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978-1-107-00343-9 - Medieval Market Morality: Life, Law and Ethics in the English Marketplace, 1200–1500

James Davis

Excerpt

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## Introduction

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The fifteenth-century poem *London Lickpenny* provides a vivid portrait of a town's streets, brimming with the vibrant noises and sights of market life. Within the marketplaces of medieval London swarmed a multitude of hawkers, pedlars, cooks and stallholders, all crying their wares and pestering potential customers:

Then went I forth by London stone, Throughout all Canwyle streete; Drapers mutch cloth me offred anone.	<i>Candlewick Street</i>
Then comes me one, cryed, 'Hot shepes feete! One cryde, 'Makerell!'; 'Ryshes grene!' another gan greete	<i>Rushes</i>
One bad me by a hood to cover my head – But for want of mony I myght not be sped. <sup>1</sup>	

The poem portrays a young man from the country who is bewildered by the cacophony of sounds, but is perhaps also seduced by the contrasting sights and smells of a commercial world in which money is the prime motivational force. The writer emphasises the variety of goods on sale, as well as the belligerent persistence of the vendors. However, a distasteful undercurrent is implied. A hood lost by the young man is later spotted by him on a stall, being sold amidst other stolen goods.

A similar touting for wares is seen in the Prologue of William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (c.1360–87) in the 'Fair Field Full of Folke', in which cries of 'hote pyes, hote!, Good goos and grys'<sup>2</sup> ring out. Bakers, brewers, butchers, cooks, taverners, weavers, tailors and other craftsmen are all represented in this 'Fair Field'.<sup>3</sup> Yet, Langland's commercial world, though brimming with opportunities and variety, belied another

<sup>1</sup> Gray (ed.), *Oxford Book*, pp. 18–19, ll. 50–98; BL, MS Harleian 367, fols. 126r–127v. Authorship is uncertain, but the poem is traditionally attributed to John Lydgate, a monk of Bury St Edmunds, writing in the early fifteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> (hot pies, hot! Good goose and young pig.)

<sup>3</sup> *Piers Plowman*, A.Prol.97–109; *Piers Plowman*, B.Prol.217–31; *Piers Plowman*, C.Prol.221–32.

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more insidious, deceitful and harmful environment, where people and traders competed with each other for material goods, driven by their own venality, avarice and gluttony. An early fourteenth-century preacher's handbook, *Fasciculus Morum*, described this dualism: 'A marketplace or a fair is now filled with people, stocked with all sorts of goods, joyful and magnificent, and in a little while everyone goes back to his home, one with profit, another with loss, and the place at once becomes deserted, ugly, dirty, and contemptible'.<sup>4</sup> A thirteenth-century French Dominican, Humbert de Romans, similarly lamented the quarrels, drinking, fraud, perfidy and injustice that pervaded medieval marketplaces. He related the tale of a man who entered an abbey and found many demons in the cloister, but in the marketplace there was only one, alone on a high pillar. He was told that the abbey and cloister were arranged to help souls find God, so that many devils were needed to lead the monks astray. But in the marketplace, since each man was a devil to himself, just one other demon sufficed.<sup>5</sup>

In these examples, the dilemmas of medieval market morality are starkly evident. The opportunities of commerce and the vital needs it served were counterbalanced by the realisation that money and profit dominated trade, which in turn was driven by avarice and self-interest. It was this paradox that lay at the core of representations of market traders in the literary and religious works of medieval England. Moralists found it difficult to fit retail traders and middlemen into concepts of social harmony. Traders were considered to be the epitome of selfishness, greed and dishonesty, yet their activities were also recognised as essential to the sustenance of society. The marketplace was the setting where these paradoxes and attitudes were played out on a day-to-day basis. How did medieval people view the market and traders with whom they interacted; was it the problematic economic and social space that consternated medieval moralists? This book is an attempt to examine and evaluate the moral undercurrents and discourses that influenced everyday medieval market practices, but also to determine the extent to which the cultural and religious environment both informed and was shaped by wide-reaching commercial developments. Retail traders, small-scale artisans and middlemen dominated the transactions of internal trade in late medieval England (1200–1500). The following study explores how they were represented in literary and cultural artefacts, how they were regulated in their commercial affairs, and how they practised their occupations in the marketplace.

