Of *Piers*, Polltaxes and Parliament: Articulating Status and Occupation in Late Medieval England

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Abstract: This paper examines the articulation and vocabulary of a newly complex social order demarcated by occupation and status in England during the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, comparing Langland’s *Piers Plowman* with Parliamentary enactment of (and documentation resulting from) the later fourteenth century polltaxes and the Statute of Additions (1413). The idyllic vista of an agrarian “fair feeld ful of folk” at the opening of *Piers Plowman* evokes the “three estates” vision of social structure, which Langland quickly renders out-moded by populating the “feeld” with representatives of numerous artisan and commercial occupations (reflected in the manuscripts of *Piers*, which frequently highlight occupational terms in red ink). The polltaxes (by expanding the taxable base of government’s financial support, from land and movable wealth to occupation and status) and the Statute (by requiring new information in legal records about status) were responses to the same reality.

A letter purportedly written in 1381 by Lollard priest and social agitator John Ball addresses by name the supposed leaders of a rebellion brewing in Essex: Johon Schep, Johan Nameles, Johan þe Mullere, Johon Carter, Peres Plouȝman, and Johan Trewaman.¹ Steven Justice has argued that these were likely pseudonyms invented to “proffer garden-variety peasant identities,” which served in portraying the rebels’ cause as one pitting a united mass of honest hardworking men against the king and various institutional abuses.² The inclusion of the name “Peres Plouȝman” in Ball’s text also suggests that he knew of William Langland’s wide-ranging dream vision *Piers Plowman* (the several versions of which were written c. 1365–1390) and had appropriated his titular plowman as one of the rebels’ peasant compatriots.³ But Langland’s *Piers* is only nominally a plowman—he soon leaves plowing to lead a pilgrimage—and in Langland’s many searching meditations on social structure, the artisan, commercial, and bureaucratic sectors crowd out the agrarian. These meditations extend to the burden of taxation, the spark in the powder keg of the 1381 revolt. Although overt
references to taxation are rare in the poem, matters related to its ethical bases—the value of money and labor, the rights of rulers, both secular and religious, the extent to which the people have a voice in government, and the moral grounds upon which some determined the financial obligations of others—form the very foundation of its overarching concerns.

Imbedded in Langland’s poem is an articulation of a social order, and a terminology to describe that order, that no longer conformed to the simplistic three-estates vision of humanity of earlier medieval convention. *Piers* uses lists to portray society at a time when the relationship between occupation or status on the one hand, and surnames and other types of bynames on the other, stood at a critical stage of development in England. And Langland’s articulation of social order through lists coincided with another development, in England’s fiscal, legal, and administrative apparatus and the records it left behind, specifically those relating to novel forms of taxation and new requirements of forms in law. What follows began and remains an interdisciplinary dialog between a scholar of manuscripts, literature, and meanings of writing and reading in late Middle English, and a historian of post–Black Death English society, economy, and law. We argue, from our respective vantages, that there was a suggestive confluence in the ways *Piers Plowman* and the documentary products of the English state attempted to describe or reflect society in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

These very different bodies of texts share a “thing” in common: lists, proliferating lists, lists of names, of occupations and social statuses, and of a variety of other kinds of descriptors, lists whose formats and arrangements in the written contexts of their appearances on parchment constitute a distinctive phase of manuscript culture. A list is a means of describing reality in catalogue form, by arranging items or categories in a matrix or grid or other spatial configuration, whether simple or approaching the logical organization of a relational database. Format or layout may constitute as important a component of the information that lists convey as their texts. Lists, especially lists for administrative purposes, are almost coterminous with the history of writing itself. Lists embedded within a narrative structure share nearly as long a tradition in Western literary history. We suggest that juxtaposing *Piers* with the nominative listings of taxpayers in the English polltax returns of the 1370s and 1380s, and with new elements in records of courts of law that resulted from mandated inclusion into the legal record of occupations and statuses in the wake of the Statute of Additions of 1413, reveals similar aspirations to taxonomy, to articulating complexities and ambiguities of social categories, sometimes struggling to do so. The juxtaposition makes it possible to propose new meaning for the ways scribes formatted the text of *Piers*, and simultaneously highlights a perhaps unappreciated latent polysemy inherent in fiscal and legal records.
During the period under study there were particular, historically contingent reasons why the description of status, occupation, and identity was especially fraught. In the middle of the fourteenth century the epidemic of plague known subsequently as the “Black Death” removed approximately 40 percent of the English population. The repercussions were immense, complex, and still subject to historians’ debates: immediate and sustained increases in the price of labor, longer term reallocation of land and the balance between pastoral and arable agriculture, challenges to the viability of some towns. Equally significant was a backlash against what some contemporaries perceived as a world-turned-upside-down as a result of demographic and economic change: specifically, a backlash against the apparently improved prospects of agricultural and artisanal laborers. The backlash took the form of (among other things) statutory attempts to freeze wages and prices and restrain the mobility of labor, and sumptuary legislation to stanch the visible effects of churning social distinctions. The world of Piers and polltaxes was ripe for articulating distinctions of status, occupation, identity itself.

The later fourteenth century polltaxes were “the most radical change in direct taxation ever witnessed in later medieval England.” In contrast to the previous ways the crown had drawn upon the wealth of the nation, especially the earlier “lay subsidy” which was assessed against moveable goods, the polltaxes extended the burden of taxation significantly further down the social and economic scale and upon a wider range of people. In some ways they were remarkably regressive. This was especially true of the first polltax collection in 1377, with a flat rate of 4d. per person for all non-clerical English subjects regardless of wealth, occupation, or status of taxpayer, though this and the later collections all exempted “genuine beggars” (VERROIS MENDIVANTS SANZ FRAUDE). Graduated or partly graduated payment schedules were the basis of the later collections of 1379 and 1381 (for the tax enacted by Parliament in late 1380). Parliament’s decision to structure the taxes’ basis and burden the way it did may reflect contemporary perceptions about shifting balances of wealth and of—as one might put it today—the economic weight of different sectors of the population.

The most immediate fiscal imperative behind the enactment of these taxes was the need for expanded revenues to fund England’s war against France, a need intensifying in the 1370s. But there is very little direct evidence to indicate why Parliament embarked upon such experiments for the ways royal government drew upon the country’s resources. Following upon post–Black Death legislation addressing prices and wages, some historians have speculated that the new polltaxes were a conscious rebalancing of the tax base onto the shoulders of those lower down the social scale, partly in response to what MPs regarded as a shift in eco-
nomic circumstances of different groups, and partly a recognition of the
new complexities of a less exclusively agrarian world.\textsuperscript{8}

Different age minima applied to each of the three successive collections: all lay people aged 14 years and older, 16 years and older, and 15 years and older in 1377, 1379, and 1380–1381 respectively, representing slightly different proportions of England’s total lay population. For much of England, the first polltax collection in 1377 resulted only in records of total numbers of persons taxed in each locality for which returns survive. The resulting data constitute one of the most important baselines for estimating the population of England and its geographical distribution for the later middle ages.\textsuperscript{9} By contrast, the typical documents at the most local level, that of the vill or township, stemming from the second and third collections—in 1379 and 1380–1381—were nominal listings: that is to say, lists of taxpayers’ names, their assessed payments, and in some cases descriptors in the form of occupation and/or status designations in addition to ostensible surnames. Central to this singular glimpse into a cross-section of English society in the later fourteenth century, then, are lists of names and descriptors, their relationships to occupational and social structure, and their reflection of bynames, other designations, and hereditary surnames.

