THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 124:
PIERS PLOWMAN AND THE PEASANT REVOLT

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 124: Piers Plowman and the Peasant Revolt. In this episode, we're going to explore one of the most important pieces of Middle English literature – the poem known as Piers Plowman. It actually survives in several different versions which are all presumably the product of a cleric named William Langland. The poem is highly revered by scholars, and at one time, it rivaled Geoffrey Chaucer's poetry in popularity. In fact, it was so popular that it was cited as inspiration by the leaders of a massive peasant revolt in the late 1300s. So in this episode, we're going to explore the connections between this important Middle English poem and the events that led to the first peasant uprising in England.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now this time, I want to talk about peasants. I've actually mentioned some important developments related to peasants over the past few episodes. In some respects, the peasants were experiencing a social and economic boost in the late 1300s. The labor shortages stemming form the plague actually created a lot of opportunities for peasants – allowing them to demand more money for work and allowing some of them to accumulate a modest estate.

The rise of the peasant class is important to the story of English because the peasants were part of the traditional English-speaking class of England. So the rise of the peasants actually meant that there was also a corresponding rise in the value of English. In the second half of the 1300s, English made a lot of gains. It became the official language of Parliament and the Courts, and it started to be used in the schoolrooms for the first time since the Conquest. And as we'll see, more and more writers were choosing to compose their literature in English.

So as we look at the late 1300s, we can see that both the peasants and their language were on the rise. But that rise was met with fierce resistance from the upper classes. Much of peasants' gains came at the expense of the nobles and the gentry. So the upper classes used their power and influence in Parliament to push back and to try to keep the peasants in their place.

In an earlier episode, we saw that they passed a law during the Back Death which limited what the peasants could charge for their labor. It actually rolled back wages to the rates that existed prior to the plague. King Edward also outlawed most sports other than archery. The sports that were banned mostly consisted of ball games which were mostly played by commoners. It was more important for them to practice for war than to play football. Again, to an extent, this restriction was aimed at peasants and commoners.

In the same year that Edward tried to restrict the sports played by commoners, Parliament took it a step further and actually tried to restrict what they ate and what they wore. The year was 1363, and this law was called the Statute Concerning Diet and Apparel. The law divided English society into several distinct classes from lords at the top to farm laborers at the bottom. In

between, in descending order, were knights, esquires, yeomen and servants. Most of these classifications and divisions were based on a person's land holdings or annual income received from those land holdings.

The law is interesting because it represents yet another attempt by the upper classes to control the rising tide of the lower classes after the Black Death. Peasants were starting to acquire a degree of wealth, and many of them spent their money on clothes that were typically worn by the nobles and the gentry. Before the Black Death, a person's social class could be roughly determined by the clothes they wore. But now, those old distinctions were starting to break down. Peasants were starting to dress like lesser nobles. So the nobles in Parliament tried to put a stop to that. And they did that by regulating what the lower classes could wear.

This law had a lot of specific provisions which aren't really important to this episode, but in general, it said that the fabric that could be worn within a particular class was limited to a specific value. The lower the class, the lower the value of the cloth that could be worn. The poorest peasants – the plowmen, herders and other farm workers – could wear cheap fabrics that could be made locally. That included the fabrics I've talked about in earlier episodes of the podcast like wool, linen and hemp. But the upper classes were permitted to wear clothing made from very expensive fabrics like silk.

Silk had its origins in the Far East, and the word ***silk*** was borrowed from Latin and Greek during the Old English period. Even though the Anglo-Saxons were familiar with silk, very few of them actually used it or wore it. It was rare and expensive, and only the wealthiest nobles had access to it and could afford it. By the current point in our story in the 1300s, the production of silk had spread to Italy, and there was even some limited silk production around Paris, but it was still a very expensive fabric in England.

Silk was smooth and luxurious. It was easy to dye and it held its color very well, so it tended to be more vibrant and colorful than other fabrics. That's why nobles loved it so much.

Europeans also discovered other types of fabric made from silk like satin and velvet. These related fabrics were discovered by northern Europeans during the Crusades, and by the 1300s, they were also reaching England. The words ***satin*** and ***velvet*** were both borrowed into the English in the 1300s, with ***satin*** appearing for the first time in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer.

Another common material regulated by the statute was fur. Fur was worn as clothing, and it was often used as a trim and lining for other clothing. Under this new law, the higher quality furs could only be worn by the upper classes. The lower classes were limited to cheaper furs made from common animals like lambs, rabbits, foxes and even cats.

So only the upper classes were allowed to wear expensive furs along with silk, and satin and velvet. They were also allowed to wear expensive jewelry. The word ***jewel*** was borrowed from French in the 1200s, and many of the words for precious stones were borrowed in the 1300s like ***emerald***, ***diamond***, ***ruby*** and ***pearl***. Again, these stones were mostly associated with the upper

classes. And even during a period when some peasants were able to afford them, the law now prevented the peasants from wearing them.

This law regulating clothing was only on the books for one year, but it was an early indication of a growing class conflict that was about to come to a head.

For the peasants, there was no better symbol of the affluent upper class that the king's son John of Gaunt. As we've seen in recent episodes, the English royal family was experiencing a collective health crisis during the period. The queen died. And the king largely retreated from public life due to old age and senility. Their eldest son Edward, known as the Black Prince, became sick during his campaigns in northern Spain. He retired to England and lived in seclusion as his health declined. The next oldest brother Lionel also died during this period. That left the third brother John of Gaunt as the most powerful noble in England. He was already one of the richest men in the country after he inherited the massive Lancastrian lands in the north from his wife's family.

