

# THE MEDIAEVAL PEASANT AND HIS WAYS

R. W. COLLINS

THE mediaeval peasant, illiterate and ignorant, has left no writings that might have revealed to us his innermost hopes, thoughts, and feelings. Moreover, he was despised by the rank and file of the upper classes, who seldom thought it worth while to mention him.

Nevertheless, it is possible by means of court and visitation records, sermon references, epics such as *Piers the Plowman*, *Meier Helmbrecht* and *Der Arme Heinrich*, the *Fabliaux*, and occasional writings to obtain here and there an intimate glimpse into the inner life of the most numerous class in mediaeval society, the tillers of the soil. But here, as so often in our modern journals, it is the abnormal and the errant who are depicted, the virtuous and the more normal who are unhonored and unsung.

Records of courts and of ecclesiastical visitations necessarily depict the darker side of the village society in which most mediaeval peasants found their sphere. They reveal that theft, quarrelsomeness, drunkenness and immorality constituted the more seamy side of peasant life. There was much thievery in every village, and the mediaeval peasant was notorious for his lack of respect for the property and rights of others. *The Manner of Holding Courts*, an English document of the fourteenth century, enjoins justices to enquire, "Whether there be among you any petty thieves, as of geese, ducks and poultry"; "whether there be among you any great thieves, as of horses, oxen, pigs and sheep."<sup>1</sup> The records of the court of the Bishop of Ely at Littleport, dating from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, also clearly reveal this lack of respect on the part of the peasants for the goods of their neighbours. Entries such as the following are frequent: "Thomas son of Reginald Clerk is suspected of petty larcenies;"<sup>2</sup> "Thomas Launce and John his brother have stolen two geese from Henry Fisher;" "Simon Breton is suspected of petty larcenies."<sup>3</sup> Theft was not infrequently accompanied by violence, as the following entry shows:

1 Maitland, F. W., *The Court Baron*, London, 1891, p. 95.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 122.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

“William Fowler of Marchford committed a trespass on Walter Albin and carried off his goods and chattels from his house on divers occasions against his will but with the consent of his wife, which consent he obtained by frequently kicking her.”<sup>1</sup> The thirteenth century romance, *The Three Thieves*, shows us a peasant who at one time had been a professional thief.<sup>2</sup> The mediaeval preacher knew well the avarice and covetousness of the peasant, and depicts him as rarely failing “to plough a little furrow beyond his field and to push back, on the right or on the left, the boundaries of his meadow.”<sup>3</sup> Master Rypon of Durham, a preacher of the fourteenth century, admonishes peasants that “they should labour with regular diligence, unspotted by the sins of theft, fraud, lying and lust.”<sup>4</sup> “There are some peasants,” declared the thirteenth century preacher, Jacques de Vitry, “who not only work on holidays, but, seeing others go to mass, profit by their absence to steal; as there is no one in the fields and vineyards, these marauders plunder the vines and orchards at the expense of their neighbors.”<sup>5</sup> Berthold of Ratisbon, another thirteenth century preacher, warns the peasants that they should “not plough one over the other’s landmark, nor trespass nor reap beyond the mark, nor feed their cattle to another’s harm, nor work any other deceit, one on the other.”<sup>6</sup> And *Piers the Plowman* makes the dishonest peasant confess: “If I went to the plough, I pinched so narrowly that I would steal a foot-land or a furrow from my next neighbor’s land. And if I reaped, I would over-reach, or instruct those who reaped to seize for me with their sickles that which I had never sowed.”<sup>7</sup> This encroachment of the peasant on his neighbor’s land was a constant source of quarrelling in the mediaeval village, and sometimes led to a redistribution of the strips of land into which the ploughlands were divided.<sup>8</sup>

All our sources indicate that violence and quarrelsomeness were characteristics of mediaeval society. Conjugal felicity was often marred by wife beating and vituperation. The *Fabliaux* depict the peasant as a brutal being who beat his wife if he suspected her of misconduct, or if his supper was not

