URBANIZATION AND POLLUTION IN AN IRISH (?) TOWN IN THE 14TH CENTURY

In this article my intention is to offer a rather different interpretation from the ones so far provided by scholars who have analysed the medieval poem known as *Satire on the people of Kildare* by underlining the sociological and 'environmentalist' concerns of the anonymous author of this work contained in MS. British Library Harley 913. The latter is a parchment *codex* composed of 64 *folia* in 12mo, which can be roughly ascribed to the first quarter of the 14th century, the *terminus post quem* being 1308, year of the death of Piers of Birmingham, the fierce opponent of the Irish in memoriam of whom a poem in the manuscript, which is now considered a mock-eulogy, is dedicated.[1]

Its pocket-size measure (140 x 91 mm.) and the items it contains, which were described by Wanley for the first time on the occasion of the cataloguing of the Harley collection, *Catalogi librorum manuscriptorum Angliae et Hiberniae in unum collecti, cum indice alphabetico*, which he started work on in 1708, and whose list was reproposed by Heuser,[2] would lead us to presume that it was destined for personal use. It is a trilingual miscellany, containing mainly Latin texts, 16 poems written in English (but the number rises to 17 if we add the short *Five hateful things*, on *Fl.* 6*v*, which is not in Wanley's list) and two in French; a linguistic composition not infrequent in other miscellanies of English origin of that age, although in Harley 913 the presence of French "is of too little importance to provide much compilatory stimulus" (Scahill 2003: 31). Needless to say they are all anonymous, except for the hymn *Swet Jesus hend and fre* (*Fl.* 9*r*) where, in

[1] For an evaluation of the literary connotation of the poem see Benskin 1989.

[2] Heuser 1904. For subsequent lists of the texts of MS Harley 913 see note 14 in Cartlidge 2003.

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the closing stanza, it is declared that the song has been written by friar Michel Kyldare, a datum which, along with a few others, has led to the conclusion that the compilation was put together in a Franciscan environment, although, as Heuser points out, there is no direct mention of his belonging to the Franciscan order (Heuser 1904: 79).

As for its provenance, its links with Ireland are widely recognized, thanks to some references to Irish places and a few loan words of Irish origin scattered in the texts, which Bliss and Long (1987: 720) have thus summarized:

> A list of Franciscan provinces begins with the provinces of Ireland, not with those of England; four Irish towns (Drogheda Kildare, New Ross, and Waterford) are mentioned by name; one of the English poems lauds the excellence of Pers de Bermingham in the slaughter of the Irish [...] a set of proverbs in Norman French is attributed to the earl of Desmond; the mythical and idyllic land of Cockaygne is located 'fur in see bi west Spayngne', the traditional position of Ireland according to medieval geography; and finally, at least three Irish loanwords are used in the English texts: *corrine* (Irish *coirín*, 'can'), *eri* (Irish *éraic*, 'compensation'), *keperin* (Irish *ceithearn*, 'band of soldiers'). A fourth word, *russin*, is equivalent in form to Irish *roisín*, 'lunch', but the Irish word may perhaps ultimately be of English origin.

To this list it is necessary to add *tromchery* 'liver' – which Andrew Breeze has demonstrated may well be Irish (Breeze 1993: 16) – and in any case a thorough reassessment of the analysis of loan words is needed.

The history of the manuscript can only be traced starting from the 16th century, thanks to an *ex libris* which can be found at *Fl.* 2, where we read *Iste liber pertinet ad me Georgium Wyse*, in which one can identify the person of George Wyse, mayor of Waterford in 1561 and bailiff of the same city in 1566. A further annotation can be read, though not very clearly, at *Fl.* 29, *Iste liber pertinet ad Ihoe lambard...Waterfordie...*; but nothing is known about what happened before that (Bliss & Long 1987: 721). Its fame is based on the attribution of the English poems to the Hiberno-English dialect put forward by Heuser, who first edited them collectively in 1904, and repeated by

McIntosh and Samuels, albeit with some perplexities, in their *Prolegomena* (McIntosh & Samuels 1968: 8).

