

The Learning of the Clerks:
Writing and Authority during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381

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ABSTRACT

(English)

My thesis examines the interplay between writing, literacy, and authority that characterized the Peasants' Revolt in England in 1381. I argue that the increasing presence of writing in England's legal system during the Middle Ages contributed to feelings of anxiety and alienation among certain classes in English society, ultimately inspiring these communities to engage in open rebellion against the growing bureaucratic class and its exclusionary use of writing and documents. I analyze a number of recorded instances of rebels interacting with manuscripts, charters, and archives to demonstrate how they attempted to repurpose the authority of official documents and the documentary form; a specific rebel publicly impaling a charter on a pitchfork, for example, is read as a symbolic gesture in which the charter's inherent authority is both denied and reaffirmed, with the rebel destroying the document and claiming its authority for himself. Through my analysis of the documents and chronicles that record the Revolt, I examine how the rebels' numerous symbolic actions can be understood as the culmination of their frustrations regarding the role of writing in the legal system, and that rather than reject this system outright, the rebels instead hoped to assert their own ability to exercise the authority they saw as inherent in writing and texts.

(French)

Ma thèse examine l'interaction entre l'écriture, l'alphabétisation et l'autorité qui a caractérisé la Révolte des Paysans en Angleterre en 1381. Je soutiens que la présence croissante de l'écriture dans le système juridique de l'Angleterre au Moyen Âge a contribué aux sentiments d'anxiété et d'aliénation parmi certaines classes de la société anglaise, inspirant finalement ces communautés

à s'engager dans une rébellion ouverte contre la classe bureaucratique croissante et son usage excluant de l'écriture et des documents. J'analyse un certain nombre de cas enregistrés de rebelles interagissant avec des manuscrits, des chartes et des archives afin de démontrer comment ils ont tenté de détourner l'autorité des documents officiels et de la forme documentaire ; un rebelle spécifique empalant publiquement une charte sur une fourche, par exemple, est lu comme un geste symbolique dans lequel l'autorité inhérente de la charte est à la fois niée et réaffirmée, le rebelle détruisant le document et revendiquant son autorité pour lui-même. Grâce à mon analyse des documents et des chroniques qui rendent compte de la Révolte, j'examine comment les nombreuses actions symboliques des rebelles peuvent être comprises comme le point culminant de leurs frustrations concernant le rôle de l'écriture dans le système juridique, et que plutôt que de rejeter ce système en bloc, les rebelles espéraient plutôt affirmer leur propre capacité à exercer l'autorité qu'ils considéraient comme inhérente à l'écriture et aux textes.

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I. Introduction

On June 16, 1381, at the height of England's Peasants' Revolt, a group of rebellious townsfolk broke into the University of Cambridge and seized two chests containing university archives.¹ They brought the archives to Market Square, set them ablaze, and proceeded to draw up a new document 'whereby the university formally surrendered its privileges to the town and agreed to be governed by municipal authorities.'² While the archives burned, an old woman named Margery Starre scattered the ashes to the winds and cried out 'Away with the learning of the clerks, away with it!' as she did so, her fellow townsfolk dancing triumphantly beside her.³

The case of Margery Starre, itself a relatively minor incident within the larger context of the Revolt, perfectly captures the essence of the rebels'⁴ discontent and provides a foundation upon which to examine their actions in the summer of 1381. That the rebels chose to destroy university archives specifically and in such a public manner is telling, as it implies a motive beyond mere destruction; why not, for example, just loot the university and ignore the archives completely? Why go through the trouble of destroying the documents in the form of a public bonfire, and then immediately draw up new documents in their place? What did Margery mean when she cried 'Away with the learning of the clerks!' as she cast the ashes into the wind?

¹ McKisack, May, *The Fourteenth Century, 1307-1399*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 416-417. McKisack describes the documents as being 'of priceless value to the historian of the medieval university.'

² Ibid

³ Oman, Charles, *The History of England, from the Accession of Richard II to the Death of Richard III (1377-1485)*, (London: Longmans, Green and co., 1920), 58.

⁴ The terminology of the Revolt is still an open question; while those involved were ostensibly 'rebels,' they likely viewed themselves as acting in service of the king, thus making such a term potentially problematic. Likewise, while it is generally referred to as the 'Peasants' Revolt,' many of those who were deemed 'rebels' were not peasants, but were tradesmen, business-owners, and occasionally even landholders and members of the clergy. Acknowledging the difficulty of employing certain terms when discussing the Revolt is crucial in avoiding mischaracterizing its participants, especially when considering historical accounts and the biases of those who recorded the events of 1381. For the sake of clarity and consistency, I employ the term 'rebels' in this thesis when referring to individuals and groups that took part in the Revolt.

Margery's story is just one of many that emerged from the Revolt in 1381 where rebels chose texts as the target of their insubordination. The authority against which the townsfolk appeared to be rebelling was, in many cases, rooted in documents rather than people. Margery's rallying cry against the 'learning of the clerks,' superimposed over the image of her throwing the remains of university archives into the wind, shows an awareness of the role that these documents played in England's developing legal system. While Margery may not have been able to read the archives she helped burn, it would seem that their specific content did not matter to her; their very existence was a symbol of the authority of the clerks, whose 'learning' Margery had vocally cast aside. It appears, then, that for rebels like Margery, the clerks' authority and the physical documents they propagated were intimately linked. That a new document was drawn up, however, indicates that while the rebels certainly found it necessary to reject the authority of the clerks and bureaucrats, they had no intention of wholly rejecting the authority of documents themselves. By granting their township new power over the university through the production of a document, the rebels made clear their intention to replace a previous authority with their own. This thesis attempts to demonstrate that the rebels' actions, here and elsewhere during the Revolt, operated at the intersection of texts, authority, and community within late-medieval England as the question of who held power in the production, distribution, and interpretation of documents was suddenly brought forward in the form of insurrection. The physical and material nature of documents held an authoritative power that the rebels questioned, often violently, as they attempted to exercise their ability to occupy the same spaces of 'learning' as the clerks.

I will begin my analysis with a brief examination of the historical background leading up to the Revolt, specifically as it relates to the question of texts and literacy. Following this, I will analyze accounts of the Revolt that involve rebels engaging, directly and indirectly, with

documents and their authority. These accounts can broadly be divided into three categories. The first relates to their actions that specifically involved the production and distribution of texts. This category, while potentially the most telling in terms of the rebels' literary proficiency, is unfortunately very limited. They are not known to have produced any of their own records of the Revolt, making textual analysis particularly difficult. They do however appear to have circulated letters amongst themselves and even publicly voiced their grievances, in writing, before royal commissioners. Several letters, generally attributed to John Ball, are recorded in the chronicles of Walsingham and Knighton, and while the letters themselves have not been preserved (indeed, the circumstances surrounding their existence are dubious and potentially unreliable), an analysis of their contents can provide insight into the rebels' apparent ability to express themselves through texts. Furthermore, in contrast to John Ball's letters, a written petition is reported to have been drawn up by John Preston and is recorded in the rolls of the Kings Bench. While the specific details surrounding the petition are difficult to assess, the account of its production and presentation to a commissioner demonstrates the variety of ways in which the rebels knew how to express themselves through writing. Analyzing both the letters and the petition provides a great deal of context to the underlying motivations and desires of those who chose to engage in open rebellion.

The second category relates to the rebels' direct engagement with texts that they themselves did not produce. This is perhaps the largest category, as there are a variety of recorded instances in which they sought out, destroyed, or publicly displayed specific documents and writings. Several of the chronicles reference their arrival at abbeys and their burning some documents while ignoring others, indicating a degree of familiarity with the structural form of documentation and a possible familiarity with Latin. One group is even said to have arrived at an

abbey demanding a document that they knew to be adorned with gold and lapis lazuli, displaying an ability to recognize texts based on more than simply the words on a page.⁵ Actions that fall into this category, while perhaps not signs of literacy in the strictest sense, do display a form of literacy that may not have been readily apparent in 1381. Instances in which supposedly illiterate' peasants were able to recognize documents employ them to serve their own interests provide clues into how these medieval communities understood and practiced their own form association with texts. In contrast with the first category, we do have access to accounts of rebels engaging with writing and documentation in this way, making it much easier to examine what occurred during these moments as well as how they were recorded.

The third and final category is again more difficult to parse, as it relates to the rebels' indirect or performative engagements with textual practices and documentary culture. Many of their actions, while not dealing specifically with writing and literacy, do speak to their ability to read and interpret social and legal customs. This includes instances where rebels supposedly conducted their own unsanctioned public trials and executions, as well as symbolic and performative actions that demonstrated their interpretive proficiencies. While analysis of these accounts can become somewhat abstract, the implications and availability of references to these actions tells us a great deal about the social forces at play during the Revolt. Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion on the transgressive nature of festivity (what he calls the 'carnavalesque') is appropriate to consider here, as it can provide a lens through which we can read some of the rebels' more festive performances (the public bonfires, for example). When considered alongside the rebels' direct engagements with texts, this category sheds light on their desire to assert their

⁵ Thomas Walsingham, *Gesta Abbatum Monasterii Sancti Albani* (Rolls Ser., London, 1869), iii, 308

ability to both understand and participate in the culture of textual interpretation that had been developing over the previous centuries, a culture from which they likely felt excluded.

II. Literary and Historical Background of the Revolt

An understanding of the literary context surrounding the Revolt in 1381 requires some level of exploration into feudal communities in England and how the general population viewed their relationship with the king and writing. The concept of a 'kingdom' signified much more than simply a geographic territory ruled by a single monarch, and the king himself was by no means granted absolute authority. A kingdom, rather, was generally viewed as being in some ways synonymous with its people, representing not necessarily the land on which they lived but the common identities they shared and the fealty they owed to the king. This king, in turn, was seen as a representative of his people and their community, not because he had been chosen specifically by the people, but because the existence of a monarch was viewed as a necessary part of the communal structure of a kingdom.⁶ The two ideas of 'community' and 'lordship' were not always distinct, and in fact often necessitated each other in the mind of a kingdom's population; a community only made sense insofar as it existed in relation to a lord, and a lord's authority came from his existence as an embodiment of the community. Furthermore, a king's status as monarch depended on the extent to which he successfully embodied his kingdom and its people. Far from having absolute authority, there was a general sentiment that in exchange for one's fealty, the king would be obligated to take responsibility for the treatment of his people and the justice they received. As the duty of a lord was to best represent and embody his kingdom, and as the idea of a kingdom was founded upon the communal identity of a people, a

⁶ Reynolds, Susan, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900-1300* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1997), 250-252

king's authority was therefore seen as necessary and legitimate insofar as it was used to facilitate the exchange of fealty for justice.⁷

This feudal relationship was by no means static, though, and ideas of how best to construct the social hierarchy were in constant flux in the minds of the intelligentsia. Part of the difficulty in discussing the motivations and social forces behind the Revolt comes from the fact that communal roles were regularly being questioned, which makes imposing categories onto the groups somewhat difficult, if not outright problematic. The synonymity between 'community' and 'lordship' and the exchange of obedience for justice, while ingrained in the minds of medieval communities, were not immune to this inconstancy.⁸ The passage of time and the development of new legal customs inevitably led to the changing of feudal roles and social systems, occasionally leading to moments of conflict and unrest such as the events of 1381.

One aspect of this change was the increasing prominence of texts and documentation within England's communities, as well as the question of literacy and its ambiguous existence across social groups. This coincided with a shift in England's legal system away from local customs and practices and towards a much more centralized and codified system of law throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Prior to this shift, while the royal court did hear certain select cases, most peoples' everyday experience with the legal system involved local courts and their individual judicial traditions. In theory, royal authority did extend to all levels of

⁷ Huscroft, Richard, *Ruling England 1042-1217* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 35. Huscroft notes several instances of medieval documents that reference the king's duty to enact laws that were just and abolish laws that were not.

⁸ Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, 259. Reynolds writes that 'Nothing could be more misleading than the textbook idea that a king of the feudal age was a *primus inter pares* ['first among equals'], dependent on "feudal bonds" for what little authority he had... Ideas of feudal hierarchy were only beginning to be worked out in the twelfth century and most of them were not articulated until even later.'

this system, but in reality the king's grip on these local courts was relatively loose.⁹ By the time of Henry II's reign (1154-1189), however, this grip had begun to tighten. As royal writs became more common within the legal system, clerks and bureaucrats began employing certain formulas in the production of their texts. This standardization of the documentary form allowed them to produce documents quickly and efficiently for specific circumstances, streamlining the process of issuing writs (with royal authority) across various levels of government. With these writs playing an ever-increasing role within local courts and legal customs, the king's authority became a more familiar aspect of peoples' daily lives.¹⁰

The king's influence on the laws and customs of English communities was not a new development, by any means, and it certainly did not signify the complete disappearance of local legal traditions. In fact, part of the king's duty regarding the exchange of obedience for justice involved his upholding of these traditions in an impartial and reasonable manner. Ranulf de Glanvill's *Treatise on the Laws and Customs of England* (*Tractatus de legibus et consuetudinibus regni Anglie*), dated at around 1187-1189, outlines the duties and expectations of a lord and the justice they are expected to administer. '[H]is Highness's court,' the *Treatise* says, 'is so impartial that no judge there is so shameless or audacious as to presume to turn aside at all from the path of justice or to digress in any respect from the way of truth. For there, indeed, a poor man is not oppressed by the power of his adversary, nor does favour or partiality drive any man away from the threshold of judgment.' For Glanvill, the king is someone who 'does not scorn to be guided by the laws and customs of the realm which had their origin in reason and have long prevailed' and, more importantly, 'is even guided by those of his subjects most learned

⁹ Huscrof, *Ruling England*, 37

¹⁰ Huscrof, *Ruling England*, 175

in the laws and customs of the realm whom he knows to excel all others in sobriety, wisdom and eloquence....'¹¹ A king's merit as the embodiment of justice, then, depends both on his ability to uphold the law impartially and truthfully as well as his ability to respect and follow the laws and customs of his realm under the guidance of those who are intimately familiar with them. Glanvill does not appear to imply that the king is the source of justice, only that it is his duty to administer it. This view of royal authority lays the groundwork for discussions about the role of texts within the English legal system, as Glanvill goes on to claim that despite England's laws being 'unwritten,' they are still to be seen as laws so long as they 'are known to have been promulgated about problems settled in council on the advice of the magnates and with the supporting authority of the prince...' He stresses that were these laws to be seen as illegitimate on the basis of their not being prescriptively written down, their authority would thus appear to come from the act of writing rather than 'the justice of him who decrees them or the reason of him who establishes them.'¹² For Glanvill, legitimate authority was rooted in the king's justice, not in the written word.