His wife was Blanche, and as we saw a couple of episodes back, she also died during this period, and her death was commemorated by Geoffrey's Chaucer's poem called the Book of the Duchess. Chaucer remained very close to John of Gaunt during this period. In fact, during this period, Chaucer's wife and her sister were both attendants in the royal court. In the early 1370s, Chaucer's wife was working in Gaunt's massive palace in London known as the Savoy. And I mention that palace because it exemplified Gaunt's wealth, and it was yet another source of resentment by the peasants and commoners. The palace was located on the banks of the Thames west of the city, and it was filled with beautiful and expensive items. It was a symbol of wealth and excess.

The people also blamed Gaunt for the English losses in France. The Hundred Year's War raged on, but from the late 1360s through the early 1370s, France racked up one victory after another, reclaiming almost all of its territory from the English forces. In 1373, Gaunt launched a new military campaign in France in an effort to stem the tide, but it was a complete failure. The French avoided a direct battle, and half of Gaunt's soldiers died of disease and hunger. This failure, combined with all of the other prior losses, left England with control of Calais on the northern coast of France and a small narrow strip along the southwestern coast. And that was it. All of the other English gains in France had been lost. Not all of that was due to Gaunt, but as the leading noble, he got a lot of the blame.

In the year 1376, all of this came to a head with the Parliament that met that year. The Commons took a leading role in that Parliament which became known as the Good Parliament. They focused much of their attention on what they considered to be abuses by leading nobles and government officials. It was partly an attempt to curtail some of Gaunt's influence over the government. They impeached several government officials close to Gaunt. Impeachment was a new proceeding, and this parliament established the procedure by which future impeachments were conducted. The Commons formally accused the officials of wrong-doing, and the Lords acted a judges in the matter. This procedure became standard in England, and was later adopted in the US Constitution where the lower chamber – the House of Representatives – formally

accuses a government official of wrongdoing, and the upper chamber – the Senate – tries the matter and can remove the official from office. All of this has its origins with the Good Parliament in 1376.

Now while the Good Parliament was engaged in those impeachment proceedings, the Black Prince died. After several years of declining health, he finally succumbed to his illness. The old king was still alive, but with the prince's death, it meant there was a potential issue concerning the succession. The Black Prince had a young son named Richard, and he was technically next in line to the throne. But many in Parliament thought John of Gaunt was going to try to usurp the throne. It was probably an unfounded fear, but nevertheless, they declared young Richard to be the duly authorized heir.

Despite all the accomplishments of the so-called Good Parliament, they were ultimately for naught because early the following year, John of Gaunt called a new Parliament known to history as the Bad Parliament. Gaunt carefully selected the representatives so that he ended up with a very friendly assembly this time. And this new Parliament proceeded to declare almost all of the actions of the Good Parliament to be illegal.

This new Parliament didn't just revoke the actions of the prior Parliament. It also issued some new legislation of its own. One of the things it did was to pass a new tax in part to help John of Gaunt continue the war with France. But it wasn't just any tax. It was a new kind of tax called a poll tax. This was a tax on every person in England over 14 years old.

Now previously, the taxes were levied on property – either land or livestock or other property. So the tax burden mostly fell upon the nobles and the gentry, but this new tax was levied on everybody – even the peasants. And the poorest peasant paid the same tax as the richest noble. In fact, it was worse than that. Since it was levied by person and not by property, a married peasant couple had to pay the twice as much as a single person. If they had an adult child living with them, it was triple the tax. If an elderly in-law lived in the household, it was four-times the tax. Needless to say, this was not a popular idea – at least not among the peasants. So the hatred of Gaunt and his supporters grew even more intense. We have to keep in mind that the government had already passed laws that limited the wages that peasants could charge for their labor. So now, on top of that, they were being hit with a brand-new personal tax. So they were getting hit from both ends. And this was only the first poll tax. The government would levy two more versions of the tax over the next four years.

Now you may be wondering why this tax is known as a poll tax. Well, the word ***poll*** appears to be an early loanword from Dutch, and it meant 'head.' So a poll tax was literally a 'head tax' because it was a tax on every head or every person. The word ***poll*** soon came to refer to the process of counting every head or every vote, and that produced the modern sense of the word – as in a poll to determine public opinion. But that original sense of the word as head also survives in another interesting word – the word ***tadpole***. A tadpole is very young toad or frog that has left its egg and still resembles a small fish. It hasn't developed any legs yet, so people once thought of it as nothing more than a frog's head with a tail. Thus, it was called a ***tadpole***. ***Tad*** is a early

form of ***toad***, and ***pole*** meant head. So a ***tadpole*** is literally a 'toad head.' So if anyone ever asks you what the connection is between frogs and voting, now you know.

Again, this poll tax – or 'head tax' – was levied by Parliament with the consent of John of Gaunt – who was essentially 'the man behind the throne.' But a few weeks later, his father King Edward III finally died after several years of declining health. He had reigned as king for 50 years – one of the longest reigns of any English king. And with Edward's death, the throne passed to his grandson Richard – the young son of the Black Prince. Richard was only 10 years old, and since England had a prior king named Richard the Lionheart, the young boy became King Richard II.

Many people still thought that the boy's uncle John of Gaunt would try to usurp the throne, but that never happened. Gaunt recognized and supported his nephew. Nevertheless, given the hatred that many people had for Gaunt, and given that the new king was just a child, many people continued to perceive Gaunt as the man behind the throne – the person pulling the strings in the background. And that perception lingered, even when it wasn't necessarily the case.

Now around the time that Richard II became King of England, and perhaps the very same year, a priest from West Midlands named William Langland was completing a long, extended poem which became one of the most popular works of English literature in the late Middle Ages. That poem is known as 'Piers Plowman' – or 'Williams' Vision of Piers Plowman.' Now to be accurate, the version of the poem that appeared around this time was actually a revised and extended version of a poem which Langland had begun a few years earlier. But the version that appeared around the year 1377 is considered by many scholars to be the definitive version of the poem.

