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Concerning Peasants: The Underlying Cause for the Peasants' Revolt of 1381

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## Introduction

“When Adam delved and Eve span, who then was the gentleman?” This quote from the infamous priest John Ball has echoed through the centuries as one of the most famous rallying cries during the Peasants Revolt of 1381.<sup>1</sup> John Ball called for equality in his sermons during the revolt, but Ball’s call for equality is only one small aspect of a very muddled and complicated event in England’s medieval history. The Peasants’ Revolt was caused by many different religious, political, social and economic problems that plagued many citizens of England in the late fourteenth century because of the death of two-thirds of England’s population caused by the Black Death.

The Black Death had a major lasting effect for the fourteenth century in England. The sheer number of deaths created a massive labor shortage, caused prices of food and land values to plummet while wages continued to rise. In order to help regulate the labor, Parliament issued the *Ordinance of Laborers* and *Statute of Laborer* in the attempt to help regulate wages and maintain a strong labor force. However, this labor legislation created societal and economic discontent between England’s nobles and its peasantry.

In addition to growing social and economic concerns, rumors of political corruption began to arise after the death of King Edward III in 1377. These rumors surrounded the new, very young King Richard II, and said those of parliament and those instructing him how to be king were the ones truly leading the country. There were also religious tensions growing worse as the fourteenth century progressed. Within England, the church had become quite wealthy, and according to some, such as John Ball, John Wycliffe, and even the Archbishop of Canterbury

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<sup>1</sup> C. Warren Hollister, *The Making of England, 55 B.C. to 1399*, (Boston: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 349.

himself, the church had strayed from spirituality and fallen into the grasp of greed and immorality.

It is for all these reasons the historians must take a step back and examine the Peasants' Revolt from a broader perspective instead of focusing on just one of many motivations of the revolt which are religious issues with the church, fighting against the political corruption of Parliament, the social inequalities brought upon by unfair labor legislation and taxation, and the already struggling economic issues including low wages and heavy taxation. Doing so would allow many to see the various connections and underlying themes of the revolt. Although the motivations of the common people during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in England varied, the quest for economic security was an underlying factor for all persons of varying wealth and social status and in the political, religious, social, and economic issues of the time.

The main primary sources include four main chronicles specifically revolving around the outbreak of the revolt and the attacks in London and the eastern counties. These four chronicles are the *Anonimale Chronicile*, *Chronicles of Henry Knighton*, *Chronicles of Thomas Walsingham*, and the *Chronicles of Jean Froissart*. As John Arnold states in his book *What is Medieval History?* chronicles are a wealth of information when looking into medieval history.<sup>2</sup> However, historians must be careful because chronicles often contain misleading or distorted information.<sup>3</sup> Each chronicler listed above had their own bias that influenced their writings; therefore when analyzing chronicles, it is important to be critical.

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<sup>2</sup> John Arnold, *What is Medieval History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 38.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold, *What is Medieval History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 39.

In addition to the chronicles, this paper delves into government legislation issued such as the *Ordinance of Laborers* issued 1349 and *Statute of Laborers* issued in 1351 as well as the *Sumptuary Laws* issued in 1363. These legal records show how the government ran and what was important at the time. In the cases of the *Ordinance of Laborers* and *Statute of Laborers* they were issued because of the lack of a labor force caused by the deaths from the Black Death. This paper will also analyze manorial court records, specifically the records showing fines issued against trespassers of the *Statute of Laborer* to see what laws were broken and how often. Analyzing these records in such a way can show how the peasantry broke the laws and for what reason. Was it leaving an employer to attempt to search for better wages? Or just requesting higher wages in general? Often both, however the number of fines issued because the peasantry tried to charge too much for their labor or goods outnumbered the former, which could lead historians to believe that the peasantry overall, had a drive for higher and equal wages.

This paper will begin with the discussion of religion and its connection to England and the corruption within the church. It is shown through much analysis that the Church had become greedy in nature and had an innate drive to accrue more wealth. Following the discussion of religion, the corruption of government will be further analyzed, using documentation from the chronicles that shows the perception of the peasantry that there were traitors within the government spending tax money “badly.” The political corruption will then lead into the social issues illustrated by the authors of the chronicles mentioned before followed by the economic issues. This paper will also show the interweaving connections between each of these four main motivations behind the revolt as well as draw one common connection between all of them: the want for economic security for both nobles and non-nobles.

## **Historiography**

The Peasant's Revolt is a widely debated topic by historians dating as far back as 1907. Many have attempted to discover the cause of the revolt through a single lens, such as, religion, politics, social concerns, or economy. Many have, within their own research, demonstrated that the revolt as a whole is a very complicated subject and, therefore, choose to focus in on one of the topics mentioned previously because of how complex the subject of the Peasants' Revolt is. The issue is, by narrowing their focus, they are leaving out a plethora of information that is necessary for understanding the revolt as a whole.

For example, Margaret Aston argues that the purpose for the Peasants Revolt was to tear down the church in her article, "Corpus Christi and Corpus Regni: Heresy and the Peasants' Revolt."<sup>4</sup> Aston states that there were three main pieces of evidence that back up her argument that the Revolt was driven by religious reasons, specifically between the years 1380 and 1382. First, the rebellion began on the day of Corpus Christi, a religious holiday where all those of the parish were to go to church, honor the Eucharistic host, and join religious processions.<sup>5</sup> The second example was that there was a clear animosity against the clergy as well as aggressive movements that John Wycliffe had spoken about for a long time preceding the revolt.<sup>6</sup> Finally, Wycliffe criticized the sacrament of bread and wine, saying it was just bread and wine and not the actual body and blood of Christ.<sup>7</sup> Many who believed and followed in Wycliffe's teachings also fought in the rebellion, further proving that it was a fight against the church.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Aston, "Corpus Christi and Corpus Regni: Heresy and the Peasants' Revolt." *Past & Present*, no. 143 (1994), 3-47.

<sup>5</sup> Aston, "Corpus Christi and Corpus Regni" *Past & Present*, (1994), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Aston, "Corpus Christi and Corpus Regni" *Past & Present*, (1994), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Aston, "Corpus Christi and Corpus Regni" *Past & Present*, (1994), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Aston, "Corpus Christi and Corpus Regni" *Past & Present*, (1994), 4.