This discussion on the role of writing within England's legal system continued throughout the thirteenth century. Henry de Bracton, in his treatise *On the Laws and Customs of England* (*De legibus et consuetudinibus angliae*), roughly dated to sometime during the 1220's or 1230's, begins by introducing the nature of English law with regards to local practices and writing:

Though in almost all lands use is made of the *leges* and the *jus scriptum*, England alone uses unwritten law and custom. There,

¹¹ Glanvill, *The Treatise on the Laws of England commonly called Glanvill*, ed. G. D. G. Hall (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1965), 1-2

¹² Glanvill, 2

law derives from nothing written [but] from what usage has approved. Nevertheless, it will not be absurd to call English laws *leges*, though they are unwritten, since whatever has been rightly decided and approved with the counsel and consent of the magnates and the general agreement of the *res publica*, the authority of the king or prince having first been added thereto, has the force of law. England has as well many local customs, varying from place to place, for the English have many things by custom which they do not have by law, as in the various counties, cities, boroughs and vills, where it will always be necessary to learn what the custom of the place is and how those who allege it use it.¹³

Here, the treatise appears to stress the importance of basing England's legal system on common usage rather than prescriptive (written) laws, while also allowing for the possibility of writing for the purpose of education and consistency. A clear dichotomy is established between a codified, prescriptive legal system and a system of common law, but neither appears to be privileged over the other. With the 'force of law' being 'whatever has been rightly decided and approved with the counsel and consent of the magnates and the general agreement of the *res publica*,' Bracton's treatise attempts to emphasize the legitimacy of England's localized judicial practices, arguing that their validity is equal to practices based on codified *leges* or *jus scriptum*. In doing so, the *Treatise* seems to value the foundation of local custom in England's legal system. Writs had certainly become a commonality by Bracton's time, so it is interesting that he displays such an explicit attempt at emphasizing the non-prescriptivist basis of English laws and their relationship to writing during a period in which writing was taking on a new role in governance and society.

¹³ Cum autem fere in omnibus regionibus utatur legibus et iure scripto, sola Anglia usa est in suis finibus iure non scripto et consuetudine. In ea quidem ex non scripto⁵ ius venit quod usus comprobavit. Sed non erit absurdum leges Anglicanas licet non scriptas leges appellare, cum legis vigorem habeat⁶ quidquid de consilio et consensu magnatum et rei publicæ communi sponsione, auctoritate regis sive principis præcedente, iuste fuerit definitum et approbatum. Sunt etiam⁷ in Anglia consuetudines plures et diversæ secundum diversitatem locorum. Habent enim Anglici plura ex consuetudine quæ non habent ex lege, sicut in diversis comitatibus, civitatibus, burgis et villis, ubi semper inquirendum erit quæ sit illius loci consuetudo et qualiter utantur consuetudine qui consuetudines allegant. Bracton, *On the Laws and Customs of England*, ed. G. E. Woodbine and S. E. Thorne (Cambridge, 1968-1967), 19

Both Glanvill and Bracton, while stressing that England's legal system is non-prescriptivist and 'unwritten,' do ultimately discuss the necessity of writing and documents in the judicial process of reviewing and interpreting laws on a case-by-case basis. Glanvill, in addressing the intended practicality of his *Treatise*, explicitly states that 'It is... utterly impossible for the laws and legal rules of the realm to be wholly reduced to writing in our time,' due to both the 'ignorance of scribes' and the 'confused multiplicity of those laws and rules.' He admits, however, that there are indeed some court rules that should be written down, a process that he finds 'very useful for most people and highly necessary to aid the memory.' His reason for writing these rules down in what he describes as an 'intentionally commonplace style and [with] words used in court' is to ultimately 'provide knowledge of them for those who are not versed in this kind of inelegant language.'¹⁴ This preliminary discussion on the role and value of writing displays not just a familiarity with the increasing prominence of textuality in the English judicial system, but a recognition of the practical relationship between memory and the written word. As the *Treatise* is explicitly stated to act as a guide for those who may otherwise have difficulty navigating the development of England's legal procedures into what would eventually become its system of Common Law, it asserts itself as something of a memory aid. Glanvill understands that the growing proliferation of writs as legal precedents would ultimately result in a bloated and confusing judicial system, and acknowledges the need for educated, literate people in the process of maintaining the non-prescriptivist and case-by-case system of lawmaking that characterized English justice.

Bracton similarly touches on the centrality of writing in his treatise. He states 'The intention of the author is to treat of such matters and to instruct and teach all who desire to be

¹⁴ Glanvill, 3

taught what action lies and what writ, [and]... to treat of law that the unskilled may be made expert, the expert more expert, the bad good and the good better, as well by the fear of punishment as by the hope of reward....'¹⁵ Bracton claims that, having examined the great many laws and customs of England, he has collected his findings into a *summa*, 'committed to memory forever by the aid of writing.' Bracton takes his intentions even further than Glanvill, going so far as to assert that his *summa* 'ennobles apprentices and... enables them to rule in the realm and sit in the royal chamber, on the very seat of the king, on the throne of God, so to speak, judging tribes and nations, plaintiffs and defendants, in lordly order, in the place of the king, as though in the place of Jesus Christ...'¹⁶ Here we see perhaps the most explicit association being proposed between royal justice and the production of texts, as Bracton implies that what he commits to writing essentially has the power to lift justices, legists, and even the 'unskilled' up to the level of the king in their understanding of the law. There is also the implicit claim that royal authority is essentially synonymous with this understanding of the law, and that both are intimately connected to divine law. Bracton's assertion, then, continues the trend of extending royal power across all levels of government in order to accommodate the increasing number of documents and legal processes. Now, however, the idea is proposed that a bureaucracy of clerks, justices, and legists is a necessary part of the administration of royal power.

With regards to writs specifically, both Glanvill and Bracton present several interesting discussions in which the authority of these documents is laid out. In his *Treatise*, Glanvill explicitly states that 'according to the custom of the realm, no-one is bound to answer concerning any free tenement of his in the court of his lord, unless there is a writ from the lord king or his

¹⁵ Bracton, 20

¹⁶ Bracton, 19,20

chief justice.’ He then includes an example of what such a writ would look like, demonstrating the proper form and structure if one were to be issued.¹⁷ In doing so, Glanvill consciously perpetuates the standardization of the royal writ and its form, as the expectation is that the contents of his *Treatise* will be used to instruct others in the writing and interpreting of these documents. Furthermore, Glanvill draws specific attention to the various degrees of litigation, outlining the process by which a case may be moved from a local court to a county court, and then from a county court to the royal court. This, alongside the standardization of writs and their authority, indicates the degree to which England’s legal system was becoming increasingly codified and text-dependent, a process that involved the extension of royal authority into the everyday dealings of local communities and their judicial practices.

Much of the work of Glanvill’s *Treatise* happens between the lines, implicitly perpetuating the automation and codification of the judiciary in a way that seemingly argues for the necessity of England’s burgeoning bureaucratic class. Glanvill describes the ‘unwritten’ nature of England’s laws as being equally legitimate to other, more prescriptivist legal systems, but is very careful to grant himself the authority to write his *Treatise*, as he deems it crucial to the education of less experienced clerks and justices. As part of this education, he addresses the social and legal functions of writs as extensions of the king’s authority and maps out the form they are to take when being constructed and issued. One of the major functions of these writs, he claims, is to expedite and standardize the process of moving litigation up the legal ladder from local courts to the royal court. Underlying all of this, though, is what he states as the main purpose of his *Treatise*, namely that there is a correct way of navigating this system as a legist, and that as most people are incapable of understanding the intricacies of the system, the guidance

¹⁷ Glanvill, 148

he provides is essential for things to run properly in the face of an increasingly complex legal system. When considered alongside Bracton's later claim that educating the less experienced members of the bureaucracy 'enables them to rule in the realm and sit in the royal chamber, on the very seat of the king, on the throne of God,' it becomes clear that the judicial function of the king and his court had begun to change. While the concept of an English 'state' was still many centuries away, its legal system was becoming much more centralized and automated as the king's authority as lawmaker gradually crept into the everyday lives of local communities.¹⁸ Part of this expansion was due to the growth of this bureaucratic class of clerks and legists, whose job it was to deal with the increase in writs as extensions of royal justice, and whose necessary existence was stressed by the writings of individuals such as Glanvill and Bracton. Their works emphasized the difficulty of understanding England's local laws and customs as well as the importance of adhering to a standard form in the production of writs, while seemingly advocating for the exclusivity of their own professions. As most people are incapable of truly engaging with English law, they say, there is a necessity for a social class whose exclusive purpose is to deal with (and standardize) the proliferation of this law, all while acting with royal authority in place of the king.

It would be a mistake, however, to view the self-assertion of this bureaucratic class as simply a malicious plot on the part of the intelligentsia to acquire and maintain royal power. While this power does appear to be important to Glanvill and Bracton, and while there was certainly a degree of intellectual exclusivity inherent in the bureaucracy, it is important to recognize that England's legal system was in fact becoming more complex and difficult to

¹⁸ Clanchy, Michael, "Literacy, Law, and the Power of the State" *Publications de l'École française de Rome*, 82 (1985): 25-34. See Michael Clanchy's article for a more extensive discussion on the centralization of England's legal system as it relates to the development of the English 'state.'

navigate. Emily Steiner notes that by the fourteenth century, ‘the legal document was clearly one of England’s primary texts, and possibly the only written text available to every social stratum.’¹⁹ Richard Firth Green argues that this expansion of and reliance on textuality coincided with a shift in peoples’ notions of ‘truth’ towards privileging written evidence over memory, and stresses ‘how difficult it had become by the mid-fourteenth century to maintain an illusion of communal coherence founded on ethical truth in the face of the unwavering insistence of written evidence on a depersonalized intellectual truth.’²⁰ This proliferation of documents and the privilege given to them ultimately contributed to the increased ability of the general population to engage with the legal system, meaning the royal and county courts were now responsible for a much larger number of cases than in previous years. Bracton states that ‘there will be as many formulas for writs as there are kinds of actions, for no one may sue without a writ,’ indicating an awareness of the potential difficulties that could emerge with such an influx of documents; if England was going to maintain its traditional, case-by-case legal customs, it would be necessary to deal with the fact that there would be a constant stream of new writs, trials, and precedents to keep track of.²¹ This evolving judicial system did legitimately require a larger number of people to coordinate and oversee it than in previous centuries. As such, the responsibilities of these people had begun to shift as well, so that lawyers, judges, sheriffs, and bailiffs now required a much more focused set of literary skills. Much of Glanvill’s and Bracton’s concerns about the need for educating a select group of people for bureaucratic positions, then, were well-founded. Whether the emergence of this bureaucracy in its ultimate form was inevitable or not would be

¹⁹ Steiner, Emily, *Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4

²⁰ Green, Richard, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 37-38

²¹ Bracton, 286

near impossible to answer, but recognizing that the development of textuality in England's legal system brought with it complex new challenges is important in understanding the build up to the Revolt in 1381. Men such as Glanvill and Bracton, while certainly making moves to legitimize their authority as bureaucrats, were by no means attempting to occupy their space in the social hierarchy without good reason.

However, despite the perfectly legitimate function these bureaucrats intended to serve, it is still no wonder that by 1381 some may have felt that the exchange of fealty for justice with the king was being interrupted. While it is true that the standardization of England's legal system would have increased the likelihood of an individual's plea being taken up by the county or royal court, the actual act of litigation, particularly at higher levels, now involved engaging with an (often obfuscating) bureaucratic process.²² Furthermore, as this process apparently asserted itself as an extension of the king, the question of who exactly was participating in the exchange of fealty for justice would have been difficult to answer: was it the king, or a bureaucrat ostensibly acting on his authority? Margery Starre's cry of 'Away with the learning of the clerks!' is particularly telling in this context; frustrated with the growing gap between her fealty and the king's justice (a gap that was beginning to overflow with clerks, documents, and bureaucrats), she vocally expressed her discontent and demanded the restoration of the idealized feudal relationship between a lord and his community.

The confusion about where exactly justice came from was only exacerbated by the fact that as English law became more standardized, so did the language in which it was conducted. By the thirteenth century, most official business in the upper levels of English society was being conducted in Latin (and occasionally French). As Latin was also the language of the Church, it

²² Clanchy, "Literacy, Law, and the Power of the State," 30-31

essentially came to represent a higher level of education and status. For those in medieval England who considered themselves to be the authoritative voices on language and literature, proficiency in Latin became, at least in theory, an indicator of one's position in society. Michael Clanchy discusses the development of this mentality in the Middle Ages. He outlines two of the axiomatic dichotomies that characterized this way of thinking, namely *clericus: laicus* and *litteratus: illitteratus*. The former, he states, indicated the medieval distinction between those who lived in the service of God (the 'clergy') and the general masses of the people (the 'laity'). The *litteratus: illitteratus* distinction, while initially of Roman origin and meant to signify the difference between those with 'knowledge of letters' and those without, eventually became synonymous with the *clericus/laicus* distinction and came to represent the divide between those with or without a Latinate education. As Latin proficiency decreased, however, these two dichotomies became entangled with one another. Those who were to be considered literate were necessarily (again, in theory) not part of the laity.²³

In reality, these distinctions were nowhere near as clear-cut as some may have envisioned them to be. Some degree of Latin proficiency was by no means exclusive to the clergy, especially by the fourteenth century. H. G. Richardson and G. O. Sayles, for example, stress that by Henry II's reign (1154-1189) '[we] may presume then that a layman who exercised an office demanding the use of written instruments was literate, just as we presume that a clerk who might be called upon to exercise an office in the Church was literate.'²⁴ Practical literacy was therefore

²³ Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record* (London, 1979), 228-232. An invaluable resource for any study of medieval literacy. Clanchy discusses the transition from a social and legal system based primarily on memory towards one that increasingly depended on writing and texts. Clanchy's work presents literacy (in the medieval sense) as an ambiguous and evolving concept, and focuses on the practical and legal benefits that literacy would have presented for people in a variety of different social classes.

²⁴ H.G. Richardson and G.O. Sayles, *Governance of Mediaeval England from the Conquest to Magna Carta* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1963), 274

an important part of life for many members of the so-called laity, such as sheriffs, justices, or bailiffs for instance. Even among the peasantry it was often useful to acquire some knowledge of Latin; Clanchy states that ‘theoretically, at least every adult in England should have known some Latin because of its use in the liturgy.’²⁵ It is not improbable, he says, that some members of the peasantry would have developed this knowledge further and could perhaps exercise enough proficiency in Latin to sign their names on official documents. The ability to speak some Latin provided a legal benefit as well, as literacy was sometimes used to prove one’s status in relation to the clergy, which could result in their sentence being reduced from hanging to imprisonment.²⁶ The assumption, then, that literacy implied one’s belonging to a very specific social class did not hold up under scrutiny. Members of the medieval intelligentsia expressed frustration at the difficulties of classifying groups of people on the basis of literacy, in much the same way that modern scholars find it difficult to apply their more modern conception of literacy to these same groups of people.²⁷

Despite this difficulty in applying the term ‘literate’ to certain people as a way of demarcating specific social groups, many members of the so-called laity would likely not have had sufficient knowledge of Latin to participate directly in the development of England’s legal system as the court language became increasingly standardized and codified. This, coupled with the development and expansion of the bureaucracy, could very well have led some groups to feel excluded from the legal process and further removed from the king’s justice than they felt they deserved to be. The traditional exchange of fealty for fair judgment had evolved to include this

²⁵ Clanchy, *From Memory*, 239

²⁶ Gable, Leona, *Benefit of Clergy in England in the Later Middle Ages*, (Northampton, Mass, 1928-1929), 73-78

²⁷ Clanchy, *From Memory*, 229-231. Clanchy provides several examples of medieval scholars struggling to discuss individuals’ status as literate or illiterate, due to their respective social classes and relation to the church.

new clerical class of lawyers and justices acting on the king's authority, disrupting the idealized social order that many would have viewed as a necessary part of a functioning feudal government. It is no wonder, then, that tensions occasionally erupted in response to these new developments as communities not included in the bureaucracy attempted to assert their right and ability to participate in the legal system as equal subjects under the king. By the fourteenth century, for example, most freemen and some serfs had claimed their own seals for use in official documents, publicly displaying their ability to sign and legitimize contracts in a fashion similar to the seals of the royalty and nobility.²⁸ The Revolt in 1381 was in many ways an instance of these tensions and confusions flaring up violently in England, with questions of literacy, legal authority, and feudal social contracts factoring into many of the events that took place on the part of the dissidents. The demands presented to the king at Mile End and the supposed speeches of John Ball indicate a desire to rethink traditional feudal relations and communities while still upholding fealty to the monarchy, and many of the rebels' actions can be read as attempts at asserting their capability of participating in spaces that had, in many ways, excluded them.

