</sup> Walsingham writes that the rebels entered the Tower of London “on a devilish instinct and . . . with an enormous cry.”<sup>61</sup> After the execution of the archbishop, the rebels’ shouting sounded like “the wailings of the inhabitants of hell, . . . the bleating of sheep, or, to be more accurate, . . . the devilish voices of peacocks.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Knighton, 215.

<sup>55</sup> Knighton, 217.

<sup>56</sup> Knighton, 217.

<sup>57</sup> Walsingham, 172.

<sup>58</sup> Walsingham, 364.

<sup>59</sup> Walsingham, 364.

<sup>60</sup> Froissart, 231-2.

<sup>61</sup> Walsingham, 172.

<sup>62</sup> Walsingham, 173.

The second technique used by the chroniclers to debase the rebels' image is the description of the victims of the insurgency as innocent, God-fearing men. Knighton, for example, portrays the archbishop and the others who are executed by the rebels as sacrificial lambs: "unprotesting and unhesitating, like the lamb before the shearer," these men "freely submitted themselves to an undeserved death."<sup>63</sup> The archbishop was portrayed in a favorable light by Walsingham as well. According to this chronicler, Sudbury followed Christ's example by forgiving his executioners and then, after being struck by the sword eight times, he "[completed] what we believe to be called his martyrdom."<sup>64</sup> Walsingham then gives several examples of people who, having prayed to the archbishop shortly after his death, were miraculously cured of their illnesses.<sup>65</sup>

While the chroniclers praise the archbishop for his meekness, they laud Bishop Henry Despenser, who organized a small band of soldiers to fight the rebels, for the justness of his wrath. They suggest that his duties as a bishop and as a warrior were perfectly compatible. Knighton describes the bishop as an agent of God: his "avenging hand" fell upon the rebels "with great joy, and the absolution of the bishop's sword was not unworthily visited upon them for their misdeeds."<sup>66</sup> Walsingham calls him "the warlike priest, [who] like a wild boar gnashing its teeth, spared neither himself nor his enemies."<sup>67</sup> Like Knighton, Walsingham sees no discrepancy between the bishop's two roles. He describes how the bishop was able to function as a priest and a warrior simultaneously: when the bishop captured one of the rebel leaders, he sentenced the man

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<sup>63</sup> Knighton, 213-5.

<sup>64</sup> Walsingham, 174.

<sup>65</sup> Walsingham, 174-5.

<sup>66</sup> Knighton, 227.

<sup>67</sup> Walsingham, 260.

to death and then “heard and absolved his confession by virtue of his office.”<sup>68</sup> And when the rebel was being dragged to the gallows, the bishop “held up [his] head to prevent it [from] knocking on the ground.”<sup>69</sup> John of Gaunt, another man targeted by the rebels, is portrayed as a Christ-like figure by Knighton. The chronicler calls him a “lover of peace and maker of peace,” who was “cast down from peace and harried, without fault on his part.”<sup>70</sup> This description is especially fitting because during the time of the rebellion, the duke was in the process of negotiating a peace treaty in Scotland. Knighton also describes him as “the good and most innocent duke,”<sup>71</sup> a man who “impartially and patiently forgave the offences of anyone who sought forgiveness.”<sup>72</sup> His praise for the duke, however, is due not only to a desire to condemn the rebels, but also to the fact that John of Gaunt, the duke of Lancaster, was a patron of the religious house where Knighton resided.<sup>73</sup>

The chroniclers also tarnish the rebels’ image by drawing comparisons between them and two men who opposed the insurgents: Sir Robert Salle and mayor William Walworth. Unlike most of the other men whom the rebels targeted, these two came from humble backgrounds and worked their way up into the ranks of the nobility. Salle and Walworth are set up in the chronicles as foils to the insurgents. The chroniclers imply that while these two men had become nobles by virtue of their skill and valor, the rebels demanded the same increase in status without being worthy of it. To the chroniclers,

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<sup>68</sup> Walsingham, 261.

<sup>69</sup> Walsingham, 261.

<sup>70</sup> Knighton, 235.

<sup>71</sup> Knighton, 235.

<sup>72</sup> Knighton, 239-41.

<sup>73</sup> Gransden, 216.

social advancement was permissible only when an individual proved that he had a brave and noble spirit.<sup>74</sup>

Froissart explains that Salle, though not born a gentleman, was made a knight by King Edward III because of his valor, skill, and strength.<sup>75</sup> The rebels, who wanted to make this “valuyaunt man” their captain, believed that he would join them because he was “no gentylmanne borne, but sonne to a villayne” as they were.<sup>76</sup> According to Froissart, however, when the rebels approached him about it, the knight bravely refused to join “suche a company of knaves.”<sup>77</sup> The rebels murdered him as he tried to escape, but not before he had killed twelve of them and wounded many others.<sup>78</sup> The *Anonimalle* chronicler expresses a similar sense of admiration for Salle’s valor, calling him “a brave and vigorous knight.”<sup>79</sup> Knighton describes him as “a knight famed for his valour in battle.”<sup>80</sup> Walsingham claims that Salle was killed by one of his own serfs; this act draws attention to the disparity between Salle and the rebels -- the knight of humble origins, who advanced by means of skill and valor, was killed by those who, undeserving, greedily wanted to be the equals of their lords.

The chroniclers portray William Walworth, the mayor of London, as another model of social advancement. Like Salle, Walworth was not born a nobleman; but he was knighted by King Richard at the end of the rebellion for his dutiful service to the king and for helping to kill Wat Tyler. The chronicles contain many words of praise for the mayor. Walsingham, for example, calls him “a man of incomparable spirit and

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<sup>74</sup> See Thrupp, “Attitudes towards Social Ascent,” in *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 300-11.

<sup>75</sup> Froissart, 237.

<sup>76</sup> Froissart, 238.

<sup>77</sup> Froissart, 238.

<sup>78</sup> Froissart, 238.

<sup>79</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 237.

bravery.”<sup>81</sup> According to the *Anonimalle* chronicler, the mayor was “a hardy and vigorous man” who bravely attacked and killed Wat Tyler.<sup>82</sup> When the king announced that he would knight Walworth, the latter protested that “he was not worthy nor able to have or maintain a knight’s estate, for he was only a merchant and had to live by trade.”<sup>83</sup> The king went ahead with the ceremony, however; but he later granted Walworth land and a stipend, presumably so that he could afford to live as a knight.<sup>84</sup>

Walworth’s unwillingness to assume the honor of knighthood is a stark contrast to the rebels’ apparent eagerness to become noblemen themselves. The chroniclers portray the rebels as greedy for social advancement, but unworthy of such an honor. Walsingham, for example, writes in the beginning of his chronicle that “the rustics . . . sought to better themselves by force and . . . planned to become the equals of their lords.”<sup>85</sup> He describes how the rebel leader Wat Tyler arrogantly refused to hurry when summoned to speak with the king, and how he grew angry when a knight who was sent by the king dared to approach him on horseback.<sup>86</sup> William Grindcobbe and William Cadyndon, leaders of the St. Albans rising, were also eager to enter the ranks of the nobility. According to Walsingham, they “desired to be held specially responsible for what was done in order to be treated as great men thereafter.” They and their followers attacked the monastery so that “henceforward they would be no longer serfs but lords.”<sup>87</sup> Froissart also indicates that the rebels desired to become lords and were acting above their station. He reports, for example, that they had bought fashionable clothing from a

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<sup>80</sup> Knighton, 238.

