

people is getting by with a broken or fractured limb.⁶ Then there are accidents of birth to consider. One bishop of Durham, Louis de Beaumont, is renowned for having two clubfeet. Most people have suffered at some time or another from a disease which has affected their youthful beauty (supposing they had some to start with).

It is generally said that medieval men are in their prime in their twenties, mature in their thirties, and growing old in their forties. This means that men have to take on responsibility at a relatively young age. In some towns citizens as young as twelve can serve on juries.⁷ Leaders in their twenties are trusted and considered deserving of respect. At the age of just twenty Edward III declares war on the Scots and leads an army into battle despite being outnumbered two to one. This is not some rash act; he commands the full confidence of his nobles, knights, men-at-arms, and infantry. In the modern world he would still be considered too young even to be an MP. When people declare that "children have to grow up so quickly these days," they should pause and reflect on this fact. Medieval boys are expected to work from the age of seven and can be hanged for theft at the same age. They can marry at the age of fourteen and are liable to serve in an army from the age of fifteen. Noblemen might hold office or be given command of an army before they are twenty. At the battle of Crécy (1346) the command of the vanguard—the foremost battalion of the army—is given to Prince Edward, then just sixteen years of age. It is unthinkable that we would put a sixteen-year-old in charge of a battalion, in combat, today.

As for women, you can advance these "prime," "mature," and "growing old" periods of life by six or seven years. A woman is in her prime at seventeen, mature at twenty-five, and growing old by her mid-thirties. In the words of one of Chaucer's characters, a thirty-year-old woman is just "winter forage." Betrothals of boys and girls take place in infancy, and marriage at the age of twelve is approved of for a girl, although cohabitation usually begins at fourteen. Teenage pregnancies are positively encouraged—another significant contrast with modern England. Most girls of good birth are married by the age of sixteen and have produced five or six children by their mid-twenties, although two or three of those will have died. At that age many of them are widows as a result of the Scottish and French wars. That is, of course, presuming they survive the high risks associated with multiple childbirth.

Having said all this, a tiny number of men and women do live into their eighties. That grizzled old knight Sir Geoffrey de Geneville, the brother of the biographer of St. Louis, is still living in the Dominican Friary at Trim in 1314, at the age of eighty-eight.⁸ The shrewd Cornish clergyman, linguist, and translator John Trevisa, who comes into the world in about 1326, has yet to depart from it in 1412, aged eighty-six. The chronicler John Hardyng, born in 1377, writes a chronicle about the triumph of the first Lancastrian king, Henry IV, in 1399 and lives long enough to rewrite the whole story with the opposite political slant for the Yorkist king, Edward IV, in the 1460s. He is still alive in 1464 at the age of eighty-seven. Similar extremes of old age are to be found among the English bishops. The average age at election of those in office in 1300 is forty-three. They live for another twenty-one years, taking them to an average age of sixty-four. Those in office in 1400 are, on average, forty-four at the time of their election. They survive for another twenty-three years, taking them to sixty-seven. Among this group are men like Bishop Skirlaw of Durham and Bishop Burghill of Lichfield, who are still in office at the age of seventy. William of Wykeham is still bishop of Winchester at the age of eighty.

The Three Estates

Medieval society thinks of itself like this: there are three sections of society, or "estates," created by God—those who fight, those who pray, and those who work the land. The aristocracy are "those who fight." They protect "those who pray" and "those who work." The clergy do the praying and intercede on behalf of the souls of the fighters and the workers. "Those who work" feed the aristocracy and the clergy through the payment of service, rents, and tithes. In this way each group contributes to the welfare of society as a whole.

It is a neat concept and particularly attractive to those doing the fighting and praying, who use it to justify the gross inequalities in society. But it is a concept that has been increasingly outdated since the twelfth century. Between 1333 and 1346 it is systematically shredded by the English longbowmen, who, although ranked among "those who work," show that they are a far more potent military force than the massed charging ranks of "those who fight." In those few years,

"those who work" become "those who fight," thereby threatening to make the old aristocracy redundant. Nevertheless, despite the inadequacy of the model, it is worth using it, if only because it shows how fourteenth-century people themselves understand their class system.

THOSE WHO FIGHT

The King

Dukes, Earls, and Barons
(50 to 80 "tenants-in-chief")

Knights (about 1,100)
Esquires and Gentlemen (10,000)
(who hold their manors from the tenants-in-chief)

As the above diagram shows, "those who fight" includes several tiers, a pyramid of wealth and military responsibility. At the top of the pile is the king, who is the lord of all the land in the kingdom. Those royal estates which are kept in the king's hand bring in an annual income from which the king pays for the royal household, including the various departments of government. In addition, the king can seek extra money to finance military expeditions through subsidies and other taxes, subject to the approval of Parliament.

