



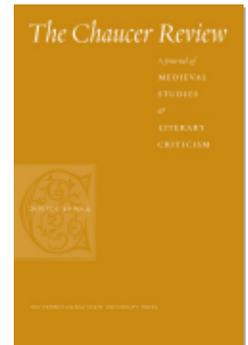
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“Soper at Oure Aller Cost”:
The Politics of Food Supply
in the *Canterbury Tales*

JAYNE ELISABETH ARCHER,
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AND HOWARD THOMAS

ABSTRACT: The reward for the best storyteller among the pilgrims in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is a meal: “soper at oure aller cost” (I 799). This narrative detail gives tangible form to the traditional association between literary creation and arable farming. Chaucer’s diverse pilgrims and the tales they tell are woven together by the language, tropes, and contemporary concerns relating to anxieties about the production, supply, distribution, purity, and quality of food. Focusing on the figure of the Plowman, the apocryphal *Plowman’s Tale*, and the *Reeve’s Tale*, and reading them in the context of sociopolitical and religious dissent (the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt and Lollardy respectively), this essay traces the ways in which the *Canterbury Tales* engages with the politics and poetics of food supply in the final decades of the fourteenth century.

Why doesn’t Chaucer’s Plowman tell a tale? The Parson, who is the Plowman’s brother, does speak. Indeed, it is possible that the *Parson’s Tale* was the one Chaucer had in mind to conclude his *Canterbury Tales*.¹ Given the seemingly idealized portrait of the Plowman in the *General Prologue*, this pilgrim’s failure to tell a tale is perhaps his most arresting characteristic. As Daniel F. Pigg remarks, “the Plowman stands out to readers perhaps most markedly

1. On the positioning of *Parson’s Tale* at the end of *CT*, see David Raybin and Linda Tarte Holley, eds., *Closure in The Canterbury Tales: The Role of The Parson’s Tale* (Kalamazoo, 2000); Michaela Paasche Grudin, “Discourse and the Problem of Closure in the *Canterbury Tales*,” *PMLA* 107 (1992): 1157–67; Lee W. Patterson, “The *Parson’s Tale* and the Quitting of the *Canterbury Tales*,” *Traditio* 34 (1978): 331–80; and Barry Windeatt, “Literary Structures in Chaucer,” in Jill Mann and Piero Boitano, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, U.K., 2012), 214–32, at 227–29.

by his silence.² One reason why this silence is especially striking is the inescapable association of the figure of the plowman with the vocal and disruptive social and political energies of the 1381 Peasants' Revolt and his appropriation as part of the challenge to religious orthodoxies represented by followers of John Wyclif.³ Given Chaucer's connections to the Ricardian court, these radical connotations gave the poet a compelling reason to keep this particular pilgrim mute. Nevertheless, Chaucer chose to include the Plowman among his pilgrims. His decision to do so was perhaps in part an acknowledgement of the social and economic changes represented by that occupation, and the growing importance of agricultural laborers more generally, in the fourteenth century.⁴ By including him among the pilgrims at the Tabard Inn, Chaucer made the Plowman's silence meaningful. Indeed, Chaucer's contemporaries and subsequent generations of editors felt the need to allow the Plowman to speak—or, rather, they saw his silence as an opportunity to speak through him (and, by implication, through Chaucer). Of the apocryphal versions of the *Ploughman's Tale*, the best known is a poem with the alternative name the *Complaynte of the Plowman*, composed ca. 1400.⁵ The work of a Lollard or Lollard sympathizer, the *Complaynte* exploits the association of the figure of the plowman with religious and sociopolitical dissent.⁶ By using the politics and poetics of food supply as a metanarrative with which to unify its critiques of contemporary spiritual and secular governments, the *Complaynte* was being faithful to Chaucer's work.

2. Daniel F. Pigg, "With Hym Ther Was a Plowman, Was His Brother," in Laura C. Lambdin and Robert T. Lambdin, eds., *Chaucer's Pilgrims: An Historical Guide to the Pilgrims in The Canterbury Tales* (Westport, Ct., 1999), 263–70, at 263. The other pilgrims who do not tell their tales are the Yeoman and the five Guildsmen. The Canon's Yeoman tells a tale despite not having been present at the Tabard Inn.

3. In addition to the titles listed in note 35, below, see R. B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 2nd edn. (London, 1983), 372–83; and Ordelle G. Hill, *The Manor, the Plowman, and the Shepherd: Agrarian Themes and Imagery in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance English Literature* (London, 1993), 21–69.

4. The social and economic advances made by plowmen in the fourteenth century are summarized by Joe Horrell, "Chaucer's Symbolic Plowman," *Speculum* 14 (1939): 82–92. Judith Bennett warns against the tendency to see the Plowman as being representative of the peasantry or even constituting a stable and well-defined occupational grouping ("The Curse of the Plowman," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 20 [2006]: 215–26).

5. For clarity, the *Complaynte of the Plowman* is referred to as the *Complaynte* in this essay. The other work to be associated with the Plowman's missing tale is Thomas Hoccleve's rhyme royal version of a Marian miracle story, *Item de Beata Virgine*. It is printed in John M. Bowers, ed., *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions* (Kalamazoo, 1992), 23–40.

6. Paul J. Patterson, "Reforming Chaucer: Margins and Religion in an Apocryphal *Canterbury Tale*," *Book History* 8 (2005): 11–36, at 12. On the place of the *Complaynte* in the Chaucer apocrypha, see Francis W. Bonner, "The Genesis of the Chaucer Apocrypha," *Studies in Philology* 48 (1951): 461–81, at 475, 476; and Kathleen Forni, *The Chaucerian Apocrypha: A Counterfeit Canon* (Gainesville, 2001), 88–105.

The *Canterbury Tales* is a game of food. Its engagement with the politics and poetics of food supply—discourses to which readers are no longer so readily attuned—helps bring coherence to the poem’s diverse voices, modes, and genres. Beginning with the pilgrims gathered for a meal at the Tabard Inn, Southwark, one of the few things we know for certain about the end of this seemingly unfinished work is that it should end with another meal, “a soper at oure aller cost” (I 799), to be presented as a reward to the teller of the best tale.⁷ Early printed editions illustrate the former of these two meals in an image that could equally serve for the projected ending—the elusive vanishing point—of the *Canterbury Tales*. In the woodcut devised for Richard Pynson’s 1492 edition, twenty-four pilgrims are gathered about a round table (Fig. 1). The image points suggestively to the Last Supper, and to the way the worldly feasts with which the *Canterbury Tales* begins and should end are mirrored and transfigured by the unwritten central point of Chaucer’s work: the pilgrims’ participation in Holy Communion at the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral. With no head to their table, the representatives of the three estates share plates of food among which is a boar’s head—the food of a knight rather than a plowman. This woodcut illustrates the potential of pilgrimage—and of Chaucer’s poetic pilgrimage—to accomplish, albeit fleetingly, what the 1381 Peasant’s Revolt and the Lollards could not: to level sociopolitical and religious hierarchies.

Paths of pilgrimage usually followed and helped sustain supply routes, and the course of Chaucer’s storytelling game, which presumably follows Watling Street from London to Canterbury, takes the pilgrims along one of the most ancient and active of those food routes. In the *General Prologue*, the prologues to individual tales, and the tales they tell, Chaucer’s pilgrims are all defined in relation to food—as producers, processors, distributors, managers, purveyors, and/or consumers. This use of food as narrative and structural device is expressed in the traditional metaphor of the tale collection as a crop or harvest. It is, then, particularly suggestive that in this game of food, the Plowman, who is the one pilgrim actually involved in the production of food, remains silent—is, perhaps, silenced.

This essay uses the Plowman’s silence to help unlock a significant metanarrative in the *Canterbury Tales*: the story of the food chain. If Chaucer’s narrator feels the need to apologize for being unable to “set folk in hir degree / Heere in this tale, as that they sholde stonde” (I 744–45),

7. All Chaucer quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987).



FIG. 1 Woodcut from the General Prologue, showing the pilgrims at the Tabard Inn, Shoreditch, before leaving for Canterbury. Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* (London: Richard Pynson, 1492) (STC 5084), sig. ciiv. © The British Library Board shelf mark General Reference Collection G.11587.(1).

then Chaucer's pilgrims and their relationships—both to one another and to the stories they tell—are woven together by the language, tropes, and contemporary concerns relating to anxieties about the production, supply, distribution, purity, and quality of food. For all their differences, Chaucer's pilgrims and their diverse tales are united with a connective tissue of allusions to arable foodstuffs and cereal crop contaminants—grain, wheat, corn, tares, darnel, cockle, bread, rye, oats, malt, bran, flour, and ale—in order to tell a story of food politics that was urgent and potentially revolutionary in the late 1300s. This metanarrative would have been immediately recognizable to Chaucer's contemporary audience, not simply because the final quarter of the

fourteenth century was a time of heightened food insecurity, but also because food supply—and, in particular, the production, processing, and distribution of arable foodstuffs—was politicized in the wake of the 1381 Peasants' Revolt and in light of the spread of Lollardy in England. Treated with varying degrees of occlusion elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales*, this metanarrative emerges, for a short while at least, as the actual narrative in the *Reeve's Tale*, which foregrounds the tensions over milling rights and food contamination that had been highlighted by rebels in 1381. By attending to its political, agricultural, and social context, we recover the ways in which the *Reeve's Tale* engages with food politics and thus with competing socioeconomic and religious debates in the final quarter of the fourteenth century.