1 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

2 Aucassin and Nicolette and Other Medieval Romances, Everyman’s Ed., London, 1910.

3 Lecoy de la Marche, *La Chaire Francaise au Moyen Age*, Paris, 1886, p. 424.

4 Owst, G. R., *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, Cambridge, 1933, p. 364.

5 Luchaire, A., *Social France in the Age of Philip Augustus*, Eng. trans, New York, 1912, p. 396.



ready on time.<sup>1</sup> Other evidence confirms this impression. "A drunken man", so runs one of those *exempla* with which mediaeval preachers loved to spice their sermons, "put a ploughshare in a bag and beat his wife with it. When the neighbors flocked in at her outcries, the husband said he was beating her with a bag only. He was brought before the judge, and swore that he had touched her with nothing but a bag, and his neighbors were obliged to confirm his statement, and so he got off without any punishment."<sup>2</sup> *The Visitation Returns of the Diocese of Hereford in 1397* likewise now and then reveal the lack of harmony in the village household. One item runs thus: "Walter Kadyle treats Farel, his legitimate wife, badly, expelling her from his house and denying her food and clothing and other things that are her due." And another: "Hugyn Walle treats his wife badly, many times threatening to kill her."<sup>3</sup>

The fault, be it said, was not always altogether on the side of the husband. Wives could be shrewish and quarrelsome. "In the ordinary households," says Lecoy de la Marche, "the most common woe is the quarrelsome and contradictory spirit, especially innate in women."<sup>4</sup> "Formerly," declares William de Montreuil, "the wife was faithful to and peaceable as a lamb towards her husband: to-day she is a lioness." A mediaeval proverb was: "They, the women, wish to wear the breeches."<sup>5</sup> A favorite mediaeval *exemplum* tells of a wife who frequently reproached her husband with such opprobrious epithets as *pediculosum* (lousy). On one occasion when she was particularly offensive, he submerged her in water, but she continued to heap opprobrium upon him by means of signs with her fingers.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes the ecclesiastical authorities intervened in domestic quarrels, and under penalty of fine and punishment enjoined husband and wife to live at peace. For instance, the officials of the ecclesiastical court of Cerisy in France in the year 1341, in the course of a diocesan visitation, declare: "We enjoined Ingerrano Douin, under penalty . . . that, from this time forth, he treat his wife kindly and peacefully as an upright man should; nor should he beat her without just cause; and the said wife that she be faithful in her duties; to which injunction they

1 Sée, H., *Les Classes Rurales et le Regime Domaniale en France au Moyen Age*, Paris, 1901, p. 554.

2 Crane, T. F., (Ed.), *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry*, London, 1890, no. CCXXV.

3 *English Historical Review*, vol. 44, pp. 451 and 289.

4 *Op. cit.*, p. 435.

5 Lecoy de la Marche, *Op. cit.*, p. 435.

voluntarily agreed."<sup>1</sup> Saint Bernardino of Siena urges men to have patience with their wives, and adds: "Not for every cause is it right to beat her."<sup>2</sup>

But quarrels in the mediaeval village, as visitation and court records show, were not confined to the domestic scene. The parishioners of Orleton in the diocese of Hereford declared that Isabella Case, the wife of Jankyn Dey, was "an habitual slanderer and fomenter of quarrels there."<sup>3</sup> The parishioners of Buterley affirmed that Isabella Ondys, the wife of John Strawe, "falsely and maliciously maligned Margaret, the daughter of Walter Caleys."<sup>4</sup> The parishioners of Bedestone said that Gwen Botterell "maliciously and falsely accused Alicia Aleyn of the theft of five hundred lines of thread."<sup>5</sup> The parishioners of Dormynton gave evidence that Agnes, the wife of Richard Hughes, "habitually slandered her neighbors and fomented quarrels among them to the great damage and hurt of the inhabitants there."<sup>6</sup> The Durham Halmote Rolls of the year 1375 contain the following significant entries: "Hedworth . . . It was ordered that no tenant of the vill should permit his wife to villify or insult any persons of the neighborhood . . ." "Hesleden . . . It was ordered that all women of the vill should hold their tongues and should not scold or curse any one."<sup>7</sup> Similar evidence is found in the visitation record of the Archdeacon of Josas made in the Ile de France between the years 1458 and 1470. There we read that "The wife of Rudolph Budan made amends for the palpable offence which she, during visitation, committed in the church by calling the wife of George de Vienne 'Sorceress'. The wife of George de Vienne [also] made amends for having called the wife of the said Budan 'prostitute', 'whore', and on top of that 'Sorceress'."<sup>8</sup> A typical village quarrel is given by the treatise, *How to Hold Pleas and Courts*: "They say that it fell out on Monday next after St. Andrew that M., wife of the hayward, and E., wife of a neighbor, were baking at an oven, to wit, that of N., and a dispute arose

