

# THE FEAR OF DOWNWARD SOCIAL MOBILITY IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND\*

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## I

The late Middle Ages have long generated broad sweeping generalisations concerning the nature of society: from the pessimism and nostalgia presented by Huizinga to the ambitions and aspirations considered by Du Boulay.<sup>1</sup> The study of social mobility in late medieval England forms a perfect example of how the latter still holds sway over much of the historiography, even if only at an implicit level, with social mobility often being used as a synonym for upward mobility. Previous studies have tended to focus upon the success of socially ambitious, generally male, careerists: to read of social mobility in late medieval England is to read the history of William de la Pole, the merchant whose eldest son was elevated into the titular aristocracy, or William Paston, the successful attorney who established his family amongst the Norfolk gentry.<sup>2</sup> This is epitomised in Bennett's analysis of careerism in Cheshire and Lancashire, in which he argued that 'new generations of local men were able to set themselves up in trade, acquire an education at the universities and inns of court, and benefit from the growing demand for men with professional qualifications in church and state', often after successful

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<sup>1</sup> J. Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, trans. R.J. Payton and U. Mammitzsch (Chicago 1996); F.R.H. Du Boulay, *An Age of Ambition: English Society in the Late Middle Ages* (London, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> E.B. Fryde, 'Pole, Sir William de la (d. 1366)', and C. Richmond and R. Virgoe, 'Paston, William (I) (1378-1444)', both in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

service in the Hundred Years War.<sup>3</sup> Such an assumption underpins many studies of chivalry, warfare and service in this period, which focus upon the avenues for upward mobility provided by these activities, with the likes of Sir Robert Knollys, Sir Hugh Browe and Sir Robert Salle serving as exemplars.<sup>4</sup> Even work on education, consumption and material culture has tended to emphasise notions of emulation and advancement rather than status anxiety, whilst Thomson's chapter on social mobility acknowledged the existence of social decline in two sentences but offered up little analysis.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, only three years after the publication of Du Boulay's book, Herlihy suggested that 'the dominant direction of social mobility in medieval society had to be downward'.<sup>6</sup> As Carocci has more recently noted, by refocusing the research agenda from a presumption of social ambition to an explicit focus upon social failure we can 'avoid anachronistic interpretations, such as mistaking for channels of social ascent what were, in reality, footholds on a slope of structural decline, or what for the majority of the population amounted to escalators on the way down'.<sup>7</sup> Despite these observations, there has been a dearth of work exploring social decline and the fears and anxieties that such prospects engendered in late medieval society.<sup>8</sup> Where work has been done upon aspects of failure in this period, such as Bothwell's study of the political misadventures of the English nobility, this has focused more upon political rather than social mobility.<sup>9</sup> Given the importance that historians, sociologists and economists now attach to the ways that a fear of downward mobility can shape modern society, we need to

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<sup>3</sup> M.J. Bennett, *Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Cambridge, 1983), 249.

<sup>4</sup> M. Keen, 'Chivalry', in R. Radulescu and A. Truelove (eds), *Gentry Culture in Late Medieval England* (Manchester, 2005), 35-49.

<sup>5</sup> J.A.F. Thomson, *The Transformation of Medieval England, 1370-1529* (London, 1983), 125-36. The essays in R. Horrox's *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes* similarly acknowledge social anxiety but predominantly focus upon advancement, whilst even Dyer's excellent Ford Lectures show the same upward focus when discussing consumption and material culture, C. Dyer, *An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2005), 132-9.

<sup>6</sup> D. Herlihy, 'Three Patterns of Social Mobility in Medieval History', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 3 (1973), 623-47.

<sup>7</sup> S. Carocci, 'Social Mobility and the Middle Ages', *Continuity and Change*, 26 (2011), 383.

<sup>8</sup> As highlighted by Maddern in a chapter on social mobility which dealt with some of the topics to be addressed in further depth here, P.C. Maddern, 'Social Mobility', in R. Horrox and W.M. Ormrod (eds), *A Social History of England, 1200-1500* (Cambridge, 2006), 113-33. See also C. Dyer, 'Social Mobility in Medieval England', in S. Carocci and I. Lazzarini (eds), *Social Mobility in Medieval Italy, 1100-1500* (Vienna, 2018), 23-44.

<sup>9</sup> J.S. Bothwell, *Falling From Grace: Reversal of Fortune and the English Nobility, 1075-1455* (Manchester, 2008).

reconsider how such forces were experienced in late medieval England and their significance in transforming society.<sup>10</sup>

This reassessment of social mobility is all the more essential given the tendency amongst historians to consider ambition the key motivating factor behind changes in the medieval economy. It has been argued that it was those people who pursued ‘the paths of ambition and social resistance who were to determine the future of England’s social and economic development’.<sup>11</sup> Nowhere is this more so than in the case of demesne lessees: apparently seeing an opportunity to profit where their lords could not in the economic conditions of the late fourteenth century, these tenants rushed to take up land across England, giving rise to ‘wealthy cultivators-entrepreneurs’.<sup>12</sup> Forerunners of the capitalist yeomen of the sixteenth century, these families were farming hundreds of acres, employing considerable wage labour, investing in buildings and farm equipment and producing for the market.<sup>13</sup> Demesne leasing thus had extensive social and economic consequences, but were the initial lessees driven by social ambition, as is traditionally thought, or by a fear of being replaced? There may have only been small margins between a yeoman and a husbandman, or a wage labourer and a semi-vagrant pauper in late medieval England, but these distinctions were desperately clung onto all the more vociferously for it.

Nor should we simply replace a narrative of ambition and upward mobility with one of concerns and fears provoked by the prospect of downward social mobility, but rather analyse how these anxieties were expressed, articulated and even inculcated in the surviving letter collections and literature of the period.<sup>14</sup> Doing so reveals not only the importance of gender and the life cycle in shaping these fears but also the subtle distinctions between status anxiety and fear of social decline: the former tended to

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<sup>10</sup> J.H. Goldthorpe, ‘Understanding – and Misunderstanding – Social Mobility in Britain: The Entry of the Economists, the Confusion of Politicians and the Limits of Educational Policy’, *Journal of Social Policy*, 42 (2013), 431-50. See also C. Crawford et al., *Social Mobility: A Literature Review* (2011), 1; P. Mandler, ‘Education the Nation III: Social Mobility’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 26 (2016), 1-23.

<sup>11</sup> S.H. Rigby, ‘English Society in the Later Middle Ages: Deference, Ambition and Conflict’, in P. Brown (ed.), *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture, c.1350-c.1500* (Blackwell, 2007), 40.

<sup>12</sup> Carocci, ‘Social Mobility’, 376.

<sup>13</sup> C. Dyer, ‘Were there any Capitalists in Fifteenth-Century England’, in J. Kermode (ed.), *Enterprise and Individuals in Fifteenth-Century England* (Gloucester, 1991), 1-24. C. Dyer, ‘A Suffolk Farmer in the Fifteenth Century’, *Agricultural History Review*, 55 (2007), 1-22.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of literature on gender and the life cycle in Europe see S. Ferente, ‘Women, Lifecycles, and Social Mobility in Late Medieval Italy’, in S. Carocci and I. Lazzarini (ed.), *Social Mobility in Medieval Italy, 1100-1500* (Viella, 2018), 217-28.

reflect the broad preoccupations of society, from worries about the parvenu to the fickleness of friends and the relentless obsession with reputation; whereas the latter tended to coalesce around specific, often urgent matters, particularly concerning debt and destitution, highlighting the undeniable importance of wealth to social status, even in the Middle Ages. These fears and anxieties permeate the surviving letter collections and literature of late medieval England, in which they form major themes across multiple genres: from the didactic literature of Lydgate, Gower and Caxton to the outlaw tradition of Robin Hood and gentry romances like *Sir Cleges* and *Sir Amadace*. Yet such subjective attitudes were not uniformly shared by all in society, revealing the futility in trying to encapsulate the age in a single emotion.

Moreover, these fears of social decline fluctuated over time and, although some social anxieties have endured throughout human history – concerns over a child’s prospects or a person’s old age – many of these emotions were exacerbated in the aftermath of the Black Death.<sup>15</sup> The post-plague period in particular has long-since gained a reputation as an age of especially rapid social mobility, potentially on a par with Modern Sweden and the United States.<sup>16</sup> Yet many of the conditions that created more opportunities for upward mobility so celebrated by historians – a shortage of tenants, cheap land, high real wages and structural changes in rural and urban society – were the same situations that made those ventures so risky in the first place.<sup>17</sup> As Payling has shown, the demographic crisis of this period gave rise to an increase in the number of heiresses, which in turn ‘provided a stimulus to upward social mobility not only within but also into the landed class’ comparable to the expansion of the land market in the wake of the Dissolution, but what of the fears and anxieties that such social change engendered?<sup>18</sup> Given the depth and pervasiveness of the mid-fifteenth-century recession, which not only effected trade and industry but also produced ‘one of the most sustained and severe agricultural depressions in

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<sup>15</sup> One of the greatest strengths of Clark’s ambitious study of social mobility through the surnames of individuals matriculating at universities is also one of its greatest flaws: the long-term vistas prove problematic because access to Oxford and Cambridge universities did not mean the same in thirteenth-century England as it did in the twentieth century, nor were attitudes towards social mobility static across this long period. G. Clark, *The Son Also Rises: Surnames and the History of Social Mobility* (Princeton, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 87; Dyer, ‘Social Mobility in Medieval England’, 30.