<sup>4</sup> *Fasciculus Morum*, pp. 558–9.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jarrett, *Social Theories*, p. 164; Murray, 'Religion'.

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**Market trade and traders**

Exchange, commerce and credit have long permeated society, in a daily and often informal manner, wherever one person has something that another needs or desires. It is likely that medieval people regularly bought and sold items and services from each other in an informal manner, agreeing prices for a pound of apples, the hire of a plough, the rent of a room, or a day's wages.<sup>6</sup> However, when production and demand reached a significant level, many marketing practices became more formal and sophisticated. This does not mean that informal trade declined, merely that formal institutions developed to assist transactions and commercial growth. This included not just physical sites for the facilitation of marketing, but also processes for the movement, sale and purchase of goods. Regular market places and times, enforcement of contracts and debts, quality-controls, supervision of prices, and protection against stolen goods were just some of the devices that helped lower transaction costs and expedite trade. These marketing developments not only encouraged new patterns of consumption and expenditure, but may have also shifted contemporary attitudes towards trade and traders.

In late medieval England, the periodic rural or small-town market, usually held once a week, was predominant because of the localised structure of society and the pervasive agricultural economy. Periodicity allowed an efficient use of time for vendors, who would be ensured a maximum number of consumers gathered for a minimum time, while consumers could concentrate their efforts to a single day. In addition, periodicity facilitated itinerant traders who could not find enough custom in a single, permanent location and could thus travel around several markets. Annual fairs were also held when the surplus agricultural produce of an area was ready to market in bulk, or to cater for luxury imports or specialist goods. More frequent marketing, as seen in larger towns, required heavier and broader consumer demand.

The marketplace was the accepted physical location where regular economic, social, cultural and political interchanges took place and attitudes were readily formed. It facilitated a dynamic congregation of professional traders, marginal retailers, part-time hucksters, peasant producers and sundry consumers, who created a hive of haggling, shouting and gossip. The core of any medieval town was the marketplace, often symbolised by a market cross. These structures, varying from simple cruciform wooden

<sup>6</sup> Schofield, *Peasant and Community*, pp. 137–9; Britnell, 'Proliferation', 211; Britnell, 'Markets, shops, inns'; Dyer, 'Hidden trade', 153.

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pillars to more elaborate stone shelters, were symbolic reminders to market users of a multiplicity of influences over their activities: the royal market charter, regulatory oversight by local officials, and the moral imperatives of divine authority.<sup>7</sup> The market cross was the economic, social and cultural heart of any market town or village. Markets were thus places where the forces of supply and demand converged, but also where such economic factors were circumscribed by contemporary regulations, morals, attitudes and prejudices.

There has been much academic interest in medieval market trade, particularly in the wake of growing research on commercialisation, internal marketing networks and small towns. Richard Britnell, Christopher Dyer, James Masschaele and others have reinforced the historical importance of smaller markets and towns to the commercial environment of medieval England. They recognised that small-scale trade was a vital lifeline for many in an increasingly market-oriented society, and that petty commodity production and exchange lay at the heart of numerous economic changes.<sup>8</sup> There has been less work on market traders specifically, but Judith Bennett and Heather Swanson have produced substantial research on brewers and artisans respectively, including the role of women who often supplemented household income by engaging in part-time retailing.<sup>9</sup> Many women would bake and brew, make butter and cheese, and raise poultry for meat and eggs, within the context of the household economy. They were common sights, sitting under the cross on market day, selling their victuals to raise extra income for the family, though their profits were often marginal.<sup>10</sup>

Rodney Hilton also highlighted the pervasiveness of hucksters and retailers in late medieval England, in both urban and rural settings, full-time and part-time, male and female.<sup>11</sup> In his investigations of Halesowen and Thornbury, he presented a medieval world dominated by petty production and petty retail trade. In particular, he drew attention to the prevalence of victuallers in court rolls and argued that this demonstrated both the volume of trade in foodstuffs and the earnestness of authorities to control such transactions. Hilton suggested that market traders and retailers were regarded with suspicion and closely controlled, though our historical perception of such people may have become distorted by the level of prosecutions evident in late medieval court rolls, as well as the

<sup>7</sup> Davis, 'The cross and the pillory'.