1 Dupont, M. G., *Le Registre de l'Officialité de Cerisy*, 1314-1457, Caen and Rouen, 1880, p. 435.

2 Coulton, *Op. cit.*, pp. 612-613. Wife-beating, it should be said, was not confined to the peasant class. Feudal law permitted the nobleman to indulge in it; but Beaumanoir in the thirteenth century says that the husband should beat his wife only "moderately". Gautier, L., *La Chevalerie*, Paris, 1883, p. 350.

3 EHR, 1930, p. 100.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 452.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 454.

6 EHR., 1929, p. 282.

7 Stephenson and Marcham, *Sources of English Constitutional History*, London, 1938, p. 248.



between them about the loss of a loaf taken from the oven, and the said old crones took to their fists and each other's hair and raised a hue; and their husbands hearing this ran up and made a great rout."<sup>1</sup> One may hazard the guess that quarrels often added spice to life and, to a certain extent, were a compensation for the lack of other forms of diversion in the mediaeval village.

The tenor of mediaeval life was violent, and quarrels that often led to bloodshed were by no means uncommon in village society. Violence frequently accompanied theft and robbery. An item in the court record of the Bishop of Ely at Littleport is an example. "It is found by inquest that John Mounfort the younger made hamsoken [housebreach] on the house of John Fox the younger and assaulted him with a drawn knife to his damage . . ."<sup>2</sup> Mediaeval preachers refer to robbers breaking into houses "to slay and to despoil."<sup>3</sup> But there was much violence even apart from robbery. The ecclesiastical visitation records already mentioned again and again refer to the use of violence. For instance, the officials of Cerisy report that one Robert des Cageux, a clerk, maliciously and cruelly struck John l'Esquier with a pewter mug over the head . . . even to the shedding of blood, and that the said l'Esquier called him *latronem et filium meretricis*."<sup>4</sup> In the Hereford Visitation Returns one finds entries such as the following: "Roger Johns without occasion violently struck Thomas ffolyot with a stick in the cemetery"; "Robyn Raglyn violently struck with his fist a certain John Stywart in the church before the high altar."<sup>5</sup> Frequently it was the clergy who were guilty of violence in the parish. In the parish of Cradley in Herefordshire, Dominus Richard and Dominus William, chaplains of the parish, "went with arms through the parish by night, shouting and disturbing the peace of the parishioners, to the scandal of the church."<sup>6</sup> In many of the cases of violence brought before the ecclesiastical court of Cerisy, clerks were the guilty parties. For instance, one Goretus Trublart, clerk, was found guilty of going to the house of one Colin Busquet by night and beating him to "the great shedding of blood."<sup>7</sup> To prevent clergy from engaging in bloody quarrels, the councils forbade them to bear arms

1 Maitland, *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

3 Owst, *Op. cit.*, p. 33 and n. 2.

4 Dupont, *Op. cit.*, p. 581.

5 EHR, vol. 44, p. 450, p. 449.

6 *Ibid.*, vol. 45, p. 96.

7 Dupont *Op. cit.*, p. 497.

except for defence, and then only if they had good reason to fear violence.<sup>1</sup>

Not only because of the violence of the age but also by reason of their unpopularity, the clergy were often attacked by parishioners. The officials of the court of Cerisy frequently had to deal with such attacks. One of the most interesting of these cases was that of a clerk of Listreyo, William le Tousey, who had been attacked by one George de Caron and so severely wounded in the arm that the doctors gave up hope of saving the injured member. The clerk had then cut off part of his arm with a sword, and produced the bones in court as evidence.<sup>2</sup> Another, which reminds one of the Jennie Geddes incident, tells how a wife threw a candelabrum at a clerk and wounded him in the forehead.<sup>3</sup> The Hereford officials record that one William Boley entered the parish church of Aspertone on Easter Sunday and expelled the chaplain, Robert Roke, by force of arms, "so that the said chaplain did not dare celebrate mass there that day." The mediaeval ecclesiastical councils accordingly issued repeated warnings against assaulting clergy.<sup>4</sup> The Council of Grado (1296) decreed that "if any clerk should draw his sword against a layman or strike him in any manner whatsoever, he should be amerced by his bishop, just as a layman who had committed a similar crime against a clerk would be punished by a secular judge."<sup>5</sup>