The Game of Food

Spurred on by scholarship in related fields, including archaeology, anthropology, and the social sciences, historians of medieval Europe have shown a renewed interest in the role of food in delineating social structures as well as in negotiating cultural change.⁸ This research has attended to the roles played by specific foodstuffs, forms of food preparation, and rituals of consumption in figuring religious concepts such as spiritual purity, sin, heresy, and corruption. For Lars Kjær and A. J. Watson, the stylized choreography of the aristocratic feast performed “ideas about authority, hierarchy and commensality” and thus helped define relationships and bonds of obligation between the social orders.⁹ Such readings of food's cultural and social functions have been informed by analyses of actual patterns of consumption. Elizabeth M. Biebel has argued that one reason for the heightened significance of food in the latter half of the fourteenth century was “its increasing scarcity as a result of recurring famine.”¹⁰ However, Christopher Dyer has shown that death by

8. See, for example, Melitta Weiss Adamson, *Food in Medieval Times* (Westport, Ct., 2004); Melitta Weiss Adamson, ed., *Food in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays* (New York, 1995); Phyllis Pray Bober, *Art, Culture, and Cuisine: Ancient and Medieval Gastronomy* (Chicago, 1999); Martha Carlin and Joel T. Rosenthal, eds., *Food and Eating in Medieval Europe* (London, 1998); Jean-Louis Flandrin, Massimo Montanari, and Albert Sonnenfeld, eds., *Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present* (New York, 1999); Allen J. Frantzen, *Food, Eating and Identity in Early Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2014); Lars Kjær and A. J. Watson, “Feasts and Gifts: Sharing Food in the Middle Ages,” *Journal of Medieval History* 37 (2011): 1–5; and C. M. Woolgar, “Food and the Middle Ages,” *Journal of Medieval History* 36 (2010): 1–19. John C. Super summarizes recent work and theoretical approaches in food history in “Food and History,” *Journal of Social History* 36 (2002): 165–78.

9. Kjær and Watson, “Feasts and Gifts,” 3.

10. Elizabeth M. Biebel, “Pilgrims to Table: Food Consumption in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*,” in Carlin and Rosenthal, eds., *Food and Eating*, 15–26, at 15.

starvation was largely confined to the first half of the fourteenth century.¹¹ The depopulation that occurred in the wake of the Great Famine (1315–18) and the Black Death helped alleviate dearth to some extent, but it also resulted in the empowerment of laborers, especially agricultural laborers, who acquired a new voice with which to speak about hunger and the inequitable distribution of resources. Dyer demonstrates that, by the end of the fourteenth century, the peasantry began to imitate the traditional foodways of the aristocracy.¹² However, memories of the Great Famine and subsequent periods of dearth lingered long in the minds of the commons, who had to devote a greater proportion of their time, labor, and income to food. Reliant on a diet based on grain, they were more vulnerable to bad harvests, poor weather, food contamination, and interruptions in food supply. Whether or not the peasantry starved in the same numbers as it had in the first half of the fourteenth century, a heightened awareness of food unrest contributed to the commons' political imperatives and the tropes and figures of speech they used to articulate those demands.

Long before the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, records show what Peter Franklin calls "a rural society seething with discontent."¹³ While regional practices continued to be various and distinct, the growth of urban populations (including centers of pilgrimage, such as Canterbury, and the universities) put increasing pressure on traditional food routes and supply chains. As C. M. Woolgar observes, depopulation, together with rising wages and a movement from the regions to urban centers, "altered the balance between population and food supply."¹⁴ With grain prices falling, there was less need to cultivate marginal lands; higher-status crops, such as wheat, were preferred over the oats, barley, and rye that had dominated the diet of the peasantry in the first half of the fourteenth century.¹⁵ Parliament responded by reversing some of the gains made by laborers in the 1351 Statute: wages were frozen and restrictions placed on the movement of peasants and laborers. Nevertheless, from the 1370s onwards,

11. Christopher Dyer, "Did the Peasants Really Starve in Medieval England?," in Carlin and Rosenthal, eds., *Food and Eating*, 53–72. See also Christopher Dyer, "Changes in Diet in the Late Middle Ages: The Case of Harvest Workers," in his *Everyday Life in Medieval England* (London, 1994), 77–99.

12. Dyer, "Did the Peasants Really Starve," 70. See also Martha Carlin, "Fast Food and Urban Living Standards in Medieval England," in Carlin and Rosenthal, eds., *Food and Eating*, 27–51.

13. Peter Franklin, "Politics in Manorial Court Rolls: The Tactics, Social Composition, and Aims of a Pre-1381 Peasant Movement," in Zvi Razi and Richard Smith, eds., *Medieval Society and the Manor Court* (Oxford, 1996), 162–98, at 195.

14. Woolgar, "Food," 1.

15. On fluctuations in grain (and other cereal) prices in the fourteenth century, see W. H. Beveridge, "The Yield and Price of Corn in the Middle Ages," *Economic History Review* 1 (1929): 92–113; and the data presented at Bruce M. S. Campbell's website, *Three Centuries of English Crops Yields, 1211–1491* (2007), <http://www.cropyields.ac.uk> (accessed March 21, 2014).

lords feared a crisis in their incomes, and ongoing resistance to clerical and state abuses in the wake of dearth and failed harvests took the form of nonpayment of tithes (in money and kind) and a refusal to recognize grazing rights.¹⁶

Written when diets were changing in line with the increasing socio-economic power of agricultural workers, the *Canterbury Tales* interweaves complex patterns of food distribution, preparation, and consumption.¹⁷ “Food,” as Kathryn L. Lynch observes, “is part of the language Chaucer used to introduce his cast of characters.”¹⁸ Reaching from the *General Prologue* into the pilgrims’ prologues and the tales themselves, food references register pressures on and fissures within the relative social standings of the pilgrims and their characters. The Franklin’s extravagance is illustrated by his hospitality, including “fissh and fless . . . so plenteuous / It snewed in his hous of mete and drynke.” (I 344–45).¹⁹ The widow in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* has a more humble diet of “Milk and broun breed” (VII 2844).²⁰ The Doctor, as we might expect, observes a diet “of no superfluitee, / But of greet norissyng and digestible” (I 436–37). Evidence of inequities in food distribution is provided by the Monk, who, as “som celerer” and thus responsible for food provision in his monastery as well as the wider community, is a glutton (“ful fat” [I 200]) who favors “A fat swan . . . best of any roost” (I 206).²¹ As Scott Norsworthy has pointed out, it is appropriate that the *Monk’s Tale* demonstrates a “continuing emphasis on food and drink,” with this pilgrim’s stories of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, and Ugolino inviting us to question the fairness with which he

16. On the relevance of famine and changing agricultural conditions and practices to the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt, see Christopher Dyer, “The Social and Economic Background to the Rural Revolt of 1381,” in R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston, eds., *The English Rising of 1381* (Cambridge, U.K., 1987), 9–42; Franklin, “Politics in Manorial Court Rolls”; and Peggy A. Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest* (London, 1990), 32–44.

17. On the role and symbolism of food consumption in *CT*, see Biebel, who focuses on the relationship between “physical food” and “spiritual nourishment” and the association of certain “food types” with gender (“Pilgrims to the Table,” 16). Susan Wallace examines the role of diet in delineating the spiritual and moral qualities of the pilgrims, in “Diet in the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*,” Ph.D. dissertation, McMaster University (Hamilton, Ont., 1977). Allen J. Grieco explains the role of diet in differentiating social classes (“Food and Social Change in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy,” in Flandrin et al., eds., *Food*, 302–12).

18. Kathryn L. Lynch, “From Tavern to Pie Shop: The Raw, the Cooked, and the Rotten in Fragment I of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*,” *Exemplaria* 19 (2007): 117–38, at 119.

19. On the medical underpinnings of the Franklin’s observance of a seasonal diet, see Joseph Allen Bryant Jr., “The Diet of Chaucer’s Franklin,” *Modern Language Notes* 63 (1948): 318–25. The sources for Chaucer’s depiction of the Franklin’s diet are discussed in Wallace, “Diet,” 77–83.

20. On the relationship between “food imagery and different kinds of catharsis” in this tale, see Patrick Gallacher, “Food, Laxatives, and Catharsis in Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*,” *Speculum* 51 (1976): 49–68, at 49.

21. On the Monk as a cellarer and the duties involved in this office, see Scott Norsworthy, “Hard Lords and Bad Food-Service in the *Monk’s Tale*,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 100 (2001): 313–33.

distributes the food charged to his care and to reflect on “the plight of a community that is poorly served by a negligent or absentee cellarer.”²²

Food supply, then, is one of the structuring themes which helps bring unity to Chaucer’s characterizations of his pilgrims along with the tales they tell, and it also facilitates an engagement with contemporary political and religious debates (including the issue of clerical abuses). But it is more than a recurring theme; it is inseparable from the art of storytelling and the language and metaphors used in shaping the tales. The pilgrimage to Canterbury is in itself conceived of as a game of food. As both Lynch and Dolores Cullen have noted, Harry Bailly’s title of “Host” gestures towards the most elevated, and contested, of all foodstuffs, the Eucharistic Host.²³ It is therefore appropriate that Bailly coordinates the pilgrimage as a game in which the best storyteller will win the prize of “a soper at oure aller cost,” a phrase that evokes the Last Supper (it is the final “soper” to be shared by the pilgrims) and hints at the contribution (the “cost”) all Christians must make towards the salvation purchased on their behalf at the Crucifixion.

At every point in the *Canterbury Tales*, the analogy between food production and storytelling is emphasized, and in a way that returns us to the material conditions of the pilgrims themselves. The Cook is warned not to concoct a tale by reheating old ingredients:

For many a pastee hastow laten blood,
And many a Jakke of Dovere hastow soold
That hath been twies hoot and twies coold.