<sup>8</sup> Britnell, *Commercialisation*; Dyer, 'Market towns'; Masschaele, *Peasants*; Bailey, 'Historiographical'; Kowaleski, *Local Markets*.

<sup>9</sup> Bennett, *Ale*; Swanson, *Medieval Artisans*.

<sup>10</sup> Goldberg, 'Women in fifteenth-century town life'; Mate, *Women*, pp. 45–6.

<sup>11</sup> Hilton, 'Lords, burgesses and hucksters'; Hilton, 'Women traders'.

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literary representations of cheating and corruption. David Farmer, in contrast, assumed that retailers and victuallers suffered daily harassment and opprobrium on the scale suggested by moralists such as John Gower and William Langland.<sup>12</sup> The relationship between the literary and legal representations of traders is still not clearly understood. Indeed, despite a number of studies on alewives, the role and behaviour of medieval market traders more generally has not been fully examined.

Medieval market traders encompassed a wide range of people, engaged in commerce for a variety of reasons and levels of gain. The following study concentrates on those that can be broadly defined as engaged in retail trade, petty wholesale transactions and small-scale commodity production, but such individuals ranged from lesser merchants and middlemen to urban shopkeepers and stallholders, and from itinerant hawkers and pedlars to marginal and part-time hucksters. Market traders did not form a contained, self-aware and homogeneous group, but were a broad and varied constituency. This book is concerned primarily with those retail traders who sold goods in the marketplaces on a regular or semi-regular basis, but it is recognised that any who were involved in vending were expected to abide by legal and moral injunctions. Indeed, retailers merely constituted the base of a commercial pyramid, at the apex of which resided the wholesaling, international merchants.

The label ‘merchant’ normally conjures up images of a wealthy Stapleman, exporting wool or cloth in exchange for various luxury goods, which he then distributed throughout the realm. Typically, he aspired to gentry life and perhaps retirement to a country estate, where he could enjoy the benefits of his commercial gains and a higher social status.<sup>13</sup> Rosemary Horrox argued that merchants wanted the best of both worlds, town and country.<sup>14</sup> The activities of such merchants have been widely investigated by historians, attracted by the abundance of customs records detailing the trade in international commodities.<sup>15</sup> There are also several studies of individual merchants and their families, as well as research into the merchant class as a whole.<sup>16</sup> However, merchants were a rank apart from the mass of small-scale traders and artisans in late medieval England. Swanson suggested that the fourteenth century saw the polarisation of wholesalers, retailers and artisans into more definitive sub-categories, whereas

<sup>12</sup> Farmer, ‘Marketing’, p. 377.

<sup>13</sup> Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, p. 234; O’Connor, ‘Adam Fraunceys and John Pyel’.

<sup>14</sup> Horrox, ‘Urban gentry’, pp. 22–44.

<sup>15</sup> Power, *Wool Trade*; Thrupp, *Merchant Class*; Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*; Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community*; Spufford, *Power and Profit*.

<sup>16</sup> Hanham, *The Celys*; James, *Studies in the Medieval Wine Trade*; Power, *Medieval People*, pp. 123–57; Penn, ‘A fourteenth-century Bristol merchant’, 183–6.

