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STEVEN JUSTICE, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 289 pp.

The records of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381—especially the six brief "letters" usually ascribed to John Ball—have been the site of several recent explorations by literary historians into territory outside the canon of later medieval English literature. Two of these essays appeared only as Steven Justice's more ambitious pursuit was at an advanced stage; but, oddly enough, he was able to respond to them in a review before his book was published.<sup>1</sup> In this review, he complains that such forays often turn out to be pretenses for demonstrating from a new angle the achievements of the great poets. He praises, on the other hand, essays that use old, philological methods to "suggest roads that a really historical study of literature might take" (791). His own mostly rewarding journey on these roads yields compelling views of the texts and events of 1381 from the perspective of the peasants themselves, but also shows how tenuous the results can be of reading boldly behind the presumed intentions of those who made the records.

Justice's fundamental hypothesis is to credit the rebels with exactly what writers both then and now have denied them: coherent perspective and intentions. He invites us to take the book "as a thought experiment: what might the rising look like if we resist infection from the panic of the chroniclers and assume a maximum (rather than the customary minimum) of discipline, consistency, purpose, and information on the part of those who made it?" (10). Reconstructing the intentions of the rebels from documents made by their persecutors, however, requires first reconstructing the perspective of the persecutors as a guide to what these writers were, and more importantly were not, able to see and, hence, how "slips" in their records might reveal to us what they did not intend to show. For this project of reading past the sources Justice rightly claims the usefulness of old, "empirical disciplines" in reconstituting both new and familiar texts (7), and he puts them to judicious use.

Justice principally reconstitutes the six brief texts transcribed in Middle English by two chroniclers—five by Henry Knighton and one

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Firth Green, "John Ball's Letters: Literary History and Historical Literature," 176-200, and Susan Crane, "The Writing Lesson of 1381," 201-21 in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt, Medieval Studies at Minnesota 4, Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1992; reviewed in *Speculum* 69, no. 3 (July 1994): 790-2.

by Thomas Walsingham—in their Latin accounts of 1381. Careful consideration of exactly how these texts were preserved establishes that, while the question of who wrote them is undecidable, they were not letters but something more like broadsides whose intended significance lay not so much in their content as in the mere fact of their production and use by a group considered illiterate. To support the notion that the rebels were claiming the privileges of literacy, Justice reexamines the long-recognized fact that the rebels consistently targeted documents for destruction. Armed with his hypothesis that the rebels had consistent intentions to which the authorities were necessarily blind, he finds, despite the chroniclers' and courts' portrayal of them as motivated by ignorant awe before the written word, clear evidence "that the destruction was specific, informed, and tactical" (51). For this the peasants needed not the kind of competence in reading and writing that is the subject of most historical studies of literacy, but a "shallower," "broader" literacy, "a savvy about the forms and functions of documentary usage" (52), which Justice argues they could have picked up from the public life of the countryside in church, alehouse, and shire court.

Thus chapter one leads persuasively to the claim that these broadsides exemplify the rebels' intention to announce their entry into the space of government marked by literacy. It concludes with an interesting explanation for why the rebels seem to have maintained their trust in the king alone apart from all other church and state authorities. This trust, Justice suggests, did not result from being hoodwinked by ideology, but rather from knowledge of the accessibility of the king's name at law. This knowledge, indeed, exemplifies what peasants could have learned in local courts. As an example of the kind of literacy behind the rebellion, however, this explanation confuses because it shows a certain trust rather than "contempt of official culture" (64). This confusion, whether on the part of the peasants, the author, or the reader, does not necessarily undermine the main argument, but it is symptomatic of Justice's failure to make the logic of his argument as explicit and clear as it could be.

In particular, he consistently avoids indicating in advance what the specific conclusions of his arguments will be. This apparent preference for starting with anecdotes and cultivating suspense is motivated, I think, by a deeper strategy. Though the book calls itself an experiment, it proceeds according to a naive view of science in which the conclusions are supposed to arise inductively from the

evidence presented. But such an attempt to avoid the appearance of theorizing in fact conceals what is necessarily the argument's method and source of strength: the thorough application of a new hypothesis to old data in order to test its explanatory power. The epilogue, in which he defends the hermeneutic of suspicion with which he approaches the chronicles, nonetheless obscures how his readings depend on his hypothesis and thus exaggerates their claim to historical truth. Within the argument, this tendency to hide the hypothesis leads him to rest too much on specific examples and chains of influence which are themselves open to alternative interpretations that he does not consider. It also requires extra patience and attention from his readers. The following rather lengthy summary recasts the argument deductively in order to suggest both its general success and its local weaknesses.