1381, however, was by no means the first instance of such a conflict between the peasantry and the authority of texts. In 1377, for example, a protest movement emerged in southern England which, despite its much smaller scale, anticipated many of the tensions that would erupt four years later. Referred to as the 'Great Rumor,' the movement centered around interpretations of Domesday Book and a question regarding ancient demesne. A community of rural workers, believing themselves to be exempt from feudal labor services based on supposed tenure agreements within Domesday Book, refused to work and collectively agreed to organize

²⁸ Clanchy, *From Memory*, 235

themselves against any attempts to seize their land or do them harm.²⁹ A petition was presented to parliament in October of 1377 expressing concern over the actions of the peasants and rural workers and requesting that a commission be formed to address the crisis. This request was granted, and ultimately a statute was issued giving authority to the formation of these commissions.³⁰

The Great Rumor and its explicit association with Domesday Book offers a glimpse into some of the questions and anxieties that plagued English society during the fourteenth century. Domesday Book had a long history of textual authority, and by the reign of Edward I (1272 - 1307) it was frequently cited to settle disputes, particularly with regards to ancient demesne.³¹ Richard FitzNeal, in his *Dialogue Concerning the Exchequer* (*Dialogus de Scaccario*), gives an account of the origins and purpose of Domesday Book: ‘When the famous William “the Conqueror” of England...’ he states, ‘had brought under his sway the farthest limits of the island, and had tamed the minds of the rebels by awful example, to prevent error from having free course in the future, he decided to bring the conquered people under the rule of written law.’³² FitzNeal describes the process by which William reportedly attempted to unify and adjust the ‘threefold versions’ of English law (Mercian law, Dane law, and Wessex law), and his efforts to survey the lands and holdings of the realm. This survey was ‘set down in common language and drawn up into a book,’ so that ‘every man may be content with his own rights, and not encroach

²⁹ Faith, Rosamond, “The ‘Great Rumor’ of 1377 and Peasant Ideology.” In *The English Rising of 1381*, edited by R.H. Hilton and T. H. Aston (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1974), 44-45.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Clanchy, *From Memory*, 156

³² FitzNeal, *Dialogus de Scaccario: The Course of the Exchequer and Constitutio Domus Regis (The Establishment of the Royal Household)* ed. Johnson, Charles, and Greenway, D. E. (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1984), 63-64. The original Latin reads: ‘Cum insignis ille subactor Anglie, rex Willelmus eiusdem pontificis sanguine propinquus, ulteriores insule fines suo suiugasset imperio et rebellium mentes terribilibus perdomuisset exemplis, ne libera de cetero daretur erroris facultas, decreuit suiectum sibi populum iuri scripto legibusque subicere.’

unpunished on those of others.’³³ He addresses the name ‘Domesday Book’ and its association with the Last Judgment, explaining that ‘as the sentence of that strict and terrible last account cannot be evaded by any skilful subterfuge, so when this book is appealed to on those matters which it contains, its sentence cannot be quashed or set aside with impunity.’ It is referred to as Domesday Book, he says, ‘not because it contains decisions on various difficult points, but because its decisions, like those of the Last Judgment, are unalterable.’³⁴

Domesday Book, drawn up in 1086 under William the Conqueror, represents not only the increasing authority of written records within English society, but the increasing association between writing and royal authority as well.³⁵ While FitzNeal’s account of its origins and significance are likely exaggerated and romanticized (Domesday Book itself did not unify and standardize English law), his description of the text is nevertheless useful in shedding light on the changing attitudes towards the authority of writing at the time. By the thirteenth century, it was not uncommon for members of the peasantry to appeal to Domesday, and copied passages from the book (called ‘exemplifications’) were in constant circulation, and were often used in the legal process of consulting Domesday. Indeed, 1377 appears to have been an exceptionally busy year in this regard, with at least seventeen exemplifications recorded in the Calendar of Patent

³³ ‘Ab hiis itaque totius terre descriptio diligens facta est tam in nemoribus quam pascuis et pratis, nec non et agriculturis, et uerbis comunibus annotata in librum redacta est, ut uidelicet quilibet iure suo contentus alienum non usurpet impune.’

³⁴ ‘Hic liber ab indigenis “Domesdei” nuncupatur id est dies iudicii per metaphoram. Sicut enim districti et terribilis examinis illius nouissimi sententia nulla tergiuersationis arte ualet eludi, sic cum orta fuerit in regno contentio de hiis rebus que illic annotantur, cum uentum fuerit ad librum, sententia eius infatuari non potest uel impune declinari. Ob hoc nos eundem librum “iudiciarium” nominauimus, non quod in eo de propositis aliquibus dubiis feratur sententia, set quod ab eo, sicut a predicto iudicio, non licet ulla ratione discedere.’

³⁵ Clanchy, *From Memory*, 156-157

Rolls between March and August across upwards of twenty different localities.³⁶ The petition issued in October of that year describes this widespread phenomenon:

To our lord the king and the council of parliament, the commons of the realm show that in many parts of the kingdom of England the villeins and tenants of land in villeinage, who owe services and customs to the lords for various reasons and within various lordships, both ecclesiastical and secular, have (through the advice, procurement, maintenance and abetting of certain persons) purchased in the king's court for their own profit exemplifications from the Book of Domesday - concerning those manors and villis where these villeins and tenants live.³⁷

Essentially, groups of these 'villeins and tenants' across England had purchased exemplifications from the Book of Domesday, and had begun using them as the basis for petitions against their lords. 'By colour of these exemplifications,' the petition continues, 'and through misunderstanding them as well as the malicious interpretation made of them by the said counsellors, procurers, maintainers and abettors, they have withdrawn and still withdraw the customs and services due to their lords, holding that they are completely discharged of all manner of service due both from their persons and their holdings.' In this case, the exemplifications were presented as proof of the peasants' exemption from their duties and obligations on the basis of ancient demesne: their claim, in essence, was that Domesday Book originally recorded their land as belonging to the crown, which in turn offered them special privileges as tenants of the land they occupied. They were, therefore, not bound to the service of their current lords.

³⁶ Tillotson, J.H., "Peasant Unrest in the England of Richard II: Some Evidence from Royal Records," *Historical Studies*, 16:62 (1964), 1-16.

³⁷ Dobson, R.B., *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (version 2nd ed., reprint.). 2Nd ed., reprinted. History in Depth (New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 1983), 76-78. The original petition and its reply are recorded in *Rotuli Parliamentorum; ut et Petitiones, et Placita in Parlamento*, (London, 1783), III 21-22

The above petition goes on to warn that the villeins in question had organized themselves ‘in confederation and alliance’ for the purpose of resisting their lords’ attempts to seize the land, gathering money amongst themselves to support their efforts and even going so far as to threaten violence on any servants or officials that attempted to ‘make distraint upon them for their customs and services....’³⁸ The petitioners express genuine fear of the potential consequences should the local lords make an effort to forcibly collect the land and services they felt they were owed, specifically referring to the villeins’ actions as ‘rebellion and resistance.’ Furthermore, the petition states ‘it is feared that, unless a speedy remedy is applied, either war might easily break out within the realm because of the said acts of rebellion, or the villeins and tenants will, to avenge themselves on their lords, adhere to foreign enemies in the event of a sudden invasion.’³⁹ A request is issued for a commission to deal specifically with the rebellious villeins in the interest of the safety of the realm, which was soon granted under a royal statute later that year.

The petition betrays a feeling of anxiety regarding the events of 1377 beyond simple fear for the public good. There is a strong emphasis on the fact that the villeins were able to both obtain exemplifications and produce readings of them, and by using language such as ‘misunderstanding’ and ‘malicious interpretation,’ the petition further perpetuates the idea that there are correct ways of understanding and interacting with documents. The villeins, it seems to imply, have not only failed to do so, but have even resorted to interpreting Domesday with malicious intent. Their actions then, by implication, could not be justified, as their reading of Domesday should not be seriously considered. The petition continues to display this sense of anxiety in its description of the villeins’ forming ‘confederation and alliance together to resist the

³⁸ Ibid., 76

³⁹ Ibid., 77

lords and their officials by force.’ While care is taken not to present these groups as legitimate, the petition cannot help but depict the villeins as more or less organized and politically capable members of the realm. Despite arguing that their interpretations of Domesday are not to be taken seriously, there is a very clear plea for parliament to take their insurgent actions seriously.

According to the petition, the local lords made no attempts to distrain the dissenting villeins, ‘for fear of the deaths that might result from the rebellion and resistance of these men....’ Perhaps in its most explicit display of anxiety, the petition directly references the possibility of larger, widespread rebellion or war, stating ‘...it is feared that, unless a speedy remedy is applied, either war might easily break out within the realm because of the said acts of rebellion, or the villeins and tenants will, to avenge themselves on their lords, adhere to foreign enemies in the event of a sudden invasion.’ It even goes so far as to advise immediate action ‘in order to avoid a danger of the sort that recently occurred in the realm of France [the *Jacquerie* in 1358] because of a similar rebellion and confederation of villeins against their lords.’

In referencing not just the idea of a popular rebellion but a very specific rebellion within recent memory, it becomes clear that these possibilities were great sources of anxiety in the minds of the upper-classes, even before 1377. And as this particular moment of dissent appears to have originated from a ‘malicious interpretation’ of Domesday Book, it is no wonder that the question of literacy among the peasant class weighed heavily on the minds of England’s intelligentsia. Both the immediate reply to the petition and the royal statute that followed wasted no time in granting the establishment of commissions to deal with the seeds of rebellion. ‘If due

Remedy be not the rather provided upon the same Rebels,' the statute says, 'greater Mischief, which god prohibit, may thereof spring through the Realm.'⁴⁰

Little is known about the ultimate consequences of the Great Rumor in 1377. Rosamond Faith speculates that the appointed commissions may never have even come to fruition, and that once the initial panic settled down, landowners may have found themselves able to rely on their local courts in dealing with the potential rebellion.⁴¹ The statute explicitly denies the villeins their provocative interpretations of Domesday Book, and in fact it appears unlikely that anything in Domesday would have actually supported their rebellious claims in the first place.⁴²

Interestingly enough, England's Patent Rolls don't appear to record any exemplifications of passages from Domesday Book between 1377 and 1381, which may indicate some degree of success with regards to discouraging 'malicious interpretations' among the peasantry.⁴³ Despite the Great Rumor's lack of documented evidence, however, it would certainly be a mistake to think of it as an insignificant moment of unrest. The social and literary forces underlying the Great Rumor were still very much at play in English society, and while the events of 1377 were certainly distinct from those of 1381, they were not entirely unrelated.

The apparent motivations of the villeins in 1377 were not nearly as broad as those of the dissidents in 1381, in large part because the latter was, by its very nature, a much more ephemeral event than the former. While figures like Wat Tyler and John Ball have entered into popular memory as leaders of the Revolt, it would be a mistake to assume that their influence

⁴⁰ 1 Richard II, *cap.* 6, in *The Statutes of the Realm*, ed. A. Luders et al., 11 vols. (Record Comm., London, 1810-1828), ii, 2-3

⁴¹ Faith, 43-73

⁴² Faith, 57-59

⁴³ Tillotson, 7

reached every locality involved in the insurrection. Those who rebelled did not think of the event as Wat Tyler's Rebellion, and the majority would likely never have heard one of John Ball's provocative sermons. Trying to prescribe universal motives or even goals to the Revolt as a whole would deny the diverse sentiments of the various communities involved, many of which were inspired by their own local disputes and discontents. This is not to say, however, that the Revolt was unorganized, nor does it mean that those involved were incapable of expressing their specific grievances and motivations. It is likely that there was at least some level of coordination between various rebel groups, and while understanding their thoughts and actions through the filter of clerks and chroniclers poses the issue of having to deal with the fact that these groups had a vested interest in negatively characterizing the rebels, there is still a great deal we can learn about the underlying causes of the Revolt from records to which we do have access. At the center of these accounts appears to be the question of literacy and textuality as it applied to the so-called peasant class. Much of what the dissidents sought to accomplish in 1381 involved engaging with writing and documentary culture, and within the records of their actions we find the same anxieties being expressed that had plagued the English intelligentsia four years earlier.

III. Rebel Texts

In analyzing accounts of the Revolt as they relate to documents and literacy, I begin by discussing the first of the three categories outlined previously, which includes texts produced and circulated by the rebels themselves. As mentioned above, there is an unfortunate lack of material to examine here. While it would be presumptuous (and problematic) to say that these communities did not produce any texts at all relating to the Revolt, the reality is that the only pieces of writing that appear to have survived and to have been attributed to the rebels are six

letters recorded in chronicles several years after the events of 1381, and one written petition found in the King's Bench Rolls. Walsingham (who records one of the letters) and Knighton (who records the remaining five) both transcribe the contents of the letters in their original vernacular, and both attribute them to either John Ball or to other rebels whom they name in their accounts of the Revolt. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that all six letters come directly from the hand of John Ball, who may have employed a variety of literary pseudonyms while writing them.⁴⁴ The question of the petition's authorship is similarly ambiguous – one John Preston delivered it to the Earl of Buckingham on June 24, and while he claimed to have written it by himself, the document appears to have been produced by (or at least at the request of) a group of rebels. An analysis of these documents and the implications of their production can therefore provide crucial insight into the actions and motivations of those who took part in the insurrection in 1381.

The first letter in question is recorded in Walsingham's *Historia Anglicana*, and its opening lines appear to be explicit calls to action. The author (who we will presume to be John Ball), takes on the role of 'Iohon Schep,' implying that he is a shepherd. He greets the apparent recipients of his letter, referencing other occupations that would likely have been common among the rebels: 'Iohan Mullere' is apparently a miller and 'Iohan Cartere' a man that transports goods in a cart. The name 'Iohan Nameles,' which precedes the others, could simply be a way of drawing attention to the occupational names that follow, or perhaps acts as a stand-in

⁴⁴ Dobson, 379-380. See also Richard Firth Green, 'John Ball's Letters: Literary History and Historical Literature.' In *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, edited by Barbara A. Hanawalt, 4:176–200. University of Minnesota Press, 1992. With regards to the authorship of the letters, Green argues that while it is still an open question, the letters do seem to indicate that John Ball was the singular author. The fact that their existence was corroborated by two independent sources (Knighton and Walsingham) and that there are a number of rhetorical similarities between them leads Green to state that 'the balance of probability does seem to favor [the conclusion] that all six letters were written by one man, and that that man was John Ball' (182).

for a general audience who may be reading the letter. Ball cautions this theoretical audience to ‘bee war of gyle in borugh, and stondeth togidre in Godes name, and biddeth Peres Ploughman go to his werk, and chastise wel Hobbe the Robbere, and taketh with yow Iohan Trewman...’⁴⁵

Following this, he includes a short series of rhyming couplets:

Iohan the Mullere hath ygrounde smal, smal, smal;
 The Kynges sone of hevene schal paye for al.
 Be war or ye be wo;
 Knoweth your freend fro your foo;
 Haveth ynow, and seith ‘Hoo’;
 And do wel and better, and fletch synne,
 And seeketh pees, and hold you therinne;
 And so biddeth Iohan Trewman and alle his felawes.

