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Reading the Lives of
the Illiterate: London's Poor

By Barbara A. Hanawalt

In writing medieval social and cultural history I have studied groups of people who, for the most part, could not read or write: peasants, criminals, children, and women. In this article, I have taken a difficult group of illiterates to read, the poor of medieval London. Even among those people in the Middle Ages who could write, recording personal experiences was extremely rare. Communication in the Middle Ages was largely oral and only when something went wrong and came into courts or when someone had the foresight to have an agreement written down do we have a record of these people. As in my other studies of the Middle Ages I have used a variety of legal records that informed me about those instances when recourse to law was necessary. The scraps of information in court records yield an odd picture of the world. The information is fragmented and people usually appear with no social context, no family history, and no subsequent appearance.

Economic, social, and cultural historians confront the problem of establishing narratives, evoking personal experiences, and trying to find broader patterns and trends using the records of manor courts, tax lists, court rolls and books, appeals, notary registers, wills, miracle stories, and a number of other official or unofficial documents. While the textual evidence of the literate is articulate, reading the lives of the illiterate in medieval records is a challenge, but it is one that none of us engaged in archival research is willing to forgo. How do we know about these people, speaking their vernacular and regional languages, whose words are translated into official Latin? Their voices are filtered through legal formulas of testimony, questions by inquisitors, and distortions by those who are recording the information itself. It is the sense of solving mysteries that keeps researchers going back to the archives for tedious, long days. It is the hope of finding some insight into the lived life experience, the material environment or the economy, and people's ways of coping with their society.

The methods that a researcher might employ in reading these voluminous records are numerous. In some cases, property disputes in particular, it is possible to follow a case through its various permutations until it either drops from the record or is resolved. Scholars have been very clever in following families through the records, at the royal, regional, and even village level. But some records are repetitious and need a quantitative approach to make sense of them. One peasant does not illustrate a village experience, nor does one criminal describe the underworld, nor does one woman who makes a success of business make a class of female entrepreneurs. But sometimes the cases are very full and many voices are present and can be analyzed. I intend to experiment here with a number of dif-

ferent approaches to using archival sources to discover the lives of London's poor and attitudes toward poverty.

The relationship between the rich and the poor was a symbiotic one in the Middle Ages. Moral teaching, beginning with the Gospels, warned the rich that their souls were endangered and that one way of saving themselves was to help the poor. The bargain was laid out in a description of the Day of Judgment in the Gospel of Mathew (25.34–40):

> Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in; Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? Or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? Or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethern, ye have done it unto me.

The passage is worth a full quote because it both outlines the promise of salvation to those who gave charity in their lifetime and also lays out the type of charity that the poor needed: succor in prison and sickness, clothing, housing, and food and drink.

The moral teachings of the Gospels on charity and the relative merits of wealth and poverty occupied canon lawyers, preachers, saints such as Francis of Assisi, and poets such as Langland. But creeping into the discourse of all of these writers and speakers was an assessment of who was deserving of charity. Should it only be members of one's parish or guild? Should charity be limited to the infirm and maimed because they cannot work? What about those who lived on charity but could find work? These debates about the "deserving poor" as compared with the "undeserving poor" became more strident following the Black Death of 1348, because the mobility of the population added an element of vagabondage and these "sturdy beggars" became lumped together with the poor. The Ordinance of Laborers (1349) and the Statute of Laborers (1351), as we shall see, began the process of limiting the rights to charity.

The poor have not been without their historians, particularly in recent years. An informative study by Brian Tierney, *Medieval Poor Law: A Sketch of Canonical Theory and Its Applications in England,* traces the canonical debates about the poor and charity.[1] Michel Mollat, in *The Poor in the Middle Ages: An Essay in Social History,* traces the social history of poverty and attitudes toward the poor.[2] Miri Rubin, in *Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge,* has described the hospitals of Cambridge and acts of charity in the city.[3] John Henderson,

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[1] Brian Tierney, *Medieval Poor Law: A Sketch of Canonical Theory and Its Applications in England* (Berkeley, Calif., 1959).

[2] Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages: An Essay in Social History,* trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New Haven, Conn., 1986). It was first published in French in 1978.

[3] Miri Rubin, *Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge* (Cambridge, Eng., 1987), and "The Poor," in *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes,* ed. Rosemary Horrox (Cambridge, Eng., 1994), pp. 169–82.

in *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence,* has studied the organized charities for the poor, the effect of the Black Death on them, and the change in charity following the plague.[4] But Bronisław Geremek, in *The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris,* has tried to describe the poor rather than charity.[5] Sharon Farmer, in *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris: Gender, Ideology, and the Daily Lives of the Poor,* has used a variety of sources to discover the lives of the poor, particularly as their experience differed by gender.[6] When one moves to the early modern period, the number of books on the poor increases significantly. Several lessons can be learned from these studies. The poor are not easy to write about because they are underreported and voiceless. They may be well integrated into their parishes, and they formed networks of support of their own. They were not always marginals and criminals. We would like to know what portion of the population was poor in medieval cities, but without population figures for cities and little knowledge of those at poverty level, we cannot know. Even the definition of poverty is not fixed.

In this paper I will look at poverty in London, combining the experience of poverty as it appears in London records with the recorded charitable acts toward the poor. London strived to define the poor and poverty as it recorded details about deaths, housing, and deviant behavior. Without writing records themselves, the poor left traces of their lives in surviving records. The quote from Matthew highlights the needs of these people, and the actual practice of charity shows that the lesson informed charity. Charitable giving illustrates the spiritual bargain between the rich and poor in the salvation of the rich men's and women's souls and care for poorer neighbors. Finally, I will look at the contraction of charity in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the distinctions that began to creep into definitions of the poor in the postplague period.

LONDON'S POOR

Cornhill was a poor part of the city that William Langland describes in an autobiographical section of *Piers Plowman.*[7] It was an area of flea markets (dealers in used clothing and other such items). It was the destination of the parades of humiliation for those who were bawds and prostitutes and those who had sold bad wine and poultry or who had baked bread with sawdust in it. The stocks and the thew (the stocks for women) were located there. The Tun, a prison for debtors and rabble-rousers, was located in the Cornhill district. Langland apparently lived there in the mid-fourteenth century with his wife Kit. He knew the poor of the

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[4] John Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence* (Oxford, 1994).

[5] Bronisław Geremek, *The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris,* trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge, Eng., 1987).

[6] Sharon Farmer, *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris: Gender, Ideology, and the Daily Lives of the Poor* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2002).

[7] Lawrence M. Clopper, "Need Men and Women Labor? Langland's Wanderer and the Labor Ordinances," in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context,* ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt, Medieval Studies at Minnesota 4 (Minneapolis, 1992), pp. 110–32; and Caroline M. Barron, "William Langland: A London Poet," in *Chaucer's England,* pp. 91–109.

area well. They were prostitutes, such as Clarice of Cock's Lane, Hick the hackney man, pickpockets, a rat catcher and a street sweeper, Rose the dish seller, and "a heap of secondhand salesmen" who all met in the house of Betty Brewer.[8] The poor of London gathered in such brewhouses.

