"Song of the Husbandman": A Critical Edition

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SONG OF THE HUSBANDMAN
A CRITICAL EDITION

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Patricia L. Hintz
1989
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Patricia L. Hintz

Approved, August 1989

John Conlee, Chair

David Jenkins

J. H. Willis, Jr.
It was customary for the ancients, in the books which they wrote, (Priscian testifies to this), to express themselves very obscurely so that those in later generations, who had to learn them, could provide a gloss for the text and put the finishing touches to their meaning. Men of learning were aware of this and their experience had taught them that the more time they spent studying texts the more subtle would be their understanding of them and they would be better able to avoid future mistakes. Anyone wishing to guard against vice should study intently and undertake a demanding task, whereby one can ward off and rid oneself of great suffering.

Marie de France

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Special thanks go to David Morrill, who also provided good conversation, though of a different nature, and whose suggestions for feminist and psychosexual interpretations of the poem unfortunately could not be included for lack of space.

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To Donald I. Gillikin, Jr.
sine qua non
ABSTRACT

This thesis presents an edition of a Middle English poem from British Museum MS. Harley 2253, "Song of the Husbandman." The text is edited conservatively, and the edition includes an introduction, interpretive notes, a commentary, and a glossary. The commentary discusses the poem, its poetic devices, and its literary context.

The commentary also asserts the singularity of the poem among other Middle English complaint poems. It is distinctive due to its detailed focus on injustices done to farmers by tax officials and to its intricate sound devices and use of proverb-like statements that are closely woven together. These elements combine to make a powerful and affecting lament.
SONG OF THE HUSBANDMAN
A CRITICAL EDITION
INTRODUCTION

The Middle English poem "Song of the Husbandman" appears in British Library MS. Harley 2253, a manuscript which contains a great variety of literary materials. These include saints' lives, fabliaux, and assorted other poems written in French, religious works in both prose and verse written in Latin, and religious and secular works written in English, including a large number of lyrics. According to G. L. Brook, the Harley MS. is the earliest extant MS. to contain secular lyrics in English, of which "Husbandman" is one.

Among the English secular lyrics of Harley 2253 are many well-known love songs and spring songs (e.g. "Annot and John," "Alysoun," and the spring song that begins Lenten vs come wip loue to toune). The MS. also contains historical poems including such occasional pieces as "The Flemish Insurrection," "The Execution of Sir Simon Fraser," and "The Death of Edward I." Two historical poems attack elements of society, "Satire on the Consistory Courts," and "Satire on the Retinues of the Great."

Though Robbins includes "Song of the Husbandman" in his collection of historical poems, it is strikingly different
from the other poems so designated. Unlike them, it is not linked to a specific historical incident or a specific king, nor is its central purpose the ridicule of an institution or class of society. Rather, "Husbandman" belongs with the less readily classifiable poems in the Harley MS., and it marks the first appearance in English of a certain type of complaint poem, one which endeavours principally to evoke pity for the victims of oppression. Though some later medieval works, both secular and not so secular, echo its themes, in the context of the Harley MS. it is a singular work.

The Title. This edition, following established editorial tradition, retains the title "Song of the Husbandman" for the poem. Too many medievalists have so named it too many times for this title to be changed with any convenience. Nevertheless, it is a questionable title, and one that could lead the unsuspecting reader to possess erroneous assumptions about the poem. It has been otherwise named. Shackford calls her translation "Complaint of the Husbandman." In The Oxford Book of Medieval English Verse, Kenneth and Celia Sisam call it "A Farmer's Complaint." The Middle English Dictionary refers to it simply by the first three words, "Ich herde men," perhaps of all possibilities the most desirable, if convenience did not dictate otherwise. In the manuscript it resembles the
other lyrics in being titleless. Since the speaker of the poem seems to represent the entire class of trodden-upon farmers, and since "I," "we," and "they" are used interchangeably throughout the poem to signify these farmers or their spokesman, "Song of the Husbandmen" might have been a more appropriate title. Calling it a "song," however, is also problematic; though the English alliterative element and the French rhyming element combine to make intricate poetry, the result is not exactly meant to be sung. Having "song" in the title is also ironic, considering that one bit of evidence the speaker gives to show the farmers' state is how they ne kelep no sawe ne no song singe.

**Date.** Scholars have not yet reached a consensus about when the poem was written. Nothing mentioned in the poem can assist such a determination, therefore seekers after precision must simply assume a date previous to the compilation of the manuscript, a matter about which the scholars also do not agree. N. R. Ker in his introduction to the Early English Text Society's manuscript facsimile publication, after consideration of both textual and paleographical data, places the manuscript in "the fourth decade of the fourteenth century." Thus "Song of the Husbandman" could have been written any time before this; most commentators assume that it was written during the reign of King Edward I (1272-1307).
Dialect. Most of the editors and scholars who comment on the language of the poem give the dialect as southwest. J.P. Oakden, due to the use of he for the third person plural pronoun, beb and bub for the present indicative plural of "to be," and here for the possessive third person plural pronoun, identifies the dialect as south. He then narrows it to southwest due to the use of an as on and y as u (hude instead of "hide," for example). "But...OE. ae as tense e (see the rhyme of l. 64), would seem to indicate a county as far north as Glos [i.e. Gloucestershire], and the rest of the evidence is not at variance with this; thus the infinite ends in e 24 times, and in en 3 times, but the former termination is proved original by the rhymes."6