It might be supposed that the economic condition of the mediaeval peasantry would prevent their indulging in excessive drinking. Moreover, what few visitation records have come down to us do not concern themselves with this aspect of village morality, and seem to mention it only when the clergy were guilty of excessive indulgence. But this does not prove that drunkenness was not a rustic vice. If both secular and ecclesiastical lords sold ban wine and other liquor, if parish clergy sometimes haunted taverns and even kept taverns themselves, it is safe to conclude that the use of liquor was not restricted to the ruling classes. Indeed there is sufficient evidence to show that drunkenness was often one of the besetting vices of the mediaeval peasant. Dr. Owst has shown that Langland's description of the drunkard *Gloutoun* has many a prototype in the sermon literature of mediaeval England.<sup>6</sup> The mediaeval

1 Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, vol. 23, col. 936.

2, 3 Dupont, *Op. cit.*, pp. 492, 570.

4 Rennes, 1273; Salzburg, 1281.

5 Mansi, *Op. cit.*, vol. 120, col. 1168.

6 *Op. cit.*, pp. 127, 128.



homilist with realistic touch vividly depicted, like some modern temperance reformer, the follies and even the tragedy in the life of the drunkard. His *exempla* often made it apparent that he was addressing a peasant audience. The drunken rustic on his homecoming, suspecting his wife of infidelity, according to one of these *exempla*, offers her the alternative of death or the ordeal. "Picking up a plough-share he puts it on the fire, and, when it is red hot, says to his wife: 'Hold this iron in your hand immediately, or else you shall die by torture!'" She, with exquisite presence of mind, replies: "Sir, since it must be so, hand me the glowing iron to hold," He, out of his rustic wits with drink, takes grip of the fiery metal with bare hand, to give it to her—"and lo! his hand was so burnt thereby that for a long while after he could do nothing with it, while his spouse remained uninjured."<sup>1</sup> Christine de Pisan, a French writer of the early fifteenth century, shows us the peasant drinking at the tavern more than he gained in the day, and fined by the provost for fighting. "At these taverns every day you will find they remain, drinking there all day as soon as their work is done. Many find it the thing to come there in order to drink; they spend there, 'tis perfectly true, more than they have gained all day. Do not ask if they fight when they are tipsy; the provost has several pounds in fines for it during the year."<sup>2</sup>

Other evidence for the prevalence of drinking in the mediaeval parish is found in the Scot-Ale or Church ale, a relic of pagan drinking festivals, to which each brought a contribution to pay for his drink. In the middle ages the Scot-Ale was often exploited for the profit of the lord, the tenants being obliged to attend and bring a money contribution. Often the participants engaged in drinking contests in which "he was the most praised who became the most inebriated and drained the fullest cups."<sup>3</sup> For this reason, probably under the influence of the Franciscan and Dominican reform movements, the church councils condemned them and commanded the clergy to abstain from participation in them.

Not only were Scot-Ales accompanied by gaming and gambling, and thus formed a relief from the monotony of village routine, but intoxication afforded an escape from the stern realities of life. An anonymous French versifier who, at the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428.

<sup>2</sup> Jusserand, J. J., *English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages*, London, 1891, pp. 134-135.

<sup>3</sup> Council of Wurzburg, 1298, Mansi, *Op. cit.*, vol. 24.

close of the twelfth century, wrote *Li Proverbe au Vilain*, and who, unlike most of the writers of his age, showed sympathy with the tillers of the soil, has given us an intimate glimpse into their feelings. "The villein," he said, "finding his sustenance in corn, the product of his plough, does not derive therefrom either sense or knowledge; but when he is completely inebriated, then he thinks he has become a free man and believes himself filled with wisdom."<sup>1</sup> In short, he found exaltation only in drunkenness.