In contrast, in his essay “The Revolt against the Justices” Alan Harding argues that the Peasants Revolt had its origins in economic issues, but was largely political. In his argument, Harding argues that it was largely political by pointing out the reasons for the Revolt as stated by the chronicles such as the *Anonimale Chronicle* and the *Chronicle by Thomas Walsingham*.<sup>9</sup> Harding says that Wat Tyler’s demand to “kill all lawyers” found in *Walsingham’s Chronicle* was to target anyone who had dealings or was instructed in the practice of law.<sup>10</sup> Harding also pointed out that according to the *Anonimale Chronicle*, Tyler demanded that the king reinstate the law of Winchester, which laid down regulations for a form of self-policing.<sup>11</sup> Harding claimed that Wat Tyler’s demands to the king were intended to incorporate the common people into the larger political structure.<sup>12</sup>

Many historians, such as Christopher Dyer, R.H. Hilton, H. Fagan, and Frances and Joseph Gies, agreed that the Peasants’ Revolt had been heavily influenced in some way by England’s struggling economy specifically when referring to the heavy taxation and fines issued to people when they broke the laws issued by the Statute of Laborers. Yet each author has their own reasoning as to how the economics effected the Revolt. Frances and Joseph Gies state in their chapter, “The Passing of the Medieval Village,” that the economic crises and edicts arose from the Black Death, beginning with the Statute of Laborers and ending with the poll tax of 1381, which was one of the triggers of the Peasants’ Revolt. In this chapter they state, “A chain of peasant uprisings was clearly directed against taxation exploded all over Europe.”<sup>13</sup> They also

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Harding, “The Revolt Against the Justices,” In *The English Rising of 1381* ed. R.H Hilton and T.H. Aston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 165.

<sup>10</sup> Harding, “The Revolt Against the Justices,” 165.

<sup>11</sup> Harding, “The Revolt Against the Justices,” 166.

<sup>12</sup> Harding, “The Revolt Against the Justices,” 193.

<sup>13</sup> Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *Daily Life in Medieval Times* (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 1969).

go one to show that after the Peasants' Revolt the edicts that had once caused great turmoil such as the poll tax and Statute of Laborers were abandoned.<sup>14</sup>

Christopher Dyer looks at the events leading up to the revolts as well as the revolts themselves through a slightly different lens. Whereas many scholars such as A.F Butcher, see the Statute of Laborers as a tax to help the current war fund and to rebuild the economy in the wake of the Black Death, Dyer sees edicts such as these as a way for the elite to profit from the growing wealth of those coming from a lower socioeconomic status.<sup>15</sup> Dyer also points out two very important items to ponder while discussing the Peasants' Revolt. First, the rebels were not all of the lower class. In fact, he states that many were part of the government and had positions such as bailiffs, jurors, and others of a respectable status.<sup>16</sup> The second point he makes is that many acts of rebellion involved the burning of manorial court records. These records held the debts owed to the landlords by the commoners. The burning of the records prevented the landlords from collecting those debts in a time of high taxation. However, unlike the other historians mentioned above, Dyer did not believe the revolts were driven by economics, but as a social movement. He states in his essay that, "Rural unrest in the late fourteenth century can readily be explained in terms of the tension between entrenched lordly power and the changes, or potential changes, in peasant society."<sup>17</sup>

David Routt argues from more of an economic perspective within his article, "The Late Medieval Countryside: England's Rural Economy, 1275-1500" that it was the labor legislation, such as the Statute of Laborers, and the stale wages of the peasantry, that killed their enjoyment

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<sup>14</sup> Gies and Gies, *Daily Life in Medieval Times*. 247.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Dyer, "The Social and Economic Background of the Rural Revolt of 1381" In *The English Rising of 1381* ed. R.H Hilton and T.H. Aston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 9-42.

<sup>16</sup> Dyer, "The Social and Economic Background," 27.

<sup>17</sup> Dyer, "The Social and Economic Background," 27.



of their new found potential for social mobility and eventually led to the Peasants' Revolt.<sup>18</sup> Routt begins with giving a comprehensive history of England's economy beginning in 1275, describing the events of the Agricultural Revolution in the thirteenth century that helped boost both England's agricultural production and population. According to Routt, this increase would lead to static or declining wages as well as an increase in both rent and goods.<sup>19</sup> This time period heavily favored the lord instead of the peasantry; they controlled the rents and still received income to buy up the current surplus of food.<sup>20</sup> After the Great Famine and the Black Death, England's population and production was significantly lower because very little of the population was left alive to harvest the fields. The *Ordinance and Statute of Laborers* allowed landlords to artificially keep wages low and hamper mobility while keeping up production on their lands. According to Routt, it was this labor legislation that further angered the peasants from their already trying state of oppression under the landlords that would eventually lead to the Peasants' Revolt.

When discussing the economic crisis that so heavily influenced the Peasants' Revolt, one must look at the struggling economy of England itself. In *The English Rising of 1381*, R.H. Hilton and H. Fagan provide a good overview of the state of the economy of mid-fourteenth century England as well as an idea of the amount of taxes an average peasant would pay.<sup>21</sup> According to these two historians, England was in a state of economic decline during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries due to a drop in agricultural prices as a result of a "shrinking market" caused by a Malthusian crisis.<sup>22</sup> A Malthusian crisis is where a community or country

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<sup>18</sup> David Routt, "The Late Medieval Countryside: England's Rural Economy and Society, 1275-1500" *History Compass* 11, no. 6 (2013), 477.

<sup>19</sup> Routt, "The Late Medieval Countryside," 475.

<sup>20</sup> Routt, "The Late Medieval Countryside," 475.

<sup>21</sup> R.H. Hilton and H. Fagan, *The English Rising of 1381*, (Lawrence and Wishart: London, 1950)

<sup>22</sup> Hilton and Fagan, *The English Rising of 1381*, 22.

has a population far too large for it to sustain on its own through food production.<sup>23</sup> Prices of commodities rose while there could be no further expansion due to over-population.<sup>24</sup> After the Black Death's arrival in 1348, close to half of England's population was killed off. This great mortality of England's population led to a major labor shortage and a shortage of what Hilton and Fagan call "free" labor, referring to serfs.<sup>25</sup> Both Hilton and Fagan argue that, the consequence of this unevenness of development was the co-existence, often in the same region, of peasants subject to very differing conditions of exploitation according to the economic policy of their feudal lords. This was an important cause of the peasant discontent.<sup>26</sup>

One important item that Andrew Prescott discusses is the use of chronicles and sources and how to keep a critical eye when analyzing them. In his article, "Writing about Rebellion: Using the Records of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381," he argues that much of the language used to describe the rioters during the Revolt of 1381 is very similar to the language used in describing the riots in England in 1981.<sup>27</sup> Although the severity of the two riots were much different, Prescott states that many of the same strategies were used by the chroniclers, such as Thomas Walsingham, when describing the riots themselves.<sup>28</sup> Many of the chroniclers looked at the revolts from a position of power and from different social strata than many of the peasant protesters. It is because of their positions and ideologies that these chroniclers portray the peasants in a negative sense. This bias is echoed through certain historians' depictions of the revolt as well. Charles Oman's popular book *The Great Revolt of 1381* claims that the

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<sup>23</sup> Hilton and Fagan, *The English Rising of 1381*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Hilton and Fagan, *The English Rising of 1381*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Hilton and Fagan, *The English Rising of 1381*, 23.

<sup>26</sup> Hilton and Fagan, *The English Rising of 1381*, 24.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Prescott, "Writing about Rebellion: Using the Records of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381." *History Workshop Journal*, no. 45 (1998): 1-27.

