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Shepherds, Regents and Lecherous Widows

The strategies of power in Middle English literature

Medieval studies have progressed far since the 1960s, when D. W. Robertson declared that

the medieval world was innocent of our profound concern for tension [...] We project dynamic polarities on history as class struggles, balances of power, or as conflicts between economic realities and traditional ideals. [...] But the medieval world with its quiet hierarchies knew nothing of these things.¹

Far from being a homogeneous, stable world resting in the quiet equilibrium of a feudal society pervaded by an all-important church, England in the twelfth to sixteenth centuries experienced numerous wars (civil war between Stephen and Matilda, the baronial conflict which resulted in the Magna Carta, Simon de Montfort's rebellion, the 1381 uprising, the Wars of the Roses), challenges to the church's authority (the Wycliffite/Lollard movement, the struggles between Henry II and Thomas Becket, the conflicts surrounding the Great Schism), and serious social disruptions (the 1381 uprising, the land enclosure movement, the Labour Laws resulting from the shortage of labour after the bubonic plague). Robertson, in his vision of an "innocent," "quiet," Edenic medieval world, which sharply contrasts with a (fallen) twentieth century full of "polarities and tensions," is himself guilty of establishing a binary opposition, and projecting that

¹ D. W. Robertson, Jr. *A Preface to Chaucer*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962, p. 51.

opposition onto history. Robertson's image of the Middle Ages owes more to his own wish-fulfilment fantasies than to the medieval texts he studied.

Scholars do not need a "profound concern for tension" to notice the widespread conflicts within medieval society. One need only think of Langland's "fair feeld ful of folk" or the variety of Chaucer's pilgrims to realise that the hierarchies upheld by three-estate theories were not reflected in the reality of the fourteenth century. John Gower's vituperative denunciations of the 1381 uprising in the *Vox Clamantis* hardly suggest a society free from class struggle or tension: "The lofty sank down because of the lowly ones, and the valuable fell because of the lowly ones, since law and order were banished."² Gower goes on to describe the rebels as raving, rampaging beasts, and an acute sense of personal terror pervades the work.³ The chronicles of the day also detail the disruptions and conflicts of later medieval society, often using language remarkably similar to Gower's.⁴ Likewise, many lyrics and popular ballads address social or economic themes. The lyric "Man upon mold" from Bodley MS 29734 suggests that, far from being stable or rigid, the class hierarchies of the middle ages were open to movement and change: it advises the reader to save his money "If thou be a yeman, a gentilman wold be" or "If thou be a gentilman, and wold be a squier" or "If thou be a squier, and wold be a knight."⁵ This lyric implies that class status was determined at least in part by wealth, and was not divinely ordained by birth. Many songs and rhymes either acted as propaganda for or commemorated various social upheavals: for example, a Digby MS 102 lyric describes the commons

² Eric Stockton, trans. *The Major Latin Works of John Gower*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962, p. 61. For commentary, see Kurt Olsson. "John Gower's *Vox Clamantis* and the Medieval Idea of Place." *Studies in Philology* 84 (1987), 27-61; Stephen Justice. *Writing and Rebellion*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994; Susan Crane "The Writing Lesson of 1381." *Chaucer's England*. Ed. Barbara Hanawalt. Minneapolis, 1992.

³ See, for example, Eric Stockton, p. 82: "my halting tongue grew numb from a chilling fear [...] my tongue remained firmly tied because of the hostile circumstances. I was often inclined to declare my mind, but I was fearful of handing myself over to the enemy, and then my tongue grew hesitant."

⁴ See Stephen Justice for a thorough discussion of the reaction of medieval chroniclers to the 1381 uprising.

⁵ Maxwell Luria and Richard Hoffman, eds. *Middle English Lyrics*. London: Norton, 1974, pp. 115-116.

rebellng and warns, “whan craft riseþ a3ens craft, / [...] þan is a kyngdom most in drede.”⁶

One could argue that these examples, even the lyrics, are primarily political texts: as such they naturally foreground conflict and tension. What might surprise a Robertsonian critic, however, is the way in which the tensions of medieval society appear in texts that are not overtly, or even implicitly, political. In this paper I propose to analyse several texts that a New Critic would have no difficulty in classifying as ‘strictly literary.’ My approach will be influenced by the New Historicist assumption that for “any literary text to have appealed to any audience, it must, in some measure, represent, not a Mimetic Real, but an actual concern or interest in the social context of its production.”⁷ I hope to show that the tensions, conflicts and oppositions of the medieval world are inscribed even into texts that are not obviously political, that do not depict or respond directly to actual political or economic events.⁸

This paper will examine the two Shepherds’ Plays in the Towneley/Wakefield Corpus Christi cycle, the verse romance *Havelok*, the lyric “The last time I the wel woke” and William Dunbar’s poem “The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo.” These works range from the thirteenth century to the sixteenth, from southern England to Scotland, from religious subjects to secular subjects, from ‘courtly’ literature to ‘popular’ lyrics. I choose a broad range of texts for two reasons: first, to show the way in which actual historical or social circumstances can be traced in diverse texts that do not pretend to be even subtly political; second, to demonstrate the wide variety of ways in which power may be used or situated, and yet nevertheless transgress traditional notions of power structures. The primary purpose of each text chosen is entertainment, although other purposes may be involved (as with the mystery plays, for example). The

⁶ Rossell Hope Robbins, ed. *Historical Poems*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1959, p. 40; cf. pp. 54–60; for commentary, see Stephen Justice; V. J. Scattergood. *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century*. London: Blandford Press, 1971, pp. 354–356.

⁷ Ralph Hanna III. “Brewing Trouble.” *Bodies and Disciplines*. Barbara Hanawalt and David Wallace, eds. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 14fn.