<sup>17</sup> M.M. Postan, ‘The Fifteenth Century’, *Economic History Review*, 9 (1939), 160–7; C. Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society: The Estates of the Bishopric of Worcester, 680–1540* (Cambridge, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> S. Payling, ‘Social Mobility, Demographic Change, and Landed Society in Late Medieval England’, *Economic History Review*, 45 (1992), 70.

documented English history', it is hardly surprising to find a diverse and eclectic range of expressions of status anxiety in the century and a half after the Black Death.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, such concerns were exacerbated by the fact that medieval society possessed an increasingly aging population as recurrent outbreaks of disease killed a disproportionately higher percentage of younger generations: the 1361 outbreak, in particular, became known as the 'mortality of children'.<sup>20</sup> These problems were compounded by the new economic opportunities that meant less need for children to stay at home and inherit the family farm, which further eroded potential sources of aid that had often already been stretched thin after the death of relatives.<sup>21</sup> The ensuing lack of welfare networks for the elderly became a major source of social anxiety. For the survivors, parish fraternities and craft guilds took on both the language of kinship and some of the social roles of extended families, providing a primitive form of welfare against a range of social fears associated with old age, illness, imprisonment and poverty, helping to explain the growth of these collective organisations after the Black Death.<sup>22</sup> As Horrox has suggested, this went beyond economic concerns and survivors of the plague may have felt vulnerable, guilty, and possessed a powerful sense of the fragility of success.<sup>23</sup>

Although many of these fears would have been experienced with differing intensities by individuals and social groups, this article will predominantly focus upon the yeomanry and gentry because they have traditionally been portrayed as especially ambitious, with a handful of aspiring and entrepreneurial families like the Heritages or the Townshends shaping our understanding of entire social

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<sup>19</sup> J. Hatcher, 'The Great Slump of the Mid-Fifteenth Century', in R.H. Britnell and J. Hatcher (eds), *Progress and Problems in Medieval England: Essays in Honour of Edward Miller* (Cambridge, 1996), 237–72; M. Bailey, 'Rural Society', in R. Horrox (ed.), *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes* (Cambridge, 1994), 153.

<sup>20</sup> R. Horrox, *The Black Death* (Manchester, 1994), 85. For example, see the Tuscan age pyramids, which report a similar proportion of elderly in the fifteenth century as in a modern population with low birth and death rates, D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven, 1985), 159–201.

<sup>21</sup> R. Faith, 'Peasant Families and Inheritance Customs in Medieval England', *Agricultural History Review*, 14 (1966), 77–95; J. Whittle, 'Individualism and the Family-Land Bond: A Reassessment of Land Transfer Patterns Among the English Peasantry, c.1270–1580', *Past and Present*, 160 (1998), 25–63.

<sup>22</sup> G. Rosser, 'Crafts, Guilds and the Negotiation of Work in the Medieval Town', *Past and Present*, 154 (1997), 3–31.

<sup>23</sup> Horrox, *The Black Death*, 244.

groups.<sup>24</sup> Such characters have often been depicted as perennially upward-looking, often seeking to emulate gentry ideals – if perhaps not in themselves then in their children – much like Bishop Latimer’s memories of his sturdy independent father, who kept a hundred sheep and thirty cows and, most importantly, kept his son in school.<sup>25</sup> Yet these groups were also amongst the worst affected by the economic pressures of the fifteenth century and so they were keenly aware of just how transient social status could be in medieval society. This article thus analyses the articulation of these anxieties and fears of social decline in late medieval England, exploring how gender and the life cycle influenced the expression of these concerns. It then demonstrates how these anxieties may have motivated manorial reeves to take up demesne leases, and how such social fears engendered the expansion of fraternities and guilds, providing a more nuanced understanding of both status anxiety and fear of social decline, as well as of the causes of economic change which moves beyond an over-reliance upon the construct of the ambitious entrepreneur.<sup>26</sup>

## II

The Black Death and subsequent outbreaks of disease undoubtedly opened up new avenues for upward mobility for many sections of society as the relationships between wages, prices and rents were fundamentally altered: labour and consumer goods were now in high demand, whereas land and staple

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<sup>24</sup> Dyer, ‘Were there any Capitalists in Fifteenth-Century England’, 1-24; Dyer, ‘A Suffolk Farmer in the Fifteenth Century’, 1-22; C.E. Moreton, *The Townshends and their World: Gentry, Law and Land in Norfolk, c.1450-1551* (Oxford, 1992).

<sup>25</sup> W.G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant: the Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village* (London, 1957), 141; M. Campbell, *The English Yeoman Under Elizabeth and the Early Stuarts* (London, 1942), 24.

<sup>26</sup> J.H. Soltow, ‘The Entrepreneur in Economic History’, *American Economic Review*, 58 (1968), 84-92; J. Mokyr, ‘Cultural Entrepreneurs and the Origins of Modern Economic Growth’, *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 61 (2013), 1-33.

agricultural goods were not.<sup>27</sup> Contemporaries were well aware of the effect that these changes were having on social mobility, as this anonymous fourteenth-century sermon complained:

There is scarcely a villein today who is satisfied with his lot. Little men are always bustling about to make themselves the equals of their betters – or even, if they can wrangle it somehow, to make themselves greater than them.<sup>28</sup>

Medieval moralists emphasised the fixed nature of society, and thus considered social mobility an aberration: those who subverted the natural order were to be castigated, be they the socially ambitious whose pride overcame due deference or the downwardly mobile whose greed precipitated their downfall.<sup>29</sup> Despite this overwhelming tendency amongst ecclesiastical and lay authorities to portray society as fixed, the widespread invocation of Fortune showed the social order to be more mutable than this in reality, providing both a warning to the socially ambitious and a potential solace to the downwardly mobile.<sup>30</sup> After all, just as good fortune was transitory so too was bad, and contemporaries appealed to Fortune to ‘torne thy whele that I may ones arise’.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, such imagery could even offer a level of absolution: rather than an individual’s sinful behaviour leading to their downfall as some of the didactic literature would have it, the anonymous influence of Fortune could be blamed for a person’s present predicaments.

There were, of course, many families who succeeded in climbing the social ladder in this period, and the Pastons serve as the traditional archetype of a socially ambitious and upwardly mobile family in fifteenth-century England: Clement, ‘a good pleyn husbond’, had his son educated at the Inns of Court; this son, William, went on to make substantial landed gains and in turn had his son, John, educated in the law.<sup>32</sup> Yet such aspirations and a fear of downward mobility were not mutually

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<sup>27</sup> J. Munro, ‘The Late Medieval Decline of English Demesne Agriculture: Demographic, Monetary, and Political-Fiscal Factors’, in M. Bailey and S.H. Rigby (eds), *Town and Countryside in the Age of the Black Death: Essays in Honour of John Hatcher* (Turnhout, 2012), 299-348.

<sup>28</sup> Horrox, *The Black Death*, 339.

<sup>29</sup> Rigby, ‘English Society’, 26.

<sup>30</sup> Maddern, ‘Social Mobility’, 113-33.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Complaint of a Prisoner Against Fortune’ in Linne R. Mooney and Mary-Jo Arn (eds), *The Kingis Quair and Other Prison Poems* (Kalamazoo, 2005), Line 21.

