Morality and Social Order in the Great Rising of 1381
the Problem of Legitimacy

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In Henry Knighton’s chronicle of the 1381 Peasants Revolt he writes that the peasants who destroyed the Savoy Palace did not steal any goods therein, “Saying that they were lovers of truth and justice, not robbers and thieves.”¹ Similar language or statements appear in the chronicles of Thomas Walsingham, Froissart, the Monk of Westminster, and the Eulogium Historiarum; of these Froissart alone claims that the peasants desired nothing but riches. Only the Anonamialle Chronicle and the City of London Letter Book H do not have any discussion of the peasantry’s views on theft. These statements raise important questions about the beliefs and morals of those participating in the revolt. If the peasants were burning John of Gaunt’s Savoy and other buildings to the ground why would they make a point that they were not taking valuables for personal gain? More importantly what can historians discern from this language about the social and legal ideas of those involved in the uprising?

To look at this revolt in detail it is necessary to take into account the sources which are available for study. The contemporary chronicles did not tend to paint a favorable picture of the rebels. From this perspective the portrayed attitudes of the peasants are even more puzzling; love for truth and justice are not negative qualities. In addition to the chronicles there are ample legal records. Contradictions to the language used by the peasants can be found both in legal records and the chronicles. Many of the legal records include indictments for theft, including indictments for theft during the razing of the Savoy. Chronicles and legal records also point to rampant blackmail during the early summer of 1381, in London as well as in the countryside rebellions. Therefore certainty as to whether or not theft occurred cannot be reached; because accounts of theft

exist it must be assumed that it did. This however, does not mean that the desires of the peasants not to be seen as thieves were disingenuous. By examining the language of theft and the actions of the peasants during the uprising it becomes clear that England was experiencing a crisis of legitimacy and that through the revolt the peasants were attempting to create a more just society.

The Great Rising of 1381 did much to upset the legal and social order of England, and its challenge to the status quo showed that peasants were conscious of the ways in which the legal system functioned. Peasants were not simply inactive members of the society. The research of historians such as Rosamond Faith and Christopher Dyer has shown that the common people of England had a great deal of experience with the legal system at the local level. Wealthier peasants, like those prominent in the rising, would have had extensive experience with the law serving as minor local officials such as ale tasters or constables. When peasants did not have enough familiarity with the law they chose to hire lawyers to help them state their grievances. Yet, peasants did not win legal cases often and they eventually exhausted legal measures. Furthermore, while the leaders of the revolt may have claimed to desire to completely abolish all law, the actions taken by many participants speak otherwise. This reveals a society made up of people with a great deal of agency and willingness to work within the law, but when the law failed the peasants looked to other means to achieve their goals.

By claiming that they were not thieves the peasants asserted the legitimacy of the revolt, while at the same time criticizing the nobility and implying that those in power were thieves. Yet this was not just a legal issue, it gives a great deal of insight into the values of the English peasantry. While moral objections to stealing may have been a key
factor, the legal deterrents to theft were enough alone. As a felony, the only legal
punishment for theft was execution. Since the rebellion itself was an act of treason, fear
of execution does not seem to be the sole reason for the language of theft. Therefore, a
broader range of social ideas must be taken into account, particularly the Great Chain of
Being and the notion of a society of orders.

In the Great Chain of Being every member of society was subordinate to one
group and superior to another. An integral part of this hierarchy was the obligations
within it; these went from bottom to top as well as from top to bottom. When one group
neglected these obligations it was the moral imperative of others to set them back on the
appropriate path. In the minds of the peasants participating in the revolt of 1381 the
nobility and upper orders of society had forgotten their obligations. It was for this reason
that commoners accused them of injustice, thievery, exploitation and corruption.