In the second tier are the lords. There are three ranks: dukes, earls, and barons.⁹ The title of duke takes precedence, being invented in 1337 for Edward III's eldest son, Edward of Woodstock, later known as the Black Prince. It is normally a royal title: three of the four dukes created before 1377 are the king's sons. More common are those great lords in the next tier of precedence: the earls. Their number fluctuates between seven and fourteen over the century. The lowest rank of aristocracy is the baronage: the number of barons fluctuates between forty and seventy.

All these lords hold their principal estates *directly* from the king and are thus known as "tenants-in-chief." They normally receive a personal summons to attend each parliament. They constitute the House of Lords. When it comes to fighting, they are all technically bound to serve the king with their retinues at their own expense for forty days

each year. In effect, however, those who are willing to serve the king do so for as long as they are required and are compensated for their expenditure accordingly.

Lordly status loosely correlates with income. In theory each earl should receive at least £1,000 from his estates. Most have between £700 and £3,000. The richest is Thomas of Lancaster, who has five earldoms and an income of about £11,000 in 1311. This is exceeded by only two people over the whole century. Second on the fourteenth-century "Rich List" is Queen Isabella, who allocates to herself 20,000 marks (£13,333) per year in 1327–30. First place goes to John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, whose gross income from his English and Welsh estates in 1394–95 is in the region of £12,000, in addition to a pension from Castile of about £6,600.¹⁰ Most barons have an income of between £300 and £700, but in a few exceptional cases—Lord Berkeley, for instance—a baron may receive as much as £1,300 per year.

The third tier in the feudal hierarchy is made up of lords of manors held *indirectly* from the king—that is to say, held by local lords from the tenants-in-chief. These local lords do not receive a personal summons to attend parliaments, although they may be elected to represent their country as "knights of the shire." They are not "lords" in the sense of having a baronial title but merely lords over their manorial tenants. In theory all of them with an annual income of £40 or more—about eleven hundred men—should be dubbed knights by the king. Those who are not are called "esquires" (provided they are entitled to bear coats of arms, due to their descent from a knight; otherwise they are just "gentlemen").

The foregoing does not account for all manorial lords. Many lordships are in the hands of clergymen or institutions, such as monasteries or university colleges. Many old manors have been divided between co-heiresses, and so a "lord of the manor" might be the holder of just a quarter of a knight's fee, perhaps less than a thousand acres, yielding as little as £5 per year. There are about ten thousand men who fall into this category of local gentry, with incomes of £5 to £40 per year.¹¹ To what extent they should be considered among "those who fight" is open to debate. Nevertheless, their legal status and family connections give them influence among their peers and power over their tenants and bondmen, so do not be fooled by their lack of wealth into thinking they are of little consequence.

The Social Hierarchy

Laity (landed and rural men)	Laity (urban)	Clergy
Dukes		Archbishops
Earls		Bishops
		Abbots summoned to Parliament, ¹² the prior of the Hospitallers, and the Master of the Templars (to 1308)
Barons		Abbots of lesser abbeys
		Priors of the larger priories, and priors of the mendicant orders (friars)
Knights	Mayors of cities and incorporated towns	Canons of cathedrals, archdeacons, and priors of lesser priories
Esquires and gentlemen with £200 or more income from land	The richest merchants, with more than £1,000 capital, and aldermen of cities and incorporated towns	Other higher clergy and wealthy rectors (normally of multiple parishes)
Esquires and gentlemen with £100 income from land	Middling merchants with £500 capital or more	Rectors of single parishes

Franklins/yeomen	Merchants with less than £500 capital; some professionals (e.g. physicians, lawyers, and a few master masons/ master carpenters)	Vicars of parishes
Husbandmen (freemen)	Shopkeepers, local traders, skilled workers, and freemen of towns	Chaplains, friars, and minor clergy
Villeins (unfree)	Laborers	Hermits
Domestic servants	Domestic servants	
	Beggars	

Those Who Pray

The hierarchy of the English clergy is similar to that of the secular lords. There are spiritual noblemen—archbishops, bishops, and the abbots of the major religious houses—and subordinate levels: archdeacons, deans, canons, and the lesser clergy.

Top of the pile in England are the archbishops of Canterbury and York. Of these two, the archbishop of Canterbury takes precedence. His province extends over fourteen of the seventeen English dioceses and all four of the Welsh ones.¹³ Each diocese is presided over by a bishop, who is directly subordinate to the archbishop. The archbishop of York is not subordinate to the archbishop of Canterbury but is obliged to yield precedence to his southern counterpart. His province covers the three other English dioceses (Carlisle, Durham, and York). There are a few other men dressed in ecclesiastical robes who are designated bishops. These are suffragan archbishops and bishops

appointed by the pope and given exotic titles such as "Archbishop of Damascus," "Bishop of Chrysopolis," or "Archbishop of Nazareth," but their authority comes from the pope; they are not part of the English church hierarchy.