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previously ‘merchant’ had been a more generic term.<sup>17</sup> By the later Middle Ages, the designation of ‘merchant’ was confined to those engaged in wholesale trade, though this covered a range of people, from international dealers to lowly intra-regional traders.<sup>18</sup> Thirteenth-century London, for instance, was well served by cornmongers, with places like Henley-on-Thames operating as entrepôts for the collection of London grain supplies.<sup>19</sup> At the higher end of the marketing scale, usually in the bigger boroughs, there were the merchants and specialised traders who dealt in imports like dyes, spices and wine, or higher-quality manufactures like cloth and metalware.<sup>20</sup> All these required distribution networks and would have differentiated the regulatory and political structures in larger towns from those in small towns and markets. The merchant elite thus dominated international and regional trade and often governed larger towns, but they were partially detached from the day-to-day retail trade in basic, low-value commodities. It was the petty retailers and craftsmen who represented everyday marketing and who were the main, accessible link between the peasantry and market dealings.

Retailers were generally poorer and less influential than wholesaling merchants, and often processed their own goods, sold them from shop fronts, stalls or moveable carts, or hawked them in the streets. On market day, simple timber stalls were erected in the marketplace, though over time some became more permanent in style and structure, encroaching upon the public space. Those without a stall would carry goods in baskets, either wandering around the marketplace or standing in designated areas. More substantial retailers might have had permanent shops under arcades or within a ground-floor room. A typical urban shop was contained within the front of a house and opened onto the street by the lifting or removal of window boards. Professional craftsmen-retailers also had workshops in the yard behind, as well as living quarters above.<sup>21</sup> Very often, resident traders with shops might seek to enlarge their commercial space by renting a stall on market day. There is also evidence that some traders travelled to other markets to sell goods.<sup>22</sup> In particular, there were itinerant pedlars or chapmen who sold minor manufactured goods: cheap clothes, pottery, metalware, buckles, purses, combs and other knick-knacks. These were often low-quality, small-scale and

<sup>17</sup> Swanson, *Medieval Artisans*, pp. 20, 110–13.

<sup>18</sup> Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, p. 6; Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, p. 109.

<sup>19</sup> Campbell, Galloway, Keene and Murphy, *A Medieval Capital*, pp. 47–9. The operations of London cornmongers seem to have contracted significantly after the Black Death.

<sup>20</sup> Britnell, ‘Town life’, pp. 148–9.

<sup>21</sup> Morrison, *English Shops*, pp. 19–27; Keene, ‘Shops and shopping’.

<sup>22</sup> Mate, *Trade and Economic Developments*, pp. 23–4.

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second-hand items, and may have been distributed around regular circuits of periodic markets.<sup>23</sup> Minor middlemen similarly wandered the countryside in search of raw materials to sell at local markets, particularly staple products such as grain, wool and fish.

There were certainly professional traders, such as brewers, bakers, cooks, butchers and various artisans, who operated from fixed shops or stalls as specialised retailers or petty commodity producers. They might sell goods acquired from local producers or wholesalers, or process raw materials themselves to retail. Indeed, the craftsmen-retailer or producer-retailer was common in all market towns.<sup>24</sup> However, the level of specialisation should not be overemphasised.<sup>25</sup> Many retailers were general dealers rather than specialists, seeking profit where they could find it: taverners were often vintners; chandlers often sellers of wax or tallow products; innkeepers were brewers and grain dealers. Other traders were irregular, part-time and *ad hoc* in their marketing patterns, often as an adjunct to another primary occupation or domestic activity. For instance, brewing was a domestic industry which many women undertook on a supplementary basis in order to earn extra household income.<sup>26</sup>

Victuallers constituted the most common trading group in late medieval markets, supplying sustenance to an increasing non-agricultural, landless or smallholding population. Indeed, with fluctuating harvests, poor transport and a lack of storage facilities (especially for perishables), the supply of food was a prime consideration for officials. Consequently, the activities of bakers, brewers, fishmongers, butchers, poulterers and other producers or sellers of foodstuffs were closely monitored and intensely regulated. In larger market centres, victuallers were seen throughout the streets, and probably throughout the week, alongside cooks who sold the ‘fast-food’ of the Middle Ages – pies, pastries and breads.<sup>27</sup> In a similar manner, inns, alehouses and taverns became an increasingly dominant part of the everyday marketing landscape, providing food and drink to a variety of customers.