Accusations of abuse during the rising were grounded in recent economic
impositions and long term grievances. Failure to maintain the accepted social
requirements on the part of the lords was a main factor in the events of 1381. The
leading antagonizing measures were the poll tax of 1380, and the 1351 Statute of
Laborers. In the last several years the monarchy had levied a series of poll taxes which
were met with disapproval, the most recent one was no different. The Statute of Laborers
put limits on wages paid to hired workers and little effort had been made to increase
wages in the thirty years after its inauguration. Neither violated legal code, nor did they
directly threaten the physical security of the peasants. However, the restrictions of the
Statute and the taxes exacted were viewed as threats to the livelihoods of the English
peasantry. Both were seen as a breach of the obligations of the nobility to ensure the best
interests of the peasants. In such a case as this, it was acceptable for the peasants to temporarily rise against the government to return society to its proper state as set out in the notion of orders.

Looking at the language of thievery in the social, legal and moral context of medieval English society gives a new perspective on the agency of peasants. This context is also necessary to fully understand why these statements were important to peasants beyond their use as a justification. The ultimate failure of those in charge of society to hold up their social obligations led to a questioning of legitimacy. Examination of the events that took place makes it clear that there was a crisis of legitimacy occurring. Through the revolt the peasants were attempting to restore justice by issuing justice on their own terms.

If anything can tell historians that the participants of the 1381 revolt were aware of political events in England it is the targets they chose. While a great deal of the blackmail and destruction was clearly the product of personal grudges there was an equal amount of rage directed at prominent political figures. John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster (1340-1399) was one such figure. As the uncle of Richard II (1367-c.1400, r. 1377-1399) he was an extremely influential figure during the minority of the king’s reign. He was powerful not only because of his relation to the king, but he was also the leading landowner in the kingdom. In the years leading up to the rising there seems to have been a sense of betrayal that was focused on John of Gaunt. His prominence meant that he was well known throughout England thus making him an easy target. He appears to have been associated with the overall failure of the government in the wars in France and
corruption at home.\(^2\) The complete destruction of the Savoy Palace in London and all of
the goods within it are enough to reveal the popular sentiment towards him.

Another figure singled out for attack was Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of
Canterbury and Chancellor of England. According to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*, during
the revolt Sudbury’s manor at Lambeth Palace was sacked, his goods destroyed and
registry books and chancery rolls were burnt.\(^3\) He was later taken from the Tower of
London and executed by the rebels. Like the Duke of Lancaster, Sudbury was one of the
most influential figures in the kingdom. As such he was also an easy target for the
peasants; he was prominent enough and powerful enough to be blamed for the current
problems like the poll tax.

Attacks on these men are concrete examples of the desire of the peasants to
remove all of the king’s evil ministers as an attempt to restore justice to the kingdom.
The peasants’ demand that corrupt ministers be removed from their offices was important
to the crisis that came to a head during the revolt. This crisis saw a questioning of the
current leadership and an attempt to replace those the peasants saw as unfit. Policies like
the poll tax and the Statue of Laborers called in to question the allegiance of ministers.
The feeling that ministers sought financial gain over the well being of those they were
supposed to protect was central to the call to remove them. It was expected that those in
power should administer justice evenly and give the king good counsel, yet in figures like
Gaunt and Sudbury the commons saw neither. The attacks on these men serve to show
that the peasants attacked those who they viewed as corrupt and that the peasants had a
good understanding of who was responsible for the current political situation.

\(^3\) *Anonimalle Chronicle* in, Dobson, *the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, p. 155.
It is possible that Gaunt and Sudbury were singled out because they were prominent figures and could easily be blamed for what the peasants saw as unfair economic stresses. Yet in the context of an underage king, it is very likely that these two men were pulling the strings and therefore the peasants were right to attribute their problems to them. The two men were symbols of the way in which the nobility had failed the expectations of the peasantry; lords had failed to secure the interests of the commons and the levying of a regressive poll tax only aggravated matter further. However, the attacks during June of 1381 were not simply directed at men of note; the general chaos was the perfect occasion to settle personal scores.

Unlike the attacks on the Savoy and Lambeth Palaces, the accounts of personal interactions amongst those of lower to middling status are filled with instances of blackmail, extortion and outright theft. In London, Paul Salesbury was indicted and later pardoned for both theft and forcibly entering several homes. According to the royal letters of pardon Paul forced William Baret to,

"Deliver to him there and under for fear of his [William’s] life two indentures (which contained matter relating to William’s title to the said hospice as leased to him by Paul’s father) as well as a schedule concerning a bond for £200 made by the latter."