With regard to the pope, you need to bear two things in mind. The first is that for most of the century the pope is not based in Rome but in Avignon, in the south of France. The second is that, from 1378, there are actually two popes. These divergences from the norm all arise from a bitter argument between Pope Boniface VIII and King Philip of France around 1300. After Boniface's death in 1303 the dispute is temporarily patched up by his successor, Benedict XI, but even in death Boniface continues to irritate the French king. The next pope after Benedict, Clement V, is a Francophile and does his best to placate Philip by creating many more French cardinals. In addition, he establishes himself and the papal court at Avignon. The extra French cardinals consistently elect French popes, who appoint more French cardinals, who in turn elect more French popes until 1378. In that year the Great Schism occurs in the Church. The Scots, French, and Spanish support the election of yet another French pope, Clement VII, who remains at Avignon. The English, Italians, and most of the German countries which make up the Holy Roman Empire regard Clement as an antipope and instead support the election of Pope Urban VI, who returns to Italy and nominally bases his court at Rome. So, in a nutshell: until 1305 there is just one pope, based in Rome. From 1305 to 1378 there is just one pope and he is at Avignon. From 1378 to the end of the century there are two popes, one at Avignon and the other in Rome, and the English recognize only the latter.

The reason why this is important is that the pope appoints every archbishop, bishop, and archdeacon in Christendom, including the British Isles. This gives him huge influence. When an English bishop dies, the king can write to the pope asking for his nominated candidate to be appointed, but the choice remains the pope's. Needless to say, the French popes (who have authority in England before the schism of 1378) are not always swayed by the requests of English kings. There are other problems too. The Avignon popes are far happier appointing hangers-on at Avignon to positions of ecclesiastical authority than distant Englishmen whom they might never have met. Thus many archdeacons and canons in the English church are foreigners, and many of

these never visit England but simply pocket the money accruing from their English appointments. Finally, England is at war with France. Resentment against the French popes is understandably high.

Like their secular counterparts, most archbishops and bishops are tenants-in-chief, holding manors directly from the king. Each English bishop receives a similar amount to an earl: a sum between £3,500 per year (Canterbury) and £400 per year (Rochester). The bishop of Ely enjoys an income of about £2,500 in 1300; the bishop of Worcester has about £1,200.¹⁴ In a few cases, the comparison between bishops and earls runs even closer. Some of the men who occupy these episcopal thrones are the sons of noblemen and hanker after a life of action. Bishop Hatfield of Durham is given command of the rearmost division in the march across Normandy during the Crécy campaign (1346). Archbishop Zouche of York similarly demonstrates his valor, jointly leading an English army to victory at the battle of Neville's Cross (also 1346). Most remarkable of all, in 1383 Bishop Henry Despenser of Norwich invades Flanders. He claims to be fighting a "crusade" against the French supporters of Pope Clement but instead he attacks the Flemish supporters of Pope Urban (whom the English also recognize). If it is too much to expect an aristocratic bishop to turn the other cheek, you would have thought at least he might obey the commandment "Thou shalt not kill."

The clergy as a whole are split into two sorts. The archbishops and bishops preside over the *secular clergy*—that is to say those priests and men in lesser orders who live in the world and administer to its needs. The *regular clergy* are, for most purposes, outside their jurisdiction, answering instead to the head of their house and ultimately to the head of their Order. Monks and canons withdraw from the world to live lives of quiet contemplation and prayer behind the closed doors of abbeys and priories. Their female equivalents—nuns and canonesses—do likewise. Friars go out into the world to preach, but their female counterparts (the Franciscan nuns, called "Poor Clares," and Dominican nuns) live in priories.

One question you are bound to ask, as you travel around medieval England, is this: if monks have withdrawn from the world to live lives of contemplation and prayer, how come you meet so many of them outside their cloisters, journeying around the country? The answer is monastic business. Abbots and priors need to attend meetings of

Types of Regular Clergy

Type	Orders	Notes
Monastic Orders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benedictines (also known as Black Monks, from the color of their habit) • Cluniacs • Cistercians (White Monks) • Carthusians 	Monks follow the Rule of St. Benedict. They withdraw from the secular world, to contemplate and pray, and have no possessions of their own. The Benedictines are the oldest Order, and the most lax in their observance of the Rule. The Cistercians are much stricter, and the Carthusians stricter still, living in cloistered monastic cells.
Regular Canons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Augustinian Canons (Austin Canons or Black Canons) • Premonstratensians (White Canons) • Gilbertines • Grandmontines 	Like monks except that they follow the teachings of St. Augustine of Hippo. The Order of St. Gilbert of Sempringham is the only monastic order to be founded in England; it permits monks and nuns to live in double monasteries and worship in the same church.
Military Orders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Order of the Temple • The Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem (Hospitallers) 	Orders of knights originally established to protect the pilgrim routes to the Holy Land. After the abolition of the Templars in 1308, only the Hospitallers have a significant presence in England.