Only recently have the surviving returns for the entire country and all three collections become available in definitive edited form, even though surviving returns represent only a small fraction of all those originally written.\textsuperscript{10} One strand of research made possible by this dataset relates to the occupational structure of England in the late 1370s. This is the chronological starting point for a major project currently underway by the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, aimed at quantifying the occupational structure of Britain over seven centuries.\textsuperscript{11} As a means of doing so, the project has developed a classification scheme consistently applicable to occupation groups over a long time series. Put very simply, it defines primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors: primary means production (agriculture, plus mining, fishing, forestry and the like), secondary means processing (all categories of industry such as cloth, metal and wood working, baking and brewing and tanning, and so on), and tertiary means selling and professions (wholesale and retail, plus law, government, clergy and so on). The goal in charting these sectors over such a long time is to be able to visualize some basic shifts, for instance when the industrial (secondary) overtook the agricultural (primary) sector.

Figure 1 (next page) displays the preliminary Cambridge projections for the three sectors (as percentages of the total male labor force) over that period of time. The figure makes it obvious that much of the data falls near the end of the period in question and relies heavily on census and other fairly recent sources. Emphasis is on “preliminary” especially
for the first datapoint, which relies solely upon projections from the 1377, 1379, and 1380–1381 polltax data. This analysis is very much in progress. Most pertinently for the present discussion, the Cambridge estimates for secondary and tertiary sectors as part of the adult male population at the time of the polltaxes are of the order of nearly 20 percent (12 secondary, 6 tertiary). Figure 1 also displays a separate projection from another recent study, by Stephen Broadberry, Bruce Campbell and colleagues, which would set the secondary and tertiary sectors at a rather higher level in

Figure 1. England’s male labour force, 1381–1911: Two estimates of percentages represented by primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors. For sources of data graphed here, see notes 11 and 12.

Figure 2. Polltax return (detail), Thorley, West Medina Hundred, Hampshire, 1379. (TNA E179/107/68 m. 3, reproduced with the permission of the National Archives)
the late fourteenth century, for a total estimate for the non-primary sector of about 30 percent (12.6 secondary, 17.8 tertiary). This is a long-winded way of observing that by Langland’s time, non-agrarian sectors constituted a demonstrably significant component of England’s economy and society.

There are at least two principal complications inherent in occupational analysis for late-medieval England from these sources. The first is that the nominal listings of polltax returns from 1379 and 1380–1381 vary a great deal from place to place in their inclusion, partial inclusion, or exclusion of occupational or status designators. Their idiosyncrasies in this respect seem to be entirely a product of decisions that collectors took at the local level. Consider two examples. The first (presented in Figure 2, previous page, and Table 1, above) is a portion of the 1379 list from Thorley in Hampshire, the second (presented in Table 2, above) a portion of the list from Garboldisham in Norfolk in the same year. The Thorley list includes a descriptor for each person or married couple listed, either as a suffix to a given name and surname or as a margination. The Garboldisham list includes a marginated descriptor for just a few of the persons listed, and it is far from clear from the list alone why just a few of the taxpayers should have been thus singled out for annotation. Extrapolation from an inconsistently present central variable is a challenge.

The second complication is onomastics, more specifically in this case the relationships among bynames, hereditary surnames, and occupations
that were in flux during the period of the polltaxes. There is general agreement that the transition in England from bynames—occupational, toponymic, or otherwise—to hereditary surnames was a long process, proceeding from top social levels of society downward and from the south of the country northward, and still in process in the fourteenth century. Bynames that were occupational in nature—baker, tailor, carpenter, for example—tended to make that transition to hereditary surnames later. To pose a hypothetical: it is more likely that the name “Joan Bakester” appearing in 1375 with no other contextual information denoted a Joan who baked, than the name “Joan Lincoln” denoted a Joan who was from Lincoln. Conversely, our hypothetical “Joan Lincoln” was more likely to bear “Lincoln” as a hereditary surname than our “Joan Bakester,” all other things being equal.¹⁴

Consider another polltax return: the 1380–1381 return for Stebbing in Essex, part of which is summarized in Table 3. This return gives occupations for most of the individuals or married couples listed as taxpayers. What is noteworthy here is that in several instances the marginated Latin occupational descriptor is echoed by the (English) second, surname-like designator in the listing: Stephen Smyth is a *faber*, Robert Taylor is a *draper*, John Skynner is a *pelliparius*, Thomas Taylor is a *scissor*.

Table 3. Polltax return (detail), Stebbing, Hinckford Hundred, Essex, 1380–1381. (TNA E179/107/68, m. 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Tax</th>
<th>Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sutor</td>
<td>Willelmus Wylle et uxor eius</td>
<td>iij s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>faber</td>
<td>Stephanus Smyth et uxor eius</td>
<td>xij d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>draper</td>
<td>Robertus Taylor</td>
<td>iiji d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agnes Culond</td>
<td>iij s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pelliparius</td>
<td>Johannes Skynner</td>
<td>iij d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nativus tenens</td>
<td>Robertus Gude</td>
<td>xij d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Petrus Skynnere</td>
<td>iij d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>serviens</td>
<td>Walteri Godyng</td>
<td>iij d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>famulus</td>
<td>serviens vicarii ecclesiæ de Stebbyng</td>
<td>iij d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laborarius</td>
<td>Willelmus Sorel</td>
<td>x d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Henricus Drane et uxor eius</td>
<td>iij s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>scissor</td>
<td>Thomas Taylor et uxor eius</td>
<td>iij s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

So the list identifies Stephen Smyth as a smith. On the other hand, it identifies William Wylle as a cobbler. One reasonable interpretation is that “Smyth” is an occupational byname—his ostensible surname is his craft—and another is that “Smyth” is a hereditable surname, passed from Stephen’s father or other ancestor, but he happened to work as a smith, and the marginated designation of occupation is only at face value a redundancy. (These alternatives are not mutually exclusive.) But “Wylle” could be a hereditable surname, or even a derivative of William’s given name, and he worked as a cobbler. The list may thus capture a moment when contextual or situational occupation-related bynames for some people co-existed with fixed, hereditable surnames detached from their possessors’
current occupations for other people. As a variation on this theme, one may point to polltax listings from yet other places that include occupational descriptors except for people who have occupation-related by- or surnames, for whom (presumably) such descriptors would have been redundant.\textsuperscript{15} Not only does that complicate simple tabulations by descriptors alone, it suggests something else that may be a pertinent context for the world of \textit{Piers Plowman}. In the decades when Langland was writing (several versions of) \textit{Piers}, there was still considerable slipperiness between what looks like a surname and what looks like an occupational designation.

Put another way: someone appearing in a tax list as “Jack Carter” may appear thus because his livelihood derived from transport for hire, or alternatively simply because his father bore that byname and Jack identified himself (or the collectors listing him identified him) by what had thus become a hereditary surname. That transition was taking place precisely in the age of Langland. Those who conceived and compiled the polltax listings experimented with a variety of formats in conveying this information.

A last observation to be made about the polltaxes is that Parliament included in the record of enactment of the 1379 levy a schedule of ranks and grades of taxpayers and the rates they would pay. Table 4 presents a greatly simplified paraphrase of what in the original was an elaborately graded spectrum.

Table 4. Simplified summary of payment schedule for the second polltax collection, of 1379.

- **Nobility and upper gentry**
  Dukes (10 marks), earls and countesses, barons and baronesses, knights, gentlemen and ladies, squires (10 marks, £4, 40s., 20s.)

- **Upper legal profession**
  Justices, serjeants, apprentices (100s., 40s., 20s., 6s. 8d.)

- **Urban notables and rural middling sort**
  Mayor and aldermen of London and other towns, great and other merchants and artificers, serjeants, franklins, and farmers of manors (£4, 40s., 20s., 13s. 4d., 6s. 8d., 40d.)

- **Others and everyone else**
  Advocates and notaries, pardoners and summoners, innkeepers, and everyone else not falling into the already named estates (40s., 20s., 40d., 12d., 4d.)