(I 4346–48)

The opening lines of the *Canterbury Tales*, “Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote” (I 1–2), fix the events of the poem at a certain point of the farming calendar and introduce the theme of food production. The belief that a dry March was propitious to sowing and indicated a good harvest was, as A. Stuart Daley has demonstrated, not simply a literary convention; rather, it draws on sound agricultural practice.²⁴ A dry March helps to firm the topsoil in readiness for plowing, sowing, and, with the onset of the April rains, germination. What might seem

22. Norsworthy, “Hard Lords and Bad Food-Service,” 316, 325.

23. Lynch, “From Tavern to Pie Shop,” 133; and Dolores Cullen, *Chaucer’s Host: Up-So-Down* (Santa Barbara, 1998), 23–24.

24. A. Stuart Daley, “Chaucer’s ‘Droghte of March’ in Medieval Farm Lore,” *Chaucer Review* 4 (1970): 171–79. See also Paul Hardwick, “The Poet as Ploughman,” *Chaucer Review* 33 (1998): 146–56, at 151.

(to twenty-first-century readers, at least) to be a tropological allusion to food production (the promise of a good harvest signifies the promise of a good story) in fact grounds the poem in the material conditions of producing food and drives home the importance of the weeks around the spring equinox. Indeed, the opening couplet anticipates the projected ending(s) of the *Canterbury Tales*, as the corn harvest will become the bread consumed by the teller of the best tale in his or her winning “soper” as well as the Host that will be consumed by all the pilgrims when they join in Mass at Canterbury.

This emphasis on food supply—and, by implication, the relationship between storytelling and food producing, as well as spiritual and material sustenance—is developed in lines 5–7:

Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
 The tendre croppes.

It is reiterated later in the *General Prologue*, as the Reeve’s fitness for his role as manager of a country estate is demonstrated by his familiarity with this wisdom:

Wel koude he [the Reeve] kepe a gerner and a bynne;
 Ther was noon auditour koude on him wynne.
 Wel wiste he by the droghte and by the reyn
 The yeldynge of his seed and of his greyn.

(I 593–96)

With its eschatological overtones, “yeldynge” conflates the moments of germination and reaping. As “gerner” and “bynne” indicate, the allusion to food security in these lines is topological as well as tropological. It has a material as well as a figurative reality, and it firmly connects storytelling with food and resource management: there is no point producing a good harvest if it is not then stored and distributed wisely. Like Joseph, who manages the Pharaoh’s “gerner[s] and . . . bynne[s]” in Genesis 41, the Reeve ensures a reliable supply of food not only by virtue of his knowledge of the meteorological factors likely to result in a good yield, but because he knows how best to store that grain—when to withhold as well as release provisions—and the conditions that will preserve the grain from corruption and contamination.

The analogy between growing wheat and literary creation, which assumes sophisticated knowledge of agricultural practices as well as literary

conventions on the part of Chaucer's first audiences, is developed throughout the *Canterbury Tales*.²⁵ It situates individual pilgrims in a hierarchical and politicized relationship with one another as complex points on the food chain, whilst also troubling that hierarchy. The Knight apologizes for his proficiency as a storyteller by comparing this skill to the art of plowing: "I have, God woot, a large feeld to ere, / And wayke been the oxen in my plough" (I 886–87). Of course, no knight plowed his own fields, and so his use of this trope as a trope announces his status as a sizeable landowner who is distanced from the physical labor of food production (together with vulnerability to food insecurity). In contrast, the Pardoner exploits the anxieties of those who do the plowing and reaping and are thus susceptible to fluctuations in yields and prices. Seeking to intervene in the process of food production, he claims to be in possession of a miraculous "mitayn":

He that his hand wol putte in this mitayn,
He shal have multipliynge of his grayn,
Whan he hath sowen, be it whete or otes.

(VI 373–75)

Chaucer's portrait of the Pardoner is not simply a satirical comment on Church abuses. It demonstrates the laity's fear of food insecurity and shows how this anxiety can expose its members to exploitation through recourse to the supernatural.

In spite of Chaucer's sophisticated and sustained use of arable poetics, we have tended to overlook the significance of food supply, food purity, and land management in the *Canterbury Tales* as our ability to perceive and read worked, arable land has declined.²⁶ In medieval studies, the distinction between the arable and pastoral is of vital significance: as Ordelle G. Hill points out, the twin social forces represented by these livings existed in a state of tension in late medieval England, with the essential shift in power, from plowman to shepherd, taking place at the end of the fourteenth century.²⁷ Recent ecocritical readings of Chaucer, such as those by Sarah Stanbury and

25. The analogy, a convention in literature in the georgic tradition, also features in Chaucer's *PF*: "out of olde felde, as men seyth, / Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere, / And out of olde bokes, in good feyth, / Cometh al this newe science that men lere" (22–25). Graham D. Caie discusses this topos in "New Corn from Old Fields: The Auctor and Compiler in Fourteenth-Century English Literature," *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 47 (2003): 59–71, but he does not acknowledge the possibility that it might remember knowledge of agricultural practice.

26. On the former point, see Hill, *The Manor*, 19. For correctives to the tendency to favor the pastoral over the arable in literary and cultural studies, see Terry Gifford, "Post-Pastoral," in his *Pastoral* (London, 1999), 146–74; and Susan M. Squier, "Agricultural Studies," in Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Science* (London, 2012), 242–52.

27. Hill, *The Manor*, 19–20.

Lisa Kiser, have focused on the poet's use of nature and associated tropes as part of an aesthetic engagement with the art-nature debate.²⁸ In such readings, the meanings of plant and place names as well as particular foodstuffs are referred away from the material objects themselves and are instead projected elsewhere—to literary authorities, religious symbolism, philosophical concepts, political allegory, and suchlike. This approach is typified by Paul Hardwick, who insists that in spite of the poet's extensive use of farming “as a potent metaphor for the making of poetry,” Chaucer's knowledge of agricultural practice must have been “wholly literary.”²⁹ Similarly, as Kathleen M. Oliver observes, the miraculous “greyne” in the *Priestess's Tale* is read as signifying virtually anything but what its name suggests and it appears to be, that is, grain, the seed of a cereal plant, especially corn.³⁰ So also, despite being given a very precise location, Symkyn's mill in the *Reeve's Tale* has been interpreted as a metaphor for illicit sexuality, the apocalypse, the Eucharist, and as the “mystic mill” or “Mill of the Host”—that is, something other than what it is said to be: a watermill in Trumpington, Cambridgeshire, in which grain is ground into flour and flour is baked into bread on behalf of the Cambridge colleges.³¹

Later in this essay, we argue that characters and locations in the *Reeve's Tale* exist in a particular set of relationships to the land, its produce, and patterns of food supply that reflect socioeconomic and political tensions in Cambridgeshire in the wake of the Peasants' Revolt and the rise of Lollardy. Before continuing with this reading, though, we turn to the *Complaynte* and

28. Sarah Stanbury, “Ecochaucer: Green Ethics and Medieval Nature,” *Chaucer Review* 39 (2004): 1–16; and Lisa Kiser, “Chaucer and the Politics of Nature,” in Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace, eds., *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (Charlottesville, 2001), 41–56. Lynch argues that in Fragment I, “food references become a way of negotiating the nature/culture divide” (“From Tavern to Pie Shop,” 17). Important correctives to this characterization of ecocriticism's engagement with medieval literature are Jodi Grimes, “Arboreal Politics in the *Knight's Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 46 (2012): 340–64; and Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester, U.K., 2008). In particular, see Rudd's discussion of the meaning of “feldes” in her reading of Chaucer's *Former Age* (12–16).

29. Hardwick, “The Poet as Ploughman,” 151.

30. Kathleen M. Oliver, “Singing Bread, Manna, and the Clergeon's ‘Greyn,’” *Chaucer Review* 31 (1997): 357–64, at 357–58. Oliver argues that “greyne” denotes the grain used to make the eucharistic Host, hence its miraculous powers; see *OED*, s.v. *grain*, n., “1. Seed; seed of cereal plants, corn.” In contrast, Shannon Gayk argues that the “ambiguity” of the meaning of “greyn”—among other objects in *PriT*—is essential to Chaucer's “sustained meditation on the exigencies of religious wonder itself” (“‘To wonder upon this thyng’: Chaucer's *Prioresse's Tale*,” *Exemplaria* 22 [2010], 138–56, at 138).

31. Rodney Delasanta, “The Mill in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 36 (2002): 270–76; Ronald Herzman, “Millstones: An Approach to the *Miller's Tale* and the *Reeve's Tale*,” *The English Record* 18 (1977), 18–21; Lynch, “From Tavern to Pie Shop,” 129–30; and Beryl Rowland, “The Mill in Popular Literature from Chaucer to the Present Day,” *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 33 (1969): 69–79. See also Onno Oerlemans, who analyzes “poems that use animals allegorically to represent something else,” despite acknowledging that “Projecting meaning diminishes our sense of their [i.e., animals'] distinctness, makes them merely subjects of our power, and co-opts their presence” (“The Animal in Allegory: From Chaucer to Gray,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 20 [2013]: 296–317, at 296–97).

argue that it is not simply an apocryphal add-on, but that it develops and helps us perceive Chaucer's engagement with the politics and poetics of food supply in the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Reeve's Tale* in particular.