<sup>28</sup> Prescott, "Writing about Rebellion" *History Workshop Journal*, no. 45 (1998), 3.

chroniclers were “not the men to understand this phenomena,” and “They only half comprehended the meaning of what they had seen, and were content to explain the rebellion as the work of Satan, or the result of an outbreak of insanity on the part of the laboring classes.”<sup>29</sup>

With these thoughts in mind it is important to point out a relatively small gap in the scholarship thus far. Many historians looking at the economic causes of the Peasants’ Revolt look at short term causes such as the poll taxes. Those historians, like Dyer, study a social movement, yet fail to acknowledge these overarching economic themes, focusing on the connection between lord and peasant instead of the bigger picture. My goal is to look at a much longer trend, beginning in 1351 and tracing the continually growing state of discontent among the peasants until 1381 when revolt finally broke loose.

### **The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381**

To better understand the overall argument of this paper, a brief background on the Peasants’ Revolt is very much needed. The Peasants Revolt of 1381 was, without a doubt, triggered by the third poll tax issued in 1380. This fact has been corroborated by both current historians and the authors of the chronicles. This poll tax was issued to raise funds for the Hundred Years War England had been fighting intermittently with France from 1337 to 1453.<sup>30</sup> The third poll tax was also subject to a fairly large scale tax evasion, causing the English Parliament to send forth commissioners, or tax collectors, to search for people who avoided the poll tax and make sure they pay the tax.<sup>31</sup> This paper relies mostly on the accounts given in the

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (London: Oxford University Press, 1906).

<sup>30</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Hundred Years War." Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed June 15, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Hundred-Years-War>

<sup>31</sup> “The Lay Population of English Counties and Town according to the Poll Tax Returns of 1377 and 1381,” in *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson (Bath: The Pitman Press, 1970), 54; “Appointment of Commissioners to Enforce the Payment of the Third Poll Tax, March 1381,” in *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson (Bath: The Pitman Press, 1970), 119.

*Anonimalle Chronicle* when describing the revolt because it has the most comprehensive list of events compared to the other chronicles.

Both the *Anonimalle Chronicle* and the chronicle written by Henry Knighton agree that the Revolt first began in Fobbing, a town located in Essex County, east of London.<sup>32</sup> A man by the name of Thomas Baker rallied many of the townsfolk from both Fobbing and a nearby town called Corningham, “violently” refused to pay said tax and chased off a tax collector, Thomas de Bampton, forcing him to return to London.<sup>33</sup> de Bampton was sent back to London, and Sir Robert Bealknap, chief Justice of the Commons Bench, was sent to deal with the people of the area.<sup>34</sup> The *Anonimalle Chronicle* says the people were fearful of indictments issued against them, but the commons rose up against Sir Robert, and made him swear on the bible to undo these false inquests issued against them.<sup>35</sup> Following the incident at Fobbing, the *Anonimalle Chronicle* states that (a most likely exaggerated) fifty thousand peasants rallied and burned all the villages around the area of Essex because they did not rise up with them.<sup>36</sup>

Soon after the initial outbreak in Fobbing, Sir Simon de Burley and two serjeant-at-arms went to Gravesend and demanded a fine of £300 in silver from a man who de Burley claimed was his serf.<sup>37</sup> The people of Gravesend asked him to revoke his claim at which point Sir Simon became angry and commanded his men to bind the man and bring him to Rochester castle.<sup>38</sup> After the Sir Simon incident, the peasants began to rise in the Kentish township and marched to

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<sup>32</sup> “The Outbreak of the Revolt according to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*,” In *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson (Bath: The Pitman Press, 1970), 123.

<sup>33</sup> “The Outbreak of the Revolt according to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*,” 123.

<sup>34</sup> “The Outbreak of the Revolt according to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*,” 124.

<sup>35</sup> “The Outbreak of the Revolt according to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*,” 124.

<sup>36</sup> “The Outbreak of the Revolt according to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*,” 124.

<sup>37</sup> “The Outbreak of the Revolt according to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*,” 126.

<sup>38</sup> “The Outbreak of the Revolt according to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*,” 126.

Maidstone where they killed one of its best men.<sup>39</sup> It is important to note here that Wat Tyler, the leader of the rebellion in London, was from Maidstone, and although it is not mentioned in this chronicle, it can be inferred it was that at this moment Wat Tyler joined the rebellion. From Maidstone, the peasants went to Rochester and met with peasants from Essex and laid siege to the castle to free the man Sir Simon had taken. The commons released all the prisoners held in the castle and began their trek to London stopping and destroying the homes of traitors, including Duke of Lancaster's household controlled by one Thomas de Heseldene, and then they sold all the supplies and goods of the manor at a cheap price to the commons.<sup>4041</sup>

The peasant rebels from Kent and Essex, led by Wat Tyler according to the chronicles, then began to make their way to London. According to Henry Knighton, the release of the prisoners of the Marshalsea, a prison the peasants had sieged and during the outbreak of the revolt, was to bolster their own numbers.<sup>42</sup> If this is the case, the later attacks on many of London's prisons could have been for those same reasons. Historian R.H. Hilton claims that it was at the Marshalsea prison that many of the offenders of the *Statute of Laborers* were held.<sup>43</sup> Then the rebels of Kent burnt down the Savoy, the duke of Lancaster's residence in London, because of their hatred of the duke of Lancaster but some medieval contemporaries believed it was the Londoners that burned down the Savoy.<sup>44</sup> In *Henry Knighton's Chronicle*, he states that the rebels arrived at the Savoy and burnt many of the goods, beds and heraldic shields as well as

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<sup>39</sup>“The Outbreak of the Revolt according to the Anonimale Chronicle,” 128.

<sup>40</sup> “The Outbreak of the Revolt according to the Anonimale Chronicle,” 128.

<sup>41</sup> “The Outbreak of the Revolt according to the Anonimale Chronicle,” 127.

<sup>42</sup> The Rebels in London according to Henry Knighton,” in *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson (Bath: The Pitman Press, 1970).

<sup>43</sup> Hilton and Fagan, *The English Rising of 1381*, 108.

<sup>44</sup> “The Rebels in London according to Henry Knighton,” 184.

tossed three barrels of gunpowder into a fire (which they thought contained gold and silver.)<sup>45</sup> Travelling around London the peasants released the prisoners from Fleet Street prison, Newgate prison, and Westminster prison, and laid siege to the Tower of London.<sup>46</sup> The king spoke from a turret, asking all the peasants to meet him at Mile End so he could hear their demands.<sup>47</sup> King Richard II proclaimed that if all rebels left the siege of the tower they would be pardoned of their crimes; the rebels responded that they would not leave until both the traitors had been handed over and the peasants had gained charters that claimed they were free of serfdom and pardoned them of all crimes and misprisions until that hour.<sup>48</sup> While the some peasants, including Wat Tyler, left to hear the king at Mile End, many stayed behind and dragged the archbishop to Tower Hill where they beheaded him as well as Sir Robert Hales, the High Prior to the Hospitallars of St. John and treasurer of England; Brother William, a surgeon and doctor and great friend to the duke of Lancaster; John Legge, the king's sergeant-at-arms, and finally a certain juror.<sup>49</sup> The peasants that later met the king at Mile End demanded an end to serfdom as well as they were not to pay homage or give services to any lord, however, they conceded that they would give four pence an acre of land.<sup>50</sup> At Mile End, Wat Tyler also demanded from the king, the reinstatement of the law of Winchester, and the release of church goods back to the parishioners. After his demands were given at Mile End, Wat Tyler was subsequently killed because of some threatening attitudes and moves towards the king.<sup>51</sup> Thus ending the Peasants'

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<sup>45</sup> "The Rebels in London according to Henry Knighton," 184.