In some ways it is very odd. It spends 95 percent of its verbiage describing what Americans in 2017 might call the 1 percent: that is to say, the elaborate gradations are gradations within the uppermost reaches of each social group. The categories cover a wide range of subgroups within (to revert to the Cambridge classification scheme) the primary and tertiary sectors: those whose wealth depended upon land, and those who fell under the headings of merchants and the legal professions. If one takes the language strictly literally, only once does the secondary sector rear its head explicitly in this list: under “lesser merchants and artificers who have profit from the land, according to the extent of their estate” [\textit{les meindres marchantz et artificers q’ont la gaigne de la terre, selonc l’afferant de}...
lour estat]. Otherwise the secondary sector falls into the everyone-else category: “every married man, for himself and his wife, if they do not belong to the estates named above and are over the age of 16, except genuine beggars. And every single man and woman of such estate and over the said age.” As part of a measure that drew deeply into the occupational structure of England as it was at that date, it appears strangely unconcerned with elaborating its language of social typology in that one sector, implicitly consigning everyone under a fairly high social level into one catch-all grouping. It also contrasts quite sharply with the thousands of occupational or status designations that appear on the polltax lists: those who drew up the lists—owing to the decisions of those collecting the tax at the most local level, that of the township—viewed society through a rather different part of the prism.

Langland’s *Piers Plowman* may give us a glimpse through that part of the prism. Through the poem’s numerous lists describing large assemblies of people, Langland presents a view of the secondary and (lower rungs of) the tertiary sectors of late medieval English society as a dazzlingly multifaceted composite of occupational groups. Complementing these populist and democratizing lists, the poem’s oblique references to taxation together with its several explicit evocations of the three estates model of social harmony work to frame that variegated society inside an abiding structure that entails enduring obligations. The three estates model, consisting of those who fight, those who pray, and those who work, does not adequately describe this society, nor—as John Ball and his compatriots would contend, does each estate contribute properly to the whole—but it still exists; and taxation, then as now, is one of life’s certainties. A look at Langland’s opening critique of the three-estate model will lead us to a consideration of the poem’s more conservative views on taxes and thence to an examination of the parallels between the lists of occupations in *Piers* and in the polltax returns.

In his opening survey of social estates, Langland makes his strongest critique of the three-estate model by turning it upside down and beginning with “those who work.” Taking the form of the narrator’s recollection of the “fair feeld ful of folk” he saw in his dream, the survey begins with folk who were tilling the soil. As the narrator recalls, these farmers worked hard and played little as they brought forth food that others either wasted or greedily consumed: “Somme putten hem to þe plouȝ, pleiden ful selde, / In settynge and sowynge swonken ful harde, / And wonnen that þise wastours wiþ glotonye destruyeth” [Some applied themselves to plowing, played very rarely, / Sowing seeds and setting plants worked very hard; / Won what wasters gluttonously consume]. Compared to plowmen, who fulfill their role in society in an exemplary fashion, the next group in the survey, “those who fight,” are introduced as those who...
“putten hem to pride” [pursued pride]. In a later passage, Langland goes so far as to have his titular plowman instruct a knight in what he must do to fulfill his part of the mutually beneficial relationship between their two estates. Passages like these would have given the leaders of the 1381 rebellion—Johon Schep, Peres Plouȝman, et al.—good reason to find support for their cause in Langland’s poem: that is, if their names truly reflected their occupations.

On the specific subject of taxes, though, Langland is less forthcoming. In his most explicit treatment of the topic, he appears at first to support the status quo but then quickly undercuts that position. The passage appears early in the famous episode recounting the marriage of Meed [reward, payment], when the dreaming narrator asks the allegorical character Holy Church a blunt question about money: “þe moneie of þis molde, þat men so faste holdeþ—/ Telleþ me to whom þat tresour appendeþ” [the money minted on earth that men are so greedy for, / Tell me, to whom does that treasure belong?]. Holy Church’s first answer to this question is flatly that some of it belongs to the king: “Go to þe Gospel,” she says, to the story of Christ in the temple, where he says, “’Reddite Cesari . . . þat Cesari bifalleþ, Et que sunt Dei Deo, or ellis ye don ille.’” [“Render unto Caesar . . . what to Caesar belongs, and what are God’s unto God or else you do wrong]. In citing biblical authority, Holy Church would seem to foreclose all debate on the issue, for as Andrew Galloway puts it, her answer “evokes Jesus’ qualified approval of taxation.” As Holy Church continues, however, it becomes clear that in her view, “Caesar” need not denote a worldly king; instead, she glosses Caesar as Reason: “For riȝtfully Reason sholde rule yow alle, / And Kynde Wit be wardeyn youre welþe to kepe” [For rightfully Reason should rule you all, / And Kind Wit be keeper to take care of your wealth]. This exchange appears in all four versions of the poem, suggesting that the imposition of the polltaxes and the turbulence it sparked did not move Langland to go on the record in the poem’s later versions with a stronger critique of tax policy.

If Langland’s great poem never openly challenges taxation, details added to it in versions that appeared after the 1377 polltax (versions B and C written circa 1379 and 1387 respectively) could have raised the issue in readers’ minds. A list of occupations added to the marriage of Meed episode for instance, includes a sampling of the small army of officials who staffed the ecclesiastical and government bureaucracy: “sisours and somonours, sherreues and hire clerkes, / Bedelles and baillifs and brocours of chaffare” [assizers and summoners, sheriffs and their clerks, / beadles and bailiffs and brokers of merchandise]. In this list, beadles, bailiffs, sheriffs, and their clerks were all involved in collecting money from other people, be it in the form of rents, fines, or taxes. By contrast, at this point in the two earlier versions of the poem (versions Z and A, written around
1365 and 1370 respectively), the dreamer describes the crowd in much broader strokes, consisting of the “lerid,” the “lewid,” and “laboureris of þropis” [the learned, the uneducated, and village laborers]. The later versions of the poem also introduce the occupational term “taxour”; in fact, its use in the B version has the distinction of being the term’s earliest attestation in English. Piers utters the word in the course of the episode mentioned above, in which he tutors a knight on his duties to society: on the matter of rents and fines, Piers opines, “mercy” should be the “taxour.” Even though, following A. V. C. Schmidt, we should understand “taxour” here as “assessor,” the term could still bring the matter of taxes to a reader’s mind, especially since “mercy” often was the assessor in the face-to-face processes of taxation in medieval England. As noted above, “genuine beggars” were officially exempt from the late fourteenth century polltaxes; moreover, medieval tax collectors were not central government operatives but rather community members who routinely exercised their own discretion—on the side of mercy—with respect to their neighbors’ tax liability. In fact, as Mark Ormrod observes, it may have been the crown’s deployment in 1381 of “experts from the central financial and judicial agencies” to look into local tax collection proceedings that was the proximal cause of the revolt of that year.