The Plowman Speaks

Echoing the silence of his Plowman, Chaucer's seeming occlusion of contemporary sociopolitical events and debates—the Great Famine, the Black Death, and the 1381 Uprising (the latter still fresh in the minds of many of his first readers)—has been noted but rarely interrogated.³² “The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 goes oddly unremarked by Chaucer, although it presumably had an impact,” Gillian A. Rudd observes.³³ A great deal hangs on that “presumably.” It is perhaps tempting to see the silence of the Plowman as representative of the silencing of the voices of the commons in the *Canterbury Tales*—a work which begins, Britton J. Harwood argues, with the attempted displacing of the aristocracy (in the figure of the Knight) by the people (represented by the Miller), and the eventual suppression of that uprising (by the Reeve).³⁴

Deploying food supply in an explicitly radical, politicized context, the *Complaynte of the Plowman* helps us to perceive the occluded but very real presence of contemporary sociopolitical and religious debates in the *Canterbury Tales*. Existing scholarship on the *Complaynte* places it within the context of Lollard and proto-Reformist critiques of Church abuses and the failure of secular government to ensure the just and equitable distribution of land and wealth. The alignment of the figure of the plowman with Lollardy in works such as Langland's *Piers Plowman* (ca. 1360–87) and the Wycliffite poem *Pierce the Ploughmans Crede* (ca. 1393–1401), together with the use of this figure in the symbolism and rhetoric adopted by participants in the 1381 Uprising, are clear reasons why Chaucer might have wished to avoid

32. Chaucer's one unequivocal reference to the 1381 Peasants' Revolt is the mention of “Jakke Straw,” one of the rebel leaders, in *NPT*, VII 3394.

33. Gillian A. Rudd, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (London, 2001), 21. Alcuin Blamires provides a sophisticated account of Chaucer's engagement with “post-Revolt ruling ideology through tactical distribution of blame for oppression among scapegoats” (“Chaucer the Reactionary: Ideology and the *General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales*,” *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 51 [2000]: 523–39, at 523).

34. Britton J. Harwood, “Psychoanalytic Politics: Chaucer and Two Peasants,” *English Literary History* 68 (2001): 1–27, at 16.

controversy by neglecting to include a tale for his Plowman.³⁵ Indeed, in spite of this omission, the *Complaynte's* careful imitation of Chaucer's style meant that subsequent readers, editors, and scholars, including John Bale, John Foxe, John Leland, Edmund Spenser, and many others, accepted the authenticity of the work and used it as evidence for Chaucer's supposed sympathy with the Lollard cause.³⁶

In a recent article, Darryl Ellison has claimed that reading the prologue of the *Complaynte* "as if it really were an authentic part of the *Canterbury Tales*" can enable us to "better understand the uncertain nature of the *Tales* themselves, and the complex status of their authentic author."³⁷ Developing Ellison's argument, we contend that the *Complaynte* helps clarify Chaucer's engagement with the politics and poetics of food supply in the *Canterbury Tales*. The plowmen described in Chaucer's *General Prologue* and the *Complaynte* are, ostensibly, figures of conformity. In the latter work, the lengthy diatribe against Church and state is presented by the Pelican and only reported by the Plowman, who distances himself from such views by affirming that he will accept the status quo and Church rulings: "To Holy Church I wyll me bowe" (line 1377).³⁸ Equally, there appears to be no hint of heresy or disobedience in Chaucer's Plowman:

A trewe swynkere and a good was he,
Lyvyng in pees and parfit charitee.

35. On the former point, see Andrew Cole, "Langland and the Invention of Lollardy," in Fiona Somerset, Jill C. Havens, and Derrick G. Pitard, eds., *Lollards and Their Influence in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2003), 37–58; Anne Hudson, "Epilogue: The Legacy of *Piers Plowman*," in John A. Alford, ed., *Companion to Piers Plowman* (Berkeley, 1988), 251–66; Katherine Little, "The 'Other' Past of Pastoral: Langland's *Piers Plowman* and Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*," *Exemplaria* 21 (2009): 160–78; and Lorraine Kochanske Stock, "Parable, Allegory, and *Piers Plowman*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 5 (1991): 143–64. The resemblance between Langland's *Piers* and Chaucer's Plowman is discussed by Robert Costomeris, "The Yoke of Canon: Chaucerian Aspects of *The Plowman's Tale*," *Philological Quarterly* 71 (1991): 175–98.

36. The *Complaynte* was first printed as a single work in Thomas Godfray's edition of ca. 1533–36 (STC 5099.5), and it first appeared as part of Chaucer's works in William Thynne's second edition of 1542 (STC 5069). Thynne's volume formed the basis of editions of Chaucer's works published until the late eighteenth century, when, in 1775, Thomas Tyrwhitt excluded the *Complaynte* from his edition. On the reception of the *Complaynte* in early modern England, see Darryl Ellison, "Take it as a tale: Reading the *Plowman's Tale* As If It Were," *Chaucer Review* 49 (2014): 77–101; Thomas J. Heffernan, "Aspects of the Chaucerian Apocrypha: Animadversions on William Thynne's Edition of the *Plowman's Tale*," in Ruth Morse and Barry Windeatt, eds., *Chaucer Traditions: Studies in Honour of Derek Brewer* (Cambridge, U.K., 1990), 155–67; P. J. Patterson, "Reforming Chaucer"; Greg Walker, *Writing under Tyranny* (Oxford, 2005), 73–100; and Andrew N. Wawn, "The *Plowman's Tale* and Reformation Propaganda: The Testimonies of Thomas Godfray and *I Playne Piers*," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 56 (1973): 174–92.

37. Ellison, "Take it as a tale," 77.

38. All quotations from the *Complaynte* are from the *Plowman's Tale*, in James M. Dean, ed., *Six Ecclesiastical Satires* (Kalamazoo, 1991), 51–114.

God loved he best with al his hoole herte
 At alle tymes, thogh him gamed or smerte,
 And thanne his neighebor right as hymselfe.
 He wolde thresshe, and therto dyke and delve,
 For Cristes sake, for every povre wight,
 Withouten hire, if it lay in his myght.
 His tithes payde he ful faire and wel,
 Bothe of his propre swynk and his catel.

(I 531–40)³⁹

As Miriam Müller among others has shown, refusal to pay tithes was a common practice in the social unrest that surrounded the 1381 Uprising.⁴⁰ Chaucer's Plowman pays his tithes "ful faire and wel" and he lives "in pees": the careful inclusion of these details positions the Plowman as a seemingly conservative figure of compliance and orthodoxy, "thogh him gamed or smerte." In the *Complaynte*, the Plowman's orthodoxy is perhaps compromised by the fact that the tale he chooses to tell is dominated by the voice of the Pelican, whose critique of Church and state is exhaustive and scathing. This technique perhaps invites us to read back into Chaucer's Plowman what Karen A. Winstead, writing about the Plowman's brother, the Parson, calls a "rhetoric of coercive orthodoxy"—something that is evident in the way Chaucer's portrait of the Plowman so carefully and pointedly confounds every stereotype of a dissident laborer.⁴¹ The Plowman's overdetermined orthodoxy, like his silence, could invite our suspicion.

The most profound similarity between the *Complaynte* and the *Canterbury Tales* is their shared emphasis on the politics of food supply. The people, the Pelican explains in the former work, have been deprived of land and thus the means to feed themselves. Food products are taxed so heavily they can be purchased only by landowners, most notably the Church. Both

39. Hardwick argues that Chaucer's portrayal of the Plowman challenges several Lollard principles, and that he seeks "to reform, rather than undermine, the institution [of the Church]" ("The Poet as Ploughman," 149). On the Plowman in *GP*, see Bennett, "The Curse of the Plowman," 215–17; Horrell, "Chaucer's Symbolic Plowman"; Pigg, "With Hym Ther Was a Plowman"; and Gardiner Stillwell, "Chaucer's Plowman and the Contemporary English Peasant," *English Literary History* 6 (1939): 285–90.

40. Miriam Müller, "Conflict and Revolt: The Bishop of Ely and the Peasants at the Manor of Brandon in Suffolk, c. 1300–81," *Rural History* 23 (2012): 1–19.

41. Karen A. Winstead, "Chaucer's *Parson's Tale* and the Contours of Orthodoxy," *Chaucer Review* 43 (2009): 239–59, at 240.

figuratively and literally, the Church consumes the commons, leaving the people hungry:

They [the Church] have a gederyng procuratour
That can the poore people emplede,
And robben hem as a ravynour.

(lines 733–35)

The *Complaynte*, with its sustained use of agricultural metaphors and allusions to land ownership—and especially when read in the context of Lollardy and the 1381 Uprising—insists that the people’s hunger is both spiritual and physical. It demonstrates the perception of there being a close connection between reform of the Church and of socioeconomic conditions (specifically, abolition of market monopolies and restrictions on buying and selling of goods).⁴² Similarly, allusions to food and hunger in the *Complaynte* are simultaneously figurative (according to legend, the mother Pelican allows her young to consume her flesh in times of famine) and actual (the Church and secular government are consuming the food produced by a starving commons). Allusions to “farming” are both figurative (describing the abuses of landowners and holders of monopolies) and actual (the produce that is appropriated and misused by those in positions of power). Bread, too, is corporeal as well as incorporeal: the poor cannot afford to consume this staple and they are deprived of the Host (the priests neglect to give Mass). The poor are left to glean the corn (“the dust”) left in fields after reaping:

they [clerks of the Church] right nought us give agayne,
Neyther to eate ne yet to drinke.

.....

They have the corne and we the dust.