⁸ One could accuse me, of course, of ‘finding’ political agendas in these texts, because of my twentieth-century “concern for tension.” However, if literary studies are to have any validity whatsoever, one must work upon the assumption that there is something ‘out there’ which has some sort of objective reality; and that that ‘something’ – in this case a text – contains evidence (‘facts,’ ‘discourses,’ ‘tensions,’ ‘themes’) against which a scholar’s thesis about ‘conflict’ or the lack thereof can be tested.

texts are often humorous. While it is always difficult to identify humour or satire, especially at such a historical distance, humour is nonetheless an excellent indicator of topical concerns or interests (we would not find sheep-rot or pregnant villagers funny, but then a medieval person would not find Bill Clinton or political correctness jokes funny). Using indicators such as humour, complaint, censure, and so on, I will delineate the intersections of tension and conflict in these works, and argue that real-life social, economic and gender pressures are inscribed within each.

First, however, some terms need definition. By phrases such as 'economic conflict' or 'class struggle' I do not mean a revolutionary struggle between the 'bourgeoisie' and the 'proletariat;' nor do I only mean conflict between the traditional three estates. Both frameworks are too narrow and restrictive to capture the complexities of economic and social relations in the Middle Ages. Likewise, when I discuss 'gender conflict' I do not subscribe to a radical feminist definition, which tends to assume that women are always oppressed. Instead, I wish to use a more fluid conception of power relationships and social groupings, in which one individual might belong to several social classes at once; in which women might sometimes hold more power than men; in which conflicts are as likely within a class as between classes, and alliances can be formed across class divisions. I propose to look at "relations of force"⁹ rather than typical "class struggles" (implying that conflict might occur between groups that do not constitute a 'class,' and that not all uses of force result in struggle, but may in fact join to achieve a common goal); at "tactics" or "strategies of power"¹⁰ rather than simple "balances" or "imbalances of power" (implying the power is fluid and shifting rather than stable, and that it is deployed as a force rather than contained in an inert pool of strength). I will adopt a Foucauldian approach which posits that "power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation;"¹¹ and that 'class' and 'social status' can be understood as the way in which "one exercises power in a network in which one occupies a key

⁹ Michel Foucault. *The Care of the Self*. Robert Hurley, trans. New York: Harmondsworth, 1986, p. 67.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Robert Hurley, trans. New York: Harmondsworth, 1978, pp. 70, 73.

¹¹ Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*, p. 92.

position.”¹² This approach treats a literary text not as a piece of propaganda or dissent by one class or group, but as a point of intersection in which several different “lines of force”¹³ may meet, each exhibiting its own strategy of power.¹⁴ Even if one strategy is dominant, other potentially conflicting ones are still evident;¹⁵ voices which have little actual power ‘in the real world’ – the shepherds in the Towneley play, for example – can be nonetheless seen in a position of resistance that is itself a strategy of power.¹⁶ The forces behind such positions are often overlooked in approaches that examine only the overall ‘purpose’ or ‘goal’ of a text.

For example, literary critics have tended to emphasise the social or religious ‘objectives’ behind the medieval Corpus Christi plays. These dramas, sponsored by the merchant guilds of a town, were performed on the feast of Corpus Christi in a procession that wove through the streets, stopping at regular stations along the way. They were religious in content, staging Biblical stories such as the creation of the world, the flood, the Christmas story, the crucifixion, and the apocalypse. The plays, many critics argue, were designed to “express the

¹² Michel Foucault. *The Care of the Self*, p. 95.

¹³ Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*, p. 94.

¹⁴ Ross Murfin provides an excellent summary of Foucault’s approach: “Foucault seldom viewed power as a repressive force. He certainly did not view it as a tool of conspiracy used by one specific individual or institution against another. Rather, power represents a whole web or complex of forces; it is that which produces what happens. Not even a tyrannical aristocrat simply wields power, for the aristocrat is himself formed and empowered by a network of discourses and practices that constitute power. Viewed by Foucault, power is ‘positive and productive,’ not ‘repressive’ and ‘prohibitive.’ Furthermore, no historical event, according to Foucault, has a single cause; rather, it is intricately connected with a vast web of economic, social, and political factors” (Ross Murfin. “What is the New Historicism?” *The Wife of Bath*. Peter Beidler, ed. Boston: Bedford Books, 1996, p. 119).

¹⁵ See Leslie Rabine. *Reading the Romantic Heroine*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985, pp. 3–4: “[Structuralism] ignores the multiple and conflictual nature of literary texts which do not emit a single message and do not have a single structure, although [...] one structure may dominate and hide the others. [...] A given historic moment is really a point at which a multitude of heterogeneous points intersect.”

¹⁶ Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*, pp. 95–96: “the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities [...] Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions, then? Occasionally, yes. But more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings.” In this conception, the 1381 uprising would not be understood as a discreet event but as the culmination of many stratagems of power.

social bond and to contribute to social integration;"¹⁷ they were written "as part of a theological message, and were intended, no doubt, to be an act of teaching and worship combined."¹⁸ Performed from circa 1450 (although the unique manuscript is from about 1500) in Wakefield, Yorkshire,¹⁹ the Towneley dramas probably fulfilled all these purposes. Yet approaches that stress the goals 'behind' the plays sometimes miss the relations of force shaped *within* the plays: real social concerns such as the shepherds' poverty, the trials of enclosures and taxes, the lot of servants, as well as the goals of the merchant guilds and the religious establishment who produced the plays.

In both the First and the Second Shepherds' plays, which relate the Christmas story and the shepherds' discovery of the baby Jesus, the shepherds are desperately poor. Yet it is the poverty of fifteenth-century rural England, not of Biblical Judaea. One shepherd's sheep have all died of rot (12.38), a disease which regularly plagued medieval livestock,²⁰ and he is so poor his "purs is bot wake, / I haue nerehand nothyng / To pay nor to take" (12.45-47). The concerns of the shepherds are "poignantly real and immediate,"²¹ - the characters are cold, hungry, and struggling to make a living under desperate conditions. While medieval watchers may have interpreted these complaints symbolically, the cold as the lack of charity when men are separated from Christ and the barren lands as the barrenness of life without Christ,²² the depiction of the shepherds nevertheless acknowledges the trials faced by real English rural workers. Likewise, although the shepherds could be seen as foolish, lazy and negligent, and thus in contrast to the 'good shepherd,' Christ,²³ their sufferings remain genuine. The shepherds' troubles may be symbolic, used for a larger didactic purpose, but they are nonetheless inscribed with the repercussions of actual events. For example, the

¹⁷ Mervyn James. "Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town." *Past and Present* 98 (1983) 1-14, p. 4.

