

Year 7 Scholar's Pathway



Extracts Term 3: Medieval

Peasants and their role in rural life

Article written by: [Alixé Bovey](#)

Published: 30 Apr 2015

By exploring illuminations depicting rural life, Dr Alixé Bovey examines the role of the peasant in medieval society, and discusses the changes sparked by the Black Death.

In the Middle Ages, the majority of the population lived in the countryside, and some 85 percent of the population could be described as peasants. Peasants worked the land to yield food, fuel, wool and other resources. The countryside was divided into estates, run by a lord or an institution, such as a monastery or college. A social hierarchy divided the peasantry: at the bottom of the structure were the serfs, who were legally tied to the land they worked. They were obliged both to grow their own food and to labour for the landowner. They were in effect owned by the landowner. At the upper end were the freemen who were often enterprising smallholders, renting land from the lord, or even owning land in their own right, and able to make considerable amounts of money. Other workers carried out trades such as basket-weaving or bee keeping. A complex web of ties formalised by a sworn oath defined the relationships between kings, lords, vassals, serfs and so on.

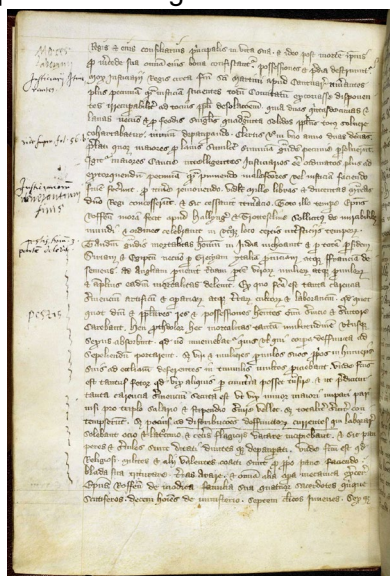
Images from rural life

It is possible to catch glimpses of rural life painted on the pages of medieval manuscripts, though it must be remembered that such images were almost always made for the wealthy patrons who had commissioned the works and so reflect their perspective on country life rather than that of those lower down the social scale. An interesting example of this is an image from a fine 13th century manuscript made in Paris, which shows a lazy ploughman, asleep by a tree as his team sit doing nothing; the ploughman represents 'Idleness'. Below 'Labour' is symbolised by a sower scattering seed, who is visually likened to the powerful David in the act of hurling a stone at Goliath.

The Black Death and Peasants' Revolt

In the mid-14th century, the catastrophic plague known as the Black Death hit Europe, and swept through the continent rapidly. It would eventually kill between a third and half of the population. These huge death tolls sparked off a chain of events that would redefine the position of the peasant in England. Due to the fact that so many had died, there were far fewer people to work

the land: peasants were therefore able to demand better conditions and higher wages from their landlords. Many advanced to higher positions in society. Thus the Black Death was ultimately responsible for major shifts in the social structure.



This manuscript extract provides a first-hand account of the Black Death, a devastating plague that reduced the population of Europe by a third. The account tells how relatives of the dead had to carry the corpses themselves to open mass graves. The Black Death killed so many that there was a severe shortage of people to work in the fields and this became a major catalyst in the rise of the peasant revolt. Knowing how much the land owners needed workers, the labourers used this as leverage in demanding higher wages and better living conditions.

The chronicle above, written at the cathedral priory of Rochester between 1314 and 1350, includes a firsthand account of the Black Death, describing the changes in the everyday lives of people across the social scale: 'there was such a shortage of servants, craftsmen, and workmen, and of agricultural workers and labourers ... [that] churchmen, knights and other worthies have been forced to thresh their corn, plough the land and perform every other unskilled task if they are to make their own bread.'

Resentment among the peasantry was simmering when between 1377 and 1381, a number of taxes were levied to finance government spending. This prompted a violent rebellion in June 1381, known as the Peasant's Revolt. A large group of commoners rode on London, storming the Tower of London and demanding reforms from the young Richard II. The rebellion would end in failure. A number of prominent rebels were killed, including their charismatic leader Wat Tyler – pictured here. Richard quelled the rebellion by promising reforms but failed to keep his word. Instead, punishments were harsh.

Extract in present day English:

A great mortality ... destroyed more than a third of the men, women and children. As a result, there was such a shortage of servants, craftsmen, and workmen, and of agricultural workers and labourers, that a great many lords and people, although well-endowed with goods and possessions, were yet without service and attendance. Alas, this mortality devoured such a multitude of both sexes that no one could be found to carry the bodies of the dead to burial, but men and women carried the bodies of their own little ones to church on their shoulders and threw them into mass graves, from which arose such a stink that it was barely possible for anyone to go past a churchyard. As remarked above, such a shortage of workers ensued that the humble turned up their noses at employment, and could scarcely be persuaded to serve the eminent unless for triple wages. Instead, because of the doles handed out at funerals, those who once had to work now began to have time for idleness, thieving and other outrages, and thus the poor and servile have been enriched and the rich impoverished. As a result, churchmen, knights and other worthies have been forced to thresh their corn, plough the land and perform every other unskilled task if they are to make their own bread.