The scarcity of documents in that dialectal variety for the medieval period has led to an increasing interest in the linguistic aspects of the manuscript more than in its content, and even when studies have been carried out on the texts on a literary point of view it has been the presence of the popular poem *The Land of Cockaygne* that has monopolized the critics' attention. It is widely accepted, after Michael Benskin's investigation on the number of scribes who intervened in the redaction of Harley 913, that the majority of the texts in the codex are in a single hand (Benskin 1990: 163-193) but, notwithstanding this peculiarity which should contribute in giving uniformity to the manuscript, "it lacks unity, even codicologically" (Scahill 2003: 31).

In an attempt to find some form of cohesion among the texts preserved in Harley 913, in a recent article Neil Cartlidge, opposing the historicist perspective of Wallace, for whom "medieval literature cannot be understood (does not survive) except as part of transmissive processes – moving through the hands of copyists, owners, readers and institutional authorities – that form part of other and greater histories (social, political, religious, economic)" (Wallace 1999: xxi), states that perhaps the search for cohesion on a formal level, one which he defines as the "continuities of theme, image, phrase, form and style", may prove to be more productive in order to understand the coherence that the compiler of Harley manuscript 913 followed in putting together the collection. He re-examines in the course of his work the easy opinions expressed on the works contained in the manuscripts, comparing the English texts with the wider Latin production, but at the same time he cannot resist the temptation of drawing an equally hasty conclusion by identifying in the sense of "festivity, order and community", the common denominator linking the texts of Harley 913, merely on the basis of an analysis of the formal aspects which would seem to characterize it (Cartlidge 2003: 33-52).

Although Cartlidge's analysis has the merit of taking into account, for the first time, not only the English poems but the texts written in Latin as well, giving greater breadth and renewed vigour to the inquiry, I still think that the whole manuscript deserves greater consideration and is still awaiting the publication of a comprehensive study in which each text, both in Latin and in English and French, is analysed in meticulous detail so as to identify what

Wallace refers to as the 'greater histories' which justify the composition and transmission of each of them; only after so doing will it be possible to understand the reasons for their presence in Harley 913. To this end, I consider that the composition known as the *Satire on the people of Kildare* constitutes an exemplary starting point for an analysis that wishes to take into account the historical and ideological motivations underlying this literary production, since in my opinion it is strongly enmeshed in the social problems of its time, connected in particular with the urban, middle class setting, or rather its 'municipal' setting, a point on which I agree with Cartlidge.

Its *incipit* is *Hail seint Michel wiþ þe lange sper* and it occurs in *folia* 7r-8v of the manuscript, after the more famous *The land of Cockaygne* and a very short poem of only 7 lines, *Bissop lorles*, better known as *Five hateful things*, and is immediately followed by the Latin *Quondam fuit factum festus*, or *The abbot of Gloucester's feast*. It was first published by Thomas Wright, who is responsible for the title, in *Reliquiae Antiquae* (1841), and it was proposed again by Furnivall in 1858. It was of course included in the edition by Heuser and a few years later (1929) in the book on Anglo-Irish literature by Seymour, together with a modern English translation. More recently (1995) it was published by Angela Lucas, *Anglo-Irish Poems of the Middle Ages*, here too together with the other 16 poems in the manuscript.

Hail seint Michel is composed of 120 lines divided into 20 stanzas with an *aabcdd* rhyme, a metrical structure which corresponds to its conceptual content, but which is entirely original, since nothing similar can be found in other poems of that time. In the first line the poet introduces the victim of his invective, followed in the next line by the attributes which characterize him or her, the third and fourth lines generally contain a gibe, while the last two lines of each stanza, which normally rhyme together, contain a laudatory expression that the poet addresses to himself for his rhyming ability, or directly to his poetical artefact. Starting from Wright, who attributed to it a very misleading title (Wright 1843: II, 174), it has long been considered a satire against the people of an Irish town and many opinions have been expressed in an attempt to identify the town which, on the other hand, is never mentioned in the poem: Heuser seems inclined to identify it with Dublin (Heuser 1904: 150-153), and so do Bliss and Long (Bliss & Long

1987: 728), while Garbáty proposes Athlone as the place of inspiration for the poem (Garbáty 1963: 139-163).