(lines 35–36, 43)

This critique of secular and spiritual authorities crystallizes in a series of allusions to the sower parables of the synoptic gospels (Mark 4:3–9; Matt. 13:1–13; Luke 8:1–15) and, in particular, the parable of the wheat and tares

42. On the relationship between Lollardy and the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt, see Margaret E. Aston, “Lollardy and Sedition 1381–1431,” *Past and Present* 17 (1960): 1–44; Paul H. Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Stanford, 1999), 266; and Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Stanford, 1996), 89.

(Matt. 13:24–30). Together, these parables are used to explain the emergence of unjust governance and to point towards unrest across the country:

A sterne stryfe is stered newe
 In many stedes in a stounde,
 Of sondry sedes that bene sewe,
 It semeth that som ben unsounde;
 For some be great growen on grounde,
 Some ben souple, simple and small,
 Whether of hem is falsere founde,
 The falsere foule mote him befall!

(lines 53–60)

Mixed seed is spread over various grounds; injustice and disorder are the result. The Pelican, the chief voice in the *Complaynte* and a traditional symbol for Christ, separates these seeds and their plants, and in the act of naming them reveals their true natures. The “falsere” seed, comprising “Popes, cardynals, and prelates, / Parsons, monkes, and freres fell, / Priours, abbottes of great estates” (lines 62–64), owns the great proportion of the land. The good seed, the landless poor, is identified with Lollards:

The other syde ben poore and pale,
 And people put out of prease,
 And seme caytyffes sore a-cale,
 And ever in one without encrease,
 I-cleped lollers and londlese.
 Who toteth on hem, they bene untall;
 They ben arayed all for the peace;
 But falsched, foule mote it befall!

(lines 69–76)

The alliterative play on “lollers” and “londlese” in the context of the naming of arable plants is suggestive. The allusion to contemporary religious controversies and socioeconomic conflict is unmistakable—not simply because of the references to “lollers” and land dispossession, but, as we will explain in the next section, because of the use of arable poetics and these parables in pro- and anti-Lollard literature as well as by participants in the 1381 Uprising.

The Politics of Food Contamination

The author of the *Complaynte* gives voice to the dispossessed and hungry precisely because Chaucer (and others in similar positions) could not do so directly. However, the former work enables us to perceive the structural and thematic importance of food supply in the *Canterbury Tales*, drawing out and making perceptible its engagement with social and political unrest. This is something we can see by comparing the treatment of the parable of the wheat and tares in the *Complaynte* and the *Canterbury Tales*. In Bible commentary and exegesis, Matthew 13:24–30 was traditionally used to explain the presence of evil in the world (in particular, the threat of heresy amidst orthodoxy) and to describe the kingdom of Heaven.⁴³ Augustine, in his sermon on the sower parables, likens the act of distinguishing between truth and heresy to that of differentiating a food crop (“good” seed) from its weeds (“evil” seed). He urges Christians to resist the temptation to attempt to identify and denounce heretics:

it is the Lord who sows; and we are only His labourers. But be ye the good ground . . . and it may so be, that they who today are tares, may tomorrow be wheat. . . . The harvest will soon be here. The angels will come who can make the separation, and who cannot make mistakes. . . . I tell you of a truth, my Beloved, even in these high seats there is both wheat, and tares, and among the laity there is wheat, and tares. . . . Let us seek after good days, for we are now in evil days; but in the evil days let us not blaspheme, that so we may be able to arrive at the good days.⁴⁴

In the final decades of the fourteenth century, the same parable was given a very different interpretation. For Gregory XI, judgment was not to be left to the angels, as Augustine had urged, nor was this parable to be taken as an endorsement of religious toleration.⁴⁵ The papal bulls issued in 1377 instructed the Church

43. For the parable as a commentary on the relationship between heresy and orthodoxy, see Robert K. McIver, “The Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43) and the Relationship between the Kingdom and the Church as Portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995): 643–59.

44. Augustine, “On the words of the Gospel, Matthew 13:19, etc., where the Lord Jesus explains the parables of the sower” (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series*, trans. R. G. MacMullen, ed. Philip Schaff, 8 vols. [Buffalo, 1888], 6:334–35).

45. The parable of the wheat and tares was used by Bishop Wazo of Liege (ca. 985–1048) in his letter to Bishop Roger of Chalons in defense of religious toleration: “the church should let dissent grow with orthodoxy until the Lord comes to separate and judge them” (qtd. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Dissent and Order in the Middle Ages: The Search for Legitimate Authority* [New York, 1992], 23).

authorities in England to identify and uproot the “tares” of heresy. Here, Gregory XI addresses the “Masters of Oxford” (Oxford being Wyclif’s *alma mater*):

you through a certain sloth and neglect allow tares to spring up amidst
the pure wheat in the fields of your glorious university aforesaid; and
what is still more pernicious, even continue to grow to maturity.⁴⁶

Seen in the context of the decline in arable farming in the late fourteenth century and the heightened awareness of food supply, this agrarian parable held particular resonances, and it echoes across the literature of the period. In the morality play *Mankind* (ca. 1465–70), the demon Titivillius torments the eponymous everyman by mingling “his corn with drawk and with darnel” so that “It shall not be like to sow nor to sell.”⁴⁷ Matthew 13:24–30 recurs throughout Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, informing, as Lorraine Kochanske Stock argues, many of the themes, metaphors, and structural elements of that poem.⁴⁸ The sower parables, and, in particular, their tropes of food contamination, were reappropriated in Wycliffite sermons and in the sermons associated with the 1381 Uprising in order to describe as well as prophesy the death and disorder that would result from a continuation of current inequities and abuses. This shared discourse provides us with a way to understand the relationship between these two movements—a relationship that has, as Margaret Aston remarks, puzzled and divided scholars.⁴⁹ John Ball’s 1381 Corpus Christi Day sermon, delivered at Blackheath, enlists the plowman as a figure of dissent and uses Gregory XI’s rhetoric against itself in order to argue that the rebels should imitate the husbandman, who uproots tares from his field of corn:

be prudent, hastening to act after the manner of a good husbandman,
tilling his field and uprooting the tares that are accustomed to

46. “Pope Gregory XI to the Masters of Oxford: On Wyclif,” in Edward Peters, ed., *Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia, 1980), 271–72, at 271. The bull is dated May 31, 1377. Aston cites Friar Daw Topias’s denunciation of John Wyclif: “Widyf . . . / began to sowe the seed / of cisme in the erthe” (“Lollardy,” 2).

47. *Mankind*, in Christina M. Fitzgerald and John T. Sebastian, eds., *The Broadview Anthology of Medieval Drama* (London, 2012), 356–77 (lines 557–58). The name “drawk” is used for a cereal weed in works from the fourteenth century onwards (the earliest example of usage cited in the *OED* is ca. 1325). However, it cannot be identified with a specific species of weed, and instead seems to have been conflated with other cereal weeds, such as cockle (*Lychnis* [or *Agrostemma*] *githago*), tares (*Vicia sativa*), rye brome (*Bromus secalinus*), wild oats (*Avena fatua*), and darnel (*Lolium temulentum*). *OED*, s.v. *drawk/drauk*, n.

48. Stock, “Parable,” 152–54.

49. Margaret Aston, “Corpus Christi and Corpus Regni: Heresy and the Peasants Revolt,” *Past and Present* 143 (1994): 3–47, at 3–4.

destroy the grain, . . . [to] act after the manner of a good husbandman, tilling the field.⁵⁰

In his letter to the community in Essex (1381), Ball returns to the traditional association between miller's flour and Christ's Passion: "Johan the Mullere hath ygrounde smal, smal, smal; / The Kynges sone of hevene schal paye for al."⁵¹ "Small, small, small" flour signifies the finest type of flour, made from the finest unadulterated wheat subjected to the hardest milling, and suitable for use in the Eucharist. The symbolism of Christ (the self-identified "bread of life" [John 6: 35]) as grain that is ground and milled for the salvation of mankind, situates the plowman and miller in quasi-sacerdotal roles, both playing central parts in the process of salvation.⁵²

Allusions to the energies as well as the dangers represented by this radical arable poetics recur throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. At the end of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, the reader is asked to "Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille" (VII 3443), a passage which prefigures but is reversed in the *Complaynte* ("They have the corne and we the dust" [line 44]), and echoes the challenge made by John Ball to the 1381 rebels. The sower parables as well as related Old Testament passages, such as Joseph's interpretation of the Pharaoh's dream in Genesis 41—all concerned with maximizing yields of cereal crops and minimizing crop contamination—inform the language and mental worlds of Chaucer's pilgrims.⁵³ The Parson interprets Matthew 7:16 in an Augustinian fashion in order to illustrate the nature of "Contricioun": "And therefore oure Lord Jhesu Crist seith thus: 'By the fruyt of hem shul ye knowen hem'" (X 116). The Miller, like Symkyn in the *Reeve's Tale*, is corrupt, pocketing grain from his customers, but he also has a natural gift for his work, as he is able to distinguish good grain from bad using his thumb: "Wel koude he stelen corn and tollen thries; / And yet he hadde a thombe of gold" (I 562–63). His "thombe of golde" is both metaphorical and literal, signifying the profit to be made by a miller who can winnow bad seed from good by hand, but also the use of cereal grains in determining the weight of gold and hence the currency.⁵⁴ The correspondences between this arable poetics and contemporary radical

50. Pamela Gradon, ed., *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1983–96), 2:287. For discussion of the context of this sermon, see Aston, "Corpus Christi," esp. 19.

51. "The Letter of John Ball," in London, British Library MS Royal 13.E.ix, fol. 287r.

52. Ann W. Astell examines Ball's use of the figure of the miller and the connections between famine and revolt ("Full of Enigmas": John Ball's *Letters* and *Piers Plowman*," in her *Political Allegory in Late Medieval England* [New York, 1999], 44–72).

