

RACHEL GREENBERG

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## From Subject to Earthly Matter: The Plowman's Argument and Popular Discourse in *Gentleness and Nobility*

In his work on popular rebellions in early modern England, Andy Wood identifies 'a unifying political language' that captures the history of class conflict during the emergence of agrarian capitalism, which he then traces through a range of popular speech acts.<sup>1</sup> As I will argue, this same thread runs through literary and especially dramatic representations of the popular voice, though scholars have often miscast or overlooked it, equating it with mere entertainment — the more immediate purpose of literature — or associating it with a particular time period or literary tradition. While critics like Stephen Greenblatt discuss literary depictions of popular speech as parody, 'cruel laughter' at the expense of the lower classes, I contend that a parallel literary movement champions and disseminates this language and follows the course Wood traces in non-literary texts.<sup>2</sup> My primary example is the early Tudor play *Gentleness and Nobility* (1525), which features a Plowman who debates a Knight and a Merchant.<sup>3</sup> This ploughman character perfectly embodies the tradition of popular ideology Wood identifies and voices a form of 'peasant' discourse that transcends any one literary or political category of the early modern period, helping to bridge the gap between the oral tradition Wood explores and a literary tradition that emerged alongside it.

I first want to contextualize this discourse as it is spoken by characters more familiar than the Plowman of *Gentleness*: the gravediggers of *Hamlet*, who are often viewed as a source of comic relief in one of Shakespeare's great tragedies. When these 'clowns' — as they are identified in most editions of the text — enter into dialogue with Hamlet, their gibes about death seem to be a foil for Hamlet's more serious musings.<sup>4</sup> Michael Bristol usefully critiques this point when he identifies the gravediggers as part of the tradition of carnival. As illuminated by Mikhail Bakhtin, carnival works to level social hierarchy by posing a set of values steeped in basic human experiences and frequently expressed as scatological or otherwise 'low' humour that

serve as an alternative to ‘official culture’.<sup>5</sup> While digging Ophelia’s grave, for instance, one of the gravediggers claims, ‘There is no ancient gentlemen but gard’ners, ditchers, and grave-makers; they hold up Adam’s professions’; his logic for this statement: Adam was the first man ‘that ever bore arms’ (5.1.28–31).<sup>6</sup> Bristol argues this moment is a ‘clear and explicit critique of the basis for social hierarchy’, a critique, moreover, rooted in a more primary equality: ‘All men and women have real arms, as opposed to a symbolic “coat of arms”’.<sup>7</sup> The gravediggers thus subvert the traditional vision of social hierarchy through their more ‘grounded’ experience as labourers, which they hold up as the true source of gentility.<sup>8</sup> Maya Mathur makes a related argument linking the ‘clowns’ that traipsed the Elizabethan stage to the tradition of subversive speech and plebian revolt.<sup>9</sup> She notes that the word ‘clown’ was ‘synonymous with “a country man, rustic or peasant”’ and that ‘the rebellious peasant was contained by presenting him as a figure of ridicule’, but argues that these same ‘clowns’ voice social critique through ‘jests’ that unsettle the status quo.<sup>10</sup> In noting the dual valences of the stage clown, Mathur speaks to the ambivalence of this figure onstage (and, by extension, of carnival), with its capacity to both invert and reinforce social hierarchy, to serve as an outlet for rebellion and as an instrument to contain it.<sup>11</sup> Thus, while we can appreciate Bristol’s point that the gravediggers serve to critique class hierarchy as well as to highlight the value of those who labour in the earth, we might question his sense that this critique is ‘clear and explicit’ in the domain of carnival.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, since the gravediggers make their claims through jests and remain in the background for the rest of the scene — if they are onstage at all — their critique may fall by the wayside.

My interest in *Gentleness and Nobility* concerns how it too defines this tradition of popular protest and subversive speech in relation to the shifts in economic production and class relations that occurred in sixteenth-century agrarian England. A sequence of popular rebellions against economic practices punctuated this period of the country’s gradual transition from feudalism to capitalism, with the initial rising of 1381 followed by events such as the 1536 Pilgrimage of Grace, which combined religious and economic motives, the 1549 Kett’s rebellion, and a series of smaller-scale risings in the 1590s.<sup>13</sup> In looking at *Gentleness*, I want to locate this tradition in a form of drama that was a precursor to Elizabethan plays, the Tudor interlude, which was popular throughout the sixteenth century, as well as to question its ‘comic’ origins and propose that its ideological ‘thread’ has a broader trajectory than critics like Bristol and Mathur suggest.

Debates concerning the play's authorship are long-standing, but most scholars credit *Gentleness* to dramatist and poet John Heywood, who quite remarkably found a place not only in the court of Henry VIII but also the Reformation and Counter-reformation courts of Edward VI and Mary Tudor. Likewise some speculate that *Gentleness* was authored or co-authored by John Rastell, a lawyer, printer, and playwright who was also Heywood's father-in-law.<sup>14</sup> The dispute among the Knight, the Merchant, and the Plowman contests the origins and justice of social hierarchy, reflecting ongoing historical clashes between the different social estates. Specifically, the Plowman condemns the Knight and the Merchant's oppression of men like himself through economic tyranny that included the enclosure or privatization of common land, a movement that dated back to the Middle Ages and regularly generated popular ire in the period. But just as importantly, the Plowman makes his critique in language that inverts existing associations between social class and speech. One's quality of speech, whether coarse or genteel, served as a key class-marker in the period, 'the original and ultimate prop of the social order', with aristocrats casting their rhetoric and eloquence in contrast to the brutish, inarticulate speech of the peasant class.<sup>15</sup> *Gentleness*, however, allows peasant speech to challenge this view and to interrogate the institutions the bolstered it. The Plowman presents an argument that overturns the notion of an inarticulate peasantry by expressing that group's immediate concerns. Most crucially, the Plowman presents a brand of 'peasant' discourse in which we see a rhetorical movement towards material conditions that highlight the vital role of peasants in the social and political economy and locate the source of ruling class power in peasant hands.

Such estate debates, common in the period, stressed the proper relationship between classes — theoretically one of mutual support and interdependence — and especially highlighted when one or more estate failed to meet its obligations. Frequently identified as part of the literature of complaint, these debates are uniquely suited to exposing social inequality.<sup>16</sup> And while some have associated the interlude with courtly entertainments, more recent critics highlight its penchant for political commentary, its flexibility as a genre, and hence its potential to play to a more socially mixed audience for a range of 'polemical purposes'.<sup>17</sup> The figure of the ploughman also has a vital role in the complaint tradition as well as a broader history in early English letters, drawing on a Biblical plot that extends to *Piers Plowman* and onward.<sup>18</sup> Andrew McRae writes, for instance:

In the earlier development of the Piers Plowman tradition ... the rhetorical structure of complaint had been consistent and straightforward. Through the persona of the ploughman, authors presented statements from one at the base of the social order, directed to an individual at the top of the order. The ploughman was the embodiment of powerlessness, humbly appealing to the better judgment of the powerful.<sup>19</sup>

McRae identifies *Gentleness* as part of this tradition and notes that arguments against enclosure ‘became something of an independent subgenre of agrarian complaint’ directed against the greed of the gentry and aristocracy, the clergy, or anyone who sought to appropriate common land and other resources for their own benefit rather than that of the larger and less fortunate community.<sup>20</sup> But though McRae acknowledges the Plowman makes some radical claims, he ultimately suggests the Plowman’s role is conventional, working to sustain the existing social order rather than reform it.

I would argue, however, that the Plowman of *Gentleness* is in several ways an exception to this tradition as McRae and other critics characterize it. The Plowman’s role in a specifically intra-class debate deserves to be highlighted, for *Gentleness* appears to be the only interlude in which a ploughman — *the* representative figure for the peasant class — appears, and he openly challenges his social superiors, even inverting the social hierarchy at one point and placing himself at the top.<sup>21</sup> The Plowman also emphasizes the social value of his labour, but unlike Elizabethan clowns he confronts the ruling classes directly, using a far more logical and serious approach than the gravediggers, which the realm of carnival might exclude. While Mathur is quite right that Elizabethan literature places popular protest on the margins, Heywood and Rastell put the Plowman at centre stage, giving the popular voice an authority and access to a space it rarely possessed.

### **Recasting the Ploughman: From the Margins to Centre Stage**

Like the Elizabethan clowns that succeed him, the ploughman of early modern literature and of *Gentleness* has been unfairly denigrated as a comic figure by contemporaries of Heywood and Rastell and by modern critics because of his base speech and his status as a labourer, one whose hands are coarse and dirty from delving the earth. Yet as I will argue, the power of the Plowman’s argument against the Knight and the Merchant stems from his ability to link the grounds for his argument to the material ground that is its foundation.