The pardon then goes on to state that Paul was also accused of stealing goods whose value amounted to one hundred and fifty shilling from Hugh Fastolf. Paul’s actions show that while the commoners who participated in the revolt in London strongly objected to stealing from their social superiors, they did not have qualms with stealing from those with whom they had personal business dealings. Perhaps the commoners felt

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4 *Royal Letter of Pardon to Paul Salesbury of London*, in Dobson, p 229.
5 *Royal Letter of Pardon to Paul Salesbury of London*, in Dobson, p 229.
that if they were dealing with someone who had personally cheated them out of money it was acceptable to blackmail or violently force them to cough it up. They would also be able to explain away their theft in a court by claiming that what they had taken was rightfully theirs. Cases such as this are typical examples of people going outside the law to settle disputes because the legal system had failed them in one way or another.

If looked at from this perspective peasants were issuing ‘justice’ when in the legal system had failed to do so. A dispensation of vigilante justice would reshape the perception of theft, making it less morally incorrect. The peasants could regard their actions as a dispensing of justice when the law had not managed to help them. In this light the actions of the peasants were an attempt to restore the law rather than an act against it. It also must be noted that in the chronicles there appears to be a greater acknowledgement of theft outside of London. This of course leads to the possibility that refusal to participate in theft was an urban characteristic.6

In the Anonimalle Chronicle, the author remarks that Suffolk rebels “Robbed many good men and threw their houses to the ground and put them to fire.”7 In addition to this the chronicler states that the leader John Wrawe “sought to have gold and silver for his own needs.”8 Here we see that the Suffolk rebels had no qualms with theft and that in addition to dispensing justice they also seized the opportunity for personal gain. The thefts by John Wrawe and his followers were primarily directed at those in the ruling class, showing a direct contrast to the events in question in London. In fact Wrawe and his followers went so far as to leave stolen goods with a taverner until they were able to

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6 Hilton, Bondmen Made Free, p 193.
7 Anonimalle Chronicle in, Dobson, p 236.
8 Ibid.
pay him for the goods they had consumed.\textsuperscript{9} The interesting contrast between stealing from the social elite and paying social equals fairly indicates that there was more to theft than simple opportunism. By taking away from lords the peasants were asserting their own power while diminishing that of those whom they attacked. In the countryside those who had their goods stolen were viewed as unworthy of the power they possessed. While in London theft was used as an informal dispensation of justice by men who believed that their demands had legal merit.

The neglect of duties that were set out in the notion of orders was a prime a contributor to the revolt. According to Michael Bush,

\begin{quote}
"The theory of orders proposed an organic society of complementary parts which, under the rule of the crown, was directed by the gentlemen and clergy and sustained by the productivity and subservience of the commonality."\textsuperscript{10}
\end{quote}

In this perfect society each order was distinguished by its duties: the commons worked thus providing for the whole society, the nobility was obligated to protect society and serve the king, and the clergy were to see to the spiritual well being of the other two orders. At the top of this structure was the king, who was an idealized figure who represented true justice. The peasantry constantly appealed to the king with the hopes that he would settle their disputes justly. Unfortunately the reality of 1381 did not meet the expectations of this ideal. As with any theory the notion of orders was open to multiple interpretations: the nobility and clergy emphasized the obedience and subservience of the commons to them; while the commonality stressed the virtue of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{9} The Deposition of John Wrawe, in Dobson, p. 252. \\
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charity and hospitality owed to the commons by the upper orders.\textsuperscript{11} To find the ideal
noble lord and the ideal peasant one only needs to look as far as Piers Plowman.

William Langland clearly describes what the ideal knight ought to do in his
plowing scene. In \textit{passus} six while Piers is plowing the knight offers to aid him with his
task, Piers responds to this offer by saying,

\begin{quote}
"Since you proffer help so humbly, / I shall sweat for us both \ldots / In exchange
for you championing Holy Church and me, / Against wasters and wicked men
who would destroy me."\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

These lines paint a clear picture of the ideal peasant/lord relationship. However, later in
the same passage the ultimate failure of the knight to hold up his end of the bargain is
shown when his meager attempt to protect Piers from the wasters is unsuccessful. It is
clear from the demands attributed to Wyatt Tyler at Smithfield that the peasants felt as
though they had maintained their social obligations while the nobility had not.