The Text. The scribe of Harley MS. 2253 indicates no stanza breaks; the only evidence is in the patterns of rhyme and repetition in the poem itself. This edition provides those stanza breaks. Abbreviations in the MS. are expanded and indicated by underlining. Otherwise the text is reproduced as it appears in the MS., without punctuation.
Notes


3 Martha Hale Shackford, Legends and Satires from Medieval Literature (N.Y., Ginn and Co., 1913).


6 J.P. Oakden, Alliterative Poetry in Middle English: A Survey of the Traditions (Manchester, Univ. of Manchester Press, 1930) 105.
Ich herde men vpo mold make mucche mon
hou he beþ itened of here tilyynge
gode 3eres & corn boþe beþ agon
ne keþeþ her no sawe ne no song synge
Nou we mote worche, nis þer non oþer won
mai ich no lengore lyue wiþ mi lesinge
3et þer is a bitterore bid to þe bon
for euer þe furþe peni mot to þe kynge
þus we carþeþ for þe kynge & carþeþ ful colde
& weneþ forte keuere & euer buþ acast
whose haþ eny god hopeþ he nout to holde
bote euer þe leuest we leoseþ alast
Luper is to leosen þerase lutel ys
& haueþ monie hynen þat hopieþ þer to
þe hayward heþeþ vs harm to habben of his
þe bailif bockneþ vs bale & weneþ wel do
þe wodeward waiteþ vs wo þat lokeþ vnder rys
ne mai vs ryse no rest rycheis ne ro
þus me pileþ þe pore þat is of lute pris
nede in swot & in swynk swynde mot swo
Nede he mot swynde þah he hade swore
þat nāp nout en hod his hed forte hude
þus wil walkeþ in lond & lawe is forlore
& al is piked of þe pore þe prikyares prude [24]

þus me pileþ þe pore and pykeþ ful clene
þe ryche me raymeþ wip outen eny ryht
ar londes & ar leodes liggeþ fol lene
þorh biddyng of baylyfs such harm hem hāþ hihþ[28]
Meni of religioun me halt hem ful hene
baroun & bonde þe clerç & þe knyht
þus wil walkeþ in lond & wondred ys wene
falsshipe fatteþ and marreþ wyp myht [32]

Stont stille y þe stude & halt him ful sturne
þat makeþ beggares go wip bordon & bagges
þus we beþ honted from hale to hurne
þat er werede robes nou wereþ ragges [36]
3et comeþ budeles wip ful muche bost
  greype me seluer to þe grene wax
þou art writen y my writ þat þou wel wost
  mo þen ten siþen told y my tax
þenne mot ych habbe hennen arost
  feyr on fyhsh day launprey & lax
forþ to þe chepyne gayneþ ne chost
  þah y sulle mi bil & my borstax

Ich mot legge my wed wel 3ef y wolle
  oþer sulle mi corn on gras þat is grene
3et I shal be foul cherl þah he han þe fulle
  þat ich alle þer spare þenne y mot spene

Nede y mot spene þat y spared 3ore
  aþeyn þis cachereles comeþ þus y mot care
comeþ þe maister budel brust aþe a bore
  seþþ he wolde mi bugging bringe ful bare
Mede y mot munten a marke oþer more
  þah ich at þe set dey sulle mi mare
þus þe grene wax vs greueþ vnder gore
  þat me vs hontþþ aþe hound dop þe hare
he vs honte e ase hound hare doh on hulle
    seppe y tek to pe lond such tene me wes taht
nabbeþ ner budeles boded ar fulle
    for he may scape & we aren euer caht

þus y kippe & cacche cares ful colde
    seppe y counte & cot hade to kepe
to seche seluer to pe kyng y mi seed solde
    forpi mi lond leye lip & leorneþ to slepe
seþþe he mi feire feh fatte y my folde
when y þenk o mi weole wel neh y wepe
þus bredeþ monie beggares bolde
    & vre ruþe ys roted & ruls er we repe

Ruls ys oure ruþe & roted in þe stre
for wickede wederes by brokes & by brynke
þer wakeneþ in þe world wondred & wee
    ase god in swynden anon as so forte swynke
1-3. i.e. "I heard men upon earth make much moan/ How they are troubled in their tilling/ Good years and grain both are gone."

4. i.e. "Nor (do they) keep stories or songs sing." The phrase, ne kepeb ne sawe has several possible implications. The Middle English Dictionary quotes the line to illustrate sawe as "writing"; translated this way, it could mean that they do not keep books. It could also mean that there is no time for conversation, or that there is no time to tell stories. Finally, sawe could mean "proverb"; thus the traditional laws or morals are not kept. The last interpretation, perhaps the most unlikely, would relate these lines to lines 23-24 and lines 31-32.

5. i.e. "Now must we work, nor is there any other way." The we is the first indication that the speaker is one of the lamenting men upon earth. This is the first shift in point of view—but not the last.

6. i.e. "I may no longer live with my gleanings." Here, the point of view shifts back again to "I"; this inconsistency continues throughout the poem but serves the salutary purpose of unifying speaker and subject in a common gloom. A. Brandl and O. Zippel try to solve the dilemma of who is speaking by putting quotation marks which begin at line 3 and close at the end of line 20. There is, however, little textual evidence for the validity of such an emendation. (Middle English Literature, N.Y., Chelsea Publishing Co., 1949.)

