ABSTRACT

"The whole of England was thrown into madness": English Church and State
Responses to Economic, Religious, and Social Disruptions after the Black Death

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Between 1348 and 1350, an outbreak of plague, known as the Black Death,

reached England and destroyed between one-third and one-half of the population.

This demographic devastation disrupted England's traditional order economically,

religiously, and socially. In the long term, these disruptions were potentially

beneficial to the poor. For society's elites, however, these disruptions threatened

their traditional authority and position in society. This thesis examines how elites

in the church and government, together as the ruling institutions of England,

responded to changes and challenges in the economic, religious, and social spheres

of English society in the half century after the Black Death. While the church and

government often operated independently in these responses, they shared the same

general goals, which were to mitigate change, preserve the traditional social

hierarchy, and stabilize society. Nevertheless, elites frequently were forced to

sacrifice traditional policies and powers in order to foster stability in society.

"The whole of England was thrown into madness": English Church and State Responses to
Economic, Religious, and Social Disruptions after the Black Death

by

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A Thesis

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DEDICATION

To Hillary

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In 1350, two sub-constables attempted to conduct some official business while in a parish church in Preston, Lancashire, England. Richard Digg, a common laborer, was their object of attention. In a rather unpleasant exchange, the sub-constables attempted to force Digg to work as a laborer for some men in the community, but the vicar interceded on behalf of Digg. The vicar challenged their authority to take such action, but the sub-constables claimed to have been empowered by the king and his justices. The situation quickly escalated. It is likely that stunned parishioners looked on while the vicar, not appeased by the sub-constables' claims, promptly excommunicated the sub-constables. The vicar's show of defiance encouraged Digg to resist the sub-constables' authority and to ignore their orders. From then on, Digg worked as a wage-laborer, according to his own desires.[1]

Why did the sub-constables try to force Digg into service? Did they really have authority from the king and justices to do so? Why did the vicar intervene on behalf of a common laborer? Most important of all, were the vicar's actions consistent with the relationship shared between clergy and royal officials, between

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[1] Judith M. Bennett, "Compulsory Service in Late Medieval England," *Past and Present* 209, no. 1 (2010): 22-23, accessed October 6, 2014, doi: 10.1093/pastj/gtq032; the Latin version of this account is found in Bertha Haven Putnam, *The Enforcement of the Statutes During the First Decade after the Black Death, 1349-1359* (London: P. S. King and Son, 1908), 410.

the institution of the church and of the state, in the aftermath of the first wave of the

Black Death? This is the central issue of this project: To analyze how the church

and state did or did not work together in the latter half of the tumultuous fourteenth

century.

War, famine, and plague, along with other natural phenomena and man-made

circumstances have the ability to influence and even overturn the existing social

order. All of these circumstances impacted England nearly simultaneously during

the fourteenth century. People, however, respond to such challenges differently.

Some might desire to use the post-crisis circumstances to reshape the social order,

while others might hope to retain the pre-crisis way of life and counter undesired

changes. The specific crisis that forms the focus of this study is the Black Death,

which destroyed approximately 50% of the population in England between 1348

and 1350 and had serious economic, religious, and social repercussions.

A critical part of understanding the Black Death's legacy is seeing how the

different segments of society reacted and came to terms with post-plague

circumstances. In particular, this study will focus on the policies and actions taken

by the ruling elite in the church and government, examining their efforts from the

onset of the pestilence to the end of the fourteenth century. Furthermore, it is the

object of this project to discover how the actions, policies, and objectives of the

church and state aligned and supported each other as they attempted to navigate

the post-plague world. In the church, the ruling elite will be taken to consist

primarily of the archbishops, bishops, and abbots who held great authority over the

spiritual and administrative affairs of the church; these individuals were also lords

over estates and were very interested in their upkeep and profitability. Indeed, it is important to remember that members of the upper clergy typically came from noble families, which means they were born and raised among the secular elite until they entered the service of the church. The policies and actions attributed to the government came specifically from the king and parliament. The archbishops, bishops, and abbots, along with the king, earls, barons, and knightly members of parliament made up a significant portion of England's ruling elite and stood in contrast to the traditionally poorer members of society, including local priests, laborers, serfs, and other peasants.

Accordingly, ruling elites perceived and responded to the post-plague world very differently from the lower members of society. It will be demonstrated that the church and government, together as the ruling institutions in England, shared similar objectives and methods of response in navigating the crises caused by the plague. In some instances, the church and government directly aided each other in issuing and enforcing policies. In other instances, even when they were less directly involved in the other's actions, they shared common goals and motivations, which can be succinctly described as the desire to mitigate change, preserve the traditional social hierarchy, and stabilize society. Before detailing these responses and objectives in more depth, it is necessary to set the stage and describe the problems that warranted reactions.

The economic, religious, and social problems that resulted from the plague were rooted in the drastic demographic decline of the English population. Economically, shortages of laborers and serfs empowered them to negotiate their

employment terms and increase their wages. Thus, as terrible as the loss of life was for all members of society, the traditionally poor sectors had reason to hope for and demand better conditions of labor. For their lordly landowners, secular and religious, shortages of labor and demands for higher wages threatened to destabilize their authority and standing in the traditional economic system. These elites needed to determine whether they would be able to enforce the old economic ways of life or be forced to adapt to the demands of their laborers.

Similarly, the significant number of priests who died or abandoned their parishes weakened the ability of the church to fulfill its mission of pastoral care in a time of great need, which disrupted, at least to a small degree, the normal spiritual lives of parishioners. Additionally, much like the laborers who demanded higher wages, some local priests also sought to take advantage of the economic situation by fulfilling their duties only for increased pay. Ecclesiastical leaders had the difficult task of deciding how to resolve these internal crises by simultaneously meeting the needs of their flocks and regulating disobedient priests, thus providing some stability to the uncertainty of the times.

The economic circumstances explained above did more than just disrupt the economic system; these circumstances also threatened to disturb the traditional social hierarchy and its established ranks of status. Because of their expanded incomes, some laborers and peasants were able to purchase previously unattainable pieces of clothing and jewelry, which were important outward expressions of one's income, status, and place in society. Spiritually, the adoption of fine fashions by peasants was taken to be a strong indicator of pride and sin, which explained, in

part, the wrath of God and His sending the pestilence to chastise his unrighteous children. As lines between class and rank began to blur and as spiritual anxieties over sin and pride mounted, secular and ecclesiastical leaders sought to restore clarity to the social order rather than allow status lines to become hazy.

These three spheres, economic, religious, and social, are the categories of analysis for this study. In each of these spheres, church and government leaders chose to act, at least theoretically, in favor of preserving the pre-plague order of life. For the church, examples of attitude, reaction, and policy are captured in official correspondence and declarations from bishops to their subordinates, as well as in chronicles, bishop's registers, and behavioral literature. Information on the state's attitudes and responses is located in royal and parliamentary ordinances, statutes, and court records. Other instances of ruling elite responses are found in manorial records as well as in instructional literature; these materials are particularly useful for seeing how local elites received and carried out national sentiments, restrictions, and policies on their estates and in their own families.

Overall, historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gave little heed to the idea of the Black Death "as a force in English history."[2] Early works on the Black Death include Cardinal Gasquet's general study from 1893, as well as Bertha Putnam's early twentieth century publications on wage laws for priests and the Ordinance and Statute of Labourers, which were regulations implemented during

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[2] Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (Dover: Alan Sutton Publishing Inc., 1991), 187.

and shortly after the plague.[3] These early works helped pave the way for later scholarship, most of which emerged after 1960.[4] Indeed, as Philip Ziegler noted in 1969, "no general study of the subject ha[d] appeared since Cardinal Gasquet wrote *The Great Pestilence* in 1893." Ziegler's book, *The Black Death*, published in 1969, is one of the first broad overviews of the plague and covers a wide variety of topics, including the plague's effect on religious, economic, and social aspects of European society. England receives most of the attention, but Italy, Germany, and France are also addressed. Ziegler identifies himself as "an amateur" historian, but his book is nevertheless widely referenced in later secondary literature on the Black Death.[5]

Studies on the pestilence touch a wide array of nuanced topics. Some have dedicated their research to medical studies of the plague as they try to understand the actual illness or illnesses that so dramatically devastated populations across Europe. Others have worked diligently to calculate this demographic decline. While these and many other topics are vital to plague studies as a whole, they are beyond the scope of this project. The objective here is to contribute to two intersecting, but underdeveloped sectors of plague studies and to unite them. These two sectors

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[3] Francis Aidan Gasquet, *The Great Pestilence (A.D. 1348-9), Now Commonly Known as the Black Death* (London: Sumpkin Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., Limited, 1893), accessed January 19, 2016, https://archive.org/details/greatpestilence00gasqgoog; Putnam, *The Enforcement of the Statutes of Labourers*; eadem, "Maximum Wage-Laws for Priests after the Black Death, 1348-1381," *The American Historical Review* 21, no. 1 (1915): 19, accessed November 3, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1836696.

[4] Ole J. Benedictow, *The Black Death 1346-1353: The Complete History* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004), 5.

[5] Ziegler, *The Black Death*, 1.

have been described above and are the church's response to the plague, and the government's response to the plague.

Though there are many valuable studies that discuss the spiritual ramifications of the plague, they do not address at length how the church responded to the changing post-plague world, nor do they discuss how the church and government faced the post-plague world together. Ziegler, for instance, focuses on the general changes in the spiritual sphere during and after the Black Death, notably his suggestion that there was a "decline in the prestige and spiritual authority of the church," which was accompanied by the general growth of religious fervor.[6] One article by Christopher Harper-Bill uses a slightly stronger top-down perspective in his argument that "the institutional Church coped remarkably well with [the Black Death], as with other crises of the late fourteenth century, and emerged three generations later as a reinvigorated body."[7] By focusing on the institutional church and arguing that it did not decline, Harper-Bill contrasts strongly with scholars who emphasize the putative decline of the church and focus their attention on the

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[6] Ziegler, *The Black Death*, 217. See also: Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* (New York: The Free Press, 1983); Colin Platt, *King Death: The Black Death and its aftermath in late-medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); for a broad overview of the church in the fourteenth century, see W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948). Pantin offers a useful overview of the church, its struggles with the state, English mysticism, religious literature, and the rise of lay piety. However, he makes little to no mention of the plague and its effects on the church.

[7] Christopher Harper-Bill, "The English Church and English religion after the Black Death," in *The Black Death in England*, ed. W. M. Ormrod and P. G. Lindley (Stamford: Paul Watkins Publishing, 1996), 79-123. Another excellent study on the institutional church after the plague is: William J. Dohar, *The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership: The Diocese of Hereford in the Fourteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

development of lay piety. Nevertheless, there is still considerable opportunity to

evaluate the church's reactions after the plague, especially since consideration of the

church during and after the plague is too strongly isolated from the other ruling

institution in English society, the government. Analyzing these two institutions

together will provide a deeper and more complete understanding of the challenges

facing England after the Black Death.

Studies on government responses to the plague are also generally

underdeveloped and unconnected to those of the English church. One notable

exception is Mark Ormod's article analyzing the impact of pestilence on the

governing elite and government issues, including administering justice and

taxation.[8] Another exception is the substantial amount of scholarship that examines

the Statute of Labourers and its enforcement.[9] These noteworthy exceptions aside,

scholarship addressing perhaps the most tangible, or at least the most visible,

government reaction to the changing society, sumptuary legislation, has not been

pursued at length or in depth. A series of sumptuary laws designed to regulate

outward appearance according to social standing was enacted across the fourteenth

and fifteenth centuries. In particular, scholarship on sumptuary law and concerns

about dress that is framed specifically in the socially transforming context of the

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[8] W. Mark Ormrod, "The Politics of Pestilence: Government in England after the Black Death," in *The Black Death in England*, ed. W.M. Ormrod and P.G. Lindley (Stamford: Paul Watkins Publishing, 1996), 147-181.

[9] See, for example: Putnam, *The Enforcement of the Statutes of Labourers*; W. M. Ormrod, "The English Government and the Black Death of 1348-1349," in *England in the Fourteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1985 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. W. M. Ormrod (Dover: The Boydell Press, 1986), 175-188; Bennett, "Compulsory Service," 7-51.

Black Death's aftermath is lacking.[10] There remains room for connecting more deeply the government's sumptuary legislation to the Black Death's impact. There is also much opportunity for analyzing the church's efforts in assisting the government regulation of attire, as well as in the government's other regulatory efforts with regard to wages and working conditions.

Considering the period more broadly, M. H. Keen's political history captures the mood of the late middle ages when he says they were times "of political strain and uncertainty, in which the most significant developments were not those initiated by government, from above, but those evoked from below, by the response of the governed to events." Keen addresses how the "the effects of the plague in the long term caused a social revolution in the humbler strata of society," emphasizing the economic and social developments they experienced.[11] This project will build on Keen's comments from another direction by connecting the top of society to the bottom, the church and government to the peasants, thus enabling one to see a fuller spectrum of responses and attitudes toward change, thereby filling a gap in the scholarly literature on the impact of the Black Death in England.

[10] See Frances Elizabeth Baldwin, *Sumptuary Legislation and Personal Regulation in England* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1926); Alan Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions: A History of Sumptuary Law* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Louise M. Sylvester, Mark C. Chambers, and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, eds., *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain: A Multilingual Sourcebook* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2014); Françoise Piponnier and Perrine Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages*, trans. Caroline Beamish (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Katherine L. French, *The Good Women of the Parish: Gender and Religion After the Black Death* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c. 1200-1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[11] M. H. Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages: A Political History* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1973), 23, 200-201.

CHAPTER TWO

Responding to Economic Turmoil

Perhaps the most obvious effects of the plague were visible in England's economy. Due to the high levels of mortality, wages, land prices, and labor relations were greatly affected. This chapter will identify the attitudes and reactions of the secular and religious ruling elite to the economic pressures coming largely from below. Events and examples are accounted for chronologically, beginning with the immediate onset of the plague and progressing to roughly the end of the fourteenth century. In particular, this chapter will discuss the 1349 Ordinance and 1351 Statute of Labourers, assessing both the purpose behind this legislation and the effectiveness of its enforcement. Ecclesiastical measures that closely paralleled the Ordinance and Statute of Labourers, namely wage restrictions for priests, are also addressed here. Furthermore, the effects of the plague on manorial economics and the ways in which religious and secular landlords came to terms with the demands of serfs and free peasants in a damaged economic system are addressed. In theory, labor legislation and related policies reflected elites' fears about overturning the traditional order of society and gave landlords authority to counter economic fluctuations. In reality, the actions of many landlords reveal a more pragmatic and flexible approach to the turning tide of demands and circumstances in their efforts to stabilize society.

Historiography

In terms of scholarship addressing the economic impact of the Black Death,

much has been said. Studies on prices of grain, wool, etc. lay outside this study

because the focus here is on legislation and policies responding to the changes

rather than on the changes themselves. Bertha Putnam wrote one of the earliest

and most thorough works on the Ordinance and Statute of Labourers. She

addresses their enforcement over the first post-plague decade and contends that the

legislation was vigorously enforced. Putnam captures the overall significance of the

economic change catalyzed by the plague and the government's response, stating,

"The statutes of labourers must be regarded not as having created a new system or a

new set of economic relations, but as affording proof that radical changes had

occurred, ushering in a new era."[1] She has also written a study on the wage

legislation for clergy within the church and even analyzes, to an extent, the degree of

cooperation between church and state in administering this legislation, an approach

that is less common in later studies.[2]

Many case studies focus on specific manors and estates, secular or religious,

and how the plague impacted them economically.[3] These studies are useful for

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[1] Putnam, *The Enforcement of the Statutes*, 223.

[2] eadem, "Maximum Wage-Laws for Priests," 19.