53. Gen. 41:1–57. Compare Augustine's reference to "good days" and "evil days" in his sermon "On the words of the Gospel, Matthew 13:19" (see note 44 above).

54. Bee Wilson, *Swindled: The Dark History of Food Fraud from Poisoned Candy to Counterfeit Coffee* (Princeton, 2008), 64.

politics and religion are made explicit in the epilogue to the *Man of Law's Tale*. The Host addresses the Parson, the Plowman's brother:

“O Jankin, be ye there?
I smelle a Lollere in the wynd,” quod he.
“Now! goode men,” quod oure Hoste, “hearkeneth me;
Abydeth, for Goddes digne passioun,
For we schal han a predicacioun:
This Lollere heer wil prechen us somewhat.”
“Nay, by my fader soule, that schal he nat!”
Seyde the Shipman, “Heer schal he nat preche;
He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche.
We leven alle in the grete God,” quod he;
“He wolde sowen som difficulte,
Or springen cokkel in our clene corn.”

(II 1172–83)

The Parson does not respond (at least immediately) to the Host's accusation.⁵⁵

The derivation of the term “Lollard” is debated by scholars, but the Host's and Shipman's comments on the Parson's alleged Lollard sympathies seem to provide contemporary evidence that the Lollards and Lollardy were associated at an imaginative level with the properties of the weeds from Matthew 13:24–30 and with “lolium” in particular.⁵⁶ Before the eighteenth century, the naming of weeds was imprecise and inconsistent. Because of its association with heresy in scriptural exegesis, the naming of the weeds from Matthew 13:24–30 was especially freighted and contested in the final decades of the fourteenth century. The first version of the Wyclif Bible (ca. 1382) translated the term given to the weeds in the original Greek (“ζιζάνια”) as “dernel or cokil” (darnel or cockle).⁵⁷ The identification of “ζιζάνια” with darnel (*Lolium temulentum* L) drew on

55. On the Parson's possible associations with Lollardy, see Frances McCormack, *Chaucer and the Culture of Dissent: The Lollard Context and Subtext of the Parson's Tale* (Dublin, 2007); and Winstead, “Chaucer's Parson's Tale.”

56. Anthony Wotton's early-seventeenth-century edition of the *Complaynte* includes a marginal gloss on “Lollers” in which this etymology is explained: “the true Christians which either seuered themselues from popish idolatry and abhominacion, or were knowne to mislike of them, were called *Lollers*: as if they had been but weeds in the Church, if that be the deriuacion of the word, it should be written with one *L*. *Lolers*, for *lo*, in *lolium*, is short, as appears by that verse of Virgil: *Infelix lolium & steriles dominantur auenæ*” (*The Plough-mans Tale* [London, 1606], sig. A4v). For recent scholarly assessments of the derivation of “Lollard,” see Cole, “Langland”; and P. J. Patterson, “Reforming Chaucer,” 24. The *OED* gives the following etymology: “Middle Dutch *lollaerd*, lit. ‘mumbler, mutterer,’ < *lollen* to mutter, mumble.”

57. *OED*, s.v. *tares*, 3. a. pl. John of Trevisa (1342–1402), a possible contributor to the first version of the Wyclif Bible, drew on Cornish dialect when he described Matt. 13:25 as “the example of wheat and *evre* that some men clepeth darnel” (cited in David C. Fowler, *The Life and Times of John Trevisa, Medieval Scholar* [Seattle, 1995], 12).

early Middle English translations of Scripture and classical sources. In the latter tradition, “lolium” denoted one of the weeds whose emergence signified the end of the Golden Age.⁵⁸ “Cockle,” adopted by Chaucer’s Shipman, denoted *Lychnis* (or *Agrostemma*) *githago*, a weed that, like darnel, grew in cornfields; its name was derived from the Anglo-Saxon *ceocan*, meaning “choke,” so-called because it was believed to choke life from the corn.⁵⁹ The second Wyclif Bible, completed by John Purvey in 1394, replaced “dernel or cokil” with “tares.”⁶⁰ It has been suggested that the reason for the substitution was to make the allusion “more intelligible” for English readers.⁶¹ In fact it was probably to avoid any connections being made between the Wyclif Bible and heresy, for one etymology of “Lollard” was believed to be *lolium*, the Latin for “darnel.”⁶²

The parable of wheat and tares, like the other sower parables, remembers real-world advice to farmers, entreating them to keep watch over their fields and take appropriate measures to eradicate weeds, whilst also encoding metaphorical significances.⁶³ For those who lived in close proximity to the worked land, “tares,” which is Chaucer’s preferred term for cereal weeds in the *Reeve’s Tale*, was less, not more, intelligible as a translation of “ζιζάνια” than

58. Virgil, *Georgics*, 1.154, and *Eclogues*, 5.37; Ovid, *Fasti*, 1.691. Plautus (*Miles Gloriosus*, 321–23) suggests that consumption of “darnel” was detrimental to the eyesight, and Pliny the Elder (*Natural History*, 18.153) notes that “If introduced into bread, [darnel] will speedily produce vertigo; and it is said that in Asia and Greece, the bath-keepers, when they want to disperse a crowd of people, throw this seed upon burning coals” (18.153.20). On the use of “lolium” in classical texts, see John H. Betts, “Classical Allusions in Shakespeare’s *Henry V* with Special Reference to Virgil,” *Greece and Rome* 15 (1968): 147–63; and F. G. Butler, “Lear’s Crown of Weeds,” *English Studies* 70 (1989): 395–406.

59. *OED*, s.v. *choke*, v. 7: “To kill (or injuriously affect) a plant, by depriving it of air and light”; and *cockle*, n¹ 1. a.: “The name of a plant: now, and prob. from Old English times, applied to *Lychnis* (or *Agrostemma*) *githago*, a caryophyllaceous plant, with handsome reddish-purple flowers succeeded by capsules of numerous black seeds, which grows in cornfields, especially among wheat. Also called corn-cockle *n*.”

60. Most English-language Bibles, including the King James Version (1611), followed Purvey’s emendation.

61. *OED*, s.v. *tares*, 3. a. *pl.*: “Evidently Purvey and his co-revisers adopted *tares* as in their opinion more intelligible than the earlier ‘dernel’ or ‘cokil.’ Probably they thought of *Vicia hirsuta* the Strangle-tare, or other species of wild vetch, as familiar noxious weeds in English cornfields.”

62. The late-fourteenth-century writer of a work denouncing John Wyclif quoted a passage from Jerome in order to argue that Lollards should be identified with the “lolium” of Matt. 13:24–30 (Walter Waddington Shirley, ed., *Fasciculi Zizaniorum Magistri Johannis Wyclif cum tritico, Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores* [Cambridge, U.K., 1858], i.). John Foxe writes in the marginalia of his *Acts and Monuments* (1570): “Lollardes, by the popes interpretation is a worde deriuied of lollium” (bk. 5, 549, <http://www.johnfoxe.org/index.php> [accessed March 21, 2014]). On the derivation of “Lollard,” see P. J. Patterson, “Reforming Chaucer,” 24, 35n. The term “Lollard” was first applied to followers of John Wyclif in 1387, i.e., between the first and second versions of the Wyclif Bible and following Wyclif’s death in 1386. On the historical use of “lolium” to describe heretics in the Church, see Pearl F. Braude, “Cokkel in Oure Clene Corne’: Some Implications of Cain’s Sacrifice,” *Gesta* 7 (1968): 15–28.

63. Matt. 13:25: “But while men were asleep, his enemy came and oversowed cockle among the wheat and went his way” (Douay-Rheims). On the agricultural significance of this parable in ancient Jordan and Syria, see Lytton John Musselman, “Zawan and Tares in the Bible,” *Economic Botany* 54 (2000): 537–42.

darnel. Farmers and millers had little to fear from tares (also called vetch, genus *Vicia*). It was inconvenient if tares infiltrated wheatfields, but because its physical appearance is distinct from wheat, it was easy to weed out.⁶⁴ For medieval farmers, millers, and consumers, the more familiar and dangerous weed alluded to in the “ζιζάνια” of Matthew 13:25 was darnel. Routinely conflated with the equally dangerous ergot (a fungus of *Claviceps purpurea*), darnel is a cereal mimicker virtually indistinguishable from wheat.⁶⁵ Archaeobotanical studies of English medieval thatch remains testify to the presence of darnel in corn crops during the fourteenth century.⁶⁶ Because it was so difficult to eradicate, darnel is likely to have been present in the bread and ale enjoyed by the pilgrims in their first night at the Tabard Inn and by the Pardoner, who is drunk as he relates his tale, having taken a “draughte of moyste and corny ale” (VI 315). When darnel entered the food chain, most often in bread or ale, symptoms included visual impairment, disorientation, headaches, and even, in high concentrations, hallucinations—a perfect metaphor for the corrupting influence of heresy and the poisoning influence of evil, and also, suggestively, for the unpredictability of a desperate commons.⁶⁷

The plowman and the miller—the two figures politicized and radicalized by Ball—were responsible for preventing the insinuation of darnel into the food chain. The fact that Chaucer’s Miller is drunk for the duration of the *Canterbury Tales* perhaps suggests that he has been intoxicated by ale containing darnel, and it is appropriate that his tale exploits fantasy and the suspension of disbelief. But the language of the parable of wheat and tares along with allusions to a contaminated food supply are most prominent in the *Reeve’s Tale*, and, in particular, the description of Symkyn. According to the Reeve, the corrupt miller gives “nat a tare” (I 4000) for his defrauding of the manciple of Soler Hall and cares “nought a tare” (I 4056) for the learning of the Cambridge clerks. In his editorial commentary, Larry D. Benson glosses *tare* as “weed (i.e., nothing),” which tallies with Symkyn’s description as a “theef” (I 3998) of “bothe mele and corn” (I 3995).⁶⁸ However, this explanation neglects the important context of corrupted food supply as both a material expression of socioeconomic tensions and a conventional trope for heresy in which the

64. This would seem to contradict the parable, which depends on the good and evil seeds being virtually indistinguishable from one another.