7-8. i.e. "Yet, there is a bitterer bite to the bone/ For always the fourth penny must go to the king."

9. i.e. "Thus we carp about the king and carry full cold." Though carpeb probably means "complain" or "gripe," it could mean simply "talk," the original Middle English meaning of the verb. The meaning of the phrase, carieb ful cold, is difficult to translate, but probably means "exist miserably."

10-13. i.e. "And hope to recover and ever are cast down/ Who so has any goods hopes, he not to hold (them)/ But
ever the dearest we lose at last/ Miserable it is to lose where little is."

14. i.e. "And have many fellows that hope there-to." Most likely, these fellows are the officials listed in the next three stanzas; thus, it is miserable also to have many fellows who hope to benefit from poor farmers. Or, possibly, these fellows may be hired hands of the once well-off speaker.

15-17. i.e. "The hayward threatens us with harm to have his [share]./ The bailiff beckons to us sorrow and hopes to do well,/ The woodward waits us wo that looks under branches." The hayward looked after the manor's grain; the bailiff was the overseer of the manor; the woodward guarded the manor's timber from peasants.

18. i.e. "Nor may rest, riches, nor repose arise for us."

19. i.e. "Thus men pillage the poor that is of little price." The phrase of lutel pris means "of small value," thus the poor are held in low esteem.

20. i.e. "Needs in sweat and in toil they must so perish."

21. i.e. "They must needs perish though they had sworn." This line could be completed with an implied phrase such as "Not to (perish)" or with "to pay the bailiff."

22-23. i.e. "That hath not any hood his head for to hide/ Thus Will walks the land and law is forlorn." Will is a common personification of "willfulness" or selfishness, which has become rampant.

24. i.e. "And all is taken from the poor [by] the riders pride."

25-27. i.e. "Thus men pillage the poor and pick them poor clean/ The rich men plunder without any right/ Our lands and our people lie full lean."

28. "Through bidding of bailifs such harm they have promised."

29. i.e. "Many [men] of religioun hold them full abject." This line is ambiguous; it could mean that the clergy despise the bailiffs; it could mean that the bailiffs victimize the clergy as well; or, it could mean that the clergy, as well as the representatives of society mentioned in the next line, all make the husbandmen abject.
30. i.e. "Baron and bondsman, the clerk and the knight."

31-32 i.e. "Thus Will walks the land and hardship is expected/ Falsehood grows fat and mars with his might." cf. lines 23-24. The repetition of "Will walk[ing] the land" underscores the poet's sense of a general moral collapse.

33. i.e. "Stand still in the place and hold him full angrily/ sternly."

34. i.e. "That make beggars go with burden and bags." Here borden may mean "staff" rather than "burden"—in other words, a foot-traveler's walking-stick.

35. i.e. "Thus we are hunted from hall to hideaway." According to the Middle English Dictionary, from hale to hurne means "from one refuge to another"; the paraphrase offered here suggests the making of beggars that line 67 explicitly mentions.

36. i.e. "Those who before wore robes now wear rags."

37. i.e. "Yet come beadles with full much boast." Beadles in this context mean tax collectors, although the term could mean that church officials were also infected with corruption.

38. i.e. "Get me silver due to the green wax." The beadle is here quoted. The "green wax" refers to the type of seal used on official documents; here it comes to represent taxation.

39. i.e. "You are written in my document that you well know."

40. i.e. "More than ten times told in my tax." This line could be the beadle saying that the speaker is written ten times in his writ to pay.

41-42. i.e. "Then must I have roast hens/ Fair (fare?) on fish day, lamprey and salmon." This is the beadle anticipating/ demanding the benefit of his corruption.

43-44. i.e. "Forth to the market it avails not to argue/ Though I sell my bill and my borst ax."

45-48. i.e. "I shall make a pledge of payment if I would/ Or sell my grain of grass that is green/ Yet I shall be a foul churl though they have the full [payment]./ All that I spare then I must spend."
49. i.e. "Needs I must spend that I spared before."

50. i.e. "Again these cachereles/officers come thus I must care." The term cachereles, the one identifiably French word in the whole poem, is another general term for tax officers.

51-54. i.e. "The master beadle comes bristled as a boar/ Saying he will my home bring full bare./ Payment/bribe? I must venture, a mark or more/ Though I at the set day sell my mare."

55. i.e. "Thus the green wax grieves to the core/heart." Under gore is an idiom often used in love poetry; gore literally means clothing.

56-58. i.e. "That men hunt us as the hound does the hare/ They hunt us as the hound does the hare on the hill/ Since I took to the land such trouble was taught me."

59. i.e. "Nor have any beadles ever boded our?er/ full(fill?)." The word "fulle" is rendered "sulle" by some editors; transcribed either way, the meaning of the line remains obscure.

60. i.e. "For they may escape and we ever are caught." This line may continue the hound and hare analogy; it may also indicate that while "they" use corrupt practices out of greed and "we" use corrupt practices (bribery) to survive, "they" get away with it.

61-72. i.e. "Thus I snatch (attack) and catch (receive) cares full cold/ Since I account and cottage had to keep/ To get silver to the king I my seed sold/ Therefore my land lies worthless and learns to sleep/ Since then my fair livestock fat in my fold/ When I think of my condition well nigh I weep/ Thus breeds many beggars bold/ And our rye is rotten and spoils ere we reap/ Ruined is our rye and rotted in the straw/ Because of wicked weathers by brooks and by streambank/ There awakens in the world hardship and woe/ As good is it to perish at once as so for to work."
TEXTUAL NOTES

28. **biddynge.** The MS reads bddynge.