Many regular victuallers also sold a percentage of their products to hucksters or regraters, who were purely retailers, buying goods directly from producers in order to sell them onto consumers. The term ‘huckster’ was frequently applied to those who dealt in small batches of victuals on a casual basis. They were often women (hence the feminine form

<sup>23</sup> See Veale, *English Fur Trade*, pp. 13–14; Davis, ‘Men as march with fote packes’; Davis, ‘Marketing secondhand goods’.

<sup>24</sup> Swanson, *Medieval Artisans*, p. 2; Hilton, *English and French Towns*, p. 78.

<sup>25</sup> Britnell, ‘Specialization’; Kowaleski, *Local Markets*, pp. 131–2.

<sup>26</sup> Mate, *Women*, pp. 39–40.

<sup>27</sup> Carlin, ‘Fast food’; Carlin, ‘Provisions for the poor’.

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‘-ster’), dealing in a selection of low-priced vegetables, poultry and dairy products. These derived from either their own holdings or from local producers, and were then carried into the marketplace in baskets on their heads or in their arms. Some resided in the market settlement, while others travelled from the surrounding countryside. They paid the appropriate market tolls, and then sold their goods from under the market cross, in the streets, or occasionally from hired stalls, depending on the arrangements and costs of the particular marketplace. Many purchased and resold ale, bread and fish, or diversified into petty manufactures like coarse cloth, yarn and candles. Hucksters were usually at the bottom of the marketing hierarchy in both status and wealth, making only meagre gains through trade.<sup>28</sup> It appears that hucksters, hawkers and regraters were closely watched, and authorities were anxious that they should not usurp the privileges of more permanent retailers, sell sub-standard foodstuffs, or engage in unacceptable regrating, forestalling or other price-raising activities.<sup>29</sup>

At its most basic extent, trade involved manorial officials or peasants, selling surplus agricultural produce or by-products, such as ale and cheese, and entering the market on a transient basis. Several studies have emphasised the extent to which the medieval peasantry were producing goods to sell in nearby markets.<sup>30</sup> They sold either to producer-retailers or directly to consumers. In turn, they would purchase a diversity of manufactures and commodities, such as pottery, metalwork or cloth, which they could not find in their own communities. For smallholders and labourers, there was a great dependence on the market simply for obtaining basic foodstuffs. But most peasants, whether they held large or small holdings, also needed to raise cash to pay fines and rents to their lords.

Market trade thus supplied the small-scale needs of numerous consumers, whether resident or visitors, in foodstuffs and cheap manufactured goods. Traders were a mix of the regular and irregular, the well-off and the poor, all seeking to make a profit. Periodic markets would throng to the sound of traders hawking their wares, while a more steady retail business for victuals and manufactures undoubtedly continued throughout the week. These petty traders constituted the backbone of a growing

<sup>28</sup> McIntosh, *Working Women*, pp. 130–2.

<sup>29</sup> Regrating was the practice of buying goods simply in order to sell them again, without added value, in the same market at a higher price. The act of forestalling involved the interception of goods either before they reached the marketplace or before the scheduled market time. See below, pp. 253–63, for a fuller discussion of these offences.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, ‘A periodic market’, pp. 472–3; Schofield, *Peasant and Community*, pp. 147–8; Britnell, *Commercialisation*.

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commercial system from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, facilitating the exchange of goods and shaping local market ethics.

### The commercialisation of English society

The history of retail trade is an important indicator of the sophistication of the English economy. Some historians argue that the expansion of market trade and production was a small, but important, stepping-stone towards a new form of economic organisation.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, the function and importance of market traders should be examined within a context of the wider economic and social environment of medieval England. Changing economic trends in the later Middle Ages ensured that petty traders did not remain peripheral or irregular figures. Indeed, it is important to recognise that there was a proliferation of market traders from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries and a general immersion of the English population in commercial endeavours.