[3] For example, Dohar, *The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership*; Mark Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom in Late Medieval England: From Bondage to Freedom* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2014), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt3fgn5m; R.H. Britnell, "Feudal Reaction after the Black Death in the Palatinate of Durham," *Past and Present* no. 128 (1990): 28-47, accessed October 20, 2015, http://www.jstor.org/stable/651008; Edmund Fryde, "The tenants of the bishops of Coventry and Lichfield and of Worcester after

examining, on a local level, economic circumstances and catching glimpses of how policies were or were not enforced. Mark Bailey's recent book, *The Decline of Serfdom in Late Medieval England*, explores causes behind villeinage's decline on 38 different manors, particularly within the context of the Black Death. A large part of his study includes analysis of the so-called "seigniorial reaction" that scholars have described as taking place in the decades after the plague. Indeed, Bailey responds directly to a number of scholars, including J. E. T. Rogers and C. H. Pearson, who have argued that landlords aggressively shackled their serfs to re-impose villeinage; and R. H. Hilton, who approached the post-plague world from a strong Marxist perspective and claimed "that 'the first reaction of the lords was repression rather than accommodation' and they were 'pressing hard' on their villeins until at least the 1370s."[4]

Bailey also addresses Paul Freedman and Monique Bourin, who argue that the seigniorial reaction was severe enough to have imposed a "neo-serfdom," and J. L. Bolton, who suggests that serfs in the decades after the Black Death suffered even greater exploitation than had been seen in the thirteenth century. Bailey acknowledges, "It is undeniable that after the Black Death landlords reacted, and villeins responded, in various ways to the dramatically altered economic and social conditions," but he contends that these arguments are not completely sound

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the plague of 1348-9," in *Medieval legal records: edited in memory of C.A.F. Meekings*, eds. R.F. Hunnisett and J.B. Post (London: H. M. Stationary Office, 1978), 224-266.

[4] Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 69-75; C.H. Pearson, *English history in the fourteenth century* (London: 1876), 229-230; J.E.T. Rogers, *A history of agriculture and prices in England,* vol. 1 (London: 1866), 26, 81; R.H. Hilton, The *Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1983), 36-37, 41.

because they oversimplify social relations, neglect proper context, and lack a strong base of evidence.[5]

This chapter joins Bailey in reevaluating seigniorial reactions and seeking a better understanding of the post-plague policies pursued by the ruling elite. In particular, this chapter contributes two main ideas that are not strongly covered in the abovementioned studies: 1. The church and government, together, responded to economic changes and upheld and supported similar policies; 2. Policy and law created by the church and government illustrate a clear reaction, in principle, to the economic changes, but actual practice reveals secular and religious authorities' willingness to favor pragmatism and adaptability in order to navigate crisis situations smoothly. By examining more closely the relationship of the church and government in creating and pursuing economic policies and how elites actually carried out these policies, our understanding of how the Black Death affected society will deepen. Furthermore, we will better understand how the ruling elite struggled to balance and maintain tradition in the face of pressures for change. The Black Death truly changed society. To understand how, we must understand what was done, and what was not done, to prevent the post-plague world from escaping the grasp of society's elite.

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[5] Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 69-75; Paul Freedman and Monique Bourin, "Introduction," in *Forms of Servitude in Northern and Central Europe: Decline, Resistance, and Expansion*, eds. P. Freedman and M. Bourin (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2005), 1-16; J.L. Bolton, The *Medieval English Economy* (London: J.M. Dent, 1980), 213.

Post-plague Policies

In the midst of the plague, the government recognized a need to address the pestilence's immediate economic impact, which "was an appalling scarcity of manual labourers, with a consequent rise in wages" and prices.[6] In some cases, laborers were refusing to work for lower wages. Intent on countering these changes and mindful of a harvest threatened by insufficient agricultural workers, King Edward III issued the Ordinance of Labourers in June of 1349. The Ordinance compelled all men and women without land or a trade who were "physically fit and below the age of sixty" to accept employment when offered; moreover, the Ordinance fixed wages for all at pre-plague rates and threatened punishment for anyone who refused to work under these conditions. The Ordinance also regulated prices, declaring that all "dealers in foodstuffs should be bound to sell the food for a reasonable price." Additionally, it condemned "sturdy beggars," those who found they could make a living by begging, thus refusing to work and spending their time in "idleness and depravity." Laborers were also restricted from leaving before the end of their contracted term of employment on penalty of being imprisoned; likewise, possible employers were forbidden from taking on such workers.[7] In

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[6] Putnam, "Maximum Wage-Laws for Priests," 13; Mark A. Senn, "English Life and Law in the Time of the Black Death," *Real Property, Probate and Trust Journal* 38, no. 3 (2003): 573, accessed October 6, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20785740;" Ziegler, *The Black Death*, 191, 197; Putnam, *The Enforcement of the Statutes*, 223. Ziegler provides evidence for agricultural prices declining while manufactured good prices increased.

[7] A. Luders and J. Caley, eds., *Statutes of the Realm 1101-1713*, vol. 1 (London: 1810), 307-308, 311-313; Rosemary Horrox, ed. and trans., *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 287-289; Bennett, "Compulsory Service," 7-8. Bennett studies "the case for reinstating compulsory service" (10) in

1351, the Ordinance matured into the Statute of Labourers. These regulations marked intervention on an unprecedented scale by the central government in economic affairs. Cases of enforcement from around the country demonstrate instances of attempts by government agents to enforce and respond to the perceived threat to England's economic well-being.[8]

In Surrey, during the summer of 1350, William atte Merre of Merrow was arrested for refusing to work for Peter de Semere, thus violating the Ordinance's declaration that all men under 60 without land or trade accept employment when offered.[9] William claimed that he was unable to accept the offer because he and his ancestors had long been serfs on the manor of the convent and prior of St. Mary. The justices doubted his claim, but after he took an oath and swore the truthfulness of his words, it was determined that Peter should not have filed the complaint and that William should continue laboring under his current work arrangements. In this instance, William was not legally obliged to work for Peter because William was, in fact, already employed. Nevertheless, that Peter's complaint was at least heard by the justices demonstrates their desire to enforce the Ordinance, even though the complaint proved to be unfounded.

England; in regards to the Ordinance of Labourers, she argues for its long-term, dependence-creating intentions for laborers, as opposed to short-term or casual employment (9-10).

[8] Putnam, *The Enforcement of the Statutes*, 7-56. Putnam describes in detail the appointments and duties of the Justices of Labourers who were responsible for enforcing the Statute of Labourers. For purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to acknowledge that the central government did make such appointments, thus installing the machinery necessary to enforce the Statute.

[9] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 317.

In June 1352, a number of cases from Wiltshire were brought before the Justices of Labourers.[10] John Laurok, an unemployed vagabond, acknowledged that he had left his employment in Oxfordshire to come to Chisledon. As such, he was in the custody of the bailiff until the details of his relocation could be determined. If it could not be proven that he had left with the permission of his former employer, John was to stand to judgement. Philip Heryng, a carpenter, was fined 12d for taking an extra 6d for his services, contrary to the Statute of Labourers. A cobbler named Richard, who had previously sworn before the justices that he would obey the provisions of the Statute, received 40d in excess from shoe sales to various men. After evading the bailiff for a time, he was taken and accused of contempt in addition to taking excess earnings; he was fined 2 marks. These three examples reflect two Statute violations: Taking excess wages and relocating without permission. Two of these individuals were fined for their contrary behavior while the third's fate depended on the outcome of an investigation. In each instance, efforts to regulate economic behavior are clear.

Rather than continuing to list case after case of Statute enforcement, it is important to discuss what these efforts signify, regardless of their overall success and impact. Issuing the Ordinance and Statute of Labourers and then empowering justices to enforce the labor provisions marked a clear and conscious effort by the central government to regulate the English economy. Keeping in mind that legislation is a reflection of and response to what is occurring in society, it is

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[10] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 318-319. See also E.M. Thompson, "Offenders against the statute of labourers in Wiltshire, AD 1349," *The Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* XXXIII (1903-1904): 403-406.

apparent that the ruling elite were alarmed by untenable food prices, laborers'
demands for higher wages, and difficulties obtaining and retaining workers. Thus,
the legislation is a direct reaction to undesirable economic changes and challenges
sparked by the plague and encouraged by the lower classes. While the government
worked in the courts to counter these changes, the church also played a role in
enforcing and circulating economic regulations.

The church was a channel for disseminating the Ordinance. Bishops received
the Ordinance of Labourers with instructions to have it read in their parish
churches. In 1349, shortly after the Ordinance was issued, Bishop Hethe of
Rochester conveyed its instructions to his subordinates in a letter. Hethe praised
the king for taking action "to check the presumptuous excesses of certain artisans
and employees" and proceeded to express his displeasure about the fact that
"although there remain strong and healthy men who are well able to work...they
obstinately refuse to enter employment or to work unless they receive intolerably
high payment." As such, Bishop Hethe considered the Ordinance's measures to be
"appropriate remedies" in correcting the lay people's actions.[11] In the diocese of
Hereford, Bishop Trillek also received the Ordinance and disseminated its
provisions pertaining to laborer wages.[12]

Bishop Hethe's letter also explains royal policies pertaining to stipendiary
clergy that paralleled the secular wage restrictions. The shortage of stipendiary
clergy inspired some surviving priests to charge excessive payments for their

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[11] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 290.

[12] Dohar, *The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership*, 74-75.

services, much to the outrage of many parishioners.[13] Bishop Hethe transmitted the

King's instructions to proclaim that each priest is "to be content with the amount of

salary or stipend which used to [be] paid before the pestilence…and should not dare

to demand more." Moreover, priests were not allowed to leave the service of any

lord who was paying him an appropriate salary without explicit permission of that

lord. Disobedient priests risked suspension.[14] Like Hethe, Trillek of Hereford

ordered all wage earning clergy under his jurisdiction to accept pre-plague wages

"under penalty of suspension and interdict."[15] Thus, the clerical regulations

mirrored the secular limitations not only in wage limitation, but also in mobility

control. Like the policies to keep peasants and laborers in check, the church upheld

standards designed to rein in avaricious priests and maintain, as much as possible,

stability in society.[16]

In receiving the royal instructions, Hethe did not consider the king's initiative

to violate the church's right to govern itself. Rather, he wrote, "We have accepted

the royal commands, not only because they are supported by reason but also

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[13] Gottfried, *The Black Death*, 87; Putnam, "Maximum Wage-Laws for Priests," 14-16. Gottfried summarizes general resentment toward the clergy, stating, "Many people believed, often unjustly, that the clergy were greedy, self-centered, and filled with a sense of their own independence."

[14] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 290-291; John Shinners and William J. Dohar, eds., *Pastors and the Care of Souls in Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 253-255.

[15] As quoted in Dohar, *The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership*, 74-75.

[16] Putnam, "Maximum Wage-Laws for Priests," 18-30; Bennett, "Compulsory Service," 12. As Bennett suggests, it is possible that Edward III and his councilors designed the Ordinance of Labourers to counter the greed and newfound power of the lower classes.

because our office constrains us to exercise our ministry for the public weal."[17] The

logic behind the king's stipulations was sound, but perhaps more important was the

solemn responsibility of the church to care for its parishioners. So serious was this

task that Hethe commanded his parishes to warn every stipendiary chaplain and

clerk "publicly, generally and canonically, so that the admonitions are too forceful to

escape notice and nobody can plead ignorance as an excuse."[18] Hethe clearly agreed

with the king's requirements, for laymen and clergy alike, and strongly encouraged

all under his jurisdiction to adhere to them in order to execute properly the church's

ministry in caring for souls.

While the king's clerical wage restrictions received support from the

episcopacy, in the following year, 1350, Archbishop Islip declared an official policy

of regulating clerical wages. His declaration, known as *Effrenata*, condemned the

"insatiable desire on the part of the priests" to refuse to take on cure of souls in

favor of private offices wherein they demand excessive salaries. This was

particularly alarming because these stipendiary clerics were encouraging beneficed

clergy to do likewise, thus "leaving their cures completely abandoned." Islip

proceeded to define appropriate wages: 5 marks for priests looking after a lesser

cure of souls; 6 marks for a middling size cure; and 7 marks for a major cure. In

short, chaplains of a parish church were to receive a one mark wage increase;

stipendiary priests, on the other hand, were to receive "the going rate accepted in

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[17] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 290-291.

[18] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 290-291.

the past" and no increase.[19] Regulating clerical wages sought to address economic

issues, of course, as well as to encourage the clergy to be an example for the laity to

follow, which would help, in theory, with the enforcement of the secular

restrictions.[20]

In 1362, after another outbreak of plague, Islip reissued *Effrenata* to the

bishop of London because it had failed to take effect. Later in 1362, parliament met

and the king requested a constitution from the archbishops and bishops addressing

the clerical wage problems. The ecclesiastical representatives in parliament assured

him they had imposed legal rates and presented to him *Effrenata*. The king accepted

Effrenata and added a provision that threatened to penalize any layperson who

violated *Effrenata*. Just as the church adopted and supported the king's lay and

clerical wage restrictions, the state accepted and supported the ecclesiastical

response. In Putnam's words, "It is not a case of legislation of the laity for the clergy

but merely a striking example of the harmonious co-operation between Church and

State."[21] *Effrenata* was reissued one final time in 1378 by Islip's successor, Simon

Sudbury, reflecting the continual problem of enforcing its terms. However, Sudbury

did raise the 5 mark wage limit to 8 marks; nevertheless, he echoed his

predecessor's disgruntlement when he complained against "the greed of priests who

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[19] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 306-309.

[20] Robert E. Rodes, Jr., *Ecclesiastical Administration in Medieval England: The Anglo-Saxons to the Reformation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 129.

[21] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 306-309; Putnam, "Maximum Wage-Laws for Priests," 18-19.

sold their labor for excessive wages which they squandered on voluptuous living."[22]

The repeated issuance of clerical wage restrictions reveals the ongoing struggle and

failure of the church to regulate the clergy's incomes in the decades following the

initial outbreak of the plague.

Near the end of the fourteenth century, additions to the Statute of Labourers

were issued, identified by Bailey as the Statute of Cambridge.[23] According to this

statute, all of the previous statutes pertaining to laborers were still in force and

"shall be firmly held and kept and duly executed."[24] It reinforced mobility

restrictions and required all migrating laborers to carry a letter patent, which was

designed to confirm that they were, in fact, authorized to leave their former

workplace in order to obtain new employment and not abandoning existing labor

agreements. Those without a letter would be put in the stocks until their

circumstances could be clarified; those with a forged letter would be imprisoned for

forty days. The statute also made provisions to compel craftsmen and artificers to

work in the harvest, as long as their trade was not in high demand during harvest

time. Wage amounts are also specified for various occupations and the fines for

violating the dictated wages are explained. Perhaps the most interesting piece of

the Statute of Cambridge is the provision declaring the following:

> It is ordained and agreed that any male or female who works as a
> carter or ploughman, or in any other agricultural occupation until
> they reach the age of 12, shall from then on remain in the same
> employment, without being put to learn any trade or craft; and if any

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[22] Dohar, *The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership*, 104-105.

[23] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 323-326; Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom,* 298.

[24] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 323.

agreement or indenture of apprenticeship shall later be made to the contrary it shall be void.[25]

Assuming the government could meaningfully enforce this provision, this would have the effect of thwarting upward socio-economic mobility sought by some peasants in the aftermath of the pestilence. Binding children to a life in the fields meant excluding a generation from attempting to advance economically while also providing sufficient agricultural laborers in the future. When combined with mobility and wage restrictions, one can see even more clearly the elites' anxieties about perceived socio-economic mobility. On a more local level, it is possible that some manorial lords built directly on this provision when they insisted that their serfs procure special licenses in order to pursue training that would educate them and increase their skillsets. While the actual issuing of such licenses was rare, Bailey contends that these efforts correspond with a period of more aggressive enforcement of personal servility on some manors, notably by high-status landlords.[26] Further discussion on the plague, serfdom, and manor economics follows below.