The structure as well as the possibility of Heywood and Rastell's dual authorship of the play suggest why *Gentleness* creates space for 'peasant discourse'. Bolwell identifies various sources that record Heywood as a gentleman;<sup>22</sup> he seems to have possessed a somewhat higher social rank than Rastell, but he earned his place at court through service — initially as a court singer and musician — rather than by birth. Under Henry VIII, he 'received a salary of at least £20 a year which is recorded in the King's Book of Payments'.<sup>23</sup> This salary increased to £40 under Edward VI, when Heywood was appointed as steward of the king's chamber, and then to £50 under Mary.<sup>24</sup> He clearly had regular access to the court on various levels; he also accumulated significant property under Henry, Edward, Mary, as well as Elizabeth I, until his Catholicism reportedly forced him to leave England. By comparison, Rastell's composition of various courtly entertainments links his name more peripherally to Henry's court while court records show that he had a private theater on his own property, which suggests he also wrote for a more 'mixed audience'.<sup>25</sup> Yet regardless of whether Heywood or Rastell authored the play singly or collaborated, the fact that both men were at court and shared a family connection suggests that *Gentleness* may be the product of an intra-class dialogue similar to the one it presents to its audience.<sup>26</sup>

Richard Axton advocates the theory of dual authorship, suggesting it is the lower-ranking Rastell who composed the prologue and epilogue, and significantly, the epilogue is voiced by a Philosopher who arrives onstage after the other characters have left it, which reiterates the Plowman's main points.<sup>27</sup> If Axton is correct, Rastell's work frames the main action of the performance, an authorial position that conflicts with and even cancels out his relatively modest class status. Structurally his work is as marginal to the piece as he himself is to the court, yet he sets the tone through which we are to see and hear the performance by having both the first and the last word. Axton divides the rest of the work, which he credits to Heywood, into 'two parts', 'a prelude ... and postlude' in which the debate is solely between the Merchant and the Knight. The section separating these parts and in which the Plowman appears and poses his argument against theirs Axton identifies as an interlude. His definition of 'interlude' as a break or pause between two parts or acts of a main play or entertainment during which another play — usually humorous — was staged differs from uses of the term applied to an entire dramatic work, but this sense of the word usefully complicates the Plowman's role. The interlude serves briefly to divert the audience from a more important and serious theme, and in charting dramatic structure this

way Axton seems to relegate the Plowman to the periphery. But in *Gentleness*, the interlude is not only structurally but also thematically and dramatically the centre of the presentation, and the Plowman's argument takes up most of the performance. It comes to govern these two other parts, challenging the audience's expectations of what an interlude should be and should say. The traditional form of the work is thus used against itself and reflects the same issues debated within the play so that ultimately *Gentleness* endorses the Plowman's argument and suggests that social struggle in the period might inspire moments of class sympathy as well as conflict.

The debate begins as a disagreement between the Merchant and the Knight about 'who is a verey gentylman and who is a noble man and how men should come to auctoryte' (p 99). Once the Plowman enters, however, he shifts and wins the debate by introducing the terms of peasant discourse, partly by evoking a more just past but chiefly by linking social to material conditions. The Plowman does not try to contest the terms gentleness and nobility on the high and purely rhetorical grounds of his social superiors; instead, he turns to the ground itself, linking his subject to earthly matter. His speech emphasizes material proof rather than abstract social and cultural ideals. The Plowman's 'naturall reason' (844) thus subverts and inverts the nature of argument itself — from abstract to concrete, from high to low terms — and destabilizes the vision of social hierarchy in which the Knight and the Merchant see themselves.

The debate between the Merchant and the Knight arises because the two men define gentleness and nobility differently. The Knight insists it is a question of lineage and inheritance while the merchant argues that gentleness and nobility rest on one's initiative and labour. Yet both characters define these qualities as tied to wealth and power derived through social institutions. The point of contention concerns how each man has acquired these things and which route is more legitimate, a debate that was ongoing in the period as growing reliance upon trade and other economic shifts created opportunities for upward mobility among the middling classes.

Yet the Merchant's case for his gentleness also paves the way for the Plowman's. Predictably, the Knight denies the Merchant's claim to gentleness because he lacks noble blood; as he remarks, 'Your fadyr was but a blake smyth', and he further notes that the Merchant's ancestors were 'but arty-fycers, / As smythys, masonys, carpenters or wevars' (41–2). The Merchant frankly concedes this point and then proudly traces his lineage through these occupations, arguing that his wealth and nobility derive from his ancestors'

capacity to ‘work and do’, and he points out that the Knight and his ancestors have acquired their possessions and status by a similar route (106). The Merchant thus challenges the Knight’s neo-feudal view of inheritance by invoking it in a middle-class form but also reveals a more basic form of labour beneath his own: ‘How can lordys and estatis have ought in store / Except that thartyfycers do get it before? / For all metallis be dyggyd furst by myners / And after wrought by the artyfycers’ (69–72). Here the Merchant argues the Knight relies upon men like himself to obtain luxuries, but his reference to miners locates the basis for trade in the hands of the labourers who supply its raw materials: men who are close kin to the Plowman.

The Plowman arrives soon after this point and his opening lines immediately reverse our customary associations between social class and speech and suggest the Merchant and the Knight’s argument is groundless, a reversal that the Merchant and Knight try but fail to contest:

PLOWMAN Now here is bybbyll babbyll, clytter clatter!  
 I hard never of so folysh a matter.  
 But by Goddys body, to speke the troth,  
 I am better than other of you both ...

MERCHANT Ye, mary, thou lewyd vyllayn and rude raskall!  
 It is for the full yll besemyng  
 To perturb any gentylmens talkyng.

PLOWMAN Gentylnen! ye gentyl men? Jak Heryng!  
 Put your shone in your bosome for weryng!  
 I accompt myself by Goddys body  
 Better than you bothe and more worthy. (175–88)

The peasant class typically speaks ‘bybbyll babbyll’ in early modern texts, but here it is the gentlemen’s talk that is judged this way,<sup>28</sup> though the Plowman’s own language is deliberately coarse as well as seditious, as Wood argues, and therefore dangerous and fraught with meaning.<sup>29</sup> Yet the Plowman’s logic is not that the Merchant and the Knight cannot speak but that their words are too removed from the material conditions that fuel their lifestyles, that their speech is not grounded on real ‘matter’, that is, the fruits of the Plowman’s labour.

The Knight responds by citing his own deeds on the battlefield and further argues he has ensured the ‘tranquylite’ (233) of the state through his patronage and governance. But he quickly diverts the Plowman’s attack by contrasting his own pursuits with the Merchant’s, which he argues stem from

greed. The Merchant, says the Knight, ‘wyl never take labour, / Except it be for ... proffet and lucoure’ (234–5). The Merchant insists he can answer both the Plowman and the Knight and claims he earns his nobility from the commodities he brings to England. Such commodities, he claims, satisfy men’s basic needs. But the Plowman then shifts the debate by classifying ‘need’ in social rather than bodily terms. He first asks, ‘Is not that the noblyst thyng in dede / That of all other thyngis hath lest nede, / As God which reynith etern in blysse? / Is not he the noblest thyng that is?’ (281–4). The Knight and the Merchant agree to this premise, and the Plowman continues:

And lykwyse that thyng that hath most nede  
 Is the thyng that is most wreched.  
 So, suffycyency is ever noblenes,  
 And necessaryte is ever wrechydnes;  
 And he, that hath more nede of that thyng  
 For the preservacyon of hys lyvyng  
 Then his felow hath, his felow must nedys be  
 By thys same reason more noble than he. (293–300)

According to the Plowman, the man who is most self-sufficient is most godly and noble. He subsequently points out he has no need of the things the Knight and the Merchant deem necessities (289). He also reiterates that it is men like himself who provide the living of the Merchant and the Knight and produce the commodities they value:

For I have nede of no maner thyng  
 That ye can do to help of my lyffying;  
 For every thyng whereby ye do lyf,  
 I noryssh it and to you both do gyf;  
 I plow, I tyll, and I ster the ground,  
 Whereby I make the corn to habounde,  
 Whereof ther is made both drynk and bred,  
 Wyth the which dayly ye must nedis be fed.  
 ...  
 I noryssh and preserve, which ye do were;  
 Which yf ye had not, no dowl ye shuld  
 Starve for lak of clothis, because of colde.  
 So both you shulde die or lyve in necessite,  
 If ye had not comfort and helpe of me. (305–12, 316–20)

We might assume it is the Plowman who lives by necessity, but here he speaks of his self-sufficiency, of what is enough to live on based on what is available in nature. Conversely, 'need' to the Plowman means being dependent on others, not being able to bear economic scarcity, and being unable to provide for oneself at the most basic level. Need thus implies a social relationship to the land as opposed to the more natural one suggested by sufficiency.