The lay subsidies of 1332 give some idea of the areas of London where the poor concentrated and the types of goods that they could own and that would not be taxed. The subsidies were a tax on movable goods (not real estate), and those whose total wealth was under 10s. could not be taxed. When the king and Parliament imposed the Subsidy of 1332, they exempted from assessment "a dress for the man, and one for the woman, and a bed for both, a ring and a chain of gold or silver, and a girdle of silk that they use every day; and also a goblet of silver or mazer [drinking cup of maple] from which they drink."[9] The legislation obviously covers a range of people, from the poor with only what he or she needed for clothing and a bed to those who had some valuable items that the king recognized that they needed to maintain their social status. As we shall see, some of the poor did have a few remaining silver items and luxury goods that they retained from a former prosperity or that they acquired with their meager earnings.

An estimated 50 percent or more of Londoners did not have the requisite movables to be taxed.[10] London was, in this respect, no different from other cities of Europe. All urban centers had their poor, and they attracted poor immigrants from the countryside with little wealth to their names. The cities of medieval and early-modern Europe relied on immigrants to provide a workforce, since they did not reproduce their own population.[11] London encouraged immigrants and did not tax them on bare necessities. London law allowed "all folk, foreigners as well as denizens, to be quit of payment at the . . . quay for trunk, fardel, pannier, or wallet which a man may carry under his arm for his necessaries for his back [clothing] and a bed."[12]

Wealth in London, according to the Subsidy of 1332, was concentrated along the riverfront at the wharves and quays. The Vintry was important for the wine merchants, and the fishmongers had quarters at Billingsgate and Queenhithe. The Cheap, of course, had goldsmiths and merchants dealing in a variety of luxury goods and thus a concentration of wealth. The poorer areas were toward the east, near the Tower, including Cornhill, Portsoken, Aldgate, and Limestreet.[13] From the wealthier sections of London, Cornhill was up a hill from the Guildhall and thus made the procession of the miscreants an obvious humiliation. The other

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[8] *William Langland's Piers Plowman: The C Version*, trans. George Economou (Philadelphia, 1996), pp. 58–59.

[9] *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, 2:447, as quoted by Margaret Curtis, "The London Lay Subsidy of 1332," in *Finance and Trade under Edward III*, ed. George Unwin (Manchester, Eng., 1919), pp. 35–92, at p. 37.

[10] Ibid., pp. 44–47.

[11] For the best modern summary of demography and immigration into European cities see Katherine A. Lynch, *Individuals, Families, and Communities in Europe, 1200–1800: The Urban Foundations of Western Society,* Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past Time 37 (Cambridge, Eng., 2003).

[12] *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London, Letter-Book G, 1352–1374,* ed. Reginald R. Sharpe (London, 1905), p. 225.

[13] Curtis, "The London Lay Subsidy of 1332," pp. 51–56.

areas were near the garrisons of the Tower that attracted soldiers, sailors, and a general odd lot of people. It had, as the East End of London long maintains, a reputation of being a rough end of the city.

The few records we have from complaints in the city wards show us that the poor rubbed shoulders with the rich even in these areas. We are used to urban areas in which the rich live spatially separated from the poor. But London housing generally did not permit such clear divisions. Poorer people rented solars, shops, and rooms from their more wealthy landlords who owned the whole house.

A surviving wardmoot presentment indicates the mix of neighbors within even one of the poor wards. Aldermen, wealthy and respected inhabitants, lived side by side with craftsmen and prostitutes. Limestreet reported on January 10, 1423:

> Mawde Sheppyster keeps open shop, retails and is not a freewoman; also she is a strumpet to more than one and a bawd also. Thomas Brid is a forestaller and regrater of victuals coming to the market. John Cool is a sustainer of them in his shop. Anneys Edward, Gass Furneys, Cateryn Sprynger and Julian Blyndale are regraters of poultry and wildfowl.

The prior of Wenlok added his own nuisance by extending his garden three feet into the highway, an action that stopped the dung and water flowing into the gutter. In Cripplegate Without, a brothel in Grub Street was attracting a noisy clientele including priests and their concubines. Among the general nuisances to the neighborhood were the smells from private privies of grocers, goldsmiths, and brothels.[14]

Modest living arrangements included small houses, shops with living quarters, rented rooms (particularly garrets or solars), and impermanent shacks erected against walls and buildings.[15] Rent of a room, since it did not contain a kitchen, often included board as well. In the mid-fourteenth century, a landlord complained that a man and his wife had "lived at his table" for three months and owed him 34s., or about 11s. a month for room and board. An inn room at the same period could cost as little as a half penny a day, but these were probably shared beds. In a fifteenth-century suit, a woman paid 6d. a week for room and board and a husbandman made arrangements for a kinswoman, Margaret Kyvet, in London that would provide her with bed and board for 6d. a week.[16] Another single woman contracted for bed and board for 16d. a week. She did not pay up and left after eighteen weeks owing her landlord 16s. She had left a girdle for security and her landlord had claimed it, but she was trying to get it back.[17] Failing to find

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[14] *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London, 1413–1437,* ed. A. H. Thomas, 4 (Cambridge, Eng., 1943), pp. 151–54.

[15] *Letter-Book G,* p. 203. Philip le Tournour and Alice his wife rented a small house outside Aldegate with the provision that they keep the road clean under the gate as was expected of tenants of the house. They paid 4s. a year: *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London, Letter Book E, 1314–1337,* ed. Reginald R. Sharpe (London, 1903), p. 8. See also John Schofield, *Medieval London Houses* (New Haven, Conn., 1994), pp. 51–56.

[16] *Calendar of Letters from the Mayor and Corporation of the City of London, A.D. 1350–1370,* ed. Reginald R. Sharpe (London, 1885), pp. 47–48; *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London, 1364–1381,* ed. A. H. Thomas, 2 (Cambridge, Eng., 1929), pp. 220–21; Great Britain, Public Record Office (henceforth cited as P.R.O.), Early Chancery Proceedings, C1/67/38.

[17] P.R.O., C1/64/764.

a room, London officials put Emma, daughter of William le Wirdrawere of York, into the Tun for the night "because she was found wandering about after curfew with a certain fardel of cloths."[18] Cheap housing, of course, had disadvantages. Julia of Camberwell and another woman rented a solar that was so dilapidated that it fell on Julia and killed her.[19]

Some very low rent places existed in the city. Margaret Kind, who occupied a bench at St. Andrew Hubbard, paid 2s. a year to the churchwardens for the privilege.[20] She must have given the churchwardens part of her take as a beggar. Alice de Goldenlant, a pauper and beggar, had a lean-to by the wall of a chapel and died of disability in this makeshift abode.[21]

Squatters were also a problem, breaking into unoccupied property and staying there against the will of the owner.[22] One homeless woman lived and died in the streets.[23] There must have been many like her. By the fifteenth century the fortunate poor found shelter in almshouses, but these establishments, as we shall see, were built by guilds for old and decrepit members or their widows. Hospitals founded by wealthy merchants were often intended to take in the poor and indigent, but it was a continual struggle to hold the hospital administration to the intention of the founders. On the whole they provided for royal pensioners, clergy, and people who made out corrodies to hospitals, such as St. Bartholomew's Hospital. People making corrodies gave real estate to the hospital to insure their care for the rest of their days. These elderly and sick patients took beds that had been intended for the poor of the laboring classes. Some hospitals charged a quarterly fee, as did St. Mary's Bethlehem, which charged 6s. 8d. a quarter. Those entering a hospital were expected to provide their own bedding, which was retained for future patients upon their death. In general, hospitals accepted more men than women. Maladministration and lack of funds left most of London's hospitals unable to provide adequate care for the poor by the end of the fifteenth century.[24]

Langland spoke with sympathy of the poor of his neighborhood, who were involved in lowly or illegal trades to survive. Failing adequate housing or having no housing, they resorted to brewhouses for the evening. The most complete picture that we have of deviant behavior of the poor comes from the Portsoken

[18] *Memorials of London and London Life in the XIIIth, XIVth, and XVth Centuries,* ed. Henry Thomas Riley (London, 1868), p. 140. See also P.R.O., C1/46/219.