<sup>81</sup> Walsingham, 178.

<sup>82</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 166.

<sup>83</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 167.

<sup>84</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 168.

<sup>85</sup> Walsingham, 132.

<sup>86</sup> Walsingham, 177-8.

doublet-maker in London;<sup>88</sup> the rebels were trying to dress richly, as though they were already noblemen.

The third major technique used to formulate the rebels' image is the creation of a contextual framework for the events of 1381. Many medieval writers used a device known as *translatio*, which Gertz defines as "the process of *translating* one set of images or knowledge created for a particular audience into a new context for a new audience."<sup>89</sup> In this case, the chroniclers transpose the images associated with the Fall of Man -- the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise after they ate the forbidden fruit -- onto the Peasants' Revolt. This biblical narrative provided the medieval reader with a frame of reference in which to interpret the rebellion.

Some of the rebels, particularly the priest John Ball, used the image of Adam and Eve in Paradise to justify their demand that serfdom be abolished. They challenged long-standing notions about the inequality of men by drawing attention to the equality that existed at the time of creation. Ball gave a sermon on this topic to the rebels at Blackheath, outside of London. According to Walsingham, the priest began his speech with the proverb, "Whan Adam dalf, and Eve span, Wo was thanne a gentilman," and then argued that:

from the beginning all men were created equal by nature,  
and that servitude had been introduced by the unjust and  
evil oppression of men, against the will of God, who, if it  
had pleased Him to create serfs, surely in the beginning of

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<sup>87</sup> Walsingham, 272.

<sup>88</sup> Froissart, 240.

<sup>89</sup> SunHee Kim Gertz, *Chaucer to Shakespeare: 1337-1580* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 35. Also see Albano, 23-4.

the world would have appointed who should be a serf and  
who a lord.<sup>90</sup>

Ball thus demanded equality of status and the abolition of serfdom by claiming that it was against God's will for one man to serve another. In the Middle Ages, this argument was used by elite scholars as well as by poorly-educated commoners to demonstrate that serfdom was evil and unnatural.<sup>91</sup>

Some medieval intellectuals referred to the Fall of Man to refute the claim that all men should be equal. Instead of denying original equality, they argued that it did not carry over into the present day because it had been destroyed when Adam and Eve sinned and were cast out of the Garden of Eden. Because these two had disobeyed God by eating fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they had forfeited the peace, harmony, and equality that they would have had in Paradise. Thus, inequality in the post-Fall world did not go against God's will.<sup>92</sup>

The chroniclers seem to have adopted this argument in response to the claim made by Ball and his followers. Throughout their accounts, they use the images associated with the Fall of Man as a framework in which to interpret the revolt. The chroniclers portray the rebellion as a sign of the continuation of man's sinful nature. The revolt itself can be seen as another Fall of Man -- the rebels, like Adam and Eve, commit a sin of pride by aiming to be like their superiors. In the case of Adam and Eve, that superior was the Lord. The rebels, for their part, desired to be equal to their lords. By

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<sup>90</sup> Walsingham, 374-5.

<sup>91</sup> Freedman, 85. As Freedman writes, the image of "Adam as universal father, an undeniable tenet of Christian belief, could be used to buttress three related assertions: fundamental equality, the illicit nature of servitude, and the hollowness of pretensions to innate nobility" (60).

<sup>92</sup> Freedman, 61. Not all medieval scholars used Adam's fall to account for this loss of equality, however. Others attributed it to Noah's curse on Ham, or to a specific historical event (Freedman, 61, 85).

relating the actions of the insurgents to original sin, the chroniclers imply that the rebels deserved their lowly status, just as Adam and Eve had deserved to be cast out of Eden.

In the context of the Fall of Man, the leaders of the rebellion occupy the role of the serpent that tempted Adam and Eve. According to Walsingham, the rebel leaders were “the angels of Satan who . . . turned the hearts of the serfs against their lords.”<sup>93</sup> Knighton portrays John Ball as a tempter of the commons, “greatly pleasing to the lay mind [by] bitterly denouncing the law and the free estate of the church” and urging the people to rise up against their betters.<sup>94</sup> The serpent in *Genesis* lures Eve into sin, encouraging her to eat from the tree of knowledge. “You will not die,” he says, “for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”<sup>95</sup> The commons are persuaded by Ball and others to rebel against their lords and demand equality, just as the serpent convinces Adam and Eve to eat the fruit in order to be like the Lord.

The chroniclers draw attention to the excessive pride of the rebels in wanting to “become the equals of their lords.”<sup>96</sup> According to Walsingham, when certain rebels asked for the king’s pardon after the death of Wat Tyler, Richard refused to give it to them. Instead, the king told the insurgents, “you will remain in bondage, not as before but incomparably harsher.”<sup>97</sup> Richard then swore that he would “strive with mind, strength and goods to suppress you so that the rigor of your servitude will be an example

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<sup>93</sup> Walsingham, 244.

<sup>94</sup> Knighton, 211.

<sup>95</sup> *Genesis*, 3:4-5.

<sup>96</sup> Walsingham, 132.

<sup>97</sup> Walsingham, 132.

to posterity.”<sup>98</sup> The king’s words are reminiscent of the punishment pronounced by the Lord after Adam and Eve had sinned:

Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground.<sup>99</sup>

In Walsingham’s chronicle, the insurgents’ prideful actions are a repetition of the sin of Adam and Eve, and Richard condemns the rebels to increased servitude just as God sentences man to trials and tribulations. Walsingham seems to be saying that if anyone doubted that Adam’s sin invalidated original equality, the rebels’ actions alone showed that they had forfeited the right to be the equals of their lords.

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<sup>98</sup> Walsingham, 311.

<sup>99</sup> *Genesis*, 3:16-19.

## Chapter 2

### *Rebel Ideology and the Formation of Identity*

As the previous chapter has shown, the chroniclers use several techniques to vilify the rebels of 1381. They portray the rebels as boorish peasants and inhuman devils; they praise the rebels' victims and contrast the actions of the insurgents with those of great men such as Walworth and Salle; and they use the contextual framework of the Fall of Man to invalidate the ideology of the rebels. The use of these techniques raises the question of why the chroniclers portrayed the insurgents in this way -- what was it about the rebellion that motivated them to distort the rebels' image? As this chapter will show, the insurgents held many of the same values, ideas and beliefs that the higher orders of society did. In addition, the rebels consciously constructed their public image by appropriating the language and the physical bodies of the elite. It will thus be argued that the chroniclers distorted the image of the rebels because they felt threatened by the similarities they saw between elite society and the community of the rebels.