Attempts to keep workers from gaining excessive wages and progressing up the socio-economic hierarchy reflect the concerns of the governing elite that the traditional social order was at risk of collapsing. Both ecclesiastical and secular leaders created, supported, and promoted these economic policies in order to curb economic change and discourage material excess among the lower classes.

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[25] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 325.

[26] Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom,* 298-299. In his 38-manor study, Bailey identifies only 5 instances of licenses to pursue a trade being issued, one each in 1393, 1415, 1420, 1451, and 1470.

Obviously, the hope of mitigating change could only be successful if these were enforced and obeyed.

In the short term, wage regulation may have had an impact. Putnam explains how the Ordinance and Statute of Labourers were certainly enforced in the decade after the Black Death and had some influence on regulating wages and prices. As argued by Putnam, "it is impossible to doubt that during this first decade [after the plague] the wages and price clauses were thoroughly enforced." Because of the regulations, she claims, even though "wages were not kept at the statutory level…they were kept for ten years at a lower level than would have resulted from a regime of free competition."[27] Despite any short term success in regulation, evidence suggests that such triumphs were limited. Ultimately the Ordinance and Statute of Labourers were "doomed to failure" because the legislation failed to restrict peasants, workers, and even lords because it was not economically favorable to follow the rules strictly.[28] Thus, the reiteration of labor restrictions and the reality of their ineffectiveness demonstrate the limitations of the religious and secular elite in countering the economic changes sparked by plague. Examining more closely the relationship of manorial lords with serfs reveals longer-term effects of the plague and how landlords were, overall, much more pragmatic in responding to the legacy of the pestilence's demographic destruction.

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[27] Putnam, *The Enforcement of the Statutes*, 219-224; see also Ziegler, *The Black Death*, 199-200.

[28] Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*, 173-174; Ormrod, "The English Government and the Black Death of 1348-1349," 178-180.

Manorial Economics and Seigniorial Reactions

This section discusses the economic effects of the plague specifically on serfdom and how religious and secular landlords responded to these effects. Serfdom, or villeinage, must be defined more clearly to understand how and why it broke down in the decades following the plague. Using Bailey's definition of serfdom, villeinage in late medieval England had three primary components: "a person holding villein tenure; a person required to render to his or her lord some or all of a range of key servile incidents; and, finally, a condition regarded as inferior and subordinate."[29] Understanding how and why villeinage declined is important, but the focus of this chapter is on the reaction of both lay and religious landlords to the decline and whether they were successful in achieving their aims or not. Evidence from various studies suggests that the so-called "seigniorial reaction" was limited in its ability to suppress serfs and keep the *status quo* because, in practice, any serious lordly reactions "largely collapsed before tenant resistance and economic realism."[30]

One final note must be made before proceeding to the specific examples: Even with some uniformity of plague and economic forces across the country, the actual experiences and timeline of serfdom's decline varied from manor to manor. On some manors, villeinage virtually ended immediately after 1350, while on others serfdom endured for many years; this is partly because the nature of villeinage itself

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[29] Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 286-287.

[30] Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 300; Britnell, "Feudal Reaction, 46-47; Paul Hargreaves, "Seignorial Reaction and Peasant Responses: Worcester Priory and its Peasants after the Black Death," *Midland History* 24, no. 1 (1999): 53-78.

varied from manor to manor. Similarly, the idea of a united and singular seigniorial

response to the changes is inaccurate. Of course, the legislation described above

illuminates the intentions of the ruling elite to mitigate change, but the reality is that

manorial lords responded differently according to local circumstances. As such, to

claim that lords everywhere responded harshly, or meekly, to change is to

oversimplify the subject. With this in mind, the cases presented below are not

meant to make broad generalizations, but to compare instances of reaction by

ecclesiastical and secular landlords and to determine how their reactions differed

from the policies described above.[31]

One of the most notable shifts in manorial administration is the conversion of

many lands from arable to pastoral use. Higher wages enhanced living standards,

which included higher quality diets featuring better bread made from wheat and

larger amounts of meat and ale.[32] In conjunction with these changes was the

increasingly important role of animals and brewing grains. Indeed, landlords often

"curtailed the scale of their arable operations and devoted more of their resources

to pastoral husbandry," which was accomplished by directly pulling land from crop

production and converting it for pastoral uses. This increased emphasis on

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[31] Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 68-75. Bailey raises these concerns about overgeneralizing the effects of the plague on different manors and the ways lords responded.

[32] Bruce M.S. Campbell, Kenneth C. Bartley, and John P. Power, "The Demesne-Farming Systems of Post-Black Death England: A Classification," *The Agricultural History Review* 44, no. 2 (1996): 131-132, accessed November 11, 2015, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40275097. See also Christopher Dyer, "Changes in diet in the late Middle Ages: the case of harvest workers," *The Agricultural History Review* 36, no. 1 (1988): 21-37, accessed December 29, 2015, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40274575.

livestock rearing demonstrates a transition to a system that was less labor intensive, which is significant given the widespread shortage of labor.[33] The shift was certainly national in scale. Two large samples of demesnes, one from 1250 to 1349 and the other from 1350-1449, reflect this development. Comparing the pre-plague period to the post-plague period indicates that arable pursuits declined by roughly 20% while the number of livestock per demesne increased by about 25%.[34] Even if landlords wanted to fill vacant tenancies and were willing to use the labor legislation to its fullest extent, there were simply not enough laborers to occupy all vacancies. Landlords were coerced to adjust their agricultural policies to favor industries that were less labor intensive.[35] This pragmatism is also seen in the ways landlords dealt directly with their tenants on their estates.

First, let us examine the actions of various ecclesiastical landlords on their estates, beginning with Thomas Hatfield, bishop of Durham between 1343 and

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[33] Campbell, Bartley, and Power, "The Demesne-Farming Systems," 131-133.

[34] Campbell, Bartley, and Power "The Demesne-Farming Systems," 132-135. The first sample accounts for 389 demesnes, the second for 297.

[35] For additional scholarship on land usage after the Black Death, see: Ben Dodds, "Peasants, Landlords and Production between the Tyne and the Tees, 1349-1450," in *North-East England in the Later Middle Ages*, eds. Christian D. Liddy and Richard H. Britnell (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), accessed November 21, 2015, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt9qdh53, 173-196; Mark Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk: An Economic and Social History, 1200-1500* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), accessed December 30, 2015, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt9qdjwp, 18, 204-241; Bruce M.S. Campbell, "Matching Supply to Demand: Crop Production and Disposal by English Demesnes in the Century of the Black Death," *The Journal of Economic History* 57, no. 4 (1997): 827-858, accessed November 21, 2015, www.jstor.org/stable/2951162; idem, *The English Seigniorial Agriculture, 1250-1450* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

1381, who was initially determined to enforce the labor legislation.[36] Evidence from

Durham Priory estates suggests that the plague deeply affected the palatinate's

population, with death rates ranging from 21 to 78 percent on various manors,

resulting in slightly over half of the tenants dying overall. Because Hatfield's estates

mirrored the distribution of the priory's, it is logical to conclude that his estates

suffered similar levels of devastation. Instances of peasant resistance to his

authority encouraged Hatfield to respond. He employed local government officers

to support his estate and punish rebellious serfs. In 1350, nine serfs announced

their plan of fleeing the bishop's land and seeking tenures elsewhere; to show their

seriousness, they surrendered the irons from their ploughs to Hatfield. Instead of

fleeing outright, perhaps these individuals wanted to test Hatfield and see what

kinds of concessions Hatfield would make in order to keep them onsite. If this was

their goal, they were disappointed. They were promptly arrested and imprisoned,

only to be released if they would pay certain debts and assure the bishop through

pledges that they would not leave their tenancies. When serfs did manage to flee, it

was the coroner's duty to recapture them; on more than one occasion coroners were

threatened with losing their office if they failed in this duty.

     Sometimes vacant lands were forcibly committed to individuals, whether or

not they were willing to accept them. Even more interesting was the practice of

committing lands to an entire township. In time of war this may have been a way of

maintaining the lands of men who were away fighting. After the Black Death this

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[36] The next few paragraphs follow R. H. Britnell's study entitled, "Feudal
Reaction in the Palatinate of Durham," *Past & Present* no. 128 (1990): 28-47,
accessed October 20, 2015, http://www.jstor.org/stable/651008.

practice "was full of potential for the management of lands nobody wanted to maintain."[37] This became a policy on the bishop's estate in the early 1350s. Forceful commitments were not limited to land, as seen in instances of cottages, ovens, and mills being committed to villages and groups of tenants. Language of the court records reveals the unwelcome nature of such commitments. In 1352, "four waste cottages with their lands were 'thrown upon' the tenants of Easington."[38] Also, in 1360, "the mills of Whickham, Swalwell and Lanchester were 'put on the tenants' for a year."[39] An example from Ricknall illustrates another variation of forcible commitments. In October 1352, "the neighbors of Ricknall were ordered to find tenants to hold the waste lands…or else to be jointly responsible for the rent themselves."[40] By directly or indirectly forcing villagers to fill vacancies, Hatfield was able to serve his own interests.

However, the reality of the economic circumstances meant the bishop did not always get his way and sometimes had to compromise. Fugitive tenants, such as William Bacon, simply refused to return when ordered. Resistance was also organized at the village level, as seen in instances when townships sent no jurors to court meetings or refused to accept the bishop's terms for holding certain lands. Such resistance forced Hatfield and his officers to make concessions, for "even the bishop of Durham found it difficult to hold on to discontented tenants, and it was not

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[37] Britnell, "Feudal Reaction," 35.

[38] Britnell, "Feudal Reaction," 36.

[39] Britnell, "Feudal Reaction," 36.

[40] Britnell, "Feudal Reaction," 36.

ultimately in his interest to antagonize whole villages beyond a certain point."[41]

Often times, tenants were allowed to pay money for villein tenures instead of

performing required labor services, a practice that was not uncommon before the

plague.[42] Such land was held at "pennyfarm." However, after 1349, tenants had

more power to make demands by delaying and avoiding labor services. For

example, in 1351, Thomas Shephird received lands for three years with the

condition that, upon the conclusion this period, the lord could restore the old labor

services. His neighbors made similar agreements with the lord, thus postponing

their labor services. Such agreements were made and renewed in various villages.

In the early 1380s, tenants held 895 acres of customary land at pennyfarm, which

was spread across 7 manors. Local groups also negotiated and made joint

arrangements to hold large tracts of land without the traditional labor services. In

short, by the 1380s, it was clear that labor services no longer played as critical of a

role in the villein-lord relationship here. The alleviation of labor services marked a

severe blow to villeinage. In some instances, Bishop Hatfield reacted strongly to

counter undesired economic changes on his estates. In theory, he had the legal

backing and authority of the labor legislation to do so. In reality, "the feudal

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[41] Britnell, "Feudal Reaction," 43.

[42] Compare this practice to "scutage," which was, essentially, the fee that knights could pay to the king instead of performing their required military service. Thus, the familiar practice of making cash payments in lieu of service obligations was applied in knightly relationships as well as in the agreements between lords and their serfs. For further reading on scutage, see Helena M. Chew, "Scutage Under Edward I," *The English Historical Review* 27, no. 147 (1922): 321-336, accessed February 29, 2016, http://www.jstor.org/stable/551703.

reaction was only an opening position, and by the 1380s it had largely collapsed before tenant resistance and economic realism."[43]

The bishop's tenants at Coventry and Lichfield also benefited from a similar pattern of compromise and service reductions. For example, on the estates of Coventry, relatively few tenants died and the bishop was able to fill many vacancies, but only after permanently cutting traditional villeinage requirements; on the properties of Rugeley, Brewood, Haywood, Prees, and Sawley, new holders were freed from all servile burdens, including labor services and tallage. However, elsewhere it was not so easy to fill vacancies. On the bishop's Warwickshire lands, vacancies were never reoccupied because nobody wanted "to perform the services which the previous tenants had been accustomed to render before the pestilence."[44] Even when the bishop made generous offers to reduce services, vacancies remained, as was the case in Rugeley, Haywood, Brewood and Longdon.[45] Apparently, even drastic service reductions did not guarantee that vacancies would be filled.

The abbot of Bury St. Edmunds, which had a history of labor disputes with its tenants, took a more balanced approach to dealing with his serfs. Broadly speaking, he was quite conciliatory in his actions, but he also flashed signs of aggression. For example, a certain John Page was a worker on the lord's lands, but he left with his father to work elsewhere. When John's father was presented to the court for this

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[43] Britnell, "Feudal Reaction," 47.

[44] Fryde, "The tenants of the bishops of Coventry and Lichfield and of Worcester," 228, 233.

[45] Fryde, "The tenants of the bishops of Coventry and Lichfield and of Worcester," 234.

violation of contract, John immediately returned and swore an oath that he would stay on the lord's lands. On one hand, the abbot's officers aggressively worked to bring John back and keep him on the estate, per the Statute of Labourers. However, instead of sending the case to the Justices of Labourers for John's clear breach of contract, John and his father received pardons. In this instance, the abbot was aggressive enough to keep his workers on his lands, but pragmatic enough to handle the matter efficiently and lightly, without seeking a much harsher punishment.[46]

On his manor at Chevington, servile requirements declined in stages; by the 1390s, most remaining labor requirements were officially abolished, again demonstrating the more pragmatic side of the abbot's policies. Interestingly, however, as the servile dues faded in the final decades of the century, the abbot vigorously attempted to impose personal servility on a group of hereditary serfs, though this policy was abandoned in 1403. During this same period, he also tried to impose a stronger degree of servitude on his manor at Fornham by investigating families to find relatives who had fled the estate and by charging higher fines. These efforts also failed, and by 1423 all aspects of villeinage had disappeared.[47]

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[46] Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 181. Bailey's book studies 38 different manors; his sample includes small and large manors and manors under lords of various status levels, religious and secular. His studies are useful, but his concern is not with comparing ecclesiastical responses to secular responses. Rather, he is investigating the chronology of serfdom's decline and whether or not there was a strong seigniorial response. I am more interested in comparing ecclesiastical landlords' responses to lay lords' reactions and determining how much the lords actually followed the goals behind the labor legislation that hoped to maintain the *status quo* and uphold traditional economic structures.

[47] Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 186-192.

Some ecclesiastical lands appear to have been more resistant to change and adopted only limited concessions. For example, on the estates of Worcester, Bishop Thoresby freed his surviving tenants at Fladbury from ploughing and harrowing his lands during Lent; he also made this concession for tenants at Ripple and Kempsey. However, aside from these exceptional cases, there appears to be no indication of a general policy of service reductions. Tallage continued to be collected and at Blockley and Hartlebury, for example, the bishop still enforced ploughing and harrowing requirements.[48]

The examples above illustrate various ways ecclesiastical lords governed their estates in the face of economic change. Each showed different degrees of conciliation and willingness to reduce servile requirements. At Coventry and Lichfield, the bishop was quite proactive in reducing labor services in order to attract tenants; nevertheless, generous contractual terms did not guarantee that his lands would be fully reoccupied. The bishop of Durham and the abbot of Bury St. Edmunds demonstrated a more balanced approach, aggressively enforcing certain aspects of villeinage while compromising on others. Finally, the bishop of Worcester appears to have been the most resistant of this group, making very few labor concessions for his tenants. Nevertheless, none of these lords attempted to completely spurn peasants' demands and did not rely totally on the labor legislation to maintain the pre-plague way of life. Each was willing to sacrifice elements of

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[48] Fryde, "The tenants of the bishops of Coventry and Lichfield and of Worcester," 226, 228, 231-232. In a more general sense, Fryde contends that the high mortality of the plague "did not on the whole produce on the part of either government authorities or landlords a more tolerant or more charitable attitude toward their underlings, though there were some admirable exceptions" (226).

villeinage, thus acting pragmatically instead of clinging to tradition and ideology in order to navigate the tumultuous circumstances. Let us now turn to examples of secular lordship and explore how these lords interacted with tenants on their estates.