[19] *The London Eyre of 1244,* ed. Helena M. Chew and Martin Weinbaum, London Record Society 6 (Leicester, 1970), p. 20, for an unknown beggar woman who was found in Billingsgate Street.

[20] London Guildhall, Churchwardens' Accounts, St. Andrew Hubbard, 15–18 Edward VI, MS 1279, vol. 1. She paid "for her stondyng ate church dore for a hold yere 2s." Although this record is later than our period, requiring payment was common practice in the Middle Ages as well.

[21] P.R.O., Coroners' Roll Just. 2/94A, m. 2 (1315).

[22] Corporation of London Record Office (hereafter cited as C.L.R.O.), Mayor's Court, Original Bills MC1/2A/45.

[23] P.R.O., Coroners' Roll Just. 2/94A, m. 2 (1315).

[24] Carole Rawcliffe, "The Hospitals of Later Medieval London," *Medical History* 24 (1984), 1–22; Nicholas Orme and Margaret Webster, *The English Hospital, 1070–1570* (New Haven, Conn., 1995), pp. 107–21; Rotha M. Clay, *The Medieval Hospitals of England* (London, 1909). For Cambridge see Rubin, *Charity and Community,* pp. 99–147.

Wardmoot of 1465 to 1483.[25] The cases reveal a number of offenses that indicate perhaps the mean-spiritedness of neighbors who reported these people to the alderman's court, or perhaps a genuine annoyance at the disruptions to the peace that the otherwise respectable poor might enjoy in their parishes. We are only given the charges, not the outcome of the cases.

In London, the aldermen were responsible for maintaining peace in their wardmoots and for hearing complaints of what we would call "misdemeanors."[26] The charges are often multiple. The picture is a confusing one of people who practiced or were accused of practicing a variety of small side occupations that brought in some extra money or simply got on the nerves of neighbors. We might want to call this the "economy of makeshift," as Olwen Hufton did in her book on the poor of eighteenth-century France.[27] Life was tenuous, and little extras, like prostitution or bringing false charges against people, brought in a few pence that might get a shared room or even small ale at a brewhouse.

Of the 431 people accused as individuals or married people in the Portsoken Wardmoot,[28] 189 (44 percent) were men, 124 (29 percent) were women, and 118 (27 percent) were married couples. Many of these people were repeat offenders and had not corrected their ways by the next year, or, indeed, throughout the period. Apparently, these by-occupations of a marginal nature were profitable, or at least sufficiently remunerative that the parties had not died in the interval and had kept starvation at bay. The men were more frequent repeaters, at 66 percent (71 cases), than women at 24 percent (25 cases) and married couples at 10 percent (11 cases). A slap on the wrist was not enough to modify the behavior of these people living on the margins, nor was one warning enough to satisfy those who were charging them in courts.

One interesting observation about the Portsoken record of misbehavior is that these people, unlike many more prosperous people, do reappear over a number of years. Their "economy of makeshift" kept them alive and made them part of a neighborhood that Langland could identify and that Farmer has found in medieval Paris.[29] Marjorie K. McIntosh has observed the same phenomenon in *Controlling Misbehavior in England, 1370–1600* in largely rural populations.[30] These

[25] C.L.R.O., Portsoken, Ward Presentations, 1465–83, 266C ms. 1, 3–7. Although the series has gaps in it, the total number of recorded cases in this poor ward is 423. Frank Rexroth, *Das Milieu der Nacht: Obrigkeit und Randgruppen im spätmittelalterlichen London,* Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 153 (Göttingen, 1999), has a chapter on wardmoot procedures, pp. 213–46.

[26] Caroline M. Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages: Government and People, 1200–1500* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 136–46. *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London, Letter-Book K, Henry VI,* ed. Reginald R. Sharpe (London, 1911), p. 160: "The Alderman to hold their several wardmoots and to refer such matters as they cannot themselves remedy to the Mayor's General Court."

[27] Olwen H. Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750–1789* (Oxford, 1973).

[28] Fifty-one cases (12 percent) are accusations of faults in rental property, but these are mostly landlords and they are cited for nuisances such as encroachment, latrines, smoky chimneys, etc.

[29] Farmer, *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris,* and "Down and Out and Female in Thirteenth-Century Paris," *American Historical Review* 103 (1988), 345–72.

[30] Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehavior in England, 1370–1600,* Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past Time 34 (Cambridge, Eng., 1998), has made an extensive study of petty misdemeanors.

people might be constant irritants, but they still lived for a number of years to annoy their neighbors.

What were their offenses? With multiple charges made against these people and with a small sample size, sorting out the people and their offenses is not particularly statistically significant. Men were accused of being strumpet mongers and barrators (making false charges and maintaining false suits), breaking the peace, acting as free of the city in trade when they were not citizens, and being penny prickers, beggars, night walkers, eavesdroppers, extortionists, or just being "suspicious." They allowed their dogs, hogs, and hens to run free in the neighborhood. Married people were often involved in shared activities of deceit: strumpet monger/strumpet, bawd, scolds, false assumption of free status in trading in the city, maintaining servants, and suspicious behavior. Charges against women were clearer: 66 percent were accused of being strumpets, 12 percent of being bawds, and 17 percent of being scolds. The rest of the accusations were scattered among other offenses. Clearly, sexual crimes were more likely to be charged against women, although among married couples it appeared that men and women were both involved in the sex trade, probably with men pimping for their wives.[31]

We can gather more from looking at the Portsoken population. Many of the men and women appear to be single, with women most often listed by their own names rather than as "wife of" someone. At least by their names, most people appear to be English, rather than foreign born. Few of either the men or the women are listed with occupations. The names could have come from *Piers Plowman*: Elizabeth the Delight, wife of Robert Jondt, John Poore, John Estro and his "lemman."[32] These people are not beggars, they are living in an economy of "makeshift."

But people that appear in the few surviving wardmoot records are the ones that offended their neighbors and entered the records because they did so. Their equally poor neighbors were perhaps among those who complained against them, but they were integrated into the respectable community of the deserving, parish poor. Among the most interesting documents dealing with London's poor are the wills recorded in the Archdeaconry Court[33] and the Commissary Court.[34] These courts, particularly the Archdeaconry Court, offered the opportunity to make a will to everyone in London regardless of their wealth. It was a shrewd idea for fund-raising because even the working poor and the very poor had some money and,

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[31] See Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York, 1996), for a discussion of English prostitution.