I do not want to minimize the results of these studies but, in my opinion, whatever the identity of the town may be, and regardless of whether or not the poem is about a real town, we should interpret the poem as expression of unease with – and thus substantially a condemnation of – the development of urban society with its rising mercantile class and the increasing differentiation in trades,[3] a consumer society which find in the urban conglomeration the ideal place to thrive, with the well-known and devastating repercussions on both the moral and the environmental level. Besides, the presumed date of composition comes in a period (13th century-beginning of the 14th century) in which there is, throughout most of Europe, widespread urban expansion. Without necessarily referring to the era of the Communes in Italy, but keeping within the geographical area of northern Europe, and particularly Ireland, the recent (but still far too limited) archeological excavations carried out in Dublin, Cork, Waterford, Wexford and Drogheda, all attest, through the enlarging of their city walls, to considerable urban expansion which continued throughout the 13th century and only slowed down in some cases during the first quarter of the 14th century.[4] The scenario to be found in the burlesque composition in French of *The Entrenchment of New Ross*, which is present in the last booklet of the Harley manuscript, according to the reconstruction of the codex given by Peter and Angela Lucas (Lucas & Lucas 1990: 286-99), in which the story is told of the building of new walls for the city in which all the social classes of the city take part, would not have been so unusual, therefore, in Ireland at that time. If we take the example of Waterford, which is linked in some way to the redaction of MS Harley 913, according to Barry (1987: 127)

> During the reign of John the city walls [...] were greatly extended westwards and southwards from their original 8-ha triangular shaped area. The construction and maintenance of the medieval extension to the walls of some 13 ha in area were paid for by

[3] For a definition of the medieval town see "The English Town in the Middle Ages" (Holt & Rosser 1990: 4).

[4] Barry 1987: 116-138. See also Graham 1987 and Bradley 1995. I am indebted to Prof. John Bradley for providing me with a bibliography on medieval Irish towns.

> regular murage grants to the city, throughout the thirteenth century, the first surviving one dating to 1224. That Waterford was expanding dramatically throughout the thirteenth century was also reflected in the surviving customs returns on wool, woolfells and hides from 1275 to 1333. In these Waterford was in second place after New Ross in Co. Wexford [...].

It is no coincidence, then, if these items, the production of which was highly pollutant, are mentioned in our poem which has to do with environmental issues as much as with social questions.

Of particular interest, in this regard, are the tirades against those who pollute the environment which represent one of the first environmental protests in medieval literature in the English language. The resulting representation of the town is an evil-smelling, noisy place, inhabited by dirty and greedy individuals from which we can infer that the poet feels nostalgia for a world which is slowly and inexorably waning. The first victims are the saints, invoked and described in detail according to a well-known iconography. So St. Michael is sneered at for the funny wings on his shoulders, St. Christopher for the amusing story about Baby Jesus carried on his shoulders, St. Mary Magdalene pictured as a rich lady (not as a penitent as some other kind of iconography depicts her), St. Dominic with his incomprehensible stick all crooked at the top, and lastly St. Francis always followed by a sort of menagerie.

Surprisingly, Cartlidge does not take into account these first five stanzas, which are highly irreverent towards the saints and which strongly characterize the poem. His failure to give due attention to this aspect leads him to define the poem as an estates satire, whereas the fact of opening the poem with such a strong element of insolence towards the protagonists of popular devotion should make us wary of classifying it in such terms. It is true that within the poem the various social classes are described and derided (however, it is also worth pointing out here that the nobility and the entire hierarchy of administrative and judicial officials are not mentioned at all), but we cannot ignore the inclusion of some five stanzas dedicated to saints, something which would be anomalous in the context of an estates satire. In my opinion, the poet's attitude and the style of the poem remind us more of certain burlesque songs that are still in vogue in goliardic contexts in