Over 50 copies of the poem survive from the Middle English period which indicates popularity of the poem at the time. That's a lot of copies, but none of them are the original version of the poem. All the surviving copies were made from earlier versions. And in fact, scholars have determined that there were actually three different versions of the poem – each composed at different times. The earliest draft was composed sometime in the 1360s or early 1370s. That earliest draft is the shortest version and is known today as Text A. It appears that it was essentially a first draft and wasn't finished at the time.

Then around the current point in our story in the late 1370s, the text was revised and significantly expanded. This second version is known as Text B, and it is twice as long as the original version. Most scholars think it was composed early in the reign of Richard II because one of the passages appears to allude to him as the new king. This second version appears to be more of a complete version, and it is the one that has attracted most of the attention of scholars over the years.

Then in the following decade – the 1380s – it was further revised. The overall length remained about the same, but many of the provisions were rewritten. And that later version is known as Text C.

Now most scholars believe that all three versions were composed by the same author who kept modifying the text over the years, but there is a competing line of thought that other people were responsible for some of the revisions. There's no way to know for certain.

Now I said the author – or primary author – was William Langland. But like most poems of this period, the name of the author is not clearly stated. The name William Langland actually comes from notes contained in two of the surviving copies which identify the author by that name. The poem also makes repeated references to a 'Will' throughout the poem who appears to be the author.

Very little is known about Langland, apart from a few autobiographical statements in the poem. It is assumed that he was a priest from the southwest Midlands in part because the poem begins in Malvern Hills which is located in that region.

One thing that stands out about the poem is the fact it does not using rhyming verse which had become somewhat standard by this point. It actually uses alliteration in the style of Old English poetry. Now this isn't the only poem from this period to harken back to that older style. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight also adopted that style. In fact, there was a general revival of that style in the second half of the 1300s. Rhyming poetry was common in Late Latin and early French, and that style had been adopted in England after the Norman Conquest. So it had an basic association with French poetry. And one theory is that during this period when English was in the ascent and poets were returning to English for their poetry, there was a sense that they had to revert back to the poetic style of the Anglo-Saxons. In other words, if you were going to compose proper English poetry, you had do it in the traditional style of the Old English poets.

This idea appears to have been strong in the north and west of England. Most of the poems that use alliteration during this period come from those regions. Meanwhile, in the south and east – especially around London – poets mainly used rhyming verse. And as we've seen, that was true for Geoffrey Chaucer who was basically a London poet. In fact, Chaucer actually alluded to this difference in poetic styles in the Canterbury Tales.

In the Parson's Tale, Chaucer gives the following lines to the Parson:

> But trusteth wel, I am a Southern man,
> I can not geste – rum, ram, ruf – by lettre.

In Modern English, it reads:

> But trust well, I am a Southern man,
> I can not recite poetry – rum, ram, ruf – by letter.

So Chaucer is essentially mocking this style of alliteration by referring to it as 'rum, ram, ruf.' And he says that he doesn't use that style because he is from the south of England.

At any rate, Piers Plowman does use that traditional style of alliteration. It's possible that Langland was intentionally trying to compose a uniquely English poem and that he was rejecting French influences.

The poem is a very Christian poem, but it is also a rebuke of the Church and most Church officials who are depicted as corrupt and mostly interested in money and wealth. The poem embraces a poor peasant named Piers Plowman as the ideal Christian.

The poem also rails against Church officials who sold pardons and indulgences. That was considered to be a way for wealthy people to buy their way out of sin or shorten their time in purgatory, and it was considered by many to be a money-grab by the Church.

Beyond the Church, the poem also goes after most other elements of society who are depicted as lazy and corrupt and too consumed with material wealth. So in this regard, the poem taps into the resentment that the peasants had for the upper classes – especially a figure like John of Gaunt who seemed to personify all that they thought was wrong with the nobility.

In fact, Langland had criticism for just about everybody. He saw corruption everywhere, and he condemned it throughout his poem. In many respects, the poem is a long, protracted sermon. Almost all of the characters are allegories. They appear in human form, but they represent specific concepts. So we encounter characters like Truth and Conscience and Reason and Patience. These characters interact with each other and often debate and argue with other. Along the way, they deliver messages about theology and philosophy, even though the intended messages are sometimes difficult to discern. In fact, the word 'difficult' is often used to describe this poem because it's complex and philosophical and doesn't always follow a single storyline or narrative. But let me give you a quick overview of the poem and, along the way, I'll focus on what the poem has to say about the life of peasants and the state of their language in the late 1300s.

First of all, the poem is dream vision – or actually a series of dream visions. That was a popular literary style in the Middle Ages, and we saw Chaucer use the same basic approach a couple of episodes back in his early poem called The Book of Duchess. In Piers Plowman, the poem begins with the poet falling asleep by a stream. Here are the opening lines – first in Modern English:

In a summer season, when the sun was soft
I dressed myself in shrouds as if I were a shepherd
in a habit of a hermit unholy of works
and wandered in this world hearing wonderful events.
But one May morning on Malvern Hills
out of the unknown a marvelous thing happened
I was very tired and went to rest
under a broad bank beside a stream.
And as I lay down and leaned back, and looked on the waters,
I slumbered and slept, it sounded so merry.

Here's the same passage in the original Middle English – and notice the alliteration:

In a somer seson · whan soft was the sonne
I shope me in shroudes · as i a shepe were
In habite as an heremite · vnholy of workes
Went wyde in þis world · wondres to here
Ac on a May mornyng · on Maluerne hulles
Me byfel a ferly · of fairy me thouȝte
I was wery forwandred · and went me to reste
Vnder a brode banke · bi a bornes side
And as I lay and lened · and loked on þe wateres
I slombred in a slepyng · it sweyued so merye.

The poet then describes a dream in which he awoke and saw a tower on a hill and a deep, dark valley below. Between the tower and the valley was a beautiful field full of people – both poor and rich all working and wandering about. There were plowmen and farm workers who worked hard at planting and sowing. The poet says that they earned what selfish men destroy with their greed.