Medieval economic history has turned full circle as scholars have revitalised the study of commercial institutions and practitioners. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century economic historians stressed the importance of markets and other commercial institutions to the economic growth of late medieval England. Ephraim Lipson and Norman Gras, for example, viewed the rise of monetarisation, merchant oligarchies and markets as part of an evolutionary progression towards a modern economy.<sup>32</sup> However, by the 1960s, the dominance of commercialism in economic histories was questioned by Munia Postan, who advocated a greater emphasis on agricultural and demographic factors, in the economic tradition of Ricardo and Malthus.<sup>33</sup> Postan moved the historical debate away from markets and monetarisation towards a more pessimistic model based upon the relationship between resources, population and income. He argued that the striking population growth of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries caused demand to outstrip available resources, leading to a decline in living standards. Postan saw agriculture as stagnant, reliant on poor marginal lands and lacking in technological innovation. As the population expanded, resources became scarce for the peasantry, particularly smallholders and the landless. Land was subdivided to such an extent that more units of production were unable to support a family group. Consequently, a growing number of peasants

<sup>31</sup> Hilton, 'Introduction', pp. 21–7. See below, pp. 19–22.

<sup>32</sup> Lipson, *Economic History*; Salzman, *English Trade*; Gras, *Evolution*.

<sup>33</sup> Postan, *Medieval Economy*; Postan, *Essays*.

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were struggling to subsist on their own landholdings and had to find by-employment and labouring wages in order to buy their food from local markets. Postan's thesis has been criticised, especially in its application to less populated parts of the realm.<sup>34</sup> The model also downplays important agricultural and technological innovations, efficient and appropriate use of marginal lands, and questions about the relationship between demographic trends and economic indicators.<sup>35</sup> The complexities of change, especially considering the stagnant population after the Black Death, are not convincingly accommodated. Others, employing a Marxist perspective, argued that more account was needed regarding the lack of seigniorial investment and the lordly exploitation of dependent peasants. Hilton and Robert Brenner both suggested that excessive burdens precipitated a crisis in both peasant welfare and lord-tenant relations, though John Hatcher argued that such a model neglected the customary and economic restraints upon lordly action.<sup>36</sup>

Issues of internal trade thus became sidelined until work in the 1980s looked anew at the commercial sector, markets, money supply and agrarian innovation. Scholars proposed a model of commercialisation in which the English medieval economy was driven by an increasing demand for grain from an expanding population.<sup>37</sup> Richard Britnell redeveloped concepts of 'commercialisation' in his book *The Commercialisation of English Society 1000–1500*, in which he studied changes in the medieval economy and emphasised the formal institutional frameworks for those changes.<sup>38</sup> In particular, he noted that the facilities of commercial exchange grew in size and number in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This was part of a wider commercial transformation, which included: a denser, organised market structure; an increase in the value and volume of coinage in circulation; growing credit markets; urban expansion and new towns; a proliferation of non-agricultural occupations; and a more market-oriented peasant society. For instance, the urban population may have, on aggregate, doubled over the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, sustained by immigration from the burgeoning ranks of the rural population.<sup>39</sup> Some towns grew in their physical size and density of settlement, while others

<sup>34</sup> Britnell, *Britain and Ireland*, pp. 85–6.

<sup>35</sup> Bailey, *A Marginal Economy?*; Smith, 'Human resources', pp. 202–11; Dyer, *An Age*, pp. 30–2.

<sup>36</sup> Hilton, *Class Conflict*; Aston and Philipin (eds.), *Brenner Debate*; Hatcher, 'English serfdom'. For further delineation of these models, as well as additional theories such as Schumpeter's model of limits to investment opportunities and catastrophe models, see Britnell, *Britain and Ireland*, pp. 84–90.

<sup>37</sup> Britnell, 'Commercialisation'; Bailey, 'Historiographical'.

<sup>38</sup> Britnell, *Commercialisation*.

<sup>39</sup> Miller and Hatcher, *Medieval England: Rural Society*, pp. 70–1.