59. **fulle.** Some editors read sulle.
"Song of the Husbandman" is a finely crafted argument for despair. Its effect is due in large part to its proverb-like statements that express the plight of medieval farmers, statements enhanced by the poet's use of alliteration and rhyme. The poem is divided into stanzas alternating between eight and four lines, with a rhyme scheme of abababab cdcd, and alliteration that follows neither the Old English pattern nor the pattern of the alliterative revival. The poem asserts with copious supporting evidence how men of the earth are troubled in their tilling ("are troubled in their tilling," 1. 2). The opening line of the poem aptly foreshadows what is to come. The first-person narrator of the first line becomes one of the "men upon earth" who "make much moan," so that the rest of the poem amounts to an enumeration of the ways in which the poor farmers are victimized.

The statement that good yeres & corn bohe bep agon ("Good years and corn both are gone," 1. 3) typifies the sort of absolute assertion the poet uses to convince his audience of the hopelessness of the farmers' situation. "Now we must work, nor is there any other way," and "I may no longer live with my gleanings" also convey that situation
in unquestionable terms. One tantalizing line, ne kepeb here no sawe ne no song synge, (l. 4) seems to be the only mention of joyful or leisurely activities—due to all the problems listed in the course of the rest of the poem, the telling and singing of stories seems to be denied to the harried farmers. The final couplet of the first stanza introduce what is apparently the farmers' major trial, excessive taxation: Yet ber is a bitterore bid to the bon/ for euer the furbe peni mot to be kynge ("Yet there is a bitterer bite to the bone/ for always the fourth penny must go to the king," ll. 7-8).

Not satisfied with the picture of hopelessness he has so far drawn, the poet proceeds to convince the reader in the second stanza through a series of balanced statements divided by caesura. Whereas most of the lines in the first stanza do not have internal breaks, the poet uses them in the second stanza to emphasize the hopelessness of the situation. These verses reflect a specific rhetorical strategy. In the first half of each line, the poet introduces some hopeful element; then in the second half of the line he undercuts that hope. For example, bus we carpeb for be kynge ("Thus we carp about the king," l. 9) suggests an action that might have a positive result, but the line finishes out & carieb ful colde ("and carry full cold"), an idiom indicating that the complaint has fallen on deaf ears. In lines 10, 11, and 12 the phrases & weneb forte keuere
("and hope for to recover"), whose hab any god ("whoso hath any goods," and bote euer be leuest ("but ever the dearest") all hint at something promising which is canceled out by the end of the line in the phrases: & euer bub acast ("and ever are cast down"), hopeb he nout to holde ("hopes he not to hold [them]"), we leoseb alast ("we lose at last").

The second stanza illustrates one of the "Husbandman" poet's two methods of advancing his argument; in the first of these he tightly structures together gnomic statements of despair, statements that indeed could often stand alone as proverbs describing the dilemma of husbandmen. In the second method, which grows out of the proverbs and sometimes cannot be distinguished from them, he gives remarkably concrete information about the bad times experienced by the farmers. The poet specifically describes the officials who plague the farmers in the third stanza:

& haueb monie hynen bat hopieb ber to be hayward heteb vs harm to habben of his be bailif bockneb vs bale & weneb wel do be wodeward waiteb vs wo bat lokeb under rys ne mai vs ryse no rest rycheis ne ro...(14-18)

("And many fellows that hope there-to
The hayward threatens us with harm to get his [share],
The bailif beckons to us sorrow, and hopes to do well,
The woodward waits us wo that looks under branches
Nor may rest, riches nor repose arise for us...")

Just as the structure of stanza two conveys the poet's
meaning, so also the parallelism and sound devices---methods used throughout the poem---make more powerful and memorable the poet's message. The verses describing these officials illustrate how the poet uses alliteration to link together verses within stanzas. Each of the main alliterating consonant sounds in lines 15-18 is anticipated at the end of the previous line. The "h" alliteration runs through both line 14 and 15; the "w" sound in weneb wel do of line 16 carries over to the beginning of line 17, be wodeward waiteb us wo; the "r" alliteration of line 18 is anticipated, in rys in line 17.

One commentator, A. T. E. Matonis, in the course of trying to argue that Harley MS. 2253 is influenced by Celtic poetic tradition, finds even more sound repetitions in these few lines. While noting the close parallelism of the lines, Matonis also comments on the similar vowel sounds contained in hayward, heteb, bailif, bale, and waiteb. This is just one example of many interlinkings in the poem that do indeed resemble intricate Celtic designs. These sound patterns contribute to the memorability of the verse in "Husbandman," the quality which makes individual lines seem so proverb-like. One particular method the poet uses to connect adjoining stanzas is stanza-linking, a device involving alliteration or the repetition of a word or phrase in the final verse of a stanza and the initial verse of the next stanza. Interestingly, particularly striking proverbial
lines occur at the beginning and end of stanzas. \textit{Luber is to leosen per ase lutel ys} ("Miserable is it to lose where little is," l. 13), which begins stanza three, could easily have been found instead in a collection of sayings. Alliteration, assonance (in \textit{Luber} and \textit{lutel}), and the compression of thought contribute to the proverbial quality of this line, as they do of the following lines at the end of stanzas which are interlinked with the thoughts nearby through sound devices, repetition, and theme: \textit{bote euer be leuest we leoseb alast} ("but ever the dearest we lose at last," l. 12), \textit{ned e in swot & in swynk swynde mot swo}, ("Needs in sweat and in toil they must so perish," l. 20), \textit{falsshipe fatteb and marreb wyp myht}, ("Falsehood grows fat and mars with might," l. 32), \textit{bat er werede robes nou wereb ragges}, ("Those who before wore robes now wear rags," l. 36), \textit{bat ich alle per spare benne y mot spene}, ("All that I spare then must I spend," l. 48), and \textit{for he may scape and we aren euer caht}, ("for they may escape and we are ever caught," l. 60).