¹⁸ Peter Happé. *English Mystery Plays*. London: Penguin, 1975, p. 11.

¹⁹ Martin Stevens and A. C. Cawley, eds. *The Towneley Plays*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, pp. xv, xix-xxii. All parenthesised references (by play and line number) are to this edition.

²⁰ Rosemary Woolf. *The English Mystery Plays*. London: Routledge & Kegan-Paul, 1972, p. 186.

²¹ Gary Schmidt. "Vides Festinare Pastores." *Neophilologus* 76 (1992) 290-304, p. 296; cf. 302; cf. John Speirs. "The Mystery Cycle." *Scrutiny* 18 (1951) 86-117, p. 107; Hans-Jurgen Diller. *The Middle English Mystery Play*. Cambridge: Brewer, 1992, p. 240.

²² F. P. Manion. "A Reinterpretation of *The Second Shepherds' Play*." *American Benedictine Review* 30 (1979) 44-68, p. 67.

²³ Robert Adams. "The Egregious Feasts of the Chester and Towneley Shepherds." *Chaucer Review* 21 (1986) 96-107, p. 102; cf. Rosemary Woolf, p. 186.

first shepherd in the Second Shepherds' Play is implicated in the power struggle that accompanied land enclosures. England's wool and cloth economy expanded rapidly in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and with the shortage of labour after the black death, landlords found it more profitable to enclose land previously used for crops, and raise sheep.²⁴ The shepherd in the Second Shepherds' Play is a "husband" (13.15, 33)²⁵ not really a 'shepherd,' and his lands "lyys falow as the floore" (13.21) rather than being farmed.²⁶ Husbandmen, in contrast to shepherds, were small farmers who "husbanded" a plot of land; the land was used directly for crops and thus could support several families, whereas land devoted to sheep primarily benefited the lord. Cawley and Stevens suggest that the argument over right-of-way for non-existent sheep in the First Shepherds' Play "has a realistic background in the endless disputes over rights of common that are recorded in the manor court rolls of the period."²⁷ One of the 'lines of force' in the play, then, is the resentment of the husbandmen over the hardships brought by the enclosure of their land and its use as pasture.

Another point of conflict in the drama is between the husbandmen and the class above them, the retainers of the landowners. The shepherds are beset by "bosters and bragers," "byll-hagers" (12.79, 83), "gentlery-men" and "men that are lord-fest" who "refe vs oure rest" (13.26-29). They feel threatened by these men: one shepherd says, "If he hask me oght / That he wold to his pay, / Full dere bese it boght / If I say nay" (12.105-108). Another shepherd echoes this sense of threat: "Wo is hym that hym grefe / Or onys agane-says! / Dar noman hym reprefe, / What mastry he mays" (13.42-45). The "husbyandys" are "opprest" and held under; they are brought in "blonder" until it is a "greate wonder / And euer shuld we thryfe" (13.34, 36-39). Although these speeches fall into the genre of the traditional 'complaint,' they are "no mere sorrowful musical complaint [...] [there is] a note of vigorous protest against the oppression of powerful, rich and evil men."²⁸ The medieval practices of

²⁴ Christine Richardson. "The Medieval English and French Shepherds Plays." *Festive Drama*. Meg Twycross, ed. Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1996, p. 262.

²⁵ The manuscript in the first example reads "shephardes"; however, the rhyme requires "husbandys." The change might have been made by a later scribe who was unaware of the earlier social context.

²⁶ See Stevens and Cawley, p. 495.

²⁷ Stevens and Cawley, p. 485; cf. Hans-Jurgen Diller, 245.

²⁸ John Speirs. *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition*. London: Faber & Faber, 1971, p. 336; cf. Rosemary Woolf, p. 191.

purveyance and maintenance tacitly underlie these complaints. Under these practices the lord “maintained” a group of liveried retainers, who then had relatively free reign to harass the labourers on the lord’s land. “He can make purveance / With boste and bragance, / And all is thugh maintenance / Of men that are gretter,” one shepherd complains (13.49–52), and another gripes that even if he gave the maintenance men his plough and wagon they would not be satisfied but would continue to make demands of him (12.90–91). Ironically, the shepherds then treat their own servants just as poorly. The shepherds in the First Shepherds’ Play almost refuse to give their servant part of the meal (12.284–292); the shepherds of the second play threaten Daw just as the maintenance men threaten them: “I shall make the full rad, / By the heuens kyng!” (12.254–255). Although these plays could in no way be considered mimetic depictions of reality, they contain traces of actual socio-economic conflict within the hierarchy of servants, shepherds/husbandmen, maintenance men and lords.²⁹

Social and economic complaint runs beneath the surface of other events in the Shepherds’ Plays, and provides much of the comedy. The humour here often points up underlying tensions, and plays on real anxieties and resentments. During the meal in the First Shepherds’ Play, in which the characters eat everything from the “foote of a cowe” to “a tarte for a lorde” (12.309, 339), the comedy comes from the bizarre mixture of foods. This mixture is implicitly coded by class: “The playwright’s mixing of high-class and low-class table delicacies makes a ludicrous gallimaufry.”³⁰ The fact that the scene is funny – that the audience would recognise the class coding of the various foods and acknowledge the absurdity of their being served in one meal – gestures towards the reality of social/class differences in medieval English society. Moreover, whether the meal is make-believe, as some critics have suggested³¹ or an actual miraculous repast, the enthusiasm with which the shepherds list the various foods, and the improbability of their ever being able to afford them, underscores their

²⁹ “The Song of the Husbandman,” one of the Harley lyrics, gives the opposite point of view – that of a husbandman a class higher from the Towneley shepherds, and the trials he faces attempting to collect rent payment from the people below him. Rossell Hope Robbins, pp. 7–9.

³⁰ A. C. Cawley. “The ‘Grotesque’ Feast in the *Prima Pastorum*.” *Speculum* 30 (1955), 213–217, p. 215.