In the last chapter, the diverse nature of the rebel community was established. Now the composition of the higher orders will be examined. The elite of fourteenth-century England, like the rebels themselves, were a diverse group. In the Middle Ages, the theory of tripartite division was commonly used to describe the structure of society. According to this theory, society consisted of three major categories, or estates: those who prayed (the clergy), those who fought (the knights), and those who labored (the peasants).<sup>100</sup> This view of society, however, is inadequate to describe the actual structure of English society at this time. There are a variety of ways to define the elite of late-

fourteenth century England. They may be identified, for example, as those who came from noble families, or as those who had a certain amount of wealth. This paper, however, will define the elite as those involved in the politics of the realm.<sup>101</sup>

A wide variety of men had political influence through their involvement in Parliament, which was generally divided between the house of Lords and the house of Commons. The Lords included dukes, earls, barons, and other high-ranking noblemen, as well as prominent ecclesiastical figures such as bishops, abbots and priors.<sup>102</sup> The house of Commons consisted primarily of knights and burgesses.<sup>103</sup> There were many different types of knights -- they could be noblemen from illustrious families, for example, or prosperous landowners who had risen up from humble backgrounds.<sup>104</sup> The burgesses were also a diverse lot -- this group included wealthy merchants, shopkeepers, and tradesmen, among others.<sup>105</sup> The membership of the house of Commons thus “[overlapped] at one end with the nobility and, at the other, with the bourgeoisie.”<sup>106</sup>

In the late-fourteenth century, a movement for political reform arose among significant portions of elite society. The Commons of Parliament were the strongest advocates of reform. In the so-called ‘Good Parliament’ of 1376, at the end of the reign of King Edward III, the members worked to eliminate corruption and make the

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<sup>100</sup> Freedman, 20.

<sup>101</sup> This definition of the elite is based in large part on Rodney Hilton’s claim that no group that “had a part to play in the accepted political game” was involved in the rebellion (*Bond Men Made Free*, 221). This statement will be analyzed further in the following chapter.

<sup>102</sup> May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century: 1307-1399* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 184-5.

<sup>103</sup> McKisack, 187.

<sup>104</sup> McKisack, 188.

<sup>105</sup> McKisack, 189.

<sup>106</sup> McKisack, 189.

government function more efficiently. They accused several officials of treason, which meant that they had violated the bond of loyalty which all owed to the king.<sup>107</sup>

The *Anonimalle* chronicler and the Parliamentary rolls provide particularly detailed accounts of this event. On the first day the Parliament convened, Sir John Knyvet, the current Chancellor, directed the members to determine “if the said Kingdom was badly and treacherously governed and councilled,” and to discuss how to remedy these problems “for the profit of . . . the King and the Kingdom.”<sup>108</sup> During the meeting, several knights spoke about the corruption of government officials. According to one of these knights, there were “divers men who have a great sum in gold and silver, the wealth and treasure of our Lord the King,” which they had gained “by extortionate means to the great damage” of the king and the realm.<sup>109</sup> Sir Peter de la Mare, who was the speaker for the house of Commons, claimed that if Edward III had been well advised by his top officials, there would be no need for him to levy taxes on the people. But, de la Mere said, the king “has with him certain counselors and servants who are not loyal or profitable to him or the realm.”<sup>110</sup> Men such as Lord Latimer, the king’s chamberlain, and Richard Lyons, a wealthy merchant, had charged exorbitant interest rates on loans they made to the king. This practice was injurious to both Edward and his subjects, because it forced the king to resort to levies to repay the loans. Other prominent merchants had convinced the king to remove the staple from Calais, an act which freed up the wool trade and allowed them to make more profit. By doing so, however, these

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<sup>107</sup> Justice, 101.

<sup>108</sup> Parliamentary Rolls, quoted by Silva-Vigier in *This Moste Highe Prince*, 192.

<sup>109</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, quoted by Silva-Vigier in *This Moste Highe Prince*, 192-3.

<sup>110</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, quoted by Silva-Vigier in *This Moste Highe Prince*, 194-5.

men had deprived the king of the custom that had previously been collected by the staple.<sup>111</sup>

The Good Parliament took the unprecedented step of impeaching those high government officials -- including Lord Latimer -- whom they viewed as traitors. It also arrested the merchants who had acted to the king's disadvantage.<sup>112</sup> But in 1377, John of Gaunt, the duke of Lancaster, reinstated the impeached officials and reversed many of the reforms that the Good Parliament had made. He also arrested the Speaker, Peter de la Mere, and several others who had been involved in the reform effort.<sup>113</sup> In that same year, Edward III died and the eleven-year-old Richard, John of Gaunt's nephew, assumed the throne. Many worried that the duke had plans to take the crown from Richard. Government corruption remained a major concern for elite society, and John of Gaunt was particularly despised by many in Parliament.

In the rebellion of 1381, the lower classes appeared to share the elite's concern for political reform. Both groups believed that certain individuals were taking advantage of the king and the community of the realm. The language the rebels used in their search for 'traitors' was quite similar to that used by the members of the Good Parliament. In Froissart's account, the rebels from the countryside and from London proclaim that "the realme of England was right evyll governed, and . . . golde and sylver was taken fro them by theym that were named noble men."<sup>114</sup> According to the *Anonimalle* chronicler, when the rebels arrived at London they announced that they "had risen to save [the king] and to

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<sup>111</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, quoted by Silva-Vigier in *This Moste Highe Prince*, 192-5.

<sup>112</sup> McKisack, 386-91.

<sup>113</sup> McKisack, 394-5.

<sup>114</sup> Froissart, 225.

destroy traitors to him and the kingdom.”<sup>115</sup> Similarly, in Walsingham’s account, the insurgents proclaim “that their intention was merely to discover the traitors of the kingdom.”<sup>116</sup>

The rebels’ apparent concern over the running of the monarchy was something quite new in England. In previous movements of the lower orders, the primary goal had been to prevent local lords from increasing the rents and service obligations of their tenants.<sup>117</sup> In 1381, however, the rebels apparently wanted to purge the entire realm of traitors. This change was brought about in large part by the economic policies implemented by the monarchy in the second half of the fourteenth century. These policies spurred the lower classes to take more of an interest in the politics of the realm. In the years following the arrival of the Black Death in England (1348), peasants and laborers became increasingly frustrated as the obstacles to their economic success mounted. Although the shortage of labor resulting from the plague initially allowed them to demand and obtain higher wages, the government quickly stepped in to curb this development and maintain the status quo. A royal ordinance of 1349 prohibited their wages from rising above pre-plague levels. In 1351, Parliament passed the Statute of Laborers, which put even more restrictions on wages and economic activities. Before the

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<sup>115</sup> *Anonimale Chronicle*, 129.