[32] C.L.R.O., 266C, m. 3.

[33] London, Guildhall Library, Archdeaconry Court, MS 9051 (hereafter references will be given as Archdeaconry Court, 9051, and the complete manuscript reference). I read the entire collection of these wills. Most of the wills are from the East End of London, and many are from mariners. Since the value of their property was so low, they did not fall into other possible courts recording wills. The Archdeaconry Court made some money on these mostly poor people.

[34] London, Guildhall Library, Commissary Court of London, MS 9171 (hereafter references will be given as Commissary Court, 9171, and the complete manuscript reference). In using these wills, which are indexed, I used the index only and have not done a complete survey. I looked at the wills of paupers and beggars along with some of the lower positions in London such as servants, laborers, water bearers, single women, and so on. Only one beggar and one pauper appear.

since the wills were made close to death, the church always received something. Perhaps this view is too cynical, for I am sure that the priest also offered comfort and a sense to the dying that their lives and inheritances also mattered.

In the Archdeaconry Court 16 of the 228 wills were those of testators described as paupers. The rest of the testators were people of modest means, or even servants and laborers, but were not described as paupers.[35] Those who are categorized as paupers by the priests recording the wills occupy our attention today. The Commissary Court has a much fuller set of wills and an index of occupations, but listed only one beggar and one pauper. The Archdeaconry Court covers the period from 1393 to 1409 and the Commissary Court from 1377 to 1480.

In looking at the comparable wills in both sets, one wonders what distinguished these people in the minds of clergy, that they called them paupers and beggars rather than simply poor people. In the Commissary Court and in some of the other records, the beggar was a separate category from pauper. Beggars lived from charity by actively asking for alms, on the street or at church doors,[36] but paupers were the poor, who might accept charity but did not openly beg. Still in the minds of the clergy of the Archdeaconry and the Commissary Court, these were different people. What made a man a "pauper," who had £1 7s. and more to leave in bequests, different from some of the servants and laborers who also made wills and had even less property? Perhaps it was the condition of employment of the latter that excluded them from being paupers, or perhaps the degradation from a former, higher status reduced some to poverty. The records do not help. The clergy seemed to be working on presumptions of categories of wealth depending on the individual case and the status the testators could presume to have had in society.

What were the profiles of these people that the wills defined as "paupers or beggars"? From the two sets, ten were men and nine were women. Although the wills do not always state marital status, two of the men were single and four were married. Four of the women were widows. Some listed former occupations: carpenter, skinner, brazier, or widow of a minstrel. Their property varied widely. West, who wished to be buried in St. Paul, had three sisters to whom to leave bequests and must have had about £2 or more. John Essex stipulated that he was to be buried at St. Martin Otterwich and left 6d. to St. Paul's Cathedral and 6d. to his parish church. The residue of his estate (amount unspecified) went to his wife Margaret and his daughter Agnes to pay debts.[37] Hawke was a married man with

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[35] For a more complete analysis of the Archdeaconry wills see Robert A. Wood, "Poor Widows, c. 1393–1415," in *Medieval London Widows, 1300–1500,* ed. Caroline M. Barron and Anne F. Sutton (London, 1994), pp. 55–70. He has divided his categories into the "very poor" and the "poor." I have limited my analysis to those labeled as poor or as beggars. His table 4 lists all the widows by name.

[36] Beggars were certainly an allowed part of the economy, as were lepers, but the role was a restricted one. Pauper was a more general category that included the poor without means of support and they could be an object of charity, but not active beggars. Rawcliffe, "Hospitals of Later Medieval London," pp. 6–7, points out that London had expelled lepers and lunatics or tried to maintain them in hospitals throughout the Middle Ages. Attitudes toward lepers were ambiguous in London as elsewhere. Leprosy was considered contagious. The *Liber Albus: The White Book of the City of London,* ed. Henry Thomas Riley (London, 1861), p. 238, did not allow lepers to go around the city by day or night, but they could stand at a parish church each Sunday to collect alms.

[37] Archdeaconry Court, 9051/1 fol. 4r.

one son and a wife. No amount is stated for his goods, but the wife was executor and the son and widow were to have the residue. Likewise a former carpenter left the residue of his estate to his wife, a pattern typical of married men.[38] One man who had been a carpenter and was single had no estate at all.[39]

Women seemed to have had broader networks and left goods to specific people. Widow Knyght had a total estate of 14s. 4d., including a house and garden that she left to a couple, perhaps kin.[40] Widow Skarlet had one son who was to receive the residue of her estate and the church was to have 12d.[41] Another widow had a good female friend to whom she left a brass pot and pan along with household goods to be shared with her own daughter, and another woman left her household goods to her executor.[42]

Both men and women left goods to the church, but again there were differences in their patterns of giving. A woman with an estate of 6s. 6d., a silver spoon, and other goods left it all to the clergy.[43] Other women also specified goods, such as the widow Alice, a beggar, who gave 29s. to the parish church and 6s. 8d. to the chaplain. Her bequests included charitable gifts as well. She gave an additional 6s. 8d. for the poor and the residue of the estate to the chaplain to say prayers for all the faithful. Another woman, a minstrel's widow, left money to the city and a taborer, in addition to money to pray for the souls of herself and her husband.[44] One female pauper had the amenities of linen table cloths and napkins and left them to her parish church.[45] A common pattern among male testators with no relatives was to reserve 2s. 6d. for burial services and leave the remainder to a member of the clergy, who also acted as executor.[46]

The striking gender difference in the bequests is that women seemed to have had more attachment to their goods and also appeared to have had a network of friends or family who provided comfort to them in their poverty.[47] Perhaps their possessions were sad reminders of a more comfortable life in which the table linens, silver spoons, and household items were essential. Among these widows the items of luxury were perhaps part of their dowry. The men among the paupers made their wives executors, if they had one, or seemed to rely on the parish priest rather than larger networks of male friends. Their bequests tended not to be as detailed as those of women in terms of material goods.

The more fortunate neighbors appearing in the Archdeaconry Court wills differed from those of the paupers not only in the amount and value of the property they had to bequeath but also in the number of people they could recognize in their final days. Godchildren, nieces and nephews, guild brothers, apprentices, laborers, and servants all appear in addition to the immediate family. But the wills

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[38] Archdeaconry Court, 9051/1 fols. 6v, 8r, 18v.
[39] Archdeaconry Court, 9051/1 fol. 6v.
[40] Archdeaconry Court, 9051/1 fol. 2r.
[41] Archdeaconry Court, 9051/1 fol. 6v.
[42] Archdeaconry Court, 9051/1 fols. 9v, 12r.
[43] Archdeaconry Court, 9051/1 fol. 9v.
[44] Commissary Court, 9171/3, fols. 152r, 302v; Archdeaconry Court, 9051/1 fol. 9v.
[45] Archdeaconry Court, 9051/1 fol. 9v.
[46] Archdeaconry Court, 9051/1 fols. 19r, 20r, 98r.
[47] Farmer, *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris*, explores the gender difference of the Parisian poor.

of servants, laborers, minstrels, gardeners, waterbearers, and spinsters indicate a level of reduced circumstances similar to the paupers among their neighbors.