After setting the stage in the first two stanzas and introducing several corrupt officials in the third, the poet characterizes the victims and the victimizers, accusing the rich of stealing from the poor. Amidst various statements demonstrating the results of the victimization of the farmers (\textit{ar londes and ar leodes liggeb ful lene}) and showing the causes of that victimization (\textit{falsshipe fatteb})
and marreb wyp myht, and we bep honted from hale to hurne)
stanza seven introduces a new voice. In it, a beadle
demands silver of the speaker, who explains that as a result
he must sell his tools (mi bil & my borstax) and his grain
before it is ready. Then the master beadle, brust ase a
bore, demands money, and the speaker must sell his mare.
bus be grene wax vs greueb under gore/ bat me vs honteb ase
hound dob be hare. Taxes, symbolized by the green wax, make
life impossible for the farmer. The poet gives effective
and logical evidence for this, as lines 63-64 indicate:

\[
\text{to seche seluer to be kyng y mi seed solde}
\text{forbi mi lond leye lip & leorned to slepe}
\]

("To get silver to the king I my seed sold
Therefore my land lies worthless and learns to
sleep")

Without his tools, his horse, and his planting seed, the
farmer has no alternative. At the end of the poem, even the
"wicked weathers" conspire against the farmers, and the poet
concludes with these dismal verses: ber wakenep in be world
wondred and wee/ ase god in swynden anon as so forte swynke
("There awakens in the world hardship and pain/ as good to
perish at once as so for to work," ll. 71-72) The poet has
carefully shown the impossibility of hope, by showing how
all his hardships conspire against his doing his work and
prospering from it.
Despite the fact that the poet achieves a tonal unity in the poem, structurally the poem does not reflect a consistent overall design. The poet does introduce some of the people who trouble the farmers toward the beginning, and he does seem to save some of the more impossible demands of the corrupt officials until later in the poem, but the individual stanzas do not each advance the argument in a logical progression. Rather than focusing on the structure as a whole to fulfill his purpose, the poet takes great care in composing intricate details. The poem is a gothic composite of many detailed parts which through the sheer weight of the whole, irregular assemblage of grievances convinces the reader of the desperate nature of the farmers' plight.

The tone of "Song of the Husbandman" is in many ways unique, and its singularity can be made more clear by comparison with other medieval poems which have some of the same concerns, poems such as "Man in the Moon," "Poem on the Evil Times of Edward II," and Piers Plowman.

"Man in the Moon," a lyric also contained in MS. Harley 2253, has much in common with "Husbandman." Like "Husbandman," it both alliterates and rhymes and is "free from French influence."² It even possesses stanza-linking, though to a much lesser degree than "Husbandman" does. In it, the speaker projects onto the moon human characteristics, finally giving the moon advice in dealing
with a hayward who does not appreciate the moon's supposed collecting of briarwood. "Moon" also indicates the difficulties of thirteenth-century farmers, but it does so in a comic mode, in contrast to the darker mode of "Husbandman." When the "Husbandman" poet writes carieb ful cold, the idiom signifies metaphorically the horrible times and cruel treatment the farmers must endure; in contrast, the speaker in "Moon" worries about the actual physical cold that the Man in the Moon must experience. When the "Husbandman" poet shows how hopeless and tragic the farmers' plight is, the "Moon" poet, in true comic spirit, suggests a sneaky solution. The corrupt beadle in "Husbandman" enters "brust as a boar"; the hayward in "Moon," however, can be tricked into becoming dronke ase a dreynt mous, so that the wed (the same sort of pledge that is another trial to the Husbandman) can be retrieved:

3ef by wed ys ytake, bring hom be trous, sete forby byn ober fot, stryd ouer sty. We shule preye be haywart hom to vr hous ant maken hym at heyse for be maystry, drynke to deorly of fol goud bou, ant oure dame douse shal sitten hym by. When bat he is dronke ase a dreynt mous, benne we schule borewe be wed ate bayly. (*If thy pledge is taken, bring home the bundle, set forth thine other foot, stride over the path. We shall persuade the hayward home to our house And make him at ease in the highest degree And our sweet dame shall sit beside him When he is drunk as a drowned mouse, then we shall obtain the pledge from the bailif.*)
The comparison of "Husbandman" with "Moon" reveals the contrastingly unremitting grimness and despondency of "Husbandman."

Whimsical craftiness and guile are not the only alternative possibilities to the gloom and distinctive dramatic response of "Husbandman" to oppression--there is also rebellion. "Poem on the Evil Times of Edward II" a poem "probably from the early part of Edward II's reign" responds to the corruption of the times with rebellion:

"When war and wreck in land and manslaughter is come
When hunger and dearth on earth the poor have undergone
When the best are thus starving
When corn has been so dear, you that will abide,
listen and you will stack the skill.
I will lay down for no man, herken who so will."