Mendicant Orders (friars)

- Dominicans (Blackfriars or Friars Preacher)
- Franciscans (Greyfriars or Friars Minor)
- Carmelites (White Friars)
- Austin Friars
- Friars of the Holy Cross (Crutched Friars)

Unlike monks, friars go out into the world, preaching the word of God to rich and poor alike. They have given up all their property and taken vows of chastity and abstinence, but otherwise they are free to roam where they will.

their Order, and many abbots and a couple of priors are summoned to attend Parliament. Some traveling is undertaken by other monks to acquire things—including manuscripts to copy for the monastic library—or to exchange news. But the vast bulk of monastic business is to oversee the abbey's estates. The monk in Chaucer's "Sea Captain's Tale" is allowed by his abbot to roam where he wants on the pretext of inspecting the monastic granges. Some monasteries have a great number of these, with vast estates all over the south of England. The great Benedictine houses of Glastonbury Abbey and Westminster Abbey have incomes well in excess of £2,000, and more than £3,000 in a good year. Most abbeys have an income of between £30 and £300.¹⁵

There is huge variety and range to the clergy in England. In addition to those mentioned above, there are hundreds of chaplains and priests in the seven hundred hospitals and chantries up and down the country. Add all these groups together and you begin to realize that "those who pray" are as rich and numerous as "those who fight." In total there are about 650 monasteries in 1348 (350 houses of monks, three hundred of regular canons). There are about two hundred friaries and 150 nunneries, making a total of one thousand religious houses. In 1348 these contain at least twenty thousand men and two thousand women. Add the hospitals—each with a complement of chaplains and other religious staff—and about ten thousand parish incumbents, plus an unknown number of religious hermits, private

chaplains, chantry priests singing Masses for the souls of the dead, university theologians, as well as priests serving nuns, and you will see that there are at least thirty thousand full-time religious people in England. As you have to be eighteen to enter a monastery or to become a priest, this means that more than 2 percent of adult males in England are clergymen.

Those Who Work

You would have thought that the last of the three estates would be the most straightforward. "Those who work" equals "peasants." Not much call for hierarchy there, you might suppose. But you would be wrong. There are as many grades of wealth and status among the peasantry as there are among the aristocracy and the clergy combined. The status of a franklin or a yeoman who has a whole yardland (thirty acres) and his own plow team of eight oxen is far higher than that of a villein who is bound to serve his lord and has just one or two acres to his own use. If that franklin's daughter marries a younger son of a gentleman, his status is even higher. If his family provide the officers for the manor—the reeve (manorial overseer), for instance—his status is further enhanced. The idea of all the peasants pulling together as one, equal in rank and wealth, is a modern myth.

It is a moot point whether there actually is a group of people called "peasants." To a manorial lord there is such a group: it is not of great significance to him if one peasant is richer than another; they are all his tenants. However, the word "peasant" is not used at this period. Ask a "peasant" if he is one and he will probably just scratch his head and wonder what on earth you are talking about. A clerk will refer to him and his companions as *rustici* (countrymen), *nativi* (those born to servitude), or *villani* (villeins), but these peasants do not refer to one another as *rustici* and not all peasants are villeins. It is not what they have in common which gives them their identity but what sets them apart from one another. Uppermost in their minds are questions such as, Where are you from? How much land have you got? Do you have any practical crafts or skills? Can you play a musical instrument? Were you born out of wedlock? And most of all—more important than every other question of status—Are you a free man?

Freedom is the biggest single division in the peasantry (let us continue to use the word as a catchall for the sake of convenience). Those who are not free are villeins or bondmen. Villeins work the lord's land for him according to a set of customary expectations, normally three days' work per week. In addition they have to perform set tasks, such as plowing and harrowing a certain acreage of the lord's land, or collecting firewood or nuts for the lord from the manorial woods. In return for their service, they have the use of some land, for which they pay rent. At the beginning of the century, about 70 percent of all villeins have the use of between a quarter and a whole yardland; very few have the use of more.¹⁶ On days when they are not working on the lord's land, or after they have finished work (about midafternoon), they can work on their own acres or tend to their gardens. But whatever they produce actually belongs—in law—to their lords, and he can take whatever he wants.