³¹ A. C. Cawley, pp. 215–216; cf. Stevens and Cawley, p. 488n.

poverty.³² Another source of humour is the misappropriation of class-specific language: one character uses 'upper class' French words such as "restorité" and "appeté," and another character accuses him, "Yee speke all by clergé" (12.344–346).³³ The misuse of a discourse that is reserved for the upper classes, its placement in an inappropriate context, shows that the shepherds are acutely aware of social stratification and class hierarchy. Again, the fact that the audience members could be expected to understand the humour demonstrates that they, too, understood the rules of the social system, and easily apprehended class differentiation.

The sequence of Mak and the sheep-stealing in the second play is primarily a comic farce, yet it too is underscored by economic tension. Mak's motive is the many mouths he has to feed at home (13.350–355). Mak's actions are reprehensible, but arise out of his social circumstances: "he does what the three shepherds and probably many in the audience would like to do: he takes what is needed for an empty stomach as an immediate solution to personal injustice and misery."³⁴ The key joke – that Mak and his wife hide the sheep in the baby cradle, and even manage to persuade the shepherds to give the 'baby' christening gifts – has decidedly sinister overtones: the substitution of the baby for the sheep, which Mak and his family plan to eat, carries with it the suggestion that people of Mak's class are so poor they may be forced to eat their children. Thus even though the cycle dramas may have served the purposes of the merchant class and the religious establishment by portraying poverty as a positive state in the Christian framework (it is because of their poverty that the shepherds are the first at the Nativity),³⁵ and by suggesting that religious devotion (rather than social or political action) is the means to happiness, the concerns of the lower classes of medieval Yorkshire leave their traces in humour and complaints of the text. Although the shepherds might have little access to power in the real world, their needs and motivations form an important facet of the 'relations of force' within the Corpus Christi plays.

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³² The poems "Winner and Waster" and *Piers Plowman* passus XIII use elaborate feasts to satirise the rich in a comparable manner.

³³ See also 12.560–564.

³⁴ Josie Campbell. "Farce as Function in the Wakefield Shepherds' Plays." *Chaucer Review* 14 (1980) 336–343, pp. 340–341.

³⁵ F. P. Manion, pp. 63–65.

Written two hundred years earlier,³⁶ in a different part of the country and under different social circumstances, the verse romance *Havelok* traces power struggles that are radically different from the ones in the Shepherds' Plays. Literary critics tend to agree that the Corpus Christi plays promote the interests of the merchant guilds and the religious establishment; however, no such agreement exists about the 'purpose' or 'goal' of *Havelok*. Although a work of art may be created simply for its own sake, and does not need to promote particular interests, critics often attempt to place the *Havelok*-poet in a particular class by speculating about which class or social category might benefit from such a romance.³⁷ Such a strategy, however, ignores the multiplicity of 'lines of force' and 'strategies of power' operative in the poem. So, for example, Halverson argues that *Havelok* written from a "middle-class milieu," displaying the 'protestant work ethic' of the working middle class;³⁸ Staines contends that the *Havelok* is a "warning to the thirteenth-century English monarchy of the needs and demands of the lower classes;"³⁹ while Delany suggests that the poem, in its calls for good government and depictions of upward mobility, expresses the aspirations of the upper bourgeoisie and the knighthood.⁴⁰ By contrast, Stuart argues that *Havelok*'s "negative portrayals of unruly barons and its emphasis on the divine right of kings" served as a warning to the aristocracy;⁴¹ and Hirsch says that *Havelok* reveals "not so much what the lower classes thought of the upper, as what the upper classes liked to think the lower classes thought of them."⁴² The desire of

³⁶ Delany dates *Havelok* between 1272–1307; Stuart and Shepherd suggest 1295–1310; Sands says 1250–1300. Sheila Delany. "The Romance of Kingship: Havelok the Dane." *Medieval English Poetry*. Stephanie Trigg, ed. London: Longman, 1993, p. 174; Christopher Stuart. "*Havelok the Dane* and Edward I in the 1290s." *Studies in Philology* 93 (1996) 349–364, p. 353; Stephen Shepherd, ed. *Middle English Romances*. London: Norton, 1995, p. 3; Donald Sands, ed. *Middle English Verse Romances*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1986, p. 56. All parenthesised references are to Shepherd's edition and will be noted by line number.

³⁷ Christopher Stuart, p. 350.

³⁸ John Halverson. "*Havelok the Dane* and Society." *Chaucer Review* 6 (1971–72), 142–151, p. 147; confusingly, Halverson later argues that "*Havelok* seems to emerge from the lower levels, the peasant stratum" (p. 150).

³⁹ David Staines. "Havelok the Dane: a Thirteenth-Century Handbook for Princes." *Speculum* 51 (1976) 602–623, p. 602.

⁴⁰ Sheila Delany, p. 179.

⁴¹ Christopher Stuart, p. 350.

⁴² John Hirsch. "Havelok 2933: A problem in Medieval Literary History." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 78 (1977) 339–349, p. 343. See also Susan Crane, who argues for a baronial audience and authorship: Susan Crane. *Insular Romance*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, pp. 43–44.

established kings to secure the heritage of their young children; the needs of those minors once grown; the ambitions of guardians or regents; the hardships of thralls and labouring classes – all these knots of force and resistance interact in the text of *Havelok*, and emphasising one at the expense of the others obscures the subtleties of medieval power relationships.

The major site of contention in the romance is the crown. In *Havelok*, the English and Danish kings both try to secure power for their heirs using several strategies: choosing a powerful, apparently trustworthy guardian; assembling the guardian's peers to witness the choice; and eliciting solemn oaths from the guardian to safe-guard the heir and the inheritance. These strategies of power, however, are ineffective once the power – in the person of the king – is absent. The minors have little or no power themselves: Goldboru is imprisoned, and fed and clothed poorly; Havelok attempts to bargain his kingdom for his life, but Godard sends him to be killed and takes his kingdom regardless. This romance, then, presents a site of tension which is a real contemporary concern (the obvious historical analogy is Richard III and his nephews): how can one ensure the succession and protect the power of minors?