While these passages suggest a timely interest in bureaucratic officials, Langland’s eye is not trained solely on this category of workers. When it comes to types of work, Piers is a big tent, enumerating the occupational terms for people who pay taxes (and rents and fines) as well as for those who collect them. In doing so, the poem provides a reflection of the changing social structure of late medieval England as a process in which the mass of people that formerly fell into the category “those who work” are becoming identifiable as individuals actively pursuing specific kinds of labor, a phenomenon to which the polltax records also attest. The very term “taxour” is a case in point, for it exemplifies an aspect of Langland’s poetics that Morton Donner has dubbed a “penchant for agent nouns”: that is, nouns with -er, or in this case, -our endings. By Donner’s assessment, the extent of Langland’s use of this form is truly noteworthy: he counts “nearly a hundred” different agent nouns in the 2500 lines of the A-text alone in contrast to a paltry twenty-some in all four of the poems written by the author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, around fifty in John Gower’s monumental Confessio amantis, which runs to 34,000 lines, and around 120 in Chaucer’s entire oeuvre. Donner’s count includes such agent nouns as beginner, leader, and payer, but he notes that fully half are occupational terms. His sense of the effect of Langland’s concentrated use of these nouns could apply equally well to the polltax returns, for both poem and returns represent people as “active agents, identifiable even in the mass as individuals who work at something.”
We find a particularly striking example of this effect of agent nouns at the end of the Prologue to *Piers Plowman*, which sets the scene for the marriage of Meed episode. As mentioned above, Langland lavishes praise on agrarian labor in his opening description of the fair field of folk; with that approbation, however, the “folk” who do this work are not mentioned again in the survey, which ranges thence over many categories of religious and clergy and concludes with a description of the crowd gathering for the wedding of Lady Meed, given in the form of a long list of occupational terms. Only two of the terms in the list could be construed as agrarian but all—with the exception of masons and cooks—take the form of agent nouns:

I seiʒ in þis assemblee, as ye shul here after; 
Baksteres and brewesteres and bochiers manye, 
Wollen webesters and weueres of lynnyn, 
Taillours and tynkers and tollers in markettes, 
Masons and mynours and many opere craftes: 
Of alle lybbyn laborers lopen forþ somme— 
As dykeres and delueres þat doon hire dedes ille 
. . . 
Cokes and hire knaes cryden, “Hote pies, hote! 
Goode gees and gris! Go we dyne, go we!” 
Taueners vntil hem tolden þe same: 
“Whit wyn of Oseye and wyn of Gascoigne, 
Of þe Ryn and of þe Rochel, þe roost to defie!” 
—Al þis I seiʒ slepyng, and seuene syþes more.

[I saw in this assemblage, as you shall hear later; / Bakers and brewers and butchers aplenty, / Weavers of wool and weavers of linen, / Tailors, tinkers, tax-collectors in markets, / Masons, miners, many other craftsmen. / Of all living laborers there leapt forth some, / Such as diggers of ditches that do their jobs badly. . . . Cooks and their kitchen-boys kept crying, “Hot pies, hot! / Good geese and pork! Let’s go and dine!” / Tavern-keepers told them a tale of the same sort: / “White wine of Alsace and wine of Gascony, / Of the Rhine and of La Rochelle, to wash the roast down with.” / All this I saw sleeping, and seven times more.]35

Galloway classes this passage along with the one quoted above featuring sheriffs, clerks, beadles and bailiffs under the memorable rubric “clattering lists of occupations,”36 and in marshaling its terms to their best alliterative advantage, Langland certainly sets up a din. But the sound comes just as much from the rhyming word endings as from their beginnings, and the combined effect of the alliteration and repeated -er suffixes is to portray this “assemblee” as a collective made up of many varieties of occupational agency, very different from the throng of agrarian laborers whom Johon Schep et al. presumably lead. Derek Pearsall picks up on the sonic quality of the passage’s conclusion when he observes, “[t]he picture crowds and blurs, and dissolves in a chorus of street-cries.”37 Taking into account the
picture and sound of the highly differentiated occupational work-force this passage creates, one might also hear its concluding street cries as the moment at which the general hum of occupational terms gives way to distinct voices, voices of specific kinds of workers—here cooks and tavern-keepers—in the course of plying their trades.

In view of the lists of occupations that run down the margin of polltax returns such as the 1381 return for Stebbing (Table 3), Langland’s detailed and lengthy list of occupations in this passage also comes into focus not only as bearing some resemblance to those lists but as possibly accomplishing a similar kind of cultural work as well, even as it contrasts sharply with the “catch all” quality of the 1379 polltax schedule with respect to occupations below the uppermost rungs of the social ladder. As far as that schedule was concerned, all of these occupations would fall into the “everyone else” category. Yet in both the Stebbing return and in this passage in *Piers*, the “everyone else” crowd does not dissolve into a blur but rather resolves into a collection of individuals involved in specific lines of work. In his comments on Langland’s lists of occupations, Galloway notes that such lists are an anomaly in medieval literature, where enumerations of “traits, synonyms, or scenic details such as plants or trees . . . are the norm.” 38 In view of the contemporaneity of Langland’s poem with the polltaxes, his innovative lists of occupations may be understood as a poetic version of the social restructuring that is also visible in the polltax returns, for in both situations—literary and legal—lists of occupational terms work to transform a mass of undifferentiated “laboureris” into a collective of individuals pursuing a range of distinct occupations.

This effect of occupational identifiers is also on display in a passage in *Piers* that features a small gathering of people whose names are given using the given-name-plus-occupational-term formula. The passage appears in the course of Gluttony’s confession of his sins in a long episode in which allegorical representations of the seven deadly sins confess their characteristic faults and misdeeds. When it is Gluttony’s turn, he makes his way to the church but is waylaid by “Beton þe Brewestere” [Betty the brewer], who invites him to try some of her new ale, an offer that Gluttony, acting in character, cannot refuse. Following Beton into a tavern, he finds the following drinking companions:

Cesse þe Souteresse sat on þe benche
Watte þe Warner and his wif boþe,
Tymme þe Tynkere and tweyne of his knaues,
Hikke þe Hakeneyman and Hugh þe Nedlere,
Clarice of Cokkeslane and þe Clerk of þe chirche,
Sire Piers of Pridie and Pernele of Flaundres,
Dawe* þe Dykere, and a doȝeyne oþere—*also David, Davy
A ribibour, a ratoner, a rakiere of Chepe,
A ropere, a redyngkyng, and Rose þe Dysshere,

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Godefray of Garlekhiþe and Griffyþ þe Walshe,  
And of vpholders an heep, erly by þe morwe,  
Geue Gloton wiþ glad chere good ale to hanselle.]

[Cissy the seamstress was sitting on the bench, / Wat the warren-keeper and his  
wife too, / Tim the tinker and two of his servants, / Hick the hackneyman and  
Hugh the needle-seller, / Clarice of Cock’s Lane and the clerk of the church, / Sir  
Piers of Pridie and Parnel of Flanders, / Dave the ditch-digger and a dozen oth-  
ers, / A rebeck-player, a rat-catcher, a street-raker of Cheapside, / A rope maker,  
a redingking and Rose the dish vendor. / Godfrey of Garlickhithe and Griffin  
the Welshman, / A heap of old-clothesmen early in the morning / Gladly treated  
Glutton to drinks of good ale.]

As the episode continues, it also features “Clement þe Cobelere,” “Bette  
þe Bocher,” “Robyn the Ropere,” and “Hikke þe Hostiler” [Clement the  
cobbler, Bart the butcher, Robin the roper, and Hick the ostler]. From a  
literary point of view, these characters have a quasi-allegorical status—  
Gluttony Enablers, every one—while their enumeration is at once a work  
of alliterative virtuosity and an extended parody of such deeds-based  
epithets as St. George the Dragon-slayer, William the Conqueror, and St.  
Julian the Hospitaller.

Several characters also represent stereotypes—Sire  
Piers of Pridie and Pernele of Flaundres are figures of bungling priests  
and prostitutes, respectively—while others add pungent verisimilitude to  
the tavern scene: the aroma of garlic and garbage, for instance, thanks to  
Godfrey of Garlickhithe and the street-raker.