All the beggars and paupers appearing in the wills, as well as their more prosperous neighbors, identified strongly with their parish and wanted to be buried in the parish church. These were local people who retained affection for their parishes. They were not vagrants, but rather residents who had had occupations or were widows and who ended life in poverty. The beggars among them probably received alms from neighbors.

These paupers were well known, but so, too, were some of the more destitute people who appear in the coroners' inquests into accidental death.[48] John Stolere, for instance, was a pauper and mendicant aged seven. He sat relieving himself in the street when Ralph de Mymmes, aged twelve and groom to John Absolon, accidentally ran over him in the early morning. Ralph was driving a water cart drawn by two horses, with a cask full of water when he ran over the boy.[49] Another mendicant, John de Kent, aged twelve years, had been standing on a wharf alone after dinner and, with the Thames being at full tide, he accidentally fell in and was drowned.[50]

The city, however, did not leave the children of London citizens to meet such unhappy ends. In 1320 the mayor and chamberlain took into the Court of Orphans Walter, son of Richard the Cook, who was described as a vagrant orphan. By provision of the city custom, Walter became the ward of the chamberlain, along with whatever property he possessed, until he became of age. He was to receive provision from the city.[51]

Cold weather took a toll of the city paupers. In 1315 England and all of northern Europe was suffering through abnormally cold and wet weather. Crops failed and the period of 1315–17 came to be known as the Great Famine.[52] Johannes de Trokelowe, a chronicler in St. Albans, spoke of servants being discharged from their positions and religious houses being unable to provide their customary alms. The dismissed were forced into the streets to commit crimes or to beg. The number of dead in Suffolk was so great that the living could not bury them, and Trokelowe himself saw dead and dirty bodies lying in the lanes and streets.[53] *The French Chronicle of London* also spoke of the prolonged rain and the failure of crops in

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[48] For an explanation of the work of the medieval coroner see R. F. Hunnisett, *The Medieval Coroner* (Cambridge, Eng., 1961). The coroners were charged with looking into all homicides, accidental deaths, suicides, treasure trove, and taking confessions from those seeking sanctuary. The accidental deaths included only those bodies found outside, even if the person had died of disease or cold, rather than violence.

[49] *Calendar of Coroners' Rolls of the City of London, A. D. 1300–1378,* ed. Reginald R. Sharpe (London, 1913), p. 220.

[50] Ibid., p. 194.

[51] *Letter Book E, 1314–1337,* p. 135.

[52] William C. Jordan, *The Great Famine: Northern Europe in the Fourteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J., 1996), has a general discussion of the famine. See also Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain, 850–1520* (New Haven, Conn., 2002), pp. 228–64. Dyer, however, does not have a discussion of poverty.

[53] Johannes de Trokelowe, *Annales (Chronica Monasterii S. Albani),* ed. Henry Thomas Riley, Rolls Series 28 (London, 1866), pp. 92–96.

1315.[54] The coroners' rolls record the deaths of beggars and paupers in the streets in December 1315 through February 1316. A man was found frozen to death on a street by the bridge at Walbroke in December. In the same month the beggar Agnes de Goldenlane died of debility in her lean-to by the wall of a chapel in a place called le Polete. In January 1317 another woman died of cold and hunger in the street and in February a man died. In April the situation had not improved and William le Bakersman, a beggar, died of starvation.[55]

Even more tragic were the deaths of nine paupers (four women and five men) at a charitable distribution. Two chaplains, executors of the wills of Robert de Ritford and Thomas de Markham, were distributing bread to the poor. A multitude of paupers came, and the victims were trampled to death, dying of broken bones. The chaplains were unable to stop the mob, even though they saw what was happening.[56]

Like the paupers leaving wills, the beggars found in the streets were all named and either had occupational surnames or were identified by places in London. In other words, these were not vagrants who had wandered into the city in the famine but people whom the coroners' jurors could identify and name. Still, the poor and hungry people from the countryside must have come to London hoping for food. There can be no doubt that the reported deaths represent only a small portion of those who died in London during this terrible famine. They appear in the coroners' inquests because they died outside and the coroners were bound by law to investigate all accidental deaths as well as homicides. They did not investigate those who died in houses and inns.

Famine revisited England again in 1322–23. Although it was less severe than the earlier famine, it brought death to the poor of London. Again a distribution of alms resulted in a mob scene. On July 3 in 1322 "a great multitude of poor people assembled at the gate of the Friars Preachers [near Ludgate] seeking alms. Robert Fynel, Simon, Robert, and William his sons and 22 other male persons, names unknown, Matilda, daughter of Robert le Carpenter, Beatrix Cole, Johanna 'le Peyntures,' Alice la Norice and 22 other women, names unknown" were fatally crushed to death as they entered the gate of the priory.[57] The event impressed one of the London chroniclers who said that 55 men, women, and children were crushed to death on the occasion of the distribution of alms for the soul of Henry Fingrie, late fishmonger.[58] Were the unnamed bodies those of vagrants who had come into the city hoping for charity or work? Or were the jurors simply overwhelmed and could not begin to identify them all? We cannot know. But the coroners took care to try to enumerate the number of dead and at least give names to those that they could.

[54] *Croniques de London depuis l'an 44 Hen. III jusqu'à l'an 17 Edw. III*, ed. G. James Aungier, Camden Society Series 28 (London, 1844), p. 38.

[55] P.R.O., Just. 2/94A, ms. 2, 3, 5.

[56] Ibid., m. 5. In the same terrible famine years Parisians provided even more relief: Farmer, *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris*, pp. 35–36.

[57] *Calendar of Coroners' Rolls*, p. 61.

[58] *Annales Paulini (Chronicles of the Reigns of Edward I and Edward II)*, ed. William Stubbs, Rolls Series 76 (London, 1882), 1:304, as quoted in Sharpe, *Coroners' Rolls*, p. 61.

CHARITY AND ALMS

The people described as paupers were generous to the poor in their wills, and the wealthy men who left charitable donations of food and pennies were also engaged in charitable acts, even though the outcome was disastrous. While the wardmoots censured those who engaged in the "economy of makeshift," the wealthy and even those who could spare just a small part of their estate remembered the poor in their wills. It was not just the injunctions of Matthew but also numerous sermons that dwelt on the passages in the Bible.[59] Parables talked of people of modest means sharing their bread with a needy stranger only to find that their loaves and fishes were multiplied and the stranger turned into Christ. Charitable gifts could be specific ones to individuals, but most often they were made to the poor in general, to the friars to distribute to the poor, to hospitals, or to guilds to give to poor and decrepit members.