65. On the characteristics of darnel, its relationship with wheat, and its historical conflation with ergot, see Howard Thomas, Jayne Elisabeth Archer, and Richard Marggraf Turley, “Evolution, Physiology and Phytochemistry of the Psychotoxic Arable Mimic Weed Darnel (*Lolium temulentum* L.),” *Progress in Botany* 72 (2010): 73–104.

66. John B. Letts, *Smoke Blackened Thatch: A Unique Source of Late Medieval Plant Remains from Southern England* (London, 1999), 1, 39–41. See also Susan Drury, “Plants and Pest Control in England circa 1400–1700: A Preliminary Study,” *Folklore* 103 (1992): 103–6.

67. On the physical effects of consuming food contaminated with *Lolium temulentum*, see Thomas et al., “Evolution,” 91–92.

68. *The Riverside Chaucer*, 79n, 80n.

poem situates Symkyn's actions. Symkyn does not simply fail to give back to the college what it rightfully owns. He adulterates its food: "In stide of flour yet wol I yeve hem bren" (I 4053). When he conceals the theft by baking some of the impure flour into bread, he makes it worse than useless—he makes it dangerous. He is, of course, violating the regulations concerning the weight and quality of bread as set out in the Assize of Bread.⁶⁹ The Assize reflected the importance of the miller's role in ensuring food purity, and it is suggestive that millers in Cambridgeshire—the location of Symkyn's mill—were prosecuted under the Assize for deceit.⁷⁰ Symkyn's mingling of "flour" and "bren" anticipates the Parson's allusion to the sower parables as he couples "draf" and "whete" in his *Prologue*: "Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest, / When I may sowen whete, if that me lest?" (X 35–36) The Parson's condemnation of mixed seed invites us to reflect back on the actions of the Cambridge clerks (John sleeps like a "draf-sak" [I 4206]) who, instead of sowing God's word, "grind" a villager's wife and daughter.

Chaucer's use of a radicalized agrarian imagery was not simply figurative, then. It reflected and spoke to the material circumstances that caused hunger and compelled the dispossessed and impoverished to eat adulterated food of poor quality. During the 1381 Uprising, anger was focused on those who monopolized the means of processing and distributing food, particularly grain. Thomas Walsingham, in his account of the Uprising, notes that the tenants of St. Albans Abbey expressed their anger about the longstanding prohibition on the use of hand mills and the abbey's monopoly on milling rights by breaking in to the abbey and lifting "the mill-stones . . . laid there as a memento and memorial of the ancient agreement between the villeins and the monastery in the time of abbot Richard [I]."⁷¹ The rebels "smashed [the mill-stones] into small pieces, giving a part of them to each man, as the bread that has been blessed is distributed and bestowed upon the Lord's people in the parochial churches" and so that "when the people saw those fragments they would recall that they had once prevailed over the monastery in

69. On the operation and impact of the Assize of Bread, see James Davis, "Baking for the Common Good: A Reassessment of the Assize of Bread in Medieval England," *Economic History Review* 57 (2004): 465–502; and Alan S. C. Ross, "The Assize of Bread," *Economic History Review* 9 (1956): 332–42.

70. For evidence of the dishonesty of Cambridge millers, see a Cambridge University ordinance (1406), which required "That no miller of the town take for the multure of wheat or other corn except the toll accustomed, but if he carry it thither, and then to take thereupon for four bushels 1*d.* for his labor and not more, under the penalty of 40*d.* to the use of the commonalty" (cited in Charles Henry Cooper and John William Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, 5 vols. [Cambridge, U.K., 1842], 1:151).

71. Thomas Walsingham, *The St Albans Chronicle: The Chronica Majora of Thomas Walsingham, 1376–1394, Volume 1*, ed. and trans. John Taylor, Wendy R. Childs, and Leslie Watkiss (Oxford, 2003), 458–59. Aston remarks on the rebels' actions: "Here again there is a chain of associations: milling, mill-stones, holy bread and communion" ("Corpus Christi," 29).

this cause.⁷² It is the corrupting effect of a monopoly over grain-processing within the context of tensions between the governing classes and the commons that provides the context of the *Reeve's Tale*.

Food Unrest in the Reeve's Tale

Edward Vasta has observed that "Reve . . . is a homograph of *reven*, 'to rob, plunder, take away, bereave.'⁷³ As we have seen, the author of the *Complaynte* has the Plowman accuse the Church of robbing the poor "as a rauinour." The representation of the Reeve in the *Canterbury Tales* is perhaps equivocal rather than straightforwardly condemnatory, and this ambiguity characterizes the portrayal of all participants in Chaucer's game of food.⁷⁴ Save for the Plowman himself, everyone involved in the production, processing, distribution, and management of food acts to some degree through self-interest. In this complex evocation of food supply, the *Canterbury Tales* provides a recognizable portrait of socioeconomic conditions in late-fourteenth-century England. Of all the tales, it is the one told by the Reeve that is most pointedly situated in the world of Chaucer's first readers. Three English place names are given.⁷⁵ The two Bible clerks originate from Strother, the significance of which is instantly dismissed by the Reeve, who describes it as "Fer in the north; I kan nat telle where" (I 4015). The clerks are members of Soler Hall, Cambridge, and the main setting for the events described in the tale is a watermill in the village of Trumpington, just south of Cambridge.⁷⁶

At Trumpyngtoun, nat fer fro Cantebrigge,
Ther gooth a brook, and over that a brigge,
Upon the whiche brook ther stant a melle.

(I 3921–23)

72. Walsingham, *The St Albans Chronicle*, ed. Taylor et al., 459. Walsingham notes that in order to prevent any further damage to the abbey, the monks distributed "an abundance of ale as well as bread in great wedges . . . in the hope that they [the commons] might remain calm because of the kindness shown them" (463).

73. Edward Vasta, "How the Reeve Succeeds," *Criticism* 25 (1983): 1–12, at 1–2.

74. On the representation of the Reeve, see Richard B. McDonald, "The Reve Was a Scendre Colerik Man," in Lambdin and Lambdin, eds., *Chaucer's Pilgrims*, 288–99; and Vasta, "How the Reeve Succeeds"

75. In *GP* we learn that the Reeve's own manor is situated by "Baldeswelle" in Norfolk (I 620).

76. On the identification of Strother, see Andrew Breeze, "Chaucer's Strother and Berwickshire," *Notes and Queries* 56 (2009): 21–23.

The “brook” (called “Vicar’s Brook” from 1600) is a tributary running to the north and northeast of Trumpington; it runs into the River Cam (or Granta) which bounds the village to the west. The very deliberate and careful positioning of Symkyn’s mill is arresting, especially in light of the paucity of English place names in the rest of the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer’s detailed knowledge of the practice of milling as demonstrated in the *Reeve’s Tale* is also noteworthy: one clerk stands “right by the hopur” to “se howgates the corn gas in” (I 4036–37), whilst the other positions himself “bynethe,” to “se how that the mele falles down / Into the trough” (I 4041–43). Chaucer’s careful description suggests that he had in mind a particular mill and a particular moment in the process of milling.⁷⁷ As Benson remarks, the “topographical details” of Symkyn’s mill “are accurate” and they would have made the site and its situation with respect to the Cambridge colleges recognizable to Chaucer’s first audiences.⁷⁸

Not only is the mill given a specific geographical location; it is also situated in a precise relationship—one of antagonism—with the largest of the Cambridge colleges:

Greet sokene hath this millere, out of doute,
 With whete and malt of al the land aboute;
 And nameliche ther was a greet collegge
 Men clepen the Soler Halle at Cantebregge;
 Ther was hir whete and eek hir malt ygrounde.
 (I 3987–91)

77. Chaucer’s familiarity with King’s Hall, Cambridge, and Trumpington, and the socio-political conditions in the surrounding area, have been documented elsewhere. Chaucer’s family had East Anglian connections (Graham Chainey, *A Literary History of Cambridge*, 2nd edn. [Cambridge, U.K., 1995], 7; and Cooper and Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, 1:153), and he is certain to have known graduates of King’s Hall (Derek S. Brewer, “The *Reeve’s Tale* and the King’s Hall, Cambridge,” *Chaucer Review* 5 [1971]: 311–17, at 312). It is possible that he would have been in attendance when Parliament was convened there in 1388 as part of the authorities’ clamp-down on the Peasants’ Revolt. On this occasion, the representatives were entertained in King’s Hall. Sir Roger of Trumpington was a contemporary of his in royal service, and in 1380–82, Lady Blanche, Sir Roger’s wife, was a fellow lady-in-waiting with Chaucer’s wife Philippa to Constance of Castile, Duchess of Lancaster. Walter W. Skeat suggests that it was through his wife that Chaucer knew of Trumpington Mill (Geoffrey Chaucer, *Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Edited from Numerous Manuscripts, 2nd edn. [Oxford, 1899], xxii).

78. *The Riverside Chaucer*, 849. The earliest record of the single watermill in Trumpington dates from 1260. It stood above the millpond (now known as Byron’s Pool). Demolished in the nineteenth century, a new mill was erected in 1890; the replacement mill was destroyed in a fire in 1928. The site is now a field. See Henry Paine Stokes, “The Old Mills of Cambridge,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* 14 (1910): 180–233.