These couplets, alongside the initial wordplay and allusions that begin the letter, display a surprising degree of sophisticated literary merit. Ball explicitly references Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, initially by name and then again with the phrase ‘do wel and better,’ which is a sign not only that he himself was familiar with the poem, but that the recipients of his letter would have been as well.⁴⁶ Richard Firth Green notes that several of the couplets may have been inspired by well-known proverbs and stock material at the time, having been reinterpreted and adapted by Ball to fit the tone of his letter. Lines 3-7, for example, appear to be a variant on ‘a well-known set of proverbs’ that read ‘He is wys that kan be war or him be wo; / He is wys that lovet his friend and ek his fo; / He is wys that havet i-now and kan seyn, “ho!” / He is wys that

⁴⁵ Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, ed. H. T. Riley (Rolls Series, 1863-1864), ii, 33-35

⁴⁶ Michael Johnston notes that John Ball is thus the first person known to have cited Langland’s poem, and speculates that he may in fact have lived a mere seven miles from Langland and could possibly have been personally familiar with the poet. See Johnston, ‘William Langland and John Ball,’ *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 30 (2016), 29-74

kan don wel, and doeth al so.’⁴⁷ Green notes that the Walsingham letter changes ‘for rather obvious reasons, the pacific injunction to love both friend and foe... into the more menacing “Knoweth your freende fro your foo.”’⁴⁸ Furthermore, Green identifies specific sources in which Ball may have found his inspiration, namely the preaching notes of Friar John Grimestone (1372) and a miscellany located in a fourteenth-century collection of miracles and preaching guidelines. The phrase ‘seeketh pees, and hold you therinne,’ however, appears to be unique to Ball’s letters. Green glosses the line as ‘Strive for peace, and keep yourselves in peace,’ a possible reference to the principle of the just war.⁴⁹ The implication, then, would be that Ball apparently did not view the Revolt as an act of aggression, but as a means of achieving peace. This would support the notion that the rebels did not necessarily view their actions as rebellious, but rather as a means of restoring order in the kingdom; imploring a community to ‘seek peace’ in the context of social unrest would help further the idea that the community’s actions are just and legitimate.

John Ball’s proficiency in literary allusion and rhyme would not necessarily have surprised someone like Walsingham, as Ball already had a reputation as a notorious preacher and would thus have been included within the ranks of the *litterati*. It is interesting, then, that he describes the letter as being ‘full of riddles,’ (*‘quamdam litteram aenigmatibus plenam’*), likely in reference to the various allusions and bits of wordplay.⁵⁰ Walsingham himself thus seems to grant the letter a certain amount of sophistication, perhaps unable to fully deny Ball (and those

⁴⁷ Green, 184-185

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Walsingham, 33

with whom he corresponded) a place among the *litterati*. His description of the events surrounding the letter's discovery, however, may actually take this a step further. He writes:

Afterwards, this letter was found in the tunic of a man who was to be hanged for his share in the disturbances... John Ball confessed that he had written this letter and sent it to the commons; and he admitted that he had written many others.⁵¹

Whether or not the letter was truly found in the tunic of a man who was to be hanged is unknown and would be exceedingly difficult to confirm, although Walsingham's account nevertheless tells us a great deal about the implications of such a letter. If we consider his account to be historically accurate, it would appear that Walsingham (consciously or unconsciously) indicates a degree of coordinated communication amongst the rebels and their various communities. The fact that he neither names the man in question nor describes his specific crimes suggests that the man may not have been of any particular significance as an individual.⁵² A seemingly insignificant member of the insurrection being in possession of such a letter could support Walsingham's claim that Ball 'admitted that he had written many others,' as it may imply that such letters were common enough to be carried in the pockets of individual rebels. Whether this specific rebel in question was the intended recipient of the letter is unknown, but the fact that (if the account is accurate) such an individual had carried the letter with him would mean that he himself had some degree of literary proficiency, or that he intended to pass it off to someone who did. Both cases would necessitate at least some level of coordination and communal literacy, as the letter was clearly meant to circulate among rebel groups.

⁵¹ '...quae ex post inventa est in manica cujusdam suspendendi pro turbatione praefata... Hanc litteram idem Johannes Balle confessus est scripsisse, et communibus transmisisse, et plura alia fatebatur et facit....' The above translation comes from Dobson's *The Peasant Revolt of 1381*, 380-381.

⁵² Although the possibility that Walsingham may have deliberately left him unnamed in order to deny him his individuality should not be discounted.

Walsingham's account then, despite its dubious historical accuracy, points towards the rebels' production and distribution of texts playing at least some role in the Revolt of 1381. The extent to which these letters directly contributed to the insurrection is, again, difficult to determine, as so few of them are available to us (and even then only indirectly). They do, however provide some insight into what figures such as John Ball hoped to achieve through insurrection, and what they hoped to communicate to the groups that joined them.

The remaining five letters are recorded by Henry Knighton in his *Chronicon*. He only directly attributes two of them to John Ball, although as stated above there is compelling evidence to suggest that Ball was the author of all five. Like Walsingham, Knighton also includes the letters in their original Middle English, a fact that Michael Johnston believes could indicate the chroniclers' transcribing them directly from copies that circulated among the rebels in 1381.⁵³ Knighton attributes the first to a Jakke Mylner, which likely would have been yet another example of a pseudonym meant to represent an archetypal laborer, in this case a miller.⁵⁴ An appeal is made to 'help to turne hys mylne aright,' followed by what seems to be a metaphor in which the image of a windmill is used to represent a virtuous and functioning society:

Loke thy mylne go aright, with the foure sayles, and the post stande in stedfastnesse. With ryght and with myght, with skyl and with wylle, lat myght help ryght, and skyl go before wille and ryght before myght, than goth oure mylne aryght. And if myght go before ryght, and wylle before skylle; than is oure mylne mys adyght.⁵⁵

⁵³ Johnston, 46

⁵⁴ The first three letters recorded by Knighton are presented as speeches given by their presumed authors, but it is generally accepted that they were in actuality letters written by John Ball. (Green, 182)

⁵⁵ Knighton, *Chronicon*, ed. J. R. Lumby, (Rolls Series, 1889-95), ii, 138-140

The qualities of might, right, will, and skill are perhaps meant to appear as the four sails of a windmill, the claim being that in order for the windmill to function properly, certain sails must come before others; right must come before might and skill before will, otherwise the mill cannot fulfill its purpose.

Aside from the apparent social metaphor, the emphasis on rhyme returns in this letter with the constant repetition of ‘ryght’ and ‘myght’ and ‘skyl’ and ‘wylle.’⁵⁶ Again we see an example of a text that employs clear literary devices; the four virtues mentioned are essentially grafted onto the sails of the windmill, itself a symbol of the laboring class. The archetypal ‘Jakke Mylner’ therefore not only has a claim to these virtues because of his occupation, but apparently is capable of recognizing the correct order in which they should go to ensure stability and functionality.

The second letter Knighthon records is attributed to a ‘Jakke Carter,’ another name that implies an archetypal laborer. It begins with a much more explicit call to action than in previous letters, as Jakke Carter ‘prays yowe alle that ye make a gode ende of that ye have begunnen, and doth wele and ay bettur and bettur, for at the even men heryth the day.’⁵⁷ Here we see yet another reference to Langland with the repetition of ‘doth wele and ay bettur and bettur,’ and indeed the letter then goes on to say ‘Lat Peres the Plowman my brother dwelle at home and dught us corne, and I will go with yowe and helpe that y may to dyght youre mete and youre drynke, that ye none fayle....’ These repeated allusions to Langland display an interpretive proficiency in not only John Ball but in the larger dissenting communities as well, as they would presumably have

⁵⁶ Richard Firth Green notes that the rhyming of these specific words was common at the time, and provides several examples of similar rhymes in medieval poetry. (Green, 185-186)

⁵⁷ Knighton, 139

been the recipients of these letters and would therefore have been expected to recognize Ball's allusions and make sense of his interpretations.

Knighton attributes the third letter to a 'Jakke Trewman.' The use of the name Trewman is interesting, as it does not appear to imply any kind of archetypal laborer as the previous names did. Its apparent reference to the idea of truth, though, is further developed in the contents of the letter, which begins by claiming that 'falsnes and gyle havith regned to long, and trewth hat bene sette under a lokke, and falsnes regneth in everylk flokke.'⁵⁸ This idea that falseness has overtaken truth in the kingdom appears several times throughout the letters, and seems to have been a relatively common sentiment among the rebels in 1381. This letter is unique however in that it specifically mentions the 'clerkus' as a source of this falseness: 'Speke, spende and spede... and therefore synne fareth as wilde flode, trew love is away, that was so gode, and clerkus for welthe worche hem wo.' The words 'clerk,' 'clergy,' and 'clerical' were, as has been discussed, ambiguous and constantly changing. Whether this letter is referencing the clergy specifically or is referring to the ever-growing class of clerks and bureaucrats is difficult to determine. Nevertheless, it is telling that one or more of these social groups are identified explicitly in this letter, particularly considering the emphasis it places on truth and falseness.

The fourth and fifth letters are directly attributed to John Ball, and contain many of the same literary moves and sentiments of the previous three. The fourth letter begins with a plea for the reader to hear his words: 'Nowe ryght and myght, wylle and skylle,' he says, 'God spede every ydele. Nowe is tyme. Lady helpe to Ihesu thi sone, and thi sone to his fadur, to make a gode ende, in the name of the Trinite of that is begunne amen, amen, pur charite, amen.'⁵⁹ John

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Knighton, 139-140

Ball again references the virtues of right, might, will, and skill, this time directly associating them with the spiritual world. He repeats his hope that what has begun (presumably the Revolt) will have a good end, explicitly calling on God and the Holy Trinity to aid them. This can certainly be read as a call to action, but it can also be seen as an attempt to legitimize the Revolt as an extension of divine will. This is developed further in the final letter that Knighton records:

John Balle seynte Marye prist gretes wele alle maner men and byddes hem in the name of the Trinite, Fadur, and Sone and Holy Gost stonde manlyche togedyr in trewth, and helpez trewth, and trewth shcal helpe yowe. Now regnith pride in pris, and covetys is hold wys, and leccherye withouten shame and glotonye withouten blame. Envye regnith with tresone, and slouthe is take in grete sesone. God do bote, for nowe is tyme amen.⁶⁰

Here, Ball opens by directly calling upon his authority as a priest, perhaps in another attempt to legitimize his actions as a member of the *clerici*. He again invokes the Holy Trinity in whose name he bids the readers take action. There is yet another reference to truth, and the claim that if all men ‘stone manlyche togedyr in trewth, and helpez treth,’ truth shall help them in return. Another series of rhyming couplets appears, this time emphasizing the dichotomy between truth and six of the deadly sins (Ball omits Wrath, as Green claims, ‘perhaps for obvious reasons’).⁶¹ The letter insists that, as sin and falseness now reign, it is time for the readers to stand together and strive for truth in the name of God. That this message appears in the form of a letter furthers this interpretation, as letters necessitate at least two parties: the sender and the receiver. There is an inherent sense of community in this textual form, which makes it appropriate that Ball would use it to insist that all men ‘stone manlyche togedyr.’

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Green, 182

These six letters, when analyzed as a whole, speak directly to the motivations of the dissenting communities and their relationship to literacy and textuality. As discussed above, these letters were clearly meant to be circulated among groups of rebels; none of them appear to have been addressed to specific individuals, but rather to various theoretical laborers and communities. Knighton's fourth and fifth letters even begin as greetings to 'all maner men,' implying that they were intended to be public documents. Steven Justice even speculates that these letters were produced as what he calls 'broad-sides,' single sheets or rolls posted in public places such as church doors and town squares. Justice, in considering this possibility, argues that a broadside 'embodied a claim as well as a message: merely by existing, it asserted, tendentiously or not, that those who read only English - or even could only have English read to them - had a stake in the intellectual and political life of church and realm.'⁶² In this case, he continues, the use of pseudonyms '[makes] authorship programmatically unlocatable, [asserting] that these letters could have been written by anyone - any miller, any carter, any true man - and that now literacy and the privileges it symbolized were to be exercised by a new clientele.'⁶³

While the evidence Justice cites in support of his claims is largely speculative, the implications of what he proposes are still worth considering. The letters do indeed seem to have been intended for a public audience, which does suggest that their existence could have been a message in and of itself. With so much tension around the exclusivity of textuality and one's ability to participate in the legal system, it would make sense that the circulation of these letters

⁶² Justice, Steven, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 28-30. A comprehensive analysis of the role that writing and texts played in the Revolt. Justice argues that the events of 1381 display an attempt on the part of the rebels to assert their claim to literacy. For Justice, literacy in medieval England represented a claim to social and legal authority, and could therefore be reinterpreted and repurposed as a means of participating in this authority.

⁶³ Justice, 38

represented an assertion of agency on the rebels' part. The repeated use of rhyme, metaphor, allusion, and wordplay could extend this even further, as it would have showcased the ability of the rebels to recognize, understand, and interpret well-known pieces of literature at the time, as well as how to deploy them to new ends.

The letters' constant references to truth and falseness may also indicate a recognition of the developing nature of 'truth,' which was becoming increasingly ambiguous as England's legal system had come to depend on textuality and documentation. This reliance on written records, Richard Firth Green argues, 'forced people to confront not only the fallibility of human memory but, far more traumatically, the unreliability of human trouthe.'⁶⁴ Green argues that this contributed to a shift that occurred during the late-fourteenth century in the meaning of the Middle English word 'trouthe' from something akin to 'integrity' or 'dependability' into a word designating 'conformity to fact.'⁶⁵ John Ball's letters consistently appear to equate truth with virtue and moral integrity, placing it in direct opposition to the deadly sins and the privileging of might over right. Furthermore, the third letter Knighton records is attributed to 'Jakke Trewman,' an interesting choice of name when we consider that each of the other pseudonyms explicitly reference laboring-class professions. The implication appears to be that 'trouthe,' in the older sense of the word signifying moral integrity, is characteristic of the peasantry, that it is essentially a profession alongside miller, carter, and shepherd.

In stressing the nature of truth as an inherent characteristic of a certain class, we may also consider how the letters call upon divine authority as a means of legitimizing their claims. Through their repeated invocation of the Holy Trinity, they establish a connection between

⁶⁴ Green, *Crisis of Truth* 38

⁶⁵ Green, *Crisis of Truth* xiv

divinity, truth, and the laboring class, all of which stand in opposition to the guile and falseness that apparently reigned in their society. It is especially interesting, then, that it is the letter attributed to Jakke Trewman which explicitly names the ‘clerkus’ as a source of moral degradation. As documents and the production of texts would generally have been associated with the clerical class, positioning clerks in contrast to truth and divinity seems to be a direct acknowledgement of the increasing status that writing enjoyed in English society, as well as the constant growth of the bureaucracy within the legal system. John Ball’s letters, then, serve not only as evidence that the Revolt had some claim to organization and cohesion, but as evidence of the rebels’ desire to assert their ability to participate in the burgeoning literary culture of fourteenth-century England.