Christopher Dyer illuminates this point by describing the ploughman's historical role: 'In the late fourteenth century "plowman" referred to two distinct social types. It could mean either a full-time farm servant with the duty of plowing or a self-sufficient peasant owning and using his own plow'.<sup>30</sup> The Plowman of *Gentleness* seems to fit the second of these types especially, and Dyer goes on to discuss the ploughman's casting in estates literature as 'a pillar of society, producing food for the rest of humanity, who are perceived in terms of the classic three orders ... His social role is to produce for his own needs, and to create through compulsory payments and voluntary charity a surplus that supports others'.<sup>31</sup> By redefining need this way, *Gentleness* seems to critique the ongoing transition from a subsistence- and community-oriented mode of production to that of agrarian capitalism and the increasingly exploitive relationships emerging between those that merely held wealth and those that produced it. Further, in separating it from the realm of necessity, the Plowman frames subsistence as outside the parameters of social relations and interdependence and therefore outside exploitation. This view of subsistence is clearly idealistic but also suggests the harm of altering the natural order and anticipates the conditions that Marx observed of industrial capitalism. In claiming a 'natural' or non-exploitive relationship to the land that is based on subsistence, the Plowman justifies his right to the 'means of production', whereas the Knight and the Merchant — while not capitalists in Marx's sense — elide this relationship and monopolize this right, taking for granted their place in the social order and remaining out of touch with the material substance at its base.<sup>32</sup> Conversely, the Plowman lives according to God's plan, in which natural order is primary, social order is secondary, and where to 'plow' and 'ster the ground' is nobler than either patrimony or commerce.

Natural order assumes an even more vital role in the Plowman's argument when the Merchant challenges the Plowman's logic: 'Now that is a folysh reason, so God me save, / For by the same reason, thou woldyst have / Everi best, fyssh, and other foule than / To be more noble of birth than a man', a point the Plowman accepts unequivocally (341–4). A beast, he concurs, has

no need of the things Man requires to live (clothing, housing, etc) and no need to labour as Man does to acquire them (369–72). The Plowman thus establishes beasts as the noblest creatures on earth, which places him next in line in the natural hierarchy while the Merchant and Knight follow him. But he then gives this ordering a sudden twist: because men have souls they are superior to beasts, a claim that shifts him and other labourers first in matters of nobility but does not redeem the Knight or the Merchant from the place he initially assigned to them. This revision of social hierarchy is decidedly radical, though McRae draws back from this view.<sup>33</sup> While the Plowman and the beasts live naturally, the Knight and the Merchant live off of others and sustain themselves through exploitation and force, a point the outspoken Plowman makes quite frankly:

All possessions began furst of tyranny.  
 For when people began furst to encrease,  
 Some gafе them self all to idylnes  
 And wold not labour, but take by vyolence  
 That other men gat by labour and dylgence,  
 Than they that labouryd were fayne to gyfe  
 Them part of theyr gettingis in peas to lyfe,  
 Or elles, for theyr landis, money a porcyon.  
 So possessyons began by extorcyon. (598–606)

Here, the Plowman may allude to not only enclosure but also the practices of rack-renting (renting at extortionate rates), the inventive methods of taxation, and the lack of price regulation that had made subsistence increasingly difficult for the poor for over a century — and that continued well into the future.<sup>34</sup> Dyer tracks this development, citing the Black Death and the resulting loss of population as one of its key starting points and an expanding commercial market as another. The Black Death created a labour shortage that initially benefitted those living off the land with higher wages and lower rents; as the population began to recover, however, and markets continued to grow, landlords sought ways to make a profit at the expense of the lower orders while their more well-off tenants did the same.<sup>35</sup> Dyer then links this earlier period to the sixteenth century, which in some ways experienced a repetition as well as the continuation and the outcome of this earlier pattern: a massive increase in population, a corresponding increase in prices and other sources of revenue to meet higher demands on food, trade, and land, and a shift to prioritizing individual gains over the well-being of the community.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, the Plowman's argument in *Gentleness* builds on an established historical pattern that was arguably reaching another peak. His point, after all, is that these unjust practices began long ago in opposition to some prior, more peaceful way of life. The Plowman thus unmasks the practices underlying patrimony and trade as tyranny and removes the grounds for the Knight and the Merchant's faith in these institutions along with their claims to gentleness.

Yet perhaps the key question here is to what extent does the Plowman's speech enter and overturn the Knight and the Merchant's framework for argument? That is, to what extent does the play acknowledge the Plowman as having taken centre stage?<sup>37</sup> The Merchant and the Knight never concede the validity of the Plowman's argument, but this lapse is precisely what the play dramatizes for the audience. At one point, for instance, the Merchant tries to return the debate to the terms on which it began, the 'talk' of gentlemen. He tells the Plowman, 'me thynkith thou makist a degression / From the argument that we furst began, / Which was to prove who was most gentyman, / Whych we disputyd. I wold thou haddist hard it' (398–401). The Plowman responds, 'Tussh, I hard what ye seyde everi whit', at which the Knight chimes in, 'Then shew thy reason therein or thou go' (402–3). Here the Merchant and the Knight discount the Plowman's reason as 'digression', another attempt to marginalize his role in the debate. But the Plowman not only refuses this critique; he causes it to rebound. When the Knight later remarks, 'Thou seydyt thou hardyst our argumentes all' (477), the Plowman responds:

So dyd I nother good nor substancyall,  
 For thy folyssh and pyvyssh oppynyon  
 Was, because of the grete domynyon  
 Of the landis and rentis wher to thou wast bore,  
 Whych thyn auncestours had long tyme before,  
 Thou thynkyst thy self a gentyman to be;  
 And that is a folyssh reason, semyth me.  
 For when Adam dolf and Eve span,  
 Who was then a gentyman? ...  
 And I thynk verely ye do beleve  
 That we cam all of Adam and Eve.  
 Then to speke by reason, grete possessions  
 Make no gentylnen but gentyll conditions. (478–86, 489–92)

Here as before, the Plowman dismisses the Knight and the Merchant's reasoning as 'folyssh' because they misread the relationship between natural and social 'conditions'. In referencing the conditions that belonged to Adam and Eve the Plowman most notably cites the ancient and common origins that he, the Knight, and the Merchant all share, finally claiming that true nobility rests on individual virtue rather than one's place in the social order. He thus reiterates that the title of gentleman is disingenuous if based solely on primitive accumulation.

Just as significantly, Heywood taps into what has become one of the signal phrases of popular discourse, 'when Adam delved and Eve span, / who was then a gentyman', the proverb that was famously deployed by John Ball in spurring the rising of 1381. Albert Friedman thoroughly discusses the history of the phrase, noting Ball's use of it as a leveling device: 'Ball preached that the claim of prelates and nobles to the services of the people because of their superior birth contradicts the biblical fact of all men's common descent from the original sinful pair'.<sup>38</sup> At the very least, Friedman's comment suggests that 'when Adam delved and Eve span' is an appeal to the same premise the Plowman deploys in *Gentleness and Nobility*, an appeal to natural over social origins. But as he later remarks, the phrase 'has been labeled a "democratic proverb", and thanks to the history manuals [Holinshed, et al], Ball's proverb has become the tag under which the Peasants Revolt of 1381 is filed in our mind'.<sup>39</sup> This particular tradition is evident in much of early modern literature, typically spoken by peasants who articulate variations of the Plowman's ideology. It appears verbatim at the beginning of the 1593 play *Jacke Strawe*, for example, which reenacts the peasant rebellion of 1381. A variation of the phrase likewise appears in Shakespeare's *2 Henry VI* — a reprise of the 1450 rebellion — when the disillusioned peasant, Jack Cade, remarks that 'Adam was a gardener' (4.2.123), as it does in *Hamlet* as detailed above. And curiously, while McRae acknowledges the importance of this phrase within the tradition of popular protest, he does not acknowledge its use in *Gentleness*, though this detail clearly strengthens the Plowman's role as a spokesman for popular discourse, aiding the proverb's transmission over time.<sup>40</sup>

### **Competing Discourses: High versus Low 'Matter'**

The grounds for the Plowman's argument remain unrecognized by the Knight and the Merchant throughout *Gentleness*, but readers should find his reasons hard to ignore since the Plowman repeatedly exposes the flaws in

their arguments and provides evidence to the contrary, evidence with which his audience must have been familiar. As the Plowman maintains, 'For myn oppynyon I have well provyd it / By substancyall reason and argument'; the Knight and the Merchant continue to discredit the Plowman's claims, trying to maintain the high ground, but they appear all the more foolish as a result (752–3). And though the Plowman speaks articulately and credibly throughout this debate, the Knight and the Merchant repeatedly cast his argument as misspoken 'babble' rather than risk acknowledging it as a discourse that destabilizes their own. The authority given to gentlemen's talk, by contrast, clearly depends upon its abstraction from the conditions that demonstrate upper-class oppression of the lower classes.