The peasants had maintained their end of the ‘social contract’ but the lords had
not. Because the lords had breached the social contract their rule could no longer be seen
as legitimate. In order to maintain legitimacy lords would have to assert their power
through acts that reflected their obligation to the peasants. The poll tax, corruption, and
exploitation all indicated to the peasantry that the lords were undeserving of their power.
As seen in the attacks on the Duke of Lancaster and the Archbishop of Canterbury the
people blamed bad leadership, and they sought to remove bad influences from the
government to protect the country and the king.

\textsuperscript{11} Bush, "the Risings of the Commons in England," p. 115.
\textsuperscript{12} William Langland, \textit{Piers Plowman}, Version B.6.24-28, in Elizabeth Robertson and Stephen H.
97.
However, the language that the chroniclers attributed to the peasants in London leads beyond the justifications for the revolt and their actions; it gives insight into the values of peasants during this time. By objecting to theft those participating were making a conscious decision not to be associated with something bad, but what exactly was it? In claiming that they were not thieves and that they loved justice and freedom the peasants were contrasting themselves to the likes of John of Gaunt and others whom they saw as corrupt. As in Piers Plowman the peasants sought to be morally superior to the nobility, and these statements are one way in which the peasants declared this. It is important to note that to the people of the fourteenth century there was no clear distinction between moral, legal and social matters. Peasants were not limited to the sphere of revolt to claim their moral superiority; they frequently used the legal system to do this.

Peasant interactions with the English manorial courts are vital to understanding the vassal lord relationship of the fourteenth century, and in understanding the ideologies behind the language of thievery. For many peasants the labor services required by their lords had long been a subject of contention, and while the revolt of 1381 brought this conflict to a violent head it was in manorial courts and petitions to the King’s Bench that these issues were commonly manifested. Villeins constantly claimed that the lands to which they were tied were ‘ancient demesne.’ The desire to prove the lands to which they were tied were ancient demesne stemmed from the fact that villeins on ancient demesne were subject to fewer services. Litigation was the primary way in which this was asserted and it gave those involved extensive experience within the manorial courts.

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13 Lands that had once belonged to the king.
In the struggles to prove that manors were ancient domain peasants committed time and money. The money needed to pay for the lawyers fees; the purchase of writs and travel was considerable. This leads to the conclusion that peasants pooled money and that those who did had at least some extra income. These struggles were not grounded in the short-term; rather they were often the product of multiple generations, the tenants of Blewbury (Berkshire) who in 1284 protested the misrule of the Abbot of Reading in 1200-13 are just one on many examples.\textsuperscript{14} Long term commitment to this struggle shows that the crisis of legitimacy was not just a problem during the revolt. Rather peasants constantly attempted to undermine the power of those above them because it was illegitimate.

In addition to operating within the legal parameters of society villeins also resorted to other methods to improve their situations with their lords. It was possible to negotiate with lords outside of the courts and this often happened. Yet when this too failed peasants could resort to other tactics that included withdrawing labor services, secretly using other mills, trespassing, and tearing down fences. This shows that while peasants were comfortable within the manorial court system they were also determined enough to go outside of it when it failed them. The rising of 1381 was a result of this ideology. Legal methods had not brought about any change for the peasants and so it was necessary to respond with illegal actions. In the actions of the uprising the peasants attempted to restore the legitimacy of the king while also dispensing justice as it was supposed to be.

Another aspect of the revolt that can be taken into account is the context of the moral economy. While this term is most generally applied to the eighteenth century it is possible find similar ideas circulating in the fourteenth century. In exploring food riots that occurred in 1347 it is possible to see a tradition of the commons rising to demand that justice be served. These protesters supported their seizure of grain with the issue of quasi royal proclamations that sought to regulate grain export.\textsuperscript{15} Here it can be seen that in addition to having experience operating within the manorial courts commons were also able to engage with legislation and use it as justification. This also shows that the rebellion of 1381 was not an isolated incident of protest, but that is came from a tradition of peasant rising up and making demands of the government.