In addition to the plowmen, there were merchants and minstrels. There was a pardoner selling indulgences, and the poet says that ignorant people put their trust in him.

There were also other clerics of varying degrees – many of whom complained to the bishops that their parishes were depleted since the plague.

Then came the king preceded by his knights. The poet says that the king, together with his knights and the clergy, arranged it so that the common people worked the them and provided their living for them.

We then get a fascinating passage where the poet describes over a thousand rats and mice coming together to discuss a dilemma they faced. There is a cat at court who appeared from time to time and pounced on them and tossed them around. If they complained to the cat, the cat would scratch and claw and terrorize them. One of the rats proposed a solution. He said that they should find a collar with a bell on it and place it around the cat's neck. That way they could hear the cat coming, and they could avoid his wrath. The rats all agreed that this is a good idea, so they found a collar with a bell on it. But there was one problem. As the poet writes:

But when the bell was brought and on the necklace hanged
There was not a rat among them for all the realm of France
That was willing to bind the bell about the cat's neck

Here's the original Middle English passage:

Ac þo þe belle was ybouȝt · and on þe beiȝe hanged
Þere ne was ratoun in alle þe route · for alle þe rewme of Fraunce
Þat dorst haue ybounden þe belle · aboute þe cattis nekke

So no rat was bold enough to carry out the plan. Another rat stepped forward and acknowledged that even if the cat was killed, another would take its place. So it was better to just leave the cat alone.

Now this passage is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, most scholars think this passage was an allusion to the English Parliament at the time. The rats and the mice were the Commons and the Nobles, and the cat that was threatening them was John of Gaunt. This connection becomes much more obvious in the next passage which reads:

"It's a pretty miserable court where the cat is a kitten."
Scripture, If you care to read it, would support him
"Woe to the land where the king is a child!"

That last sentence is from Ecclesiastes in the Bible, and in the poem it seems to be a clear reference to the new boy-king Richard II. He was a child, and using the analogy to a cat, he was also a kitten. That's part of the reason why scholars think this B version of the poem was composed around the time that Richard became king in 1377.

Now this passage about the bell around the cat's neck is also the first reference we have to a phrase that you may be familiar with – "to bell the cat." It usually refers to a situation where a person undertakes a risky endeavor or has a good idea but can't complete the mission without great harm. It stems from this story or fable about a group of mice trying to place a bell around a cat's neck. The fable is actually much older than Piers Plowman, but Piers Plowman is the first time that the fable and the phrase were presented in an English document.

The passage then goes on to say that the mice should focus on their own business and not try to bother the cat. This gets to one of the underlying themes of the poem – that people should work hard and do their jobs as required by God's law and not harm or take advantage of other people. That's why the plowman is such an ideal character. He works the land very hard every day and doesn't get involved in political intrigue or corrupt activities.

In the next part of the poem, the poet is approached by a beautiful woman who identifies herself as the Holy Church. She explains that the tower on the hill is Truth which is an essential aspect of God. And the valley below the hill is the place where the devil resides. The people occupy the place in the middle – what the Anglo-Saxons called the Middle Garden or Middle Earth.

The poet asks her to show him the way to Truth, and she launches into a theological discussion about the nature of Truth and God. She says that it is important to act properly, and that the wealthy and powerful should have pity on the poor and treat them with humility. Here's a passage from the slightly older A Text of the poem – first in Modern English:

For you may be someone truthful with your tongue, and profit honestly
And you may be as chaste as a child that weeps in a church;
But unless you really love and lend to the poor
a goodly share of the goods that God gives you
you have no more credit in attending mass and saying prayers
than a peasant girl desired by no man has in keeping her maidenhood
for James the gentle judged in his books,
that faith without actions is worth absolutely nothing,
It's as dead as a doornail unless followed by deeds.

Now the same passage in Middle English:

Forthy beth trowe of your tonges, and trewlyche wynne,
And ek be chast as a chylde that in the cherche wepys;
But ye love lely and lene the pore,
Of such gode as God sent goudlyche departyn,
Ye have no more meryte in masse ne in houres
Than Malkyn of hire maydynhede, þat no man desyres
For Jamys the gentyl jugyd in his bokys,
That feyth withoute fet is febelere than noughth,
And ded as a dorenayl, but yif the dede folwe.

Now not only does this passage emphasize the importance of doing good deeds, especially for the benefit of the poor, it also contains the first recorded use of the phrase 'dead as a doornail' in an English document.

I mentioned that phrase a few episodes back about occupational surnames. It's a phrase associated with blacksmiths, and it refers to a bent nail. A bent nail was useless, so it was essentially dead. And bent nails were commonly used to fasten the boards used to make doors. So 'dead as a doornail' referred to a bent nail used in making a door, but it was also a way to emphasize that something was useless. And notice that it also uses alliteration – 'dead as a doornail.' That's probably why the phrase became so popular because it rolled off the tongue. And it also meant that it was perfect to use in a poem based on alliteration.

We're then introduced to Lade Mede – a central figure in the early part of the poem. In Old and Middle English, the word ***mede*** meant a reward or payment or compensation. But it also had a secondary sense as a bribe or corrupt payment. And in this poem, Lady Mede represents both concepts. She first appears in the guise of a wealthy woman dressed in a robe trimmed with fur, and a dress of made of expensive scarlet cloth, and wearing rings inset with diamonds, rubies and sapphires. If we think back to that law that defined what the various classes of people could wear, Lade Mede definitely represented the highest class of society. We're told that she had done a great deal of harm and had told many lies. She is engaged to marry to the character known as False who is enamored with her wealth. The character of Theology intervenes and declares that God intended that Lady Mede marry Honesty – not False. This is because God intended that

honest laborers should receive the reward of Lade Mede. It is decided to take the dispute to the king's court where all disputes are ultimately decided.