Chapters 2 and 3 trace the rebels' reception of John Wyclif and William Langland, respectively. Following his hypothesis, Justice reopens the question of how these two figures influenced the revolt by looking not for simple echoes of each in the rebels' words and actions, but for interpretations.

In the case of Wyclif, he imagines the rebels overhearing a message that was meant especially for the nobility and, because they do not share the context of the target audience, making of it something other than what Wyclif intended. Conjecturing carefully which of his teachings would have been available in the vernacular before the Revolt, Justice focuses attention on the connection Wyclif makes between the disendowment of clergy who abuse their wealth and the responsibility owed to the poor, who bear the mark of Christ's authority. Whereas Wyclif used the poor as a prop for calling the lords to step in and fulfill this responsibility by disendowment, the rebels took his proclamation of their authority seriously. Justice's brief and simplified presentation of Wyclif's views on authority and dominion often makes poverty sound like a ground of authority for Wyclif rather than just a sign of it, and minimizes the distance between Wyclif's elaborate arguments and what the rebels might have drawn from his conclusions. Nonetheless, such an interpretation by the rebels plausibly explains many of their actions in London, especially the link between their refusal to plunder John of Gaunt's palace and their ritual execution of Archbishop Sudbury as a thief and therefore a traitor.

Some connection between the rebel letters and *Piers Plowman* is indisputable because they refer to the poem's title character and its

central terms Dowell, Dobet, and Dobest. Justice eventually makes a good case that these citations absorb Langland's terms into the already-formed ideology that sustained local peasant communities. *Piers* came to represent in their letters not Langland's mysterious notion of pilgrimage, but an established list of rights and wrongs, and the rebels learned from Langland a way of turning their concrete "local and native vocabulary into an analytic, generalizable, and prescriptive one" (131). The chapter begins, however, with an attempt to connect to Langland not the letters transcribed in the vernacular but Walsingham's report, in Latin, of John Ball's preaching. His point is the same—that Ball read into Langland an un-Langlandian consistency that arose from his own program—but the connections themselves are dubious. Ball's admittedly incongruous attack on bastards suggests a reference to an attack on bastards in *Piers Plowman* B, passus 9. So far so good. But the surrounding links between the sermon that Walsingham then summarizes and nearby passages of *Piers* are strained at best. Much hangs on the suggestion that Ball's "a natura" and "a principio" translate Langland's "of hir kynde" and "out of o man," a shaky argument to make from a secondhand (at least) Latin report of an English sermon. Moreover, the term Walsingham puts in Ball's mouth with "a natura" is "ab initio," not "a principio," although "in principio" occurs two lines later in the Latin text from the *Chronicon Angliae* given (correctly) in a footnote. The claim that the rest of Ball's reported sermon uses "specifically Langlandian terms" rests on his exhortation to act "more boni paterfamilias excolentis agrum suum, et exstirpantis ac rescantis noxia gramina quae fruges solent opprimere, et ipsi in praesenti facere festinant: primo, majores regni dominos occidendo..." ("in the manner of a good paterfamilias cultivating his field, pulling out and cutting down the poisonous weeds that smother the corn: first killing the great lords of the realm..." Justice's translation, 110). Certainly *Piers Plowman* uses such agricultural imagery; the clincher is supposed to be the term "paterfamilias," which Justice takes as a reference to Langland's passus 6, where Piers is portrayed with a family and in charge of a field. A much more likely source for Ball's imagery, however, can be found in the parables of Jesus. "Pater familias" occurs eleven times in the Gospels, nine of these being in parables. In fact, the reference here is clearly to the parable of the weeds and the wheat (or wheat and tares) in Matthew 13:24-30, where the owner of the field is called a "pater familias." And it is not so much Ball's reference as Walsingham's, who makes a joke at Ball's

expense by stressing, in a phrase that Justice neglects to translate ("et ipsi in praesenti facere festinant"), that Ball reversed the message of the parable by urging "that they hurry to do these things in the present" rather than wait for harvest time (the universal judgment) as the paterfamilias of Matthew commands his servants. This unmistakable result of Walsingham's bias, which Justice is usually astute in filtering out, throws doubt on his whole attempt to use this report as an accurate record of Ball's words.

Again, I do not think these criticisms are as damaging to Justice's argument as his construction of it might make them appear. The idea that the rebels were responding to Wyclif and Langland, or something like them, through their own consistent set of commitments makes good general sense of their words and actions. But arguing too forcefully for clear lines of inheritance has the curious effect of returning to the kind of focus on the originality of canonical texts that he had criticized in his earlier review. This particular lapse highlights the distance that Justice has put between his historical reading of these texts and a Robertsonian, exegetical historicism. Yet without considering the influence of a broader cultural matrix, in which biblical tradition must figure prominently, Justice's new historicism would be rather thin. In the next chapter, however, he turns to an array of such influences that is potentially as important and informative as medieval exegesis.