("When war and wreck in land and manslaughter is come
When hunger and dearth on earth the poor have undergone
When the best are thus starving
When corn has been so dear, you that will abide,
listen and you will stack the skill.
I will lay down for no man, herken who so will.")

With spirit and fire, especially in the last line quoted, the poet exhibits a determination not to let corruption and petty officials tread upon him. The poet's intention is reform, even though he offers no practical solution to the ills of society he describes. Both the "Husbandman" poet and the "Evil Times" poet find a release for their
frustrations in their poems, the "Husbandman" poet in a dark, lyric lamentation which culminates in a statement of resignation, the "Evil Times" poet in an angry declaration of his determination not to surrender. As John E. Wells evaluates the significance of "Evil Times":

The piece is of very great importance, because of its presentation of the conditions of the first quarter of the fourteenth century; because of its reflection of the attitude of many persons of the time toward these conditions; and because of its anticipation, by perhaps fifty years, of much of the motive and spirit that motivated Langland. (Wells, p. 239)

The first two claims apply equally well to "Husbandman." Indeed, "Husbandman" gives even more specific detail than "Evil Times" of conditions perhaps a little earlier. The purpose and spirit, however, of all three poems differ from each other. Although all three see the corruption in society, "Husbandman" expresses carefully crafted despair, with no call or hope for change, while "Evil Times" demands change but provides no plan. Only Piers Plowman calls for anything like concrete reform, according to Thomas L. Kinney, who puts the first seven passus of Piers in the complaint tradition:

"The temper of complaint as hitherto described is obvious in the poem, and all the emotions and attitudes mentioned can be found in it, but what makes the poem so strong is not so much the tension of complaint as it is the resolution of it, the development and fulfillment of another temper occasionally emergent in the poems of complaint, namely exhortation....the poem gets its impetus from the earlier verses of complaint. So much despair, hope, lamentation, frustration, anger, hysteria, denunciation, and invective need resolution, the balm to the pain."
Thus, whether or not William Langland knew "Song of the Husbandman," or any other particular poem of complaint, the sentiments they express were no doubt familiar to him and gave him, in part, his subject matter.

A comparison of the approaches of Langland and the "Husbandman" poet illustrates differences in style and emphasis. In the C-Text of *Piers Plowman*, Langland describes the plight of the poor:

> Ac that most neden aren oure neyhebores, and we nyme gode hede,  
> As prisons in puttes and pore folke in cotes,  
> Charged with childrene and chief lordes rente;  
> That they with spynnyng may spare, spenen hit on housshuyre,  
> Bothe in mylke and in mele, to make with papelotes  
> To aqlotye with here gurles that greden after fode.  
> And hemsulve also suffre much hunger,  
> And wo in wynter-tymes, with wakynge on nyhtes  
> To ryse to the reule to rokke the cradel....(6, 11-19)

("But those that need most are our neighbours, and we should take good heed,  
As prisoners in dungeons and poor folks in hovels,  
Those who with spinning may spare, spend it on household goods,  
Both milk and meal, to make with porridge  
To feed their children that hunger after food.  
And they themselves also suffer much hunger,  
And woe in winter times, with waking on nights  
To get out of bed to rock the cradle....

That sad is to read or in rhyme show  
The woe of these women that live in hovels;  
And of many other men that much woe suffer....")
Like the "Husbandman" poet, Langland identifies the fele to forge there-to, and fewe panes taketh, the "many who would receive there to, and a few pennies take" from the poor who soffre much hunger, and wo in wynter tymes. But Langland is even more concerned with the poor in this passage, as he specifically describes their state in an attempt to persuade his readers to pity and help them. He writes especially of poor women and children, a subject the "Husbandman" poet, unconcerned with the personal lives of the victims in his poem, mentions not at all. The "Husbandman" poet leaves to the imagination the personal implications of the oppression for the poor, except for his fleeting references to breeding beggars and bat er werede robes nou wereb regges ("those who before wore robes now wear rags"). The speaker in the earlier lyric poem desires no more than that his reader recognize his plight; he does not intend to incite anyone to action. The passage from Piers Plowman also illustrates the difference in style between the later, alliterative revival epic, and the earlier intricately composed lyric. Both are dense, but "Husbandman" is dense with sayings woven together; Piers Plowman is dense with more details, such as the mylke and mele the children cry for.

In the brief mentions "Husbandman" receives in survey discussions of complaint poetry, commentators on medieval poetry tend to address two broad issues---the social standing of the poet and the subject matter of the poem.
The mystery of the first issue is shown by R. H. Robbins. He points out that:

The complaints and protests against the wicked age are generally those of the middle and upper classes....The legitimate complaints of serfs and peasants are not discussed, simply because they were illiterate and without spokesman.