Catholic countries (this is certainly true for Italy) also in the light of the more or less explicit sexual references which heavily imbue the stanzas dedicated to the saints. Moreover, the impression one has in observing the detailed descriptions of the saints' attributes is very much that of a situation of ἔκφρασις. If we analyse, for example, the stanza about St. Christopher who is depicted by the poet with his feet in the water with eels swimming around them:

> Hail, Seint Cristofre wiþ þi lang stake!
> þou ber Ur Louerd Jesus Crist ouer the brod lake.
> Mani grete kunger swimmeþ abute þi fete.
> Hou mani hering to peni at West Chep in London.
> (7-10)

This hypothesis is confirmed if we compare the iconography described here of the bearer of Christ with a fresco in a church in Pickering, which depicts St. Christopher with various types of fish, including an eel. It has been dated at about 1500, but I am sure that it would not have been hard to find similar ones around the beginning of the 14th century. Another fresco in Oaksey shows St. Christopher with a mermaid![5] This should not be taken as meaning that the poet necessarily despises the saints themselves; the author's attitude could be seen as an attack not against them as such, but rather against the iconography through which the Christian religion is divulged, or more precisely, the naïve and popular form of art of the frescoes painted on the church walls in order to kindle popular devotion, which visually pollutes the town.

But again, which town? Every town which, around the end of the 13th century, saw the number of its inhabitants increase enormously in the process of urbanization, leading to a confluence inside its walls of all sorts of craftsmanship that could satisfy the needs not only of its population but also far beyond. And even those who should have been tied to a specific place – I am referring to the religious orders – go and increase the number of lay people residing in the town. So the Carmelites, characterized here by their white copes, choose to reside in a city like Drogheda which is well-known for its intense trading activities. The disapproval of the poet towards the

[5] For images of saints on medieval English churches, see Marshall 2004.

excessively worldly choice made by this order is more apparent if we consider its origins: set up in the 12th century (possibly after the third crusade) out of a spontaneous congregation of pilgrim-penitents coming from Europe, who were gathered together at 'Elia's fount', in one of the valleys of Mount Carmel, in order to live as hermits in imitation of the prophet Elia; obviously the rule written for them by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Albert Avogadro imposed not only the obligation to reside in the cell they were assigned to but also the shedding of any private property: both provisions are neglected by the representatives of this order in the poem who are not only far removed from leading a life restricted to their cells but who also appropriate, thereby committing sacrilege, the aspergilla of the churches that they encounter along their journey.

> Hail be ye freris with þe white copis!
> Ye habbiþ a hus at Drochda war man makiþ ropes
> Euir ȝe beþ roilend the landis al abute
> Of þe watir daissers ye robbiþ þe churchis.
> (32-34)

The same attitude can be found in the Williamites, or friars of the *ordo eremiticus sancti Wilhelmi*, who abandon their hermit existence and flock to the city; it would seem that they do not have a well-defined identity: the poet puts them halfway between minor friars and preaching friars, but basically they tend towards the accumulation of wealth:

> Hail be ye gilmins wiþ yur blake gunes!
> ȝe leuith þe wildirnis and filliþ þe tuniss.
> Menur wiþ oute and prechur wiþ inne,
> Yur abite is of gadering, þat is mochil schame.
> (37-40)

In the following stanza the poet criticizes the Benedictine monks for their love of drinking, but in this case the feeling one has is that we are dealing with a stereotype:

> Hail ȝe holi monkes wiþ yur corrin
> Late and raþe ifillid of ale and wine!
> Depe cun ȝe bouse, þat is al ȝur care.
> With Seint Benet is scurge lome ȝe disciplineth.