Considered as a product of a period of growing social complexity in  
which an individual was increasingly identified by his or her occupation,  
this passage also resonates in several extra-literary domains. From the  
point of view of onomastics, the bynames of the gathered drinkers present  
an interesting mix of occupational and toponymic derivations. Several of  
those toponyms refer to neighborhoods in London, and, as Pearsall has  
pointed out, the entire episode of the sins’ confessions is rife with allu-  
sions to the city, in particular, to its merchants and craftspeople, several  
of whom are present in the tavern with Gluttony. Such a diverse and  
bustling urban milieu may also be found in the Livre des mestiers [Book  
of Crafts (or Trades)], a foreign language teaching text designed for mer-  
chants, which provides an alphabetically ordered lexicon—beginning with  
Adam and ending with Zacharie—of professions and crafts in the form  
of as many people who are identified first by their personal names and  
then by their occupations: “Mahaut, le moustardiere,” for instance, and  
“Nicolas, le candilleur.” Composed in Bruges around 1340, the original  
version of this manual was in French and Flemish; a later version in French  
and Dutch was probably the source for the French and English version  
printed by William Caxton in 1483.
Might Langland have known of this text in one of its early versions? Several of the characters’ names in his tavern scene suggest, tantalizingly, that he did: the names Clement, Clarice, and David appear in both the Livre and among Gluttony’s companions. Taking into account nicknames and equivalent English forms, we could also add Cesse, Robin, and Watte, nicknames for Cecile, Roberts, and Watiers respectively.\(^{46}\) The names are not associated with the same occupations in the two texts: in the French, Cecile is a “fileresse” [spinner], Clarice an “esbouresse” [napster], David a “lormier” [bridle-maker], Roberts a “deitiers” [dice-maker], and Watiers a “patrenostrier” [a rosary maker]. As for “Clements,” in place of an occupation, “[il] tencha orains a se fillastre” [he scolds his step-daughter].\(^{47}\) Neither is the French text alliterative, but since Piers Plowman is alliterative, the alphabetical ordering of the Livre conjures a possible scenario for Langland’s use of it: as an alphabetically ordered trove of names to pair with a list of occupational terms, which could be altered—using Cesse instead of Cecily, for instance—to better evoke a motley crowd.

Langland could also have drawn these names from his encounters on the same streets of London the tavern scene evokes; indeed, Watte, a nickname of Walter, was a very popular masculine personal name in medieval England.\(^{48}\) Whether or not it was a direct source for Langland’s cast of Gluttony’s drinking companions, the Livre des mestiers still provides an illuminating context for his naming convention in the scene insofar as the Livre presents a collection of individuals who are identifiable by their occupations and ordered solely by the alphabet rather than by social hierarchy. As Werner Hüllen points out, lists of professions and crafts are common in medieval glossaries, where they appear within larger lists of demographic terms organized according to the three-estates social structure: with “the emperor at the top and the worker at the bottom,” as he puts it.\(^{49}\) In Germany this custom of arranging terms in glossaries persisted into the sixteenth century and entailed a finely graded hierarchy among merchants and craftspeople. In the Das Ständebuch [The Book of Trades], published in 1574, for instance, traders are the fourth category of people, right after “the learned professions,” followed by “(v) producers of food, (vi) producers of clothes, (vii) people who care for the human body, (viii) workers with metal, (ix) workers with other materials, (x) workers with wood, (xi) various, (xii) musicians, (xiii) fools.”\(^{50}\) By contrast, Hüllen observes that the order of the Livre’s list “seems accidental, or local.”\(^{51}\) The characters gathered in Langland’s tavern scene seem similarly accidental and most certainly local, just folks in the neighborhood gathered for a morning drinking session. The early time of their rendezvous casts them all in a bad light, for which purpose the characters with occupational bynames might just as well have been called Watte, Tymme, Ned, Clement, and so on. Unlike Pernele of Flaundres—obviously a prostitute—craftspeople
like tinkers, cobbblers, and needle-makers are not standard figures of ill repute, which might explain why in the C version of the poem (written around 1387), Langland swells the tavern group with a notably seedy lot of *un-named* participants, including pickpockets, “pilede toth-draweres” [bald tooth-pullers], “a dosoyne harlotes” [a dozen villains], and a hangman.\(^5^2\) For the characters included in the poem’s B version quoted above, the addition of occupational terms supplies interest, as already noted, but also reflects a larger cultural phenomenon, the use of occupational terms to identify individuals (which Hugh? Hugh the needle-seller), exactly the use to which occupational terms were put following the 1413 Statute of Additions.

The Statute of Additions (1 Hen. V, c. 5) was an Act passed by the first Parliament of Henry V’s new reign, in 1413. It directed that thenceforth, certain legal documents (writs, in litigation; indictments and appeals, in criminal cases) would include, along with the name of the defendant, his/her “Estate or Degree, or Mystery [*estat ou degree ou de mistere*]”—“mystery” in this context denoting “trade” or “craft”—“and of the Towns or Hamlets, or Places and Counties, of the which they were, or be, or in which they be or were conversant”—as we might summarize, the defendant’s status or occupation, and place of residence.\(^5^3\) The Statute did not include an approved list of “additions”: there was no drop-down menu of approved status terms for clerks to choose from while drafting.\(^5^4\)

The Statute—or rather, the documentation it generated—has been the basis for recent discussion by historians about evolving terms for social classification in late medieval England. It may be useful to consider its significance under these headings: the documentary artifacts of the Statute, in the form of the topic of our essay, lists of people and their designations; social terminology, as it appears in certain kinds of records as a result of the Statute; the reasons, insofar as one can infer, for the Statute’s enactment in the first place, especially why it was enacted when it was enacted; and broader arguments for its significance.

The first result of the Statute was that writs and indictments did immediately begin to contain “additions.” To take an example pretty much at random (though with a distinctive array of “additions”), on 1 March 1417 in a court session of gaol delivery (a county-level criminal court) at Dorchester (Dorset), the defendants included “Robert Frome, plowman, and John Taillour, ‘Frenssheman,’ from Fifehead Magdalen in Dorset and John Alman, laborer, from Berwick in Wiltshire.”\(^5^5\) Thus from the time of the Statute’s enactment it becomes systematically feasible—and, perhaps, temptingly simple—to construct tabulations of status/occupation from particular samples, as in the information displayed in Table 5 (next page) for defendants in two sets of records of gaol delivery court sessions, from York castle, 1420–1422,\(^5^6\) and from Salisbury (Wiltshire), Dorchester, and
Ilchester (Somerset), 1416–1422. These are not in any sense statistically significant samples, rather mere illustrations of the range of typologies that are common in fifteenth-century criminal records. Similar tabulations from litigation (especially in the central courts of Common Pleas and King’s Bench at Westminster) contrast mainly in that criminal defendants tend to cluster lower in the social scale than litigants.

“Temptingly simple” such additions are, but not universally. There are plenty of instances in the criminal trial records where the clerk who drew up the indictment had ambiguous information to convey. One reason (again, as with the polltaxes) is onomastics. Trial documents after the Statute of Additions contained descriptors that were contextual, relational, and changeable over time. It is not difficult to find examples of the same kinds of slipperiness among occupation, byname and ostensible surname, and of designations that changed depending upon the individual’s circumstances, as the polltax returns exemplify. For instance, at a session of gaol delivery at York on 12 March 1422 one defendant, according to the record, was “William Thomson of Cottingham in the county of York, otherwise called William Smith of Cottingham in the same county, smith.”

At another York session on 27 February 1428 a defendant appeared in the records as “John Jovyn of Wakefield in the county of Yorkshire, labourer, taken by the name of Jovyn recently servant of Nicholas Neuton of Knowsthorpe in the county of Yorkshire, labourer.”