<sup>32</sup> N. Davis (ed.), *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford, 1971), I, xli. For more on the Pastons, see H.S. Bennett, *The Pastons and their England: Studies in An Age of Transition* (Cambridge, 1932); and H. Castor, *Blood and Roses: One Family's Struggle and Triumph during the Tumultuous Wars of the Roses* (New York, 2007).

exclusive, and the surviving letters of the Pastons are full of advice about how to avoid slipping down the social ladder they had so recently climbed. The culture of many amongst the gentry was thus ‘pervaded by a sense of insecurity’, especially for such precariously-positioned families, who were only too aware of how transient social status could be in late medieval England.<sup>33</sup> Such social fear is reflected in contemporary literature and, although some motifs derived from older literary traditions, images like the spendthrift knight became a focal point for many stories after the Black Death. For example, in *Sir Cleges* (c.1400) the eponymous hero provides sumptuous Christmas feasts, but in order to continue hosting them he is forced to mortgage his lands, before eventually ‘hys maners wer sold away,/That hym was left bot one,/And that was of lytell valew’, leaving him on the cusp of gentility.<sup>34</sup> This reflects the very real fear of social decline that could be brought on by the excesses of the age as reported by William Paston II to his brother: ‘Yt is the gyse of yowre contre-men to spend alle the good they haue on men and leuery gownys and hors and harnes, and so ber yt owth for j wylle, and at the laste they arn but beggarys’.<sup>35</sup>

Spendthrift knights like Sir Cleges incurred heavy debts whilst trying to keep up the port of a gentleman but credit relations were an everyday part of medieval life, from international exchange to village marketplaces.<sup>36</sup> Such debts were a continual source of anxiety and when these lines of credit became over-extended they could lead to family disputes, contrasting the individual experience of social mobility with the collective family. For example, in 1478, Richard Cely exasperatedly complained to his brother George that their eldest brother, Robert, had spent the 30s intended for his travel expenses and lodgings at dice.<sup>37</sup> Although the family continued to pay for many of Robert’s expenses, his two

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<sup>33</sup> The very adoption of the terms ‘gentleman’ and ‘gentlewoman’ in the early fifteenth century was partly motivated by the desire of the lower echelons of the gentry to distinguish themselves from the increasingly prosperous yeomanry. R. Radulescu and A. Truelove, ‘Introduction’ and P.C. Maddern, ‘Gentility’, both in R. Radulescu and A. Truelove (eds), *Gentry Culture in Late Medieval England* (Manchester, 2005); C. Carpenter, *Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Gentry, 1401-99* (Cambridge, 1992), 44-5.

<sup>34</sup> A. Laskaya and E. Salisbury (eds), ‘Sir Cleges’, in *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, 1995), Lines 74-6.

<sup>35</sup> *Paston Letters*, I, 83, p. 154.

<sup>36</sup> C.D. Briggs, *Credit and Village Society in Fourteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2009); P.R. Schofield and N.J. Mayhew (eds), *Credit and Debt in Medieval England, c.1180-1350* (Oxford, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> For more on Robert Cely and Thomas Kesten, see A. Hanham, *The Celys and their World: An English Merchant Family of the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985), 82-107; A. Hanham (ed.), *The Cely Letters, 1472-1488*, Early English Text Society, 273 (1975), 32, p. 29.



brothers considered cutting him off because ‘hyt ys better to pyttye than be pyttyed. I awyse you to lene hym no mony, ne do no thyng wyth hym byt afor record. Ye knowe the onstedfastenes of hym well inow’.<sup>38</sup> But one of the most evocative letters of the period was written by Thomas Kesten to the Cely brothers in 1484: seemingly resigning himself to be in ‘pouerte the wiche I muste contenew in all my lyffe’, he mused that ‘thowe I dede nat allwheys well, I hadde hopid it scholde nat haue comen to so evell concleveuseon’.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps seeking absolution, Kesten pointed out that he was ‘nat alone in sorow...for I se dayly kengys, pryncys and oder estattys, from the heyeste degre to the lowest, wytty and riche that both hathe fayllid them, whereffore in thes worlde ye may see men now hey nowe lowe, nowe riche now pore, now alywe now dedde’.<sup>40</sup> If Fortune could lay low such authorities, then what chance did others stand against her vagaries? The social decline that could be precipitated by mounting debts forms an important theme in the late medieval outlaw tradition, especially in *A Gest of Robin Hood* (early- to mid-fifteenth century), where Robin Hood comes to the aid of an impoverished knight who is in danger of losing his lands. Before helping him, however, Robin asks whether he had been ‘made a knyght of force/Or ellys of yemanry/Or ellys thou hast bene a sori husbande/And lived in stroke and stryfe/An okerer or ellis a lechoure’, emphasising the connection between social decline and sinful behaviour: just as the pride of the socially ambitious was to be castigated, the sloth, imprudence and greed of the downwardly mobile was similarly condemned.<sup>41</sup>

The potential for such gentry families to experience downward mobility was nothing new in the late Middle Ages and, even in the thirteenth century, Walter of Henley had thought that his book on estate management would help the reader avoid falling ‘by little and little into poverty’.<sup>42</sup> But the increasingly fluid nature of society after the Black Death rendered social mobility a pressing concern for many. As Carpenter has argued, it is probable that the lesser gentry, ‘struggling to provide for their

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<sup>38</sup> *Cely Letters*, 47, pp. 43-5.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 219, pp. 216-8.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 219, p. 218.

<sup>41</sup> ‘A Gest of Robyn Hode’, in S. Knight and T.H. Ohlgren (eds), *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, 1997), Lines 179-82. A ‘knyght of force’ refers to the dstraint of knighthood, in which landholders holding sufficient lands were compelled to become knights.

<sup>42</sup> Maddern, ‘Social Mobility’, 118. For original see Walter of Henley, ‘On Husbandry’, in D. Oschinsky (ed.), *Walter of Henley and Other Treatises on Estate Management and Accounting* (Oxford, 1971), 109.

families while sustaining a level of consumption superior to that of the richer peasants, lived closer to the margin of their income.<sup>43</sup> Some families fell upon hard times because they were still determined to carry out their roles in society, such as Walter Hawick, who settled his manor of Little Eden in Durham upon trustees to pay his debts whilst he journeyed to France in service of the king.<sup>44</sup> Such financial problems led to a whole host of sales by similar single-manor families in the Durham region from the late fourteenth century onwards: the Eppletons, Gourlays, Gildfords, Farnacres and Alansheles all alienated their solitary manors to their greater knightly neighbours.<sup>45</sup> After his financial difficulties, it was this same group of single-manor families on the very cusp of gentility that Sir Cleges had slipped into, and it is unsurprising that his first action upon being rewarded by the king was to return home and repay the family's debts as 'fast as thei myght'.<sup>46</sup>

Such families were not only concerned with the capricious nature of Fortune but also the potential fickleness of friends, revealing the keen concerns surrounding this social relation. When asked where his friends were in his hour of need, the knight in the *Gest* recalled that:

While I was ryche ynowe at home  
Great boste than wolde they blowe.  
And nowe they renne away fro me,  
As bestis on a rowe;  
They take no more hede of me  
Thanne they had me never sawe.<sup>47</sup>

Likewise, in his autobiographical *Complaint* (1463), George Ashby bemoaned that his enemies had left him with 'unpayable det/Lykly to be therfore a wrechyd thrall', but what grieved him the most was 'that myn old acquaintance disdeyned me'.<sup>48</sup> Undoubtedly this was both a literary trope drawing upon works

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<sup>43</sup> Carpenter, *Locality and Polity*, 58 and 155.

<sup>44</sup> A.T. Brown, *Rural Society and Economic Change in County Durham: Recession and Recovery, c. 1400-1640* (Woodbridge, 2015), 148-71.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 148-71; C.D. Liddy, *The Bishopric of Durham in the Late Middle Ages: Lordship, Community and the Cult of St Cuthbert* (Woodbridge, 2008), 51.

<sup>46</sup> 'Sir Cleges', Lines 562-4.

<sup>47</sup> 'Gest of Robyn Hode', Lines 235-40.

<sup>48</sup> Ashby, 'Complaint', Lines 19-23, 37-9 and 44-5. For more on the debtors' prison see G. Geltner, *The Medieval Prison: A Social History* (Princeton, 2008).

like Hoccleve's own *Complaint* (c.1420), and a religious motif that emphasised the transitory nature of material possessions and mortal life. Yet the widespread use of this imagery suggests that it reflected genuine contemporary concerns. For example, after Sir Cleges' money had dried up, 'hys men, that wer so mych of pride/Weste away onne every syde;/With hym ther left not one', whilst in *Sir Amadace* (late-fourteenth century), the eponymous hero worried that 'men full fast wold ware me' if they discovered his newfound poverty.<sup>49</sup>

Again though, this was not simply a moralising motif of medieval literature but reflected fears that destitution would cause individuals to become socially ostracised, like when Thomas Kesten's move into a 'lesse lodgeng' in Calais was accompanied by the description of it as a 'fayre rome and chambur for all my gode maysteres and frendes yf yt plesse any of them to se me in my pouerte'.<sup>50</sup> Concerns surrounding these social relations reveal how deeply entwined wealth, social status and political influence were in late medieval England: Sir Cleges was deserted by his men when he could no longer afford to retain them; Kesten worried about the impression his newfound poverty would have on his trading partners; whilst Sir Amadace and Ashby were shunned by acquaintances for perceived debts and ruinous political allegiances, respectively. People throughout the social hierarchy relied upon a network of neighbours, kin and friends to perform a range of services that included money lending, passing on messages, and seeking out possible marriage connections, and the loss of such services could have serious financial, political and social ramifications.<sup>51</sup> This was especially so in legal disputes, where the vital intervention of allies could turn the tide in a family's favour: it was, after all, thought that 'a friend in court is better than penny in purse', and the Plumpton letters are full of instructions

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<sup>49</sup> 'Sir Cleges', Lines 79-81; E.E. Foster (ed.), 'Sir Amadace', in E.E. Foster (ed.), *Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace* (Kalamazoo, 2007), Line 19; See also, Caxton, *Game and Playe of the Chesse*, Book 3, Lines, 434-6.