Throughout the later middle ages, the de Vere earls of Oxford possessed the manor of Aldham. Aldham had a high proportion of customary land and, having been governed by a single family, "provides a good example of the type of manor where villeinage should have been strongly and conspicuously upheld."[49] However, the lords of Aldham were surprisingly accommodating to the changes at hand. Villein tenures were widely converted to leaseholds and some labor requirements were commuted. For example, in 1365 Matilda Rogge's tenure was immediately converted into a lifetime lease with only harvest service requirements after she appealed to the lord because of her poverty, family circumstances, and inability to carry out the traditional services.[50]

However, two harsher instances of villeinage enforcement took place in the late 1360s against two fugitive serfs. Nicholas Mervyn and Roger Miller were required at court to make and pledge their obedience to the lord and then "come bind himself to the lord whenever and wherever he wishes."[51] Although being forced to make public oaths of this kind would have been humiliating, neither Mervyn nor Miller were fined for their absence; rather they were simply expected to

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[49] Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 135.

[50] Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 142

[51] Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 142.

return to work when summoned. At Aldham, these two examples of more aggressive enforcement were the exception rather than the rule. Overall, villeinage requirements easily and quickly dissolved.[52]

The lords of Tillingdown manor had deep and powerful political connections. Hugh Audley had been a close friend of Edward II and served as a knight in the royal household. Upon his death, his lands, including Tillingdown, passed to his son-in-law Ralph Stafford. In 1351, Edward III named Stafford earl of Stafford for his services during the war with France. Despite their high status and power, the Staffords were relatively accommodating to change. The general lack of laborers at Tillingdown empowered tenants to demand payment for their labor services, withhold their work altogether, or leave in search of opportunities elsewhere. In response to these demands, records indicate that, in 1358, a cash payment was made to workers "because no-one is obliged to work there by tenure of his land," suggesting that traditional labor services were unenforceable and that laborers were demanding cash payments. However, in 1364, the lord attempted to exact traditional labor services by calling upon 6 men to bring their ploughs and work. By 1366, estate officials at Tillingdown decided to lease demesne lands without requiring labor services, charging only an annual payment for use of the land. It is worth noting that Tillingdown was less dependent on customary labor than other manors, relying instead on a core of full-time workers. During labor shortages, the earl was willing to pay higher wages, but on occasion he also tried to enforce customary labor dues and tried to follow the Ordinance of Labourers by adjusting

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[52] Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 142-146.

food allowances for laborers. In these actions, Stafford tried to balance pragmatism with obedience to the ideals behind the labor legislation. Nevertheless, "the long-term effects of the Black Death at Tillingdown may be identified as the ending of labour services and the leasing of the demesne."[53]

One of the duke of Norfolk's manors was Dunningworth, where he was quite accommodating to serfs' circumstances until the end of the century. By the 1390s, villein tenures hardly resembled the pre-plague version of customary tenure. Labor requirements were severely diminished and the fees of tallage and millsuit were abandoned; "in bondage" language previously used to describe conveyances had vanished.   However, like the abbot of Bury St. Edmunds, the duke's harsher responses were delayed, in this case until about the 1390s. At this point the duke suddenly and aggressively levied two traditional fees, chevage and merchet, and worked to keep track of servile families, which continued well into the next century. Thus, at Dunningworth, the quick decline of villeinage was later countered by a harsher response, which is one of the few instances where the response succeeded in helping elements of serfdom to endure.[54]

The secular landlords' responses to economic changes and serfs' demands were very similar to those of their ecclesiastical counterparts. Both groups reduced labor requirements and eliminated traditional fees. Even though the exact approaches varied, all of them were willing to make concessions in the face of

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[53] Mary Saaler, "The Manor of Tillingdown: the changing economy of the demesne, 1325-71," in *Surrey archaeological collections, relating to the history and antiquities of the county* 81 (1991-1992): 23, 35-38.

[54] Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 199-213.

changing times. Said in another way, none of them were willing to cling completely to tradition and rely wholly on labor legislation and forceful policies to uphold their way of life. Based on this sample, it is difficult to claim that ecclesiastical or secular landlords were clearly more inclined than the other to pursue a certain policy path. In general, the exact timing and nature of servile reduction policies varied from manor to manor, lord to lord, and some manors experienced little to no change in labor service expectations while others underwent more radical changes.[55] The point here is that it was common for landlords, lay and religious alike, to make concessions in order to attract new tenants and meet tenants' demands, even at the expense of sacrificing, to an extent, traditional economic structures and ideological feelings about society's proper order.

Conclusion

The ruling elite wasted no time in responding to the dramatic effects of the Black Death. Because of labor shortages, peasants discovered new bargaining power and made demands pertaining to labor contracts and wage rates. In response, the crown and parliament issued legislation that restricted wages and prices and compelled peasants to work on terms favorable to the landlords. Bishops and other ecclesiastical lords faced almost identical challenges as secular lords, as well as challenges within the clerical hierarchy because of clerical shortages, and implemented policies that closely mirrored the secular reactions. The king himself ordered the church to restrict clerical wages, a policy the church wholeheartedly

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[55] Fryde, "The tenants of the bishops of Coventry and Lichfield and of Worcester," 230-235. The estates of Coventry experienced much more compromise and service reductions than did the lands of Worcester, for example.

supported and supplemented in the years to come. Likewise, the church embraced

the labor legislation and disseminated it to parishioners throughout the kingdom,

thus raising awareness and making clear the government's intentions to police

economic change. As such, ecclesiastical and state regulations interlocked with and

complemented each other.

In principle, all of these policies sought to prevent peasants, laborers, and

priests from taking advantage of the economic turmoil that began during and

continued after the Black Death. Indeed, there were instances of landlords and

government officials enforcing the labor legislation. Ruling elites were clearly

concerned by the economic demands of the peasants because, according to their

perception, they threatened to derail the social and economic system that had

prevailed for generations. However, despite the motivations and fears that inspired

these policies, evidence suggests that ruling elites were largely unsuccessful in

enforcing them. It would be more accurate to state that ruling elites were much

more pragmatic in their reactions to peasants' economic demands than the official

policies would have allowed.

Various examples from manorial case studies illustrate just how secular and

religious landlords approached the economic challenges with a strong sense of

pragmatism. With the backing of the labor laws, some landlords tried to force land

tenures onto peasants and capture serfs who had fled the manor. Nevertheless,

demands from serfs and the need of many landlords to fill vacant tenures

encouraged changes in and the overall decline of villeinage. Manorial lords

increasingly abandoned many traditional fees and labor requirements associated

with villeinage and replaced them with simple land rents in order to make tenancy on their lands more attractive. Over the next 30 years, these conciliatory policies contributed to the gradual dissolution of villeinage on these manors, which were owned by secular and religious lords alike.

Despite strongly worded and widely disseminated economic policies, on the ground, elites chose to face their challenges pragmatically rather than ideologically in order to restore some stability to society and navigate the post-plague world more smoothly. When there were efforts to reinforce villeinage and uphold the labor laws, whether immediately after the plague or in the following decades, they proved ineffective. The church, when facing myriad problems, also made a number of pragmatic policy changes in order to fulfill its pastoral mission and help stabilize society, which is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

Resolving the Church's Administrative Tribulations

One exemplum in a fourteenth-century sermon collection tells of a "great master of divinity" who was studying the nature of the Trinity, with hopes of writing a book on the subject. He was walking along the beach pondering his studies when he noticed a child sitting on the sand. The child was near a small hole and was busily scooping seawater with a seashell, then pouring it into the hole. Intrigued, the scholar asked the child what he was doing. In response, the child declared his intention to "hold all the water of the sea in this pit." "Thou shalt never do that," said the scholar. To this the child replied, "I shall as soon do this as thou shalt do what thou art about." The child then vanished. Reflecting upon this experience, the master realized "how it was not God's will that he was about, and left his studying and thanked God for warning him."[1] The key of this story is that the priest chose to abandon his studies. This narrative was part of a broader sermon on the Trinity that warned against the dangers of high-level academics because taking an academic approach to matters of faith was not a good idea. While this story supports the idea of "the futility of an intellectual approach to faith," when considered within the context of the disastrous priest shortages caused by the Black Death, this story may have also served to discourage priests from leaving their cures in pursuit of

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[1] Albert R. Elsasser, "The Exempla of Mirk's *Festial*" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1924), exemplum LIX.

education because "it was not God's will."[2] By staying home, the priests could

minister to the needs of their parishioners, which was especially important during

this time of crisis. This tale illustrates one way the church responded to problems

caused by the plague with hopes of stabilizing society, fulfilling its pastoral duties,

and providing a sense of normalcy to the English community.

The Black Death seriously challenged the ability of the English church to care

for its parishioners and forced ecclesiastical leaders to take action. This chapter

focuses on how the church responded to internal crises caused by the pestilence,

beginning from the plague's impending arrival and continuing through the next

several decades. The church led efforts to purify the English population through

prayer and procession in order to dispel the plague, but to no avail. Once the plague

arrived, members of the clergy were by no means immune to its effects and suffered

extraordinarily high levels of mortality as they labored in the midst of their afflicted

flocks. The resulting shortage of priests was at the core of several serious problems

for the church as it tried to accomplish its pastoral mission. In response to these

problems, the church became more flexible. It adapted its ordination policies,

allowed lay folk to hear confessions, and borrowed monastics to fill vacant

positions. Ecclesiastical leaders also responded to issues involving leaves of study

for priests, depleted parishes, and internal disputes over burial rights. Overall, the

church responded in pragmatic ways to internal institutional challenges of the post-

plague world. It adopted new policies and even sacrificed traditional ways of

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[2] Judy Ann Ford, *John Mirk's Festial: Orthodoxy, Lollardy, and the Common People in Fourteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 92-93.

operating in order to provide better spiritual care for its parishioners, thus helping to stabilize society and provide at least some sense of normalcy.

The state, in this case the king and laws or statutes originating from his court or parliament, played a rather limited role in responding to crises internal to the church, meaning the church was left largely on its own to handle and solve its problems. The notable exception to this rule was the state's conspicuous hand in regulating clerical wages, which the church wholeheartedly supported and expanded upon.[3] Despite the state's lack of direct involvement in resolving the church's issues, the motivation behind the church's responses to internal crises mirrored one of the primary motivations behind the state's reactions to economic and social emergencies: Stabilize society and, where possible, uphold the pre-plague social order. However, the stabilizing actions that addressed problems internal to the church often sacrificed traditional practices in order to satisfy parishioners' needs and more smoothly navigate the plague's effects.

Historiography

The effects of the plague on the clergy, the decline of the church, and changing lay religious perceptions are common themes in many scholarly discussions about religion and the plague.[4] However, these studies largely emphasize the changes in spirituality among the laity and typically survey the responses of the institutional church to the plague's challenges only briefly. As a

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[3] These regulations were discussed at length in Chapter Two.

[4] See Ziegler, *The Black Death*; Gottfried, *The Black Death*; Platt, *King Death*; Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*; Benedictow, *The Black Death*; Harper-Bill, "The English Church," 79-123.

result, how the institutional church responded to internal problems and change in the post-plague world is an underdeveloped field. Philip Ziegler's influential broad survey of the plague, for instance, focuses on the general changes in the spiritual sphere during and after the Black Death, claiming there was a the "decline in the prestige and spiritual authority of the church" that occurred alongside a general growth of piety among lay people.[5] Robert Gottfried and Colin Platt, likewise, offer broader plague surveys that emphasize general effects of the plague and discuss the damaged image of the church, but gloss quickly over the church's policies in response to these effects. On the other hand, Christopher Harper-Bill's article on the English Church after the Black Death focuses more on the various bodies of the institutional church, arguing that "the institutional Church coped remarkably well with [the Black Death], as with other crises of the late fourteenth century, and emerged three generations later as a reinvigorated body."[6] As such, Harper-Bill's institutional focus and argument for strong church authority after the plague contrasts with other scholars, such as Ziegler, Gottfried, and Platt, who emphasize lay spirituality and the decline of the church and its authority. It is the objective of this chapter to build on these discussions by underscoring plague-caused institutional problems within the church and describing how church leaders decided to treat these problems.

William Dohar has written an excellent and very useful study on the diocese of Hereford before and after the Black Death based on the registers of Hereford's

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[5] Ziegler, *The Black Death*, 217.

[6] Harper-Bill, "The English Church," 79.

bishops; his study thoroughly addresses internal administrative problems and how the bishops of Hereford addressed them.   In this work he seeks to answer questions such as, "How, in fact, did the church manage to accomplish its pastoral aims?" and "Were there changes in the institutional and pastoral life of the diocese and, if there were, were they of a transient or permanent nature?" Dohar acknowledges that his focus is on Hereford, but suggests that "what we observe in a single diocese occurred in broad terms elsewhere."[7] This chapter strives to test this assertion, answer questions similar to Dohar's, and establish a broader understanding of the church's crisis management decisions during and after the plague, drawing from letters from bishops, archbishops, and the king, as well as records from episcopal registers, which supply a wealth of information about ecclesiastical policy and action.

Practices to Prevent Plague

The church was quick to respond to the ominously approaching plague. By the end of summer 1348, the plague had spread through France and the Low Countries.[8] Only the English Channel separated the British Isles from the pestilence. Fearing that the great "mortality, pestilence and infection of the air" would reach

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[7] Dohar, *The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership*, 6-7. Dohar concludes that the church was quite resilient and withstood the test of the Black Death and that basic parish features remained unchanged, though "some aspects of the [church] had changed in significant ways" (150). This chapter focuses on the changes the church made to policy and process; the church was much more conservative in its regulation of wages, as discussed in Chapter Two.

[8] Gottfried, *The Black Death*, 54-58; for a broad overview of the plague's spread and mortality, see J. F. D. Shrewsbury, *A History of Bubonic Plague in the British Isles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

England, ecclesiastical and political leaders responded with hopes of allaying the

contagion. As early as July 1348, church leaders called for special prayers and

processions. On 28 July, William Zouche, Archbishop of York, wrote to his

subordinate, commanding him to "let it be known with all possible haste" that all

churches and clergy in their diocese must offer a special prayer in mass every day,

hold processions every Wednesday and Friday, and proffer additional prayers for

the king, the church, and all Englishmen and women. Because the pestilence was

"surely caused by the sins of men," repentance, purification, and prayer were

necessary to turn away God's anger.[9]

Similarly, about three weeks later on 17 August, Ralph of Shrewsbury, Bishop

of Bath and Wells, sent word to the archdeacons in his diocese. The threat of plague

was, no doubt, from God. "Unless we pray devoutly and incessantly," he wrote, "[the

pestilence] will stretch its poisonous branches into this realm, and strike down and

consume the inhabitants." He instructed them to "arrange for processions…to be

performed at least every Friday" in all churches. In addition to procession and

prayer, the people needed to confess before the Lord, reciting psalms, and

performing works of charity. Again, by purifying themselves and increasing the

piety of clergy and lay folk alike, they hoped to avert God's wrath.[10]

Ecclesiastical leaders were not the only ones who believed additional

spiritual measures must be adopted in order to prevent the plague from reaching

England. King Edward III asked John Stratford, the Archbishop of Canterbury, to

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[9] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 111-112.

[10] Horrox, *The Black Death,* 112-113.

have his diocese offer prayers against the pestilence. The Prior of Christchurch, the

Bishop of London, and the Bishop of Exeter passed the orders along to their

subordinates and implemented practices mirroring the ones mentioned above.

Prayers petitioning God to "save and protect the king's realm," processions

demonstrating the piety of God's people, devout confessions, and recitations of

psalms and hymns typified efforts to soften God's heart and "transmute his just

judgement into mercy."[11] These actions exemplify how the king and church

responded, together, to the pending crisis. They also demonstrate, to a degree, the

king's own spirituality and trust in the church to help protect his kingdom and his

subjects from calamity.