This sort of abstraction is equally apparent in another, much more famous Henrician text that bears a possible connection to *Gentleness* and in which a brand of popular discourse speaks from the margins: Book One of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). Like *Gentleness*, Book One consists of a debate (as well as a debate within a debate) in which the central issue is the proper management of a commonwealth and what best serves the common people. This focus, which dovetails with the subject matter in *Gentleness*, is all the more relevant given that Rastell, Heywood's potential co-author, publisher, and father-in-law, was also married to More's sister, Elizabeth.<sup>41</sup> The main debate in Book One is between a fictionalized More and Raphael Hythloday, a traveler and philosopher. It centers on what sort of royal counselor Hythloday would make, a position for which he insists he is unsuited.<sup>42</sup> Hythloday significantly frames this debate by first making a case against enclosure and by citing a past incident of popular rebellion, the 'revolt of the Cornishmen' against Henry VII, locating his debate with More-the-character within the same tradition as Heywood's Plowman.<sup>43</sup>

Yet just as striking is Hythloday's attention to ruling-class discourse and how it works to discredit more popular rhetoric. For instance, Hythloday warns his interlocutors of the trouble that would ensue should he speak frankly to the King about how to manage a commonwealth and contrasts his own suggestions with the advice that other counselors might give about how to increase the king's treasury by manipulating currency and imposing taxes 'under [the] pretext' of sustaining a 'make-believe war' (22–3). Thus Hythloday speaks piercingly to the sorts of economic appropriation or outright theft proliferated by Henry VIII, as well as by his father and predecessor.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the mention of a hypothetical war used to raise funds seems almost to foresee popular attitudes towards Henry VIII's 1525 Amicable

Grant, through which Cardinal Wolsey sought to raise funds for a war with France by soliciting supposedly ‘voluntary’ contributions from the commons, a measure taken almost a decade after *Utopia*’s publication. But in these tactics we also see the sorts of strategies Marx regarded as masking ‘the sources of primitive accumulation’ that obfuscate the relationship between the raw materials of wealth and those who work to create it.<sup>45</sup> By contrast, Hythloday imagines his own advice to the king working against these methods: ‘suppose I were to get up again and declare that all these counsels are both dishonorable and ruinous to the king? Suppose I said his honor and his safety alike rest on the people’s resources, rather than his own’ (24). Hythloday thus advocates a kind of popular ideology; though he does not utilize base or so-called ‘peasant’ speech, he does highlight the people’s role in the economy and links it to the king’s power.<sup>46</sup>

It is in the character More’s response, however, that we see the conflict between Hythloday’s speech and ruling-class discourse most clearly, for as the dialogue continues he tries to recast Hythloday’s argument into a more abstract, less politicized form:

MORE This academic philosophy is quite agreeable in the private conversation of close friends, but in the councils of kings, where grave matters are being authoritatively decided, there is no place for it.

HYTHLODAY That is just what I was saying. There is no place for philosophy in the councils of kings.

MORE Yes, there is ... but not for this scholastic philosophy ... There is another philosophy that is better suited for political action, that takes its cue, adapts itself to the drama in hand, and acts its part neatly and well. This is the philosophy for you to use. When a comedy of Plautus is being played, and the household slaves are cracking trivial jokes together, you propose to come on stage in the garb of a philosopher, and repeat Seneca’s speech to Nero from the Octavia. Wouldn’t it be better to take a silent role than to say something wholly inappropriate, and thus turn the play into a tragicomedy? You pervert and ruin a play when you add irrelevant speeches, even if they are better than the original. (25–6)

In noting two such different philosophies, More acknowledges two opposing discourses of economy: Hythloday’s versus the royal court’s. It is not clear what More-the-character means by this other philosophy or why it is ‘better suited to political action’ than Hythloday’s style of argument, but in casting

his discourse as a kind of bad drama, More fictionalizes and abstracts that argument from its proper context. He then reconfigures it as a 'high' form of discourse while simultaneously characterizing it as 'inappropriate' and damaging to that form. It is also significant that the problem More identifies in Hythloday's discourse is one of genre; he suggests that in bringing his philosophy — a term equivalent to social critique — to court, Hythloday introduces tragedy to comedy and does so misguidedly. More-the-character thus attempts to cast Hythloday's politics as a poor aesthetic choice, a move that reiterates the mistaken view that the comic excludes social critique (as does his 'trivializing' the jokes of 'household slaves', another pool of unprivileged labour and potential source of popular discontent) and that relegates Hythloday's discourse to the sidelines. Just as the Merchant and the Knight discount the Plowman's reason as 'digression', More-the-character discounts Hythloday's philosophy, judging his argument 'irrelevant' to the space of the court and encouraging his friend to be 'silent' even though his ideas are frankly acknowledged as 'better' than the status quo. But in this way, More-the-author speaks popular ideology while demonstrating how it is suppressed and allows popular concerns to be voiced, however paradoxically, through the talk of gentlemen. And while neither *Gentleness* nor *Utopia* advocates for rebellion — quite the contrary — this need not suggest their authors were disengaged from or unsympathetic to popular ideology.<sup>47</sup>

In fact, this ventriloquizing of popular discourse fits within a larger historical pattern identified by Annabel Patterson through which 'the popular voice raised in articulate protest has come down to us ... in the texts of the dominant culture'.<sup>48</sup> Specifically, she examines *Norfolk's Furies, or a View of Kett's Campe*, a reportedly first-hand account of the 1549 Kett's rebellion in which thousands of peasants and members of the urban poor tore down hedges, fences, and other enclosures, and briefly assumed control of the city of Norwich. As written by Alexander Neville, a gentleman, *Norfolk's Furies* conveys an elitist contempt for the rebels, identifying them as 'many base and vile persons', but also reports their complaints with surprising clarity.<sup>49</sup> According to Patterson such ventriloquism aims to discredit the popular voice but also allows it to be heard and thus to establish 'a cultural tradition of protest' that builds on the history of class struggle by citing an 'ancient' past that enjoyed more just conditions than the present — precisely the rhetoric deployed by the Plowman and the gravediggers.<sup>50</sup>

Not surprisingly Patterson and like-minded critics ground their studies of class struggle in terms of class antagonism. Regardless of whether the ruled

or the rulers speak in early modern texts, class relations tend to come across through the language of us versus them. In his own discussion of ‘plebeian’ speech, for instance, Wood notes that ‘both popular and elite definitions of social conflict could flagrantly ignore local subtleties of social structure and power relations to define instead a confrontation between “rich” and “poor”’.<sup>51</sup> Here Wood points to the existence of competing discourses that stem from inequalities that often split society down the middle. But he then discusses circumstances in which more complex social relations and more subtle brands of class identity might emerge as people moved up and down the social scale and as their class allegiances shifted based on what seemed to best serve their interests.

A case in point may be Robert Kett himself, the tanner and well-to-do tradesman who emerged as the leader of the 1549 revolt.<sup>52</sup> Ironically, Kett had enclosed land until confronted with a group of peasant rebels at which point he ‘joined them in leveling his own enclosures, and led them in attacks on others’.<sup>53</sup> Thomas More arguably also fits this ambiguous category in so far as he voices peasant ideology through Hythloday and casts himself as its ally. But more crucially More provides a clear reference point for Heywood and Rastell, who air popular grievances through the Plowman and provide a space in which popular and ruling class discourses compete. We see, however, that *Gentleness* uses a more empowering as well as a more complex brand of ventriloquism when the Plowman briefly speaks Latin to quote scripture. Janette Dillon argues this moment belies the Plowman’s rustic ‘simplicity’ while also indexing the vernacularization of the Bible and the Protestant goal of educating the lower orders ‘across traditional boundaries of class and education’,<sup>54</sup> a movement that reflects the Plowman’s leveling ideology and may even have carried associations with the ongoing peasant rebellion in Germany, though it would seem to conflict with Heywood and Rastell’s Catholicism for these same reasons. (Note that Rastell converted to Protestantism a few years after *Gentleness* was published.)<sup>55</sup> Yet using Latin would also have been consistent with Heywood and Rastell’s education and their desire — as suggested above — to reach a varied audience with a corresponding range in formal education, perhaps to lend authority to the Plowman’s discourse and out of class sympathy with his lot. This desire may well have transcended their religious affiliation. Dillon moreover argues that the Plowman ultimately rejects Latin as the ‘authoritative discourse’ of the period in favour of his own more reasoned and grounded speech and ideology.<sup>56</sup> Though she focuses on religious reform, Dillon helps build the case that *Gentleness* enacts

a conflict between two established forms of political discourse and that the more 'popular' side wins out.