The King hears the dispute and eventually calls in Reason to provide his testimony. Reason sides against Lady Mede and she is dismissed from the court.

Reason then goes out to the field described at the beginning of the poem and begins to preach to the people gathered there. The people listen to his message and decide to repent. This includes the Seven Deadly Sins. One by one, the characters representing each of the Seven Deadly Sins come forward and confess.

The character of Repentance encourages the confessions. When Greed confesses, we get the following exchange between Repentance and Greed – first in Modern English:

Repentance asked Greed, "Have you ever repented or made restitution?"
Greed replied, "Yes, once I was staying at an inn with a group of merchants
and I arose when they were resting and rifled their bags."
"That was not restitution," said Repentance, "that was a robber's theft.
You deserved to be hanged for that more than for any other sin you've shown."
"But I thought rifling was restitution," said Greed, adding "I never learned to read a book,
and I do not know a word of French. No one does who comes from the farthest end of Norfolk.

Here's the same passage in the original Middle English:

Repentestow euere quod repentance · ne restitucioun madest
"ȝus, ones I was herberwed," quod he · with an hep of chapmen
I roos whan þei were arest · and yrifled here males
That was no restitucioun quod repentance · but a robberes thefte
Þow haddest better worthy · be hanged þerfore
Þan for al þat · þat þow hast here shewed
I wende ryflynge were restitucioun quod he · for I lerned neuere rede on boke
And I can no frenche in feith · but of þe ferthest ende of norfolke

Now I mentioned that passage for a couple of reasons. First, it tells us something very interesting about the state of French in England in late 1300s. Greed implies that he is from Norfolk on the eastern tip of England, and he says that he doesn't really understand what the word ***restitution*** means because it's a French word and no one from Norfolk speaks French. So this passage implies that knowledge of French was mostly limited to urban areas like London. But out in the countryside, most common people didn't speak French, even though they were often exposed to new French words. And very often, they didn't really understand the precise meaning of those words. That process helps to explain why loanwords often take on slightly different meanings within a new language.

The other reason why I wanted to mention that passage is because it contains the first recorded use of the word ***rifle*** as a verb meaning 'to plunder and steal.' Just like Greed, we might rifle

though someone's belongings. That word is interesting for another reason because it also gave us the term ***riff-raff*** which is often used as a derisive term people who are poor or low-class. The word ***raff*** or ***raffle*** had a sense of waste or refuse or leftover bits. And sometimes, those two similar sounding words were put together – ***rifle*** meaning plunder and ***raffle*** meaning waste – and together, those words meant the process of looking through waste for something valuable. More specifically, it referred to the searching of dead bodies on a battlefield for anything of value. To 'riffle and raffle' or to 'rif and raff' eventually gave us the term ***riff-raff*** for the people who stole from the bodies of dead soldiers. And since those people were considered the dregs of society, the term came to mean any type of trashy person. For the nobles and gentry, the term ***riff-raff*** was often used as a general term for peasants and the lower classes.

The tendency to associate the lower classes with crime and bad behavior is reflected in several other words from this period as well. An unfree peasant was called a ***villein*** – V-I-L-L-E-I-N – from a Latin word meaning a farmhand. But since peasants were perceived as having no morals and prone to bad behavior, the word ***villein*** evolved into our modern word ***villain*** – V-I-L-L-A-I-N meaning a bad or evil person.

The same thing happened with the word ***vulgar***. It originally meant common or ordinary. It didn't necessarily have a negative meaning. We still have some of that original sense of ***vulgar*** in the related word ***divulge*** which comes from the same Latin root. If you divulge something, you make it common knowledge. And that knowledge becomes ***vulgar*** in the original sense of the word meaning 'common' or 'commonly known.' You might also remember that the Latin dialects spoken by the common people around Western Europe were called the Vulgar Latin dialects because they were the dialects of the common people. But once again, over time, the word ***vulgar*** acquired a sense of something dirty or profane.

The same thing happened with the word ***lewd***. I've noted before that Middle English documents often used the phrase 'learned and lewed' to refer to all people of society. The 'learned' were the educated people, and the 'lewed' were the common uneducated people. But once again, over time, 'lewed' or ***lewd*** came to mean something dirty or profane.

So ***villain***, ***vulgar*** and ***lewd*** have all acquired a negative or pejorative sense over time because they were originally associated with commoners and peasants. And the term ***riff-raff*** has a similar history. It was originally a negative term for people who plundered the bodies of dead soldiers, but since most of those people were peasants and since peasants were often viewed with derision by the upper classes, it became a more general term for peasants over time.

Now returning to the poem, after Greed confesses and repents, the other Seven Deadly Sins also repent. That includes that character of Sloth who is depicted as a lazy monk. He is filthy and barely awake. He belches then thumps his chest and says 'Bless Me.' Then he stretches, yawns, and falls back asleep, snoring loudly. Repentance tells him to wake up and make his confession. Sloth replies with the following passage – first in Modern English:

If my life depended on it, I couldn't be bothered to open my eyes and look.
I can't say my 'Pater Noster' or Lord's Prayer as the priest sings it,
but I can sing the rhymes of Robin Hood and Randolph of Chester,
However, of Our Lord or Our Lady - I know not the least that was ever made.

Now in the original Middle English:

If I shulde deye bi þis day · me liste nouȝte to loke
I can nouȝte parfitly my pater noster · as þe prest it syngeth
But I can rymes of Robyn hood · and Randolf erle of Chestre
Ac neither of owre lorde ne of owre lady · þe leste þat euere was made.

Now this passage once again illustrates the poet's contempt for many members of the clergy. He uses a monk to represent the sin of Sloth. Sloth is depicted as lazy and ignorant. He doesn't really know the important prayers of the Church, but he knows all about secular songs like the ballads of Robin Hood. And this is actually the first reference to Robin Hood in all of English literature. And the fact that the poem mentions Robin Hood in passing without explanation suggests that everyone knew who he was by that point. So the legend of Robin Hood had spread throughout the country in song in the oral tradition.