The chronicle of Gilles li Muisis from France recorded a popular prayer that

demonstrates the belief that divine intervention was vital, even required, to

overcome and alleviate the plague. The prayer was addressed to St. Sebastian, who

first became a popular saint during a sixth-century plague epidemic.[12] Here is an

excerpt from the prayer:

> O St. Sebastian, guard and defend me, morning and evening, every
> minute of every hour, while I am still of sound mind; and, Martyr,
> diminish the strength of that vile illness called an epidemic which is
> threatening me. Protect and keep me and all my friends from this
> plague. We put our trust in God and St Mary, and in you, O holy
> Martyr. You, citizen of Milan, could, through God's power, halt this
> pestilence if you chose…O martyr Sebastian! Be with us always, and
> by your merits keep us safe and sound and protected from plague.[13]

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[11] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 113-115.

[12] Gottfried, *The Black Death*, 87.

[13] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 125-126.

This prayer illustrates the active role of saints as protectors and intercessors in European society and the belief that spiritual intervention was necessary to receive protection from the plague. This prayer also illustrates the trust placed in God and the Virgin Mary, as well as the hope that they would protect the people from calamity.

Similarly, many of the English church's letters emphasized God's wrath behind the calamity, especially as a means of punishing and rooting out sin. By piously repenting and demonstrating their spirituality they hoped to mollify God and avoid punishment. The granting of indulgences to those who devoutly participated in these prayers, processions, and masses was also a common feature of some of these letters; perhaps offering indulgences was another way of encouraging the people to act, in case the fear of plague alone was not a sufficient motivator.[14] Indeed, in this same vein of thought, Gottfried contends that, overall, doing good works gained greater importance during and after the Black Death.[15]

Unfortunately for the English, despite their prayers, processions, and repentance, the plague reached coastal England around August of 1348.[16] On 24 October, William Edendon, Bishop of Winchester, wrote "to all abbots, priors, chaplains, rectors and vicars" in his diocese, lamenting the plague's destruction in

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[14] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 112, 115.

[15] Gottfried, *The Black Death*, 88, argues that the anxieties of lay people during the Black Death inspired the church to emphasize the spiritual benefits of doing good works; he makes a case for this emphasis as being part of the growing role of indulgences during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. He connects this emphasis to papal orders that encouraged indulgences and the increasing number of indulgences being sold.

[16] Gottfried, *The Black Death*, 58-59.

foreign lands and expressing his distress at the "serious news which has come to our

ears: that this cruel plague has now begun a similarly savage attack on the coastal

areas of England." He expressed his terror that the plague would reach any part of

their diocese and instructed them to purify themselves through confession and

penance.[17] As other bishops had done, he also ordered the clergy to perform

processions and prayers. His letter provides a glimpse as to what these

processionals may have looked like:

> We also order that every Friday you should go solemnly in procession through the marketplace at Winchester, singing these psalms and the great litany instituted by the fathers of the church for use against the pestilence and performing other exercises of devotion, together with the clergy and people of the city, whom we wish to be summoned to attend. They are to accompany the procession with bowed heads and bare feet, fasting, with a pious heart and lamenting their sins (all idle chatter entirely set aside), and as they go they are to say devoutly, as many times as possible, the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary. They are to remain in earnest prayer until the end of the mass which we wish you to celebrate in your church at the end of each procession, trusting that if they persevere in their devotions with faith, rectitude and firm trust in the omnipotence and mercy of the Saviour they will soon receive a remedy and timely help from heaven.[18]

Even when the pestilence reached English coasts, the church hoped to dispel

the plague through pious repentance and increased spiritual devotion. Bishop

Edendon reminded the clergy in his letter that "it is not within the power of man to

understand the divine plan" and that God strikes them with afflictions to test their

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[17] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 115-117. Horrox indicates that Edendon wrote this letter from Southwark, near London, so "his belief that the plague had not reached his diocese may therefore be out of date."

[18] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 115-117. Bishop Edendon also instructed them to recite every Wednesday and Sunday in the monastery the "7 penitential psalms and the 15 psalms of degrees on your knees." Horrox notes the penitential psalms as numbers 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, and 142; the psalms of degrees as numbers 119-133.

patience and chasten them for their sins. Though the arrival of the plague was

terrifying, yet justified, they still believed they could avoid the crisis and stabilize

the situation by turning to God "humbly and with our whole hearts."[19]

The plague quickly began its grim work upon the English population. Of all

those who died, perhaps the parish clergy were the worst affected, though mortality

rates varied greatly between parishes.[20] Between 1348 and 1349, in the diocese of

Coventry and Lichfield for example, some parishes experienced priest mortality

rates as low as 29% while others experienced rates closer to 60%. In an extreme

example, at the town of Pentrich, four different priests held the same position in just

five weeks. The high mortality rates for parish priests is not surprising because it

was the parish priest who visited the sick and administered the appropriate

sacraments, thus increasing their own exposure to the illness.[21]

The deaths of so many parish priests caused great anxiety among church

leadership and lay folk alike and threatened the spiritual well-being of parishioners.

In January 1349, just a few months after the plague reached England, Ralph

Shrewsbury, Bishop of Bath and Wells, expressed his grave concern about priest

mortality. The pestilence had left many churches without an incumbent, leaving lay

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[19] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 115-117.

[20] Platt, *King Death*, 97.

[21] Platt, *King Death*, 97; R. A. Davies, "The effect of the Black Death on the parish priests of the medieval diocese of Coventry and Lichfield," *Historical Research* 62, no. 147 (1989): 87, 89; Benedictow, *The Black Death*, 124-125, 342-360. Ziegler, *The Black Death*, 97-99. Benedictow discusses in great detail parish mortality and concerns with accurately accounting for priest mortality rates, including a discussion on whether it was the beneficed priest or the auxiliary priests who actually did the most visiting and administering to the sick.

folk "bereft of a priest." Many priests died from the disease, but many others

resigned from their posts for fear of contracting the plague themselves. "Because

priests cannot be found for love or money to take on the responsibility for those

places and visit the sick and administer the sacraments of the church," many people

were dying without a priest to guide them through the sacrament of penance. Being

without a priest, truly an emergency situation, the people feared for their salvation.

The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 clearly stipulated that every adult parishioner

needed to confess to the parish priest at least once a year and perform assigned

penance in order to receive salvation, which was a relatively new development in

medieval theology. Furthermore, they believed a confession of their sins was only

valid if they confessed to a priest. This was a grave dilemma for the church and its

flock. The church needed to address the shortage of priests and related problems

swiftly in order to meet the spiritual needs of its flock and stabilize society.[22]

Responses to Internal Crises

The church responded to the shortage of clergy with two main courses of

action—the church instructed lay folk that, if necessary, confession could be made

to another layperson; and the church worked to replenish clerical ranks, which

included the ordination of many younger clergymen to be priests, many of whom

had not yet completed their clerical training. These decisions were very practical

and may have helped diffuse anxieties, at least in the short-term. Taking such

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[22] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 271-273; Platt, *King Death*, 97-98; Benedictow, *The Black Death*, 342-360; "Medieval Sourcebook: Twelfth Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV 1215," last modified November 4, 2011, http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.asp.

pragmatic approaches demonstrated the church's willingness to part from traditional practices or rules, to an extent, in times of crisis in order to provide at least a small measure of stability.

First, let us examine the issue of lay confessions, which exemplifies an instance of separation from traditional rules in order to meet parishioners' spiritual needs. In the same letter that Bishop Shrewsbury expressed his concern for the lack of priests, he instructed the clergy to announce in all the churches that lay people, "if when on the point of death they cannot secure the services of a properly ordained priest, they should make confession of their sins…to any lay person, even to a woman if a man is not available." Additionally, they needed to reassure lay people that doing so would be "of great benefit to them for the remission of their sins." To alleviate worries that a lay confessor would reveal what was said to them, Bishop Shrewsbury declared that all lay confessors were obliged to keep any confessions confidential, lest they commit "an extremely grave sin" and incur the "indignation of Almighty God." The responsibility placed on lay confessors to keep information confidential reflected the strict rules placed on priests, as declared in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Canon 21 declared that any priest who "dares to reveal a sin confided to him in the tribunal of penance…[will] be not only deposed from the sacerdotal office but also relegated to a monastery of strict observance to do penance for the remainder of his life." Keeping confession confidential was clearly a

serious matter and it was important to convince lay folk that they could confess to each other, if need be, in good faith and without fear.[23]

Allowing lay folk to hear confessions, even in just the most desperate circumstances, was a radical transfer of clerical power. The church, represented by its trained and ordained clergy, had long held exclusive rights to officiate in penance and confession, not to mention the other sacraments; the Black Death, by indirectly influencing church leadership to grant this power to lay folk, even if only in dire situations, "compelled the church to forfeit its monopoly on last rites." If the monopoly was broken, how much did the laity need the institution of the church? Of course, based on the evidence in this project, it would be a stretch to suggest that the Black Death rendered the church completely useless in society and directly caused what would become the Reformation; nevertheless, one must also consider Ziegler's argument that the plague critically challenged the church and helped set the stage for transforming religious landscapes in the future.[24]

The church's second major action was to replenish the suffering ranks of ordained clergy who could administer the sacraments. On October 12, 1249,

[23] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 271-273; Platt, *King Death*, 98; "Lateran IV 1215," http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.asp. According to Platt, Bishop Shrewsbury was not alone in extending confessional rights to lay people; Bishop Gynwell of Lincoln also implemented this policy.

[24] Senn, "English Life and Law," 580; Ziegler, *The Black Death*, 218-219. Senn connects the lay people's ability to hear confession directly to Wycliffe's beliefs that the church and its administration of the sacraments were not vital for salvation. Ziegler does not claim that the Black Death caused the Reformation, but argues that it helped create an environment in which the church could be more easily criticized and in which the Reformation could occur. Certainly, the plague's effects challenged the church's ability to minister to its parishioners and may have fostered such an environment, but more evidence is needed to clarify the plague's direct connections to the Reformation, if there are any.

William Zouche, Archbishop of York, petitioned Pope Clement VI for permission to ordain men "to all ranks of clerics," including those who were at least 21 years old, which was younger than the established canonical age, and even those who were of illegitimate birth.[25] One month later, Pope Clement responded and granted Archbishop Zouche's request.[26] Before the end of the year, the church began to ordain men from the church's minor orders and to appoint them to positions that previously had been closed to them. In one instance, for example, the Bishop of Lincoln filled many vacant benefices with roughly 150 former acolytes, deacons, and subdeacons. Though this figure may be exaggerated, the fact that the church was filling vacancies with men who had previously been too young, which means they spent fewer years in clerical training, lends some credence to Platt's contention that "there is no doubting the fact that a high proportion of the new clergy admitted at this time were seriously underqualified for their posts."[27]

In order to ordain such large numbers of men, bishops were forced to hold ordination ceremonies more often. For example, before the plague, in more normal times, Bishop Trillek of Hereford held, on average, two ordination ceremonies a year

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[25] Shinners and Dohar, *Pastors and the Care of Souls*, 283-284; Senn, "English Life and Law," 579; Dohar, *The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership*, 70. Gratian, *Decretum*, Dist LXXVIII, c. 4-5 in *Corpus iuris canonici,* edited by Emil Friedberg, 2 vols., (Leipzig, 1879-1881). In *Decretum*, the established canonical age is 30 years; however, if no suitable candidate is found, the age may be lowered to 25 years. Dohar refers to a petition made by Archbishop Islip to the pope to allow for the ordination of underage men; Islip's request closely parallels Archbishop Zouche's request, though neither request actually mentions the original age requirement.

[26] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 273.

[27] Platt, *King Death*, 98.

between 1345 and 1348. After the plague arrived in 1349, however, Trillek performed ordination sacraments six times a year until 1352 and continued to hold extra ordinations for the next three years. In March of 1349 alone, Trillek held two ordination ceremonies and ordained about 470 men to the various orders of the priesthood. By the end of the 1350s the number of ordinations declined, not because of his unwillingness to celebrate the sacrament, but because the pool of candidates had consistently shrunk.[28]

Minor orders were not the only sources of new parish priests; in some cases the regular clergy filled empty positions. Archbishop Zouche appointed Brother Thomas de Stodeley, a regular canon from the monastery of St. Oswald, because so many priests "have been carried from our midst by the plague of mortality which hangs over us."[29] In 1351, Abbot Thomas de la Mare of St. Albans sent 30 of his monks to care for the parishes where priests had died.[30] Bishop Trillek of Hereford appointed commissioned monastics to hear confessions on a few occasions: between 1351 and 1355, it is possible that there were as many as 27 monks serving as confessors in the diocese; Trillek also granted licenses each year from 1355 to 1358.[31] However, some bishops were not enthusiastic about using friars to hear confessions because they believed confessing to a friar did not meet the requirements described in Canon 21 of the Fourth Lateran Council. For instance,

[28] Dohar, *The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership*, 67-68.

[29] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 273-274; Platt, *King Death*, 98.

[30] L. F. Rushbrook Williams, *History of the Abbey of St. Alban* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1917), 165-169.

[31] Dohar, *The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership*, 76-77.

Richard Fitzralph, archbishop of Armagh, adamantly opposed friars hearing

confession. In 1357, he even argued against the friars at the papal court in Avignon

in his *Defensio Curatorum*, wherein he claimed that the parish church was the best

place for confession and that the parish priest was worthier to hear confessions

than were friars. He further expounded that parish priests were better confessors

because they were tied directly to their parishioners and were motivated by love to

do what was in the best interest of his parishioners.[32] Nevertheless, replenishing

the ranks of clergy was critical if the church hoped to meet the spiritual needs of its

parishioners and to restore at least some sense of normalcy in the tumultuous post-

plague world, even if it meant utilizing monks and ordaining younger, less prepared

men.

Though this section has emphasized the secular clergy's responses to the

plague, the normalizing actions of the regular orders also merit attention. Like their

secular counterparts, a main objective of the various regular orders, the Cluniacs,

Cistercians, Dominicans, Augustinians, and Franciscans, was to replenish the

populations of their religious communities to full strength. Leaders commonly

transferred members to religious houses that had been severely impacted by plague

in order to maintain, as much as possible, normal religious life. Like the secular

church, regular orders also lowered the age requirements for new members to join,

which allowed for the recruiting of members under 14 years old, the age established

by canon law for entering religious life. The Austin Friars, for instance, were

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[32] Ellen K. Rentz, *Imagining the Parish in Late Medieval England*, (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015), 56-57. See also Arnold Williams, "Relations between the Mendicant Friars and the Secular Clergy," *Annuale Medievale* 1 (1960): 25; "Lateran IV 1215," http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.asp.

allowed to lower their recruitment age from 14 to 11 years in 1350; monastic

shortages endured in the decades following the plague and, in 1385, the Austin

Friars were again permitted, by dispensation, to lower the recruitment age, this time

even to boys younger than 11 years old. However, the mendicants' aggressive

recruiting practices sometimes aggravated members of the secular clergy,

particularly in university settings. Archbishop Fitzralph, again expressing his dislike

of the friars, even accused mendicants of kidnapping young students at Oxford and

elsewhere. In 1358, Oxford and Cambridge passed a statute forbidding mendicants

from admitting any university students under 18; the mendicants appealed to the

papal court and to the king, which, in 1366, resulted in the nullification of the

statute.[33]

Like the decision to allow lay folk to hear confessions, filling vacant positions

with new priests and even monastics may have alleviated some anxieties initially.

The church was diligently working to respond adequately to the crises at hand, but

unfortunately many of the same problems recurred over the next decades as new,

smaller outbreaks of plague struck.

Indeed, many of the church's responses to later plague outbreaks mirrored

the prayers and processions encouraged during the first epidemic. In July 1361,

John Thoresby, Archbishop of York, called for more devout and insistent prayers

and "other offices of pious propitiation, so that our Lord and God, pitying his people,

may drive away all sickness, bestow health, and grant quiet, concord and peace."