<sup>50</sup> *Cely Letters*, 76, p. 67.

<sup>51</sup> P.C. Maddern, "'Best Trusted Friends": Concepts and Practices of Friendship among Fifteenth-Century Norfolk Gentry', in N.J. Rogers (ed.), *England in the Fifteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1992 Harlaxton Symposium* (Stamford, 1994), 100-17.

from their lawyers that the family ‘make your frynds to take your part as frynds shold doe’ in their legal battles.<sup>52</sup>

The avenues for upward mobility are well known but, apart from cases of a few successful careerists, this generally involved a slow and steady accumulation across multiple generations. By comparison, social decline could be much more unpredictable, sudden or even violent: bad harvests or poor trade deals, political misadventures, mediocre management or prodigious expenditure could throw a family into poverty.<sup>53</sup> But social status involved more than just wealth and material goods: gossip and rumour could be just as important as actual changes in a family’s finances, and concerns over reputation reveal the profound status anxiety felt by many in late medieval England. This is reflected in the Paston letters, where the family’s beadsman, John Russe, related how John Waynfleet thought there ‘shal no thyng hurte hym [John Paston II] but youre streytnesse of mony to hym...and there be jentilmen sones of lesse reputacion that hath mony more liberal ten tymes than he hath.’<sup>54</sup> Social ambition and this kind of status anxiety often went hand-in-hand: when Sir John Paston II failed in his attempts to get elected to parliament, his younger brother lied about Sir John’s intentions for fear it would reveal the family’s political weakness. Friends of the Pastons had assembled in Norwich to support his appointment in 1472, but when it became clear that he could not secure the position, John Paston III told those assembled that:

ye wold haue noo voyse as thys day, for ye supposyd not to be in Ingland when the perlement shold be. And so they cam not at the sherhous, for if they had it was thowght by syche as be your frendys her that your aduersarys wold haue reported that ye had mad labor to haue ben on, and that ye koud not bring your purpose a-bowght.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 103. For original see B.J. Whiting (ed.), *Proverbs, Sentences and Proverbial Phrases from English Writings Mainly Before 1500* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), F633, F653, F661 and F666; J. Kirby (ed.), *The Plumptre Letters and Papers*, Camden Fifth Series, 8 (1996), Letter 153, p. 144; C. Carpenter (ed.), *The Armburgh Papers: The Brokholes Inheritance in Warwickshire, Hertfordshire and Essex, c.1417-1453* (Woodbridge, 1998), 8 and 20.

<sup>53</sup> J.S. Bothwell, *Falling from Grace: Reversal of Fortune and the English Nobility, 1075–1455* (Manchester, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> *Paston Letters*, II, 643, p. 247.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., I, 354, p. 578.

This kind of status anxiety lies behind many defamation cases in late medieval England, showing the importance of restoring a person to ‘good fame’: in a world where business transactions were often informal and based upon personal connections, reputation ‘was no less a part of someone’s “value” than any monetary calculation of their alienable property’, and many defamation cases were linked to debt or breach of contract.<sup>56</sup> It was actionable to publicly and ‘maliciously impute a crime to any person who is not of ill fame among good and serious men’, and common cases involved accusations of theft, perjury, heresy, adultery or forgery, but underpinning many cases lay a breach of contract.<sup>57</sup> Yet, anxieties about reputation ran far deeper than what was legally defined as defamation, something the Pastons were acutely aware of, and much of their communication revolved around combatting negative gossip. For instance, in 1461 Clement Paston thought that John Paston II had not done enough to ingratiate himself into the king’s court, but Clement feared that if John was brought home then ‘men wold thynke that he were put owte of seruice’.<sup>58</sup> Two years later, one of the family’s beadsmen wrote how ‘summe sey that ye [John Paston I] and he [John Paston II] both stond howth of the Kynges good gras, and summe se that ye kepe hym at home for negerd chepe and wyll no thyng ware up-on hym’.<sup>59</sup> Conscious of the importance of reputation, he was instead telling people ‘that he is the rather at home for the saue gard of the coast’. Such was the focus upon a family’s worship and reputation that Margaret Walkerne asked her father-in-law, Robert Armburgh, for a loan of twenty shillings after giving birth in 1430 because ‘ladyes and gentilwemen and other frendys of my modres and myn ar lyk to vysite me while I ly ynne childe bedde and I am not purveyd of onest beddyng’.<sup>60</sup>

Such anxieties were important because gossip and rumour could compound financial difficulties, as the Plumpton discovered when Isabel wrote to her husband that, as far as money was concerned, she could ‘get none nowhere; and as for wood, ther is none that will bey, for they know ye want money,

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<sup>56</sup> C. Muldrew, “‘Hard Food for Midas’: Cash and its Social Value in Early Modern England”, *Past and Present*, 170 (2001), 78-120; H. Robb, ‘Reputation in the Fifteenth Century Credit Market: Some Tales from the Ecclesiastical Courts of York’, *Cultural and Social History*, 15 (2018), 297-313.

<sup>57</sup> R.H. Helmholz, ‘Canonical Defamation in Medieval England’, *The American Journal of Legal History*, 15 (1971), 255-68; R.H. Helmholz, *Select Cases of Defamation to 1600*, Selden Society, 101 (1985).

<sup>58</sup> *Paston Letters*, I, 116, pp. 199-200.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 680, pp. 293-4.

<sup>60</sup> *Armburgh Papers*, 40 and 126-7.

and without they myght haue it halfe for nought they will not bey none': neighbours were only too willing to exploit their financial difficulties.<sup>61</sup> This link between gossip, reputation and impending social decline are readily apparent in the story of that other spendthrift knight par excellence, *Sir Amadace*. Like the Plumptons, Sir Amadace worries that people will discover his financial difficulties, telling his steward, 'Lette nevyr mon wete my grete mischefe, Butte hele hit us betwene'.<sup>62</sup> Planning to mortgage his lands and flee into hiding, he first needs to maintain the appearance of solvency and so 'he gafe ful riche giftus' to friends and neighbours, lavishly spending everything until he has but £40 left: an important symbolic amount given that it was the threshold income for the distraint of knighthood.<sup>63</sup> That the fear of public condemnation lay behind this sudden extravagance is made explicit by Sir Amadace, who thinks that 'So curtase a mon was nevyr non borne/That shulde scape withoute a scorne/Be iche mon had told his tale': behind many gentlemanly façades lay stories of chronic insolvency.<sup>64</sup> Despite its chivalric overtones, this is ultimately a story about a knight who escapes from debt, a story that undoubtedly resonated with gentry readers during the early fifteenth century.<sup>65</sup>

These late medieval stories, therefore, sought to bolster the traditional beliefs of the gentry: the knight in the *Gest* is rewarded for his truthfulness, Sir Amadace for his charity, and Sir Cleges for his courage. Unlike much of the didactic literature that considered sinful behaviour behind a person's fall from grace, these stories reaffirm the gentry's identity by taking the side of Wynnere in the famous alliterative debate *Wynnere and Wastoure* (c.1352-70): overspending may have been the root cause of all their problems, but their generosity was seen as a virtue that ultimately led to the restoration of their previous fortunes.<sup>66</sup> These stories and surviving letters, however, reveal the considerable social anxieties that such attitudes could produce: how were the gentry to maintain these values without risking

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<sup>61</sup> *Plumpton Letters*, 199, p. 181. Enemies were, of course, even more keen to seize upon such indebtedness if it became widely known, as Robert Armburgh feared when he begged his brother to pay off his debtors, 'for, and myn aduersariis haue onys knowlech that I be endetted, yt wold be gret hyndryng to al myn other maters and also thei wold be moche the bolder vpon me'. *Armburgh Papers*, 48 and 127-8.

<sup>62</sup> 'Sir Amadace', Lines 29-30. The story begins with Sir Amadace discussing his financial problems with his steward and, although we are never told the cause of his troubles, it seems likely that over extravagance lies at their heart.

<sup>63</sup> M. Johnston, *Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 2014), 82.

<sup>64</sup> 'Sir Amadace', Lines 46-8.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, Foster introduction.