<sup>116</sup> Walsingham, 169.

<sup>117</sup> Hilton, “Peasant Movements Before 1381,” in *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism*, 127-133. Violent peasant rebellions were quite rare in medieval England. Peasants often used non-violent forms of protest and looked for legal solutions to their problems. In the 1370s, for example, many villeins and tenants got copies of the Domesday Book and used it to prove that their land was part of the royal manor; peasants who could claim the king as their lord generally had more rights and privileges than those who served local lords. Also see Hilton, *The Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England*, 28-31; Peter Franklin, “Politics in Manorial Court Rolls: The Tactics, Social Composition, and Aims of a pre-1381 Peasant Movement,” in *Medieval Society and the Manor Court*, 162-198; and H.S.A. Fox, “Exploitation of the Landless by Lords and Tenants in Early Medieval England,” in *Medieval Society*, 518-569.

plague, the central government had rarely imposed such strict regulations on the economy.<sup>118</sup>

The Hundred Years' War caused more financial difficulties for the lower orders. The king's expensive military campaigns led him to implement three poll taxes between 1377 and 1381. The third and final tax was especially unpopular. Approved by Parliament in 1380, it stated that "three groats [one shilling] should be given from each lay person of the realm, within franchise or without, both male and female and of whatsoever estate or condition, who have reached the age of fifteen."<sup>119</sup> This ungraduated tax demanded much more from peasants than the previous two taxes did; although wealthier citizens were supposed to help the peasants of their town meet the one shilling requirement, they were often forced to pay the full amount by themselves.<sup>120</sup> Widespread evasion of this tax resulted in the collection of far less revenue than the king and his administration had hoped for. The government, demanding that the full tax be collected, sent commissioners into the countryside to enforce the collection of revenue from the peasantry.

The labor restrictions and the poll taxes directly affected the lower classes and made them more concerned with the functioning of the monarchy. It was not the local lords who were to be blamed for these things, but high government officials. The commons disliked figures such as Chancellor Simon Sudbury, Treasurer Robert Hales, and John of Gaunt, who helped to design and implement the poll taxes. These men had many opponents among the elite as well. The growing intrusion of the central

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<sup>118</sup> R.H. Britnell, *The Commercialization of English Society, 1000-1500* (Columbia University Press, 1993), 92-4.

<sup>119</sup> "The Northampton Parliament of 1380 and the Grant of the Third Poll Tax: According to the Rolls of Parliament," in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. Dobson, 117.

government in the lives of the commons thus broadened their political awareness and brought their aims more in synch with those of their social betters.

Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury and Chancellor of the realm, was one of the rebels' primary targets. He had been an advocate of the poll tax at the parliament of 1380.<sup>121</sup> In Walsingham's account, the rebels call the archbishop a "traitor to the kingdom" and "the despoiler of the common people."<sup>122</sup> Froissart describes the rebels' arrival at Canterbury in search of Sudbury; they demanded that the archbishop give them "acompte of the revenues of Englande, and of the great profytes that he hath gathered syth the kynges coronacyon."<sup>123</sup> Similarly, upon entering London, they stated that "they wolde never depart" until the archbishop accounted for "all the good . . . that [had been] levyed through the realme."<sup>124</sup>

The rebels' loathing of John of Gaunt seems to have been equal to, if not greater than, their hatred for the archbishop. The rebels could not physically harm the duke because he was in Scotland negotiating a treaty at the time of the rebellion. As Knighton says, however, the commons had "the greatest hatred for the duke . . . [and] if they had come upon him they would have destroyed him without hesitation."<sup>125</sup> According to Froissart, the rebels spoke of John "in malyce and hatered" and called him a traitor.<sup>126</sup> All of the chroniclers give detailed descriptions of the burning of the Savoy, the duke's London residence, which was "unrivalled in splendour and nobility within England."<sup>127</sup> So great was the rebels' hatred for the duke that there seems to have been some sort of

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<sup>120</sup> Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 27-8.

<sup>121</sup> Dobson, 112.

<sup>122</sup> Walsingham, 173.

<sup>123</sup> Froissart, 228.

<sup>124</sup> Froissart, 233.

<sup>125</sup> Knighton, 231.

<sup>126</sup> Froissart, 248.

disagreement between the rebels from the countryside and the commons of London over who would get to burn down the Savoy. According to Walsingham, when the commons of the city heard that the rebels were going to destroy the structure, they “[thought] it particularly shameful for others to harm and injure the duke before themselves,” and so they immediately ran to the Savoy and set fire to it.<sup>128</sup> The *Anonimalle* chronicler indicates that there was some confusion over who had actually destroyed the palace: while “the commons of Kent received the blame for this arson . . . some said that the Londoners were really guilty of the deed, because of their hatred for the said duke.”<sup>129</sup> In Walsingham’s chronicle, the rebels seemed to fear that John was planning to usurp the throne, since they forced people to swear allegiance to King Richard and to promise that they “would accept no king who was called John” -- this was apparently a reference to the fact that the duke had married a Castilian princess and thus called himself the ‘King of Castile’.<sup>130</sup>

The rebels had a clear motive for targeting the archbishop, John of Gaunt, Robert Hales, and others who were involved in the implementation of the poll taxes. But it is less clear why they sought out and executed Richard Lyons, the wealthy merchant who had been accused of extorting money from the king. Knighton describes Lyons as “a famous citizen” who had been convicted by the Good Parliament of 1376 “of many frauds committed against the king and the queen, and against many other lords and ladies of the kingdom, in a matter of precious stones and other jewels.”<sup>131</sup> He had been sentenced to life imprisonment, but he was released when John of Gaunt reversed many

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<sup>127</sup> Walsingham, 169.

<sup>128</sup> Walsingham, 169.

<sup>129</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 157.

<sup>130</sup> Walsingham, 133.

of the parliament's decrees. Since Lyons had not committed frauds against the commons, it seems strange that the rebels would have targeted him. Froissart claims that Wat Tyler had served Lyons in France and that Tyler decided to have him killed because "this Rycharde Lyon had beaten hym whyle he was his varlet."<sup>132</sup> However, Froissart is the only chronicler to make this claim, and there is no outside evidence to suggest that Tyler did serve under Lyons. It seems more likely that Froissart, not knowing the real reason behind Lyons' murder, attributes it to Tyler's desire for revenge because he wishes to further stain the image of the rebels.