How, then, did "The Song of the Husbandman" come to be? Who might have written with such sympathy for farmers made desperate by taxes, corruption, and even weather? A partial answer may be found in the poem itself. Though he speaks of the poor, the poet does not seem to be one of them; rather, he seems to fear becoming one of them: bat er werede robes nou werenb ragges. Thus, J.P. Oakden's description proves inaccurate on more than one count; he writes, "in diction and style it is extremely crude, but the poem did not come from a literary artist---it came from a simple peasant." Oakden overlooks the intricate artistry of sounds, which argues a highly literate composer. Also, what he identifies as crudity, no doubt on account of the occasional lack of articles and difficult word order, is simply due to the poem's having been written in early Middle English. The diction of "Husbandman," it should be noted, is almost purely English; there is little French diction and little "French refinement." The poet himself, as Arthur K. Moore points out, "implies that he has not always been a farmer" in verse 58, sebbe y tek to be lond such tene me wes taht ("Since I took to the land such trouble was taught me").
Moore gives the explanation most founded in the poem when he suggests that the poet is "one of that class of relatively prosperous tenant farmers coming into prominence during this period." (pp. 85-86)

The second issue, the nature of complaint poetry, coincides with discussions of the nature of complaint poetry itself. Of the commentators who discuss "Husbandman," Kinney, in his attempt to define a common "temper of the verse of complaint," describes the character of complaint poems best, and therefore places "Husbandman" in its context most effectively. They are, according to him,

composed of emotions of despair, resignation, nostalgia, bitterness, anger, frustration, and indignation; the temper is rarely humorous or ironic, but it is sometimes vicious, snarling and nasty, denunciatory, ranting, and whining.... just as despair can become bitterness and bitterness anger, so can all the other emotions combine into what one may call temper, a temper which sets the character of the verse of complaint and gives it its characteristic attitude.12

"Husbandman," however, is not typical of most Middle English complaints. It possesses only some of these emotions, and it possesses those with a particular intensity and unity, going into more detail than any other Middle English poem about the effects of corrupt taxation on farmers. Kinney describes accurately the progression of emotion in the poem:

Lamentation merges with the sense of oppression, and bitter frustration emerges from powerlessness; the combination produces anxious tension. Concatenation links the stanzas, and waves of emotion unify the poem, opening in gloom, rising to excited bitterness,
receding into lamentation, and closing in despair.\textsuperscript{13}

"The Song of the Husbandman" is the earliest extant poem of its kind in Middle English, that is, a complaint poem whose main purpose is not to satirize the corruptions of society but to win sympathy for the victims of corruption. Its pervasive and consistent gloom is reminiscent of the Old English poem "The Wanderer." "Husbandman" gains its power through its use of detail, its use of statements that possess the ring of proverbial truth, and its verbal intricacies. It is significant historically because it mentions specific tax related abuses that, after the effects of possible exaggeration are considered, probably indicate some of the actual practices of officials and the actual dilemmas faced by farmers in England during the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries; it also dramatizes vividly a certain, probably common, hopeless and grim response to those corrupt practices. It would be appropriate, as noted above, to read "Husbandman" in conjunction with another Harley lyric, "Man in the Moon," which offers a comic response to a similar dilemma. Although "Song of the Husbandman" is rather loosely structured overall, it does possess carefully patterned smaller units of individual lines and groups of lines, and a unity of tone that makes it worthy of attention from more than specialists in English medieval complaint poetry.
Indeed its message of gloom, which could have been self-pitying if not for the effectiveness of the poetry and the specificity of the argument, make "Song" more universal than the satires with which it is usually associated. The power of its poetic argument, due to the effectiveness of its use of proverbial statements and the intricacy of its making, and the singularity and clarity of what it says, make the relatively unknown "Song of the Husbandman" a poem worthy of inclusion---along with more well known poems such as "Sumer is icumen in" and "The Blacksmiths"---in the canon of medieval lyrics read in undergraduate literature courses.
Notes


3 Brook 69.

4 Thomas J. Elliot, "Middle English Complaints Against the Times: To Contemn the World or to Reform It?" Annuale Mediaevale 14 (1973): 27.

5 Elliot 27.


12 Kinney 87.

13 Kinney 79.
GLOSSARY

a3eyn adv. again, 50.
acast adj. cast down, overcome, 10.
agôn adj. gone, vanished, lost, 3.
al n. all, 24.
alast adv. at last, in the end, 12.
anôn adv. immediately, at once, soon, 72.
ar pro. our, 27, 59?.
aroût adj. roasted, from rosten, to roast, 41.
ase as, 13, 52, 56, 57, 72.

bagges n. bags, 34.
bailif n. a minor official, often a process server, 16, 28.
bale n. misfortune, disaster, harm, anguish, misery, sorrow, 16.
bare adj. sterile, scanty, empty, poor, 52.
bid n. bite; cut, blow with a sharp weapon, 7.
biddyng v. ordering, asking, 28.
bil n. a cutting or grubbing instrument; pickaxe, hoe, 44.
bocknep v. to beckon or summon with a gesture, 16.
boded v. obeyed; abided, 59.
bolde adj. fearless, arrogant, impudent, brazen, shameless, 67.
bon n. bone, 7.
bonde n. bondsman, person holding land in return for services, 30.
bordon n. burden; staff?, 34.
bore n. boar, 51.
borstax n. ax for splitting logs; boring tool, 44.
bost n. boast, arrogance, presumption, threats, 37.
bote conj. but, 12.
bræðep v. breed, multiply, increase, 67.
brokes n. brooks, streams, 70.
brust adj. bristly, bristled, 51.
brynke n. shore bank, hill slope, 70.
budeles n. beadles, minor officials, tax collectors (often for the church), 37, 51, 59.
buggling n. a dwelling, 52.