<sup>66</sup> I. Gollancz (ed.), *Wynnere and Wastoure* (London, 1930).

financial ruin? Such anxieties are reflected in the Sumptuary Legislation of 1363, which upheld the idea that status should be instantly recognisable: before ever a person opened their mouth, their clothes had spoken for them. Of course, social mobility had been prevalent before this period, but this new raft of legislation after the Black Death reveals the intense fear that key markers of status were being eroded.<sup>67</sup> As Peter Idley bemoaned in the fifteenth century, ‘a man shall not know a knave from a knight, for all be alike in clothyng and array’.<sup>68</sup> In the *Gest*, after pointing out that, ‘It is almus to helpe a gentyll knyght,/That is fal in poverte’, Little John notes that the knight’s ‘clothinge is full thynne’.<sup>69</sup> Similarly in *Sir Cleges*, the knight ‘in pore clothing’ and ‘in symple aray’ tries to visit the king’s court in Cardiff but is thrice denied entry: first, by the porter, who threatens to ‘breke thi hede smartly’ and instructs him to ‘stond in begers route’; second, by the usher, who says ‘Go, chorle, out of my syght’ and again threatens to ‘bete every lythe,/Hede and body, withoutyn grythe’; and third, by the steward, who makes this connection explicit by telling him to ‘withdraw the with the clothes olde’.<sup>70</sup> Again, this underlines the close links between property, prestige and power in late medieval England: Sir Cleges’ poverty and the loss of his lands leads to his retainers abandoning him, which in turn results in him being denied access to the king and the attendant political influence of the court.<sup>71</sup> John Gower’s pessimistic view of medieval society undoubtedly rang true for many: ‘one’s worth is now in his wealth; property confers honours, and abject poverty is an object of utter reproach. When a rich man speaks, then every ear will pay attention, but the words of a poor man are worth nothing’.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Other examples of statutes introduced in this period that were likely motivated by such status anxiety include the hunting legislation of 1390 and the forty-shilling freeholders act of 1429, A.R. Myers, *English Historical Documents, 1327-1485* (London, 1969), 465. Given the language of this legislation and the overt attempts at defining social demarcations, these were clear attempts to reinforce the social hierarchy and were thus likely motivated by status anxieties.

<sup>68</sup> A.J. Pollard, *Late Medieval England 1399-1509* (London, 2000), 185. For original see Evelyn (ed.) *Idley’s Instructions*, 160.

<sup>69</sup> ‘Gest of Robyn Hode’, Lines 275-8.

<sup>70</sup> ‘Sir Cleges’, Lines 260-320.

<sup>71</sup> For the original Weberian theory of stratification, see for example M. Weber, ‘The Distribution of Power within the Gemeinschaft: Classes, Stände, Parties’, in T. Waters and D. Waters (eds), *Weber’s Rationalism and Modern Society: New Translations on Politics, Bureaucracy and Social Stratification* (New York, 2015), 37-58. See also S.H. Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages: Class, Status and Gender* (Basingstoke, 1995).

<sup>72</sup> John Gower, *Vox Clamantis*, in E.W. Stockton (ed.), *The Major Latin Works of John Gower* (Seattle, 1962), Book 3.1, 118.

## III

Such fears and anxieties were heightened during particular periods in the life cycle. One of the most important opportunities for upward mobility was marriage but this could also be an oubliette for the unwary, as Margery Paston discovered when she pledged herself to Richard Calle, Sir John Paston's steward, much to the family's chagrin.<sup>73</sup> Much of this concern over marriage partners was motivated by fear of downward mobility, as when Margaret Paston advised her eldest son, John Paston II, that: 'I wuld that ye shuld not be to hasty to be maried till ye were more suere of your lyvelode, for ye must remembre what charge ye shall haue, and if ye haue not to mayntene it, it wull be a gret rebuke'.<sup>74</sup> Just as concerns over reputation were expressed as an individual's 'worship', so too were many of the anxieties and fears articulated here encapsulated in the concept of 'livelihood'. For example, marriage was seen as a way to stave off social decline by tempering some of the excesses of youth and, upon the death of his wife, Sir William Stonor was urged by William Harleston in 1480 to remain within his livelihood:

for Goddes sake be ware now, for now ye may breke your howshold with your honour and worschep, now after the decesse of my good lady your wiff, and stabill your howshold now saddely and wisely with a convenient feleshepp so as ye may kepe yow withynne yowr lyvelode...And of certen thynges I wold desire you and pray you in the name of God, that ye wolle not over wish yow, ner owyr purches yow, ner owyr bild you; for these iij thynges wolle plucke a yongman ryth lowe. Ner medyll not with no gret materis in the lawe.<sup>75</sup>

Medieval theorists were well aware of the close links between social mobility and the life cycle, as represented by the connections between the Wheel of Life and the Wheel of Fortune.<sup>76</sup> Henry Parker

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<sup>73</sup> Rigby, *English Society*, 318. See also the case of the 20-year-old Elizabeth Paston who refused to marry the disfigured 50-year-old Stephen Scrope, the heir to considerable property, who was reportedly 'beaten once in the week or twice, and sometimes twice on a day, and her head broken in two or three places'.

<sup>74</sup> *Paston Letters*, I, 201, p. 338. Indeed, Clark has gone so far as to argue that 'with the appropriate choice of mates, a family can avoid downward mobility forever', and, although unaware of his 'social genotype', contemporaries were well aware of the impact of marriage on social mobility, Clark, *The Son Also Rises*, 281.

<sup>75</sup> C.L. Kingsford (ed.), *The Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290-1483, vol. II*, Camden Third Series, 29 (1919), Letter 260, p. 98. For more on the Stonor family, see E. Noble, *The World of the Stonors: A Gentry Society* (Woodbridge, 2009).

<sup>76</sup> N.R. Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm* (Woodbridge, 2001), 35-44.



vividly described the life cycle in his *Dives et Pauper* (printed in 1493): ‘For nowe a man is byneth in his youthe and in his begynnynge. In myddel age he is aboue in his welthe and in his floures. But anon the whele turneth downe ayen to greter age, to pouert, to seknesse and feblenes, tyl at the last he fallith of ye whele and dieth and lyeth there as a clott of erthe by the walle’.<sup>77</sup> Such sentiments provoked considerable anxieties about how people were to maintain their livelihoods and social positions in ‘retirement’. For example, George Ashby was nearly eighty years old when he was imprisoned in 1463 and recalled how he had served Henry VI, Margaret of Anjou and the Duke of Gloucester faithfully for ‘full fourty yere’.<sup>78</sup> The bitterness of this old clerk is palpable in his *Complaint*: ‘And in theyr service I spendyd all my youth,/And now in pryson throwen in myn age/Havyng of me no pyté ne routh’.<sup>79</sup> Although imprisoned as a consequence of his Lancastrian loyalties, this undoubtedly reflected the fears of many an aging gentry retainer, and patrons often sought to retire favoured servants to monastic houses or hospitals as rewards for their service. Edward III, for example, sent a number of retired servants to Durham Priory, while the likes of John Fortescue advised in 1470 that household retainers ‘be rewarded with corrodies and have honest sustenance in their old days’.<sup>80</sup>

One way that most sections of society could provide for themselves in old age was by giving over the use of their lands or goods to a person, who would in return provide an allowance of shelter, food and clothing, or increasingly after the Black Death, a cash annuity.<sup>81</sup> When John atte Wood, salter, gave all his goods and chattels, totalling some £332, to his daughter and son-in-law in 1381, they were to provide for him according to his rank, and to give him 14d. a week to spend as he wished.<sup>82</sup> Such arrangements for medieval tenants were often formalised in manorial court records, and show not only

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<sup>77</sup> Henry Parker, *Dives et Pauper* (London, 1493).

<sup>78</sup> J. Scattergood, ‘Ashby, George (b. before 1385?, d. 1475)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004); Ashby, ‘Complaint’, Lines 61-3; J. Summers, *Late-Medieval Prison Writing and the Politics of Autobiography* (Oxford, 2004), 142-69.

<sup>79</sup> Ashby, ‘Complaint’, Lines 71-7.

<sup>80</sup> D. Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe, c.1300-c.1500* (Manchester, 2006), 178-81; J.T. Rosenthal, ‘Retirement and the Life Cycle in Fifteenth-Century England’, in M.M. Sheehan (ed.), *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe* (Toronto, 1990), 173-88; J.T. Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 1996).

<sup>81</sup> R.M. Smith, ‘The Manorial Court and the Elderly Tenant in Late Medieval England’, in M. Pelling and R.M. Smith (ed.), *Life, Death and the Elderly: Historical Perspectives* (London, 1991), 39-61.