Most critics dismiss the two regents as the “evil Earl Godrich” and the “diabolical Godard,” whose usurpations “figurally re-enact the archetypal Christian conflict of good and evil.”⁴³ While such associations are operative in the text, this kind of reading does not recognise the relations of force that surrounded a medieval regent and his ward. The regent had the unenviable position of holding power for some twenty years, and then having to give it up and return to his former, subordinate position.⁴⁴ Moreover, like the king, the regent was interested in protecting *his* power and *his* children's heritage. Godrich wants to make his own son king of England: “Ich have a sone, a ful fayr knave: / He shal Engeland al have; / He shal ben King; he shal ben sire” (308–310; cf. 1075), while Godard decides he cannot allow Havelok to live if his children are to thrive, “Loverdinges after me / Of al Denemark micten he be” (515–516). As far as the regents are concerned, there is no obvious reason why Havelok and Goldboru should be rulers instead of their own children; as Godrich says, “Wether she sholde be / Quen and levedi over me? [...] Sholde Ic yeve a fol – a therne! – / Engeland, tho sho it yerne?” (292–293, 298–299). It is not at all self-evident why a young girl – a “fool” – should rule rather than a competent, powerful man, and many

⁴³ Sheila Delany, pp. 175–176.

⁴⁴ See Christopher Stuart, p. 356.

individuals in medieval society may have felt the same.⁴⁵ Godrich sees Havelok's re-assertion of Goldboru's rights as a disinheritance of *him*: "Hwat! wenden he to desherite me?" (2547). Rather than merely condemning Godrich and Godard as 'evil earls,' it is important to recognise the real political concern about regents' dynastic ambitions inscribed into the text of *Havelok*.

Other social concerns and class conflicts are also registered in the romance. Several critics have seen *Havelok* as a piece of propaganda for the 'lower classes,' a "vehicle for a critical overview of the contemporary political situation and the desires and complaints of the lower classes."⁴⁶ However, as Stuart points out, *Havelok* is similar to the American novels of upward nobility: "While they seemed to offer their readers the promises of future riches, this was conditional upon their readers' willingness to work endlessly and uncomplainingly for little immediate reward."⁴⁷ The text, then, may not so much express the complaints of the lower classes as reflect the wishes of the upper classes. Notwithstanding this, asking 'whose interests does this text serve' can obscure the many lines of force which slip through the text: while it is unlikely *Havelok* was written by the lower classes as a warning to the upper, nevertheless it contains the trace of their economic and social struggles. The thralls, represented in the text by Grim, are depicted as being motivated principally by a desire for freedom: for his freedom, Grim is willing to kill Havelok when Godard asks (530, 562). It is possible Grim realises how unlikely it is that Godard will actually give him his freedom,⁴⁸ for Grim's allegiance changes when he realises who Havelok is. One of the first things he says is "Thou shalt me, loverd, fre maken, / For I shal yemen the and waken - / Thorou the wile I fredom have!" (629-631). As a thrall, Grim has very little power: he cannot force Godard to fulfil his promises, and suffers name-calling and threats of hanging (682, 687). Even once he escapes from Denmark, he lives in an earth hut and the text emphasises that he "swank sore / for his mete" (788-789). However, a Foucauldian reading of *Havelok* demonstrates that even impoverished thralls form "mobile and transitory points of resistance"⁴⁹ that occasionally gain enough power to change society. In this case, Grim's actions

⁴⁵ Consider the contrast between John of Gaunt and Richard II, for example.

⁴⁶ David Staines, p. 607; cf. John Halverson, p. 150.

⁴⁷ Christopher Stuart, p. 354.

⁴⁸ Indeed, Godard refuses to fulfil his promises even though he is under the impression Grim has killed *Havelok* (681-684).

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 96.

help overturn the most powerful men in two kingdoms and, far from incidentally, make Grim's sons free and powerful lords.

Like the plight of the thralls, the hardships faced by ordinary workers are inscribed in *Havelok* – even if the portrayal appears to serve an upper-class fantasy about a cheerful, hard-working labour force. With the onset of famine Havelok is forced to go to Lincoln to search for employment. He has no clothes other than a piece of sailcloth, no shoes and no hose. He goes two days “fastinde” because “non for his werk wolde him fede” (865–866); on the third day he shoves down nine or ten other people to gain work, for which he receives a bit of food. This depiction is far from an idyllic image of medieval hierarchies: Delany observes, “Noteworthy in this passage are, first, the large number of unemployed [...] and, second, Havelok’s brutal fervour in shoving his hungry competitors into the mud.”⁵⁰ When Godrich tries to force him to marry, Havelok asks:

Hwat sholde Ich with wif do
 I ne have none kines thinge;
 I ne have hws, I ne have cote,
 Ne have I stikke, I ne have sprote,
 I ne have neyther bred ne sowel,
 Ne cloth but of an hold with covel.
 This clothes that Ich onne have
 Aren the kokes – and Ich his knave!

(1137–1146)

Despite working “more than he were a best” (944), Havelok has neither shelter, nor fuel, nor food, nor clothing, and he is forced to marry against his will.⁵¹ Although the romance suggests that this negative situation has arisen because Godrich is a bad ruler, nonetheless it demonstrates the real precariousness of life for the labouring classes.

A final line of force in *Havelok* is represented by Ubbe, the Danish noble who helps Havelok regain his throne. Once again, critics have argued in reference to Ubbe that the poem expresses the aspirations of the upper bourgeoisie;⁵² aside from the anachronism of applying Marxist terms to

⁵⁰ Sheila Delany, p. 180.

⁵¹ Goldboru, too, is forced to marry; many of the gender issues that arise in Dunbar (see below) are applicable here as well.