I've noted before that there are some fascinating contrasts between the ballads of Robin Hood and the legends of King Arthur. In modern culture, they are probably the two most well-known literary figures of the Middle Ages, but Arthur was a product of the upper classes whereas Robin Hood was very much a product of the lower classes.

Arthur was a king, surrounded by his knights of the Round Table, all bound by notions of chivalry. As we've seen before, his legend was shaped in literature that was mostly composed in Latin and French, so it was read by the educated classes.

At the other end of the spectrum, Robin Hood was an outlaw – a thief who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. He lived in the forest, not a royal court. And his legend was spread in English in the oral tradition among commoners and peasants. By the time the name appeared in literature in Piers Plowman, the ballads and songs were already well-known. And the poem suggests that the songs were even popular among the monks and members of the clergy.

Now after the Seven Deadly Sins confess and repent, the gathered throng of people decide to go searching for Truth which again is an aspect of God, but no one knows the way. They ask a man dressed as a pilgrim assuming that he has traveled far and wide and might know the way, but he doesn't know either. At that moment, a plowman steps forward. This is Piers Plowman who makes his first appearance deep into the poem. He informs everyone that he knows the way to Truth. Here's the passage – first in Modern English:

By Saint Peter, said a plowman, and put forth his head
I know him as well as a clerk knows his books
Conscience and Kind Wit directed me to his place

And they made me ensure them that I would serve him forever
both sowing and planting for as long as I have the strength.

Here's the same passage in the original Middle English:

Peter quod a plowman · and put forth his hed
I knowe hym as kyndely · as clerke doþ his bokes
Conscience and kynde witte · kenned me to his place
And deden me suren hym sikerly · to serue hym for euere
Bothe to sowe and to sette · þe while I swynke myghte

Piers says that he has tended Truth's flock and taken care of Truth's farm for over 40 years, and he can lead the gathered throng to the place where Truth resides, but first he has to plow a half acre of land. To avoid a long wait, many of the people chip in and help. After a few hours, Piers goes to see who is working and who is sitting around doing nothing. Piers becomes irate at the people not working. He yells at them says they can starve to death for all he cares. Some start to make excuses, and others become angry and tell Piers that they can do as they please. Piers says he will make them pay for their laziness, and he calls out for Hunger to appear. The character of Hunger immediately arrives and grabs the layabouts and makes them suffer and starve. Piers eventually tells Hunger to spare their lives, and the lazy men eat and finally start to do some work.

Piers thanks Hunger for coming and teaching everyone an important lesson. He bids Hunger farewell, but Hunger says that he isn't going anywhere until he has his meal for the day.
Piers says that he doesn't have very much to eat. He has a few loaves of bread, and little bit of cheese and few greens. But he doesn't have anything that would make a hearty meal. He says:

And I swear on my soul I have no salt bacon
Nor any cock's eggs, by Christ, nor mincemeat to make.

In the original Middle English, it reads:

And ȝet I sey by my soule · I haue no salt bacoun
Ne no kokeney bi cryst · coloppes forto maken

So there was no bacon and eggs with mincemeat. The reason I read that passage to you is because it contains the first recorded use of the term 'cock's eggs' – or in Middle English ***kokeney***. ***Cock's*** was often rendered as ***koken*** in Middle English, and ***ey*** – spelled E-Y – was the Old English word for ***egg***. You might recall from earlier episodes that this old word ***ey*** and ***egg*** are cognate. ***Egg*** is actually the Norse version of the word borrowed from the Vikings. And it eventually replaced the native English word ***ey***. So a 'cock's egg' was a 'koken ey,' or as it's rendered here, ***kokeney***. And again, this passage contains the first known use of that term.

Now you're probably wondering why I'm telling you about a 'cock's egg' or ***kokeney***. Well, it's because ***kokeney*** is the original version of the word ***cockney*** as in a native of East London and

also the term for the very distinctive London accent associated with that community. So how did a word first used in Piers Plowman for an egg come to refer to a well-known English accent?

Well, let's look at closer at that term. A cock is a male chicken, so it doesn't actually lay eggs. You have to have a female chicken – or hen – to get eggs. So what is a 'cock's egg' anyway? Well, it apparently had two meanings. One meaning was a very small or deformed egg, so the type of egg produced by a chicken that wasn't supposed to lay eggs at all. Since these eggs were deformed, they tended to be cheap and unwanted. The better eggs might be sold at the local market, but peasants would keep the 'cock's eggs' to eat at home. It also appears that the term was sometimes used a child's term for an egg.

At any rate, an egg was easily broken, so you had to take care of it, and hens nurtured their eggs for a long time waiting for them to hatch. So within English, the term ***kokeney*** meaning 'cock's egg' came to refer to a young child that was over-nurtured and over-protected. From there, it was extended to an adult who was weak or soft and unable to fend for himself. It often had the sense of an effeminate man. And in the countryside, the peasants thought of themselves as strong and self-sufficient and hard working, but they thought of city dwellers as soft and pampered and unwilling to do hard labor. So ***cockney*** was extended again to refer to people who lived in cities. It became an insulting term for a city-dweller. And by the 1600s, the term had become restricted to the people who lived in London – the largest city in the country. By the 1800s, the term was being applied to the accent of the Londoner's who spoke the very distinct dialect of the city, especially in the East End. Since this was a non-standard dialect, it was often ridiculed and stigmatized and became associated with the working-class of London. And there's no better example of that class distinction that the musical and movie "My Fair Lady" based on the play Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw. In that story, we have the phonetics professor Henry Higgins trying to teach Eliza Doolittle how to lose her Cockney accent and speak 'proper' English.