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[33] Anne Müller, "Managing Crises: Institutional Re-Stabilisation of the Religious Orders in England After the Black Death (1347-1350), *Revue Mabillon* 16 (2005): 210-213.

Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote a letter requesting prayers in 1375, stating, "in our modern times, alas, we are mired in monstrous sin and the lack of devotion among the people provokes the anger of the great king to whom we should direct our prayers." Because of their sinful condition, "we are assailed by plagues or epidemics, by the horrors of war, the unhealthiness of the air, the scarcity of crops…" In this particular instance, Sudbury mentioned more than just plague, referring to the ongoing war with France and food shortages.[34] As in previous instances of crisis, ecclesiastical leaders called for prayers and processions to counteract God's wrath and purify themselves from sin.

In terms of recruiting and ordaining new priests, leaders also mirrored policies instituted during the first plague. For example, during the 1360s in the diocese of Hereford, the scarcity of clergy continued to be a problem, which was not helped by the 1361 plague. Bishop Lewis de Charlton quickly held ordinations in 1362, his first year in Hereford. In each year of his episcopacy, 1362 to 1369, Charlton held no fewer than three ordinations, sometimes holding five or six. This is a significant increase of ordinations in Hereford when compared to the immediate pre-plague years, which averaged only two annual ordinations. Like his predecessor, Trillek, Charlton appointed confessors, including monastics, to work in the diocese, but the circumstances were not as urgent as they were during the first pestilence outbreak, as evidenced by the delay of several years in issuing the licenses. However, in his final year, Charlton was much more cautious about licensing confessors, partly due to reports of unlicensed and even unordained men

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[34] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 119-120.

who were travelling around the diocese and attempting to hear confessions.[35] The

very presence of these unordained confessors may have been an indicator that the

clerical shortage was not resolved by the number of Charlton's appointments and

granted licenses.

In the half century following the Black Death, the shortage of clergy also

affected other aspects of church administration, as seen in the reduction of

opportunities for the clergy to obtain an education.[36] Traditionally, a parish was

able to save a small portion of its income to sponsor a young cleric's educational

expenses. However, parish revenues were tied to the economic side effects of the

Black Death. Furthermore, because of difficulties recruiting and retaining sufficient

numbers of clergy, clerics were not encouraged to leave their posts, even for

educational purposes; stricter clerical residency requirements reflect this concern.

The diocese of Hereford clearly demonstrates the decline of study leaves as a result

of these apprehensions. From 1287 to 1360, there were 148 study licenses granted

in the diocese. To take an average of the period, this equates to 2.03 study licenses

per year. Between 1361 and 1404, only 7 study licenses were granted, an average of

.16 study licenses per year, or about 1 study license every 6 years. It is clear that the

decline of study leaves was not unique to Hereford. From a sample of 188

University of Oxford students holding study-licenses, 11 licenses were granted in

the thirteenth century, 105 in the first half of the fourteenth century, 47 in the

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[35] Dohar, *The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership*, 67-68, 80-88.

[36] The issue of clerical wages, a problem directly connected to the shortage of clergy, is discussed at length in Chapter Two, alongside the secular wage restriction policies.

second half of the fourteenth century, 26 in the first half of the fifteenth century, and

only 5 in the second half of the fifteenth century.[37] This charts a clear rise during

the thirteenth and fourteenth century, followed by a decline in the amount of study-

licenses granted that extended into the next century; the turning point toward

decline was marked by the advent of the Black Death.[38]

Other factors help account for the decline of study leaves. In particular, the

development of pastoral literature had blossomed by the end of the fourteenth

century and, though not intended to replace university studies, certainly provided

opportunities for improving pastoral education. Such literature included William of

Pagula's *Oculus sacerdotis*, John de Burgh's *Pupilla Oculi*, and John Mirk's *Festial*. In

fact, an exemplum found in late twelfth and thirteenth-century religious literature,

as well as in Mirk's *Festial*, illustrates the concerns about clerics who were away

studying by telling the story of the child who rebuked a scholar, with which this

chapter began. That Mirk included this exemplum demonstrates its continued

relevance in the fourteenth-century world.[39]

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[37] These 188 students came from different dioceses, including Lincoln, Exeter, and Bath and Wells.

[38] Dohar, *The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership*, 122-126; Roy M. Haines, "The Education of the English Clergy During the Later Middle Ages: Some Observations on the Operation of Pope Boniface VIII's Constitution *Cum Ex Eo* (1298)," *Canadian Journal of History/Annales Canadiennes d'Histoire* 4, no. 1 (1969): 10-11, accessed November 11, 2015, http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1297322271?accountid=7014.

[39] Dohar, *The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership*, 123-124; Elsasser, "The Exempla of Mirk's *Festial*," exemplum LIX.

To reiterate what was stated earlier, the key factor to consider from this story is that the priest chose to abandon his studies. While this story certainly had elements of anti-intellectualism, when considered within the broad context of clerical shortages and educational limitations described above, this story also discouraged priests from leaving their parishes to obtain an education because "it was not God's will."[40] For this reason, the anti-intellectualist message of this tale is tempered by the fact that the church simply needed priests to stay in their parishes and care for their flocks, thus providing at least some sense of normalcy to the parishioners' tumultuous circumstances.

As has been discussed, clerical shortages left many parishes vacant or understaffed. Similarly, the incomes of drastically reduced parishioner populations were sometimes too small to support a priest in their parish in the first place. To address such circumstances, the church sometimes felt it was necessary to combine existing parishes in order to minister better to its flock. Such was the case in the parishes of Great and Little Collington in the diocese of Hereford in 1351. Plague had reduced the population so much that poverty had stricken and "the rents of both churches are scarcely enough to support one priest." According to the bishop's register, a number of parishioners and church patrons petitioned the bishop and made a "wholesome suggestion" to unite the parish church of Great Collington to the parish of Little Collington. The bishop found the reasons to combine the parishes to

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[40] Ford, *John Mirk's Festial*, 92-93. Ford includes this narrative in her chapter on secular authority and rebellion; in particular, this is part of a broader discussion on attitudes toward literacy and high levels of education as reflected in *Festial*, wherein she argues that Mirk accepts literacy among the clergy, but establishes "a narrative world in which high-level literacy jeopardizes salvation" (89).

be "valid, just, true and have general support." Little Collington was chosen to be the center of the amalgamated parish because its church was better built and closer to the parishioners. After the next major outbreak of plague in 1361, Bishop Charlton heeded the appeals of parishioners from the parishes of Puddleston and Whyle and united them for the same reasons that the parishes of Collington were united.[41] These decisions reflect the church's strong desire to provide adequately for its parishioners and stabilize their seriously disrupted lives. By consolidating parishioners into fewer administrative units, the church could eliminate some parish vacancies and ensure that every parishioner lived in a parish with a priest, which, no doubt, would have contributed peace to parishioners' minds and a sense of normalcy to their lives. Of course, simply combining parishes would not have guaranteed better spiritual care in practice, especially if the newly formed parishes had significantly larger populations that resulted in increased parishioner to priest ratios. Though combining parishes should not necessarily be seen as a dramatic action taken by the church, the need to do so clearly illustrates the ability of the plague to disrupt normal society operations and the problems stemming from having too few clergy.

The enormous number of deaths caused by the plagues also sparked disputes over burial rights within the church. After the pestilence outbreak of 1361, the Dean and Chapter of Hereford brought suit against the vicar of St. Peter's, Roger Syde, for holding funerals in his church and not at the cathedral, a violation of the cathedral chapter's rights. Traditionally, all parishioners who died within the boundaries of

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[41] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 302-303; Dohar, *The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership*, 78-80.

the chapter were supposed to be brought to the cathedral for final ceremonies and burial. Parishioners had tried to avoid this practice in the past, arguing that it was too expensive and unnecessary to travel to the cathedral, but the cathedral affirmed its rights and received the support of the bishops, who even threatened to excommunicate violators. In one extreme case, Bishop Trillek ordered improperly buried parishioners to be exhumed and reburied correctly. Financially, whenever parishioners were not blessed and buried at the cathedral, the cathedral lost revenues for candle purchases, voluntary oblations, and other service fees; the occasional improper burial may not have caused great controversy, but because of the large number of deaths and improper burials during the plagues, 120 in the first plague and 40 in the plague of 1361, the cathedral decided to take action.[42]

The legal dispute dragged on for years due to a number of appeals and the unwillingness of either side to give in. Roger appealed to the Archbishop of Canterbury's court, which ruled against Roger. Roger even appealed to the pope and the papal auditor actually ruled in Roger's favor. The cathedral then appealed the auditor's ruling until Pope Urban VI himself confirmed the decision to side with Roger and dispensed a letter defending Roger's position. At Urban's request, King Richard II confirmed and upheld the pope's decision. So, after 18 years of expensive legal proceedings and conflicting court decisions, Roger finally won the case. In order for Roger to remain in Hereford, it was agreed that parishioners could choose where to bury their dead and that Roger's church would be allowed to receive funerary offerings without fear of retaliation from the cathedral chapter; when

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[42] Dohar, *The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership*, 82-83.

parishioners were brought to the cathedral for burial, however, mourners would purchase at least a few candles as an offering to the chapter. In this instance, the cathedral was simply trying to restore order, as other church leaders had done, and reinforce its rights. However, because of the hardships caused by plague, "the people grew all the more weary and far less patient with customs that now seemed excessive and outmoded." Traditional practices, like the chapter's burial rights, were inconvenient and restrictive. The local courts' rulings that Roger was in the wrong indicate efforts and hopes of protecting tradition. The pope's ultimate decision to side with Roger reveals that even the pope himself affirmed Roger's practical actions in the face of crisis, at the expense of higher church authority.[43] In this case, resolving problems and providing stability meant abandoning a longstanding traditional practice.

Conclusion

The church was remarkably responsive to the crises caused by the plague. Even before the plague arrived, ecclesiastical leadership guided the laity in prayer and procession, with the support of the state, in order to protect the kingdom and appease God's wrath. Though these efforts failed to allay the pestilence, the clergy busily attended to the spiritual needs of their parishioners as the plague devastated the country, increasing their exposure to the disease with large numbers dying in consequence. The resulting shortage of clergy greatly contributed to a variety of other problems that the church had to respond to, such as granting leaves of study, disputes over burial rights, and the need to combine parishes. In each of these

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[43] Dohar, *The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership*, 82-87.

instances, the church made changes to traditional standards and rules in order to navigate the crisis more smoothly. Allowing lay folk to hear confessions was a significant policy adjustment, as was adjusting the age requirements for young men to be ordained, even if their clerical training was not complete. The struggle between Roger Syde and the cathedral chapter of Hereford over burial rights ultimately illustrated the cathedral's unrealistic desire for upholding its traditional burial rights when the pope ruled in favor of Roger even after the archbishop's court ruled against him. In short, the church was faced with many difficult administrative challenges. Ultimately, it often adopted new policies and made changes in order to stabilize society and better fulfill its pastoral mission, though these actions frequently sacrificed traditional standards and were not always unanimously approved within the church, as seen in Roger's various court rulings and in the tensions over licensing monastic confessors. The government was not very involved in these matters of church administration, but the two institutions worked together extensively in other matters, such as in regulating standards for clothing and attire, which is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Preserving the Traditional Social Hierarchy

The Black Death greatly tested England's traditional social hierarchy,

indirectly due to the economic changes caused by the plague. As a result, the church

and government struggled to maintain a semblance of this traditional hierarchy and

its corresponding ranks of status. Covering approximately the years 1350 to 1400,

this chapter will analyze the post-plague efforts of the ruling elite in the church and

government to uphold the traditional hierarchy by attempting to enforce standards

of dress and attire according to social status. A variety of measures characterized

these efforts, including legal codes, religious literature, and instructional and

behavioral manuals. Naturally, the king and government spearheaded the legal

remedies for improper dress and attire while the church participated in other

avenues, notably through religious and instructional literature. Even though neither

institution was directly involved in the other's efforts, elites in government and the

church worked to counter the impact of the rising economic affluence of

traditionally poor members of society and preserve the pre-plague social hierarchy.

By dictating what people could and could not wear, according to income and social

status, the church and government together sought to control outward

manifestations of disorder and suppress nonconformance to the accepted norm.

Historiography

Many scholars have addressed English society and the Black Death.

However, scholarship on dress-regulating efforts framed specifically in the socially

transforming context of the Black Death's aftermath is scarce. Two primary modes

of discussion on clothing standards prevail. The first category discusses dress

standards, particularly sumptuary legislation, on its own terms, without much

historical context. These studies include works by Frances Baldwin, Alan Hunt, and

Françoise Piponnier and Perrine Mane. While these are excellent pieces of

scholarship, they typically mention the Black Death only in passing, inadvertently

minimizing connections between the plague's effects and corresponding sumptuary

law, religious texts, and instructional manuals; this restricts their ability to analyze

more fully the policies and responses of the ruling elite to the undesired social

changes caused by the pestilence.[1] The second category more explicitly connects

dress regulations to the Black Death's context, but these scholars are more focused

on other topics and only highlight briefly these restrictions. Katherine French, for

example, mentions instances of sumptuary law and other clothing regulating efforts,

but her research, in this case, is more narrowly focused on women's experiences in

the church after the plague and not on the institutional policies of the church and

government.[2] In short, there is a need for scholarship that more fully analyzes the

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[1] See Baldwin, *Sumptuary Legislation*; Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions*; Sylvester et al., *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain*; Piponnier and Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages*.

[2] French, *The Good Women of the Parish*. French emphasizes the religious concerns of proper dress.

struggles of the church and government to resist changes to the longstanding social order after the Black Death by stipulating proper dress habits.

This study demonstrates that dress-anxiety and the reactions to it must be considered in greater depth directly within the context of the Black Death's impact. I argue that the proliferation of sumptuary legislation, religious texts, and instructional manuals pertaining to dress codes were direct reactions to the social changes sparked by the Black Death that threatened to disrupt the traditional order. I also argue that while the church and government did not explicitly participate in each other's efforts, they shared the same goals of preserving the traditional social hierarchy. Part of this includes understanding how spiritual beliefs directly complemented and informed some of the responses of the church and government. While men and women may have had increased possibilities after the plague, the improving conditions for the lower classes, and the types of clothing they were adopting were perceived as dangerous to the social order.[3]

Concerns about dress and attire certainly predated the Black Death. In 1344, the Westminster chronicle predicted, "the English have been madly following outlandish ways, changing their grotesque fashions of clothing yearly. They have abandoned the old, decent style of long, full garments for clothes which are short, tight, impractical, [etc.]…The sin of pride manifested in this way must surely bring down misfortune in the future."[4] According to the chronicle, the cause of this calamity would be the sin of pride as manifest in improper dress and attire,

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[3] French, *The Good Women of the Parish*, 12.

[4] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 131.

reflecting the strong spiritual concerns that tied sin to calamity. Despite warnings

that pride, demonstrated in "improper" clothing, caused the Black Death, dress

impropriety did not disappear with the Black Death in 1350. As members of the

lower classes discovered new economic opportunities and the means to purchase

previously unattainable styles of clothing, concern over what people were wearing,

or dress-anxiety, intensified.

Sumptuary Law

First, we will examine the legal codes that regulated dress and attire, which

were pursued primarily by the king and parliament. In 1363, only about a decade

after the Black Death and only a couple of years after another outbreak of plague,

King Edward III and Parliament issued "an act containing a hierarchy of clothing

restrictions based on social rank."[5] According to Rosemary Horrox, "this was the

first attempt to regulate clothing according to social status;" that the first attempt

occurred in the wake of the Black Death and subsequent outbreaks is telling.[6] The

law was created in response to a "petition put forward by the commons concerning

the excess of dress of people beyond their estate, to the very great destruction and

impoverishment of the land." Essentially, the law outlined the income levels of

different classes, detailed restrictions on how much money individuals in these

classes could spend on clothing, and forbade specific types of clothing to be worn by

certain classes. For example, "all manner of gentlemen," who are not knights, who

do not have property or an income to the amount of £100 were prohibited from

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[5] Sylvester et al., *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain*, 200-207.