From the point of view of the Church, the most serious shortcoming of the mediaeval peasant, if we can judge from the attention it received in the visitation records, was immorality. The Hereford Returns and the Court Register of Cerisy reveal the loose sexual relations that prevailed in the mediaeval parish. Cohabitation without matrimony was common.<sup>2</sup> Husband and wife were often unfaithful to each other. Entries such as the following abound: "Th. Bequet and his wife, Agnes, the daughter of R. Guesdon, do not live together, and the wife is illfamed of incontinence."<sup>3</sup> The parishioners of Garwy in the diocese of Hereford affirmed that "John Smyth was guilty of adultery with Alicia Willok, his concubine, and ill-treated his wife."<sup>4</sup> Promiscuity was not uncommon, and occasionally one finds notices of the activity of procurers and procureresses.

There is abundant evidence to show that the clergy, by their conduct, did not always improve the moral condition of the village. Contrary to canon law, the village priest was frequently living in clerical marriage and no doubt was often faithful to the one woman. But the visitation records reveal an appalling looseness of morals among the parish clergy, and show that they often had illicit relations with their female parishioners. This is true not only of the Hereford Returns and of the Court Records of Cerisy, but applies also to the record of Odo Rigaldi, the Archbishop of Rouen, who, during the years 1248-1259, made many pastoral visits throughout his diocese.

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Many pagan conceptions, which were only thinly overlaid with a veneer of Christianity, still prevailed in the minds of the mediaeval peasantry. Magical practice, incantations, sorcery,

<sup>1</sup> Langlois, Ch., *La Vie en France au Moyen Age*, vol. II, Paris, 1925, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> Dupont, *Op. cit.*, pp. 331-332; EHR, vol. 44, p. 287.

<sup>3</sup> Dupont, *Op. cit.*, p. 328; 45, EHR, vol. 44, pp. 288-289.

<sup>4</sup> EHR, vol. 45, p. 453; vol. 44, p. 445: "Item quod Matilde Thomas tenet communem burdellum (brothel) in domo sua, receptando adulteros et fornicatores in domo sua."



divination were common. The Council of Gerona in Spain decreed that during an inquisition throughout the diocese it should be ascertained "whether there were any magician, diviner, wizard, soothsayer, or sorcerer; or if anyone made offerings to trees, streams, or stones, or placed there lighted tapers or any gift whatsoever; or if there were present any deity [*numen*] which [in the minds of the peasants] could bring about good or evil."<sup>1</sup> Another article of the same council enjoined that enquiry should be made "whether there were any woman who, by means of certain evil deeds or incantations, claimed that she was able to change the minds of men, *i.e.*, that she could convert them from hate to love and from love to hate."<sup>2</sup> We do not know what this enquiry in Gerona revealed; but, in the visitation records we possess, one finds the mention of sorcery. For instance, the parishioners of Cradley in Hereford report that Amisia Daniel makes use of sorcery.<sup>3</sup> The references are more numerous in the Cerisy report. For instance, "The wife of William Billehaut is ill-famed because of sorcery."<sup>4</sup> Or, "The wife of John de Ceraseyo is ill-famed in that she gives health to the afflicted by means of incantations and the white thorn, an herb believed by the Romans to possess magical properties. She received a summons before the court."<sup>5</sup>

Mediaeval preachers likewise refer to the magical practices to which the villagers were addicted. In many places in his sermons, Berthold of Ratisbon alludes to sorcery and magic. In his pages there appear the *Mortbeter* who utters prayers in order to bring death to another, the magician who sells himself to the devil in order to obtain power or riches, the soothsayer and the prophetess. But it is chiefly the inhabitants of the village who are subject to the belief in sorcery and all kinds of ghosts, and more especially the women who are given to nefarious practices.<sup>6</sup> "Woman resorts to magic before she takes a husband," asserts Berthold; "she uses magic when she marries him, she employs it before her child is born, then before it is baptized, and again afterwards." Berthold also reproaches peasants with the belief in good and evil omens, in witches, in sacred springs, trees and graves which they believe endowed with magical power. Peasants do not even hesitate to make use of the sacraments for nefarious purposes, especially chrismal

1, 2 Mansi, *Op. cit.*, vol. 23, col. 939, arts. 40 and 42.

3 EHR, vol. 45, p. 97.

4, 5 Dupont, *Op. cit.*, pp. 350 and 380.