⁵² Sheila Delany, p. 179.

medieval society, however, one can make an equally strong argument that the poem expresses the aspirations of the king or monarchy.⁵³ While Ubbe is presented as a positive figure, it is because of his support of Havelok; upper class individuals (Godrich and Godard) who betray the king because of their own wishes for 'upward mobility' are invariably depicted negatively. Nevertheless, it is still interesting to note the strategies of power used by characters such as Ubbe. He has extensive power, protecting merchants commanding large groups of men. He is loyal to Havelok; yet in this he is, like Godrich, Godard, Grim, Havelok and Goldboru, acting in his own interests and working to increase his own power. Although he is one of the strongest lords in Denmark ("In al Denmark ne was no knith, / Ne conestable, ne shireve [...] That he ne com biforn sire Ubbe - / He dredden him so thef doth clubbe" [2285–2289]) his association with Havelok makes him even more powerful: by the end of the poem, Havelok places him in supreme control of all Denmark (2960). Ubbe is the one who makes Havelok a knight, and in the complex web of feudal loyalties, this places Havelok in the delicate position of owing allegiance to his own vassal. As well, Ubbe is truly a 'kingmaker,' for it is through Ubbe's power and military strength that Havelok regains both his throne and Goldboru's: "[Ubbe] made him King heylike and wel" (2229). Ubbe, then, is a central site of power in the tale, and may even be said to hold more power than his own king – for who makes a king can often unmake him. Ubbe's upward mobility, like the change in status of Grim's children, demonstrates that medieval hierarchies were not rigid and stable but were open to contesting and shifting; it also demonstrates that lines of power and influence can run counter to traditional class hierarchies (since Ubbe, in many ways, holds more power than his social superior, Havelok). *Havelok* contains many sites of force – the regents, Grim, Ubbe, Havelok himself – in a way that shows that power in medieval society was not solely 'top-down' but multi-faceted and complex.

* * *

Love lyrics – as opposed to kingship romances – seem an unlikely place to find political or social tensions. Yet the early fifteenth-century lyric "The last time I the wel woke,"⁵⁴ has genuine social struggles underlying its humour.

⁵³ Christopher Stuart, p. 350.

⁵⁴ The lyric is here reprinted according to Luria and Hoffman's edition.

*I have forsworne it whil I live
To wake the well-ey*

The last time I the well woke
Sir John caght me with a croke
He made me to swere be bell and boke
I shuld not tell-ey

Yet he did me a well wors turne;
He leide my hed again the burne
He gave my maidenhead a spurne
And rove my kell-ey

Sir John came to oure hous to play
Fro evensong til light of the day;
We made as mery as flowres in May –
I was begiled-ey

Sir John he came to our hous;
He made it wonder copious;
He seid that I was gracious
To beire a childe-ey

I go with childe, well I wot;
I schrew the fader that it gate,
Withouten he finde it milke and pap
A long while-ey

The carol falls into the *planctus* or “deceived young maid” tradition, in which a young girl makes her complaint that she has been deceived by a higher-class man, and is now pregnant. Lyrics are notoriously difficult to date or localise, and since they are largely anonymous, it is not easy to tell for what segment of society they were intended, and thus whether they are humorous or sincere, parodic or merely poetically exaggerated.⁵⁵ Notwithstanding, critics have tended to agree that, just as *fabliaux* were probably written for the amusement of the

⁵⁵ T. L. Burton. “‘The Fair Maid of Ribbesdale’ and the problem of parody.” *Essays in Criticism* XXXI:4, 1981, 282–298, p. 282.

upper classes rather than for the lower classes they apparently portray, so too the 'popular woman's songs' were likely written by men, in the Goliardic or satirical tradition.⁵⁶ Statements such as "alas I go with chile" are unlikely to be autobiographical, since there is little conceivable reason for such self-exposure;⁵⁷ instead, they were written by men speaking in a woman's voice to achieve a humorous effect.⁵⁸ Since the line "bryan hyf my name iet"⁵⁹ is written in the same hand after the lyric "The last time I the wel woke," and since the lyric falls into the tradition of "alas I go with chile" songs, it is probable that this song was written by a man (although the signature could be the scribe's), and hence may be read as humorous parody rather than realistic autobiography.

As such, we cannot expect the lyric to mimetically represent historical reality. At the same time, the song would not be considered funny if it did not have some social relevance. In the lyric, a young girl goes to the well and is "caght" by "Ser John" (4); in the last stanza she sings, "I go with childe, wel I wot" (19). However, unlike many other "I go with chile" lyrics,⁶⁰ "The last time I the wel woke" has overtones of force and class conflict. First of all, the man is called "sir" John: the lover is probably a knight or a lord, and thus is of higher social status than the young girl. Unlike many humorous songs, in which the girl seduces (or at least enjoys) the man's attentions, this girl was "caght" with a "croke" (4) and forced to swear "be bell and boke" she would not tell what sir John does to her (5-6). She has no romantic illusions about their encounter, saying, "he did me a wel wors turne" (7); her head is laid against the "burne" and

⁵⁶ Lois Bragg. "'Wulf and Eadwacer,' 'The Wife's Lament' and Women's Love Lyrics of the Middle Ages." *Germanisch-Romanische Monatschrift* 70, 1989, 257-268, p. 262; cf. Doris Earnshaw. *The Female Voice in Medieval Romance Lyric*. New York: Peter Lang, 1988, pp. 2, 14, 33.

⁵⁷ John Plummer, quoted in McNamer. "Female Authors, Provincial Setting." *Viator* 22, 1991, 279-310, p. 286.

⁵⁸ While I disagree strongly with Earnshaw, that "Gender is universally distinguishable in human speech" - she rather ludicrously uses male and female birdsong to prove her statement - I do think one could argue that there are traits more likely to be found in female speech than an author can exaggerate or exploit when he wishes to parody a woman's voice. Earnshaw, p. 54 n. 71.

⁵⁹ Richard Greene, ed. *The Early English Carols*. Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1935, p. 309. All parenthesised references to the lyric (carol 456 in Greene's edition) will be taken by line number from this edition.