<sup>46</sup> "The Rebels in London according to the Anonimalle Chronicle," In *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson (Bath UK: The Pitman Press, 1970), 158.

<sup>47</sup> "The Rebels in London according to the Anonimalle Chronicle," 159.

<sup>48</sup> "The Rebels in London according to the Anonimalle Chronicle," 159.

<sup>49</sup> "The Rebels in London according to the Anonimalle Chronicle," 162.

<sup>50</sup> "The Rebels in London according to the Anonimalle Chronicle," 159.

<sup>51</sup> "The Rebels in London according to the Anonimalle Chronicle," 167.

Revolt. The remaining peasants at Mile End were free to go as King Richard had agreed to all of Tyler's demands although the king would later go back on them.

Through the use of many primary sources, the events of the Peasants' Revolt can be pieced together rather coherently. That being said, what is unclear was the motivations of the peasants during the revolt. The four main chronicles discussed in this paper are the *Anonimelle Chronicle*, *Henry Knighton's Chronicle*, *Jean Froissart's Chronicle*, and *Thomas Walsingham's Chronicle*, and each of these chronicles prescribe different motivations of the peasants for revolting. Walsingham suggests religious and societal issues whereas Knighton and the *Anonimelle Chronicle* suggest that it was caused by the political corruption or a fight for equality and justice.<sup>52</sup> Froissart states it was a fight for equality in both status and wages.<sup>53</sup> The goal of this paper is to take all these issues listed in the chronicles and show the common underlying factor of each issues, the quest for economic security.

### **The Religious Motivations**

The Church as a whole was in great turmoil in the latter half of the fourteenth century. Parishioners developed major issues with the church for its wealth and spiritual failures.<sup>54</sup> These faults in the church had been seen since the twelfth century, but had peaked after the arrival of the Black Death, creating social discontent and certain radical religious groups such as the Lollards.<sup>55</sup> The Lollards rallied behind the teachings of John Wycliffe, a professor at Oxford University, and John Ball, a defrocked and excommunicated priest. Wycliffe criticized the

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<sup>52</sup> "The Rebels in London according to the Anonimelle Chronicle", "The Rebels in London according to Henry Knighton" and "The Rebels in London According to Thomas Walsingham" In *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson (Bath UK: The Pitman Press, 1970).

<sup>53</sup> "The Causes of the Revolt according to Froissart" In *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson (Bath UK: The Pitman Press, 1970), 370.

<sup>54</sup> Hollister, *The Making of England*, 341.

<sup>55</sup> Hollister, *The Making of England*, 341.

church and their wealth and believed they needed to emulate the poverty of Jesus Christ, not live in luxury and wealth. Furthermore, Wycliffe denounced the belief of transubstantiation, or the belief that the bread and wine given at communion actually transformed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ.<sup>56</sup> John Ball echoed these teachings and preached equality, more specifically the end to serfdom.<sup>57</sup> Coinciding with Wycliffe and Ball, an English Franciscan philosopher known as William of Ockham believed that the church had become greedy and corruption in nature.<sup>58</sup> It is this ecclesiastical corruption and greed that is often described within the Peasants' Revolt accounts and furthers the proof that there is a connection between religion and a form of economic security.

The Church in medieval society was one of the most powerful institutions and the focal point for much controversy in fourteenth-century England. Many of the complaints of the revolts described by the chroniclers at the time say the peasants had a hatred of certain aspects of the church. The church had become very wealthy at the time; not just as an organization but as individuals within the church who tried to secure their own wealth. In the document "Simon Sudbury increase priests' wages" written in 1378 the commons of England issued many complaints against the clergy that "priests of today within the city, diocese and province of Canterbury, have been so infected with the sin of greed that, not satisfied with reasonable wages, they hire themselves out for vastly inflated salaries."<sup>59</sup> The archbishop's response was to raise the wages of all priests to prevent them from falling further into "various fleshy delights, until

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<sup>56</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Lollard." Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed June 07, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lollards>.

<sup>57</sup> "John Ball According to Thomas Walsingham" In *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson (Bath: The Pitman Press, 1970), 375.

<sup>58</sup> Hollister, *The Making of England*, 342.

<sup>59</sup> "Simon Sudbury Increases Priests' Wages" in *The Black Death* ed. and trans. by Rosemary Horrox (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 311.



they are dragged down into the very vortex of whirlpool of evil.”<sup>60</sup> Although there is no proof that the raise in wages reduced the priest’s desire for “fleshy delights” exists, it is important to note that even a high ranking member of the church, such as the archbishop, recognized greed within its own organization even before the revolt in London. This growing greed of the church did not go unnoticed, specifically by a certain defrocked priest by the name of John Ball.

During the Revolt of 1381, a man by the name of John Ball spent his time preaching to the commons, criticizing the government and the church as an institution. According to the chronicle of Thomas Walsingham, Ball echoed the teachings of John Wycliffe in his sermons and stated that all those paying tithes to the church or to the priests of the parish, should not do so if said priests were richer than they were or if the persons of the parish knew that they were better men than the priests.<sup>61</sup> John Ball’s sermons against paying the priests shows his issues with the growing wealth of the clergy. Connecting demands that no one should pay priests if they are richer than the parishioners and the archbishop of Canterbury raising the wages of, quite possibly some of those very same priests, shows that the churches greed did not go unnoticed by the common people of England. Considering how many rallied behind Ball during the revolt, and the demands of Wat Tyler at Mile End, many of the peasantry had major issues with the wealth the Church had been accruing.

In addition to John Ball’s sermons against the church’s greed and government corruption, there were the demands of rebel leader Wat Tyler that demonstrate the discontent that many of the commons had with the greed of the church. At Mile End, Tyler demanded that “...all the lands and tenements of the possessioners [the church] should be taken from them and divided

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<sup>60</sup> “Simon Sudbury Increases Priests’ Wages,” 311.

<sup>61</sup> “John Ball According to Thomas Walsingham,” 374.

among the commons, only reserving for them a reasonable sustenance.”<sup>62</sup> Tyler also demanded that the church give back all their goods to the parishoners.<sup>63</sup> The demands of Tyler shows the issues many had with the greed of the church. Even the Archbishop of Canterbury admitted to many of the priests belonging to the clergy being greedy and looking more towards the material gain than religious piety. Although some of the peasants’ critiques of the church dealt with morality and spirituality, or lack thereof, the underlying critique appears to have been the economic corruption of the medieval clergy. Stripping the church of its wealth and property would potentially enrich the participants in the Peasants’ Revolt.