Usually lords demand nothing of their peasants' goods except a "heriot." This is the customary fine of a villein's best beast, or most valuable chattel, which his heirs must give up to the lord on the villein's death. But as one old abbot better versed in law than in diplomacy will tell you, legally his villeins "own nothing but their own bellies."¹⁷ In fact, that abbot could rub even more salt into the wound of his tenants' servitude by reminding them that they have no right to leave his manor for more than a day. If he sells his land, he sells them and their families with it. Nor do they have recourse to any legal judgment but his. They have no right of trial before the royal justices, only in his manorial court. In some manors, the lord has the power of life and death over those found guilty.

There is worse. A lord has power over whom his villeins might marry. If a villein allows his daughter—who is, by implication, also unfree—to marry a man from another manor, then he must pay the lord a fine to compensate him for the loss of further generations of villeins. If a widow has not remarried within a few months of her first husband's death, and the lord's land is in danger of being neglected as a consequence, she will be ordered to choose a capable husband before the next court—normally within three weeks. If she does not, the bailiff or the reeve will select a suitable man for her. If the parties refuse to marry, they will be fined and, if they continue to refuse, imprisoned until they do consent. An arranged marriage, in which the

parents choose the bride or bridegroom, is a blessing by comparison. It is not an exaggeration to say that there are aspects of a villein's life which you will find repugnant.

Villeins may escape from their servitude in one of two ways. One is to be made free by the lord. The other is to run away. If a man runs away to a town, and lives there for a year and a day, he is legally free. Of course he will forgo all his possessions in his original manor, and his nearest male relative will be fined.¹⁸ If he is married then his wife and children will be turned out of the house and the family possessions confiscated—so married men do not often escape. If they try, their wives are likely to follow them and drag them home again. Also, it is worth remembering that a free man is not necessarily better off than his unfree cousins. Even if he has a craft or skill, he will not have the tools or money to start up in a trade. Most escapees have nothing to sell but their labor, and that is very cheap. In this way a town is regularly kept populated, mainly by younger sons seeking their fortune. As the poor men in the slums die off from malnutrition, injury, and disease, there is a regular stream of incoming young men ready to take their place, living in the cheap subdivided tenements while eking out a living by laboring in dangerous and unsavory occupations.

Just as there is a great difference between the villeins on the manor—between those who have more than thirty acres and those who have just one or two—there is a considerable range of wealth and status among the franklins and yeomen (freemen). At the high end are those who have acquired enough freehold land to sustain their families comfortably and to employ others to help them farm their acres. They also have several servants. But even within this group there is a degree of variation. At the very top there are some who have undertaken to rent the entire manor from the lord, farming the whole estate, court and all, as if they themselves were the lords. This is not that uncommon after the Great Plague, when lords are increasingly eager to offload the financial risk of managing their estates by renting them out lock, stock, and barrel for fixed rents.¹⁹ The franklins who take on such an estate further blur the distinction between the gentry and the peasantry by marrying the daughters of esquires. A man who appoints his own bailiff, is attended by servants, has cousins among the gentry, and lords it over his fellow villagers in the manorial court hardly fits the usual image of a peasant.

The majority of freemen are not as well off as farmers of manors. Like villeins, most of them have less than a yardland in the common fields. Obviously they cannot farm all thirty acres at once—a third or so must be left fallow—so they have to earn a living from their remaining fifteen or twenty acres. In a good year this will leave them with a cash surplus; in a bad year they will struggle to get by. They may have other rights, such as the right to graze their livestock on the lord's common or to gather firewood in the wood, but the freeholder has a hard time of it when sequential harvests are bad. Those freeholders who have less than eight acres—about half of all free peasants—have the hardest time of all. In terrible years (like the Great Famine of 1315–17) they can see that the villeins are economically better off than they are. In such circumstances there is little to do but sell up to a wealthier, more secure franklin and start laboring.

For all these reasons, when you trot into a village on your palfrey, and see one villager's wife leaning over a wall talking to another, and think to yourself how harmonious everything seems to be, just reflect that there are many inequalities, tensions, and fears which you cannot see. The three or four families from which the local officers are most often drawn (the reeve, jurors, chief tithing-men, ale-tasters, constable, and hayward) may well be resented by those who have suffered most from their accusations in the manorial court. Some families consider other families beneath them on account of their villein status or because one of them is a servant. In most places the manorial lord will be held in a special position of esteem or hatred. The general philosophy—especially in the early part of the century—is that the harsher a lord is towards his tenants, the more he will be feared and respected, be he an abbot or a knight. And on the whole peasants *do* respect their lords. This is not surprising when you reflect that villeins in particular are dependent on their lords for their lands and their livelihoods, as well as customary feasts at harvesttime and Christmas. It is relatively rare for tenants to ransack and loot their lord's houses and granges. The idea expressed during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381—that all peasants should be freed from their manorial bonds—is a reflection of the changing circumstances after the Great Plague and not of a long tradition of widespread interclass bitterness.