Courts had to deal with descriptors’ ambiguities in at least two ways. There were a (perhaps surprisingly large) number of fifteenth-century criminal cases in which judges quashed indictments because they did not include admissible “additions.” Sometimes a rank, a trade or craft, or a locality was simply missing, but sometimes the defect was more ambiguous. At Newcastle upon Tyne on 6 August 1437, a court dismissed an indictment of “Joan Langland, recently servant of William Lawson of Ridley” because

Table 5. Status/occupation designations of criminal defendants in two series of gaol delivery trial records. (TNA JUST3/199, mm. 10-15v; TNA JUST3/198, mm. 8-14)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>gaol delivery, York, 1420–1422</th>
<th>N = 62</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>gentleman 1, yeoman 7, housewife 5, knave 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>husbandman 17, laborer 15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crafts 14 (bocher, jueler, nayler, smyth, souter, strynger, taillour, webster)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clergy 1, merchant 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>gaol delivery, Salisbury, Dorchester, Ilchester, 1416–1422</th>
<th>N = 38</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yeoman 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>husbandman 4, laborer 8, servant 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crafts 12 (grome, plowman, shephurde, skynnere, smyth, spynnestere, taillour, thecchere)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clergy 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Frenssheman” 1, lawyer 1
wife of X 1, widow of X 1
“the same indictment makes no mention of what mystery the same Joan is, according to the form of the statute of additions of cognomens.”62 In litigation, lawyers challenged the wording of writs, forcing the creation of a body of case law about the admissibility of “additions.” In 1465 the justices of Exchequer Chamber ruled that “servant” was not admissible, since it could denote such a wide range of circumstances (though “X servant of Y” was more precise and so admissible).63 Law reports during Henry VI’s reign alone contain more than two dozen cases in which serjeants in their court arguments attempted to raise objections on such grounds.

So: a writ directed to “John at Stile, mercer of London” is different from one directed to “John at Stile of London, mercer,” because one might be a mercer of London but not resident there; a writ directed to someone as “John Cross, otherwise known as Milner, formerly of Dale in [such and such a] county, yeoman” was debated because it left it uncertain whether “milner” was an alternative surname or a mystery; King’s Bench ruled that “vagabond” was not a lawful addition.64

In her book, Medieval Singlewomen, Cordelia Beattie observes that courts heard debates as to whether “singlewoman” was an admissible addition to designate an unmarried or never-married woman (eventually they concluded it was). Beattie also argues that the Statute of Additions had an influence well beyond its stated terms of reference. In the decades after its passage, it became increasingly common practice in a variety of governmental record types to add “additions.” Descriptors of status and/or occupation became more firmly ingrained in the culture of record keeping generally. Beattie argues that the Statute was a principal reason for this, and that “singlewoman” was just one of several terms of social differentiation that came into sharper focus and more common currency in the fifteenth century as a result.65

Similar arguments have been made in connection with other terms. One such is gentleman/gentlewoman. Though one can certainly find it in a range of sources earlier, the general consensus among those studying the development of the term is that it comes into frequent currency rather suddenly, in the first half of the fifteenth century. In its emerging usage at that time it was a rather multivalent term. One sense of it was what came to be its subsequent, centuries-long meaning, the bottom rung of the gentry and nobility (below peers, knights, and esquires, but above yeomen), but in the fifteenth century it also described lawyers, higher-level government clerks and similar bureaucratic functionaries, and higher-status urban classes. Peter Coss, among others, has argued (to summarize very skeletally) that the emergence of “gentleman” as a social descriptor was a product of a crisis of authority, a general churning of rank and hierarchy in the wake of the Black Death, along with a sense of need to demarcate more minutely and gradedly the terms of social hierarchy, of which the Statute was both indicator and instrument.66
In a similar way, at the time of the Statute’s enactment the term “yeoman” was in flux. It bore multiple meanings: a traditional one, a servant in an aristocratic household; a more specific one, a forester (which lends a specialized significance to the identification of Robin Hood as a yeoman in the earliest gests); a life-cyclical one, as a kind of service for a younger male of gentry status in a period of training; and what it came to mean most generally by the end of the middle ages, a status in agrarian society above husbandmen but below gentlemen.67

The Statute, like much legislation early in Henry V’s reign, was the result of petitions from the Commons, not royal initiative. The context for this was a concern for addressing crime and disorder, one of the focal points of politics and royal policy during the reign. The Statute was an attempt to make legal process more readily enforceable, and less easily abused, by demanding higher standards of specificity regarding persons who were its targets, and so is rooted in a politically contingent moment.68 But—in line with the contention of this article—it also came at a time of particularly obvious social change, of shifts in the meaning of social terminology and configuration.

There are at least two ways one can interpret the Statute’s creation. One is that the Statute was a neutral instrument: a technical requirement that certain information enter the record systematically in ways it had not earlier, for specific and limited reasons, in effect a curtain raised to reveal a constellation of social terminology in the course of rearranging itself, but in itself not party to the rearrangement. Alternatively, one could argue that once created, the Statute acquired an agency of its own: it spurred the insertion of a language of social typologies into many other kinds of records, and by doing so forced a hardening of the usage and specificity of that language. This is the sense in which Beattie writes about “the wider impact of the Statute of Additions,” and also the way in which Peter Coss argues that the Statute “established a line of demarcation between those of gentle status on the one hand and the highest of the non-gentle, the yeomen, on the other.”69 Others express skepticism that the Statute had such a degree of agency, again specifically in the context of the terms “gentleman” and “gentlewoman.”70 Or more broadly one could argue that the Statute, like the polltaxes, was merely another step in a much longer-term development of “documentary culture” and a dynamic input to social differentiation.71

As a work of literature, Langland’s Piers Plowman both reflects and furthers the growth of documentary culture and social differentiation by putting its terms into imaginative play. As the workers who brought Piers into material form, its scribes also had a part in realizing the social and imaginative work the poem does, particularly with respect to the shifting relations among occupation, naming practices, and social status.
Of special interest in this regard are choices made by scribes who were known to work on government documents, scribes who worked as London Guildhall clerks, for instance, three of whom have been identified, along with one copy of *Piers Plowman* for each, thanks to the meticulous labor of Linne R. Mooney and Estelle Stubbs. These clerks are Adam Pinkhurst, London scrivener and Guildhall clerk from 1378–1410, who was responsible for the copy of *Piers* in Cambridge, Trinity College MS B.15.17 (c. 1390s); John Marchaunt, Chamber Clerk from c. 1380–1399 and Common Clerk from 1399–1417, who penned the copy of *Piers* in London, University Library, MS SL V.88 (the Ilchester Manuscript, c. 1390s); and Richard Osbarn, Chamber Clerk from 1400–1437, who inked the witness in San Marino, Huntington Library MS HM 114 (1420s). As the dates of their *Piers* manuscripts attest, all three scribes worked on the poem after the polltax levies while only Richard Osbarn did so after the Statute of Additions. Examination of their handling of the list of occupational terms at the end of the Prologue, the list of names in the tavern scene, and one additional cluster of occupational terms we have not so far considered reveals patterns of capitalization, page layout, and marginal annotation that suggest that as a group, these scribes uphold the structure of society delineated in the schedule for the 1379 polltax even as they are in the process of negotiating between different ideas of the connection between name and occupation, a process that is also reflected in the Statute of Additions.

Among the three Guildhall scribes whose copies of *Piers Plowman* have been identified, Pinkhurst may be singled out for his penchant for the capital letter. Beginning with a look at his rendition of the tavern scene, we find that he capitalizes all baptismal names and occupational terms as well as the allegorical name Gluttony (see Figure 3, next page). Looking to his treatment of the list of occupations that describes the crowd gathering for Meed’s wedding, we find that he capitalizes all those occupational terms as well; in fact, on further examination, it becomes clear that Pinkhurst consistently capitalizes the first letters of occupational terms throughout his copy of *Piers*. Describing Pinkhurst’s work in the *Canterbury Tales* in the illustrious Ellesmere Chaucer (San Marino, Huntington Library MS EL 26 C 9), A. I. Doyle noted that he shows “a preference for an initial *littera notabilior* on some nouns such as names of professions: C and T, it seems, more than other letters.” Repeating Doyle’s observation in the essay in which she identified Pinkhurst as Chaucer’s scribe, Mooney added that this tendency “may simply be a carryover from a habit acquired early in his career copying *Piers Plowman*, where so many allegorical figures have names with initials capitalized.”