### **The Political Motivations**

England was in a social and economic crisis and the state of England’s government was of no help in the attempt to fix said crisis. After the death of King Edward III in 1377, his ten-year- old grandson, Richard II, took up the throne.<sup>64</sup> After Richard had become king, England’s government was essentially run by government officials and contending baronial factions.<sup>65</sup> The English Parliament was also heavily influenced by John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster and the wealthiest, powerful, and hated person in England. John of Gaunt was so hated because he was seen as a poor leader, the main driver behind the first poll tax, and the reason why England was not successfully defeating France during Hundred Years War. In addition to the poor leadership, there had been rumors that many people within Richards’s court had been pocketing money from the taxes being collected.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> “The Rebels in London according to the Anonimale Chronicle,” 165.

<sup>63</sup> “The Rebels in London according to the Anonimale Chronicle,” 164.

<sup>64</sup> Hollister, *The Making of England*, 340.

<sup>65</sup> Hollister, *The Making of England*, 340.

<sup>66</sup> Hollister, *The Making of England*, 353.

Political issues and its ties to the greed of members of Parliament and economic wealth first began with the poll taxes issued directly before the Revolt of 1381. Parliament had issued these three poll taxes between 1377 and 1381, in the hopes of raising money to fund the seemingly endless Hundred Years War in which England and France were currently participating. The first poll tax was issued in 1377, and it taxed all persons living in the country over the age of fourteen, regardless of sex.<sup>67</sup> The only people not taxed were beggars, according to Thomas Walsingham.<sup>68</sup> Each person that fit the requirements of the tax was required to pay one groat, which was equal to four pence.<sup>69</sup> The second poll tax was issued in 1379, and people belonging to the lower economic status were only required to pay a total of four pence,<sup>70</sup> and those of the elite had a much higher sum to pay depending on their title, marital status, and clerical status.<sup>71</sup> The third and final poll tax was issued in 1381 and was the subsequent trigger of the Peasants' Revolt. Because of government corruption, much of the money collected from the poll tax of 1379 did not reach the war funds for which they were originally intended.<sup>72</sup> According to the grant commissioning the second poll, tax there was a total of £22,000 collected, but £50,000 was needed to help pay the wages of the soldiers.<sup>73</sup> This final poll tax was issued because of a desperate need for money in the war budget and was—by far—the most expensive poll tax of the three. It required that all persons over the age of fifteen (instead of fourteen) pay one shilling, three times the amount of the original poll tax.<sup>74</sup> Yet despite the increase in amount,

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<sup>67</sup> Thomas Walsingham, "The Rebels in London According to Thomas Walsingham" In *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson (Bath: The Pitman Press, 1970) 103.

<sup>68</sup> Walsingham, "The Rebels in London," 103.

<sup>69</sup> Walsingham, "The Rebels in London," 103.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (London: Oxford University Press, 1906) 27.

<sup>71</sup> "The Grant of the Second Poll Tax, 1379" In *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson (Bath UK: The Pitman Press, 1970) 105-111.

<sup>72</sup> "The Northampton Parliament of 1380 and the Grant of the Third Poll Tax: According to the Rolls of Parliament" in *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson (Bath: The Pitman Press, 1970) 111-118.

<sup>73</sup> "The Grant of the Second Poll Tax, 1379," 105-111.

<sup>74</sup> Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381*, 27.

the government received only two-thirds of what they had received in 1377.<sup>75</sup> The reason for the lack of funds collected was not because of some massive die off of the people but because of tax evasion. Many people, according to Oman, “suppressed the existence of their unmarried female dependents, widowed mothers, aunts, sisters, and young daughters,” to avoid paying the tax per person.<sup>76</sup> Regardless of the reason for the tax evasion, the document “The lay Population of English Counties and Towns according to the Poll Tax Returns of 1377 and 1381” reveals the major dip in collections from the poll tax of 1377 and the poll tax of 1381.<sup>77</sup> Three years before the final poll tax, there were accounts from a Parliament meeting of a man stating that the peasants could not afford to be taxed any harsher than they already were.<sup>78</sup> What this massive tax evasion and account of heavy taxation shows is that there was a significant number of people who either could not pay the tax or potentially felt like they should not have pay because of already the high rate of taxation.

The peasantry was not only discontent with the rate of taxation, but also with how the money was being spent and who was in control of the money. The peasantry believed certain individuals were instructing the young King Richard II badly and the peasantry believed report the tax money was “being spent badly.” However, both notions are hearsay of the peasantry and the authors of the various chronicles.<sup>79</sup> There are only a few accounts stating where the money collected from taxes was going or how it was being spent. Certain nobles began hearing that those close to the king had been using the money collected from taxes for their own personal

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<sup>75</sup> Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381*, 27.

<sup>76</sup> Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381*, 27.

<sup>77</sup> “The Lay Population of English Counties and Towns,” 54-57.

<sup>78</sup> “Proceedings in the Good Parliament of 1376” in *English Historical Documents 1327-1485* ed. By A.R. Meyers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 117.

<sup>79</sup> “The Rebels in London According to the Anonimalle Chronicle,” 155.

gain.<sup>80</sup> Despite the rumors relating to money being spent badly, many of the chronicles agree that the peasants were set to kill the traitors and these traitors were the ones advising the king at the time. For example, in “The Outbreak of the Revolt according to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*,” the King, “heard of the peasant uprisings and their attempts to save him and destroy the traitors to him and his kingdom.”<sup>81</sup> In the *Anonimalle Chronicle*’s account of the revolt in London, King Richard II attempted to reason with the peasants laying siege to the Tower of London, telling them to meet him at Mile End so he could hear all their complaints.<sup>82</sup> The peasants responded by saying they would not leave until they had captured the traitors within the tower of London.<sup>83</sup> And according to Thomas Walsingham, the duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt, was a traitor in his own right and inspired the other traitors.<sup>84</sup> The peasants were very concerned about who aided the king and were convinced that it was those in Parliament who ran England and who were considered traitors to the crown. It was these “traitors” who were spending the peasant’s tax money badly and issuing all the taxes that further angered the Peasants. Although recorded well after the Peasant’s Revolt, the peasant songs are one of the few documents available that allow historians to analyze the complaints and feelings of the peasants, not their feelings as stated by the chroniclers. One of the songs preserved and recorded around 1450 from the Peasants’ Revolt offers a little proof of the peasant’s true demands and issues with the “traitors” in Parliament.

“The Song of the Kentish Rebels,” went as follows:

God be oure gyde, and then schull we spede.  
Who-so-euur say nay, ffalse for ther money reuleth!  
Trewth for his tales spolleth!  
God seend vs a ffayre day!