Those Outside the Three Estates

You will already have realized many of the shortcomings of the “three estates” model. Bishops may take up arms and fight, and are manorial lords just like earls and barons. In some cases a rich peasant may be indistinguishable from a poor gentleman. But a bigger failing with the model lies in the fact that many people fall outside it altogether. For example, where are the merchants? As shown in chapter 1, about an eighth of the population lives in a town; so where do these people appear in the scheme of “the three estates”? They hardly count among “those who work,” as their income does not support a lord. And what about everyone else? Where are the jugglers, the acrobats, and the jesters? What about the mariners, servants, and the emerging professions such as physicians and lawyers? Where do they fit into the three estates?

The people who fall outside the three estates are among the most interesting you will meet. Consider the servants. You might assume that a servant is the lowest ranking person of all, beneath even those who work. But as any servant will tell you, service has its reward, and the level of that reward depends on whom you serve and in what capacity. A royal serjeant-at-arms is a servant but, as a man-at-arms authorized to act as a king's enforcer, he commands a great deal of authority—more than the rich merchants whose merchandise he may be sent to impound. Similarly the man who acts as a lord's steward may be a manorial lord in his own right. A bailiff overseeing the running of a manor is similarly a lord's servant, but he has more authority than probably everyone else resident on the manor. A lord's son is often sent to learn how to behave by being placed in the service of another lord: he too is a servant, but not lowly in status, even though he receives no income. At the bottom end of the scale, a ten-year-old boy serving in the house of a hardworking villein or poor franklin has a very low status, lower than the other peasants. He might grow up to be a peasant farmer in his own right, but in the meantime he is the lowest of the low. His wages reflect this; boys and girls often receive nothing at all for their labor but board and lodging.

You can say similar things about merchants. At the top end of society there are some very wealthy merchants. Almost all the really rich ones—international traders with goods and property worth £1,000

or more—live in London. Their incomes, which roughly equate to a tenth of their wealth, put them on a par with wealthy knights. Approximately 14 percent of all London merchants fall into this category.²⁰ Many more have less than £50 worth of goods, and commensurately lower incomes. A significant number of them mix their trading of goods with renting-out of town houses in order to make a living. Lower down the economic ladder you have the various traders who can hardly be called merchants at all, on account of their relatively low incomes and the limited and specific nature of their work. Few of them earn as much as £5 per year. Those tailors, bakers, apothecaries, cordwainers, and butchers making £4 annually are doing well—much better than the average water carrier or laborer. At the bottom of the hierarchy are those who are not even freemen of the city and who have no right to carry on a trade within the walls. In the first half of the century, carters are lucky if they make £2 10s annually, and laborers if they make £2 (see chapter 4). And there are many people worse off than these men, who are at least employed.

The inequalities of wealth in a town, coupled with the domination of the manorial lords in the country, might make you yearn to escape the whole medieval hierarchy. If you do, you will not be alone. There are quite a few travelers on the road. There are the beggars who roam around the country, stopping in each place for a while, until they are moved on. Such men—and almost all of them are men—often have routes incorporating the houses of friendly hosts, with whom they will stay for a week or two each year. Lepers of course are forced into such a life, but, once their symptoms begin to show, they are made to feel so unwelcome that they tend to confine themselves to leper hospitals near towns. Much more readily received are the traveling performers: the tumblers and jugglers. Although most professional musicians are attached to great men's households and religious houses, you do come across wandering minstrels. It is not a bad life in the summer months: traveling around, playing a merry jig on a pipe or a rebec. You may decide to help with the harvest in the daytime, before keeping your fellow workers dancing in the evening. It certainly beats being one of the mass of men peddling some sort of service. Who would be a pardoner, selling documents purporting to guarantee the purchaser freedom from sins? Or a soothsayer, predicting doom? Or a hermit, living on the proceeds of alms given by passersby?

Women

Unlike men, women are not usually described by what they do but by their marital condition. Thus the medieval mind tends to categorize women as follows: maidens, wives, nuns, and widows. The status of a maiden or wife depends on that of the man who supports her. When she is a girl, this is her father or stepfather. On marrying, it is her husband. Once she has married, she becomes subject to his authority. She is unable to resist him sexually, to borrow money without his consent, or to dispose of any property—even to the point of being unable to make a will. Nuns depend on their nunnery in much the same way, being considered the brides of Christ. Only widows and aged spinsters can achieve a measure of independence, and even widows are often categorized according to the status of their last husband. This is the most fundamental aspect of women's lives. From birth until widowhood they are living under the control—nominally, at least—of someone else, in most cases a man.