A look at our other two scribes’ capitalization policies may undermine Mooney’s explanation. Beginning once more with the tavern scene, we find that Marchaunt does not capitalize the allegorical name “gluttony”
nor does he capitalize personal names consistently. The only occupational terms he capitalizes are “Ribibour,” “Ratoner,” “Raker,” and “Reding king,” which are not associated with personal names. In some cases he capitalizes toponyms and in others he does not: for instance, he writes both “þe hangema of Tybourne” and “pernelle of flaundres.” Mauchaunt is similarly averse to using capital letters in the lists of occupations at the end of the Prologue and in the marriage of Meed episode except when they occur at the beginning of lines. Moreover, a survey of his capitalization practice from the beginning of the poem through the end of passus three shows that he is also relatively insensitive to allegorical names: he capitalizes the names Simony and Civil but not false or foul or conscience or guile or even the bride Meed. For his part, Richard Osbarn observes a similar pattern with allegorical names, capitalizing Simony and Civil but not their minions false and foul though he does capitalize Meed occasionally as well as Guile, Conscience, Envy and Wrath. Showing deference to terms for officials, he capitalizes Sub-deans (and also Deans, which appears at the beginning of a line), Officials (as well as Archdeans, which also begins a line), Constable and Justices. For the occupational terms and names at the end of the Prologue and in the tavern scene, Osbarn’s practice is virtually identical to Marchaunt’s except that he does capitalize Flaundres.

While Marchaunt’s and Osbarn’s capitalization practices weaken the argument that Pinkhurst acquired the habit of capitalizing occupational terms through transferring a standard practice of capitalizing allegorical
names in *Piers Plowman* manuscripts, his own standard practice of capitalizing both allegorical names and occupational terms points to a functional similarity between the two kinds of names: they both (like agent nouns) label individuals—be they real, fictional, or allegorical people—in terms of their habitual actions. A Cook cooks; a Brewster brews; Gluttony overindulges in both food and drink while Patience practices being patient towards one and all. In distributing capital letters equally among allegorical and fictional characters, Pinkhurst’s practice anticipates the early modern emergence of a notion of social “sorts.” While early modern society recognized such general sorts as “middling,” “better,” and “poorer,” Pinkhurst’s capitalization practice distinguishes brewers, bakers, and butchers each as a sort unto itself. On the other hand, Osbarn’s and Marchaunt’s avoidance of the capital letter would seem to render occupational terms as identifying labels, distinguishing Tom the tinker from Tom the tailor. This second pattern seems more in line with the function of occupational terms in documents following the Statute of Additions, such as that of gaol delivery discussed above, with its references to Robert Frome, lower-case plowman, and John Alman, lower-case laborer. For both Guildhall clerk and clerk of the court of goal delivery, the occupational term serves to identify an individual person rather than to sort him into a larger class.

Osbarn and Marchaunt make a pair in their conservative capitalization policy, but Osbarn and Pinkhurst stand together in their practice of highlighting clusters of occupational terms using page layout devices. In particular, both scribes attend in a similar way to the following passage, also in the marriage of Meed episode, which narrates the responses of five different occupational groups to the character Liar:

Thanne lourede leches, and lettres pei sente
That he shold wonye with hem watres to loke.
Spycers speken to hym to spien hire ware,
For he kouþe on hir craft and knew manye gommes.
Ac mynstrales and messagers mette with hyum ones,
And wiþhelden hym half a yeer and elleuene days.
Freres wiþ fair speche fetten hym þennes,
And for knowynge of comeres coped hym as a frere.

[Then doctors were indignant and drafted letters to him / That he should come and stay with them to examine urine. / Apothecaries wanted to employ him to appraise their wares, / For he was trained in their trade and could distinguish many gums. / But minstrels and messengers met with him once / And had him with them half a year and eleven days. / Friars with fair speech fetched him thence; / To keep him safe from the curious they coped him as a friar.]²⁹

In essence the passage is a set of four two-line vignettes, a structure that is made especially clear by the way these two scribes have treated it on the page: Pinkhurst leaves a space between each two-line description.
while Osbarn places a red-ink paraph mark at the beginning of each (see Figures 4 and 5). Since these verses focus on characteristic actions of doctors, apothecaries, minstrels and messengers, Osbarn’s and Pinkhurst’s treatment of them on the page functions analogously to capitalization of occupational terms, which, as argued above, identifies individuals according to what they do. In this way, both capitalization and matters of page layout serve as scribal forms of Langland’s plethora of agent nouns and call attention to concentrations of those nouns in the form of lists.

So far we have seen that scribes’ rendering of Langland’s poem may emphasize and thereby also contribute to the vision of a society in flux that is registered both in the text of *Piers Plowman* and also in the Statute of Additions and polltax returns. But a scribe may bring out aspects of the

![Figure 4](image_url1). Cambridge, Trinity College Library MS B.15.17, f. 12v (detail), reproduced with the permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge.

![Figure 5](image_url2). Huntington Library, San Marino, California, MS HM 114 f. 11v (detail).
poem that are rooted in the old order as well. Osbarn may be seen to do just that in the form of three marginal notes he makes on folio 11v of HM 114, the page on which the Prologue ends and passus one begins (Figure 6, next page). The first two notes pertain to the narrator’s setting the scene for the marriage of Meed: he recalls, “houed þer an hundred in howues of selke—/ Sergeantȝ, it semed, þat serueden at þe Barre” [scores of men stood there in silken coifs / Who seemed to be law-sergeants that served at the bar]. Going on, the narrator recounts that there were “Barons and burgeis and bondemen als[81]” [Barons and burgesses and bondmen also]. Galloway puts it mildly when he observes of this second line that it “links an extraordinary span of social ranks through alliteration”: from the highest rank of nobility to the lowest of villeinage. In other words, the line accomplishes and epitomizes the kind of rearranging and leveling of the social hierarchy that Langland performed in the poem’s opening lines by beginning his survey of the fair field of folk with plowmen. Guided by Osbarn’s marginal notes, however, a reader might see this scene-setting passage as a rearrangement of only the top two categories of people worthy of having been named in the 1379 polltax schedule: using the terms of our Table 4, the categories of “Nobility and upper gentry” and “Upper legal profession.” The first note—and the one highest on the page—is set next to the mention of law-sergeants and reads “Men of law”; the second, lower note, next to the line “Barons and burgeis and bondemen als[81],” reads “Barons and opere” [Barons and other].

Moving down the page, we find that Osbarn has left untouched the marginal space next to Langland’s enumeration of occupations—the bakers, brewers, butchers aplenty, weavers, tailors, tinkers, and so on—which immediately follows the line on barons and burgesses. He does, however, add the note “A Lady” next to the first appearance of the gracefully attired Holy Church at the beginning of passus one: “A louely lady of leere, in lynn[83]en yclothed” [A lady lovely of look, in linen clothes]. Before he was Guildhall Chamber Clerk, Osbarn worked as a lawyer in the Husting court, which was open to all citizens of the City of London. Considering this page with Osbarn’s career history in mind, we might catch a glimpse of a Husting court lawyer’s view of its important actors: Men of Law first, next Barons and Ladies, and bondmen as well as the citizens of London in the category of “other.” In this way, the latest witness to Piers Plowman among these three, inscribed a good forty years following the 1379 tax schedule, not to mention the events of 1381, provides evidence of its vision of society still holding sway though perhaps increasingly from the margins.

This discussion has been very self-consciously the product of a dialog between two methodological and disciplinary vantages: that of late-medieval literature, manuscript culture, and the history of reading and writing on the one hand, and that of the social, demographic, and legal history of the same
period in England on the other. Given our two perspectives, our evocation of Steven Justice’s *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* in our opening paragraph not only sets the stage for our investigation of the connections between *Piers Plowman* and the cultural milieu of 1381 with respect to naming practices but also situates our work in a lineage of scholarly work for which Justice’s 1994 book served as model and inspiration: books and articles that have attended to documentary as well as literary culture in late medieval England.\(^85\) The present essay—and the conference for which its first draft was written—represents a new stage of that development, even as—and perhaps because—it also attends in a self-consciously dialogic way to the real and productive differences between the approaches of a historian and a literary scholar to a given object of study, in this case, lists of personal names and occupational terms. Our dialog on these topics has unfolded over the course of a year and a half, a relatively leisurely pace that has allowed for a process of discovery that has been iterative and reflective of what either disciplinary side either takes as given or usually neglects.