<sup>82</sup> A.H. Thomas (ed.), *Calendar of the Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London, vol. 2, 1364-81* (London, 1929), p. 294.

the desire to stave off poverty but also a preoccupation with maintaining a person's status and standard of living in old age; some wanted poultry kept for eggs, bees tended for honey, pigs to provide 'bacon at Christmas': food that was, in short, 'pleasing'.<sup>83</sup> For others, space was paramount, such as Joan Pekke, a widow of South Elmham (Suffolk), who requested two rooms in her son's house that had 'free entry and exit for herself and her friends for life'.<sup>84</sup> These formal contracts were sometimes broken, as in the case of Estrilda Nenour of Great Waltham (Essex) who was awarded 6s. 8d. in compensation by the manor court after her daughter had not provided the requisite accommodation, food and clothing.<sup>85</sup> With recurrent outbreaks of disease generally killing children and with increasing economic opportunities away from the home for young adults, how the elderly were to maintain their socio-economic standing in old age was of particular concern in the century after the Black Death.<sup>86</sup>

These fears extended beyond individual anxieties about old age to familial concerns surrounding intergenerational downward mobility: what was to become of the family upon a person's death? In 1477, for example, Margaret Paston rebuked her son, John Paston II, for his actions regarding Sporle (Norfolk), writing that it:

causyth me to be in gret dowte of yow what yowyr dysposycion wul be here-aftyr for swheche lyfelood as I haue dysposyd be-fore this tyme to leue yow after my decesse, for I thynke veryly that ye wulde be dysposyd here-aftyr to selle or sette to morgage the lond that ye xulde haue after me ... Yt greuyth me to thynke vpon yowyr gydeyng after the greet good that ye have had in yowyr rewle ... and soo symply spendyt as yt hath ben.<sup>87</sup>

Such fear for the next generation is a key factor in *The Tale of Gamelyn* (c.1350-70), where Sir John of Boundes wishes to circumvent primogeniture in order to provide for his youngest son, Gamelyn: 'The good knyght cared sore, sik ther he lay/How his children shuld lyven, after his day'.<sup>88</sup> Such problems were not uncommon for younger sons of the gentry and, in a draft will written in 1466, Agnes

<sup>83</sup> E. Clarke, 'The Quest for Security in Medieval England', in M.M. Sheehan (ed.), *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe* (Toronto, 1990), 189-200.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., and Youngs, *Life Cycle*, 176.

<sup>85</sup> Smith, 'The Manorial Court and the Elderly Tenant', 45; Youngs, *Life Cycle*, 176.

<sup>86</sup> Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families*, 159-201; Youngs, *Life Cycle*, 32-3.

<sup>87</sup> *Paston Letters*, I, 227, p. 379.

<sup>88</sup> 'The Tale of Gamelyn', in S. Knight and T.H. Ohlgren (eds), *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, 1997), Lines 11-12.

Paston bemoaned how the livelihood assigned to her two youngest sons ‘was so littill that they miht not leve theron wythouht they shuld hole the plowe be the tayle’.<sup>89</sup>

In trying to retain land and stave off the associated dangers of downward mobility, lengthy legal proceedings could ensue, as the Armburghs, Pastons and Plumptons experienced first-hand, and at least some of the status anxiety expressed in their letters stemmed from this tenuous grasp on much of their property. The Plumptons, for example, faced extensive legal battles over lands in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Yorkshire.<sup>90</sup> Yet these problems were not Sir Robert’s alone, and his two wives were often left trying to maintain the family’s position whilst he fought these protracted legal battles. His first wife, Agnes, complained bitterly in 1504 that Sir Robert had ‘dow none’ whilst their enemies had ‘there mynd fulfilled in every case’, and because of this, ‘the tenaunts cannot pays there housses, but they shalbe cagid; and also none of your servants shall not pas the dowers, but they mon be trobled’. As a result, there ‘will no man deale with any of your servants, nether to bye wod, no nor nothing els’, and Agnes despaired, not knowing ‘how your house shalbe kept, for I know not whereof to levy one pennyworth’.<sup>91</sup> The problems continued for the Plumptons, and Sir Robert’s second wife, Isabel, was similarly left struggling to keep the family afloat, suggesting that they sell some land, ‘for I know nothings els wherwith to helpe you’, and that Sir Robert ‘take anend, soe we are brought to beggar staffe, for ye have not to defend them withal’.<sup>92</sup>

In maintaining the household, wives could often take a leading role in fending off such impoverishment, as in 1531 when Ann Abbott wrote a letter to Ann, Lady Rokeby, explaining why she had not repaid her husband’s debt to Lady Rokeby’s daughter, begging her to ‘let not my husband know of this letter’. Such were their financial difficulties that Ann feared losing their farm: ‘for in good faith we buy that we spend in our howse, and I am faine to eate browne bread and drinke small alle my selfe, and liues as hardly, as God knowes, and must do for this yeare’. Fearing the impact upon the family’s credit-worthiness, she prayed that Lady Rokeby would not tell her daughter, ‘for then she will nether

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<sup>89</sup> *Paston Letters*, I, 31, p. 44.

<sup>90</sup> *Plumpton Letters*, 166, pp. 154-5.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 188, p. 172.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 199, p. 181.

trust my husband nor me'.<sup>93</sup> Such anxieties were even more pressing for poorer, especially single, women. In 1499, Robert Eyre III expressed concern about the potential social decline of a widow, praying that Sir Robert Plumpton would be a 'gud master unto' the 'wyfe and vij smale children' left behind on Christopher Law's death, 'so that she might have hir farme'.<sup>94</sup> Perhaps most disastrously, an unplanned pregnancy could begin this spiral of social decline for single women, as when William Whitaker wrote to Sir Robert Plumpton, begging him to be a 'good master unto this poore woman' after a 'servant of yours hath gotten a child with hir, the which is lost for lacke of keeping, as God knowes. She hath kept it as long as she may, whils she hath not a cloth to hir back but which I have given hir'.<sup>95</sup> The mother of an illegitimate child was often dependent upon the father having the ability and desire to support her and her baby in order to escape destitution: where either was lacking, and where the woman had insufficient resources of her own, her situation was 'at best frighteningly marginal, and at worst unsustainable'.<sup>96</sup>

#### IV

Status anxiety and fear of social decline were thus rife but how could such concerns shape the medieval economy? One example can be seen in the withdrawal from direct demesne management by lords between the 1370s and 1420s, which has been regarded as one of the most significant developments in the economy of late medieval England. This is often interpreted as transferring the decision-making about everyday agriculture 'from the aristocracy to entrepreneurs': new men who, by 'taking on a lord's demesne transformed their whole way of life and economic behaviour'.<sup>97</sup> The motivations for this

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 227, pp. 203-4.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 139, p. 133.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 101, p. 103.

<sup>96</sup> P.C. Madder, "'Oppressed by Utter Poverty': Survival Strategies for Single Mothers and their Children in Late Medieval England", in A.M. Scott (ed.), *Experiences of Poverty in Late Medieval and Early Modern England and France* (Farnham, 2012), 44.

<sup>97</sup> Dyer, *An Age of Transition*, 197; C. Dyer, 'A Suffolk Farmer in the Fifteenth Century', *Agricultural History Review*, 55 (2007), 1-22.

withdrawal by lords have been extensively discussed: falling or stagnant population levels led to rising wages and, from the 1370s, to declining grain prices, whilst the increasing assertiveness of tenants and the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 made labour services difficult to enforce.<sup>98</sup> The profitability of direct agriculture was therefore in doubt, and it is thought that landowners preferred the relative security of leasing out their lands. For example, on the manor of Bromham (Wiltshire), all three attempts at leasing out the demesne came after short spells of low prices, while the cessation of direct demesne sheep husbandry in Wiltshire similarly followed low wool prices in the middle of the fifteenth century.<sup>99</sup> As we have seen, the lesser gentry struggled financially in these economic conditions, with the likes of John Catesby, an esquire from Northamptonshire, recording that the demesne of one of his manors was 'of no value beyond costs' in the 1380s.<sup>100</sup>

So why then did tenants take on this land, and how did they make it profitable? The answer often given is that tenants tended to work with a greater degree of efficiency because they did not need the cumbersome estate administration of manorial lords, and that they accepted a lower profit margin. Yet this implicitly assumes that tenants were essentially land-hungry, even though this period is littered with complaints about tenants unwilling to take on land, with vacancies accumulating on manors across the country.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, even when the bishops of Durham resorted to using all of their seigniorial authority to coerce their tenants to lease land it ultimately failed, revealing potential flaws in assuming that the majority of tenants were land-hungry.<sup>102</sup> New demesne lessees might try to exploit their land in new ways. As Sapoznik has shown, peasant output per acre was higher than that of the demesne at Oakington (Cambridgeshire) because peasants used their holdings more intensively, sowing their land more regularly and leaving less as fallow.<sup>103</sup> However, it is not clear that a peasant family previously

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<sup>98</sup> For the most recent discussion of serfdom and the 'feudal reaction', see Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom*.