And I wanted to make that connection for you because Cockney still stands in contrast to the standard dialect of England known as Received Pronunciation. Cockney still retains some of that perception as a working-class accent, so it makes sense that it would have its ultimate origin as a peasant term for eggs first used in Piers Plowman.

Now returning to the poem, Piers can't offer bacon and eggs to Hunger, but the poor people gather some peas and beans and apples and feed him what they can. Eventually, the harvest produces enough food to satisfy Hunger and he falls asleep. And as soon as he falls asleep, the lazy men once again stop working, and the beggars and poor peasants will only eat the finest foods no longer content with the basic rations that had been available when Hunger was awake.

Truth hears what is happening and offers Piers and all who help him on the farm a general pardon from all their sins. The pardon is written in Latin, so a priest steps forward and offers to translate it into English for Piers. As it turns out, the pardon consists of only two lines: The first line is "Do well and have well and God will receive your soul," and the second line is "Do evil and have evil and the devil will take your soul." Piers rejects the pardon and tears it up – leading to an argument between Piers and the priest. The argument is so loud that it wakes the poet from

his dream. Thinking back on his dream, the poet isn't sure why Piers tore up the pardon, but he thinks about it some more and concludes that to 'do well' as stated in the pardon is more important than the pardon itself. On Judgment Day, pardons won't mean a thing. The only thing that will matter is if you followed the directive to 'do well.'

Now this basically marks the end of the first version of the poem – Text A. And many scholars think that version ends here because it wasn't finished yet. When the second version appeared around the current point in our story in the late 1370s, it contained an extended section after this point which essentially doubled the length of the overall poem. In this extended section, the poet goes on a search to understand the true meaning of what it means to 'Do Well,' as well as the related concepts of 'Do Better' and 'Do Best.' These are the sections that many scholars find most challenging because they are very loosely structured with lots of digressions and Biblical analysis and theological discussions.

Ultimately, the poet realizes that Piers Plowman epitomizes the concept of 'Do Well.' He does as the Bible instructs. He works hard, does his job, is selfless, and is never tempted by wealth or other corruptions. That's why he knows Truth so well. The poet starts to conclude that Piers is actually Christ. And in the final passages, the poet dreams of the crucifixion of Christ, but Christ appears in the dream as Piers Plowman. The poet realizes that they are in fact one and the same.

Now, from all of that, you may be able to see why this poem gained an audience among the peasants and lower classes of England. In an era when most literature was aimed at the upper classes who were more likely to be literate, this poem was somewhat unusual in that it its hero was a poor peasant man. Of course, most peasants were not able to read and write, and very few could afford a book, so it seems that most peasants learned about the poem through others – especially through preachers who picked up the message of the poem. And one of those preachers was apparently a man named John Ball.

John Ball was a 'hedge priest' meaning that he didn't have a specific home or a specific church. He simply traveled from place to place sleeping under the hedges if need be. For many years, he traveled and preached around the country – often to peasants who gathered to hear his sermons. His preached in English to English-speaking peasants. And he delivered a radical message – that the common people were being held down by the lords and nobles who exploited them. He said that there should be no nobility at all other than the king. It harkened back to a time before the Normans arrived and before the Norman ruling class had been imposed. Needless to say, the authorities were not impressed with this radical preacher, and he was thrown into prison on several occasions. But John Ball continued to preach, and he encouraged his followers to bide their time, waiting for the right time to rise up. And that time came in the year 1381.

In that year, Parliament levied the third poll tax on the people of England. The first in 1377 had hit the peasants hard, and many simply didn't pay it. Two years later, another poll tax was levied, but that tax was based on a person's wealth, so the peasants didn't have to pay as much as the nobles. But two years after that – in 1381 – a third poll tax was levied. And like the first, this one required everyone to pay the same amount. And the more people in the household, the more that had to be paid. Once again, many peasants tried to avoid paying it, so the government sent tax

collectors to the countryside to force people to pay, and that sparked a conflict that almost brought down the government.

All of those pent-up frustrations of the peasants came to a head in the summer of the 1381. It began in the southeast in Kent. It was common for parents to avoid paying the poll tax on older children by claiming that they were under the required age for the tax. According to some chronicles, a Kentish man claimed that his daughter was too young to pay, but the tax collector didn't believe him. The collector ripped off her clothes to try to prove that she was old enough to pay. The father was so incensed that he attacked the collector and beat him to death. The father was a roofer or tiler named Wat, and he came to be known as Wat Tyler. A mob soon gathered to support him, and under his leadership, they demanded that the government hear their grievances.

At the time, that radical preacher named John Ball was in prison in the town of Maidstone in Kent, so the crowd headed there and took over the prison and set him free. Ball then sent messengers throughout the country to let people know that the time had come to take action, and small peasant revolts started to break out everywhere – especially in the southeast. One of the fascinating things about John Ball's call to action is that it specifically cited Piers Plowman. A couple of his letters were preserved by chronicles, and here is part of one of those letters – first in Modern English:

John Schep (*which was a secret code name for Ball himself*), sometime Saint Marie priest of York, and now of Colchester, greeteth well John Nameless, and John the Miller and John Carter, and bid them that they be wary of guile or deceit among those who pledge loyalty, and stand together in God's name, and bid Piers Plowman go to his work and chastise Hobbe the Robber (*apparently a nickname for the country's Treasurer Robert Hales*), and take with you John Truman, and all his fellows, and no more, and look sharp and obey only one head or leader, and no more.

Now here's the same letter in its original Middle English:

Iohon Schep, som tyme Seynte Marie prest of ȝork, and now of Colchestre, greteth wel Iohan Nameles, and Iohan þe Mullere, and Iohon Cartere, and biddeþ hem þat þei bee war of gyle in borugh, and stondeth togidre in Godes name, and biddeþ Peres Plouȝman go to his werk and chastise wel Hobbe þe Robbere, and takeþ wiþ ȝow Iohan Trewman, and alle hiis felawes, and no mo, and loke schappe ȝou to on heued, and no mo.