(43-46)

Equally stereotypical would seem to be the accusation made against the nuns of some unspecified monastery of St. Mary whom the poet, using a marvellous metaphor, condemns for their weak respect for the vow of chastity:

Hail be ȝe nonnes of Seint Mari house,
Goddes bourmaidnes and his owen spouse!
Ofte mistrediþ ȝe ȝur schone, ȝur fete beþ ful tendre:
Daþeit þe sotter þat tawiþ ȝure leþir!
(49-52)

He does not neglect to mention the priests, characterized by their big books and flowing locks, notwithstanding the rule of the tonsure:

Hail be ȝe prestis wiþ ȝur brode bokes!
þoȝ ȝur crune be ischaue, fair beþ ȝur crokes.
ȝow and oþer lewid men deleþ bot a houue,
Whan ȝe deliþ holibrede, ȝiue me boute a litel.
(55-58)

The poet lashes out against easy religious callings that put religion in the hands of unscrupulous people, from whom nothing can be gained for the edification of souls. As a consequence of all this, moral pollution pervades the whole of society, from merchants to tailors to shoemakers, in a pyramidal sequence that sees carders at the bottom rung of the social ladder.

The accusation against merchants is that of being extremely miserly. Although they deal with precious things and various currencies, they give very little to the poor:

Hail be ȝe marchand wiþ ȝur gret packes
Of draperie, auoir depeise, and ȝur wol sackes,
Gold, siluer, stones, riche markes and ek pundes!
Litil ȝiue ȝe ther of to þe wrech pouer.
(61-64)

Tailors cut and make clothes from the cloth that merchants trade in, but the clothes they sew for the town buyers are of very poor quality:

Hail be ȝe tailurs wiþ ȝur scharpe schores!
To make wronge hodes ȝe kittiþ lome gores.

Aȝens mid winter hote beþ yur neldes.
Þoȝ ȝur semes semiþ fair hi lestiþ a litil while.
(67-70)

Shoemakers are directly linked to the production of clothes, but they do not just make shoes that protect their customers' feet: in trying to satisfy the ever more sophisticated taste of the purchasers, they engage in the production of more and more extravagant shoes, using the skins of strange animals – *selcuth bestis* – which are rare and consequently expensive. Although they deal with high quality products, the shoemakers themselves look hideous with their black teeth:

Hail be ȝe sutters wiþ ȝour mani lestes
Wiþ ȝour blote hides of selcuþ bestis,
And trobles and treisuses, bochevampe and alles!
Blak and loþlich beþ ȝur teþ, hori was þat route.
(73-76)

I want to highlight here the use of the adjective *hori*, which will occur again in the text – as we shall see – in a context linked to the town's problematic environmental situation. The poet will describe it more pointedly when he refers to the tanners, accused of making the town air smell foul with their stinking vats where the leathers are laid out to soak for months in a pestilential liquid:

Hail be ȝe skinners wiþ ȝure drenche kiue!
Who so smilliþ þer to, wo is him aliue,
Whan þat hit þonneriþ ȝe mote þer in schite.
Daþeit ȝur curteisie, ȝe stinkeþ al þe strete!
(79-82)

We do not know how aware the poet was of the risks that the presence of leather workers in the centre of a town constituted for public health; certainly he is annoyed by the horrible smell coming from their vats. But those risks were not ignored by the municipal authorities, at least in some parts of Italy, for example, where the problem had been faced by local councils, insofar as an environmental perception of the problem was possible in the Middle Ages. As Laures has pointed out in one of the very few studies on the subject (2000):

> The actual tanning process was generally conducted in open pits (and later in vats). The process was slow, but thorough, requiring some fifteen months before completion. The process obviously produced a large amount of chemical wastes which found their way into the commune's waterways and sewer systems. One of the primary concerns of the statute-makers was to prevent this sort of abuse. The only real concern reflected in the legislation was the proper disposal of the waste products generated by that trade. The Ferrarese statute-makers, almost as an afterthought, appended a statute to the end of the Fourth Book of the Code of 1287. The statute simply states "that no leather worker or any other person can nor should in any way or at any time remove the flesh or hair (from any hide) or intestines next to the cesspool of the City of Ferrara nor next to the Po on the side of the city." Bassano was more explicit: leather workers were warned that they could not "strip the flesh from hides, wash hides, or place any waste in the streets or in the waters from the Bridge of the Brenta downstream to the end of the structure near the water on the bank of the Campus Marcius." Bassanese tanners were also warned to practise their trade within the city without creating nuisances by storing hides in or about butcher shops or by greasing the hides in the streets, porticos, or meadows of the town. Again, there is a definite effort to restrict the area in which the tanners could practise their trade and dispose of their waste products, but no attempt to restrict the practice of the trade itself. Verona, also concerned about water quality, insisted its leather workers should not work or soak leather or hides "in the River Fossatum." Tanners, their apprentices, and equipment were also banned from the streets near the Palace of the Commune. The intent and problem of the municipal officials is clear.