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<sup>80</sup> “Proceedings in the Good Parliament of 1376,” 118.

<sup>81</sup> “The Outbreak of the Revolt according to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*,” 129.

<sup>82</sup> “The Rebels in London according to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*,” 159.

<sup>83</sup> “The Rebels in London according to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*,” 159.

<sup>84</sup> Walsingham, “The Rebels in London,” 169.

a-wey traytours, a-wey!<sup>85</sup>

If this song was indeed sung by the Kentish rebels, it shows that the rebels did indeed think that the traitors within Parliament were driven by money and the traitors needed to be sent away. This song, in addition to the chronicles, indicated that the peasants believed those who they deemed traitors to the crown were driven by their need for personal wealth, instead of what was good for all of England.

Unfortunately, many of the chronicles only refer to the “traitors” as such and never specify to whom they are referring. Despite this, it can be inferred that some of the people targeted and subsequently killed during the height of the revolt in London could have been the “traitors” mentioned above. On the attack at the Tower of London Simon of Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Sir Robert Hales, High Prior to the Hospitallars of St. John, Brother William, a well-known surgeon and doctor as well as a good friend of the Duke of Lancaster, and John Legge, a sergeant-at-arms were killed.<sup>86</sup> The Archbishop of Canterbury, Simon of Sudbury, was a main driving force behind the third poll tax. In addition to this, many peasants had issue with the church in its current, greedy state, making the Archbishop a prime target. Sir Robert Hales was not only a High Prior to the Hospitallars of St. John, he was also the treasurer of England. Although he had only been in office since February of 1381 (the revolt occurred in June) he was seen as a man who let the poll tax be issued and was complacent with the heavy taxation of England’s populous. Not much can be found on Brother William: aside from being a well-known doctor and surgeon, he was also one of John of Gaunt’s allies and “a favorite

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<sup>85</sup> “Song of the Kentish Rebels” in *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson, (Bath: The Pitman Press, 1970), 385.

<sup>86</sup> “The Rebels in London according to the Anonimale Chronicle,” 162.

servant” of his.<sup>87</sup> The hatred of John of Gaunt stems from his influence on the first poll tax as well as his involvement with the “severe tenths and fifteenths and other subsidies lightly conceded in parliaments and extortionately levied from the poor people.”<sup>88</sup> The peasantry of the rebellion clearly drew a connection between the corruption in government and the government’s quest for money. Although it cannot be confirmed that the men mentioned above were the traitors to whom peasants often referred, it can be inferred when considering each of the positions held by those assassinated. These “traitors” to the crown were responsible for high taxation and poll taxes.

### **The Social Motivations**

Social inequality had been prevalent in England during the fourteenth century because of serfdom. Serfdom was a type of servile bondage occurring mostly among manors across Europe. A serf is a form of unfree peasant. According to Bennet, a serf could not move from place to place because they were essentially tied to the land of the lord they served.<sup>89</sup> They were required to work on their lord’s manor weekly and for special times of the year. They were also required to pay certain fees or fines for the manor that they served on.<sup>90</sup> A serf was determined by birth, meaning if their parents were serfs, so would their sons and daughters.<sup>91</sup> Serfdom was not the only source of inequality; the *Statute of Laborers* prevented both social and economic mobility, forcing many peasants and serfs to remain in the same jobs instead of searching for higher

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<sup>87</sup> Walsingham, “The Outbreak of the Revolt,” 134.

<sup>88</sup> “The Outbreak of the Revolt According to the Anonimale Chronicle,” 123.

<sup>89</sup> Judith Bennett, *A Medieval Life: Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock, c. 1295-1344* (Boston: McGraw-Hill College, 1999), 143

<sup>90</sup> Bennet, *A Medieval Life: Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock c. 1295-1344*. 143.

<sup>91</sup> Bennet, *A Medieval Life: Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock c. 1295-1344*. 143.

wages. Byrne suggested that labor legislation like the *Statute* was a new legal weapon used to oppress those who are employed by business owners.<sup>92</sup>

Another attempt at social division was the issuing of the Sumptuary Laws. In 1363, attempt by Parliament to control what a person could and could not wear based on their social status called the “Sumptuary Legislation”. This defined what different social levels could wear what such as “... Craftsmen and those of the status yeomen shall not receive or wear cloth worth more than 40 shillings,” and “everyone involved with animal husbandry of the status groom, and everyone with goods and chattles worth less than 40s shall receive and wear no sort of cloth other than blanket or russet price 12d, and shall wear belts of fabric appropriate to their standing.”<sup>93</sup> According to Rosemary Horrox, this vain attempt would be repeated often throughout the years, usually beginning with how poorly the previous legislation worked.<sup>94</sup> This may have no direct connection the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 as a whole, but it is a good example of the mounting social discontent among the social statuses. George Huppert says, “City people were parasites who lived off the peasantry. Peasants ate black bread so that they could pay their rents, tithes, and taxes with cartloads of fine wheat.”<sup>95</sup> This issue Huppert presented illustrated exactly the point of the *Statute of Laborers* and the *Ordinance of Laborers*. The peasants were simply a means to an end, the only reason the wealthy wanted peasants in their city was for their own wealth. The upper echelon of English society clearly used their laws and courts to keep the peasants in their places to secure their own wealth and status. This issue of social inequality that the peasants felt is strewn throughout the chronicles, specifically in the *Anonimale Chronicle*.

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<sup>92</sup> Joseph Byrne, *The Black Death*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press: 2004) Kindle Edition, Location 1050.

<sup>93</sup> “Sumptuary Legislation” trans. Rosemary Horrox (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 340.

<sup>94</sup> “Sumptuary Legislation,” 340.

<sup>95</sup> George Huppert, *After the Black Death: A Social History of Early Modern Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 16.



But what the Sumptuary Legislation shows is that the idea that the peasants were lesser people or were not equal to the nobles preceded the revolt by twenty years. These sumptuary laws not only created a social divide between the peasantry and the elite, it also gave the royal authority another way to collect fines for their various reasons.

However, this inequality did not just concern peasants and nobles. Former priest and notable historical figure John Ball had many issues with serfdom and the lack of equality among society and he often preached equality within his sermons. In addition to Ball's criticisms of the church, he also heavily criticized the social structure of the society. He claimed in his sermon that in the Bible, there were no serfs or villeins. If God had wanted it to be so he would have created the serfs himself.<sup>96</sup> He also stated that God had created all men equal.<sup>97</sup> This idea of social equality heavily influenced many of the rebels within the revolt in London specifically.

Across the *Anonimale Chronicle* and Thomas Walsingham's chronicle, the peasants were indeed fighting for equality and justice. Thomas Walsingham remarked in his account of the London revolts, "crowds of them [peasants] assembled and began to clamour for liberty, planning to become equal to the lords and no longer be bound by servitude by any master."<sup>98</sup> Ball and Walsingham were suggesting that what peasants desired most was equality and freedom from servitude. This very much matched Wat Tyler's demands to the king. Wat Tyler not only demanded the freeing up of church lands as mentioned before, he also demanded an end to

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<sup>96</sup> "John Ball According to Thomas Walsingham," In *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson (Bath: The Pitman Press, 1970) 375.