These competing discourses also square off in Heywood's much lengthier Marian work *The Spider and the Flie* (1556), another interlude and debate that highlights ruling class appropriation of common land and the consequent harm to peasant living. Here the Plowman's part is taken by Buz the Fly while the Merchant's role is either eliminated or combined with that of the Knight, who is portrayed by the Spider. In this later text, however, the more typical associations with high and low speech are in place. The Spider characterizes flies' speech as hissing, buzzing, or babbling; they are an unruly and ignorant mob that will, under the influence of too much ale and crowd mentality, speak and act irrationally.<sup>57</sup> Yet the chief danger the Spider identifies is the flies' 'kind of talke' and the likelihood that it will 'walke' or spread, an acknowledgement that flies have a class-specific language that cannot be silenced and that what they say is as dangerous as and therefore tantamount to outright rebellion.<sup>58</sup>

By the same token, Buz calls attention to the semantic slipperiness of the Spider's speech and the class bias that privileges it, noting that whereas 'the knave fly *railth*', 'Maister spider *speakth his pleasure*' (192). Buz also juxtaposes two very different notions of 'ill' speech to show how the Spider uses this bias to manipulate the debate. The words of flies, Buz argues, are neither rhetorically poor nor slanderous, as the Spider suggests, but are instead truthful and therefore unflattering to spiders, who are guilty of 'ill deedes'. Thus, Buz challenges the idea that flies say 'nothing' and rather suggests that flies speak plainly or directly while also indicating the degree to which spiders suppress fly speech.<sup>59</sup> Yet the Fly and the Plowman's arguments are also made effective by simply being voiced; both texts in fact offer an unusual opportunity in allowing peasant figures to speak at all and lend weight to Patterson's description of the popular voice as 'represented ... despite or because of its political silencing'.<sup>60</sup> In *Gentleness*, however, the Plowman remains firmly within the debate with the Knight and the Merchant, insisting that 'all the reasons syth ye began, / That ye have made therof, be not worth a fly' (209–10), and it is he that holds our attention onstage.

These discourses likewise surface in interludes by Heywood's contemporaries as well as his successors. *Gentleness* may owe a literary debt to John Skelton for his dramatic work *Magnyfycence* (1515–20; pub. ca 1533), for instance.<sup>61</sup> Also published by Rastell, *Magnyfycence* is often identified as a transitional step between the morality play characterized by a strictly theological focus,

allegorical characters, and the goal of general moral instruction and the much more secular, historically specific interlude, which aims at social commentary.<sup>62</sup> Like *Gentleness*, *Magnyfycence* concerns the proper management of wealth and how it reflects on one's nobility, but Skelton's play aims exclusively at a courtly audience, highlighting the dangers posed to a ruler by corrupt courtiers or 'gallants'. Skelton's purpose, moreover, is to model fiscal responsibility for a king, not the distribution of wealth among the various estates; *Magnyfycence* does not concern class relations in any way.

Yet the fact that *Magnyfycence* moves generically towards the concrete makes it a useful reference point for *Gentleness*, as does its depiction of high and low speech. The vice characters in the play, who are 'specifically courtly vices',<sup>63</sup> alternate between comparatively elegant and base speech, and the latter bears a striking resemblance to expressions used by the Plowman, including oaths like 'By the masse' (513, 572) and other 'bad language'.<sup>64</sup> While this baseness inevitably evokes the same class bias we see in Heywood's work, where low speech is an index of low class status, in *Magnyfycence* such speech implies what is merely uncourtly behavior among the elite, the 'dissolute lifestyles' and the 'over-familiarity' the gallants show towards their sovereign.<sup>65</sup> When the gallants speak to Magnyfycence directly, however, their language changes as they flatter him and seek courtly favour. Magnyfycence says to Courtly Abusion, for instance, 'I am supprysyd / Of your langage, it is so well deuysed / Pullyshyd and fresshe' (1529–31), and likewise 'Mary, your speche is as pleasant as though it were pend' (1538), a remark that speaks to the gallants' literacy and gentle status as well as their ability to manipulate their listener.<sup>66</sup> But like that of the Knight and the Merchant, the gallants' speech is devoid of reason, and as in *Gentleness* each side of the debate in *Magnyfycence* chides the other for unintelligible speech or 'iangelynge' as a means to strengthen its own case (258, 262). But while the Plowman's reason in *Gentleness* stems from a sense of class injustice, reason in *Magnyfycence*, whether good or bad, stems from class privilege and having an excess of wealth, the very things the Plowman condemns. While high and low speech do carry different political weight in *Magnyfycence*, they do not constitute different class discourses as in *Gentleness*.

We can, however, see distinct class discourses vying in plays like Nicholas Udall's interlude *Respublica* (1553), another Marian work that allegorizes class conflict by pitting 'gallants' named Insolence, Oppression, and Adulation against People, who represents the commons (1).<sup>67</sup> People complains to the sovereign Respublica about the gallants' abuses, naming specific hardships

that were well established in the period and that recap the same grievances voiced by the Plowman (1075–80).<sup>68</sup> But the gallants dismiss People's words because of his low status and so-called rude speech, saying to *Respublica*, 'rude peples wordes will ye geve credytee unto? / will ye iudge yourselfe after his foolish iangling?' (1106–7). The gallants then attack People directly, calling him 'peasant' and 'lout', and berate him for crying out against his 'betters' (1143, 1147). Here too, the social elite dismisses the evidence People presents of their tyranny and casts the popular voice as not just incoherent speech but as bestial clamour. In *Respublica*, however, the popular voice fails to make its own case; instead, other characters must intercede on People's behalf, namely the figure of Nemesis, a surrogate for Queen Mary.<sup>69</sup> This case strengthens the view that popular protest became less frequent and less effective over time but that the discourse it produced continued in some form.<sup>70</sup>

This pattern is also evident in *A Proper Dialogue Between a Gentleman and a Husbandman* (ca 1529).<sup>71</sup> Here the Gentleman and the Husbandman have been denied control over the means of production, this time by the clergy, and voice 'peasant' discourse.<sup>72</sup> Yet the key parallel between *A Proper Dialogue* and *Gentleness* is again a conflict between an abstract, ruling class discourse and a more popular, materialist mode of speech. The Gentleman and Husbandman are more interested in regaining the commodities they have lost than challenging the social order, but they nevertheless complain against the clergy's monopoly of land and underscore the problems that arise when the connection between land and labour is lost, tracing these issues to the clergy's hollow speech. We discover the Gentleman has traded his land to the clergy in exchange for their prayers, and he laments sacrificing his 'substance' for their words since words cannot compensate for his starving wife and children (158–9). The Husbandman agrees and claims that in using prayer as a commodity the clergy have 'brought the land to beggary' (248). Prayer thus has the same function in *A Proper Dialogue* as the 'high and subtle' (1105) discourse deployed by the Knight and the Merchant in *Gentleness*, but it too is brought down to earth. In weighing spiritual against earthly substance and one discourse against the other, the Gentleman and Husbandman reduce the clergy's authority to empty rhetoric and suggest they should instead give themselves to physical labour since it yields tangible results.

Given this context, it is strange that the notion of a popular voice is largely absent from the little criticism available on *Gentleness and Nobility*, which often denies the popular voice altogether. As suggested above, critics refer to

the Plowman as merely a comic figure, rude and unsophisticated in his logic, and as a bad rhetorician. Kenneth Cameron remarks, for example

The chief source of the humor is the digression on bodily sufficiency ... by which the ploughman covers his bad logic ... It is certain, however, that the Ploughman's deductions were hardly intended for serious-minded auditors ... they prove to be sentimental and designed to provoke laughter ... the condemnation of wealth, property, culture, and social tradition is understandable ... but when the playwright carefully shows what is to be substituted for them — boorishness, rudeness ... one does well to conclude that he has his tongue in his cheek.<sup>73</sup>

Cameron here acknowledges the Plowman's success in shifting the terms of the debate, but remarkably he sees this shift as a poor and hasty rhetorical move the Plowman barely gets away with rather than an attempt at a different kind of argument. Like the Knight and the Merchant, Cameron focuses not on what the Plowman says but how he says it as the basis for his critique.