The desire of the rebels to give legitimacy to their actions can be seen directly in their use of the space of the market place. As a space where the decrees of the king were made the market place had the ability to lend legitimacy to actions that took place within its confines. Peasants participating in the revolt used the market as a space to hold their own legal trials, as a place to organize and set demands, and as a place to swear allegiance to each other. In St. Albans the rebels gathered in the market where they performed beheadings and the like. By performing these acts in this public space of authority the rebels transformed, “the occasion into an illustration of the new configuration of power in the town.”\textsuperscript{16} These actions show that the peasants were concerned with asserting their own legitimacy. What is more is the methods used to give


legitimacy to their actions were not of their own creation, but rather they were borrowed from the very people that they were attempting to overthrow.

Justification for actions was not limited solely to the sphere of the villeins, lords also found ways to justify actions that were criticized. When accused of oppressing their serfs lords responded by focusing on their moderation and reason. They claimed that services were voluntary and that services rendered were rewarded with a free meal or some other form of payment.\(^{17}\) This response shows that the lords recognized the threat presented by accusations of injustice and oppression. It was clear that small matters had the potential to threaten lordship as a whole.\(^{18}\) Fears that small grievances had the ability to undermine the entire hierarchical system were not irrational. The uprising in 1381 is evidence of this. The peasants who rose during this rebellion were in fact responding to a number of longstanding and short term grievances, and their actions affected and threatened the power structures that held society together.

The defensive stance of both lords and serfs during this time reveals a society in which the members were preoccupied with a struggle to assert the legitimacy of their actions and desires. Persons within this society were not equal and who was in charge was based on moral and rational superiority. Therefore peasants constantly tried to assert that they were equal to and better than the lords as well as vice versa. Upsetting this delicate balance was dangerous, small successes on the part of the peasants were seriously threatening to the entire system of lordship. This helps to explain why peasants were so concerned with the appearance of thievery. Stealing would be a display of moral inferiority and it would give fuel to the argument of those in power.

\(^{17}\) Dyer, “Memories of freedom” p 285.
\(^{18}\) Ibid.
As previously mentioned English legal policies also helped to determine peasant attitudes towards theft during the revolt. The possibility of being convicted for theft was clearly unpleasant. Why would this matter if those participating were already in jeopardy of being accused of treason? People in large groups had the possibility of anonymity, but if a person was found with stolen goods there was no way to deny the theft or involvement in the revolt. Therefore theft was a marker of multiple crimes.

In light of all of the evidence of a society that is fixated on mutual obligation accounts of theft seem to be contradictory. Chroniclers give detailed descriptions of John Wrawe and what appears to be his constant search for financial gain. The accounts tell of forcing ransoms, stealing silver dishes and disputing with other over the spoils. While these examples of blackmail and theft were not directed at random, they lack a personal aspect. Events in London seem to be the result of personal grudges and genuine grievances over rents or other contracts. On the other hand Wrawe’s attacks seem to be directed at people of note regardless of any personal connection. Wrawe’s actions appear to be the work of opportunism in a time of political upheaval whereas events in London were the articulation of legal disputes outside to a legal forum.

One of the most intriguing accounts in the chronicles of the destruction of the Savoy tells of what happened to a man caught stealing. Henry Knighton describes the events, “One of the criminals chose a fine piece of silver and hid it in his lap; when his fellows saw him carrying it, they threw him, together with his prize, into the fire.”\textsuperscript{19} Behavior like this indicates that the peasants were genuine in their statements. They did not simple say they were not thieves but they enforced it as well, and although the mode

\textsuperscript{19} Henry Knighton in, Dobson, \textit{The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381}, p 184.
of punishment was not the same the end result was. By throwing their comrade into the fire the peasants displayed a commitment to their morals, this shows that they were not using their claims to love freedom and hate thieves simply to cover their own misdeeds.