In the Archdeaconry Court, in which the paupers registered their wills and in which most of the testators were men and women engaged in crafts, 29 percent of the 228 testators left alms. Maude Penne, widow of a skinner, left money to the poor and to hospitals.[60] A mercer left money for four prisoners (recall the injunction in Matthew), and a pewterer not only remembered prisoners at Newgate but also provided dowries for poor girls of marriageable age.[61] Another man, described only as a citizen of London, left £5 for paupers, and a linen draper left 1d. each for 60 paupers.[62] The largest gift of alms for the poor came from a butcher named Godspeed who left £113 6s. 8d.[63] More specific bequests were 10 marks for six poor men and for the bedridden poor. An anchoress left money for twelve poor widows.[64] Obviously, the people leaving money for the poor in these wills knew about the hardships of life. Prisoners had to supply their own food and drink, as well as a mat for a bed and relief from fetters. Prison was an inhospitable place in which a prisoner might languish until a debt was paid or a person tried for a crime.[65] The Gospel had preached sympathy for the prisoners, and many testators left money to feed and succor the prisoners.

Of the wealthier London men whose wills were enrolled in the Husting Court of Wills and Deeds, only 9 percent of the testators left alms for prisoners, hospitals, and the poor.[66] In a book covering a later period, W. K. Jordan found that from

[59] Rubin, *Charity and Community,* pp. 74–98, discusses sermon literature and popular instruction on charity. Barron, "William Langland," pp. 96–98, feels that Langland's knowledge of the need for charity came from his experience living among the poor in London. Langland also chastised the mayor for not doing more to keep down prices of goods in London. See also H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 217–19.

[60] Archdeaconry Court, 9051/1 fol. 5v.

[61] Archdeaconry Court, 9051/1 fols. 14r, 17v.

[62] Archdeaconry Court, 9051/1 fols. 16r, 19r.

[63] Archdeaconry Court, 9051/1 fol. 89r.

[64] Archdeaconry Court, 9051/1 fol. 94v.

[65] R. B. Pugh, *Imprisonment in Medieval England* (Cambridge, Eng., 1968).

[66] This seemingly grudging figure should not be taken as entirely accurate, since it was taken from a printed calendar of wills. Since it was a calendar, some bequests, including those made to charities, might have been left out. Of the 3,330 men's wills recorded until 1500, 779 men left public donations

1480 to 1540 Londoners' pattern of giving was to increase the amenities of the city and to endow educational institutions including grammar schools and colleges. Only 13 percent of their charitable giving went to the poor.[67] Perhaps the pattern was already well established in the late Middle Ages and those who really cared about the poor were those who were not too many steps removed from the status themselves. The will of one city merchant summed up the attitude toward "sturdy beggars" in his bequest of £26 8s. 4d. to four city hospitals in 1479. He excluded "the commyn beggeres going aboute all the daie light and lying in [hospitals] the nyght tyme." His alms were designed for "the veray needy lakking frendeship, comfort and help."[68]

But another explanation for the seeming callousness of the wealthy was that they provided for their own poor through their guilds. Most guilds had a clause such as that of the Merchant Tailors: "Ye shall give in your lifetime or else bequeath in your testament to the use and behoof of the said Fraternity more or less after your estate, and demean that ye hear and leave to the same in supporting and maintaining the priests and poor almsmen of the said Fraternity." Furthermore, the guild also had a provision that members of the guild or their laborers who had fights among themselves or who produced bad products or engaged in shoddy business practices should pay into the poor box for the benefit of poor brethren or sisters.[69]

In accordance with these provisions we find bequests for coals to be given to the poor and needy brothers at Christmas. Donors and the guild masters were careful of the feelings of the recipients. One donor asked the master and warden to select carefully and be sure to give the money in such a way as to preserve the self-respect of the recipients. While "poor," the recipients were to be "such who may have been honorable and discreet persons of the mysterie and afterwards by the visitation of God come to poverty." The alms were to be paid to them at their homes to save them the embarrassment of receiving them in the Common Hall.[70] Gifts of real estate to the fraternity meant that the poor box was replenished from the rents.[71]

Another solution to raising funds was to make a direct charge on members. In the fourteenth century the Goldsmiths asked their members to pay 5d. each for eight almsmen and £2 for general alms at Christmas. The Goldsmiths were most concerned about those of the craft who had been blinded by furnaces or those who had become otherwise infirm. In 1341 they put aside £20 a year for these people, for a chaplain, and prayers for the souls of the departed. They had originally also granted burial, but apparently the tremendous loss of life during the

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including guilds, the city, colleges and schools, etc., while 295 of the men made donations to the poor, prisoners, hospitals, etc.: *Calendar of Wills Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Husting, London, A.D. 1258–A.D. 1688*, ed. Reginald R. Sharpe, 2 vols. (London, 1890).

[67] W. K. Jordan, *The Charities of London, 1480–1660: The Aspirations and the Achievements of the Urban Society* (New York, 1974), p. 22.

[68] Rawcliffe, "Hospitals of Later Medieval London," p. 4.

[69] Charles M. Clode, *Early History of the Guild of Merchant Taylors of the Fraternity of St. John the Baptist, London* (London, 1888), p. 110.

[70] Ibid., p. 121.

[71] Ibid., pp. 121–23.

Black Death broke the bank and they had to withdraw this benefit.[72] The Gold-
smiths were also a fractious group and fights were frequent. The master and war-
dens arbitrated these disputes and used a contribution to the poor box as a form
of binding the arbitration. Thus when Edward of Bowdon and Davy Panter en-
tered into an enormous fight in which one called the other a "rough footed Scot,"
the wardens intervened and had them each post a bond of £40 to the poor box if
they started fighting again. The poor box was enriched, because they did start
fighting again.[73]

The guilds kept accounts so that we have some idea about the numbers sup-
ported and the types of benefits they received. In 1334 the Goldsmiths had seven-
teen poor members on the rolls at a cost of 133s. including sustenance and burials.
In 1335 the attrition was such that they had eight on their rolls at a cost of 3s.
4d. each. In addition to this support, the Goldsmiths paid for the decrepit members
to come to the guild feast each year. The amount of assistance was not generous
but social status increased the amount. Among the recipients of charity was John
Kelk, once a warden, who had become blind and received alms at 2s. a week in
1473.[74] The Cutlers likewise had an almsman, Thomas Hamond, who had been
a warden in 1444–45. He had been a prosperous cutler on London Bridge and
paid an annual rent of 23s. 4d. But in 1450–51 he could not pay the rent and the
company came to his aid. He lost the business in 1456 and became an almsman.
The company paid 46s. 8d. arrears of rent and rented a house for him for 16s.
8d. In addition he got 10d. weekly and 8s. 8d. for wood and coal. He died in
1461 and the company paid for his funeral. His widow got a pension after his
death, and the guild paid for her burial in 1475. Their daughter got a weekly
pension of 8d. and was invited to feasts.[75] The Merchant Tailors were also gen-
erous with their impoverished and decrepit members, paying both short- and long-
term compensation.[76] The Founders Guild and the Drapers Guild accounts show
that they, too, sustained their destitute members.[77] While the Goldsmiths finally

[72] Thomas F. Reddaway, *The Early History of the Goldsmiths' Company, 1327–1550* (London,
1975), pp. 5, 28.

[73] Ibid., pp. 151–53.

[74] *Memorials of the Goldsmiths' Company, Being Gleanings from Their Records*, ed. Walter Pri-
deaux (London, 1896), pp. 1, 5, 22, 25.

[75] Charles Welch, *History of the Cutlers' Company of London*, 1 (London, 1916), pp. 150, 169,
170.