Critics have similarly downplayed the Plowman's use of 'When Adam delved and Eve span' and its political implications. Axton, for example, acknowledges the 'social' concerns of the work but shrugs off the thought of the Plowman as revolutionary in any sense.<sup>74</sup> He admits the Plowman possesses a certain authority due to his prominence in the work but suggests that the phrase was commonplace before the 1381 revolt and should not therefore be taken as 'the rallying cry of a new social revolution'.<sup>75</sup> Yet we cannot read the phrase as it appears in *Gentleness* 'in isolation',<sup>76</sup> and though Axton is correct that 'when Adam delved' was in common usage before 1381 — prior to earning its 'rebellious' connotations — we cannot look at *Gentleness*, published in 1525, and exclude them. The year 1525 saw outbreaks of rebellion in England in reaction to the Amicable Grant, and the German Peasants' War was at its height, a source of great concern to the English king as well as to Wolsey. In fact Henry was regularly preoccupied with the boldness of German 'rabble' against the upper classes and the influence it might gain in England.<sup>77</sup> Considering how the popular maxim functions in *Gentleness* and the period cumulatively grounds the Plowman's argument in a much longer political tradition.

The proverb also reappears in *Spider and the Flie*, and James Holstun argues convincingly that the work reprises the events of Kett's rebellion while plotting a fictional but much more idyllic resolution to the conflict. In

Heywood's version, the Crown intervenes in the progress of agrarian capitalism, punishes the ruling-class offenders, and returns the commonwealth to an earlier more egalitarian state that, as Holstun reminds us, 'never came to be'.<sup>78</sup> *The Spider and the Flie* thus offers ironic and very grim commentary on the real state of agrarian relations as they continued to evolve and is a much less optimistic work than *Gentleness*, reflecting the growing frustration of peasant complaints. The Plowman interrupts the dialogue between the Knight and the Merchant purposefully and forcefully and disputes their logic throughout, even going so far as to physically beat the Merchant and the Knight for their flawed arguments. By contrast, Buz the Fly submits completely to the Spider's judgment by the end of the work and is only saved by the intervention of the Maid of the house (another stand-in for Queen Mary) who crushes the spider with her foot and restores order to the household/commonwealth, sweeping away the cobwebs that have barred the Fly from subsisting on household scraps. Though we are glad to see Buz survive and the Spider punished, the outcome of the work places all recourse against ruling-class tyranny in the hands of the crown, another indication that the means and occasion for large-scale popular protest had become more limited while recourse to the monarch remained precarious. The peasant language *Gentleness* deploys nevertheless presents a clear line of defense and offense in the period that was common to many strains of popular protest, and the proverb 'When Adam delved' in particular seems to have been an accepted part of its strategy, perhaps because it so effectively brought the social and natural orders together and cast the peasantry as the link between them, a strategy Patterson traces through the English Civil War.<sup>79</sup>

The voice and discursive strategies of Heywood and Rastell's Plowman not only speak against England's shift to an increasingly capitalist mode of production but also seek to demystify the process. While the bulk of sixteenth-century literature serves to mask this shift, texts like *Gentleness* reveal it with language that stresses the material foundations of the social order and thereby inverts its values, creating a forum for popular speech that recasts whose words mattered in early modern society. The play suggests that it is 'base' speech that carries the most weight, bringing tangible social and economic relations to bear upon the discourse. Just as significantly, *Gentleness and Nobility* may represent a point of intersection for a range of literary and political traditions and categories that critics have tended to divide. James Simpson, for instance, acknowledges the Plowman's authority and political force in the play but separates *Gentleness* from popular ideology and literary

tradition by classing interludes in ‘professional’ (private/elite) as opposed to amateur (public/civic) theatre.<sup>80</sup> By contrast, while he is deeply invested in the bottom-up politics the Plowman advances as well as the literary ploughman tradition, John King excludes *Gentleness* from his discussion of Reformation literature because he sees this tradition as Protestant and focuses almost solely on texts produced during the reign of Edward VI. King acknowledges Heywood at several points briefly, and notes his longevity in the English court and his Catholicism, but only cites *Spider and the Flie* as being frankly political, reading the play as a ‘conflict between the Protestant spider and the Catholic fly’ rather than a debate over class and the means of production.<sup>81</sup> By the same token, critics have often limited the Plowman’s brand of literary politics by genre as well as by time period. Pat McCune, for instance, describes the morality play as ‘reflecting the final stage of development in the literature of complaint and counsel that flourished in England during the late middle ages’ because of its civic and popular origins and suggests that later incarnations of drama became less political as they were professionalized and fell under the auspices of elite patrons.<sup>82</sup> This view of drama’s evolution is not unfair, but its political scope may be too narrow, excluding plays like *Hamlet* and *2 Henry VI*. By acknowledging the presence of a ‘peasant’ language grounded in historical fact and precedent, however, we can link *Gentleness* to a much longer political tradition that transcends particular genres, regimes, and other categories, a tradition that surfaces in later drama as well as in non-dramatic forms such as the writings of Gerard Winstanley, who emerged from the 1640s protesting the continued practice of enclosure and offered his 1652 work *The Law of Freedom* to Oliver Cromwell with the following advice: ‘take of the clownish language, for under that you may see beauty’.<sup>83</sup>

## Notes

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I would like to thank Jim Holstun for his seminar in Commonwealth literature, which provided the foundation for this article; my colleagues Bob Butler, Jack D’Amico, and Mark Hodin at Canisius College for reading early drafts and offering encouragement; my friend and colleague, Scott Oldenburg, who read virtually every draft and provided invaluable comments; Maya Mathur for her additional insights; and Helen Ostovich and Erin Kelly at *Early Theatre* for their rapid response and editorial expertise.

- 1 Andy Wood, *The 1549 Rebellions and the Making of Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2007), 133.
- 2 Stephen Greenblatt, 'Murdering Peasants: Status, Genre, and the Representation of Rebellion', Stephen Greenblatt (ed.), *Representing the English Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1988), 116.
- 3 Dates that appear parenthetically indicate the earliest known date of publication, unless otherwise specified. Performance and composition may have occurred earlier.
- 4 The gravediggers are referred to as 'clowns' in Q1, Q2, and F1. 'Clown' is also used in the modern Arden, Norton, and Bevington editions.
- 5 Michael Bristol, "'Funeral Bak'd Meats': Carnival and the Carnavalesque in *Hamlet*", Susan Zimmerman (ed.), *Shakespeare's Tragedies* (New York, 1998), 241. Bristol specifically refers to 'activities such as agricultural labor or the preparation of food by means of which human life is produced and reproduced' (241), which again captures the role of the gravediggers.
- 6 All Shakespeare quotations are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt (ed.), 2nd edn (New York, 2008).
- 7 Bristol, "'Funeral Bak'd Meats'", 248.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 248, 239–40.
- 9 Maya Mathur, 'An Attack of the Clowns: Comedy, Vagrancy, and the Elizabethan History Play', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 7.1 (2007), 33–54. Mathur references the use of the clown in Elizabethan history plays such as the anonymous *Life and Death of Jack Strawe* and Shakespeare's *2 Henry IV*.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 39.
- 11 Leah Marcus discusses the more 'top-down' aspects of carnival in *The Politics of Mirth: Jonson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the Defense of Old Holiday Pastimes* (Chicago, 1986) but focuses on later authors than Heywood and Rastell.
- 12 Bristol "'Funeral Bak'd Meats'", 240, says that carnival has a 'liminal' status but does not acknowledge its potential for containing subversive language and activity.
- 13 See for instance Christopher Dyer's *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain 850–1520* (New Haven, 2002), 286. Anthony Fletcher also gives a comprehensive picture of rebellions during the sixteenth century in *Tudor Rebellions* (Essex, 1973). All of these rebellions opposed economic practices to some degree.
- 14 Further quoted passages from the play will be cited directly in the text and will reference line numbers unless otherwise noted from Richard Axton's edition in *Three Rastell Plays* (Ipswich, 1979), 20–124.
- 15 Greenblatt, 'Murdering Peasants', 118.
- 16 For a discussion of the literature of complaint, see Andrew McRae's *God Speed the Plow: The Representation of Agrarian England, 1500–1660* (Cambridge, 2002).