Canto 3

"THROUGH me you pass into the city of woe:
Through me you pass into eternal pain:
Through me among the people lost for aye.
Justice the founder of my fabric mov'd:
To rear me was the task of power divine,
Supremest wisdom, and primeval love.
Before me things create were none, save things
Eternal, and eternal I endure.
"All hope abandon ye who enter here."

Such characters in colour dim I mark'd
Over a portal's lofty arch inscrib'd:
Whereat I thus: "Master, these words import
Hard meaning." He as one prepar'd replied:
"Here thou must all distrust behind thee leave;
Here be vile fear extinguish'd. We are come
Where I have told thee we shall see the souls
To misery doom'd, who intellectual good
Have lost." And when his hand he had stretch'd forth
To mine, with pleasant looks, whence I was cheer'd,
Into that secret place he led me on.

Here sighs with lamentations and loud moans
Resounded through the air pierc'd by no star,
That e'en I wept at entering. Various tongues,
Horrible languages, outcries of woe,
Accents of anger, voices deep and hoarse,
With hands together smote that swell'd the sounds,
Made up a tumult, that for ever whirls
Round through that air with solid darkness stain'd,
Like to the sand that in the whirlwind flies.

I then, with error yet encompass'd, cried:
"O master! What is this I hear? What race
Are these, who seem so overcome with woe?"

He thus to me: "This miserable fate
Suffer the wretched souls of those, who liv'd
Without or praise or blame, with that ill band
Of angels mix'd, who nor rebellious prov'd
Nor yet were true to God, but for themselves
Were only. From his bounds Heaven drove them forth,
Not to impair his lustre, nor the depth
Of Hell receives them, lest th' accursed tribe
Should glory thence with exultation vain."

I then: "Master! what doth aggrieve them thus,

That they lament so loud?" He straight replied:
"That will I tell thee briefly. These of death
No hope may entertain: and their blind life
So meanly passes, that all other lots
They envy. Fame of them the world hath none,
Nor suffers; mercy and justice scorn them both.
Speak not of them, but look, and pass them by."

And I, who straightway look'd, beheld a flag,
Which whirling ran around so rapidly,
That it no pause obtain'd: and following came
Such a long train of spirits, I should ne'er
Have thought, that death so many had despoil'd.

When some of these I recogniz'd, I saw
And knew the shade of him, who to base fear
Yielding, abjur'd his high estate. Forthwith
I understood for certain this the tribe
Of those ill spirits both to God displeasing
And to his foes. These wretches, who ne'er lived,
Went on in nakedness, and sorely stung
By wasps and hornets, which bedew'd their cheeks
With blood, that mix'd with tears dropp'd to their feet,
And by disgustful worms was gather'd there.

Then looking farther onwards I beheld
A throng upon the shore of a great stream:
Whereat I thus: "Sir! grant me now to know
Whom here we view, and whence impell'd they seem
So eager to pass o'er, as I discern
Through the blear light?" He thus to me in few:
"This shalt thou know, soon as our steps arrive
Beside the woeful tide of Acheron."

Then with eyes downward cast and fill'd with shame,
Fearing my words offensive to his ear,
Till we had reach'd the river, I from speech
Abstain'd. And lo! toward us in a bark
Comes on an old man hoary white with eld,
Crying, "Woe to you wicked spirits! hope not
Ever to see the sky again. I come
To take you to the other shore across,
Into eternal darkness, there to dwell
In fierce heat and in ice. And thou, who there
Standest, live spirit! get thee hence, and leave
These who are dead." But soon as he beheld
I left them not, "By other way," said he,
"By other haven shalt thou come to shore,
Not by this passage; thee a nimbler boat
Must carry." Then to him thus spake my guide:

"Charon! thyself torment not: so 't is will'd,
Where will and power are one: ask thou no more."

Straightway in silence fell the shaggy cheeks
Of him the boatman o'er the livid lake,
Around whose eyes glar'd wheeling flames. Meanwhile
Those spirits, faint and naked, color chang'd,
And gnash'd their teeth, soon as the cruel words
They heard. God and their parents they blasphem'd,
The human kind, the place, the time, and seed
That did engender them and give them birth.

Then all together sorely wailing drew
To the curs'd strand, that every man must pass
Who fears not God. Charon, demoniac form,
With eyes of burning coal, collects them all,
Beck'ning, and each, that lingers, with his oar
Strikes. As fall off the light autumnal leaves,
One still another following, till the bough
Strews all its honours on the earth beneath;
E'en in like manner Adam's evil brood
Cast themselves one by one down from the shore,
Each at a beck, as falcon at his call.

Thus go they over through the umber'd wave,
And ever they on the opposing bank
Be landed, on this side another throng
Still gathers. "Son," thus spake the courteous guide,
"Those, who die subject to the wrath of God,
All here together come from every clime,
And to o'erpass the river are not loth:
For so heaven's justice goads them on, that fear
Is turn'd into desire. Hence ne'er hath past
Good spirit. If of thee Charon complain,
Now mayst thou know the import of his words."