⁶⁰ See, for example, lyrics 83, 86, 87, and 88 in Luria and Hoffman, pp. 84-86 (carols 452, 453, 454 and 457 in Greene).

sir John “gafe my maydenhed a spurne / And rofe my bell-ey” (8–10).⁶¹ The overtones of force in this description are disturbing, even though the girl later learns to enjoy sir John’s attentions and the gifts he brings. In the final stanza, however, she curses sir John, saying “I schrew the fader that [my child] gate” (20). The chorus of the lyric declares that she will no longer “wake the well-ey,” and in this there is the underlying implication that she is too afraid to go to the well anymore, whether from shame (over her obvious pregnancy) or because she is fearful of another, similar, encounter. Moreover, the singer expresses a concern rarely mentioned in the *planctus* genre: she is worried her erstwhile lover will not help her “fynde [the child] mylke and pap” (21). Even though this text is ostensibly humorous, the plight of single mothers with no support or income comes through clearly.⁶² The undertones of class conflict – the power of upper class men to rape lower class women without repercussions, and the problems those women then face – are lost if one classifies this poem as simply humorous fabliau, rather than tracing the workings of power in the text. Likewise, while the song in no way serves the interests of the lower classes, it nevertheless gestures towards some of their real concerns and complaints.

* * *

If one conceives of gender or class tensions as fields of relations, rather than specific struggles or conflicts, one can position the lyric “The last time I the wel woke” as capturing one group of forces; William Dunbar’s poem “The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo,” while still within the field of gender and class relations, delineates very different sites of conflict and manifestations of power. The poem is primarily a discussion of marriage between three women, yet the lines of force extend beyond these women to their husbands, their relatives, the audience and the whole late fifteenth-century Scottish framework of society and marriage. Critics tend to either condemn the women in the poem

⁶¹ Luria and Hoffman give “kell-ey” for Greene’s “bell-ey,” and gloss it as “maidenhead”; yet the reading “bell-ey” works, especially in the context of a young girl who might well feel her belly is being riven.

⁶² My interpretation of this lyric suggests interesting readings for other lyrics, for example “O Lord, so swet Sir John dothe kis” (number 85 in Luria and Hoffman). Although Bragg classes this lyric as a “frank expression of sexual desire” (Bragg, p. 262), the reappearance of “sir John” and the final line of each stanza, “I have no powre to say him nay” suggests a more ominous reading.

for their "greed and lust,"⁶³ for being "sunk in sin,"⁶⁴ or condemn the author (or narrator) as misogynistic, and the poem as the worst kind of anti-feminist satire.⁶⁵ By contrast, Priscilla Bawcutt notes that the poem "resounds with laughter, yet many critics (chiefly men) are unamused, and subject it to solemn and often hostile analysis."⁶⁶ Like the *planctus* lyrics, the humour in this poem points up real social concerns; yet this humour is broadly directed at both men and women, and in the midst of satirising its victim it acknowledges the victim's genuine grievances. Economic power, sexual power and social relations are intertwined in a complex web of force relations, and the way these relations play out are humorous since they capture and exaggerate elements of real social, economic and sexual struggles: "always behind the poem stands the reality of medieval marriage, with its special dangers for women. This reality of women's lives comes ever before us in the details enumerated by the married women."⁶⁷ Yet the 'dangers of marriage for men' are also present in the poem. "Dunbar delights in exploiting areas of social tension, between men and women, clerics and laymen, seculars and friars, Lowlanders and highlanders," Bawcutt writes,⁶⁸ and in the *Tretis* he exploits the tensions between men and women in a way that exposes the strategies of power and resistance that *both*, rather than just the men, use.

The first intersection of lines of force described in the poem is between the first wife and her old husband. The woman calls marriage "bair of blis and

⁶³ Deanna Evans. "Dunbar's *Tretis*: The Seven Deadly Sins in Carnavalesque Disguise." *Neophilologus* 73 (1989) 130–141, p. 133.

⁶⁴ Tom Scott. *Dunbar: A Critical Exposition of the Poems*. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966, p. 190.

⁶⁵ A. D. Hope. *A Midsummer Eve's Dream*. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1970, p. 258; Edwina Burness. "Dunbar and the Nature of Bawdy." *Bryght Lanternis*. J. D. McClure and M. Spiller, eds. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1989, p. 217; Deanna Evans, p. 130.

⁶⁶ Priscilla Bawcutt. *Dunbar the Makar*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, p. 325.

⁶⁷ Maureen Fries. "Medieval Concepts of the Female and their Satire in the Poetry of William Dunbar." *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 7 (1983) 55–77, p. 73; cf. A. C. Spearing. *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur*. Cambridge: Brewer, 1993, p. 262; Tom Scott, p. 197; Priscilla Bawcutt, p. 345. See Judith Bennett. "Medieval Women, Modern Women: Across the Great Divide." *Culture and History 1350–1600*. David Aers, ed. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1992, p. 153; or Rosalind Marshall. *Virgins and Viragos: A History of Women in Scotland from 1080–1980*. Chicago: Chicago U. P., 1983, p. 33, for a discussion of women's situation in Scottish marriages.

⁶⁸ Priscilla Bawcutt. "William Dunbar and Gavin Douglas." *The History of Scottish Literature* vol. 1. R. D. S. Jack, ed. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988, p. 79.

bailfull” and describes it as being in “chenzeis.”⁶⁹ She is forced to have sex with her husband: “Thair ma na sayne me save fra that auld sathane, / For thocht I croce me all cleine fra the croun doun / He wil my corse all beclip and clap me to his breist” (102–104). She dares not cry out or “schout” for fear, “for schore of that auld schrew” (109, 110). To get what she wants, she has to trade sex for economic benefits: “or he clyme one my corse [...] I have conditioun of a curche of kersp all ther fynest, / A gown of engranyt claith right gaily furrit, / A ring with a ryall stane or other riche jowell” (137–140). All the same, the “baid” is “deir aboucht” (143). A medieval marriage was a place in which women had little power, and paid dearly for what few benefits they received. Legally, the husband controlled not only his property but whatever property the wife brought to the marriage or achieved on her own; a married woman was a “femme couverte,” and virtually did not exist in the law.⁷⁰ A wife could not sell or give away any of her property without her husband’s consent.⁷¹ The problems the wife in Dunbar’s poem describes, therefore, are – despite their humour – quite realistic: a wife would be unable to buy anything for herself, and would be forced to find some way of persuading her husband to buy it for her.