The rebels' targeting of Lyons may instead be a sign of how broad their goal of political reform was. They understood that the merchant was indirectly responsible for the poll taxes because his financial activities had contributed to the king's dependence on levies. Lyons' actions showed the insurgents that what was bad for the king was harmful for the entire kingdom. The rebels were aware of how inter-connected the realm was -- they saw how the activities of one wealthy London merchant could have serious repercussions for thousands of peasants. The fact that Lyons was one of the men who had been condemned by the Good Parliament, but then let off the hook by John of Gaunt, also made him a clear symbol of the corruption in government. The rebels' desire to purge the kingdom of traitors thus extended beyond what directly affected them. They defined traitors as all of those who acted against the interests of the king and the realm, not just those individuals who were immediately responsible for the poll taxes.

In addition to sharing a desire for political reform, the insurgents and the elite also shared a lexicon of social discourse. Terms such as 'commons,' 'community' and

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<sup>131</sup> Knighton, 219.

<sup>132</sup> Froissart, 233.

‘common profit’ figured prominently in contemporary theories about the nature of society. The rebels used this terminology to portray themselves and their cause as legitimate and respectable. According to Walsingham, the rebels at St. Albans “gloried in [the name of ‘commons’] and believed no name was more honourable than the name of ‘community’.”<sup>133</sup> They also called themselves ‘burghers’ and ‘citizens’, terms that signified that they were respectable members of the realm.<sup>134</sup> In Froissart’s account and in the *Anonimalle Chronicle*, the rebels proclaim that they are rising for the “common profit.”<sup>135</sup> According to the *Anonimalle* chronicler, when the insurgents came to Canterbury they made all the inhabitants swear that they would be faithful to King Richard and “the loyal commons of England.”<sup>136</sup> Walsingham also reports that the rebels in St. Albans made people pledge “that they would adhere to King Richard and the commons.”<sup>137</sup> By using this terminology in their oaths, the rebels attached themselves and their cause to the legitimizing figure of the king.

The rebels used these terms to establish their own identity and to convey a certain image to the rest of the realm. According to Strohm, the term ‘community’, or *communitas*, had “ultimately respectable implications in the social thought of the day.”<sup>138</sup> The word also had a specific legal usage -- Steven Justice writes that it “designated the village population . . . as a political corporation with rights and responsibilities before the common law, derived immediately from the crown.”<sup>139</sup> By identifying themselves as a ‘community’, the rebels conveyed the idea that they were entitled to participate in the

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<sup>133</sup> Walsingham, 275.

<sup>134</sup> Walsingham, 275.

<sup>135</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 124; Froissart, 229.

<sup>136</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 127.

<sup>137</sup> Walsingham, 171.

<sup>138</sup> Strohm, 40-1.

<sup>139</sup> Justice, 172.

political life of the kingdom. The phrase was intended to enhance the image of the rural people and link them to the official legal structure of the realm.

The term ‘commons’ was also a significant form of self-identification for the rebels. Although this word could be used in a pejorative sense to signify “the poor and the low,”<sup>140</sup> it developed a much more positive connotation in late-fourteenth century England. It was often used to signify a diverse and upwardly mobile group of people, such as landholders, artisans, and merchants.<sup>141</sup> In Parliament, the house of Commons referred to the group of knights and burgesses who were chosen from each shire to participate in the politics of the realm.<sup>142</sup> The term thus encompassed a wide variety of people. By calling themselves ‘commons’, the rebels implied that they were in the same category as wealthy merchants, members of Parliament, and many other respectable members of society.

During the rebellion, the insurgents tried to present themselves in ways that would be looked upon favorably by large segments of the population. By using terms such as ‘community’ and ‘commons’, they conveyed a positive image of themselves to the rest of the realm. They also tried to persuade the public to support them by emphasizing the justness of their cause. According to Walsingham, the rebels “[asserted] that their intention was merely to discover the traitors of the kingdom, after which they would disband.” They also announced that “they would not plunder at all but buy everything at a fair price.”<sup>143</sup> When the insurgents descended on the Savoy, they forbid any of their

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<sup>140</sup> Thrupp, 289.

<sup>141</sup> Thrupp, 289.

<sup>142</sup> McKisack, 189.

<sup>143</sup> Walsingham, 169.

number to take the objects they found there, “under penalty of execution.”<sup>144</sup> The rebels made these public statements to “[gain] greater credence” for their cause and to demonstrate to “the whole community of the realm . . . that they were not motivated by avarice.”<sup>145</sup> They portrayed themselves as honest citizens who were merely trying to defend the king and the people of the realm from traitors. According to Walsingham, the rebels succeeded in “[persuading] the community of Londoners and the rest of the kingdom to favour them” by making these proclamations.<sup>146</sup>

In addition to using the language of social discourse, the rebels also appropriated the legal concepts and procedures of the elite to give themselves and their cause more legitimacy. They were highly aware of the power of official documents, as manorial lords often used contracts to delineate the rights and obligations of their tenants or serfs.<sup>147</sup> During the revolt, the rebels destroyed those documents which they saw as obstacles to their freedom, and created new charters that would establish and preserve their rights. Most of the chroniclers emphasize the rebels’ burning of legal documents, in part to tarnish their image by emphasizing their destructive behavior. In addition to being a violent act, however, the destruction of these records demonstrates the rebels’ deliberate assertion of control over the legal procedures of the elite. According to Walsingham, the insurgents destroyed these documents “so that once the memory of ancient customs had been wiped out their lords would be completely unable to vindicate their rights over them.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Walsingham, 169.

<sup>145</sup> Walsingham, 169.

<sup>146</sup> Walsingham, 169.

<sup>147</sup> For an analysis of the extent of peasant literacy, see Justice, “Insurgent Literacy,” in *Writing and Rebellion*, 13-66.

<sup>148</sup> Walsingham, 133-4.

The rebels did much more than destroy legal documents. They also sought to uncover old records that entitled them to certain rights, and they had new documents drawn up in order to establish the liberties which they now desired. The commons who revolted against the St. Albans monastery, for example, demanded that the monks produce an ancient feudal document that was in their possession, which they claimed granted a number of liberties to their town.<sup>149</sup> These liberties were relatively conservative in nature -- they included fishing rights and the freedom to erect hand-mills wherever and whenever they wished.<sup>150</sup> Some of the rebels from St. Albans went to London to ask the highest authority in the land, the king, for a writ that would compel the abbot to produce this document. Richard II granted them this writ, but Walsingham, who was a monk at St. Albans at the time, denies its legal validity by claiming that it had been “extorted rather than obtained from the king.”<sup>151</sup>

Some of the chroniclers include the texts of the charters given by the king to the insurgents in London. In one of these documents, the king addresses the rebels as “good commons,”<sup>152</sup> and in another he calls them “burgesses and good men of the town.”<sup>153</sup> The use of such terms suggests that Richard accepted the rebels’ definition of themselves as respectable citizens and members of a *communitas*. According to Walsingham, however, the king granted these charters merely to placate the rebels and persuade them to leave London, without intending to honor them.<sup>154</sup> Thus, the terminology used in the charters may just have been a way of humoring the rebels to get them to disperse.