<sup>97</sup> "John Ball According to Thomas Walsingham," 374.

<sup>98</sup> Walsingham, "The Outbreak of the Revolt," 132.

serfdom and that all men should be equal.<sup>99</sup> He also demanded that the lordship held by the current nobles should be divided up among all people to help solidify this idea of equality.<sup>100</sup>

### **The Economic Motivations**

The actions taken by the rebels during the attacks in London also echoed these ideas of a desire for equality, however these same actions also took on an economic tone. In Henry Knighton's account of the rebels in London, he describes the attack on the Savoy Palace, John of Gaunt's residence, and how the rebels sacked it and intended to burn all his riches. One of the rebels attempted to steal a piece of silver and get away with it while his fellow rebels continued on with the destruction. According to Knighton, his fellow rebels saw this and caught him and threw him in the fire, exclaiming that "they were lovers of truth and justice, not robbers and thieves."<sup>101</sup> Despite the peasants being so called "lovers of truth and justice" Wat Tyler's demands at Mile End show a clear desire for economic security. The division of lordship could have meant the lands held by the lords, allowing peasants to gain a small parcel of land to grow their own crops, but it could have also meant that Tyler was requesting that the peasantry had more of a voice in politics as Harding suggests.<sup>102</sup> Allowing the peasantry to have more of a voice in politics would have better regulated taxation and the collection of said taxation. It was not just the poorest of the peasantry that was affected by unfair and heavy taxation. By the mid-fourteenth century, many of richer peasants were employing a large amount of wage labor.<sup>103</sup> However, it is important to remember that as rich as they were, they were still under the thumb of a lord. Dyer gives an example in his own essay of a fairly well off peasant family who

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<sup>99</sup> "The Rebels in London according to the Anonimale Chronicle," 165.

<sup>100</sup> "The Rebels in London according to the Anonimale Chronicle," 165.

<sup>101</sup> "The Rebels in London according to Henry Knighton," 184.

<sup>102</sup> Harding, "The Revolt Against the Justices," 165.

<sup>103</sup> Hilton and Fagan, *The English Rising of 1381*, 28.

received fines far above the norm to their offenses.<sup>104</sup> He suggests that this peasant family was being subject to such harsh fines as a form of exploitation so the lords could gain a little extra money. Dyer connects this with many richer peasants rejecting positions of bailiffs or jurors as a form of revolt and a way for them to stand with their neighbors who may have been taxed heavier than others on the manor.<sup>105</sup> This not only shows social tensions between richer peasants and the elite, but it also further proves that those people of the elite were still attempting to gain more wealth. Whether driven by greed or economic security it is still not clear, but when the elite began charging richer peasants higher taxes it became clear that money was their motivation.

The Black Death had killed off an estimated forty percent of England's population in 1348.<sup>106</sup> This led to many deserted villages across the English countryside, a major decline in the wool trade which was England's chief export item, and a massive labor shortage.<sup>107</sup> The labor shortage created a temporary rise in wages and a major reduction in grain costs and land profits and values.<sup>108</sup> Landlords began to live solely off of the rents of their tenants and Parliament attempted to fix wages to pre-plague levels by issuing the *Ordinance of Laborers* in 1349 and the *Statute of Laborers* in 1351.<sup>109</sup>

This drive for equality was not just for equal treatment in social status, but for better wages as well. In his chronicles, Jean Froissart stated that one of the reasons the revolt may have begun was the peasants' want for better wages and the poor wages came from *Ordinance of Laborers* in 1349.<sup>110</sup> The *Ordinance of Laborers* was issued as a response to the major drop in

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<sup>104</sup> Dyer, "The Social and Economic Background to the Rural Revolt of 1381," 36.

<sup>105</sup> Dyer, "The Social and Economic Background to the Rural Revolt of 1381," 36.

<sup>106</sup> Hollister, *The Making of England*, 304.

<sup>107</sup> Hollister, *The Making of England*, 339.

<sup>108</sup> Hollister, *The Making of England*, 339.

<sup>109</sup> Hollister, *The Making of England*, 340.

<sup>110</sup> "The Causes of the Revolt According to Froissart," 370.

population due to innumerable deaths caused by the Black Death. This *Ordinance of Laborers* was issued as a royal *Ordinance* under King Edward III. The *Ordinance* did four major things: all adults under the age of sixty were required to work in some way unless he or she was tending to their own property, employers could not hire more workers than needed most likely because of the severe drop in laborers due to the Black Death; and this *Ordinance* fixed the wages of laborers at pre-plague levels, and finally, it fixed the prices of many foods and staples at a fairly reasonable price for the time.<sup>111</sup> In addition to this fixing of prices and wages the *Ordinance* stated that any people who violated the laws in the ordinance would be swiftly imprisoned or fined depending on the violation.<sup>112</sup> This *Ordinance* was not seen as very successful and because of that, three years later, a new edict was issued called the *Statute of Laborers* to reinforce the previous laws. It restated previous *Ordinance* requirements but included the penalty that if men who met the requirements to work but still either could not or would not because of inadequate wages, then they were to be sent to jail until they decided to work or could pay their fines.<sup>113</sup> The *Ordinance of Laborers* stated, "...that carpenters, masons, and tilers, and other workmen of houses, shall not take by the day for their work, but in manner as they were wont, that is to say: a master carpenter 3 d. and another [non-master carpenter] 2 d.; and master free-stone mason 4 d. and other masons 3 d..."<sup>114</sup> In addition to these requirements, all people who charged a fee for their goods had to take an oath to follow the laws of the *Statute* and set prices at pre-plague levels.<sup>115</sup> Christopher Dyer believes that the *Statute of Laborers* was put in place to allow the wealthier citizens to profit by gaining the ability to pay their laborers less while still having them

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<sup>111</sup> "Ordinance of Laborers, 1349," *Medieval Sourcebook*, accessed March 2, 2017, <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/seth/ordinance-labourers.asp>

<sup>112</sup> "Ordinance of Laborers, 1349" *Medieval Sourcebook*

<sup>113</sup> "Statute of Laborers, 1351," *Medieval Sourcebook*, accessed March 2, 2017, <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/seth/ordinance-labourers.asp>

<sup>114</sup> Fordham University, "Ordinance of Laborers, 1349."