Yet the power in the poem is not solely on the husband’s side, for Dunbar clearly demonstrates that a ‘senex amans’ (an old lover) will have grievances as well. The young wife can withhold sex (even though she initially says she cannot, she evidently does [141]). Indeed, this ability to withhold sex is implicit in the commodifying of sex described above: if the wife could not refuse to have sex, she would be unable to trade it for economic benefit. Moreover, the young wife can take a lover, and the threat of this is a line of force she can turn to her own use. Alternately, she can simply call her husband names (as she does throughout her speech). Interestingly, much of the abuse centres around impotence: “Given the importance, both social, moral and economic, of successful male sexual performance, it is not surprising that several terms of abuse in Dunbar’s work should involve impotence.”⁷² The poem delineates “not only women’s desires but men’s fears – concerning sexual satisfaction, material possessions, and, above all,

⁶⁹ “The Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo” ll. 51, 53; James Kinsley, ed. *The Poems of William Dunbar*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979. All parenthesised references are to this edition, quoted by line number.

⁷⁰ Judith Bennett, p. 153.

⁷¹ Rosalind Marshall, p. 33.

⁷² Edwina Burness, p. 218.

power.”⁷³ The marriage of young women to older men was a reality in the Middle Ages,⁷⁴ and Dunbar clearly depicts the stagings of power at work within such a match.

The second wife also outlines real-life conflicts in her description of her marriage. She is married to a play-boy, a young man who has “bene lychour so lang quhill lost is his natur” (174). Someone married to an old man, she says, at least knows what she is getting; marriage to this kind of man, by contrast, is finding only “glase” in the “glemyng of gold” (202). Not only can she not get sexual satisfaction from her husband, but she faces the risk of venereal disease (the suggestion of syphilis is latent in the husband’s impotence) and must deal with the double standard that condemns a woman’s adultery but allows it in men. Another ‘line of force’ that played a part in a medieval marriage appears when the wife mentions that she is in a marriage arranged by her family: “my wekit kyn that me away cast / To sic a craudoune” (214–215). “Dunbar spares little pity for these women,” writes Spearing, “but here we get a glimpse of the relationships of power and money that really deprived most medieval women of a choice of partner.”⁷⁵ Daughters were used to cement economic or social alliances for the family, and “all but the poorest families had a vested interest in marriage.”⁷⁶ The space of marriage, then, becomes a political space, a site of intersection for various lines of force: the wife’s, the husband’s, the wife’s kin. The interests of all parties are at stake in this space, and a focus on the dominant interests (the husband’s) misses the negotiations of power that make up a marriage. The wife, her husband, and her family are all depicted as using different tactics of power to gain their own advantage in the marriage; and this contested space in the text reveals some of the concerns and dynamics at work within real fifteenth-century marriages.

The widow’s two marriages explicitly expose many of the economic, social and sexual strategies of power at work in the nexus of forces that was a medieval marriage. While a traditional feminist approach to the text would concentrate on the oppressions within the two wives’ marriages, it might not explore the lines of power the widow herself deploys, nor the way the men are subjugated to that power. The widow’s first marriage seems like the first wife’s

⁷³ Priscilla Bawcutt. *Dunbar the Makar*, p. 328.

⁷⁴ Tom Scott, p. 183.

⁷⁵ A. C. Spearing, p. 258; cf. A. D. Hope, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Rosalind Marshall, p. 24.

marriage, a young woman forced by her kin to marry a much older man; rather than fighting against the marriage as the first wife does, however, the widow uses the forces already within the marriage to her advantage. Her youth and gender, which first seem disadvantages, become tools to get what she wants. She pretends to dote on her husband and takes care of him until “his cheif chymys he had chevist to my sone, / Suppos the churll wes gane chaist or the child wes gottin” (292–293). The wife here appropriates social forces outside the marriage as well, for if the husband accuses her of adultery he risks exposing his own impotence. As a result of this deployment of social forces, the husband leaves his lands to another man’s child. Dunbar here depicts a real threat in a society in which older men married younger women, and yet blood heritage and family dynasties were important. For a man in a patriarchal society, few things could be more disastrous than leaving one’s property to another man’s child, and the fact that the husband does so demonstrates the extent of the widow’s power.

In the widow’s second marriage, economic and class forces are even more clearly at play. The widow is from a higher class than her husband: “we na fallowis wer in frendschip or blud, / In fredome na furth bering, na fairness of persoune” (298–299). This poses a problem in medieval marriage, for the woman is supposed to be inferior; in this marriage the ‘lines of force’ of social standing and the ‘lines of force’ of gender clash. The widow uses her higher birth as a power strategy against her husband, calling him names, making him scared of her and making him “subjeit and sett at myn bydding” (327). In the end, she makes him sign over his wealth to her children (again, an event which medieval inheritance laws generally worked to prevent), and mistreats the children of his first marriage. Metaphorically, the widow “gelds her husband and this suggests the husband’s complete humiliation, sexually and financially – with an implicit connection between the two. He is now bankrupt, or ‘superspendit’ [...] his resources ‘spulzeit’ or plundered, by his wife.”⁷⁷ In this case, the class conflicts within society have even entered a marriage, and the widow generally uses these forces to her advantage.

Yet the ‘lines of force’ are against the widow, as well. She still must have sex with someone she despises, and her only recourse is to pretend he is another man (390). Furthermore, she is still subject to social pressures, and cannot act freely. Even once she is a widow, presumably ‘free,’ she must resort to deception and trickery to get what she wants. Social norms and expectations

⁷⁷ Priscilla Bawcutt. *Dunbar the Makar*, p. 341.

prevent her from taking lovers openly, and her movements are constrained. She is constantly under the surveillance and the judgement of society; and the final line of the poem implicates the reader in these social forces, asking him to place *his* judgement on the three women. (The audience is explicitly male, since the question is “Quhilk wald ze wail to 3our wif?” [530].) The women in the tale will be redeemed or condemned by the judgement of the audience, and this judgement becomes yet another line of force. A reading that condemns the “greed and lust” of the three women, or their “base qualities,”⁷⁸ itself participates in the subjugation of these women to the social forces around them, rather than recognising the way in which those forces are deployed by and against the women. In this poem, marriage is a highly disputed site of intersection for economic, social, class and gender forces, and the reader himself becomes involved in the power relations at work.

⁷⁸ Deanna Evans, p. 133.