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<sup>149</sup> See Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 199-202.

<sup>150</sup> Walsingham, 270.

<sup>151</sup> Walsingham, 275.

<sup>152</sup> *Anonimale Chronicle*, 159.

<sup>153</sup> Walsingham, 275.

<sup>154</sup> Walsingham, 275.

In addition to destroying, preserving, and creating written documents, the rebels also made use of oral legal procedures in their effort to assert control over the forms of legality. The insurgents often made the residents of the towns they entered take oaths of loyalty to the rebels and to the king.<sup>155</sup> They seemed to be appropriating a legal practice known as *jurare*, which was commonly used when people gave testimony in court or entered into contracts.<sup>156</sup> In the beginning of the rebellion, the insurgents made Robert Bealnap, a justice who had come to hold inquests concerning the evasion of the poll tax, swear on a Bible that he would not hold these sessions.<sup>157</sup> This act seems symbolic of how the rebels appropriated the legal procedures of the elite, as embodied by Justice Bealnap, and used it to promote their own aims.

In addition to adopting the terminology and the legal practices of elite society, the rebels also tried to appropriate the actual bodies of the nobility. This was another part of the rebels' effort to assert control over the image they conveyed to the public. Walsingham writes that the rebels, fearing that "their own authority was too slight to justify" their actions, "determined to secure the support of the earl of Suffolk" so that if they were caught and accused of crimes, they could claim "that they had been acting under the shadow and with the connivance of a greater man and a peer."<sup>158</sup> The earl was warned of the rebels' intentions and managed to escape. But the rebels then forced other knights to go with them "around the country for the sake of greater security."<sup>159</sup> They apparently thought they would not be blamed if they could claim they were acting under the authority of members of the nobility -- the physical presence of the knights within the

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<sup>155</sup> *Anonimale Chronicle*, 128; Walsingham, 171.

<sup>156</sup> Strohm, 39.

<sup>157</sup> *Anonimale Chronicle*, 125.

<sup>158</sup> Walsingham, 257.

rebel army could serve to legitimize their actions, and their public image would improve if it looked like they had gentlemen supporting them. Froissart also recounts how the rebels in the countryside forced “the knightes and gentylnen” whom they encountered “to go with them wheder they wolde or nat.”<sup>160</sup> The next chapter will suggest that not all of the knights were conscripted unwillingly into the rebel army.

Some of the rebels may have even planned to use the king’s body to legitimize their actions and create mass support. According to the *Anonimalle* chronicler, the insurgents planned to seize King Richard and “lead him round the whole of England with them.”<sup>161</sup> The rebels would then “force [the king] to grant them all their desires,”<sup>162</sup> but they may have also wanted to use the king as a puppet to gain widespread support. In Walsingham’s chronicle, one of the rebel leaders, John Straw, indicates that this was indeed their intention -- Straw says that the insurgents planned to take the king around with them “in the full sight of all; so that when everybody . . . saw him, they would willingly have joined us and our band -- for it would have seemed to them that the king was the author of our turbulence.”<sup>163</sup> Even without having taken the king hostage, some of the rebels claimed that they were acting under his authority. Walsingham includes in his chronicle the text of a letter sent by the king to local officials. In this letter, Richard makes note of the fact that some rebels were claiming “that they have made the said assemblies and risings by our will and with our authority.”<sup>164</sup> Although the king denies the validity of this claim, it provides another example of how the rebels tried to

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<sup>159</sup> Walsingham, 258.

<sup>160</sup> Froissart, 228.

<sup>161</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 130.

<sup>162</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 130-1.

<sup>163</sup> Walsingham, 365.

<sup>164</sup> Walsingham, 309.

appropriate elements of elite society -- in this case, the king himself -- in order to gain legitimacy.

### Chapter 3

#### *The Role of the Elite*

In the last chapter, it was demonstrated that the rebels had much in common with elite society. They shared a desire for political reform, a standard language of social discourse, and a command over the uses of legal documents and procedures. The insurgents used carefully-calculated terms of self-identification, as well as the physical presence of members of the nobility, to try to improve their public image and give themselves a broader base of support. The chroniclers generally try to distance the insurgents from their own social milieu by tarnishing the image of the rebels and portraying them as the ‘Other’; they deny that the rebels could have had anything to do with the elite. There are indications, however, that the higher orders were not totally unsympathetic to the cause of the rebels. As this chapter will show, significant portions of elite society demonstrated some degree of support for the insurgents. More often than not, this support was passive in nature -- the noblemen allowed the rebellion to continue by choosing not to oppose the insurgents. But there are also hints of more active support for the rebels by members of the aristocracy.

As has already been shown, the rebel community contained a diverse population. In addition to peasants, reeves, craftsmen, townsmen, city-dwellers, and many others participated in the revolt. But historians such as Rodney Hilton have generally drawn the line of participation between those with political standing and those without. Hilton denies that “any group which had a part to play in the accepted political game” took part

in the rebellion.<sup>165</sup> These groups included lords and ecclesiastics, wealthy merchants, citizens and burgesses who were eligible for Parliament, and landholding knights. However, the chronicles contain indications that significant portions of elite society, though not actively participating in the revolt, may have aided it through their passivity.

The chroniclers make numerous references to the inactivity of the nobility during the rebellion. According to Walsingham, for example, “the lords were not alert to the need for opposing these iniquities; but they remained inert, staying quiet and motionless in their homes.”<sup>166</sup> Most of the chroniclers attribute this inactivity to the lords’ fear of the rebels. In Knighton’s chronicle, the knights in the Tower of London “lamentably [hid] the boldness of their spirit . . . as though struck by some womanish fear.”<sup>167</sup> Walsingham states that the knights living in the countryside “had . . . lain low for fear of the commons,”<sup>168</sup> and Froissart writes that “The gentylnen of the countreis . . . began to doute, whan they sawe the people began to rebell.”<sup>169</sup>

Although the chroniclers claim that the noblemen were inactive out of fear, this explanation seems doubtful when their descriptions of the rebel army are taken into account. The insurgents, according to the chroniclers, were not well armed: in Walsingham’s description, “some [rebels] carried only sticks, some swords covered with rust . . . .Among a thousand of these men it was difficult to find one who was properly armed.”<sup>170</sup> Froissart reports that out of every twenty of the rebels in London, “ther was

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<sup>165</sup> Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 221. Hilton also states that ‘the rising was one of the whole people below the ranks of those who exercised lordship in the countryside and established authority in the towns’ (*Bond Men Made Free*, 184).

<sup>166</sup> Walsingham, 134.

<sup>167</sup> Knighton, 213.

<sup>168</sup> Walsingham, 260.

<sup>169</sup> Froissart, 226.