We know that some of the health precautions had also been adopted by the municipal authorities of Dublin in relation to the production of hides; thus in the 13th century it is laid down that: "No sheep's pell is to be sold or worked in the city; if worked, then he who worked it shall be subject to amercement, and the fur worked treated as fake. The same is to be done with regard to fraudulent cloth and inaccurate weights. There is no need to say anything here about the weighing of bread, but let such matters be handled as they were in times past. No currier is to cure leather beneath solars; if one does so, he is to be put in prison" (Gilbert 1870: 232-39). It is interesting to note that the legislator does not bother to specify the regulations for the

selling of bread, since he refers to the *assisae panis* which were repeatedly updated by the specific legislative authorities which the poet explicitly refers to in the stanza dedicated to bakers.

More dirt and bad smells are added by the potters who habitually work in mud and dust. They have to supply the firing chamber of the kiln with plenty of wood, so that they look frightening with their axes raised, their bodies covered with yellow mud, surrounded by flies which they sometimes swallow:

> Hail be ȝe potters wiþ ȝur bole ax
> Fair beþ ȝur barmhatres, yolow beþ ȝur fax.
> ȝe stondiþ at þe schamil, brod ferlich bernes
> Fleiis ȝou folowith ȝe swolowiþ ynow.
> (85 -88)

A mention of some forms of moral pollution is present in the verses dedicated to bakers and brewsters. The production of bread, like that of shoes – as we have seen in the stanza addressed to the shoemakers – is becoming more and more sophisticated in order to satisfy the tastes of town customers, but it encourages fraud because the bakers cheat on weight:

> Hail be ȝe bakers wiþ ȝur louis smale
> Of white bred and of blake, ful mani and fale!
> ȝe pincheþ on þe riht white a ȝens Goddes law.
> (91-93)

while the brewesters, who use all sorts of containers dipping their thumb deeper than they should do into the glass or beaker, skimp on the quantity of beer they pour:

> Hail be ȝe brewesters wiþ ȝur galuns,
> Potels and quartes ouer al þe tounes!
> ȝur þowmes berriþ moche awai, schame hab þe gyle.
> (97-99)

In order to regulate the activities of these two categories various assizes had been held since the time of Edward II in order to fix the price of bread, according to its weight and quality, and of beer, according to its quantity.[6] If

[6] The assizes are collected in Luders 1810-1828.

we take as an example one of the *Assisa panis*, which regulated the price, weight and quality of bread, we can have an idea of how the production of bread in those times had become more and more varied, depending on the kind of wheat or the weight of the loaf, so that we can appreciate better the verse "of white bred and of blake ful mani and fale": "*Quando quarterium frumenti venditur per xiid. tunc panis quadrantis de Wastello ponderabit sex libras & sexdecim solidos. Panis de Coket de eodem blado & de eodem bultello ponderabit plusquam Wastellum de duobꝫ solidis. De blado minoris precii ponderabit plusquam Wastellum de quinqꝫ. Panis vero de siminello ponderabit minus de Wastello de de duobꝫ solidis, quia bis coctus est. Panis [integro de quadrante de frumento] ponderabit Coket & đī. Panis vero de [trait] ponderabit duos Wastellos. Et panis de [omni blado] ponderabit duos Coketos*."[7] And so on, listing further differences in prices.