From this it is only a small step to realize that women are constantly the victims of sexual prejudice. It is not that they are second-class citizens—class has got little to do with it; high-status females are just as highly respected as high-status males—it is that women are blamed for all the physical, intellectual, and moral weaknesses of society. It was a woman who first persuaded a man to take a bite from the forbidden fruit, with the result that all humanity was cast out of Paradise, and that is a difficult thing to live down. The fact that the Bible is “a text wherein we find that woman was the ruin of Mankind” (as Chaucer puts it) presents a fundamental platform upon which all manner of prejudices are founded (although Chaucer himself is remarkably free from these). According to a thirteenth-century work translated into English in the fourteenth century, women are smaller, meeker, more demure, more gentle, more supple, and more delicate, but they are also “more envious and more laughing and loving, and the malice of the soul is more in a woman than in a man.” The author goes on to add that a woman “is of a feeble nature, tells more lies . . . and is slower in working and in moving than a man.”²¹ Clearly this author is not wholly unappreciative of female qualities, but his report of women is not exactly a glowing one.

Although you may find these sexual prejudices disturbing, it is difficult to see how things could easily change. This is not just because of the misogyny of society; it is also a matter of trust in the law and social norms. Men might act in the name of the law but that does not qualify them to change it, especially as it has been built up slowly, over many generations. Nor does the law help them understand the problem of legal prejudices against women. It is debatable as to how many people think there is a problem. Many women consider that this male-dominated society is simply the way things are, and the way that God intended the world to be, as a punishment on women. For if anyone looks anywhere for guidance in such matters, they look in the Bible, and Genesis is not the only book with a sexist slant. In addition, the intellectual developments of the thirteenth century—which increasingly form the basis of educated opinion in the fourteenth—have spread the Aristotelian dictum that women are basically “deformed men.” A few educated women rail against this sexism but there is not much they can do about it except write witty antisexist polemics, to be shared with their friends and acquaintances.

The paralyzing factor in male–female relations at all levels of society is the inability to understand and control sexual desire. Medical knowledge, which is heavily based on the teachings of the third-century writer Galen, holds that women's wombs are “cold” and need constant warming by “hot” male sperm. In addition, if women do not regularly copulate, their “seed” (as Galen calls it) might coagulate and suffocate their wombs, thereby damaging their health. Therefore it is widely understood that women have a physical need to have sex regularly. Marriage is seen as an essential means of satiating both female and male lust through making each partner “indebted” to the other. By this reckoning, neither partner may deny the other repayment of the marital “debt.” You therefore have a society in which men are led to believe that their wives are constantly aching to have sex as often as they can. At the same time the women are led to believe that they are the physical manifestations of lust and that their wombs will suffocate with excess seed unless they have sex regularly. For unmarried women this presents something of a problem. John Gaddesden—one of the leading medical lights at Oxford in the early part of the century—recommends women suffering from a superfluity of lust should find a man and marry him quickly. If this is not possible, they should travel,

exercise frequently, and take medicines. If this regimen does not work, and the lust brings on a fainting fit, a woman should find a midwife who should lubricate her fingers with oil, insert them into her vagina, and "move them vigorously about."²²

The results of this inadequate understanding of female sexuality, together with biblical, legal, and intellectual prejudices against women, are profound. Galen teaches that women must have an orgasm in order to conceive a child. That is all well and good for those women whose husbands will toil long and hard to help them conceive, but for those who come into contact with the mass of young men traveling around the country, it is dangerous. The implication is that if a man wants to seduce a woman, and rapes her so brutally that she derives no physical pleasure from the experience, she should not conceive. There is a specific statute making rape a crime, and it is taken seriously enough to be deemed one of the crimes which can only be dealt with by the king's justices (rather than in the local courts), but it is very difficult to apply. If the woman fails to conceive, and there is no other evidence that sex took place with the accused, it is unlikely that the perpetrator will be held to account: any trial would be just her word against his. On the other hand, if the woman *does* conceive, then she is deemed to have physically enjoyed the experience (according to Galen's teaching) and so legally no rape has taken place.

These difficulties are compounded by the social hierarchy of men. If the perpetrator of a rape is a high-status individual, it is very difficult for anyone to proceed against him. If a summoner tries to take action against a man of rank, he will incur the man's enmity as well as the embarrassment of accusing someone, on the dubious strength of a woman's slander. When a royal tax collector starts sexually molesting girls and young women on a systematic basis in 1381, his actions help trigger the Peasants' Revolt. Unlawful violence is practically the only form of revenge open to the outraged fathers.

The foregoing makes the woman's lot seem a particularly harsh one. However, there are some great advantages to being a woman. When the king issues writs to his sheriffs summoning an army, it is the men who have to risk their lives and fight, not the women. Despite this, high-status women are still entitled to all the benefits of being connected to "those who fight." They can inherit land in their own right, even when ownership entails providing military service.