<sup>115</sup> Byrne, *The Black Death*, Location 1040.

do the same, if not more work.<sup>116</sup> Dyer's theory reflected exactly some of the complaints peasants stated during the revolts in London, which linked this legislations to revolt motivations. Although the *Statute* was issued in 1351, court cases and complaints of peasants not cooperating with the *Statute* continued until the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

The court cases and fines issued to violators of the *Statute of Laborers* reveal the cause of these fines. In many court cases, there were more accounts of peasants charging higher wages than what was stated to be an acceptable amount in the *Statute*. One such example is the case of Philip Heryng of Chilsledon. Philip Heryng was a carpenter who decided to charge more than the customary 6d from various men in the area, despite the wage limits issued by the *Statute of Laborers*.<sup>117</sup> He was brought to the deputy justices in Chilsledon and was fined 12d for his crimes.<sup>118</sup> And in the document "Trespases on the Statute of Laborers, 1373-5" an unknown writer records various violations against the statute, such as abandoning their landlord to seek better wages elsewhere, and receiving or charging more money for a service than the *Statute* allowed.<sup>119</sup> These constant fines can suggest that peasants, not being happy with their wages, were attempting to ignore the rule so they could make a little more money. This desire is not surprising considering that it is estimated that between the years 1349 and 1377, there were around many cases in violations against the statutes which most the time, resulted in the employees of land owners receiving fines.<sup>120</sup> Byrne suggested that there were an estimated 7,556

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<sup>116</sup> Dyer, "The Social and Economic Background of the Rural Revolt of 1381," 28.

<sup>117</sup> "Cases brought Under the Statute of Labourers," trans. Rosemary Horrox (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 318.

<sup>118</sup> "Cases brought Under the Statute of Labourers," 318.

<sup>119</sup> "Trespases on the Statute of Laborers, 1373-5" In *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson (Bath: The Pitman Press, 1970) 70.

<sup>120</sup> Byrne, *The Black Death*, 65.

finances issued in violation against the statute in Essex County in 1352 alone, and this continued up until 1389 where 791 fines were issued for the same reasons.<sup>121</sup>

It is important to note that although fines and taxes were collected quite often, there was no real form of standard taxation, the government would demand any amount of money at any time. Even so, certain nobles agreed that the peasants were being taxed too harshly. In “The Good Parliament of 1376” an unnamed south country knight stood up for the peasants against unfair taxation.<sup>122</sup> The knight states “...our lord the king has asked of the clergy and of the commons a tenth and a fifteenth and the custom on wools and other merchandise for one year or two; and it seems to me that this is too great to grant, for the commons are so weakened and impoverished by various tallages and taxes already paid.”<sup>123</sup> This heavy taxation would explain the constant violations of the Statute of Laborers in the court cases mentioned earlier. These peasants most likely attempted to create their own wages to help pay for this heavy taxation.

These issues of unfair taxation and the drive for money and a greater economic status appear throughout the Peasants Revolt as well. During the outbreak of the revolt, many of the commons destroyed manors and villages on their way to London according to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*.<sup>124</sup> One manor that was specifically targeted was Thomas de Heseldene’s; Thomas was a well-known servant to John of Gaunt, and the chronicle speculated that his status was why he was targeted. The rebels “cast his manors and houses to the ground and sold his live-stock—horses, oxen, cows, sheep, and pigs—and all sorts of corn at a cheap price.”<sup>125</sup> These actions

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<sup>121</sup> Byrne, *The Black Death*, 65.

<sup>122</sup> “Proceedings in the Good Parliament of 1376” in *English Historical Documents 1327-1485* ed. A.R. Meyers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 118.

<sup>123</sup> “Proceedings in the Good Parliament of 1376,” 118.

<sup>124</sup> “The Outbreak of the Revolt according to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*,” 128.

<sup>125</sup> “The Outbreak of the Revolt according to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*,” 128.

were a way for the peasants to get back at the nobles for their heavy taxation. Aside from the obvious destruction of goods and houses, the pillaging allowed a finite number of peasants to gain some goods that they may have not been able afford in their current economic condition. Another example of this drive for economic security can be seen in “The Depositions of John Wrawe,” in 1381, which described various accusations against Wrawe, a priest turned rebel leader in Suffolk, England. According to the document, Wrawe often sacked houses and manors to steal valuables to possibly further his own wealth or the wealth of his rebels.<sup>126</sup>

Occasionally signs of economic revolt were not as obvious as selling the goods of a manor that had been sacked, such as of the burning of manorial court records. Manorial court records often held debts and fines accrued by local peasantry. In the *Anonimalle Chronicle*, there are accounts of churches within London being broken into and having all their records burned, essentially wiping all traces of debt clean.<sup>127</sup> If debt collectors had no proof of fines or debt, such as the manorial records, then it would be much more difficult to prove in court which lead to debts not being collected and peasants continued to live their lives debt free.

However, one notable item to discuss is the destruction of manorial records and church records throughout London during the revolt. This destruction of court rolls occurred at the manor of the archbishop of Canterbury and at the Temple as mentioned in the *Anonimalle Chronicle*.<sup>128</sup> These records that were burned most likely contained debts and fined owed by various persons in the area. The burning of court records essentially freed peasants from all debts they owed. If no one could find a record stating someone owed a debt, they would have no proof,

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<sup>126</sup> “The Deposition of John Wrawe” In *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, ed. R.B. Dobson (Bath: The Pitman Press, 1970) 248-254.

<sup>127</sup> “The Rebels in London According to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*,” 128.

<sup>128</sup> “The Rebels in London According to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*,” 128.

freeing whomever owed the money from their obligation to pay it. The burning of records that may show debts owed, and the distribution of stolen goods shows that money heavily influenced the economic causes of the peasant's revolt.

## **Conclusion**

By looking at the Peasants' Revolt from such a wide scope, connections could be drawn that may have not been previously seen. Historians such as Dyer, Harding, and Aston have tended to focus in on one aspect of the revolt such as the social, political, or religious motivations. Narrowing their research allowed those historians to cover every available aspect of the revolt from that particular perspective. However, in doing this, they are de-emphasizing other causes of the revolt. With something as complicated as the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, it is more beneficial to look at the larger picture and discuss it entirely.

In looking at the revolt from such a wide scope, connections between the religious, political, social, and economic factors become more prevalent. All of these topics are intertwined in one way or another, but each have an underlying factor which is the drive for economic security. Understanding the main drives for the individuals of varying economic statuses may help historians understand this particular revolt as well as other revolts better by looking at the bigger picture and understanding the complicated nature of the study of history. This method of examining the Peasants' Revolt may also complicate the understanding of other revolts, prodding other historians to look deeper into the reasons of other revolts to find connecting factors.

Despite this in depth look into the English Peasants' Revolt there are still many unanswered questions. One such question that was not addressed is how much the *Ordinance of Laborers* and *Statute of Laborers* influenced the Peasants' Revolt itself. There is documentation



of minor revolts and protests between 1349 when the *Ordinance* was issued and 1381 which appear to be because of the labor legislation passed.<sup>129</sup> Unfortunately, the accounts and documentation of the revolts themselves appear to have no evidence suggesting that the *Ordinance* or *Statute* had any direct influence on the outbreak of the 1381 revolt. As historians, we can only speculate whether there is a connection between the *Ordinance* and *Statute* and the outbreak of the revolt until more information is discovered.

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<sup>129</sup> “Rebellious serfs at Wawne” trans. Rosemary Horrox (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 331-338.

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