<sup>99</sup> J. Hare, *A Prospering Society: Wiltshire in the Later Middle Ages* (Hatfield, 2011), 93 and 97.

<sup>100</sup> Dyer, *An Age of Transition?*, 100.

<sup>101</sup> A.T. Brown, 'Estate Management and Institutional Constraints in Pre-Industrial England: The Ecclesiastical Estates of Durham, c. 1400–1640', *Economic History Review*, 67 (2014), 699–719; C. Dyer, 'A Redistribution of Incomes in Fifteenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, 39 (1968), 11–33.

<sup>102</sup> R.H. Britnell, 'Feudal Reaction after the Black Death in the Palatinate of Durham', *Past and Present*, 128 (1990), pp. 28–47.

<sup>103</sup> A. Sapoznik, 'The Productivity of Peasant Agriculture: Oakington, Cambridgeshire, 1360–1399', *Economic History Review* 66 (2013), 518–544.

farming thirty acres could easily translate many of their practices to these newly-leased demesnes. After all, much of their increased productivity came from the use of family labour, especially that of elderly relatives and young children who might not command a significant wage outside of the household. As Wrightson has argued, it is easy to understand why tenants would accumulate small parcels of land – as a store of wealth for a rainy day, for example – but ‘accumulation beyond what could comfortably be farmed with family labour is less readily explicable’.<sup>104</sup> As lessees, they would face the same difficulties caused by the trends in wages and prices that so troubled the gentry. Moreover, many of the examples of successful demesnes lessees, such as the Heritages, come from the end of the fifteenth century, when economic conditions were improving for producers, but in the late fourteenth century the first generation of lessees faced significantly different challenges.<sup>105</sup>

Rather than solely thinking about what the initial lessees stood to gain from leasing the demesne, we should also consider what they had to lose if they did not do so. Harvey emphasised that the initial lessees tended to be ‘the ministerial-type’, with service as a reeve giving the ‘mere customary tenant some of the expertise and a little of the money needed for farming on the scale implied in the lease of a demesne’.<sup>106</sup> Dyer similarly concluded that generally the ‘initial grant was made to a familiar figure, and the reeve or bailiff who had been responsible to the lord for the demesne became the first farmer’.<sup>107</sup> It was not uncommon for these families to secure a long hold on both the manorial office and the demesne lease, with the likes of John Norreys, father and son, leasing the demesne at Eye (Middlesex) from 1421 to 1481, the latter also acting as bailiff of the manor; or Richard and Thomas Stowte, each in turn rent-collectors, who leased the demesne at Sutton-under-Brailes (Warwickshire)

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<sup>104</sup> K. Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven, 2000), 101.

<sup>105</sup> C. Dyer, ‘Were there any Capitalists in Fifteenth-Century England?’, 1-24.

<sup>106</sup> B. Harvey, ‘The Leasing of the Abbot of Westminster’s Demesnes in the Later Middle Ages’, *Economic History Review*, 22 (1969), 20.

<sup>107</sup> Dyer, *An Age of Transition?*, 196-7; C. Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society: the Estates of the Bishopric of Worcester, 680-1540* (Cambridge, 1980), 209-17. Unfortunately, it is difficult to quantify the exact number of reeves who became lessees because of the often poor survival of consecutive manorial accounts on many estates, but in a sample of 67 families who leased the demesnes of 14 manors, Hare has shown that 27 were of unknown origin, 8 were active locally in the village but their legal status is unknown, and 26 were customary tenants in the village: of these 26, we know eight acted as reeves and one as a rent collector. However, ‘this figure is a clear under-estimate’ because it is very difficult to successfully identify the reeve immediately prior to leasing the demesne. Hare, *Prospering Society*, 101-2.

between 1442 and 1497.<sup>108</sup> The reason some tenants, and reeves in particular, were willing to take on land may not be a simple story of social aspirations and economic entrepreneurship, but rather a more complex mixture of ambition alongside a deep-seated status anxiety.

The reeve was a customary tenant, usually drawn from a village's elite, who was responsible for the management of the lord's demesne: for the cultivation of crops, the care of livestock and the organisation of labour. As such, 'the reeve was often a powerful and well-connected individual within village society'.<sup>109</sup> Although often elected annually from amongst the jurors, the reeve was also an office that could be dominated by specific individuals or families for years, if not decades: a reeve of the Merton College manor of Cuxham (Oxfordshire) served for thirty-eight years.<sup>110</sup> It was from this group of manorial officials that many of the first generation of demesne lessees were drawn, as on the Bishop of Worcester's manor of Bibury (Gloucestershire) where Robert Giffard, the reeve of the manor since 1388/9, became the farmer of the demesne in 1395.<sup>111</sup> Although there have been debates about how attractive these kinds of manorial offices were in the late fourteenth century, reeves were one of the people in village society who stood to lose the most should the lord lease the demesne to an outsider.<sup>112</sup> After all, there were many ways for demesne managers to benefit, both formally and informally, from their office. For example, at Landbeach (Cambridgeshire), the bailiff John Frer, was reported for having sent a cart of the lord's peat turves to the house of John Waldescef, 'where Milisent [Frer's] concubine was dwelling'.<sup>113</sup> Such tenants were afraid of not only losing some of the social capital, economic advantage and political influence that was associated with being the lord's officer, but also of forfeiting their ability to influence local employment and food networks as the demesne manager. So rather than considering the first generation of lessees as entrepreneurs solely driven by social ambition, should we

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<sup>108</sup> Harvey, 'The Leasing of the Abbot of Westminster's Demesnes', 21; B. Harvey, *Westminster Abbey and its Estates in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1977), 151-2.

<sup>109</sup> C. Briggs, 'Monitoring Demesne Managers Through the Manor Court Before and After the Black Death', in R. Goddard, J. Langdon and M. Muller (eds), *Survival and Discord in Medieval Society: Essays in Honour of Christopher Dyer* (Brepols, 2010), 189.

<sup>110</sup> P.D.A. Harvey, *A Medieval Oxfordshire Village: Cuxham, 1240-1400* (Oxford, 1965), 63-74.

<sup>111</sup> E.B. Fryde, *Peasants and Landlords in Later Medieval England, c.1380-c.1525* (Stroud, 1996), 80-1.

<sup>112</sup> D. Stone, 'The Reeve', in S.H. Rigby (ed.), *Historians on Chaucer: The 'General Prologue' to the Canterbury Tales* (Oxford, 2015), 399-420.

<sup>113</sup> Briggs, 'Monitoring Demesne Managers', 187.

in fact think of them as simultaneously trying to maintain their position in village society, and in so doing fundamentally altering the medieval economy?

A less fraught way of safeguarding against social decline, but one no less important in shaping the economy, was to join a parish fraternity or craft guild, helping to explain the growth of such collective organisations in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Although guilds and fraternities had been a feature of medieval society for generations, their primitive role in social welfare often filled the void left by the deaths of extended families in the aftermath of the Black Death and subsequent outbreaks of disease.<sup>114</sup> By the late Middle Ages, these collective organisations were ubiquitous in both the English countryside and urban centres: almost three-quarters of parishes in Cambridgeshire supported at least one guild between 1350 and 1558, whilst there were over twelve hundred guilds meeting in Norfolk and almost five hundred in Suffolk at some point between 1300 and 1550.<sup>115</sup> Religious devotion lay at the core of such foundations, and a major justification for guilds seeking royal charters of incorporation in this period was to enable this provision of social welfare: the London Goldsmiths did so in 1393 to enable the acquisition of property worth £20 per year in order to support the blind and infirm of the trade.<sup>116</sup> And whether for good or ill, fraternities and, in particular, craft guilds, had a significant role in the medieval economy, again demonstrating how these fears and anxieties could have a very real economic impact. At their most pessimistic, historians have understood guilds as routinely curtailing competition, often under the guise of quality regulation, whilst a whiff of monopolistic behaviour has followed these organisations throughout the centuries.<sup>117</sup> More optimistically, however, guilds have been interpreted as promoting the growth of human capital through training a skilled workforce and creating and regulating markets, whilst away from the traditional urban

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<sup>114</sup> G. Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages: Guilds in England, 1250-1550* (Oxford, 2015), 6.

<sup>115</sup> V.R. Bainbridge, *Gilds in the Medieval Countryside: Social and Religious Change in Cambridgeshire, c.1350-1558* (Woodbridge, 1996), 33; K. Farnhill, *Guilds and the Parish Community in Late Medieval East Anglia, c.1470-1550* (Woodbridge, 2001), 30.