[6] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 340.

wearing clothes or shoes priced higher than 4½ marks and could "not wear cloth-of-gold, silk or silver, or any manner of embroidered clothing, ring, brooch, clasp of gold, ribbon, belt or any other apparel or attire of gold or silver, or any precious stones, or any manner of fur."[7] In this fashion the law outlined the rules and restrictions for the various classes, but left for last "the very lowest class in society," "almost as if it had been elbowed aside by the chapters dealing with more important people."[8] For offenders of all classes, the prescribed penalty was to forfeit to the king all contrary apparel that had been worn.[9]

Specific terminology in this law indicates that it was not directed either for men or women exclusively. The law addressed the general occupational or social title of the classes, described their respective restrictions, then frequently followed with the oft-repeated phrase, "and their wives and children" or "and their wives, daughters and children." In some cases, the phrase "and their wives, daughters and children" is followed by specific prohibitions on women's dress, specifying

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[7] Sylvester et al., *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain*, 200-207.

[8] Baldwin, *Sumptuary Legislation*, 50.

[9] Sylvester et al., *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain*, 207; P. J. P Goldberg, ed. and trans., *Women in England, c. 1275-1525* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 31-34. Goldberg notes a 1337 statute that declared "no man nor woman, great or small" should wear any cloth except it be made in England. It also outlines which classes could wear fur. The Hundred Years' War with France had begun and England sought to protect its own industries as well as restrict who could wear what. This law predates the Black Death and illustrates that sumptuary concerns existed before the plague. It also applies to men and women, and recognizes some class distinctions, "a recognition that appears more clearly at the time of the Black Death."

permitted types of fur and gemstones.[10] Addressing men first gives the impression

that the law is intended primarily for men and secondarily for their wives and

families. Identifying women as secondary players does two things: First, it confirms

dominance of males as the "drivers of changing fashions in the Middle Ages."

Second, and closely tied to the first, it reflects broader "medieval notions of the

superiority of men over women" and shows how women's status was dependent on

their husband or father.[11] Despite being directed at males, the female-inclusive

language of the 1363 law demonstrated assumptions that women also had an

interest in fine clothing.[12] By specifically addressing women, albeit in a secondary

role, the law acknowledged the influence, and threat, of women in a chiefly male

fashion world; nevertheless, women did not face harsher punishments than men.

While the law helped to reinforce male and female relationships, gender did not

define the targets of the legislation. Rather, sumptuary law hoped to control both

men and women who were violating socioeconomic norms. Ultimately, the law of

1363 proved unpopular and was repealed about a year later.[13]

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[10] Sylvester et al., *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain*, 202-207. To understand more clearly why daughters are listed separately from children, see the 1478 petition, which specifically refers to "unmarried daughters" (233). It would be sensible to conclude that the daughters in the phrase, "and their wives, daughters and children," were daughters of a marriageable age, but were still under their fathers' household.

[11] French, *The Good Women of the Parish*, 11; Piponnier and Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages*, 77.

[12] French, *The Good Women of the Parish*, 11.

[13] Sylvester et al., *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain*, 200; Baldwin, *Sumptuary Legislation*, 55. Unfortunately, I did not come across additional

The next items of discussion are two petitions made by the commons to enact sumptuary legislation. The first petition came in April 1379, a couple of years after Richard II succeeded Edward III and a couple of years before the Peasants' Revolt. Because the petition is quite short, it is worth quoting in its entirety, as it was recorded in parliamentary records:

> 55. Item, that no man or woman within the said kingdom, except knights and ladies, shall wear any kind of gemstones, fur, cloth-of-gold, or ribbon of gold, or cloth of silk, if they cannot spend £40 a year, on pain of forfeiting whatever they wear if they contravene this.

> Answer: The king will consider it further before the next parliament.[14]

Like the law of 1363, the petition suggested a class-defining financial standard and listed specific types of clothing to be forbidden, but because there is no evidence that legislation was actually enacted in response to this petition, it is difficult to gauge how this petition would have translated into legislation.[15]

A 1402 petition by the commons of Henry IV requesting sumptuary legislation closely followed the 1363 sumptuary law in its form and language. The 1402 petition first addressed restrictions for a variety of male occupations, then proceeded to specify limitations for women, "restricting the use of several kinds of fur to the wives and daughters of knights, their ladies-in-waiting, and wives of certain officials." The penalty for any person violating the law, it was suggested, was to surrender the clothing and pay a fine of 100 shillings. There seems to have been

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scholarship or sources that expound upon the reasons for repealing the law of 1363, beyond it being unpopular.

[14] Sylvester et al., *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain*, 206-207.

[15] Sylvester et al., *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain*, 206.

no subsequent legislation following the petition, which was again submitted in

1406, but the king's response is worth noting:

> The king wishes to command all the estates of his realm that they should maintain themselves in their attire each according to his status, abandoning excesses. And moreover, our said lord the king wills that those of his council should have power by authority of parliament to make ordinances concerning the said attire by their good deliberation.[16]

Like the first law from 1363, this petition echoed the dominating role of men in

fashion and society, but recognized that women also needed to be addressed and

regulated. King Henry IV's response, quoted above, illustrated the broader concerns

of the time, namely maintaining social boundaries by encouraging his subjects to act

and dress "according to his status, abandoning excesses." The very possibility, and

threat, of obtaining "excesses" aligns with the increased opportunities and buying

power of workers after the Black Death.[17] If successfully enforced, sumptuary

legislation may have helped mitigate change, at least in people's appearance, but it

could do little to halt the powerful undercurrents of the changing society.

An important issue that must be addressed is how the principles of

sumptuary laws were enforced. In terms of direct legal enforcement, my research

failed to yield evidence that would indicate there were effective mechanisms in

place for enforcing the laws. This aligns with Hunt's conclusion that there is a

general consensus among scholars that sumptuary laws simply failed to regulate

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[16] Sylvester et al., *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain*, 208-211.

[17] French, *The Good Women of the Parish*, 8-9. The improved economic circumstances of laborers and peasants are discussed more in depth in Chapter Two.

attire effectively; if there was some measure of enforcement, it was limited.[18]

However, sumptuary legislation was not the only force at work in the battle of

clothing regulations. Religious texts and instructional literature, authored largely by

clerical figures, also sought to regulate dress habits. While it is difficult to measure

the success of sumptuary enforcement in these non-legal spheres, they demonstrate

that anxieties about people's clothing resonated through society. Studying examples

of religious and moral attitudes toward clothing illustrates that even though the

government may have failed to enforce sumptuary laws, other societal channels

existed and may have helped in regulating the classes and controlling unreasonable

dress. It was in these alternate channels that the church participated in dress

regulation.

Religious Texts

The clergy was very interested in regulating the clothing of their

parishioners, especially for women. Some accused well-dressed women of "vanity

and self-promotion…[and of] using fine clothing to attract men and compete with

neighbors." Also, priests were concerned that luxurious clothing might also

encourage lust or pride. Others accused women of considering church a social event

and dressing up to meet men. Indeed, there existed a "clerical obsession with what

women wore to church."[19] Nevertheless, even though many texts directly addressed

women, these concerns are often portrayed in language that reflects general

socioeconomic and spiritual anxieties. Furthermore, other texts in this genre also

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[18] Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions*, 325.

[19] French, *The Good Women of the Parish*, 91-92, 201-205.

illustrate spiritual concern for what men were wearing, which indicates that women were not the only targets of dress regulating messages. These texts also demonstrate how religious beliefs complemented socioeconomic dress-anxiety; regulating clothing would have served to cure both socioeconomic and religious concerns. The church, therefore, played an important role in encouraging proper dress and attire. A range of religious texts illustrates these efforts.

The Book of Vices and Virtues, a popular fourteenth-century didactic text, addressed proper dress for women. A Dominican friar wrote the original French text in the late thirteenth century. Between 1340 and 1486 there were at least nine versions in English, which strongly indicates widespread circulation in England. Thus, although the contents and concerns of this book predate the plague, its wide circulation in the years following the Black Death indicates the continuing, and even concentrated, relevance of its subject matter.[20] One passage of this book paraphrased the teachings of the Apostle Paul stating,

> [women] should have honest clothing and attire and not too much, that is to say in accordance with a women's estate. For what is too much for one woman is not too much for some others. For much more behooves to the queen than to a burgess' wife or to a merchant's or to a squire's or a simple lady such as a knight's wife.[21]

Here, the emphasis on dressing according to one's estate is clear, reflecting the consciousness of social differences and boundaries. It is important to note that this passage and the aforementioned sumptuary laws did not ban fine clothing

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[20] French, *The Good Women of the Parish*, 91-92; W. Nelson Francis, ed., *The Book of Vices and Virtues* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), ix-xii, xxxii-xl.

[21] As quoted in French, *The Good Women of the Parish*, 91-92; Francis, *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, 239-240.

altogether. Rather, they sought to regulate attire based on socioeconomic status.

Even though this passage was intended for women, the guidelines utilized

socioeconomic language to define which women could wear what. Indeed, these

guidelines clearly shared the sentiments expressed in the parliamentary petitions

that people should dress according to their status. Restrictions were not based on

the fact that they were women; rather, they were based on the woman's status,

which was directly connected to her husband, who was also regulated by law and

religious texts. Given the economic and social mobility of the post-plague era, it is

not surprising that behavior-regulating religious texts, such as *The Book of Vices and

Virtues*, were popular and widespread.[22]

John Mirk, writing in the 1380s, also expressed his sentiments about proper

women's clothing in his sermon collection called *Festial*. He wrote of one woman

who demonstrated great charity by giving away "all the clothes she had except for

the worst" because she "was so devout in service to Our Lady." However, this same

woman was ashamed to attend church, "for she had no honest clothes as she should

have had." This woman's predicament exemplifies the relationship of clothing to

status. Because the woman had given away all but the worst of her clothing, she

could not dress honestly to her estate. In other words, dressing in rags for church

"was as inappropriate as dressing above one's station;" this passage teaches women

to dress according to their status, neither above nor below.[23] While a woman is the

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[22] French, *The Good Women of the Parish*, 205.

[23] French, *The Good Women of the Parish*, 204-205.

subject of the story, the emphasis is not on her gender, but on wearing clothes in compliance with one's estate.

It is worth mentioning briefly that Judy Ford has analyzed the whole of Mirk's *Festial* at length and argues that it was created to sustain existing religious and secular institutions. This was critical in a time of social and religious crises that coincided with the rise of the heretical Lollard movement. *Festial* defended the traditional secular and religious institutions not by merely regurgitating orthodox doctrines and practices, but by "persuading the ordinary parishioners…that they belonged to a tradition that embraced illiterate commoners and excluded both the highly literate and the rebellious."[24] For instance, *Festial* carefully sympathized with the poor and unlearned while simultaneously encouraging them not to seek to redress their condition in this life, but wait until death whereupon their wrongs would be righted and their oppressors punished.[25] In other words, *Festial* countered ideas that encouraged resistance to the authority of the church and government by helping parishioners see how they could live contently, according to their allotted station in life. In this sense, Ford's assessment of *Festial* supports the idea that, in principle, the church and government wanted to preserve the pre-plague social structure The aforementioned exemplum from *Festial* about the woman who charitably gave away her fine clothing demonstrates *Festial*'s broader purpose in action specifically against improper attire.

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[24] Ford, *John Mirk's Festial,* 150.

[25] Ford, *John Mirk's Festial*, 14, 111.

Other evidence provides insight into the spiritual concerns associated with improper dress. In Mirk's *Instructions for Parish Priests*, the priest, when examining a parishioner, was to ask questions regarding their sins and spiritual understanding. In the section on pride, one of the seven deadly sins, the priest was to ask, "Hast thou been proud of any guise…of diversely colored pants…of tagged clothes, as fools are wont to be?"[26] This was a question that could be asked of anyone because anyone could become proud and sinful because of his or her clothes. In another section on proper behavior in church, men were specifically encouraged to "put away all vanity" at church. Does the use of "vanity" here refer to clothing or to a more general attitude or character disposition? Given the clear connections of lavish attire to pride and unrighteousness, clothing certainly may have been a source of vanity and a distraction during church services.[27] In these instances, Mirk demonstrates that clothing was a source of vanity and pride that church authorities needed to check.

A number of chronicles clearly describe the spiritual fears of prideful and improper dress. The Westminster chronicle, mentioned earlier in this chapter, clearly described how men and women adopted improper dress. Men paved the way with new styles and "women flowed with the tides of fashion in this and other things even more eagerly." The sin of pride rooted in the obsession of new styles

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[26] John Mirk, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. Edward Peacock (London: Early English Text Society, 1902), 32, 99, 102. "Hast þhou ben prowde of any gyse Of any þynge þat þou dedust vse, Of party hosen, of pykede schone, of fytered cloþes (as foles done)…"

[27] Mirk, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, 9. "…þenne bydde hem leue here mony wordes, Here ydel speche, and nyce bordes, And put a-way alle vanyte, And say here pater noster & here aue."

promised future misfortune.[28] While this chronicler believed women were even more eager than men in the fashion changes, it was the pride of the collective that threatened misfortune, not the pride of either gender in particular.

This example predates the plague by a few years, but later chronicles also describe sin from clothing as a cause of divine punishment and recurring plague. Another chronicle notes that, in 1362, about a decade after the Black Death and the year after a recurrence, "the whole of England was thrown into madness and excitement by a rage for bodily adornments." This entry specifically mentions only the new, and appalling, styles of men's clothing, noting for example, how wealthy and middling men, including esquires and freeholders, owned extremely valuable belts, "even when they do not have 20 pence to rub together." That these men owned expensive articles of clothing, but had nothing left in their pockets, suggests that some were spending most, if not all, of their wealth on stylish clothing. Perhaps these individuals found their enhanced buying power, a courtesy of the Black Death, too tempting to restrain. The chronicle continues its lament, "because the people wantonly squander the gifts of God on rage, pride, lechery and greed—and all the rest of the deadly sins—it is only to be expected that the Lord's vengeance will follow."[29] Because the English obsessed with new styles of clothing, pestilence and punishment was to be expected. Efforts to regulate clothing appropriate to one's status through sumptuary law, religious texts, and instructional manuals clearly reflect hopes of addressing these religious concerns. Indeed, regulating fashion by

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[28] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 131.

[29] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 131-134.

dictating standards dependent on social status would have helped mitigate

excessive dress and protect the country from sin and God's wrath as well as

maintain ideal socioeconomic boundaries.

One final chronicle example demonstrates the role of obsession with dress in

causing plague and divine punishment. John of Reading described how in 1365,

heavy rains damaged property and a pestilence killed people and animals. To

Reading, these events were no surprise. "No wonder," he wrote, "given the empty

headedness of the English, who remained wedded to a crazy range of outlandish

clothing without realizing the evil which would come of it." He described the

clothing as "useless" and "misshapen." Obsession with the new clothing

undoubtedly filled people with "malice, cunning, deceit and evil," which inspired a

number of other immoral actions.[30] Encouraging dress codes for everyone and

implementing legislation sought to preserve socioeconomic boundaries as well as

counteract sins inherent to obsessing with new styles of clothes, especially clothes

that were immodest and untraditional.

Instructional Manuals

This final section describes examples of conduct and behavioral literature

that sought to advise proper dress habits. As will be seen, these writings were

directed at women, as opposed to men. However, misogynistic feelings were not

necessarily the driving motivations behind their message. Instead, these texts were

inspired by general spiritual and socioeconomic motivations.

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[30] Horrox, *The Black Death*, 133-134.