While these letters have received a good deal of critical attention, there is evidence of another document that could very likely have come from the hands of a rebel. On June 24, after the rebellion had ostensibly been defeated, John Preston of Hadleigh in Suffolk delivered a written petition to the Earl of Buckingham. It read as follows:

We the commons beseech of the special grace of our Lord the King that no-one should pay annually for customary land more than 4d an acre or 2d for half an acre or a halfpenny for a rood, with or without buildings, for all services and demands, and also we beseech that if less was paid it should remain as it was before this time. We also beseech that no court should be held in any vill apart from the leet of the Lord King annually and forever. And also we beseech that if any thief, traitor or malefactor against the peace be captured in any vill, that you will give us a law by which he will be chastised.⁶⁶

Commissioners immediately arrested Preston and asked him who had drawn up the petition;

Preston’s response was, remarkably, that he himself had written it. The commissioners pushed

⁶⁶ Prescott, Andrew, “Writing about rebellion: using the records of the Peasants’ revolt of 1381,” *History Workshop Journal*, Volume 45, Issue 1, SPRING 1998, 13-14. Preston’s case is originally found in the Rolls of the King’s Bench, at KB 145/3/6/1.

him further on this matter but, after obtaining no new information from him, had Preston beheaded.⁶⁷

Whether he was executed simply because of his participation in the Revolt or due to his supposedly producing such a radical petition is difficult to say. It is entirely possible that the very act of writing the petition was seen as treasonable in itself; the commissioners may not have believed that Preston was literate enough to write up a document without help, as evidenced by their insistence on discovering his accomplices. That the petition begins with ‘We the commons’ would seem to add credence to this, the implication being that Preston at least believed himself to be speaking on behalf of his community. Furthermore, the petition appears to refer to the concessions at Mile End in which the king agreed to abolish villeinage and permitted his subjects to find and punish ‘traitors,’ placing the petition firmly within the political language of the Revolt as a whole. The fact that the petition roots its authority in ‘the special grace of our Lord the King’ also speaks to the idea that the rebels saw themselves as defenders of the realm, acting in accordance with Richard’s wishes. Preston may not have considered that his petition would be met with such condemnation upon its delivery, especially if he truly believed himself to be acting with royal authority. Also of note in the petition is the demand that ‘no court should be held in any vill apart from the leet of the Lord King annually and forever.’ For Preston (and any others he may have been speaking for), the role of the king in administering justice is of particular significance, and the inclusion of this specific demand indicates a sense of frustration with the legal system that had grown large enough to inspire a formal, written petition. We see again a deference to royal authority, which could further explain Preston’s decision to present his petition to the Earl of Buckingham; having presumably participated in the Revolt and heard

⁶⁷ Ibid

about the concessions at Mile End, it is entirely possible that he rationalized his actions based on what he believed (with some justification) to be the king's orders, a common trend during the events of 1381.

In considering these rebel texts, Andrew Prescott notes the striking differences between the letters of John Ball and the petition of John Preston. He stresses how 'down-to-earth' the petition is, with its relatively formal language and 'common-sense character.' It has, according to Prescott, 'been worked out with the care of a legal document,' as evidenced by the care with which the rent demands are presented.⁶⁸ John Ball's letters, by comparison, take on a much looser form, employing a variety of metaphors, rhyme schemes, and literary allusions. This is not to say that either document is more valuable as a primary source than the other; in fact, the existence of both shows that the rebels were capable of emulating different textual forms to serve their immediate purposes. The letters, which were likely meant to circulate only among rebel groups, come across as playful and loose with their poetic nature compared to the much more formal structure of the petition, which was evidently produced specifically for an audience of commissioners and justices. Despite their difference in form, though, the petition and the letters still appear to contain the same (or at least similar) message, namely that it was the duty of the rebels to punish 'traitors' in the service of the king. Furthermore, both place a heavy emphasis on community in their content and construction; while it is possible that each may have been written by individuals, they do imply communal authorship, and neither would be able to function as intended if removed from their social contexts (letters and petitions assume an audience, by their very nature). The implications of these (admittedly few) documents speak directly to the underlying forces at play in the Revolt. Those who rebelled, faced with a growing bureaucratic

⁶⁸ Ibid, 15

class that they believed stood between themselves and royal justice, pinpointed texts and writing as a major locus of authority, and sought to manipulate it to serve their collective interests.

Producing documents that could serve as cryptic letters or official petitions was just one way of demonstrating that they were perfectly capable of occupying the social and legal space of clerks, justices, and lawyers; they not only understood the authority of such documents, but how to construct and employ them as well.

IV. Rebel Engagement with Existing Documents

Despite this lack of rebel-produced documents, there is by no means a lack of sources indicating how the rebels felt about texts that already existed. On 13 June, 1381, a group of rebels made their way through Essex along the coast towards London, stopping at various localities and seizing the belongings of landowners, priors, and royal officials. Ralph atte Wode, one of their leaders, is recorded as having broken into the house of Edmund de la Mare, an admiral located in the village of Peldon. Ralph, upon discovering ‘a writ patent of the King with all the muniments touching the office of Admiral upon the sea,’ impaled the document on a pitchfork and carried it with him to Mile End to display before the king, after which he apparently returned it to de la Mare’s house in Peldon.⁶⁹ Although Ralph was arrested, he eventually appeared before the king’s court in Westminster with a royal charter that he believed

⁶⁹ ‘...et libri domini Regis a domo dicti Edmundi usque le Mile End super unum longum furcum felonice portandum coram domino Rege....’ KB 145/3/6/1, translated and recorded by J. Sparvel-Bayly in “Essex in Insurrection, 1381,” *Transactions of the Essex Archeological Society*, vol. I (1878), 217-218. Sparvel-Bayly translates the Latin *furcum* as ‘gallows,’ however most modern scholars agree that Ralph likely impaled the document on a two-pronged pitchfork.

granted him a pardon.⁷⁰ Unsure if Ralph's actions placed him outside the scope of the general pardon, however, the court ultimately had him recommitted to prison, after which no more appears to be known about him.

The case of Ralph atte Wode tells us a great deal about the relationship between the rebels in 1381 and the increasingly pervasive role of textuality in English society. It therefore acts as an appropriate starting point from which to examine the second of the three categories outlined above, which includes instances of rebels interacting directly with existing documents during the Revolt. Regardless of Ralph's motivations (about which we unfortunately know very little), his actions clearly stand out as symbolic gestures within the wider context of the Revolt, providing a key example of the interplay between textuality, public performance, and authority. This is not to say, however, that Ralph's actions were entirely unique; there are in fact many recorded instances of similar symbolic actions taking place throughout England at the time. Interacting directly with texts and documents was a common thread among the various groups of rebels, and therefore it is important to take these accounts seriously in attempting to understand the Revolt. As the frustrations and grievances of the rebels largely involved their uneasy relationship with a legal system that increasingly depended on written documents, there is a great deal to unpack in terms of how they chose to make use of the documents to which they had access. As the existing evidence is rarely explicit in its depiction of the Revolt, however, analysis of the various instances recorded in chronicles and legal documents necessarily requires a good deal of speculation. What follows is an examination of these instances, in which I will identify commonalities between them in an effort to demonstrate that at the center of the Revolt there

⁷⁰ Richard granted general pardons to all rebels involved in the Revolt, with the exception of any involved in the killing of royal officials, specifically Archbishop Sudbury, Chief Justice John Cavendish, and John Cambridge, the prior of Bury. (Sparvel-Bayly, 217)

existed feelings of unease and exclusion among the rebels regarding the intersection of texts, literacy, and authority.

Returning to the case of Ralph atte Wode, there are a number of things to consider in reading his actions - the choice, for example, to impale the writ on a pitchfork. Much of what is recorded of the Revolt refers to the rebels destroying official records and documents, and it appears that Ralph, prior to his arrival in Peldon, burned a collection of books at the Temple of Cressyng.⁷¹ In the case of Edmund de la Mare's 'writ patent of the King,' then, the question is why Ralph chose instead to impale this specific document on his pitchfork and parade it all the way to London and back. Unfortunately, the exact contents of the document are unknown, other than that it described 'all the muniments touching the office of Admiral of the sea,' so it is impossible to tell whether or not Ralph viewed the text itself as having any special significance. If not, it is entirely possible that he simply saw it as a material representation of de la Mare's authority, regardless of what the document actually said. It would make sense then, as Juliet Barker speculates, that Ralph 'perhaps intended to show that [he] had claimed the office of admiral from de la Mare' by publicly displaying the writ as if it were a royal banner.⁷² If this is indeed the case, it would appear that Ralph viewed the document as authoritative in and of itself, and that his being in possession of it was, at least symbolically, the equivalent of possessing de la Mare's authority as admiral. His gesture would then be a way of drawing explicit attention to the materiality of the document, effectively denying its inherent authority while simultaneously

⁷¹ Sparvel-Bayly, 217

⁷² Barker, Juliet, *England Arise* (London : Little, Brown and Company, 2014), 200-201. Barker further considers the possibility that Ralph atte Wode may have come from Bradwell-on-Sea, a village across the shore from Peldon, which could be an indication that he had previously clashed with de la Mare over maritime disputes. Barker does acknowledge, however, that Ralph most likely came from Bradwell near Essex, and thus that the two probably did not know each other.

affirming his own ability to possess said authority; the document would, in this case, represent a specific office rather than a specific person, and thus Ralph's seizing the document for himself can be read as a seizure of the office from de la Mare. The fact that Ralph chose to impale de la Mare's writ on a pitchfork specifically could be further evidence to support this reading of his gesture; the pitchfork, as a tool generally associated with farmers, can in this case be read as a symbol of the peasantry and their labor. Taking this a step further, one could even read into the fact that pitchforks were generally used to shovel manure and animal feces, indicating that value Ralph saw in the charter. Impaling and publicly displaying an official document on such a symbolic instrument would highlight the apparent contrast between the peasantry and the *litterati*, and would again act as an affirmation of Ralph's ability to possess, interpret, and utilize textual forms in service of his own interests.

It would be a disservice, however, to ignore the comparatively darker implications of Ralph's symbolic actions. The image of a person engaged in active revolt publicly displaying an object on the prongs of a pitchfork will inevitably evoke images of body parts, particularly decapitated heads, impaled on stakes and displayed as grotesque warnings. Indeed, the rebels in 1381 were known to have engaged in this practice; Walsingham describes at least three examples of rebel groups publicly beheading both church and royal officials and impaling their severed heads on the pillory.⁷³ This act, as Nicole Gaunthier explains, was meant 'to make a mockery of it and to add to the infamy of the condemnation,' with the displacement of the head from the rest of the corpse representing 'an enormous part of the penalty for those who hope for the resurrection of the bodies.'⁷⁴ Symbolically, then, the displaying of a severed head implied much

⁷³ Walsingham, *Saint Albans Chronicle*, 451, 481, 485

more than a simple warning. The intent was essentially to demean the beheaded individual, reducing their visage to a gruesome and monstrous image, entirely removed from the rest of the body and instilling a feeling of utter disgust in all who look upon it.

In impaling an official document on a pitchfork and publicly carrying it before the king, Ralph atte Wode essentially mimicked the symbolic gesture of displaying body parts as a form of punishment and humiliation. In this case, the document would then take the place of de la Mare's head, the object of humiliation being the office and duties of admiral-upon-the-sea. Furthermore, while Ralph certainly did not literally impale de la Mare's head, there was still a sense of corporeality to the document, as the parchment itself would have been made of animal skin. His audience would have been aware of this, making the symbolic connection between the document and flesh readily apparent in the minds of those witnessing his actions. It is thus possible that Ralph hoped to emphasize an interchangeability that he saw between de la Mare's body (or just the human body in general) and the writ he possessed, implying that such documents had come to represent much more than their purported function.

In drawing this connection between documents and body parts, Ralph's actions could also be read as commentary on the notion of royal bodies in general. The image of the body politic as an extension of the king's body could recontextualize the gesture of impaling an official document on a pitchfork, especially when we consider to what extent these documents had come to be viewed as extensions of the king's justice. In a sense, Ralph may have been proclaiming his dissatisfaction with how this justice was being administered, displaying de la

⁷⁴ 'Du corps supplicé on prélève parfois la tête afin de la porter en dérision et d'ajouter à l'infamie de la condamnation.... Cette dispersion représente une part énorme de la pénalité pour qui espère la résurrection des corps.' Gaunthier, Nicole, *Le châtement du crime au Moyen Âge* (Rennes : Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1998), 111-172

Mare's writ as the object of this dissatisfaction as well as a symbol of royal justice being a part of the king's body. In his *Policraticus*, considered one of the earliest medieval works of political philosophy, John of Salisbury draws such a connection between the body politic and the body of the king. 'It is first of all required,' he states, 'that the prince evaluate himself entirely and direct himself diligently to the whole body of the republic, whose condition he enjoys. For a republic is... a sort of body which is animated by the grant of divine reward and which is driven by the command of the highest equity and ruled by a sort of rational management.'⁷⁵ John then explicitly lays out the anatomy of this 'body,' in which the position of the head is granted to the prince, 'subject only to God and to those who act in his place on Earth...'⁷⁶ Interestingly, John specifically references the position of record keepers within this body, whom he describes (along with the treasurers) as the stomach and intestines; '[T]hese,' he says, 'if they accumulate with great avidity and tenaciously preserve their accumulation, engender innumerable and incurable diseases so that their infection threatens to ruin the whole body.'⁷⁷

Ralph atte Wode's actions take on an intriguing significance when viewed within the context of this analogy. The king, as head, would be expected to direct the rest of the body accordingly to ensure good health and balanced humors. Record keepers, as the stomach and intestines, are to effectively regulate the accumulation of legal history in the form of documents, ensuring that the body does not become 'infected' from overabundance, hearkening back to

⁷⁵ 'Est ergo primum omnium ut princeps se totum metiatur et quid in toto corpore rei publicae, cuius uice fruatur, diligenter aduertat. Est autem res publica, sicut Plutarco placet, corpus quoddam quod diuini muneris beneficio animatur et summae aequitatis agitur nutu et regitur quodam moderamine rationis.' John of Salisbury, 282. Translation from Nederman, 66

⁷⁶ Ibid 282-283

⁷⁷ 'Quaestores et commensuarienses (non illos dico qui carceribus praesunt, sed comites locorum priuatorum) ad uentris et intestinorum refert imaginem. Quae, si immensa auaritia congeruerint et congesta tenacius reseruauerint, innumerabiles et incurabiles generant morbos, ut uitio eorum totius corporis ruina immineat.' Ibid 283

Glanvill's assertion that England required a class of trained legists to 'correctly' produce and interpret texts. Impaling such a document on a pitchfork and displaying it publicly before the king, then, draws the attention of the head to a source of potential infection within the stomach and intestines. The document itself then acts as a substitute for a piece of the king's body and, more broadly, the body politic of the kingdom. In this case, Ralph's gesture would be an appeal to the king to address the ailments of the realm, ailments Ralph saw as resulting from a failure to properly regulate and administer justice by way of official documents. And while it is unlikely that he had John of Salisbury's specific metaphor in mind while marching with his pitchfork, it does seem that he similarly viewed documents and bureaucracy as pieces of a complex body (with the king at its head) that could be acted upon.