6 Cf. Berthold von Ratisbon *Über die Zustände des Deutschen Volkes im*

oil and the consecrated host. The employment of the host for magical purposes Berthold brands as the "greatest of sins", and preachers and moralists told edifying stories of the fate of all who were guilty of such sorcery. "I have heard," says Stephen de Bourbon, the French preacher, "that when a certain woman of the diocese of Lyon took communion at Easter, she retained the body of Christ that she might do magic with it, and placed it, wrapped in cloth, in her purse. While she slept, she beheld a chorus descending from heaven and adoring a most beautiful youth whom they carried back with them to heaven. Awakened and terrified by this vision, she resolved in desperation never to confess what she had done. But presently she was stricken with an astonishing affliction: not finding the body of Christ where she placed it, she contracted violent pains in her feet and hands. Brought to penitence by this means, she called a priest, and when with tears and contrition she confessed her sin, she was restored to health."<sup>1</sup>

The belief in ghosts and in intercourse with familiar spirits was common in the mediaeval village. The Hereford Visitation Returns record that the parishioners of the village of Kilpak declared that their chaplain John was not strong in the faith, because "he often held converse in the night time with familiar spirits." Likewise the parishioners of Ruwardyne asserted that Nicholas Cuthlere, after the death of his father, "publicly gave out that the spirit of his father nightly haunted the parish, and that one night he, Nicholas, kept vigil at his father's grave to the great scandal of the Catholic faith."<sup>2</sup>

But more detailed evidence for the belief in ghosts comes from a series of twelve ghost stories, published by Dr. M. R. James in *The English Historical Review* in 1922. These stories reflect the ancient idea that unhappy spirits walked the earth and appeared to men as ghosts; but the reason for their unhappiness is given a Christian, or rather an ecclesiastical, turn, and it is possible that collections of such stories may have been used by mediaeval preachers.<sup>3</sup> It appears that, according to the popular belief, those who died excommunicate, or burdened with some unabsolved sin or crime, or were improperly buried, haunted the earth and appeared to men, seeking to have their disability removed that they might rest in peace. This could be secured by ecclesiastical absolution, by masses, or by reparation of the wrong committed.

<sup>1</sup> Etienne de Bourbon, *Anecdotes historiques*, Paris, 1877, pp. 328-329.



One of these ghosts was accustomed to leave his tomb at night and walk through the village, disturbing and frightening the villagers, even causing the dogs to follow and bark loudly at him. Eventually the ghost confessed "his various faults" to a priest, received absolution and the injunction to rest *in pace*.<sup>1</sup> According to another of these stories, a rustic and the master ploughman were carrying on their operations in the field when suddenly the master in a panic ran away and left the rustic struggling with a ghost who tore his garments. Having obtained the victory, the rustic conjured the spirit, who confessed that he had been a Canon of Newburg and had been excommunicated for the theft of silver spoons which he had hidden in a certain place. The ghost therefore begged the rustic to return the spoons to the Prior, who had apparently excommunicated the thief without knowing who he was, and obtain absolution for him. When this was done, the spirit thenceforth rested in peace.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the best of these stories is that of one Richard Rountre who left his wife at home to go on a pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint James of Compostella. While the party he accompanied was spending the night in a forest adjoining the highway and Richard was taking his turn as watch, he heard a great commotion on the highway and saw a company of spirits riding on horses, sheep, cattle and other animals, which had been their "mortuaries". At the end of the procession he beheld what was apparently an infant rolling along in a stocking. This last apparition he conjured, and asked who it was and why it rolled along in this fashion. Whereupon the infant replied that he was his (Richard's) son, still-born, unbaptized, and buried without name. The parent then took off his shirt, wrapped it around the infant instead of the stocking, and in the name of the Trinity bestowed upon him a name. The child then ran off exulting, and the pilgrim took the stocking in which the midwife had buried it, and on his return home obtained a divorce.<sup>3</sup>

Not only was the mediaeval peasant a believer in magic and ghosts, but he was often heedless of the Church and its laws. The Hereford Visitation Returns inform us that there were parishioners who neglected the Church and its services. Items such as the following recur again and again: "John Lupson absents himself from the parish church on Sundays and feast days,"<sup>4</sup> or "John Baker does not come to church on Sundays

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 37, p. 418.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 419.