<sup>170</sup> Walsingham, 132.

scant one in harness.”<sup>171</sup> In Knighton’s account, the rebels who entered the Tower of London did not even use weapons; they seized the archbishop and the other traitors “not by force or assault, not with the sword or the arrow, or by any other compulsion, but by threatening words and the clamour of the crowd.”<sup>172</sup>

In addition, the rebels seem to have been easily defeated in the rare instances when they were resisted. The *Anonimalle* chronicler describes how the men of Huntingdon prevented a band of rebels from coming into their town; they had only to kill “two or three of the commons” before the band gave up and decided to flee.<sup>173</sup> When Bishop Henry Despenser attacked the same group of rebels, he easily dispersed them and killed more than twenty men.<sup>174</sup> Walsingham recounts a confrontation that took place in Essex between a small armed force and a “great number of” rebels who had “fortified their position...[with] ditches, stakes and carts;” the insurgents also had the advantage of “the more secure protection of woods and forests,” but they were “easily dispersed” by the soldiers.<sup>175</sup> In London, the rebels were not seriously resisted until the death of Wat Tyler; but once the insurgents were confronted, they seemed to give up quite easily. At Smithfield, having been surrounded by armed men “just as sheep are enclosed within a fold,” the rebels threw down their weapons and “humbly sank to the ground.”<sup>176</sup> Describing how easily the rebels were defeated might have been part of the chroniclers’ effort to degrade the rebels’ image. However, these claims seem quite credible when one considers how well trained the knightly class was in the arts of war, while most of the commons who took part in the revolt would have had little or no formal training.

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<sup>171</sup> Froissart, 234.

<sup>172</sup> Knighton, 213-5.

<sup>173</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 236.

<sup>174</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 236.

The nobility's inactivity thus does not seem to have been due to fear, since the rebels were poorly armed and could be easily defeated. Instead, it may have been a sign of passive support for rebel aims and a willingness to let the rebellion go forward, at least for a time. As suggested in the previous chapter, some of the primary aims of the rebels coincided with the desires of the elite. The insurgents demanded accountability and political reform, much as the Good Parliament had in 1376. The chroniclers describe how some of the noblemen targeted by the rebels were also disliked by the elite. According to Froissart, John of Gaunt had so many enemies that he could not be sure "of whome he was beloved [or] hatyd."<sup>177</sup> Similarly, Knighton writes that there were "many who were jealous of him, and were his enemies, both rich and poor," and indicates that some were conspiring against him.<sup>178</sup> Many ecclesiastics also disliked John of Gaunt because he had been a patron of John Wyclif, whose religious beliefs went against many Church tenets. The duke had become widely unpopular because of his failures in war, and because of his domestic scandals.<sup>179</sup> It was feared that the powerful and ambitious duke planned to steal the crown from his nephew, Richard II.<sup>180</sup>

The chronicles also hint at the unpopularity of Simon Sudbury. According to Walsingham, many believed that God punished the archbishop "by the horrid passion of his death because of the lukewarmness of his care" in Church matters, such as on the controversial issue of transubstantiation.<sup>181</sup> They were apparently dissatisfied by Sudbury's performance in the office of archbishop of Canterbury. However, although the

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<sup>175</sup> Walsingham, 311.

<sup>176</sup> Walsingham, 179-80.

<sup>177</sup> Froissart, 247.

<sup>178</sup> Knighton, 235.

<sup>179</sup> McKisack, 393.

<sup>180</sup> McKisack, 393.

<sup>181</sup> Walsingham, 367.

archbishop might not have been popular, it is doubtful that large segments of the population would have wanted him killed. To murder an archbishop was, needless to say, an impious and damnable act. The higher orders may not have minded if Sudbury were removed from his post, but few would have gone so far as to support his death.

The last chapter has shown how the rebels consciously formulated their public image in order to gain a wider base of support. They adopted terms such as ‘commons’ and ‘community’ to give themselves an air of respectability and legality. They apparently used the physical presence of knights to persuade the higher orders to support their cause. Walsingham indicates that the rebels were successful at winning support for their attacks on the ‘traitors’. The rebels, he writes, “had persuaded the community of Londoners and the rest of the kingdom to favour them” by claiming that they would merely seek out and remove the traitors to the kingdom, and by promising not to steal or plunder.<sup>182</sup>

In addition, elite society was not totally unsympathetic to the hardships faced by the lower classes. The chroniclers themselves sometimes admit that the commons were treated unjustly by their lords and by the government. They express dissatisfaction over the poll taxes, for example, even though they were not personally disadvantaged by them. According to the *Anonimalle* chronicler, these “subsidies had been granted lightly at the parliament;” lords as well as commons believed they “had not been properly or honestly collected but had been raised from the poor people and not the rich, to the great profit” of the tax collectors.<sup>183</sup> Knighton recounts the injustices performed by the commissioners who were sent out to enforce the collection of the poll tax. One of these commissioners,

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<sup>182</sup> Walsingham, 169.

<sup>183</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 123-4.

John Legg, would have the inhabitants of each town he passed through assemble before him. Since the tax had to be paid by adults and not by children, he “would shamelessly raise the young girls’ skirts, to discover whether they were corrupted by intercourse with men,” thereby compelling the girls’ parents to pay the tax for them so that they would not be “shamefully mistreated.”<sup>184</sup> Knighton seems to understand the difficult situation faced by the commons; he writes that they began to rebel because they were “greatly harassed . . . [by the] intolerable burdens incessantly laid upon them, without hope of redress.”<sup>185</sup>

Some of the chroniclers also recognize that the peasants were treated unfairly by the nobility. Walsingham, for example, admits that many “lords were tyrants to their subjects.”<sup>186</sup> The *Anonimalle* chronicler recounts the story of Sir Simon de Burley, a knight who “charged a man with being his own serf” and demanded that he pay him three-hundred pounds in silver, a sum which the man did not have. When the residents of the town told Simon that this man “was a Christian and of good repute and so ought not to be ruined for ever,” the knight “grew angry and irritable . . . and out of the haughtiness of his heart,” he had the man arrested and taken to a castle.<sup>187</sup> The *Anonimalle* chronicler here touches upon an issue that concerned many of his contemporaries -- the belief that it was wrong for one Christian to enslave another. Although most medieval intellectuals accepted the existence of unequal status in the post-Fall world, they did oppose the “arbitrary and unjust lordship” that so often arose when a man was held as a serf.<sup>188</sup>

The rebels’ desire for political reform, their deliberate construction of their public image, and sympathy for peasants all contributed to the passivity of the elite during the

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<sup>184</sup> Knighton, 207.

<sup>185</sup> Knighton, 207-9.

<sup>186</sup> Walsingham, 368.