The regulation of the production of beer, or *Assisa Cervisie*, prescribed a difference in price according to the place where the beer was sold, i.e. in town or out of town *:* "*Quando quarterium frumenti venditur per tribꝫ solidis vel quadraginta denaris, & ordeum pro viginti denaris vel duobꝫ solidis, & quarterium avene pro [quindecim] denariis, tunc bene possunt braciatores vendere in Civitatibꝫ [duas lagenas] cervisie ad denaris, & extra debent vendere tres ad denarium. Et quando in Burgo venduntur tres lagene ad denarium extra debent vendi quatuor, & bene possunt; & ista assisa debet teneri per totam Angliam.*"[8]

[7] The assize reported above is thought to be emanated during the reign of Henry III, possibly 1251. "When a Quarter of Wheat is sold for xiid., then Wastel Bread of a Farthing shall weigh £vi and xvis. But Bread Cocket [of a Farthing] of the same Corn and Bultel, shall weigh more than Wastel by iis. And [Cocket Bread] made of Corn of lower Price, shall weigh more than Wastel by vs. Bread made into a Simnel shall weigh iis. less than Wastel. Bread made of the whole Wheat shall weigh a Cocket and a half, [so that a Cocket shall weigh more than a Wastel by 5s]. Bread of Treet shall weigh ii Wastels. And Bread of [common] Wheat shall weigh two great Cockets. When a Quarter of Wheat is sold for 18d., then Wastel Bread of a Farthing white and well baked shall weigh £4 10s. 8d. When for 2s., then £3 8s. When for 2s. 6d., then for 54s. 4d. ob. q. When for 3s., then for 48s [...]' (Luders 1810-1828: I, 199).

[8] "When a Quarter of Wheat is sold for 3s. or 3s. 4d. and a Quarter of Barley for 20d. or 2s. and a Quarter of Oats for 16d. then Brewers in Cities ought and may well afford to sell Two Gallons of Beer or Ale for a Penny, and out of Cities to sell 3 [or iv] Gallons for a Penny. And when in a Town 3 Gallons are sold for a Penny, out of a Town they ought and may sell four; and this Assise ought to be holden throughout all England" (Luders 1810-1828: I, 200).

The same laws were applied in the Irish colonies which were under the jurisdiction of the Crown and, as Frame points out, "in Ireland, where English law and administration were taken over wholesale, there was a deep-seated tension between legal and institutional forms on the one hand, and social and political realities on the other" (Frame 1981: 94). When one of these statutes was breached, the established punishment was set in the *Judicium Pillorie*, according to which "*Si Pistor convictus fuerit, vel Braciatrix convicta, qđ [istas assisas] non observavit, primo, secundo & tercio amercietur secundum quantitatem ...., [&] non graviter deliquerit; & si graviter deliquerit pluries, & castigari noluerit, paciatur judicium corporis, scilicet, Pistor collistrigium, et Braciatrix trebuchetum vel castigatorium.*"[9] So when the poet warns the bakers of the risk of ending up on a *fair pillori*: "To þe fair pillori, Ich rede ȝe, tak hede!" (94) and of the risk of the cucking-stool for the brewsters: "beþ iwar of þe coking stole, þe lake is dep and hori." (100) He does so in accordance with the *Judicium Pillorie.* It is worth highlighting that in the last verse examined there is another mention of the hoary waters of the lake which so traumatize the poet, where – we can imagine – tanners and potters pour the evil-smelling liquids deriving from their production.

The poet's disgust for the deplorable environmental conditions of the city is all the more exasperated when in the following stanzas he describes the stalls of the female peddlers with their filthy merchandise along the bank of that filthy lake. They display all sorts of candles (I suppose mostly made of tallow), buckets and black cooking pots where presumably they cook food (tripe, cows' hooves and sheep's heads) which they offer to the customer in decidedly unhygienic conditions:

> Hail be ȝe hokesters dun bi þe lake,
> Wiþ candles and golokes and þe pottes blak,
> Tripis and kine fete and schepen heuedes!
> Wiþ þe hori tromcheri hori is yur inne.

[9] "If a Baker or a brewer be convicted, because he has not observed the Assize of Bread and Beer, the first, second, and third times, he shall be amerced according to his offence; if it be not over-grievous; but if the offence be grievous and often, and will not be corrected, then he shall suffer punishment of the body, that is to wit, a baker to the pillory, and a brewer to the tumbrel, or some other correction" (Luders 1810-1828: I, 201-202).