The Book of the Knight of the Tower was one such text. Written by a French

knight, beginning in 1371, this book hoped to instruct the knight's daughters in

proper behavior, including several sections on clothing and attire, which, according

to M. Y. Offord, reflects the knight's apparently "strong and rather irritable views"

toward the subject.[31] Neither a cleric nor member of the government wrote this

book; rather, the knight was simply another member of the ruling elite, in France,

who was clearly concerned with conduct of his daughters and was perhaps

influenced by the destabilized social hierarchy. One section advised against quickly

adopting new styles of clothing because women who "shall never rest until they

have thereof a copy" of the new style clearly "have their heart most set to the

pleasure of the world."[32] Another passage tells of a woman who adorned herself in

rich clothes in preparation to meet St. Bernard. However, St. Bernard refused to

look upon her because of her grand attire. He advised her "how to leave the folly of

the world and the vanity thereof and showed her how she should save her soul."

The woman went, sold most of her rich clothing and attire, and "led so holy a life

that she had the grace of god."[33] These two examples advised against seeking the

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[31] French, *The Good Women of the Parish*, 201; M. Y. Offord, ed., *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, trans. William Caxton (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), xi, xviii-xix, xliii. The English translation was completed by Caxton in 1483.

[32] Offord, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, 38-40. "shall neuer reste till they have thereof a Copye"; "haue their hert moost sette to the plesaunce of the world."

[33] Offord, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, 47-48, 264. "Thenne this hooly man declared to her hou she shold leue the folye of the world and the bobaunce therof/ and shewed to her how she shold saue her sowle;" "And ledde soo hooly a lyf/ that she had the grace of god."

latest and finest fashions and encouraged overcoming the vanities of the world, even if it meant selling off valuable attire.

The knight gave perhaps the most direct advice about clothing in a tale of a woman who "lost her marriage by her fine raiment and clothing."[34] In this story, a knight made arrangements to marry the daughter of another knight. The daughter and the knight had never met, so when the knight came to meet her, she "adorned herself in the best manner that she could, to the end that she might seem fairer, smaller, and of a well-shaped body."[35] Unfortunately for the daughter, it was a terribly cold winter and her elegant clothes did nothing to keep her warm. By the time the knight arrived, her skin had become pale and sickly, but her younger sister, who had chosen to wear appropriate clothing, was warm and had a fresh, red complexion. Upon seeing the marked difference in their complexions, the knight changed his mind and chose to marry the younger daughter instead. At the end of the story, the author wrote, "Now have ye heard a good example of how one ought not to adorn her body to show it small and better shaped, especially in the winter."[36] The message of this story did more than encourage one to wear warm clothes in cold weather. It warned the knight's daughters that wearing excessively nice

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[34] Offord, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, 158-160, 267. "I Shalle telle yow another Ensample of the doughter of a noble knyght/ that loste her maryage by her coynted Raymentes & clothynges."

[35] Offord, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, 158. "And she whiche knewe wel of his comynge arayed & coynted her self in the best manere that she coude/ to thende that she myght seme the fayrer/ smaller/ & of body well shapen."

[36] Offord, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, 160, 267. "Now haue ye herd good Ensample how one ought not to coynte her body for to shewe it small and better shapen & specially in the winter."

clothing could have negative consequences. The younger daughter, who wore what was appropriate, was the one rewarded.

In considering these excerpts, it is critical to keep in mind the targets of these messages: the daughters of the knight. If they had not already done so, they would have ideally entered marriage and assumed their position as mothers and wives in their new families. The excerpts described above taught the daughters appropriate attitudes toward clothing and fashion, encouraging them to be wary of fine clothes and to foster spiritual well-being instead. These messages correspond directly with spiritual concerns about worldliness and pride that applied to both men and women. Thus, even though this book was directed specifically to women, it reflects general spiritual concerns that applied to all, which played a role in complementing socioeconomic dress anxiety.

Another instructional text, *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, reflects socioeconomic concerns in the way that it teaches proper dress habits. *The Good Wife* dates to the middle of the fourteenth century or earlier and was in circulation to the end the fifteenth century, if not longer. During the later middle ages, many teenage girls left their homes to enter service, particularly in urban areas. It seems likely that one use of this text was to instruct these urban servant girls who were out on their own. The premise of the manual is a mother teaching her daughter, but the author was very likely a male, who may have also been a member of the clergy. In one section, the mother counsels her daughter not to "mock or scorn, nor burn as fire" upon seeing a neighbor's wife wearing rich attire. Instead, the daughter ought to "thank God of heaven for that which he has given you." In another section, the

daughter is counseled to "make not your husband poor with spending nor with pride. A man must spend as he is able that has but modest goods."[37] Both of these passages taught the daughter to be happy and grateful for her lot in life and avoid spending beyond her means. Certainly, these passages taught a sense of spiritual humility and contentment that reflected the general spiritual concerns of the time, but it also fits directly within the socioeconomic rhetoric that has already been examined. *The Good Wife* targeted economically independent women, in this case servant girls. These girls needed guidance because they were economically autonomous, not yet married, and future wives in a household. Thus, encouraging the targets of *The Good Wife*, who were dangerous, independent women, to adopt appropriate clothing habits resonated with socioeconomic and spiritual concerns found in laws and other religious texts. Teaching these young servant girls to dress suitably and not lavishly was but one small front in the war against improper clothes purchased and worn by the traditionally poor and lower class members of society. Successfully teaching these attitudes and clothing standards would have helped to uphold the traditional social hierarchy and preserve the established ranks of status.

Conclusion

The Black Death had a tremendous effect on English society. For the lower classes, the post-plague world offered higher wages, greater economic mobility, and the possibility of greater social status. In other words, the economic and

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[37] Goldberg, *Women in England*, 97-103; French, *The Good Women of the Parish*, 184.

demographic developments of the post-plague world challenged existing societal boundaries.[38] This chapter focused primarily on the responses to the disruption of the social order as manifest in the lower classes' adoption of more luxurious clothing habits. However, it would be imprudent not to mention the significance and relevance of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 to broader post-plague challenges in the social order.[39] Rebel leaders made demands that called directly for the dissolution of serfdom and any form of social hierarchy or social ranks. This kind of language demonstrates that the rebels were fully aware of and very discontent with the existing social hierarchy and felt oppressed; no doubt, the promulgation of economic and social regulations contributed to their feelings of oppression. As such, the Peasants' Revolt is perhaps the most famous instance of English post-plague social anxieties erupting in a manner that threatened not only the health of the social hierarchy, but also the physical well-being of those whom the rebels considered to be oppressive and unjust. Thus, the Peasants' Revolt, in an extreme way, exemplifies the underlying tensions between peasants and elites that also was manifested in peasants' dressing habits. In the clothing sphere, peasants resisted the social order not through violence and rebellion, but by adopting the fashions of their social superiors and blurring the lines between social standings.

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[38] French, *The Good Women of the Parish*, 5-13.

[39] A few noteworthy pieces of scholarship include: R. H. Hilton, *Bond men made free; medieval peasant movements and the English rising of 1381* (New York: Viking Press, 1973); Juliet R. V. Barker, *1381: the year of the Peasants' Revolt*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014); Richard Barrie Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 2nd ed., History in Depth (London: Macmillan, 1983);

As the poorer members of society discovered increased socioeconomic mobility and opportunity and, thereby, expanded their wardrobes, the traditional powers in society, the nobility in the church and government, sought to limit change and preserve customary order. Sumptuary legislation, religious texts, and instructional manuals all played a role in this struggle. By attempting to regulate what people could wear according to social class, elites in the government and church hoped to maintain their positions in society and limit the changes happening below. However, they were largely unsuccessful in curbing change and keeping the peasants in line; their failures in clothing regulation and in other sectors, such as economic policies, contributed to the environment that spawned the Peasants' Revolt. While the socioeconomic concerns were at the front of the dress-anxiety war, spiritual concerns also informed the measures taken by the church and government alike. Elites in the government worked to draft and enforce sumptuary laws while religious leaders and other lay elites encouraged proper dress habits through religious texts and instructional manuals. Thus, while the efforts to correct inappropriate attire were carried out in a variety of relatively independent channels, and even though they were largely unsuccessful, they shared the same purpose, namely to uphold the traditional social hierarchy, cure spiritual offenses, and limit socioeconomic advances occurring among the poorer, lower members of society.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

England faced a number of crises throughout the fourteenth century including war, famine, and plague. Each of these calamities tested the resilience of English society and had the potential to influence greatly existing structures and orders of everyday life. The Black Death, a horrific wave of pestilence that spread across Europe and devastated the English population from 1348 to 1350, was so serious that it reshaped traditional economic, religious, and social structures and institutions. However, members of society did not stand idly by while the world around them changed; they were fundamentally involved in society's transformation, acting according to their interests either to encourage change or to preserve traditional ways of life. This study has examined, in particular, how the ruling elite in the church and government, separately and together, responded to the plague's effects in economic, religious, and social spheres in order to stabilize society and preserve, as much as possible, their traditional power and place in England. Also, as has been demonstrated, stabilizing society often meant sacrificing traditional practices, policies, and powers.

The resulting economic, religious, and social problems occasioned by the plague were rooted in the drastic demographic decline of the English population. Economically, shortages of laborers and serfs enabled these individuals to negotiate for better employment conditions and increase their wages. Given these

opportunities, even in the aftermath of such tragic loss of life, poorer members of society optimistically hoped for and demanded better living and working circumstances. These changes threatened to overturn the traditional economic system and undermine the authority of secular and ecclesiastical lords. Religiously, the church struggled to fulfill its pastoral mission and tend to its parishioners because so many priests died or abandoned their posts. Additionally, some local priests followed the behavior of the laborers who demanded higher wages; they, too, refused to fulfill their duties unless their wages were increased, which further hampered the ability of the church to care spiritually for its parishioners. As a result, many laymen and laywomen experienced a disruption in their normal spiritual lives. Socially, the enhanced economic opportunities for the poor threatened to overturn the traditional social hierarchy and disrupt existing notions of rank and status. Laborers and peasants were able to purchase with their increased earnings fine clothing and jewelry that had previously been out of reach. When traditionally poorer people started wearing such fine attire, which was an important outward manifestation of one's rank, income, and place in society, lines between social ranks blurred. In short, the plague unsettled long established norms in the economic, religious, and social spheres of English society. For the ruling elite, these disruptions to traditional ways of life were unwelcome. Accordingly, elites in the church and government had to decide their manner of responding to each of these challenges.

Economically, secular and religious lords saw the demands for higher wages as threats to destabilize their authority and undermine their positions in the

longstanding economic system. By issuing the Ordinance and Statute of Labourers, thereby regulating wages and forcibly putting people to work, elites sought to uphold the old economic ways of life and keep the *status quo*. The church actively supported these regulations and issued its own wage restrictions on opportunistic clerics, as declared in *Effrenata*, for example. In practice, however, secular and religious lords discovered it much easier to negotiate and compromise with their laborers. Based on the studies examined in this project, it appears as though secular and ecclesiastic lords adopted very similar pragmatic approaches that resulted in the widespread abandonment of many labor requirements and servile fees for serfs, such as tallage and millsuit, which helped some lords fill vacant lands and contributed to the decline of serfdom as a whole. Additionally, the "in bondage" language that had previously described land conveyances was disappearing. The church and government, together, ultimately adopted pragmatic approaches in handling economic challenges, which meant abandoning some older practices and expectations in order to navigate the crisis more smoothly and help restore some stability to the tumultuous circumstances.

In terms of religious challenges, ecclesiastical leaders had the difficult task of simultaneously meeting the needs of their flocks and regulating disobedient priests, thus providing some stability to the uncertainty of the times. The church was willing or, perhaps more accurately, forced to adjust old policies related to hearing confessions, allowing laymen and even laywomen to serve as confessors when a priest could not be found. Bishops also increasingly licensed friars to come and hear confessions in their diocese, though this practice caused contention in the church,

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notably for Archbishop Fitzralph who believed that priests were better qualified to serve as confessors. Additionally, age requirements related to priesthood ordinations were lowered and bishops, like Bishop Trillek, increased the number of annual ordination ceremonies in order to alleviate the pressures stemming from having too few clergy. Priests were also discouraged from leaving to obtain educations and were encouraged to stay in their parishes and care for their flocks, as demonstrated in the exemplum about the young boy who told the priest to abandon his studies. All of these actions were designed to provide better spiritual care for parishioners, even if there were sometimes disagreements within the church about certain issues, such as in disputes over burial rights and licensing monastic confessors. The government was involved only minimally in these issues of church administration, but the church shared the government's primary goal of stabilizing society.

As the poor began to incorporate fine clothing into their wardrobes, elites in the church and government feared that the longstanding social hierarchy would become destabilized. They responded in several different channels. The government passed several pieces of sumptuary legislation that regulated clothing standards according to one's income and rank in society. Religious texts authored by clerics, including *Instructions for Parish Priests*, *Festial*, and *The Book of Vices and Virtues,* stressed dressing in accordance to one's social estate and warned of the spiritual repercussions that accompanied the adoption of improper attire. Several chroniclers, such as the Westminster chronicler and John of Reading, even blamed the plague, its recurring visitations, and misfortune in general on the pride of the

English people as manifest in inappropriate clothing habits. Instructional texts like *How the Good Wife Taught her Daughter* and *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, which were authored by secular and religious elites alike, also encouraged readers to dress properly, according to one's station, and to avoid becoming preoccupied with vanity and clothing. Ultimately, the government's laws were ineffective and it is difficult to measure the success of the regulatory messages found in religious and instructional literature. Nevertheless, the concern about improper dress habits and their ill effects on English society resonated strongly in the minds of elites in the church and government. They acted in their respective circles of influence and, while one institution did not overtly have a hand in the other's efforts, they worked to stabilize society and preserve the existing social order, as much as possible.

Let us now return to the story of Richard Digg that was introduced at the beginning of this project and to the questions raised about the relationship of the church and government. Recall that in 1350 the vicar of a church in Preston (Lancs.) excommunicated two sub-constables for attempting to coerce Digg into the service of local lords. From the evidence introduced elsewhere in this study, it is clear that the sub-constables did, indeed, have authority derived from the king and justices, under the Ordinance of Labourers, to compel Digg; this program was part of an effort to counter labor shortages. It is also evident that the church supported such measures and implemented some of its own to regulate clerical issues stemming from the plague. The primary issue, however, was whether the vicar's decision to resist the sub-constables accurately reflected the relationship shared between clergy and royal officials, between the institution of the church and of the state. The

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answer to this question is that rather than stand in opposition to government policies, as this particular vicar chose to do, the church and government, together as the ruling institutions in England, actively supported each other in responding to the challenges sparked by the Black Death. As such, the dissonant actions of this vicar simply did not represent the official actions and policies pursued by the institutional church and government. Rather, this case exemplifies another instance of discord within the church over plague-related policies and demonstrates an occasion where a clearly reactionary post-plague policy faced stern resistance, this time from a low ranking member of the clergy. Thus, individuals, such as the vicar, could successfully challenge and resist even official policies upheld by the elites that governed the church and state.

Even though the church and state often operated independently in applying responses, their tactics were frequently very similar and their motivations were essentially the same. By implementing new policies and altering existing ones, the church and government wanted to stabilize society and to preserve, where possible, existing economic, religious, and social systems and orders. Of course, because of the depth and significance of the plague's effects, elites were simply unable to enforce many of their policies in a meaningful way. As a result, they chose to act much more pragmatically, even at the expense of established powers and norms. Perhaps a better way to characterize the elites' actions would be to state that in order to stabilize society and preserve at least a semblance of pre-plague ways of life, elites were forced to make sacrifices and accept certain changes in order to provide some stability, thus minimizing the risk of outright conflict that could

threaten much more radical economic, religious, and social reforms. By considering

the actions and motivations of the church and state, together, as the ruling bodies of

England, this study has attempted to broaden our understanding of their

relationship in times of crisis and describe how they interacted with those subject to

their authority. By so doing, this project complements existing scholarship that

examines how the Black Death affected the peasants, contributes to a more

complete picture of the medieval social spectrum, and analyzes how one's place in

society directly contributed to how they perceived and responded to trying times.

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