<sup>187</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 126.

rebellion. This is not to say, however, that elite support for the rebels was absolute and unconditional. Some of the insurgents' aims were too radical to be supported or tolerated by the elite. Wat Tyler and other rebel leaders had called for an end to villeinage, equality of status, the division of Church goods among the commons, and a variety of other radical demands.<sup>189</sup> The higher orders could hardly be expected to support such aims, which would have overturned the social structure and destroyed their own privileged position in society. Thus, it is more accurate to say that the elite supported some goals of the rebellion, while rejecting others. They remained passive only up to a point, when it became clear that the rebellion was growing too violent and destructive. The murder of top officials such as Sudbury and Hales probably contributed the most to ending the passivity of the elite. Indeed, Wat Tyler was killed and the rebellion was essentially put down on the day following their execution.

There are indications in the chronicles, however, that a small number of noblemen actively participated in the revolt. The last chapter has shown how the rebels seized lords and knights to try to give an aura of legitimacy to their actions. Although most of the gentlemen associated with the insurgents were probably taken by force, there were some who may have voluntarily served the rebel army. According to Froissart, for example, many people believed that the earl of Buckingham took part in the insurgency, and "some sayd certaynlye howe they had sene hym there amonge" the rebels. The chronicler, however, claims that these people were mistaken and that they had merely seen a man "that was very lyke the erle" in appearance.<sup>190</sup> Walsingham describes how the rebels of Norfolk decided to send two knights whom they had presumably seized, along with three

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<sup>188</sup> Freedman, 83.

<sup>189</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 164-5.

commons, to secure a charter of manumission and pardon from the king. Along the way, the knights and their companions encountered Bishop Despenser, who then ordered the knights “to declare on their loyalty if there were any traitors to the king present with them.” Walsingham claims that the knights, having been “exposed to the fear of the rustics for so long,” failed to admit that their three companions were rebels. When the bishop realized that they were frightened and urged them to tell the truth, the knights finally confessed that those with them were insurgents.<sup>191</sup> But why would these knights, if they truly had been held by the rebels against their will, have hesitated at all, given that the bishop was accompanied by an armed force and the rebel army was nowhere in sight? It is possible that those who believed they saw the earl of Buckingham were mistaken, and that the knights were too afraid to immediately denounce their companions to the bishop; but it may be that Walsingham and Froissart, unable to come up with any respectable explanation for why these things were reported, were merely trying to disavow the idea that gentlemen would have voluntarily associated with the rebels.

There may even have been support for the rebels within the highest levels of government. There is little or no outside evidence for this theory and it can only be speculation, but there are indications in the chronicles that top administrators did not try to stem the rising tide of the rebellion. For example, the king’s advisors were repeatedly unable to offer the king advice on what to do while the rebels were in London. Froissart expresses surprise that the king and his men did not take action upon first hearing of the rebellion. He calls it a “great marveyle” that neither Richard nor his counsel tried to

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<sup>190</sup> Froissart, 230-1.

<sup>191</sup> Walsingham, 259.

remedy the situation.<sup>192</sup> The *Anonimalle* chronicler writes that when the king summoned his advisors into his chamber to give him advice, “none of them could or would give him any counsel.”<sup>193</sup> The counselors, he writes, “did not know how to advise [the king], and were surprisingly abashed.”<sup>194</sup> Walsingham also remarks on the ease with which the insurgents penetrated the Tower of London: the king “allowed the rebels to enter . . . like someone who could deny them nothing with safety.”<sup>195</sup> The rebels were not opposed as they searched for the archbishop and the other ‘traitors’, even though there were, according to Walsingham, “six hundred soldiers, skilled in arms, strong and most expert, as well as six hundred archers” in the Tower. “Marvellously enough,” he writes, these soldiers “were inclined to appear more like the dead than the living.”<sup>196</sup> The insurgents “conversed familiarly with the soldiers . . . [and] suggested that [they] might swear to help seek the traitors of the kingdom.”<sup>197</sup> Although Walsingham attributes the soldiers’ inaction to fear, perhaps these men had been persuaded by the rebels’ words to look the other way.

The king himself may have wanted the rebels to disable those figures who were a threat to his power, such as John of Gaunt. Although such a conspiracy seems unlikely, it is not beyond the realm of possibility. Indeed, some of those who witnessed the rebellion believed that the insurgents were supported by the king. According to Walsingham, for example, “it was said in many parts of the kingdom that what had been done against [John of Gaunt] had been done with royal approval.”<sup>198</sup> His chronicle also includes the

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<sup>192</sup> Froissart, 227.

<sup>193</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 159.

<sup>194</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 160.

<sup>195</sup> Walsingham, 171.

<sup>196</sup> Walsingham, 171.

<sup>197</sup> Walsingham, 171-2.

<sup>198</sup> Walsingham, 235.

text of a letter sent by the king to local officials, in which the king denies the claim, apparently made by some of the rebels, that they were acting under his authority.<sup>199</sup> The fact that the king felt the need to make this denial suggests that a significant number of people actually suspected the king of giving his support to the rebels.

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<sup>199</sup> Walsingham, 309.

## Conclusion

As this paper has demonstrated, the chronicles of the Peasants' Revolt vilify the rebels and present them as the enemies of elite society. These very same chronicles, however, indicate that the rebels were closely related to the elite in a number of ways. Both groups desired political reform and the removal of corrupt officials. The rebels appropriated the language of social discourse and emulated the legal procedures of the elite. They consciously presented themselves as legitimate and respectable members of society. The elite's passivity and failure to oppose the insurgency indicates that they supported the rebels' cause to some degree. In general, the rebels and the higher orders had much more in common than previously thought. It was this similarity between the insurgents and the social elite that prompted the chroniclers to distort the image of the rebels, in order to distance these unstable forces from their own social milieu.

The chronicles of the Peasants' Revolt are full of tension and contradictory elements. They seem to be centered around two competing sets of images. The chroniclers present their own image of the rebels -- they describe them as lowly, foolish, and wicked creatures. Beneath this representation, however, there lies another image of the insurgents -- that which the rebels themselves had produced. The rebels had attempted to present themselves as respectable citizens of the realm. They used terms such as 'commons' and 'community'; they proclaimed that their goal was to purge the kingdom of traitors; they tried to show that they were not motivated by avarice by forbidding anyone to take objects from the Savoy palace; they got charters from the highest authority in the land, the king, to provide a firm legal foundation for their

liberties; and they claimed to have the support of certain noblemen, and even of the king himself, to persuade the community of the realm that their cause was just. In the end, however, it was the chroniclers' image of the rebels that overtook the popular imagination. The fact that we today use the term 'Peasants' Revolt,' when in fact so many of the insurgents were not peasants, shows that the chroniclers succeeded in conveying the image of the rebels as lowly and base. The chroniclers, with their command over the written word, had the upper-hand in the struggle to establish the accepted image of the insurgents. Fortunately for the historian, though, the chronicles still contain traces of the identity which the rebels had tried to establish for themselves. This identity is often obscured by the condemnatory language of the chroniclers, but it has not been entirely erased.

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