- 17 Peter Happé, Introduction, Peter Happé and Wim Hüskén (eds), *Interludes and Early Modern Society: Studies in Gender Power, and Theatricality* (Amsterdam, 2007), 7–22. Happé suggests the potential of the interlude to address ‘powerful people’ in the audience, either as patrons or as objects of critique (9). By comparison, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Early English Theatre* (Cambridge, 2006) Janette Dillon emphasizes that interludes could have been adjusted for either elite or more mixed audiences and would therefore have evoked different responses. Dillon also cites the politicization of interludes with the Act of Uniformity in 1549, passed as a result of the Kett rebellion, which ‘forbade interludes containing matter “depraving or despising” the new Book of Common Prayer’; qtd in Teresa Grant and Barbara Ravelhofer (eds), *English Historical Drama, 1500–1660: Forms Outside the Canon* (Hampshire, 2008), 47.
- 18 The ploughman as a figure in the leveling tradition is suggested in Amos 9:13–15, which stresses God’s punishment of those who oppress the poor. The second edition of the Great Bible renders the passage as ‘Behold, the tyme cometh, (sayeth the Lord) that the plowman shall overtake the mower & treader of grapes, him [that] soweth sede. The mountaynes shall droppe swete wyne / and the hills shall be fruteful, and I wyll turne the captyvvyte of my people of Israel: they shall repayre the waste cyt[i]es and have the[m] in possessyon: they shall plante vynyardes, [and] drynke the wyne thereof: they shall make gardens / [and] enjoy the frutes of them. And I wyll plante them upon theyr owne grounde / so that [they] wyl never rote [them] out agayne from theyr land which I have geven them sayeth the Lorde thy God’ (London, 1540; STC: 2069) *EEBO*, ff 81r–81v.
- 19 McRae, *God Speed the Plow*, 33.
- 20 *Ibid*, 43.
- 21 See Darryll Grantley’s survey, *English Dramatic Interludes, 1300–1580: A Reference Guide*, (Cambridge, 2004).
- 22 Robert George Whitney Bolwell, *The Life and Works of John Heywood* (New York, 1921), 12, 18, 33, 38, 42, 137, and 154.
- 23 Axton, Introduction, *Three Rastell Plays*, 21.
- 24 Robert Bolwell, *The Life and Works of John Heywood* (New York, 1921), 18.
- 25 Dillon, *Cambridge Introduction*, 40–3.
- 26 McRae, *God Speed the Plow*, suggests that Heywood must have intended *Gentleness* for a genteel audience. Janette Dillon, ‘The Ploughman’s Voice: Of *Gentleness and Nobility*’, Ton Hoenselaars and Marius Buning (eds), *English Literature and the Other Languages* (Amsterdam, 1999), 13–26 further cites Heywood’s familial connection with Thomas More and notes that the work shares the same humanist philosophy as More’s *Utopia*, but also suggests the play may aim at a more varied

- audience, reflecting the mixed class background and alliances of its authors; see esp. 24.
- 27 There is no final consensus as to whether Heywood or Rastell authored *Gentleness*, or whether the work was a result of their collaboration, though most critics think they are the likeliest candidates for authorship. Joining Axton in the case for dual authorship are Karina Welna, 'Magnificent Money: Wealth and Nobility in *Magnificence* and *Gentleness and Nobility*', Andrew Lynch and Anne M. Scott (eds.), *Renaissance Poetry and Drama in Context: Essays for Christopher Wortham* (Newcastle, 2008); Janette Dillon, 'The Ploughman's Voice'; Kenneth Cameron, *Authority and Sources of 'Gentleness and Nobility': A Study in Early Tudor Drama* (Raleigh, 1941); and Robert Bolwell and Robert C. Johnson in *John Heywood* (New York, 1970). Only Axton credits Rastell with the prologue as well as the epilogue. For more thorough coverage of the authorship debate, see Albert J. Geritz, 'Recent Studies in John Rastell', *English Literary Renaissance* 8 (1978), 314–50, and Philip Kolin's 'Recent Studies in John Heywood', *English Literary Renaissance* 13.1 (1983), 113–23.
- 28 Janette Dillon sums up this point in *Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England* (Cambridge, 1998): 'Rebellious speech is often ... dismissively constructed as mere babble. The voice of the people, especially the voice with which they rebel against their leaders, is regularly represented, in both dramatic and historical writing, as foolish or ill informed' (200).
- 29 The Plowman's questioning of the social order and his social superiors might well have been viewed as seditious on its own, but particularly because of his use of the oath 'by Goddys body'. Wood explains, 'Exclamations such as 'By the mass' or 'By God' represented more than simple punctuations but instead were intended to give an added weight to an outburst. Witnesses to seditious speech often mentioned how such oaths preceded especially dangerous phrases'; see *The 1549 Rebellions*, 134.
- 30 Dyer, 'Piers Plowman', 158.
- 31 Ibid, 168.
- 32 Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York, 1977), 931.
- 33 McRae writes that *Gentleness* is one of a few plays that 'allowed for consideration of particularly radical streams of thought' and claims that the Plowman 'dominates the play' after his entrance, but then suggests that the Plowman is ultimately a conservative figure who is 'satisfied with his position' within the social order (*Sermon of the Plough*, 95). Dillon, in turn, says that the play 'is daring enough to make the Ploughman a spokesman for some fairly radical social forms', but curiously, also purports that 'The Ploughman's authority within the play is in doubt', though this is partly because she weighs his 'social' against his religious radicalism ('The Ploughman's Voice', 25).

- 34 The increases in taxation and price inflation, especially evident in the later half of the sixteenth century, as well as the long-term growth in population that fueled continuing competition over resources, have been well documented. See for instance Marx, *Capital*; Anthony Fletcher, *The Tudor Rebellions*, 2nd edn (Burnt Mill, 1973); Roger Manning, *Village Revolts: Social Protest and Popular Disturbances in England, 1509–1640* (Oxford, 1988); and Manning, 'Patterns of Violence in Early Tudor Enclosure Riots', *Albion* 6.2 (1974), 120–33; and R.H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1912).
- 35 Dyer sums up the role of enclosure as follows: 'In the thirteenth century, in a countryside coming under increasing pressure from rising population, social competition and commercial development, many thousands of acres of land were enclosed .... In the early fourteenth century the end of growth seems to have encouraged further ditch digging and hedge planting, as taking in new land offered a prospect of increased revenue .... The long term impact of the enclosure movement was to increase the proportion of land that was regarded by its tenants as held securely, separate ("several") in relation to their neighbors and under their own control'; see 'Conflict in the landscape: the enclosure movement in England, 1220–1349', *Landscape History* 28 (2006), 21–33, 31. Dyer describes how, in addition to enclosure and raising rents, men converted arable land to pasture, which had lower labour costs, and then divided land into smaller tracts to increase the number of their tenants.
- 36 Dyer traces this same history in more depth throughout *Making a Living*.
- 37 Related to this point is the question of the performance conditions for *Gentleness* and whether Heywood's Plowman ever actually entered the space of the court. No strong evidence exists to settle this question, and critics disagree. Bolwell suggests that *Gentleness* may well have been performed for Henry, in *Life and Works*, 95; James Holstun argues that it would have been saved for a London audience or for Rastell's private, home theater, in 'The Giant's Faction: Spenser, Heywood, and the Mid-Tudor Crisis', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37.2 (2007), 348; Dillon also suggests that *Gentleness* was a likely candidate for Rastell's theatre in *Cambridge Introduction*, 43.
- 38 Albert Friedman, "'When Adam Delved ...': Contexts of an Historic Proverb", Larry D. Benson (ed.), *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature* (Cambridge MA, 1974), 213–14.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 222.
- 40 Neither does Dillon in 'The Ploughman's Voice'.
- 41 Dillon writes of *Gentleness*, 'the play remains a likely candidate for Rastell's stage whichever of them [Rastell or Heywood] wrote it ... and it encourages the audience to think about serious philosophical questions. Such aims would fit within the