and feast days." Of one such delinquent we read that he hardly ever attended church, not even at Easter when church law required all parishioners to be present, to confess and to receive the sacrament.<sup>1</sup> Similar entries are found in the Cerisy record. "Le Torte Fiquet is ill-famed for not attending church during the past three years"<sup>2</sup>; and "John Rabiosi is ill-famed by the community because he does not attend church on any occasion during the entire year."<sup>3</sup>

In addition to neglecting the Church and its services, parishioners sometimes continued to carry on their farming operations on Sundays and saints' days. For instance, the parishioners of Scraworthyn inform the ecclesiastical officials "that Jankyn Webb and John Webb habitually work on Sundays and saints' days."<sup>4</sup> And the parishioners of Orleton report that Robert de Were "habitually worked on feast days in the autumn."<sup>5</sup> How seriously the church authorities viewed such offences is shown by the visitation record of Odo Rigaldi. Archbishop Odo reported that, in October, 1260, on the festival of Saint Matthew, while travelling from Meduntam to Gisetium, he came upon "plough-teams working and ploughing, the horses of which," he continues, "we ordered brought to Meullentum, because they presumed irreverently to work on the festival of so great a saint." The owners of the teams were obliged to make amends and to promise to refrain from such illegal activity in future.<sup>6</sup> On another occasion, finding a team hauling timber on Sunday, he imposed a fine of ten *solidi* on the owner.<sup>7</sup> The officials of Cerisy likewise endeavored to stop all unnecessary labor on Sundays and saints' days. "Peter Neel," they reported, "promised to make amends for his son William, because he worked on the feast of Saint Nicholas [December 6], and swore on the holy gospels of God that he would do our will."<sup>8</sup>

Yet the impression one gets from reading these records is that the number of such delinquents was comparatively small. The Cerisy report says of one person that he "does not attend church like other Christians."<sup>9</sup> Only in one parish in the diocese of Hereford does the number of those who fail to attend church or who work on Sundays and feast days run as high as seventeen. As a rule it is only one or two from a single parish

1 EHR, vol. 44, p. 452.

2, 3 Dupont, *Op. cit.*, pp. 401, 399.

4, 5 EHR, vol. 45, pp. 462 and 100.

6, 7 *Op. cit.*, pp. 375 and 501.

8 Dupont, *Op. cit.*, pp. 396-397.



who defy the Church by absenting themselves or by working on holy days, and by no means every parish has to report this particular type of delinquency. Besides, the very fact that they were reported at all shows that public opinion in the village was against them, and suggests that perhaps the majority conformed.

But there is abundant evidence to show that when the villagers did attend their parish church, they were not always reverent and devout. A parishioner's disturbance of the church services was occasionally sufficiently serious to call for mention in the Hereford Visitation Returns. Thus the parishioners of Dormynton declare that "Margareta Northyn is garrulous in church and impedes divine service;"<sup>1</sup> those of Ministerworth that Henry Merekote "disturbs mass [*divinum officium*] when he comes to church."<sup>2</sup> Preachers and acts of councils both confirm the Hereford report. For instance, the Council of Chichester (1292), under the heading, "That parishioners should hear mass in silence," decreed: "We enjoin that parishioners be diligently warned that on Sundays and other solemn festivals they remain in the church solemnly and devoutly, at least while mass is being sung, constantly following the prayers and other devotions, not noisily running about anywhere, as hitherto customary, through the cemetery and other places adjoining the church, often to no purpose but an unseemly one."<sup>3</sup> And Berthold of Ratisbon complains of those who disturb the church services. In church, people "jest and babble as if they were at a fair". Men boast of what they have seen abroad, at sea, on a journey to Rome or on a pilgrimage to Saint James, he declares. "And ye women! Ye never let your tongues rest from unprofitable chatter! Thus one tells of her maid, how fond she is of sleep, how chary of work; another of her husband, and still another of her children, how one is a problem and the other delicate."<sup>4</sup>

All this bears out the truth of the mediaeval lament that there were notoriously few peasant saints.<sup>5</sup>

1 EHR, vol. 44, p. 282.

2 EHR, vol. 44, p. 452.

3 Mansi, *Op. cit.*, vol. XXIV.

4 Pfeiffer, F., *Berthold von Regensburg*, 2 vols., Vienna, 1862, vol. I, p. 448.

5 Coulton, G. G., *The Medieval Village*, pp. 239ff.