It was not simply the poll tax of 1380 that upset the peasants and provoked them into revolt; it was the decision of the government to send commissions of inquiry to look into cases of avoiding the tax that upset people. While the tax was adjusted to reflect the abilities of each household and children were not taxed it is clear that a large number of household were able avoid taxation. The number of people recorded in the 1377 poll tax out number those recorded for the 1380 poll tax, this does not reflect a decline in population but rather a greater success in avoiding payment. It is also clear from the records that it was not simply the commons who avoided the tax, nobility and clergy were also keen to avoid payment of the tax. Records from the 1377 poll tax indicate that the diocese of Canterbury had 1,094 clergy men, but in 1381 there were only 787 clergy accounted for.  

So, when Richard II sent out additional collectors in 1381 to enforce the tax people began to fear having to pay twice. The extension of power given to those on the poll-tax commission and their exploitation of such power created much anger among the commons. An example of this is John Legge who in Kent would only allow tax exemptions to girls under the age of fifteen whom he had personally examined. These actions were a great abuse of power and led to immense hatred; it is no surprise that Legge was beheaded on Tower Hill along with Sudbury. It was the further enforcement

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of the poll tax that caused people to become agitated, and when they did they needed justification for what they were doing. Stress on the lower orders did not only manifest itself in the form of taxation, the Statute of Laborers was another contributor to the civil unrest.

The Statute of Laborer like the attempt to claim ancient demesne was one of the more long term factors that contributed to the revolt. The statute sought to protect the nobility from unfair demand made by wage laborers after the decrease in population as a result of the Black Death in 1349. Yet thirty years later and the wage cap had not been increased. This was not only a problem for laborers it was also a problem for wealthy yeomen who needed to hire seasonal laborers. In a need to supplement family labor many yeomen must have been prepared to offer higher wages in order to get the help they needed.\textsuperscript{22} Inability to get the appropriate amount of help during harvest season meant that these families were more likely to suffer. During the years leading up to the rising Justice’s of the Peace had become increasingly occupied with enforcing the attempted wage freeze.\textsuperscript{23} This can help to explain why so much anger was directed towards legal officials during the revolt. The JP’s were enforcing and law that was regarded as unjust and exploitative and beneficial only to the nobility.

In strict legal terms the Great Rising was illegal, but in what terms was it a socially accepted way of dealing with the problems at hand? As a very young king Richard II was in many was ineffectual and it was easy for the kingdom to fall to the hands of those with more political experience. The space left by the king was filled by the likes of Sudbury, Gaunt, and those who had more contact with the people like Legge,

\textsuperscript{22} Hilton, \textit{Bondmen Made Free}, p 154.
\textsuperscript{23} Hilton, \textit{Bondmen Made Free}, p 151.
JP's and the local over lords. It can be stated that in light of the existing political and social climate, the rising was a way of legitimately attempting to restore the deserving to power.

The number one figure on the list of those to be restored to their rightful power was the Richard II. During this period the king was an infallible figure and it would have been nearly impossible to justify any direct action against the king on the part of the commons. Therefore if it was not the fault of the king it was the fault of those who were close to him and were leading him astray. This explains why none of the demands of the peasants were to remove the king, instead Wyatt Tyler and others wanted to restore the king’s rule from the evil doers who had taken over the government. Richard II however, demonstrated that he was not simply a passive figure.

His actions at Smithfield according to the chroniclers reveal a capable and brave leader. According to Froissart he singlehandedly rode into the crowd after Wyatt Tyler was killed and spoke to the people thus, “Sirs, what aileth you? You shall have no captain but me: I am your king: be all in rest and peace.”\textsuperscript{24} All of the chroniclers tell similar stories of Richard II rising to the occasion by leading and dispersing the crowd. Yet this action of taking his place as a social superior seems to be the exception rather than the rule in the peasants’ revolt.