High-status women also share the power of their husband's position and rank. Many widows are only too pleased for people to associate them with their late husbands—after all, how many dowager countesses want people to forget that they were once married to an earl? This can apply farther down the social spectrum. A villein's wife is a co-tenant of the manor along with her husband and valuable in her own right. Women in cities are able to carry on their husband's trade after his death. So a woman married to a tailor may become an independent tailor herself, or a practitioner of any one of more than a hundred trades—even an armorer or a merchant. Margaret Russell of Coventry is a prime example of an exceedingly wealthy provincial female trader. Just one of her ventures to Spain consists of goods worth £800. When women have this sort of capital, and are managing international trading ventures from Coventry, you can hardly look upon them as downtrodden. Nor should you forget that the second richest person in all of fourteenth-century England is a woman—Queen Isabella. The fact that a wife is legally subordinate to her husband is of relatively little consequence when she is socially superior to everyone else.

Another point to remember is that this discrimination against women is only legal, it is not personal. If a wife is spirited enough, she may do more than hold her own against her husband, as Chaucer's Wife of Bath will gladly relate. While a man may legally beat his wife, she may accuse him in a church court of cruelty, for beating her too much, and have the court force him to mend his ways.²³ But no man could take his wife to court for this—for husband beating—as no court will sympathize with a man so feeble that he cannot defend himself against his own wife. Similarly, if a man wants to take legal action against his wife for adultery, he has to admit he is a cuckold, and in so doing he may make himself appear ridiculous. If a husband and wife turn to crime—and many families do engage in criminal activity together—and if they commit a hanging offense, only the husband hangs. His wife simply has to plead that she was obeying her husband's orders. Through such technicalities, the apparent gross inequalities of the law appear more extreme on parchment than in the majority of people's daily lives. As the Wife of Bath puts it, "Any wife who knows what's what, can make her husband think that black is white, with her own maid in witness as support."

There are other advantages enjoyed by women too. A surprising number of townswomen are literate. Nunneries might be poor in their endowments but they are keen on their schools, and they educate as many girls as boys. Then there is old age. If a woman survives giving birth repeatedly there is every chance she will reach a greater age than her husband. Her respectability will have improved in comparison to his too. Men over the age of sixty are often seen as something of an embarrassment, no longer masculine, and unable to fulfill the dominant male role in society.²⁴ Women on the other hand are seen as having lost nothing in strength but having gained much in wisdom. Women do not have to enter tithings—the social control mechanism of the peasantry (see chapter 10). Another subtle advantage arises from the female role within the household. While it is true that women take on most of the routine work within the community—including washing clothes, tending the sick, and laying out the dead—the result is that they are far more aware of what is going on in the neighborhood. This also applies to their own households; through seeing with their own eyes what the servants have been up to, they have a far better idea of what is actually going on than their husbands. In many wealthy households the wife is the link between the staff and her husband, who might be elsewhere on business. She rules the household in her husband's absence and, when he returns, she tells him what needs doing and who must be disciplined, if she has not already seen to this herself. For these women it is hardly worth considering what the Bible says about females. Their own position is very much to their advantage, and if it requires occasional lip service to the odd snippet of biblical history to preserve the order of their home, then so be it.

As you can see, the lot of a woman in medieval England depends very much on her luck in the marriages stakes. Some husbands are absolutely devoted to their wives. This includes kings—Edward I, Edward III, and Henry IV, in particular, all deeply love their wives—as well as magnates and lesser men. In describing her married life, Christine de Pisan writes lovingly of her late husband, telling how, when he married her (when she was fifteen), he did not force her to make love with him on their wedding night, wanting her first to get used to his presence. Chaucer's own view is unequivocal: "What is better than wisdom? Woman. And what is better than a good woman? Nothing."

At the other extreme, a bad marriage can be fatal, literally, for the woman. That is why it is so cruel for a manorial bailiff to force a bondswoman to marry against her will. There is nothing she will be able to do to stop being bound to a man who will rape her and beat her, take and spend all her wealth, and force her into a life of repetitive drudgery, and then perhaps abandon her. On top of that, with every child she conceives she runs a small but significant risk of a painful death, roughly equating to a one in ten chance of dying over the course of having five children (see chapter 9). Her marriage vows include her oath to remain sexually faithful to her abusive husband—although he himself does not have to promise likewise—and if she leaves him she forfeits not only all her possessions but any dowry which would be rightfully hers should she outlive him. Given that some women find themselves in exactly this situation, it is not surprising to learn that there is a saint, St. Wylgeforte, to watch out for women who are plagued by bad husbands. You cannot help but have some sympathy for those women who have no one else to call on but St. Wylgeforte.

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IAN MORTIMER

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