Chapter 4 reconstructs an aspect of the peasants' *mentalité*, their "native forms of rural self-government" (188), in answer to the question of what they meant by the term "trewthe" that is prominent in the letters. "Trewthe," Justice argues, "connotes the rural culture of contractual reliability" (188), a face-to-face accountability to the community at large, which in the rebels' view had been supplanted by bureaucracy and for the sake of which they wanted to remake documentary culture. His reconstruction follows two main lines. The first is the liturgical celebrations culminating in Corpus Christi. Ancillary rituals such as neighborhood bonfires already functioned to support agrarian more than ecclesiastical community and provided a model for the public burning of documents in the Revolt. Other events of the Revolt show the rebels plundering the central rituals of the feast for symbolic actions which they used to convey "the passage of clerical privileges into the regime of local political culture" (172). Second, in order to describe this political culture itself, he looks at such things as village bylaws and the practice of personal pledging in light of the exigencies of late fourteenth-

century farming. He draws here on the work of generations of historians, and it would take an historian to judge his use of their work. As an exercise in philology, however, the chapter gives satisfying substance to some of the rebel's expressions.

Chapter 5 returns to canonical authors: Walsingham and the three major Ricardian poets whose names are known to us, John Gower, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Langland. All three poets come out ahead of the chronicler in perceiving the rebels' agenda as Justice has reconstructed it, though their witnesses are negative—overreaction, exclusion, and evasion. Read in the light of Justice's hypothesis, Gower's portrayal of the rebels as noisy animals in the first book of his *Vox Clamantis*, the only part of that work written after the Revolt, becomes a defensive response to what he saw, accurately, as a threat to the claim in what he had already written that he was speaking with the voice of the people. Chaucer's single explicit reference to the Revolt, in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, becomes a parody of Gower, comprehensible only within the coterie they shared, that attributes his overreaction to "psychosexual and intestinal dysfunctions" (217). Even more subtly, the proximity (within 50 lines) of the Nun's Priest's reference to Jack Straw and his concluding address to his audience as "goode men" becomes a reference to the French peasants' term for themselves in the Jacquerie of 1358, "li Jacques bon-hommes." Because the Nun's Priest, however, elsewhere so conscious of his potential audiences, seems unaware of this potential "call to insurgency" (223), it shows Chaucer's own awareness of his fellow authors' unawareness of a peasant audience. More plausibly, Justice argues that *The Canterbury Tales*' concern for individuals forestalls any group from speaking together and thus excludes the memory of the Revolt from the poem even as Chaucer's pilgrims reverse the route taken by the Kentish group of rebels.

Subtler still are his readings of changes between the B and C texts of *Piers Plowman* as records of Langland's response to 1381. To the long-noticed changes that specify phrases in B so that they could not be taken to concur with the rebels, Justice adds the general claim that "Langland acknowledged—tenuously, evasively, and by analogy only—what no other poet or chronicler was willing to: that the commons who rose in 1381 defined themselves too as textual communities" (251). "Too" here refers to Justice's important argument that in the autobiographical passage added to C passus 5, Langland responds to criticisms of wanderers like himself, made both by peasant communities and by the lords, by attaching himself not to a

place but a people, his audience. Moreover, by imagining his audience as both his community and his lord, he is following the model of local politics upon which the rebels wanted to remake the government of the realm. Justice's readings of other changes, however, are less successful. Changes to B passus 9 add little to the argument that it provided the inspiration for Ball's reported sermon, but do come into focus when read as intended for an audience that already saw links between the B text and the murder of Archbishop Sudbury as a traitor to the poor. The otherwise appealing idea that Langland removed the notorious tearing of the pardon "lest he seem to endorse the rebels' way with documents" but instead "allowed the rebels' concerns to shape the contents of the pardon itself and found theological authority in the desperation of rural smallholders" (243-4) is hampered by the unargued assertion that the long description of the pardon *is* the pardon itself.

In this final chapter, then, Justice brings his hypothesis full circle by using the reconstructed ideology of the rebels to illuminate the intentions of those who preserved their memory. Despite its inductive appearance, the argument inevitably surrenders to a hermeneutic circularity like the one it has found in the chroniclers themselves. While Justice illuminates how literary texts anticipate ways they will be interpreted, these texts in turn clarify and support his method by anticipating his hypothesis. Thus the argument is finally hard to escape, and the circle it travels is wide, making sense out of a good deal of diverse and perplexing evidence. Greater clarity about his method throughout would only help establish the basis and necessary limits of his claims for recovering the "social outside" of canonical texts (5).

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