The desire to restore the power of Richard II reveals a society which was falling apart at the seams, or if not the people within it felt that something was terribly awry. If the king who was supposed to be at the top of the notion of orders was no longer in control then there was a social, political and moral crisis. The evidence that the power structures that held English society together were breaking down are everywhere in the

\textsuperscript{24}Dobson, \textit{the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381}, p. 196.
revolt. While the markers of failing legitimacy are widespread across the counties of the revolt the best example is London.

The ease with which the rebels marched into London amazes the reader of the chronicles. This tells us that the gatekeepers failed to do their job when the city was faced with attack. A total lack of any display of power continued to occur during the following days when rebels burned, pillaged, and killed within the walls of the fortified city. It appears that there was no competent figure to assert authority and defend the city by keeping the rebels at bay. What is equally astonishing is that according to the chronicles the rebels were given free reign in the Tower of London.

Not only was the Tower fortified but it was also the safe house for Richard II, the Archbishop, and the Queen Mother and it is highly unlikely that it would have had at least some military protection. Like the knight in Piers Plowman who was unable to protect Piers from the wasters it seems that those whose job it was to protect and hold society together were unable to even protect themselves. If the response to a violent rebellion was to allow the rebels in it is no wonder that the peasants sought to remove those in power. In their inability to protect the Tower of London the lords confirmed the beliefs of the rebels that they were unfit to rule over society.

The social and moral commentary offered by William Langland in Piers Plowman is one of many more general indicators that English society had a legitimacy crisis. The portrayal of nobility, higher clergy, and other power figures as corrupt and weak in the tale points to criticism of the regime by more than Langland alone. The moral criticisms and commentaries offered in Piers are like mirror images of the Great Rising. Both show contempt for the existing powers because they are exploitative, corrupt, and fail to fulfill
their part of the ‘social contract’ of the notion of orders. However it was not simply a legitimacy crisis it was also a moral crisis. There was no real distinction between social and moral concerns for in the fourteenth century. Failure to pay taxes or theft would have been treated in the same way as heresy. If the current regime was no longer moral they were also no longer legitimate, failure to lead moral lives was just as bad as failure to offer protection to the peasants.

This moral aspect of the revolt is important to the language of theft, and can help to explain why theft was not acceptable while revolt itself was. In this study many examples have been given to show how social protest was process with a long history within English society. Revolt was regarded as a necessity; it temporarily turned society upside down in order to return things to their rightful order. In a revolt that was opposed to exploitation and corruption it would have been hypocritical of the peasants to steal. Social protest was an extension of the legal process; it was an extreme resort when all other measures failed. Theft on the other hand was always wrong morally and otherwise.

The social and moral crisis during the peasants’ revolt was filling a vacuum caused by the lack of legitimacy. Socially England was in crisis because of the inability of those in power to maintain society together. Richard II’s actions at Smithfield were an exceptional occurrence. Society was also experiencing a moral crisis due to the feeling among the peasantry that the nobility had neglected their obligations to the rest of society. These two crises are difficult to separate; this difficulty arises from a lack of separation between social and moral issues in the minds of contemporaries. The populace arose in the shape of the revolt in an attempt to correct these problems. There
seems to have been a constant struggle in the fourteenth century to assert the legitimacy of grievances.

Peasants who refused to become thieves during the Uprising of 1381 were making attempting to legitimize their actions. The participants recognized that in order to do so it was necessary to behave with good moral judgment. The commons wanted to contrast themselves with the nobility and show that they supported justice and truth. Those in London who did participate in theft had personal dealings with their victims, and would have felt justified in their actions. Evidence of the fact that these accounts of theft found legal support is easily found in the case of Paul Salesbury, who was pardoned for his actions during the revolt.

Lastly the desire to restore the king to his rightful position of power makes it clear that Peasants were not attempting a complete abolishment of the existing power structures. They believed that Richard II, like themselves was a lover of truth and justice and that if he hears their complaints he would help them. This desire to appeal to the king shows an acceptance rather than a rejection of the status quo. Peasants who attempted to dispense justice during the revolt indicate that while they were rebelling against the law, they were in other ways willing to work within it. By looking at the revolt in the context of the fourteenth century as a whole it becomes clear that the peasants participating had complex relationships with the law, their superiors, and their own morality.
Bibliography