So the preacher, John Ball, specifically called his followers to 'bid Piers Plowman go to his work.' This was apparently a call to action. He then concluded the letter with another cryptic reference to the poem. He writes:

And do well and better, and flee or avoid sin,
And seek peace, and hold you therein...

So he makes specific reference to 'Do Well' and 'Do Better' – the specific concepts introduced in Piers Plowman as the way of finding Truth. And all of this shows that the peasants were familiar with the poem and considered Piers Plowman's message to be a rallying cry.

The rebellion soon spread to Essex east of London. The road between London and Canterbury was famous as a pilgrimage route, and it would soon become even more famous thanks to Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. But now, in June of 1381, it was teeming with peasants who were joining the rebellion. And they soon acquired a slogan – "With King Richard and the true Commons." This was the idea that there should be no nobles standing between the king and his people.

Tens of thousands of peasants soon converged on London. They gathered south of the Thames and starting burning and looting and releasing prisoners from jails.

John of Gaunt was actually in the north of England at the time negotiating with the Scots, but the young King and the government officials and the Archbishop of Canterbury were all in London. To avoid the approaching mob, they headed to the Tower of London for safety.

When the crowd crossed London Bridge into the city, they continued to burn and loot. They soon headed down to John of Gaunt's massive palace called the Savoy which I mentioned earlier in the episode. Everyone knew that it was Gaunt's palace and what it represented. They still blamed him for the poll tax and all of the other abuses of the peasants. So the mob burned the palace to the ground. By the way, the palace was never re-built, but a hotel and theater stand on the site today – appropriately called the Savoy Theatre and the Savoy Hotel.

Now King Richard was only 14 years old at the time, but he agreed to meet with the rebel leader Wat Tyler outside of the city walls to hear the peasants' demands. At the meeting, the rebel leader demanded freedom for all peasants. They should no longer be required to provide unpaid labor. The peasants should be paid for their work and should permitted to pay rent for their land. They should also be able to freely buy and sell their land. In order to stop the riots, Richard agreed to the terms, and charters started to be drawn up to satisfy the peasant leaders.

But meanwhile, back at the Tower of London, the mob broke in and retrieved the Treasurer Robert Hales. He was the person alluded to in that letter written by the radical priest John Ball. They also retrieved the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was a political ally of John of Gaunt, and who had been critical of peasant concerns over the years. Both men were removed from the Tower and were beheaded by the mob.

The rioting continued in the streets, and the mob started to target foreigners – basically anyone who couldn't speak English. At this time, there were a lot of people from Flanders living in London. As I've noted before, England had a very close trading relationship with Flanders thanks to the wool industry. But during this uprising, many of those Flemings were killed in the streets. A chronicle called the Chronicles of London contains the following entry for the year 1381:

In this same year, the 11th day of June after Trinity Sunday was the Rising of the Commons of England against the lords; at which time they beheaded the Archbishop of Canterbury at the Tower hill; and sir Robert Hales, prior of Saint Johns, and many Flemings lost their heads at that time, and namely they that could not say 'Bread and Cheese,' but 'Case and Brode.'

So in other words, the mob would approach people who were thought to be Flemings, and if they used the Dutch word ***case*** for cheese or ***brode*** for bread, they were killed on the spot.

Since the violence continued in the streets, young King Richard demanded a second meeting with the peasant leaders. At this second meeting, in an open field outside of town, Richard wanted to know why the revolt was continuing and why the city continued to burn. This time, Wat Tyler – the rebel leader – was apparently drunk. He didn't show the king any courtesy as he approached him. Tyler also insisted that there were new demands. All Church land was to be confiscated, and the nobility was to be outlawed. There was to be no one standing between the king and his people. So the demands went from aggressive to radical. With this, an argument ensued between Wat Tyler and the London mayor who accompanied the king. Tyler pulled out a dagger and tried to stab the mayor, but one of the soldiers protecting the king struck Tyler with a sword killing him. The peasant mob started to approach when they saw Tyler fall, but King Richard quickly rode out to the crowd to calm them down. He told them that he would be their leader from now on, and he would promote their cause. It was a risky move, but it worked. According to the chronicles, Richard spoke with the peasants in English. He listened to their concerns, and calmed them down, and told them to return home while he worked on carrying though with their demands. Over the next few days, the peasant revolt disbanded, and most of the peasants returned home.

By all accounts, the teenage king acted with bravery and confidence, but he never followed through on his promises. The reforms were never implemented, and there was a severe crackdown on those who had participated in the revolt. About 7000 peasants were soon hanged. The radical priest John Ball was also captured, and after a quick trial, he was hanged, drawn and quartered. A brutal death reserved for traitors.

Nevertheless, many of the peasants' concerns were alleviated over time. The demands of the market continued to weaken the old feudal system. Peasants continued to leave the manors where they were forced to provide work, and they moved to the cities or to other manors where they were paid for their labor. Over the following century, almost all peasants became free tenants paid for their work with money and paying rent for their land in exchange. Forced bondage gradually disappeared in England. And the threat of another peasant revolt subsided. There wouldn't be another major working-class movement in England for another three centuries.

Throughout this episode, we have seen that there was a simmering conflict within English society between the peasants and the upper classes, but there was also a simmering conflict within the Church. Many clerics, and many outside the Church, felt that Church officials had become too consumed with wealth and political power. These concerns were laid out Piers Plowman and given further voice by radical preachers like John Ball. But John Ball was an extreme case.

There were also other reformers within the Church who were a bit more measured in their demands. One of those reformers was John Wyclif, and he was also active during this period. And he gave us the first complete translation of the Bible into English. Now that may not seem like a big deal today, but it was a radical idea at the time. So next time, we'll explore the history behind the first English Bible, and we'll see how it impacted the English language.

Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.