[76] Clode, *Merchant Taylors*, p. 123. In 1371 five men got £4 a year, Sara Lunt got 40s. per year,
Robert atte Rye 56s. 8d., Will Herford 52s. for three quarters of a year, Geffrey Kent 45s. for three
quarters, another man got 45s. for half a year, and another 28s. 4d. for a fraction of a year. In 1468–
69 (p. 126) the guild was still giving out rather generous alms. John Claham got £6 14s. 4d. for the
year, three men got £3 17s. 4d., and others got lesser amounts. Apparently, alms were distributed either
by need or by the prestige of the member.

[77] *Wardens' Accounts of the Worshipful Company of Founders of the City of London, 1497–1681*,
ed. Guy Parsloe (London, 1964), pp. 6, 18, 22, 30, 83, in both monetary payments and aid with
rentals. A. H. Johnson, *The History of the Worshipful Company of Drapers of London*, 1 (Oxford,
1914), pp. 199, 268. The Drapers offered 16d. weekly from the Common Box and would bury the
poor. By the late fifteenth century they were giving 13s. 4d. each quarter for needy members. But to
qualify for aid, the person had to be a full member of the guild for seven years. Those who had been
guild wardens were to get 14d. a week.

gave up burying their impoverished members, other guilds, such as the Founders, continued the practice. They paid for the winding sheet, the burial pit, ringing of the bells, torches, and masses for their departed.[78]

In the fifteenth century, guilds increasingly organized their charity for their members by building almshouses, often connected with the guildhalls that they were building during the same period.[79]

Parish churches and parish guilds offered some limited support for their members. Mostly, the parish church could provide burial for very poor parishioners, not those who appeared in wills and who seemed to have enough goods for a burial. The better-off members of the parish paid for the burial of the poorer ones, and the church wardens administered this fund.[80] The parish church was also a good conduit for alms. John Bedeham in 1477 made provision that three poor men be paid 4d. a week (similar to what a craft guild might pay) from the twenty-eighth day of December 1477 to the sixth day of February 1479. That is, for 111 weeks he would expend 111s. for prayers for his soul from these men.[81]

Not only the parish church but also the various social-religious guilds associated with parishes provided some assistance for their members. These guilds were voluntary associations made up of lay men and women that provided masses, processions, feasts, and a variety of benefits for their members. They represented one response to the devastation of the Black Death and the increasing emphasis on Purgatory. The guilds were quite explicit about the sort of members that they would help. They would help those with physical impairment, including loss of limbs, leprosy, and blindness. They also might cover losses at sea or from fire or robbery. Old age or debilitating illness might also be included in the coverage. But if poverty arose from the foolishness or neglect of a business rather than an act of God, then the guilds would not offer assistance.[82] While urban guilds from around England usually offered 4d. to 8d. a week, London guilds offered 14d. a week.[83]

Ben McRee has argued that the reason for inclusion of benefits for poor members in the guild statutes was that they enhanced the reputation of the guild. The statutes also mention who was to be excluded from guild membership and guild charity. Prominent among these people are beggars. In London, the Guild of All Souls stated that begging was a false and deceptive habit and that the guild offered aid so that poor members would not take to the streets. Another London guild excluded members from benefits who went public with their begging, because it

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[78] *Wardens' Accounts of the Worshipful Company of Founders*, pp. 12, 22, 83.

[79] Schofield, *Medieval London Houses*, pp. 2, 5, 47–48, 60, 97, 115. He includes floor plans and later drawings of some of these houses.

[80] *The Medieval Records of a London Church*, ed. Henry Littlehales, Early English Text Society, O.S., 125, 128 (London, 1905), pp. xlix, 84.

[81] Ibid., p. 89. For Cambridge see Rubin, *Charity and Community,* pp. 237–44. By 1391 Parliament was trying to enforce parish poor relief: *The Statutes of the Realm,* 2 (London, 1810), p. 80, c. 6.

[82] Ben McRee, "Charity and Gild Solidarity in Late Medieval England," *Journal of British Studies* 32 (1993), 195–225, at pp. 203–5.

[83] Ibid., p. 206.

brought shame and dishonor on the guild. Other forms of behavior, such as per-petrating felonies, also excluded members from aid.[84]

While the guild bylaws are clear about eligibility for aid, evidence that payments were actually made is elusive. Caroline Barron argued that the parish fraternities of London offered no aid at all despite their bylaws.[85] Miri Rubin also did not find that the Wisbech guild offered any real relief.[86] In order to know if the guilds paid the benefits it is necessary to look at the guild account rolls. Ben McRee found that the Trinity Guild in Lynn did pay benefits. Between 1373 and 1484 the guild had an average of twenty-five people on its rolls each year. The recipients of aid were almost equally divided between men and women, but women pre-dominated at 55 percent. Most of them were widows.[87]

If the amounts spent on the material relief of members was not great, we must not overlook the spiritual and social comfort that guilds provided. The parish guilds cut across class boundaries and included craftsmen and their wives as well as more elite members of the parish. The guilds contributed to parish cohesion and social contacts. But the most important benefit that the guilds provided was prayers for members to insure a smooth transition to the afterlife and continued aid in moving out of Purgatory. Guilds undertook a number of responsibilities for funerals, excluding burials. They would bring the body back from about a twelve-mile radius of the parish, lend a hearse, and provide candles at the funeral pro-cession. In addition they had masses said for the souls of departed members both at the funeral and in subsequent memorial masses. Guild brothers and sisters attended the funeral and prayed for the souls of the dead. They were assiduous in providing insurance for the afterlife, and that must have been a comfort to these true believing Christians.[88]

CHANGES IN CHARITY AFTER THE BLACK DEATH

The practices of giving charity through guilds—merchant, craft, and parish—reflected a change that was generally taking place in late-medieval England. Miri Rubin suggested that an underlying shift in social relations and attitudes in the fifteenth century led to a less "harmonious social climate" and a greater unwill-ingness to seek eventual reward in heaven from acts of charity. People began to think more of their own salvation.[89] The parish guilds' anxiety about appearances and the necessity of excluding beggars also suggests a change of attitude toward the poor. Brian Tierney found fewer changes in canonistic theory, the administra-tion of charity, and discussions of poverty and charity among churchmen at the

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[84] Ibid., p. 210.

[85] Caroline M. Barron, "The Parish Fraternities of Medieval London," in *The Church in Pre-Reformation Society*, ed. Caroline M. Barron and Christopher Harper-Bill (Woodbridge, Eng., 1985), pp. 26–27.

[86] Miri Rubin, *Charity and Community*, p. 255.

[87] McRee, "Charity and Gild Solidarity in Late Medieval England," pp. 215–16.

[88] Barbara A. Hanawalt, "Keepers of the Lights: Late Medieval English Parish Gilds," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance History* 17 (1992), 21–37.