Our two vantages converge upon one conclusion in particular: that lists of persons and circumstances, as a means of organizing information, assumed new prominence and significance in the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, both in the byproducts of the administrative state and in Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, considered both as an authorial work and as a product of scribal culture. The significance of the lists in question lies in their relationship to social and economic change and the terminology of social typologies, as well as to the evolution of naming patterns and occupation or status. Our study suggests that during this period it became more necessary to elaborate the vocabulary of individuals’ circumstances, and the lists thus produced demand scrutiny in terms of their physical and relational configuration. Viewed from complementary disciplines, the distinctiveness of *Piers Plowman*’s portrayal of society assumes new significance, for it parallels the polltax returns and (a little later) the products of the Statute of Additions and holds previously unnoticed implications for onomastics. Conversely, study of the manuscript culture of Langland’s poem highlights the significance of capitalization and spatial arrangements in lists resulting from taxation and legal processes; and combining cross-disciplinary perspectives introduces new complexities and new questions in both directions, particularly in underscoring the problematic nature of name and descriptor.

The rebel leaders of 1381 were supposedly named Johon Schep, Johan þe Mullere, Johon Carter, and Peres Plouȝman. Perhaps these were their “real” names after all, or their real “situational” names, the situation at hand being one in which they wanted to stand for and with a peasant type. Forty-five years after their rebellion such an ad hoc name change might have been less effective, and someone whose “real” name was Peres Plouȝman might appear in a document as “Peres Plouȝman, cook.”
Notes

3. Further details in Jak Carter’s speech make it all but certain that the writer did know of the poem, on which, see Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 102–39.
9. For the most recent synthesis, see Stephen Broadberry, Bruce M. S. Campbell, Alexander Klein, Mark Overton, and Bas van Leeuwen, *British Economic Growth, 1270–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3–45. There is a wide variety of ways in which one must project from the raw data of the returns, to arrive at either national or local populations or (as discussed below) inferences about occupational or other patterns within the imputed total population. This present discussion does not aspire to address all the complications. The polltax returns were by no means comprehensive census-like enumerations, and were not intended to be so. Different minimum ages for those liable to taxation in different years, as noted, reflect different proportions of the total lay population, in ways that are not always obvious. For instance, it may seem at first glance intuitive that the population of lay English aged 14+ in 1377 were the same group as lay English aged 16+ in 1379. But that is not so, since in the interval some 14+s alive in 1377 would have died by 1379 (so that the group in question was smaller in the latter year), while births occurring between the two collections would have made under-16s in 1379 more numerous than under-14s in 1377, under any reasonable projections from model populations. It is clear from the nominal lists of the 1379 and 1380–1381 collections that there were systemic imbalances between the persons appearing in the lists and what model populations would predict: women, younger people, and servants appear to be underrepresented. There has likewise been much discussion about how much evasion of the tax may have taken place, which has an obvious bearing upon how one projects from the raw data. Carolyn Fenwick has usefully pointed out the distinction between “evasion” and “exemption”: in other words, between those who


13. These and other polltax returns discussed here are from the National Archives, Kew, London (hereafter TNA). The Thorley return is TNA E179/173/41, m. 3; the Garboldisham return is TNA E179/149/55, m. 1.


19. Ibid., B.P.23.

21. Ibid., B.1.44–45.
22. Ibid., B.1.52–53.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 378, 381.
34. Ibid., 375.
41. For an in-depth discussion of the figurative quality of the occupational byname and its use by Middle English writers, see Steiner, “Naming and Allegory.”


49. Hüllen, English Dictionaries, 133.

50. Ibid., 134.

51. Ibid.


53. Printed in Statutes of the Realm, II (London: Record Commission, 1816), 171. The English translation given here of the statute’s original French is as it appears in the Record Commission’s edition.


56. TNA JUST3/199 mm. 10–15v.

57. TNA JUST3/198 mm. 8–14.

58. An example of such a tabulation—of status or occupation of plaintiffs and defendants from East Anglia in King’s Bench 1422–1442—is Phillippa C. Maddern, Violence and Social Order: East Anglia, 1422–1442 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 40–41.


60. Johannes Jovyn de Wakefeld in comitate Eboracensis laborer captus per nomen Jovyn nuper servientis Nicholai Neuton de Knowsthorp in comitate Eboracensis laborer: TNA JUST3/199, m. 1.


62. Johanna Langland nuper serviens Wilhelmi Lawson de Redle . . . idem indicamentum nullam facit mentionem de qua mistera eadem Johanna existit juxta formam statuti de additionibus cognominum. TNA JUST3/208, m. 35v.


64. Y. B. Easter 4 Edw. IV fo. 10a (Common Pleas); Y.B. Mich. or Trin. 5 Edw. IV fo. 141b–142a (Exchequer Chamber); Y.B. Easter 22 Edw. IV fo. 1a (King’s Bench). The Year Books are most conveniently accessed through the online index and summary compiled by Professor David J. Seipp at Boston University: http://www.bu.edu/law/faculty-scholarship/legal-history-the-year-books/.


73. For biographies of these scribes together with analyses of their hands, and lists of literary works they produced, see Mooney and Stubbs, Scribes and the City. Dates for these three Piers manuscripts are also from this work. On the duties of the Common and Chamber Clerk (also referred to as controller), including references to both Marchaunt and Osbarn, see Caroline M. Barron, London in the Later Middle Ages (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 182–88.


76. Langland, Piers, C.6.370–71, 367, and 366. Ilchester MS, f. 35. Perhaps it is only specific town names that are worthy of capitalization: Marchaunt also capitalizes Banbury in “pe bedil of Banbury” (Ilchester, f. 11v).

77. Langland, Piers, B.2.173–74, 199, and 3.14, on HM 114, ff. 10v, 11r, and 14v.


80. Ibid., B.P.211–12.

81. Ibid., B.P.217.

82. Galloway, Piers Penn Commentary, 143.


84. A survey of additional Piers manuscripts limited only to those represented in the Piers Plowman Electronic Archive, reveals capitalization and page layout practices that are similar to those of these three Guildhall scribes. For the list of occupations at the end of the Prologue, only Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 201 resembles Pinkhurst’s capitaliza-
tion policy, capitalizing at least the first two occupational terms on each line and adding a stroke of red ink to those first two terms as well. That manuscript as well as San Marino, Huntington Library MS HM 128, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud. Misc. 581, Oxford, Oriel College MS 79, and the composite R manuscript (London British Library Lansdowne MS 398 and Rawlinson Poetry 38) all treat the passage in which various groups respond to the character Liar (B.2.224–31) in a fashion similar to our three Guildhall scribes, whether with paraph marks as Osbarn does or by also arranging the lines in stanzas as Pinkhurst does. The scribe of Oriel College MS 79 goes so far as to note the various groups in the margin of the page as well. Finally, the scribes of all the manuscripts are somewhat inconsistent in their treatments of names in the tavern scene; in general, though, their preference is to capitalize first names and not occupational terms. When they do capitalize occupational terms, those beginning with R (which are also not accompanied by personal names) are favored, as they are by Osbarn and Marchaunt: thus the Corpus Christi MS 201 scribe capitalizes “Roper” and “Redys kyng,” but not “ribibour” or “ratoner,” and the scribe of London, British Library Additional MS 35287 capitalizes all four. For a complete account of words highlighted with red ink in Corpus Christi 201, see Noelle Phillips, “Seeing Red: Reading in Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 201’s *Piers Plowman,*” *Chaucer Review* 47(4) (2013): 439–64.