Ralph's case, though, was by no means the only instance of rebels channeling their frustrations into the destruction of documents; most (if not all) accounts of the Revolt reference the seizing and burning of various records, archives, and contracts. Walsingham, for instance, describes such occurrences taking place near St. Albans Abbey, where he lived as a Benedictine monk: '[The peasants] accordingly decided to set fire to all court rolls and muniments, so that after they had got rid of these records of their ancient service their lords would not be able to claim any right at all against them at some future time....'⁷⁸ Later, he recounts a group approaching the abbot at St. Albans Abbey, demanding that 'new charters of liberties be drawn up for them, and that they be immediately released from the pledges which their fathers had

⁷⁸ '...statuerunt omnes curiarum rotulos et munimenta uetera dare flammis ut, obsoleta antiquarum rerum memoria, nullum ius omnino ipsorum domini in eos in posterum uendicare ualerent; factumque est ita.' Walsingham, 414, translation provided by Leslie Watkiss, 415. Walsingham uses the Latin *rustici* to refer to the dissidents in question, which Watkiss translates as 'peasants.'

made to the monastery.’⁷⁹ Fearing for his life, the abbot agreed to their demands, apparently intending to draw up such charters for the dissidents and ordering that they be officially released from their services. The rebels, however, were not wholly satisfied; ‘Accordingly,’ Walsingham writes, ‘the villeins, who intended to have no recourse to civil law or canon law in future, immediately consigned to the flames in the town market-place by the Cross, the pledges as well as certain muniments of the house and rolls which they had extorted from the archdeacon.’⁸⁰

Walsingham’s account implies at least some degree of familiarity with official documents on the part of the dissenting groups; while it is certainly possible that they simply chose to burn records indiscriminately (‘...they accordingly decided to set fire to all court rolls and muniments’), the fact that Walsingham refers to the documents specifically as ‘records of their ancient service’ and ‘pledges as well as certain muniments of the house and rolls’ would seem to indicate that the rebels were capable of recognizing documents that related to their particular communities (or, at the very least, that they understood how such documents functioned with regard to their daily lives). This of course may only have meant that they knew how to spell their own names or the names of the lands they inhabited. Regardless, the fact remains that these groups of rebels were clearly not acting without direction and motive, especially when one considers the symbolic significance of their method of destroying the documents they seized.

Destruction by immolation would have been a very familiar public spectacle for communities at the time. Midsummer Eve in particular (which was to take place on 23 June, only a few weeks after the initial outbreak of the Revolt) was often characterized by communities

⁷⁹ ‘...postulantes nouas cartas illis fieri libertatum, et obligationes quas fecerant patres eorum monasterio ipsis protinus redonari.’ Ibid 456-457.

⁸⁰ ‘Igitur mox obligationes, cum quibusdam domus munimentis et rotulis quas extorserant ab archidiacono, quia nec iura ciuilia nec canonica de cetero frequentare cogitauerant, in foro uille, iuxta crucem, flammis consumpserunt.’ Ibid.

gathering in the streets around bonfires as a way of celebrating their respective localities. This image of festivity became so ubiquitous that different neighborhoods within a town were sometimes even referred to as ‘bonfires.’⁸¹ The rebels' public burning of records would almost certainly have brought to mind Midsummer Eve celebrations, especially as the actual Midsummer Eve was only weeks away. Moreover, choosing to stage this burning ‘in the town market-place by the Cross,’ as Walsingham describes it, meant that the goal was in fact to stage a public spectacle; the marketplace would have been the center of economic and communal life, and the nearby cross may have provided a sense of spiritual legitimacy. Furthermore, as the rebels were apparently motivated by a desire to ‘[get] rid of these records of their ancient service’ and ensure that ‘their lords would not be able to claim any right at all against them at some future time,’ their burning of these documents in such a public fashion can be read as a celebration of their perceived liberation from manorial servitude. Their performance of the Midsummer Eve festivities would then involve not just an affirmation of their neighborly bonds, but of their supposed communal freedom as well.

It is important to note, though, that the rebels’ interactions with documents during the Revolt did not always involve the process of destruction. Amidst the accounts that attempt to depict them as a violent and destructive force, there are a number of references to moments where their focus appears to be the production (or at least the preservation) of documents. An appropriate study of the Revolt requires the recognition of these instances; placing too heavy an emphasis on the rebels’ violence towards documents would give the sense that they sought only to negate the authority and presence of documentary culture, rather than assert their ability to participate in it. Had their actions stopped at the burning of charters and records, they would

⁸¹ Phythian-Adams, Charles, “Ceremony and the Citizen: The Communal Year at Coventry 1450-1550,” *Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500-1700* (Routledge : London, 1972) 57-85. Also see Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 151.

indeed have appeared to outright reject the social and legal authority of the written word.

However, while it is certainly possible to read a sense of rejection in their actions, the fact that accounts exist of their choosing to engage in production rather than destruction indicates that their motivations were far more complicated than simple negation.

Perhaps the most indicative example of this is again found in Walsingham's account of the Revolt. In his description of the events at St. Albans Abbey, he refers to an instance in which a group of rebels, apparently dissatisfied with the concessions the abbot had granted them, continued to demand 'an ancient charter about the liberties of the villeins, whose capital letters [they said] were alternately gold and azure.'⁸² Insisting that he knew of no such charter, the abbot assured the rebels that he would search for it and that, if found, it would be surrendered to them 'without any trickery....' Eventually, having failed to discover the charter in question, the abbot approached the crowd and offered a new charter that he had drawn up according to their demands, telling them that 'if they were prepared to accept it, he was ready to confirm it with the authority of the seals of the abbot and the convent.'⁸³ This new charter, however, was rejected:

...it failed to meet their approval because they had not framed its terms themselves; and with great arrogance they sent a message by one of the abbot's esquires to the abbot, that he was to send his clerk with ink and parchment, to write what they themselves decided, and the abbot and convent were to affix their seals after that. The abbot declared to them that he would confirm all that they wanted provided that in future they would be friendly and cease their activity.⁸⁴

⁸² 'Set ista sufficere non ualebant indisciplinato populo quin quamdam cartam antiquam reposcerent de libertatibus uillanorum cuius littere capitales fuerunt, de auro una, altera de azorio, sine qua non posse satisfieri uotis populi asserebant.' Walsingham, 456-457.

⁸³ '...et si dignarentur eam acceptare, paratus erat ad confirmandum eam roboramine sigillorum abbatis et conuentus' Walsingham, 460-461.

⁸⁴ 'Set non potuit placere eis quod ipsi non conceperant; set cum magna superbia miserunt abbati per quemdam armigerum ipsius, ut destinaret suum clericum cum incausto et percamento, ut quod ipsi decernerent, ipse scriberet et expost abbas et conuentus apponerent sigilla sua. Abbas uero renunciauit eisdem se confirmaturum uniuersa que uellent, ut tantum de cetero forent amici et desisterent ab inceptis.' Ibid.

Even after this new charter was drawn up under the direction of the rebels themselves, though, they were apparently still not satisfied and continued to demand that the abbot surrender the specific charter in question. This continued for some time, the abbot repeatedly assuring them that such a charter did not exist, until they eventually acquiesced and left the gates of the abbey.⁸⁵

The rebels' insistence on obtaining this very specific document appears to have found its origin in a belief that the Mercian King Offa (756-796) had, upon founding the abbey, granted certain liberties and privileges to the local inhabitants, liberties which had been forcefully taken away by the abbots and monks of St. Albans. This belief, Walsingham claims, originated from 'the lies of certain old men of the said villages' who had used 'false stories' (*falsas fabulas*) to convince the younger villagers to rebel.⁸⁶ Walsingham is quick to deny the historical validity of these claims, and his dismissal of these 'certain old men' and their 'false stories' appears to be an attempt at denying them the foundation upon which they justified their actions. This would certainly be in line with the notion of the *litteratus/illiteratus*, *clericus/laicus* distinction, as Walsingham clearly viewed the rebels' ability to read and understand ancient charters as underdeveloped and bordering on superstitious. Even if the case were as simple as this, though, the fact remains that these apparently underdeveloped beliefs had undeniable consequences on the abbey; Walsingham's account is testament to how powerful these beliefs could be, even if he

⁸⁵ Ibid 461-467.

⁸⁶ 'Instigabant villanos praecipue ad rebellandum, et ad libertates petendas, mendacia quorundam inveteratorum dictae villae, qui juniores per falsas fabulas ad hoc induxerunt, ut crederent se quondam habuisse libertates et privilegia a rege offa concessa, sed per abbatas et monachos exposit violenter abstracta, et contra justitiam vacuata.... Asseverabant enim, quod Rex Offa illustrissimus, cum congregasset artifices, fabros, lignarios, caementarios, et latomos, ad construendum monasterium, cum officinis suis, dederat ipsam villam latomis et operariis aliis ad inhabitandum, et ipsam honoraverat libertatibus et privilegiis, munificentia regali provisus.' Walsingham *Gesta Abbatum* iii, 365.

himself refused to acknowledge their validity. The insistence that ancient charters both granted specific liberties and were still applicable centuries after being issued was not a new phenomenon; it had only been four years since the Great Rumor addressed the authority of ancient demesne and Domesday Book. The question then should not be whether the rebels at St. Albans were ‘literate’ enough to understand the charters and documents they sought to obtain, but rather how they asserted other forms of literacy in their interactions with members of the so-called *litterati*.

Of particular interest in Walsingham’s account is the fact that in their dealings with the abbot, the rebels apparently demanded a document (specifically stated to be an ancient charter regarding their liberties) that they knew to be adorned with gold and azure capital letters. While Walsingham didn’t appear interested in dwelling on this particular aspect of their demands, his choice to present this detail at all is telling. In drawing attention to their only knowing the document by its gold and azure letters, he implies that their knowledge of such a charter was restricted to its less ‘literary’ qualities. He appears to give the sense that the rebels’ lacked a proper understanding of documentary culture and form, and as such their demands were unsophisticated and ungrounded. It is interesting, then, that he (perhaps unintentionally) contrasts this image with one in which the rebels were fully aware of what they were demanding. He explicitly states that they knew the charter to contain information about their ancient liberties, and he clearly recognizes the source of this knowledge as being rooted in local beliefs regarding King Offa’s involvement in the construction of the abbey. He also acknowledges the rebels’ dissatisfaction with the charters they did receive from the abbot, as well as their insistence on participating in the production of a new charter when the one they had originally requested could not be found, implying that they had at least some specific vision of what such a charter would

look like were they to produce it themselves. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for royal charters to be decorated with gold and azure letters; someone among the ranks of rebels, then, would have to have been familiar with this, and may have even known that such documents could have existed within the abbey's archives.⁸⁷

There is a kind of paradox, therefore, in Walsingham's account. On the one hand he describes a group of villeins, inspired by 'false stories,' demanding a specific document (that supposedly did not even exist) which they could only recognize by its gold and azure letters. On the other hand, though, his account implies that this group of villeins, inspired by a long history of appealing to documents for the recognition of ancient privileges, demanded a charter that they saw as an important artifact of King Offa's reign. In doing so, they displayed both an awareness of the physical form this charter would take as well as an understanding that such a document could possibly be found in the archives of an abbey. They appear simultaneously ignorant and knowledgeable of the role of documents and historical precedence in England's legal system.

For Walsingham, the consequences of such a reading would undeniably complicate the *litteratus/illitteratus* binary; though perhaps not literate in the formal sense, members of the so-called laity were, in this instance, displaying a surprisingly sophisticated understanding of physical documents and their authoritative role in English society. Indeed, Steven Justice goes so far as to argue that Walsingham's recording of the incident at St. Albans is an indication that he could not have understood the rebels' request for a charter with gold and azure letters, 'because he could not connect the request with the one thing he "knew" for certain about peasants: that writing was simply a mystery to them.' The fact that Walsingham would record these instances that, according to Justice, would have contradicted his preconceived notions about the laity is a

⁸⁷ Justice, *Writing and Rebellion* 257

sign that he could not have seen them as anything other than incoherent and irrational.⁸⁸ The tension in his account, then, is not simply a result of his presenting two different images of the rebels and their actions; the tension emerges from the fact that the specific actions he attempts to depict as incoherent and irrational do not appear as such to modern readers.⁸⁹ Walsingham's account does indicate clear and coherent literary thought on the part of the rebels, even if he himself could not recognize this.

Perhaps the most illuminating example of the rebels' understanding of documentary form and literacy is their insistence on and participation in the production of a new charter at the abbey. Their request that the abbot bring them 'ink and parchment, to write what they themselves decided' and then affix his seal on this new document creates an interesting dynamic in which the authenticity of a charter is intertwined with the context in which it was produced. Clearly aware of what such a charter would look like, the rebels at St. Albans demonstrated through their request an understanding of the creative process that went into the production of these documents. Walsingham appears to make no explicit claims about the legitimacy of the charter that was written up for the rebels, and there is no evidence that it directly resulted in any social or legal consequences; it is unlikely, though, that Walsingham would have viewed this document as carrying any sort of authority in and of itself, considering the coercive context in which it was written. The rebels, however, would have seen this same context as definitive proof of the document's authority. Having been written and sealed by an abbot at St. Albans, it would have occupied the same position of authenticity as the multitude of charters already stored within the abbey's archives.

⁸⁸ Justice, 258

⁸⁹ Ibid

This question of authenticity is closely related to the concept of forgery in the Middle Ages; Alfred Hiatt covers this topic extensively, and while the document produced at St. Albans in 1381 may not be a forgery in the strictest sense of the term, many of Hiatt's conclusions are still applicable. Forgeries, Hiatt argues, are not always simply attempts at deception. A forged document is intended to 'express the *concept* of documentation,' to 'invoke a type of "intertextuality" which is... the perception of "relations" between the idea of the document and a particular "work"....' A forger's goal, he says, is to 'produce precisely such an artefact, a text which seems to narrate, more or less fully, its own context, which seems to invoke the story of its genesis.'⁹⁰ The rebels' request at St. Albans would certainly fit this framework. Their knowledge of a document with gold and azure letters had informed their understanding of this 'concept of documentation,' and they appear to have had at least some knowledge of the documentary form on which to base the production of the new charter. Furthermore, as the charter they hoped to produce was intended to replace the one they were unable to obtain, it seems they believed the new charter would therefore step into the authoritative position vacated by the old one. Its context would thus be both the contemporary circumstances of its production as well as the ancient circumstances in which the original had supposedly been issued under King Offa. That the rebels placed such a heavy emphasis on the physical characteristics of the documents at the abbey speaks to their recognition that these characteristics were an integral part of a charter's social and legal power; even when the abbot presented a new charter to them, they refused to accept it as they were not present during its production. Their specific request that 'the abbot and the convent were to affix their seals' to the charter after it was written up under their watch

⁹⁰ Hiatt, Alfred, *The Making of Medieval Forgeries: False Documents in Fifteenth-Century England* (London : British Library and University of Toronto Press, 2004), 4

further supports the notion that their actions were based in large part on a relatively sophisticated knowledge of documentary form and production.

Central to this knowledge was a recognition of the historical value inherent in documents. The charter they sought to produce was intended to perform an authoritative role based on its historical context as an extension of Offa's authority. The performativity of such a document, Hiatt suggests, 'lies in its enactment of events, its ceremonious enunciation of an action, and the record it provides for re-readings, and hence re-enactments.'⁹¹ The purpose of their new charter was to free them from their service to the abbey, thus re-enacting the role of the supposed original charter, but it also would have served the purpose of codifying this act itself in a piece of text that could in turn guide later re-enactments. The charter, then, would be infused with the memory of both the original document as well as the circumstances of the Revolt, a memory that would in a sense be 'activated' through future readings and re-readings.⁹² It draws attention to itself as a performative object, a physical materialization of communal identity that, through its social and historical authority, allows for the continuous re-enactment of the circumstances in which it was produced.