cacche v. catch, grasp, take hold of; to receive, be given, 61.
cachereles n. a petty tax collector, a minor bailif, 50.
caht v. caught, 60.
care n. sorrow, trouble, 50.
carpe v. to utter, say, speak; to complain about, find fault with, 9.
chepeyn n. marketplace, 43.
cherl n. churl: a man, fellow, chap; a low, base person, 47.
chost n. contention, strife, quarrel, dispute, 43.
clene adv. completely, 25.
colde n. coldness as suffered or undergone, 9, 61.
corn n. grain sown or grown, 3, 46.
cot n. peasant's cottage, 62.
counte n. account, 62.
er adv. ere, formerly, before, 36, 68.
falshshipe n. falsehood, falsity, 32.
fattep v. grows fat, 32.
feh n. livestock, 65.
feire n. fair, holiday, market, 65.
feyr adj. fair, fine (or possibly n. fair, marketplace), 42.
forp conj. therefore; adv. forward, ahead, 43, 64.
forlore adj. lost, destroyed, undone, doomed, 23.
forte prep. for to, 10, 22, 72.
ful adj. full (used as an intensifier of adverbs), 27(fol), 37, 52, 61.
furpe adj. fourth, 8.
fyhsh n. fish, 42.
geynep v. to be profitable, to avail or help, 43.
gode n. goods, something valuable, 3, 11.
gore n. garment, 55.
gras n. grass, field, 46.
grene adj. green, 38, 46, 55.
greuep v. grieves, troubles, 55.
greyep v. prepare, get ready, make ready, 38.
habben v. have, 15, 41.
hale n. hall? from hale to hurne, from one refuge to another, 35.
halt v. hold, carry oneself; to walk lamely, depart from truth, deviate from proper course, 29, 33.
hed n. head, 22.
hene adj., adv.?, abject, injured, oppressed, hated, 29.
hennen n. hens, 41.
herde v. heard, 1.
hetep v. promise, threaten, 15.
hiht v. promised, 28.
hod n. hood, 22.
honted v. hunted, 35, hontep, 56, 57.
hude v. hide, 22.
hulle n. hill, 57.
hurne n. corner, hideaway, niche, 35. (see hale)
hynen n. hines, fellows, men (often used contemptuously); servants, a household of servants, 14.

ich pro. I, 1, 6, 45, 54.
itemed v. troubled, ruined, harassed, 2.

kepeb v. keep, maintain, preserve; desire, 4, 62.
keuere v. recover, regain, 10.
kippe v. seize, snatch, attack, 61.
knyht n. knight, 30.

launprey n. lamprey, eel, 42.
 lax n. salmon, 42.
 legge v. lay, 45.
 lene adj. lean, 27.
 lengore adj. longer, 6.
 leodes n. people, 27.
 leornep v. learns, 64.
 leosep v. lose, 12, 13.
 lesinge n. gleaning, 6.
 leuest n. most beloved, most valued, 12.
 leye v. lay, 63.
 lip adj. miserable, foul?, empty?, 64.
 liggep v. lie, 27.
 lokep v. looks, 17.
 lond n. land, 23, 27, 31, 58, 64.
 luper adj. miserable, greivous, 13.
 lutel n. little, 13, 19.
 lyue v. live, 6.

marke n. a mark, a monetary unit, 53.
 mede v. bribe, payment, 53.
 meni n. many, 29.
 mo n. more, 40.
 mold n. earth, 1.
 mon n. moan, lamentation, 1.
 monie adj. many, 13, 67.
 mote v. must, 5, 8, 41, 45, 49, 50, 53.
 munten v. to venture, 53.
 myht n. might, power, 32.

ner adv. never, 59.
 nou adv. now, 5, 36.

oper conj. or, 46; adj. other, 5.

piked, pykep v. despoil, steal, dig up, 24, 25. ?
pilep v. rob, pillage, 19, 25.
pore n. the poor, 19, 24, 25.
prikyares n. riders, 24.
pris n. value, price, 19.
prude n. pride; adj. proud, 24.
raymep v. plunder, fleece, take at will, 26.
repe v. reap, 68.
ro n. repose, 18.
roted adj. rotted, 68, 69.
ru3e n. rye, 68, 69.
ruls adj. overripe, 68, 69.
rycheis n. riches, 18.
ryht n. right, 26.
rys n. branch, twig, 17.
ryse v. arise, happen, 18.
sawe n. saying, story, proverb; writing, book, 4.
seche v. seek, 63.
seppe conj. since 58, 62, 65.
seip v. says, 52.
seluer n. silver, 38.
spene v. spend, spent, 48, 49.
stont v. stand, 33.
stre n. straw, 69.
stude n. place, 33.
sulle v. sell, 44, 46, 54.
swot n. sweat, 20.
swynde v. decrease, perish, 20, 21, 72.
swynk n., v. toil, labor, 20, 72.
taht v. taught, 58.
tek v. took, 58.
tene n. vexation, injury, harm, 58.
tensipen adv. ten-fold, ten times, 40.
per ase adv. where, 13.
waitep v. watches, waits, 17,
wed n. pledge, compact, 45.
wene n. hope, suppose, 31.
weneb v. hope, expect, 10, 16.
wo n. woe, 17.
wodeward n. woodward, an official who guards the manor's timber, wolle v. will, 45.
own n. way, 5.
wondred n. hardship, 31.
wost v. know, 39.
\`eres n. years, 3.
\`et conj. yet, 7.
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