This said, the gloomy region trembling shook
So terribly, that yet with clammy dews
Fear chills my brow. The sad earth gave a blast,
That, lightening, shot forth a vermilion flame,
Which all my senses conquer'd quite, and I
Down dropp'd, as one with sudden slumber seiz'd.

Dante's Inferno

Canto VI

Inferno: Canto VI

At the return of consciousness, that closed
Before the pity of those two relations,
Which utterly with sadness had confused me,
New torments I behold, and new tormented
Around me, whichsoever way I move,
And whichsoever way I turn, and gaze.
In the third circle am I of the rain
Eternal, maledict, and cold, and heavy;
Its law and quality are never new.
Huge hail, and water sombre-hued, and snow,
Athwart the tenebrous air pour down amain;
Noisome the earth is, that receiveth this.
Cerberus, monster cruel and uncouth,
With his three gullets like a dog is barking
Over the people that are there submerged.
Red eyes he has, and unctuous beard and black,
And belly large, and armed with claws his hands;
He rends the spirits, flays, and quarters them.
Howl the rain maketh them like unto dogs;
One side they make a shelter for the other;
Oft turn themselves the wretched reprobates.
When Cerberus perceived us, the great worm!
His mouths he opened, and displayed his tusks;
Not a limb had he that was motionless.
And my Conductor, with his spans extended,
Took of the earth, and with his fists well filled,
He threw it into those rapacious gullets.
Such as that dog is, who by barking craves,
And quiet grows soon as his food he gnaws,
For to devour it he but thinks and struggles,
The like became those muzzles filth-begrimed
Of Cerberus the demon, who so thunders
Over the souls that they would fain be deaf.
We passed across the shadows, which subdues
The heavy rain-storm, and we placed our feet
Upon their vanity that person seems.
They all were lying prone upon the earth,
Excepting one, who sat upright as soon
As he beheld us passing on before him.
"O thou that art conducted through this Hell,"
He said to me, "recall me, if thou canst;
Thyself wast made before I was unmade."
And I to him: "The anguish which thou hast
Perhaps doth draw thee out of my remembrance,
So that it seems not I have ever seen thee.

But tell me who thou art, that in so doleful
A place art put, and in such punishment,
If some are greater, none is so displeasing."
And he to me: "Thy city, which is full
Of envy so that now the sack runs over,
Held me within it in the life serene.
You citizens were wont to call me Ciacco;
For the pernicious sin of gluttony
I, as thou seest, am battered by this rain.
And I, sad soul, am not the only one,
For all these suffer the like penalty
For the like sin;" and word no more spake he.
I answered him: "Ciacco, thy wretchedness
Weighs on me so that it to weep invites me;
But tell me, if thou knowest, to what shall come
The citizens of the divided city;
If any there be just; and the occasion
Tell me why so much discord has assailed it."
And he to me: "They, after long contention,
Will come to bloodshed; and the rustic party
Will drive the other out with much offence.
Then afterwards behoves it this one fall
Within three suns, and rise again the other
By force of him who now is on the coast.
High will it hold its forehead a long while,
Keeping the other under heavy burdens,
Howe'er it weeps thereat and is indignant.
The just are two, and are not understood there;
Envy and Arrogance and Avarice
Are the three sparks that have all hearts enkindled."
Here ended he his tearful utterance;
And I to him: "I wish thee still to teach me,
And make a gift to me of further speech.
Farinata and Tegghiaio, once so worthy,
Jacopo Rusticucci, Arrigo, and Mosca,
And others who on good deeds set their thoughts,
Say where they are, and cause that I may know them;
For great desire constraineth me to learn
If Heaven doth sweeten them, or Hell envenom."
And he: "They are among the blacker souls;
A different sin downweighs them to the bottom;
If thou so far descendest, thou canst see them.
But when thou art again in the sweet world,
I pray thee to the mind of others bring me;
No more I tell thee and no more I answer."
Then his straightforward eyes he turned askance,
Eyed me a little, and then bowed his head;
He fell therewith prone like the other blind.
And the Guide said to me: "He wakes no more
This side the sound of the angelic trumpet;

When shall approach the hostile Potentate,
Each one shall find again his dismal tomb,
Shall reassume his flesh and his own figure,
Shall hear what through eternity re-echoes."
So we passed onward o'er the filthy mixture
Of shadows and of rain with footsteps slow,
Touching a little on the future life.
Wherefore I said: "Master, these torments here,
Will they increase after the mighty sentence,
Or lesser be, or will they be as burning?"
And he to me: "Return unto thy science,
Which wills, that as the thing more perfect is,
The more it feels of pleasure and of pain.
Albeit that this people maledict
To true perfection never can attain,
Hereafter more than now they look to be."
Round in a circle by that road we went,
Speaking much more, which I do not repeat;
We came unto the point where the descent is;
There we found Plutus the great enemy.