<sup>116</sup> *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, Richard II, vol. 5, 1391-96* (London, 1905), 219.

<sup>117</sup> A. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Book One, Chapter 10, Part 2; P. Musgrave, *The Early Modern European Economy* (Basingstoke, 1999), 71; T. Smith (ed.), *English Gilds: The Original Ordinances of More Than One Hundred Early English Gilds*, Early English Text Society, 40 (1870), 180, 286, 317, 337, 342.



focus, rural fraternities have been viewed as risk-pooling institutions, acting as primitive farmers' cooperatives in the medieval countryside.<sup>118</sup>

The majority of these guilds and fraternities across medieval England contained some form of provision to help 'any brother or sister of the guild fallen into poverty or mischief by adventure of the world'.<sup>119</sup> Some ordinances, however, further demonstrate that the downwardly mobile were not uniformly condemned in medieval society: it mattered how a person fell upon hard times. For example, the guild of the Blessed Mary in Chesterfield offered help to brothers who had suffered losses 'whether by fire, by murrain, by robbery or any other mishap', or were in poverty 'through age, or loss of limb, or leprosy', but would not reimburse those whose loss came 'through his own lust, or gluttony, or dice-play, or other folly'.<sup>120</sup> These provisions follow a general hardening of attitudes towards the idle and indolent poor after the Black Death, with charity increasingly aimed at aiding those who were considered the most deserving and in greatest need.<sup>121</sup> Although old age, illness and misfortune could lead to social decline through a loss of wealth or political influence, it did not necessarily produce the scorn or social judgement most often associated with profligacy.<sup>122</sup> Perhaps most noticeably, these ordinances sought to allay the catalogue of fears and anxieties so prevalent in many of the letters and literature of the period, not only providing alms for the poor, but with guilds like that of St Leonard in Lynn instructing brothers and sisters to visit and comfort any member of the guild sent to prison, or the guild of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Hull, which provided a free grant of 10s. to brothers.<sup>123</sup> Guilds also sought to prevent intergenerational downward mobility by providing for children of members: the Palmers of Ludlow instructed that 'if any good girl of the guild, of marriageable age, cannot have the means found by her father, either to go into a religious house or to marry, whichever she wishes to do',

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<sup>118</sup> S.R. Epstein and M. Prak (eds.), *Guilds, Innovation and the European Economy, 1400-1800* (Cambridge, 2008), 4; G. Richardson, 'The Prudent Village: Risk Pooling Institutions in Medieval English Agriculture', *The Journal of Economic History*, 65 (2005), 386-413.

<sup>119</sup> Smith (ed.), *English Gilds*, 15-41.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 and 37.

<sup>121</sup> Dyer, *An Age of Transition?*, 238-40; M.K. McIntosh, 'Local Responses to the Poor in Late Medieval and Tudor England', *Continuity and Change*, 3 (1988), 209-45.

<sup>122</sup> Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity*, 68-9.

<sup>123</sup> Smith (ed.), *English Gilds*, 50, 156-7. The Smiths of Chesterfield and the Palmers of Ludlow had similar provisions, 170, 194; Farnhill, *Guilds and the Parish Community*, 74-7.

then the guild would provide the funds from the common chest.<sup>124</sup> Though guilds also had a role in promoting upward mobility through the formation of social and political networks, some such as St Michael-on-the-Hill in Lincoln, were explicitly ‘founded by folks of common and middling rank’, and sought to exclude any ‘of the rank of mayor or bailiff’ unless they were found ‘to be of humble, good and honest conversation’ and, even if admitted, ‘none such shall meddle in any matter’ nor would he have a claim to office ‘on account of the honour and dignity of his personal rank’.<sup>125</sup> In other words, the entire structure of the guild was predicated upon helping other ‘common and middling folks’ rather than assisting members ascend the social hierarchy: an impression reinforced by the provision that if any brother or sister fell into ‘such an ill state that he is unable to earn his living’ he shall have ‘day by day, a penny from the brethren and sisters of the guild, in the order in which their names stand on the register of their admission to the guild; each brother or sister giving the penny, in turn, out of his own means’.<sup>126</sup>

Although social mobility is most often discussed in connection with individuals or families, the extended network of brothers and sisters in medieval guilds reveal how other forms of identity could prompt new social anxieties: not necessarily for oneself or family, but for the collective guild. Despite the sizeable charitable income of the Tailors of London, the guild was not simply in the altruistic business of helping all poor tailors but rather those who had enjoyed success previously and had since suffered hardships. Many of the guild’s almsmen were in fact former masters; the likes of William atte Rule, Master in 1384, received £6 per year for the eight and a half years he was an almsman, whilst Robert Fenescalles, Master in 1420, spent six and a half years as an almsman with his wife Christian, who survived him as an almswoman for a further eleven years.<sup>127</sup> The general aim of the craft guilds of London was not necessarily to aid all poor members of the mistery, but rather to preserve the status and dignity of their liverymen, and in so doing maintain the position of the guild itself.<sup>128</sup> The London Skinners, for example, stipulated in 1472 that recipients of alms had to have been liverymen for at least

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 194. Berwick had similar provisions, 340.

<sup>125</sup> *English Historical Documents*, 624.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Davies, ‘The Tailors of London’, 72-4.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

seven years.<sup>129</sup> Individual poverty was regrettable, but the guild was far more likely to intervene when such destitution threatened the collective dignity of the corporation; it would not do for a former master to live in squalor on the streets.

## V

Status anxiety, of course, was not invariably the same as fear of impending social decline: it often accompanied positions of power and authority even under stable conditions. John Paston II's frustrated political expectations reveal how even acts of ambition can be tempered by such anxieties: if his enemies discovered his political impotence it would reveal his weakness, but not necessarily lead to downward social mobility. This kind of ambition and anxiety often went hand-in-hand: a yeoman may have acquired six silver spoons in emulation of the gentry, but such luxury items were also cultural necessities distinguishing them from their husbandmen neighbours. After all, the consumption of material goods was not always motivated by imitation and emulation, and we need to consider the possibilities of consuming objects 'as a means of retaining place and face'.<sup>130</sup> Status anxiety tended to revolve around issues of reputation, worship and public perception: the Pastons expended considerable thought and energy combatting potential misinterpretations of their actions, but failure to do so would not necessarily have induced social decline. Fear of downward social mobility, by comparison, tended to be provoked by specific and often urgent issues, especially surrounding financial problems, such as in the *Gest* when the knight is about to lose his lands. Status anxiety, therefore, tended to be broader and more nebulous in nature, but these feelings were also often deeply entwined with a fear of social decline: the financial pressures of the fifteenth-century recession undoubtedly produced a general anxiety amongst many, but when Agnes Paston worried that her sons would need to hold the plough in

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<sup>129</sup> J.J. Lambert, *The Records of the Skinners of London* (London, 1933), 90.

<sup>130</sup> S. Parnell, 'Consumption and Consumerism in Early Modern England', *The Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), 559.

order to survive she was clearly articulating a fear of their impending downward mobility. Indeed, a fear of the latter could also provoke status anxieties, such as the concern of public condemnation engendered by Sir Amadace's poverty, or the problems the Plumpton had in finding a buyer once their financial difficulties became public knowledge.

Although we should be cautious of constructing a single, uniform social outlook, simply supplanting an 'age of ambition' with 'an age of anxiety', many of the same fears of social decline pervade the surviving sources: from worry over debts to the fickleness of friends and concerns over the next generation. The articulation of these concerns demonstrate how deeply entwined wealth, social prestige and political influence were in medieval society. The loss of one of these attributes – and in this respect the emphasis upon wealth is unmistakable – had serious repercussions for a person's social status in late medieval England. These worries were shaped by both gender and the life cycle, from the likes of Ann Abbot going behind her husband's back to resolve the family's indebtedness to George Ashby's resentment at being cast aside in his old age. Social status was far from fixed and static in late medieval England, despite what the moralists would wish: in their everyday actions, people were continuously positioning themselves with reference to those both above and below themselves on the social ladder, and even those of relatively humble means were far from perennially upward looking. As Mascuch has argued for the early modern period, 'the openness of the abyss of poverty into which whole families might be cast...was more awesome than the openness of the elite into which individuals might climb'.<sup>131</sup> In trying to hold on to the advantages of their position, reeves may have fundamentally altered the medieval economy, just as those joining guilds for protection against social decline in old age or illness could shape economic development. As a motivating factor, therefore, status anxiety and a fear of social decline were often just as important as social ambition and aspirations in shaping economic activity: change can, after all, be wrought by people desperately trying to preserve the status quo.

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<sup>131</sup> M. Mascuch, 'Social Mobility and Middling Self-Identity: The Ethos of British Autobiographers, 1600-1750', *Social History*, 20 (1995), 61.