In this case then, the rebels at St. Albans were not, as Walsingham hoped to indicate, mindlessly lashing out in ignorance at the abbey and its archives. Their actions displayed a clear understanding of the form and function of documents as well as a desire to participate in the authority of documentary culture, sentiments that were by no means restricted to the rebels at St. Albans. Instances of this kind of engagement with documents can be found in several places throughout the Revolt, indicating an underlying feeling of discontent with the social role of

⁹¹ Hiatt, 12

⁹² Ibid, 59

writing in fourteenth-century England. Several instances appear in official records that tell of specific rebels possessing documents that they believed granted them authority to act on behalf of the king, displaying these documents as both a means of inciting others to rebel as well as justifications for their rebellious actions. The specific documents vary in terms of form, content, and authenticity, but as a whole the manner in which they were used speaks to the rebels' underlying motivations and sentiments regarding their ability to participate in England's documentary culture.

John Gresystone of Bottisham, for example, had in his possession letters of protection for himself and his property that had been issued by the chancery. Greystone 'went... with the aforesaid protections in his hand to show the seal to the villages of Wilburgham, Swaffham, and Burwell,' claiming that he had 'full royal power to gather and raise the population of every village to destroy the traitors and other men whom he himself might name.'⁹³ It is unknown if the protections Greystone carried were issued before or after the concessions at Mile End on 15 June, and therefore whether they specifically applied to his rebellious actions or not. Regardless, he clearly operated under the belief that the document he carried permitted him to punish those he deemed traitors to the crown, a belief that can also be seen in those inspired by his claims to revolt.⁹⁴ Greystone was arrested while in possession of his letter of protection and continued to assert that he was not culpable for the felonies he committed, again claiming to be acting on

⁹³ 'Et qd idem Johannes colore cujusdam protectionis domini Regis de pace et salvacde bonorum suorum habend sibi in cancellar domini Regis a die isto in unum annum preteritum sibi facta, ivit de villa de Bodeksham cum predicta protections in manu sua ostend' sigill' ad villas de Wilburgham, Swaffham, et Burwell, et alibi in dicta com' dicend' se habere plenam potestatem regiam congregand' levand' populam cujuslibet villat' ad destrued' proditoris ac alios homines quos ipse eis nominaret, precipiend' eis in villis predictis sub pena arcois dom' et decollat' ut secum insurgerent, et sequent' & sic falso et mendaciter levavit quam plures homines ignot' in prejudicium domini Regis Jc purturbacSem vill' predictarum' W. M. Palmer, 'Records of the Villein Insurrection in Cambridgeshire', *East Anglian* (1896), 81

⁹⁴ Barker, 218

royal authority.⁹⁵ Similarly, Adam Clymme was arrested as a ‘raiser of sedition,’ having broken into the office of one Thomas Somenour and destroyed ‘different rolls of extracted green wax,’ (*diversi rotuli extracti viredis cere*), among other muniments.⁹⁶ Clymme was said to have, while armed, wandered his locality ‘carrying a sign to gather rebels’ and ordering all bond men to immediately cease their duties to their lords on pain of beheading, ‘traitorously [assuming] the Kingly power.’⁹⁷ The ‘sign’ that Clymme carried may in fact have been a standard rather than a document, but the orders he issued clearly indicate his knowledge of the concessions at Mile End that had apparently abolished all villeinage.⁹⁸ His actions, then, were rooted in the same belief as Greystone’s, that a physical sign or seal could act as a legitimate source of royal authority and justify otherwise felonious acts.

While both Greystone and Clymme were ultimately executed, John Stanford was not. Stanford, who also wandered his locality inciting others to rebel, based his authority on a commission that he supposedly carried with him in a box (*in quadam pixide*).⁹⁹ While the contents of Stanford’s box remain unknown (if indeed it contained anything at all), his actions were certainly in line with those of Greystone and Clymme. The specifics of the document he supposedly carried were essentially irrelevant; the very possibility that he possessed a document authorizing him to incite rebellion was enough to legitimize his actions in the eyes of the community, particularly after word had spread of the Mile End concessions. Stanford and his box

⁹⁵ Palmer 81

⁹⁶ Palmer, 212

⁹⁷ ‘...fuit vagans armatus armis discoopertis portans siguum ad insurrectionem congregandum, precipieus ne aliquis cujuscumque existens conditionis libere vel simul intenderet domino suo ad aliqua servicia seu consuetudines faciendum sub pena decollationis aliter quam eis informaret ex parte magne societatis.’ Ibid

⁹⁸ Barker, 218

⁹⁹ Palmer, 100

provide yet another example of rebels exercising their own interpretive power regarding the authority of documents. The accounts of Greystone, Clymme, and Stanford show a recognition of not just the power a supposedly royal charter could hold, but that such power could reside in the document's existence as a material object. Publicly displaying these documents as objects when it was unlikely that most rebels would have been able to read them is testament to this, as the power Greystone, Clymme, and Stanford exercised apparently did not reside in the documents' words, but in their materiality.

The rebels' focus on this aspect of documents and documentary culture allowed people like Greystone, Clymme, and Stanford to assert their ability to participate in a legal system that had increasingly come to rely on writing. Their actions, rooted in the authority they (and their audiences) granted to royal charters, had clear consequences in their communities; property was destroyed, people were injured or killed, and villeins ceased rendering dues and services to their lords. The social role these documents played generally involved their enacting change, enforcing laws and customs, and serving as evidence of royal authority. Documents represented a physical extension of the king's power and as such were able to serve as justifications for particular actions. During the Revolt, while the rebels certainly manipulated these roles, they did not reject them entirely. Greystone, Clymme, Stanford and the larger communities still clearly recognized the power inherent in the royal charters they possessed (or claimed to possess); the difference lay in how they interpreted and exercised this power to serve their own purposes. They were not, therefore, rejecting the authority of documents, but were instead affirming their ability to participate in this authority.

V. Transgressive Performance and Symbolic Action

This affirmation was not necessarily restricted to the rebels' interactions with texts, though. In his account of the events at St. Albans on Saturday, 15 June, Thomas Walsingham records an instance in which a group of rebels broke into the abbey and tore up a stone floor, which had been constructed from a collection of millstones that previously belonged to the townsman. Members of the abbey had confiscated these millstones from the local tenants, who had been using them in illegal hand mills. Walsingham writes:

Some ribald people, breaking their way into the abbey cloisters, took up from the floor of the parlour doorway the millstones which had been put there in the time of Abbot Richard as a remembrance and memorial of the ancient dispute between the abbey and the townsman. They took the stones outside and handed them over to the commons, breaking them into little pieces and giving a piece to each person, just as the consecrated bread is customarily broken and distributed in the parish churches on Sundays, so that the people, seeing these pieces, would know themselves to be avenged against the abbey in that cause.¹⁰⁰

This incident, while not directly related to writing and documentary culture, still offers a valuable glimpse into the motivations of the rebel groups in 1381 and opens the door to an investigation of the third category outlined above, which includes accounts of the rebels' more symbolic and performative actions relating to texts, literacy, and authority. The motives and sentiments that inspired the rebels to burn records and impale charters on pitchforks is just as apparent in their more symbolic actions, even in the absence of physical documents; examining

¹⁰⁰ 'Tamen interim ribaldi, cum instrumentis claustrum ingredientes, de locutorio forinseco lapides molares, qui in pavimento ostii locutorii, in munimentum et memoriam antiqui placiti inter villanos et Monasterium tempore quonedam Abbatis Rcardi, locati fuerant, levaverunt, asportaverunt, et ad communes detulerunt, et ibidem minutatim confecerunt, dantes partem cuique, ut panis benedictus Dominicis diebus partiri et conferri in ecclesiis parochialibus consuevit; ut, videlicet, videntes easdem particulas, apud se recognoscerent sese olim in ea causa de Monasterio vindicasse.' (Walsingham, *Gesta Abbatum* 309, translation by Rosamand Faith, *The English Rising of 1381*, 66)

these actions reveals that the rebels were not concerned solely with texts *qua* texts, but with attitudes towards material proof and their ability to wield it.

In tearing up the floor of the abbey, for example, the rebels inscribed a new meaning onto the millstones; now, instead of acting as symbols of the abbey's victory over local millers and their illegal hand mills, the stones acted as symbols of the surrounding community's assertion of agency and self-management in the face of a domineering abbey. For someone such as Walsingham, the millstone-floor represented something specific and (quite literally) grounded in local tradition, namely, the tradition of the abbey exercising control over the community. The rebels, however, rejected this interpretation of the floor, and sought to replace it with something new. What gives actions like this significance then, as Rosamond Faith claims, is 'the fact that they expressed through symbolic means victories, albeit temporary ones, for the peasants in essentially local struggles that had gone on for generations and which must have been the subject of local tradition.'¹⁰¹

To be clear, the rebels' victory did not involve the reclaiming of the millstones to be used as millstones; if this were the case, they almost certainly would not have broken them further into little pieces to be passed around 'just as the consecrated bread is customarily broken and distributed in the parish church on Sundays....' This ritualistic act speaks to the rebels' true victory, in which the authority of the abbey was subverted and replaced by the local townsman with their own kind of authority. If reclaiming the millstones represented a reclamation of their communal agency, then perhaps their distributing the stones in the same manner as the consecrated bread represented their religious or spiritual agency. Groups of rebels taking the place of religious functionaries in this symbolic distribution process would be yet another

¹⁰¹ Faith, 66

subversion of the abbey's authority. This episode, as described by Walsingham, shows a symbolic victory in which the rebels reject and replace both the abbey's communal *and* spiritual authority with their own, a victory they achieve through a rereading and reinterpretation of the millstone-floor.

This is, of course, not the only instance of the rebels engaging in symbolic or performative actions as a means of asserting their agency. Accounts of the revolt describe several other moments in which groups of rebels publicly perform certain roles, rituals, and festivities in the service of proclaiming their discontent regarding their position in the feudal order. And while these performances do not necessarily include physical documents, they do provide valuable insight into the minds of those rebels who *did* interact with physical documents.

In his account of the events at Saint Albans, for example, Walsingham describes an incident where a group of rebels gathered 'with great pomp' and destroyed a number of gates and fences surrounding the local woods. They continued to demand the liberties that local tradition supposedly granted them (hunting rights, for example), threatening more violence against any that hindered their progress. Eventually, having gathered in the Saint Albans woods, the rebels swore an oath to each other and laid claim to the surrounding warrens, forests, and fields, joining their right hands and passing around branches they had taken from the trees as a symbolic

gesture of ownership.¹⁰² They then captured a live rabbit from a nearby field and ‘fixed it upon a pillory in the village of Saint Albans, as a sign of freedom and the warren they had acquired.’¹⁰³

This sequence of ritualistic actions demonstrates the extent to which the rebels had understood and internalized their own local traditions (the story of King Offa’s charter discussed above, for instance), as well as how far they were willing to go to publicly demonstrate their adherence to these traditions. By forming a crowd and ‘with great pomp’ destroying the barriers between themselves and the nearby hunting grounds, they were, both literally and figuratively, rejecting the barriers that prohibited them from making use of the surrounding lands. They did not, however, stop with this rejection, as evidenced by their swearing an oath of fealty to each other and to their newly acquired land. Walsingham’s claim that part of this oath involved the distribution of branches taken from nearby trees is interesting, as it seems to indicate that the rebels saw a symbolic significance in the trees and their branches. This act could be read as a reclamation of the woods in a physical, communal sense, possibly even as a parallel to the rebels’ distribution of the millstone-floor. Finally, their fixing a rabbit on a pillory to signify their ‘freedom’ and the warren they had ‘acquired’ further emphasizes their ability to symbolically proclaim interpretive authority; with their seizure of the warren came a claim to hunting rights, which they publicly exercised by capturing and displaying the rabbit. Here, the rebels yet again inscribe symbolic meaning onto a material object, in this case a captured animal. It is possible that they viewed the rabbit in much the same way as they viewed the documents and charters

¹⁰² Cumque vidissent turbam quae convenerat ipsorum jussu, magnos se reputantes, non modice confortati sunt, et elevatum est cor eorum; moxque jungentes dextras, fidem acceperunt ab invicem, et dederunt seisinam warennae et communium boscorum et camporum in boscis et campis Eleemosynarii de Sopwelle Bury per ramos arborum. Walsingham, *Gesta Abbatum* iii, 302.

¹⁰³ Ceperunt quemdam cuniculum vivum, inter eos in plano campi per multitudinem populi vi captum, et in quadam hasta coram se ferri statuerunt et super collistrigium in villa Sancti Albani, in signum libertatis et warennae sio adeptse, defixerunt... Ibid 303

they demanded from the abbey; both would have represented claims to authority, and would have carried a symbolic weight that the rebels apparently hoped to appropriate for themselves.¹⁰⁴

In considering this episode as a whole, it is of particular interest that Walsingham initially describes this group of rebels as acting ‘with great pomp’ (*cum pompa magna*). There is a sense here that their actions also involved an element of festivity. As such, reading the rebels’ actions as deliberate moments of public play and performance rather than random acts of destruction and insurrection opens the door to interpretations of the Revolt that could potentially counteract the condemnatory tone of accounts like Walsingham’s. The paradox, of course, is that oftentimes the only sources from which to read about the rebels’ actions are the very accounts that condemn them (the chronicles, for instance). Paul Strohm addresses the difficulty of relying on these sources by arguing that ‘a narrator who wishes to discredit an actor or group of actors must first, in however grudging or distorted a fashion, *represent* their actions or words,’ and that once these actions or words have been represented, they are subsequently opened up for interpretation.¹⁰⁵ So while Walsingham may not have looked favorably on the rebels in his writing, his chronicle does appear to recognize the abundance of symbolism in their actions, a sign that we can in fact discern clear and deliberate rebel motivations from such sources.

With an even greater tone of condemnation, the anonymous Westminster chronicler provides an account of an attack on Lambeth Palace during the Revolt:

A base mob of peasants rose up. On June 12 a large multitude of countryfolk from Essex and Kent gathered together. And indeed, those from Kent, running through their country like rabid dogs, completely

¹⁰⁴ This would be yet another case, similar to that of Ralph atte Wode discussed above, in which the rebels established a symbolic connection between the physical body, writing, and authority.