- range of Rastell's known activity, from court revels to household performance and printing, and would fit with the expressed interests of Sir Thomas More's circle, with which Rastell was connected by marriage' (*Cambridge Introduction*, 43).
- 42 All quotations come from Thomas More, *Utopia*, Robert M. Adams (ed.), 2nd edn (New York, 1992), 25.
- 43 Perhaps the most relevant and famous line from Book One is Hythloday's comment to Cardinal Morton that English sheep, which were increasingly being pastured on enclosed land, are 'becoming so greedy and wild that they devour men themselves' (12). Hythloday then goes on to lament the loss of the plow thanks to enclosure and the subsequent eviction of tenants, the escalating costs of grains, etc.
- 44 Hythloday's conversation with More-the-character recalls an earlier conversation with Cardinal Morton, whom More-the-author served as a boy, while Morton in turn served under Henry VII. The earlier complaints Hythloday implicitly makes against Henry VIII therefore dovetail with those he raises against Henry VII.
- 45 Marx, *Capital*, 743.
- 46 Richard Halpern traces the origins of Raphael Hythloday's in ways that resonate with the argument I am making about the Plowman and how 'peasant' speech is represented. Halpern notes that 'hythlos' translates from Greek as 'idle talk' or 'nonsense', and that it 'designates nonphilosophical speech' and 'speech that aims at pleasure rather than knowledge', while 'daios' refers to being 'learned ... not in a philosophical or a scholarly sense, but "experienced," "cunning," "skilled" as an artisan might be skilled at his craft'. Halpern suggests that Hythloday's speech is misunderstood by his listeners as merely entertaining rather than as reasoned argument, in part because of its association with manual labour, thus mirroring the characterization of other speakers of popular discourse in the period. See Halpern's *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital* (Ithaca, 1991), 142.
- 47 By contrast, McRae, *God Speed the Plough*, 24, 114–15 suggests that *Utopia* was appropriated to the commonwealth cause unjustly, that More would have wanted nothing to do with its more radical goals, and that both *Utopia* and *Gentleness* have an intellectual/humanist rather than a popular agenda.
- 48 Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Cambridge, 1989), 41.
- 49 Alexander Neville, *Norfolkes Furies, or A View of Ketts Campe*, trans. Richard Woods (London, 1615; STC: 18480), B3r.
- 50 Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, 32, 40. Wood adopts the notion of ventriloquism from Patterson and expands upon it in *The 1549 Rebellions*, 91. He makes the point, however, that we cannot trust the accuracy of Neville's reporting and critiques Patterson for taking this speech 'at face value' (97).

- 51 Wood, “‘Poore Men Woll Speke One Day’: Plebeian Language of Deference and Defiance in England, c. 1520–1640’, Tim Harris (ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, c. 1500–1850* (Houndsmills, 2001), 72.
- 52 S.T. Bindoff, *Ket’s Rebellion 1549*, Historical Association Pamphlet (London 1949; rpt 1968), 3.
- 53 James Holstun, ‘The Spider, the Fly, and the Commonwealth: Merrie John Heywood and Agrarian Class Struggle’, *English Literary History* 71 (2004), 54. The case has been made that Kett’s motives for this seeming class solidarity were questionable, that he was merely responding tactically to a feud with his lawyer-turned-squire neighbour John Flowerdew. See Roger Manning’s ‘Patterns of Violence in Early Tudor Enclosure Riots’, *Albion* 6.2 (1974), 122.
- 54 Janette Dillon, ‘The Ploughman’s Voice’, 16, 18.
- 55 The Peasants’ War lasted from 1524–6 and stemmed from religious and economic causes. The rebels reportedly saw support for their cause in Luther’s theses against the Catholic church and social hierarchy more generally; we may see Luther’s influence most clearly in the first of the peasants’ Twelve Articles, which demanded popular election of church officials and preaching of scripture without mediation by the clergy.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 20
- 57 Representing the commons as a hive of buzzing, humming insects or other form of inarticulate mass was a common trope in the period, seen in works including Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia* and Thomas Deloney’s *Jack of Newbery*, to name a few.
- 58 John Heywood, *The Spider and the Flie* (1556) (1894; rpt New York, 1967), 191. Quotations are referenced by page number.
- 59 In particular, Buz gestures to the silencing of peasant protest against enclosure by the upper classes when he tells the spider, ‘Ye graspe up all: and flies may sai nought: but mum’ (192). Wood likewise calls attention to ‘plebeian’ silence as an indication of power relations between the upper and lower classes, and the fact ‘Plebeian obedience was synonymous with silence’, while seditious speech was often met with severe punishments or execution (*The 1549 Rebellions*, 113).
- 60 Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, 32.
- 61 Here the first date refers to an approximate time of composition, partly to account for Heywood being in creative debt to Skelton, who preceded Heywood as courtly dramatist, and since it seems possible that Rastell’s 1533 edition may not have been the first, occurring approximately a decade after the play was likely in performance at court. All subsequent parenthetical dates refer to first publication.

- 62 See Ramsay's introduction to his edition of the play: *Magynfyence: A Moral Play* (1908: rpt Oxford, 1925), xxii. All quotations from the play cite line numbers from this edition.
- 63 Liliana Sikorska, 'Writing a New Morality Play: The Court as the World in John Skelton's *Magynfyence* and John Redford's *Wit and Science*', Noel Harold Kaylor, Jr. and Richard Scott Nokes (eds), *Global Perspectives on Medieval English Literature, Language and Culture*, (Kalamazoo, 2007), 22.
- 64 John Scattergood, 'Skelton's Magnificence and the Tudor Royal Household', *Medieval English Theatre* 15 (1993), 39.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 Sikorska, 'Writing a New Morality Play', 22.
- 67 Nicholas Udall (attrib), *Respublica: An Interlude for Christmas 1553*, ed. W.W. Greg (London 1952), 1. References are by line number to this edition.
- 68 Greg Walker, *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge, 2006), 172. Walker makes the point that *Respublica* draws on 'current events', and also suggests the play has not been fully appreciated for its political import — like *Gentleness*. He critiques readings that 'underestimate the wealth of particular detail which underpins the text's political and moral strategies, and the passion with which it engages with both contemporary events and issues and their abstracted meaning'.
- 69 Nemesis counsels *Respublica* to adopt the counsel of four other female characters who represent the virtues *Misericordia*, *Veritas*, *Iusticia*, and *Pax*.
- 70 McRae, *God Speed the Plough*, 58–79 suggests that popular complaints decreased or at least became more distanced from the agrarian complaint of the Edwardian regime. Wood, *The 1549 Rebellions*, 187–207 makes the claim that popular revolt declined following the 1549 rebellions.
- 71 All quotations reference line numbers in *A Proper Dyalogue Betwene a Gentillman and an Husbandman*, ed. Douglas H. Parker (Toronto, 1996). Parker notes the uncertain authorship of the play in his introduction; *A Proper Dyalogue* is usually attributed to either William Roye or to Jerome Barlow, though an early edition gave credit to William Barlow (22–50).
- 72 The husbandman is obviously a close relative of the ploughman but my sense is that 'husbandman' more plausibly suggests a farmer, a figure more socially elevated than a ploughman because he is in possession of more land and more concerned with profit than subsistence. The husbandman also seems to replace the ploughman in the literature of agrarian complaint, again reflecting England's shift to a more capitalist mode of production.
- 73 Cameron, *Authority and Sources*, 36.

- 74 Axton, Introduction, *Three Rastell Plays*, 21–2.
- 75 Ibid, 25. Cameron echoes this view, further citing the triteness of the phrase before 1381 (*Authority and Sources*, 26).
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 See for example ‘Henry VIII: January 1524, 16–31’, ‘Henry VIII: April 1524, 1–10’, and ‘Henry VIII: August 1525, 1–15’, *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. 4 (1524–1530), ed. J.S. Brewer (London, 1875), *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/> as well as other documents in the same volume.
- 78 Holstun, ‘Spider’, 55.
- 79 Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, 40–1.
- 80 James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution* (Oxford, 2004). Simpson identifies popular drama as cycle plays and royal entries (he does not mention morality plays), which he describes as ‘non-metropolitan, amateur, played in the street, and as critical of its own exercise of power as it is of royal and episcopal power’ versus ‘Tudor household drama’, which is ‘metropolitan, professional, played indoors, and extremely cautious under the eyes of its powerful patrons’, 553. He acknowledges this distinction is ‘an oversimplification’ but only in so far as ‘it implies that there were no court entertainments, and no interludes, in the pre-Reformation period’, not to problematize the ‘elite’ versus ‘popular’ categories he sets up.
- 81 John N. King, *English Reformation Literature: The Tudor Origins of the Protestant Tradition* (Princeton, 1982), 251–2. King does not name John Rastell, though he does mention his son William as a printer in the period.
- 82 Pat McCune, ‘Order and Justice in Early Tudor Drama’, *Renaissance Drama* 25 (1994), 171–96, 172–3.
- 83 Gerard Winstanley, *The Works of Gerard Winstanley*, ed. George H. Sabine (New York, 1965), 510.