The embedding of the mill in a network of social and geographical relationships marks Chaucer's clearest departure from his immediate source, the thirteenth-century French fabliau "The Miller and the Two Clerics," which exists in two known versions.⁷⁹ It invites readers to interpret the *Reeve's Tale* within these networks and, as Graham Chainey notes, consider the ways in which the story "mirrors historical truth in fourteenth-century Trumpington."⁸⁰

Chaucer's first readers could have been expected to undertake this type of reading. However, twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars have largely overlooked the socioeconomic context of the *Reeve's Tale* and its engagement with specific communities in a particular set of relationships with one another. Derek Brewer has considered the ways in which the tale reflects what is known of the administration of "soler halle" in the second half of the fourteenth century.⁸¹ Soler Hall is probably based on King's Hall (founded in 1326 and later merged into Trinity College), which, in the final quarter of the fourteenth century, "was both the largest and, through its royal connections, the most important of the seven or eight existing foundations."⁸² With thirty-six fellows, King's Hall had half the fellows in the entire University. Despite finding the portrayal to be largely accurate, Brewer warns against "the absurd notion that an actual adventure of two particular scholars is recorded in the *Reeve's Tale*."⁸³ More recently, William F. Woods has noted that the mill and miller in the *Reeve's Tale* exist in a hostile relationship to the land and its people, but he does not explore the ways in which this relationship might describe the situation in Cambridgeshire at the time of writing.⁸⁴

Using Cambridgeshire local records, together with the University archives, the relationship between King's Hall, Trumpington Mill, and the rest of the county can be reconstructed and brought to bear on our reading of the poem. The growth of the University in the fourteenth century placed increasing demands on the Cambridgeshire countryside. Although some

79. "The Miller and the Clerk," in Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Andersson, eds. and trans., *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux: Texts and Translations* (New York, 1971), 101–15. In this fabliau the two clerics (who are not affiliated to a particular university) seek to become bakers in order to make enough money to be able to eat, and therefore escape "hunger, which vanquishes everything" (101). Other sources for *RvT* are listed in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 849.

80. Chainey, *A Literary History of Cambridge*, 6.

81. Brewer, "The Reeve's Tale."

82. Chainey, *A Literary History of Cambridge*, 6. Alan B. Cobban notes that "The designation Soler Hall is not found anywhere in the King's Hall records," but concludes that the identification of Soler Hall with King's Hall "is assuredly the most probable hypothesis" (*The King's Hall within the University of Cambridge in the Later Middle Ages* [Cambridge, U.K., 1969], 17). Brewer accepts the identification and suggests that "Soler"—the reading accepted by most modern editors—is a scribal error for "Scoler" ("The Reeve's Tale," 311, 316–17).

83. Brewer, "The Reeve's Tale," 316, 315.

84. William F. Woods, "The Logic of Deprivation in the *Reeve's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 30 (1995): 150–63.

supplies were purchased from London, the King's Hall's accounts show that it bought most of its food and fuel from the surrounding areas.⁸⁵ Without a landed endowment similar to those enjoyed by other, smaller colleges, King's Hall "depended on the market to a greater extent than other colleges" for grain and fuel.⁸⁶ Consequently, the college was especially vulnerable to food insecurity. One of the historical accuracies Brewer identifies in Chaucer's poem is the careful auditing of food found in the King's Hall accounts. These records reveal "how important was precisely the management of wheat and malt barley" to the college and show that Trumpington "was one of the many parishes where the college dealt in both."⁸⁷ The short- and long-term viability of the college depended on its ability to secure affordable and reliable supplies of food. The reputation of the King's Hall administration for ineptitude in the 1370s and 1380s—together with the notoriety of local millers for deceit, as noted above—endangered this objective.⁸⁸ Whether or not Trumpington Mill had a monopoly over local milling rights is uncertain. However, the colleges were dependent on the mills outside Cambridge, as the river within the town was not strong enough to work watermills, thereby putting nearby mills such as the one at Trumpington in a powerful position with respect to King's Hall.⁸⁹

The tense relationship between college and countryside described in Chaucer's poem thus reflects the situation in Cambridgeshire during the final quarter of the fourteenth century. The University's close association with the royal court meant that it, like St. Albans Abbey, was a focal point for rebel attacks.⁹⁰ Thomas Roo of Wood Ditton was accused of acting as a summoner on Corpus Christi Day 1381 and the six days following that feast. During this period he falsely claimed royal authority for issuing threats of loss of life and burning of houses against those who did not join the rebel commons.⁹¹ Armed bands rode about the county during that summer, and John Shirle of Nottinghamshire was hanged in Cambridge for defending John Ball as a

85. Cambridge, Trinity College Archive, King's Hall accounts. For analysis of King's Hall's private agreement with suppliers of wheat, malt barley, and fuel, see John Lee, "The Trade of Fifteenth-Century Cambridge and Its Regions," in Michael Hicks, ed., *Revolution and Consumption in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2001), 127–40.

86. Lee, "The Trade," 132.

87. Brewer, "The Reeve's Tale," 315; and Cobban, *The King's Hall*, 128 ff.

88. On maladministration at King's Hall in the late fourteenth century, see Brewer, "The Reeve's Tale," 312.

89. Chainey notes that "it was not unusual for a college to send its meal as far as Trumpington to be ground" (*A Literary History of Cambridge*, 6).

90. On the University's associations with the royal court, see Harwood, "Psychoanalytic Politics," 15.

91. Kew, The National Archives JUST 1/103, m. 2v; W. M. Palmer and H. W. Saunders, eds., *Documents Relating to Cambridgeshire Villages*, 6 pts. (Cambridge, U.K., 1925–26), 2:21, 36.

prophet.⁹² Rebels broke into Corpus Christi College and burned its books. Corpus Christi, a matter of contention for those who participated in the 1381 Uprising as for followers of John Wyclif, is, as we have seen, one of the presiding symbols of the *Complaynte*.⁹³

When Symkyn orders his wife to take “half a busschel” of the Cambridge clerks’ flour and “kneade it in a cake” (I 4093–94), he is not, however, a hero of the people. If the University was associated with royal authority, so too was Trumpington Mill. Sir Edmund de la Pole’s purchase of the mill (as part of Cayley Manor) was part of a larger program of land acquisition in and around Cambridgeshire, and resulted in his appointment as a justice of the peace for Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire in the wake of the 1381 Uprising.⁹⁴ The privileged position of the miller as guardian of food purity and gatekeeper in the supply chain made him a potential source of antagonism to the rural population as much as to urban centers such as Cambridge. The *Reeve’s Tale’s* focus on food supply and food purity reflects contemporary concerns as the rural population of Trumpington and Cambridgeshire suffered under the increasing demands and rapacity of the Cambridge colleges (as reflected in the *Tale’s* indisposed bursar) and those who acted as mediators in the supply chain (such as Symkyn and also the Reeve). Symkyn and the Reeve are not champions of the commons, but, as Woods remarks, they typify “those . . . whose central place in rural commerce allows, or better, compels them to prey upon extended domains representing established capital bases.”⁹⁵ Instead, the *Reeve’s Tale* portrays, without taking sides, a specific set of tensions relating to food supply and food contamination with respect to Trumpington Mill and the grain-growing regions of Cambridgeshire. These relationships are played out, within the safety valve that satire provides, in Chaucer’s poem. The commons’ historical act of invading Corpus Christi College on June 15, 1381, can be discerned, in altered form, in the *Reeve’s Tale*: Cambridge clerks enter the space of a miller and take what is most precious to him, but they return to their college with an underweight load of adulterated flour.

92. Palmer and Saunders, eds., *Documents Relating to Cambridgeshire Villages*, 2:32, 33, 35; and Aston, “Corpus Christi,” 22.

93. Aston, “Corpus Christi.”

94. Anthony Tuck, “Pole, Michael de la, first earl of Suffolk (c.1330–1389),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004); online edn., Jan 2008, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22452> (accessed March 21, 2014). Harwood argues that “*The Reeve’s Tale* is evidence that Chaucer deeply identified himself with [Michael de la] Pole,” Sir Edmund’s brother (“Psychoanalytic Politics,” 8).

95. Woods, “The Logic of Deprivation,” 150.

In Chaucer's day, the north transept of Canterbury Cathedral was decorated with a stained-glass image of the Mill of the Host accompanied by a Latin text: "What the old law and the new grind as a pair of mill-stones, this food is your passion, cross and word, O Christ."⁹⁶ The Mill of the Host at Canterbury, the conceptual destination of Chaucer's pilgrims, can be glimpsed throughout the *Canterbury Tales* in the poem's use of the language of arable foodstuffs, their contamination, and their distribution. Chaucer demonstrates a thorough understanding of the language and mechanics of food production, supply, and contamination. He traces the ways in which food formed an essential part of social structures and bonds of obligation. And he describes some precise locations in which the politics of food supply were particularly contentious in the 1380s. Of all the pilgrims' stories, it is the *Reeve's Tale* in which these themes are explored most fully. In the battle between the clerks and the miller, spiritual and secular powers are set in opposition, as are food consumers and food producers, and urban against rural populations. Here, as in the *Complaynte of the Plowman*, food supply and food contamination are used to interrogate the challenges to spiritual and social authorities that convulsed England in the second half of the fourteenth century.

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96. Madeleine Harrison Caviness, *The Windows of Christ Church Cathedral, Canterbury* (London, 1981), 116. The window and the iconography of the Mill of the Host are discussed by Aston, "Corpus Christi," 30–31.