¹⁰⁵ Strohm, Paul, “‘A Revelle!’: Chronicle Evidence and the Rebel Voice,” in *Hochon’s Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1992), 34-35.

destroyed many homes and manors, beheading not a few, and forced those not belonging to their sworn association to adhere to them and to swear an oath of alliance with them, in the defense of King Richard, imagining themselves as defenders of the king and the welfare of the realm against their traitors. Now, their throng thickening, they rampaged far and wide, claiming that Master Simon Sudbury, then both archbishop and chancellor of England, was a traitor and deserved to die; whence descending on his manor of Lambeth, they burnt books, vestments, linen, and many other things left there; they broke open and drained casks of wine, pouring out what was left on the floor; they broke all the kitchen utensils by beating them together; and while doing these things, as if applauding a praiseworthy accomplishment, exclaimed, "A reveille! A reveille!"¹⁰⁶

Of particular note here are the claims that the rebels forced other townsfolk to 'swear an oath of alliance with them,' that they imagined themselves to be 'defenders of the king and the welfare of the realm against their traitors,' and that they exclaimed, 'as if applauding a praiseworthy accomplishment,' the phrase 'A reveille! A reveille!' The Westminster chronicler paints a picture of these rebels as 'rabid dogs,' but the account does imply a macabre and deliberate performance of festivity. The 'oath of alliance,' like the oath mentioned in Walsingham's account at Saint Albans, gives the sense that the rebels took their actions seriously enough to warrant such a swearing of allegiance among themselves; that they saw themselves as 'defenders of the king and the welfare of the realm' implies that their oath meant more to them than simple comradeship. In what was perhaps an imitation of a royal oath of fealty, the rebels evidently hoped to instill some

¹⁰⁶ Ignobilis turba rusticorum surrexit. Eodem anno pridie Idus Junii coadunata fuit maxima multitudo ruralium Essexie pariter et Cantie; et hii quidem qui de Cantia per plures partes Cantie uti rabidissimi canes discurrentes plurimorum domos et maneria solotenus diruerunt, nonnullos decapitaverunt, et quosque sibi occurrentes qui de eorum contubernio non fuerant ut eis adhererent et cum eis in defensionem regis Ricardi interposito juramento constringebant, pretendentes se defensuros regem et regni commoditatem contra suos traditores. Quare concrescente eorum turba longe lateque debachabantur, magistrum Simonem de Sudbur i tunc archiepiscopum pariter et Anglie cancellarium proditorem esse asserentes et morte dignissimum; unde ad manerium suum de Lambhuth descendentes libros, vestes, mappas, et plura alia inibi relictia igne combusserunt; dolia vino referta confregerunt et hauserunt, et quod vini fuerat relictum in terram effuderunt; singula coquine vasa adinvicem collidentes fregerunt; et ista perpetrantes velud de re laudabili plaudentes "A reveille! A reveille!" exclamarunt. The Westminster Chronicle, 1381-1394. Ed. L. C. Hector and Barbara Harvey. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 2. Translation provided by Paul Strohm in "'A Reveille!'", 36. Strohm provides an analysis of the chronicle's response and its representational strategies.

legitimacy in their insurrection through their use of gestures that already held a great deal of symbolic social significance. This impression is borne out elsewhere – in another account, the rebels were said to have made use of passwords and phrases to identify each other in public; the *Anonimalle Chronicle* claims that these groups would address others with the English phrase ‘With whom haldes yow?’ the correct response to which would have been ‘Wyth kynge Richarde and wyth the trew communes.’ Supposedly, those who did not know the correct response or chose not to answer were met with violence.¹⁰⁷

The most explicit evidence of play and festivity, though, is the rebels’ cry of ‘A revelle!’ during their destruction of Lambeth Palace. The Westminster chronicler clearly looks on this cry with a feeling of derision, apparently viewing their celebratory exclamation as entirely inappropriate and grossly disconnected from their actions. Despite this condemnatory tone, however, the chronicle (perhaps inadvertently) contributes to the image of the rebels as deliberately subversive and performative; their treatment of the insurrection as an occasion for revelry, especially after having sworn oaths of allegiance and proclaimed themselves to be defenders of king and realm, allows them to enter a public space in which it is difficult to produce a clear reading of their actions. The line between play and rebellion is blurred, the rebels embracing the nature of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the ‘carnavalesque.’ Bakhtin describes social rituals based on laughter and festivity as being entirely distinct from political or religious ceremonies, offering ‘a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations,’ and building ‘a second world and a second

¹⁰⁷ ‘et ceux qe ne savoient ne vodroient respondre, furount decolles et mys a la mort.’ Galbraith, V. H. *The Anonimalle Chronicle, 1333 to 1381* (Manchester : University Press, 1927), 139.

life outside officialdom....’¹⁰⁸ For medieval communities, Bakhtin claims (perhaps too simplistically) that these rituals and ceremonies were not spectacles that the people viewed from the outside; they were lived experiences. ‘While carnival lasts,’ Bakhtin writes, ‘there is no other life outside it.’¹⁰⁹

Of note in Bakhtin’s discussion of the carnival is his description of what occurs within the community while inhabiting this second, ritualistic world: ‘In the framework of class and feudal political structure,’ he says, ‘[the] specific character [of official medieval feasts] could be realized without distortion only in the carnival and in similar marketplace festivals. They were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.’ Official medieval feasts, at least as Bakhtin understood them, ‘whether ecclesiastic, feudal, or sponsored by the state,’ only ‘sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it,’ and did not create any kind of second world for the community. On the contrary, ‘the carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal.’ It was, as Bakhtin says, ‘hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.’¹¹⁰ The carnival, then, marked a moment in which a community could transgress the rigid social distinctions that restricted their actions.

In the case of 1381, this transgression included not only the class divide between the rebels and the clergy, bureaucracy, and landholders, but the divide between the *literati* and the

¹⁰⁸ Bakhtin, Mikhail, “Carnival Ambience: Laughter, Praise and Abuse,” in *The Bakhtin Reader*, ed. Pam Morris (London : E. Arnold, 1994), 197.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid 198

¹¹⁰ Ibid 198-199

illitterati as well; with the rebels subverting accepted forms of material proof, the question of their literacy became much more difficult to answer. The ritualistic gestures and cries of ‘A reveille!’ in the context of violent insurrection create an image of (almost grotesque) festivity, a moment in which the rebels inhabit a world where their actions did not depend on their social status. The crowd that Walsingham describes, acting ‘with great pomp’ as they destroyed the physical barriers between their own community and the abbey’s forests, subverted the distinction between those who held authority over documentary forms and those who did not through their inscribing symbolic meaning onto the body of the rabbit. When a number of charters and records were taken from the abbey and burned publicly in the marketplace, the rebels were (perhaps unintentionally) mimicking the communal bonfires characteristic of Midsummer festivities.

Turning to perhaps the most well-known figure of the Revolt, we can see a similar performative quality in Wat Tyler’s interactions with Richard II at Mile End. At their meeting, Tyler is described in several accounts as having acted entirely inappropriately for a man of his social standing. The *Anonimalle Chronicle* claims he addressed Richard as ‘frer’ and washed his mouth with beer ‘rudely and villainously’ in front of the king¹¹¹; Walsingham’s *Historia Anglicana* describes a dispute in which Tyler furiously demanded that the king’s retinue approach him on foot rather than horseback, going so far as to threaten a knight with his knife for challenging this demand¹¹²; Knighton describes Tyler tossing a dagger from hand to hand while addressing the king, ‘as if playing like a child.’¹¹³ While the chroniclers may have exaggerated their accounts of Wat Tyler’s actions in front of the king, the general sense that he acted in

¹¹¹ ‘...rynsa soun bouche ledement et vilaynesment avaunt le roy...’ *Anonimalle Chronicle*, 147-148.

¹¹² Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, 1:464.

¹¹³ Knighton, 137 (Hie regi adhaerens et ipsum pro aliis unus alloquens, et eultellum evaginatam, quem dagger vulgus vocant, in manu gerens, de manu in manum jecit quasi pueriliter ludens).

complete defiance of his social status in the face of a monarch appears to be a common thread. Knighton's claim that he acted 'as if playing like a child' is particularly interesting; certain public gestures would have been expected of someone addressing the king, and yet Tyler evidently chose to forego these expectations and play the role of a child, unconcerned with the vast social gulf between himself and Richard. His performance, while perhaps not an explicit example of carnival as Bakhtin would describe it, does showcase a desire to transgress certain social boundaries that divided the different feudal classes. Tyler, as a kind of representative for the rebels, performs as though he were Richard's equal in the negotiations. In much the same way as the rebels who posted a rabbit to a pillory or cried out 'A revelle!' while destroying a castle, Tyler demonstrated his knowledge of the public gestures one was expected to employ when addressing the king and, more importantly, his ability to appropriate these gestures in a transgressive way.

Tyler's was not the only such performance of subverting royal authority, however. Geoffrey Lister, a dyer from Felmingham and the leader of a group of rebels in Norfolk during 1381, even went so far as to declare himself 'King of the Commons' (*Regem Communium*).¹¹⁴ Walsingham describes Lister as having forced five local knights to ride with him and his company of rebels, who were ultimately compelled to act as 'tasters of his food and drink and to obey his commands on bended knee as he sat at dinner.'¹¹⁵ Lister and his company went on to preside over a series of trials in nearby communities of both people deemed 'traitors' as well as

¹¹⁴ Walsingham, *Chronicon Angliae*, 305-306. Walsingham mistakenly identified him as John Lister, while Froissart identified him as William Lister (Prescott, Andrew. "Lister [Litster], Geoffrey (d. 1381), rebel." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 23 Sep. 2004).

¹¹⁵ '...mererentur praegustatores effici ciborum ejus et potuum et flexis genibus ei obsequi in prandio residenti.' Walsingham, *Chronicon Angliae* 305-306. The five knights in question were Lord Scales, Sir William Morley, Sir John Brewes, Sir Stephen Hales, and Sir Robert Salle. Sir Robert was apparently killed shortly after joining the rebel band for disobedience and publicly condemning the group's actions.

people accused of ordinary felonies; apparently, several of these trials resulted in guilty verdicts and executions.¹¹⁶

Similarly, Richard de Leycester and John Buk both rode through the town of Ely ‘bidding all men of whatsoever degree, to rise and go with [them], and destroy divers traitors whom [they] named to them, on the part of the King and the faithful commonalty....’ Leycester supposedly issued a series of proclamations as well, ‘seditiously and to the King’s prejudice.’ He then gathered a group of rebels and led them to the monastery of Ely, where he stood on the pulpit and ‘publicly [showed] to them, the things to be performed on the part of the King and the commonalty against traitors and other unfaithful.’ Furthermore, Leycester is said to have ‘feloniously adjudged’ one Edmund de Walsingham, a justice of the king in Cambridgeshire at the time; Edmund was found guilty, promptly executed, and had his head placed on the pillory.¹¹⁷

The accounts of both Geoffrey Lister and Richard de Leycester speak again to the authoritative power of performance during the Revolt. Lister’s self-proclaimed moniker ‘King of the Commons’ would be seen as ridiculous if not for the context in which he claimed such a title; he even had a retinue of knights and food tasters, and evidently his presence was enough to legitimize the series of trials and executions over which he presided. Leycester, too, seems to have regarded his claimed authority as legitimate, given the proclamations he issued to his followers regarding the ‘destruction’ of traitors. His speech from the pulpit of the monastery would surely have evoked images of a priest’s sermon in the minds of his ‘congregation,’ which

¹¹⁶ Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (Kitchener : Batoche Books, 2001), 82. Lister and his company also collected and burned ‘an infinite number of deeds and court-rolls’ from local townships.

¹¹⁷ Palmer, ‘Records of the Villein Insurrection in Cambridgeshire’, *East Anglian* (Dec 1896), 211

appears to have been enough to ensure that those who followed him wouldn't question his authority in sentencing a man to death. As with other cases during the Revolt, the line between performance and reality is difficult to distinguish with people like Lister and Leycester. None of their actions were officially sanctioned by royal authority; indeed, both men were ultimately executed for their participation in the Revolt. However, the roles they performed were clearly quite effective at inspiring local communities to join them, and regardless of whether the authority they exercised in overseeing trials and executions was legitimate or not, there were very real (and violent) consequences of their performances. Neither Geoffrey Lister nor Richard de Leycester, nor their respective followers, explicitly rejected the authority of the roles they took on for themselves; rather, they demonstrated their ability to perform this authority in their own ways, transgressing the normal social order through public play and symbolic gestures.

This is not to say, however, that Geoffrey Lister, Richard de Leycester, or any other rebel was maliciously putting on a playful show for the explicit purpose of blurring the line between legitimate and illegitimate authority. They almost certainly viewed their occupation of these authoritative spaces as unquestionably legitimate, and clearly took their new roles seriously. In all likelihood, the rebels understood perfectly the symbolism of passing out pieces of the millstone-floor as a priest passes out the consecrated bread, or of posting a rabbit to a pillory as a declaration of ownership over hunting grounds, or of standing at a pulpit issuing a rebellious 'sermon' to a group of dissidents; these actions were chosen deliberately, despite the tendency of the chroniclers to depict the rebels as 'rabid dogs.' That they understood the symbolism of these performances, though, does not mean they viewed the Revolt as a frivolous occasion for revelry. While festivity was certainly an important part of their symbolic actions, the rebels ultimately sought to demonstrate that they were perfectly capable of understanding and exercising the

authority of social positions from which they had customarily been denied access. The roles they performed during the Revolt were not just opportunities to play at being priests, judges, or kings; the authoritative space they inhabited while performing these roles was, at least in their minds, entirely theirs to occupy.

VI. Conclusion

When Margery Starre joined her fellow townsfolk in burning university archives, crying out ‘Away with the learning of the clerks!’ and casting a handful of ashes into the wind, she was not engaging in the simple act of destruction for destruction’s sake. She was not denouncing texts as a communicative medium, nor was she denouncing their authoritative role in English society. Margery was, deliberately or not, tapping into a profound desire among the rebels to assert their own authority in the production and interpretation of texts, a desire to inhabit the social and legal space that had become occupied by a growing bureaucratic class of clerks, justices, and lawyers who, in the eyes of the rebels, stood between themselves and the justice of the king. It mattered not that Margery and her fellow townsfolk were likely unable to read the documents they burned; what mattered was that they were now asserting control over the documents, rejecting the exclusivity of the ‘learning of the clerks’ and replacing it with their own authority. That they followed the act of destroying documents with the act of creating one of their own was a public affirmation that they could, in their own way, play the role of the clerks, justices, and lawyers. Like Ralph atte Woode and his pitchfork, the Saint Albans rebels and their gold and lapis charter, or John Stanford and his mysterious box, Margery Starre and her fellow townsfolk recognized that the inherent authority of texts was often ambiguous, ephemeral, and malleable.

At the center of the Revolt, then, lay this matter of legal, textual authority. To the rebels, the archives in Market Square represented much more than records of the University's history; their significance lay in the fact that they stood as manifestations of the power the University had held over the local community. The rebels' festivity during the burning begins to make sense when understood as an expression of their supposed liberation from the archives' authority, as they now had the freedom to fill the empty space with a document of their own making. Despite condemnation from members of the intelligentsia (the chroniclers, for instance), who would have seen the destruction of these documents as a baseless act of violence and mayhem, the reality is that we can see clear signs of interpretive decision making in the rebels' actions. They changed the physical nature of the archives when they set fire to them, reducing the parchment to ash. This recognition of physicality, a common thread throughout the Revolt, was a blatant display of agency over the texts; despite their status as members of the *illitterati*, they were able to understand and manipulate the form of documents, even choosing to replace them with their own texts. Casting the ashes into the wind may then have been an attempt on Margery's part to mimic the distribution and proliferation of documents throughout England, a process in which she was more than capable of participating once the texts had been reduced to ash. In her eyes, the clerks' exclusive control over the production, interpretation, and distribution of texts was no longer necessary; in that moment she believed she had broken this exclusivity, having forced herself into a position where she could assert her own authority over the university archives.

It is important to recognize this sentiment in any investigation of the Revolt. While the various rebel groups were by no means unified ideologically across England, it is clear that they were not simply acting as 'rabid dogs,' lashing out indiscriminately at the clerks and their documents. The actions of Margery Starre and her fellow townsfolk expressed clear frustrations

with the developing role of texts and bureaucracy in English society; as they understood it, the gap between their fealty to the king and the justice he owed them was becoming increasingly occupied by legists, charters, bureaucrats, and documents. The rebels sought to forcefully assert their ability to inhabit this authoritative space and, in doing so, cast aside the learning of the clerks.

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