(103-106)

Women peddlers, *hockesters* in our text, *trecche* or *treccole* in Florence, *regatières* in 14th century French, *regateras* in Spanish of the same period, were a highly despised category all over Europe. According to Antonio Pucci, a Florentine writer of that period, describing the famous market in Florence in his poem La proprietà di Mercato Vecchio, they were hideous women: *"Sempre di più ragion vi stanno trecche: / diciam di quelle con parole brutte / che tutto il dì per due castagne secche / garrono insieme chiamandosi putte*".[10]

A later reference to *trecche* can be found in Tommaso Garzoni who, in *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo*, published in Venice in 1588, affirms that they were so awful and such liars that "*se dicessero il vero, gli cadrebbero i denti di bocca*" ("if they said the truth their teeth would soon drop out of their mouth").[11]

In *Piers Ploughman* the wife of Covetise is the regrater Rose, who, as Langland says "has holden hokkerye all hyre lyf-tyme"(5:222); she had first worked as a weaver of woolen cloth, but used to cheat on the weight by which she paid the spinners she employed, later she became a brewester, but she used to mix good ale with poor quality beer (Schmidt 1978: 49). Our poet is so annoyed by their presence that in the last two lines of the verse he forgets to praise himself for his poetical skill and says instead:

He is sori of his lif
þat is fast to such a wif.
(107-108)

But the worst invective is reserved for the wool carders who are so rowdy that the poet would have one of them sit on a flax comb!

Fi a debles kaites þat kemiþ þe wolle,
Al þe schindes of þe tronn an heiȝ opon ȝur sculle!
ȝe makid me sech a goshorne ouer al þe wowes,

[10] "There are hocksters from more and more regions:/ of them we may say with rude words/ that for two dried chestnuts they spend the whole day/squawking and calling each other: Bitch!" (my translation) (Corsi 1969: 165; Sapegno 1962: 404-405).
[11] See the edition by G. B. Bronzini, 1996: 367.

þer for ich makid on of ȝou sit opon a hechil!
(109-112)

From what has been said so far it is clear that the poet is basically depicting the society of his time which is becoming bourgeois and mercantile. We are in the early 14th century, a period of great expansion, both demographically and economically, which appeared to contemporaries to be never-ending. But, as we know, the end did come, in 1348, the year of the Black Death which marks an inexorable halt and the beginning of a reverse trend with people fleeing from the overcrowded towns and searching refuge in the countryside. But the poet, faced with the transformation of a society that he neither understands nor approves of, is unaware of the fate of the towns in the mid-14th century, and he gives vent to his unease. His ideal is not the town, the urban conglomeration, at all, but the countryside where the aristocracy live a refined and quiet existence, or at most by the monastery, a far cry from the noisy streets, the churches with their garish frescoes, the smoky, stinking inns, the cries of women peddlers and the hubbub coming from craftsmen's workshops. By way of conclusion I would like to underline that the poet's attitude is not one of severe reprimand of the bad habits spreading through the city, just as the punishment that he hopes will fall on the heads of the transgressors does not belong to the kingdom of Heavens but to human justice; there are no visions of paradise as reward for those who have followed the straight and narrow path, but at the end of the poem there is an invitation to drink up, after all these are people who live in the town, there is nothing that can be done. Although the poet is culturally aware of the evils deriving from modern city life, and he knows the laws that should regulate the society of his time, the tone is light-hearted, songlike, and, as we have seen at the beginning, irreverent. Moreover, while the poem certainly contains substantial references to estates, it undoubtedly differs from the other works of its time (e.g. the French *Roman de Fauvel*, or the German *Der Welsche Gast* by Thomasin von Zerclaere or, staying in the English domain, *Piers Plowman* and *Vox Clamantis* by John Gower (and, to some extent, even the *Canterbury Tales*), which focus on this theme and where the author is morally engaged in re-establishing the tripartite estate order which lay at the heart of the early medieval conception of society, in the sense that the poet is not concerned with re-establishing the social order because he himself is subverting it by writing a transgressive song.

Lucia Sinisi
Università di Bari

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