[89] Rubin, *Charity and Community*, pp. 297–99.

end of the Middle Ages than in the twelfth and thirteenth century. He saw the changes in attitudes toward the poor appearing more in secular law than canon law. The late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries suffered a general decline in intellectual interest among the clergy in discussing poverty and charity.[90] The religious concerns seemed to be moving to lay literature as well, as in *Piers Plowman*.[91]

The driving force for the secularization of concern for the poor came from the effects of the Black Death of 1348–50. The immediate effect of the plague was an acute shortage of labor. Workers were quick to realize that they could charge more for their labor than they had previously, and craftsmen realized that their products were so valuable that they could raise prices. The king and Parliament reacted with equal rapidity, passing first the Ordinance of Laborers (1349) and then the Statute of Laborers in 1351. The intention of the statute was to force workers to charge the wages that they had received in 1347 and craftsmen to price their goods at the 1347 level.[92] In modern terms, the laws were trying to suppress the economic law of supply and demand. In medieval terms, it was a conservative effort to return laborers to the countryside and keep them on the manor as villeins. Such laws, as we know, were impossible to enforce, and the population began to move seeking higher wages. While past experience with famine led people to believe that the whole problem would solve itself, the repeated visitations of plague and other diseases meant that population remained low and did not recover until the late fifteenth century. The movement of people around the countryside and into cities blurred the line between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor. Vagrants and beggars began to be lumped into one category as marginals and undesirables.

The rhetoric that would form the basis of the government's argument against beggars appeared in the preamble to the Ordinance of Laborers in which Edward III deplored "the great scarcity of servants" and alleged that too many laborers refused to work "giving themselves to Idleness and Vice, and sometime to Theft and other Abominations." The lawmakers were so worried about begging that they forbade the English people to give alms because it encouraged sloth, idleness, vice, and even worse "theft and other shameful activity." The almsgivers were threatened with prison for their acts of kindness.[93]

In London the city government complained that vagrants were converging on society from "diverse counties" and asking for charity even though they were able-bodied and capable of work.[94] The mayor and alderman issued a proclamation against vagrants in 1359 ordering them to quit the city; if they persisted and continued to beg, they were to be put in stocks for half a day for the first offense, an entire day for the second one, and imprisoned if they still begged.[95] The problem

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[90] Tierney, *Medieval Poor Law,* pp. 109–33.

[91] McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehavior,* pp. 186–208, has a full discussion of changing attitudes toward the poor in the late Middle Ages.

[92] London tried to set a schedule of prices: *Memorials of London,* pp. 253–58, 312.

[93] *Statutes of the Realm,* 1:307, 308, c. 7, provision of the Statute of Laborers, pp. 311–13.

[94] *Memorials of London,* p. 304. *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London, Letter Book I, 1400–1422,* ed. Reginald R. Sharpe (London, 1909), p. 196.

[95] *Memorials of London,* pp. 304–5.

did not go away, and again in 1375 the mayor and aldermen ordered Londoners not to give alms to anyone who could earn a living by handicraft or bodily labor.[96] By 1376 Parliament had received an impassioned plea from the Commons asking for stronger measures against vagrants, not just in London, but in the countryside. The Commons' petition conflated the beggars with vagrants and said that they lived an idle life or worse, became "staff-strikers" or thieves. They wanted these false beggars arrested and imprisoned.[97] Again Parliament complied, enacting statutes that would force the begging poor back into their communities rather than being on the road.[98]

While the laws were many, the enforcement was difficult. The London Mayor's Court recorded the case of Adam of Spalding, wandering through the city begging and "pretending that he was unfit for work whereas upon examination of his body, it was manifest that he was strong and lusty, capable of labor and able to earn his food and clothing and a reasonable wage. . . ." He did not deny this and swore not to beg again under penalty of pillory. Others who were rounded up at the same time (November 1381) similarly swore.[99]

London's government was not heartless, however. In an attempt to alleviate the problems of poorer members of society, they attempted to establish fair prices for staples so that the population could afford to buy them.[100] By the reign of Henry VIII the city was attempting to regulate the poor by defining them. The poor, aged, sick, and blind were to have tokens of pure white metal to wear on their right shoulders to indicate they were legitimate beggars. Vagabonds who were found to be in good health and "mighty beggars" were to wear a letter *V* in yellow cloth on their breast and be excluded from the city. The legitimate poor were to be well mannered to those from whom they begged. Furthermore, "all such poore people as been visited with the great pokkes outwardly apperyng or with other great sores or maladyes tedious loathsome or abhorible to be loked uppon or seen to the great annoyances of the people" should be put in hospitals.[101]

By using a variety of sources and methodologies some clear patterns emerge about the poor and attitudes toward them in London. From the beginning of Christian teaching on the poor and charity, a distinction was made between the deserving and the undeserving poor. The rhetoric of discrimination of the two categories was in place early in the history of charity, but it became stronger in the period following the Black Death and when the population of vagrants increased. Londoners increasingly gave alms to those of their neighborhood, their

[96] *Memorials of London*, p. 390. Sheila Lindenbaum, "London Texts and Literary Practice," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge, Eng., 1999), pp. 300–307, found that London was becoming increasingly concerned with regulating society.

[97] "Commons' Petition against Vagrants," in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. R. B. Dobson (London, 1970), pp. 72–74.

[98] *Statutes of the Realm*, 2:32–33; 2:56, c. 3; 2:58, c. 2, c. 3 Richard II c. v, and *Statutes of the Realm*, 12 Richard II c. iii, c. vii, c. viii.

[99] *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London, 1381–1412*, ed. A. H. Thomas, 3 (Cambridge, Eng., 1932), p. 5.

[100] *Letter Book G*, pp. 148–51, 274, 301, 311. *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London, Letter-Book H, 1375–1399*, ed. Reginald R. Sharpe (London, 1907), p. 183.

[101] C.L.R.O., Letter Book N, calendar in manuscript, p. 93, 8 Henry VIII.

parish, or their guild. They had personal contacts with these people, and they knew their needs and the cause of their distress. The laws show an increasing distrust of begging and tended to lump the beggar, the vagrant, and the thief into the same category. These laws laid the groundwork for the Poor Laws of the sixteenth century, which tried to keep the poor population immobile and put the charge of their upkeep on the community.

Finally, one may wonder if the poor of Paris and London were similar. Geremek's study of Paris is broad ranging in its discussion of marginals and criminals, but he found a similar pattern of intensified legislation against vagrancy following the plague.[102] On the other hand, Geremek's description of the relationship between the deserving poor and the citizens of Paris, based on wills and support of hospitals, concludes that the poor were well integrated into medieval Paris.[103] Henderson likewise points to the hospitals of Florence and the public provision of grain for the poor as a sign of ongoing charity.[104] Certainly, London was far behind Paris and Florence in hospital foundations, municipal distributions of food, and charitable guilds devoted to the poor. Mollat was not as sanguine about the relationship between the poor and the city. He reads the laws as a shift in perceptions of the poor following the plague and describes the laws as a move from "charity to policing the poor."[105] Parisians, like Londoners, had a problem of distinguishing between the deserving and the undeserving poor, and their anxiety is shown in laws, in literature, and in arrests. But Parisians were more generous in establishing hospitals for the poor than were Londoners.

[102] Geremek, *The Margins of Society,* pp. 29–43.
[103] Ibid., pp. 167–210.
[104] Henderson, *Piety and Charity.*
[105] Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages,* pp. 251–94. Henderson, *Piety and Charity,* p. 407, sees a similar concern about policing in Florence.

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