CRITICS OF KINGSHIP
IN LATE FOURTEENTH AND EARLY FIFTEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND

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CRITICS OF KINGSHIP

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Thesis

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary criticisms from chroniclers of the kings they lived under provide interesting insights into the nature of kingship late fourteenth and early fifteenth century England. This paper examines the issue of kingship in this period to better understand how contemporaries viewed their monarchs. This discussion is supported by two major chronicles of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries: The Chronicle of Adam Usk 1377-1421 and The St. Albans Chronicle 1376-1394.¹ Though these sources have been used in most studies of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, there have been few studies that have discussed the chronicles in their own right. Most historians have used them to answer their own questions, and so have failed to listen to what the primary source was trying to say.² The purpose of this study is to reveal what the contemporaries believed were the important issues of their times. While modern scholars have extensively studied late medieval kings, they have not analysed the contemporary understanding of kingship, an issue that dominates the contemporary accounts of Adam


² See below, 3-5.
and Thomas. Though modern historians heavily use these two texts they have never addressed the primary concern of Adam and Thomas: the issue of kingship.

This paper will show the clear message that both Adam Usk and Thomas Walsingham were trying to make about the nature of kingship in their period. It is striking how similar their criticisms and concerns were of the monarchs they were living under, and therefore their definition of ideal kingship. The king was not an absolute ruler, his subjects owed him their loyalty and service, but there were clear limits to the monarch’s power. Adam and Thomas were both strong advocates of their society’s structure, and believed that without effective kingship there would be anarchy. Therefore when there was unrest in society, such as during the peasants’ rebellion, they lay the blame at the top for the way the kingdom was being ruled. It was the king’s role to act as protector of all his subjects, who in return would give their loyalty, service, and tax to the king. It was vitally important for a monarch to respect the position of his nobility and to treat them justly, as it was from the nobility that the king received council and military service. However, a king could not ignore his common people and the church without suffering dire consequences. A tyrannical monarch who oppressed the common people and the church with harsh taxation would suffer dire consequences. Therefore the king had responsibilities to all members of society, not just the elites.

The Chronicle of Adam Usk is significant because it touches on issues from the Great Schism, the Hundred Years Wars, the revolt of Owain Glendower (1402-1409), and the Peasants’ Rebellion (1380), to the deposition of Richard II (r.1377-1399).³ The

³ See Anthony Steel, Richard II (Cambridge, 1962), or more recently Nigel Saul, Richard II (London, 1997), for an in-depth look at the reign of Richard II.
*St. Albans Chronicle* is equally important. It extensively covers events such as the Good Parliament 1376, the bishop of Norwich’s crusade 1383, and all of the major military campaigns of the period, as well as much of the same ground as Adam Usk. Both sources are vitally important commentaries of their times, which is underlined by how frequently they have been used by modern historians. Yet, this paper will treat them in a completely different way to how they have been studied before.

There are many themes that run throughout these texts; yet one of the most significant that both authors discuss in detail is the issue of kingship. Both of these authors expressed grave concerns over how their country was being ruled in very lively and stinging critiques. Adam Usk spans the reigns of Richard II, Henry IV and Henry V, while Thomas Walsingham covers the end of Edward III’s reign, the regency of John of Gaunt, and the reign of Richard II. This is significant because Richard II is one of England’s most derided kings, while Henry V’s legend has grown out of all proportion. Therefore these texts offer great examples of contemporary critiques of the monarchs of their period, showing historians what they believed were good attributes and major flaws in each monarch’s kingship.

The Chronicles of Adam Usk and Thomas Walsingham have received very little historical analysis devoted primarily to themselves; yet they represent some of the most used sources in the history of late fourteenth and early fifteenth century England. Few of the major political narratives of this period have ignored either of these two sources. The seminal works of Maurice Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*, E. F. Jacob, *The Fifteenth Century*, and May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century*, all rely heavily on one
or both of these sources. All these studies are excellent resources on the political narrative of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Yet they use the chronicles for narrative purposes, and so do not represent any significant discussion of the sources themselves.

Where Adam’s chronicle has received more in-depth analysis it has been in relation to whether it represents Lancastrian propaganda, including G.O. Sayles, “The Deposition of Richard II: Three Lancastrian Narratives,” and Christopher Given-Wilson’s “Adam Usk, the monk of Evesham and the Parliament of 1397-8.” These articles seek to answer questions regarding the historical accuracy of the chronicles surrounding the issue of Richard II’s deposition in 1399, or the historical reputation of Richard II. Christopher Given-Wilson has looked in detail to uncover where Adam got his information from, or whether he was copying off another chronicle. He argued that it was probable that Adam as well as other chroniclers got a lot of their information from Lancastrian pamphlets that were circulating at the time for propaganda purposes, and so Richard II’s historical reputation has been too heavily degraded. Yet whether Adam Usk had a Lancastrian bias


or not matters little to this study, as his criticisms of the king do not stop with Richard II, but runs throughout his chronicle.

The only really detailed analyses of the two chronicles come in the introductions to the translations of the sources. These discussions cover a variety of issues regarding the texts, but once again are mainly concerned with the accuracy of chronicles regarding events such as the peasant’s rebellion, or the Hundred Years War.

The first translation of Adam Usk’s chronicle was by Sir Edward Maunde Thompson in 1904, though this has now been superseded by Given-Wilson’s 1997 edition. His discussion of the text details specific narrative issues regarding the chronicle, and does a great job of dating when certain parts of the text were written by Adam. For Thomas Walsingham the most recent translation is from 2003 by Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss. This also includes a substantial discussion of the source in the introduction. However, none of these discussions concentrate on the issue that dominates both texts, that of kingship. Given-Wilson’s only comment was that Adam took kingship for granted.\(^7\) Taylor, Watkiss, and Childs do make a little more reference to kingship, saying that Thomas saw Richard II as a weak king due to his character, and that Thomas looked to the nobility to redress his grievances.\(^8\) This paper does not disagree with these observations, but takes this discussion much further to show how kingship was at the very heart of both chronicles, not merely a minor observation. It will also cover new ground in comparing the two chronicles to reveal the striking similarities in the message

\(^7\) *Adam Usk*, lxii.

\(^8\) Thomas Walsingham, *The St. Albans Chronicle*, xcix, cv.
that both authors were made. Both Adam and Thomas were in agreement in their
criticisms of kingship, and what the ideal should be, even though they covered different
events from different backgrounds. The historiography of the late fourteenth and early
fifteenth century has yet to recognise the importance of the issue of kingship to the
contemporary authors of these two chronicles.

The rest of chapter one will provide brief backgrounds to the two authors and their
chronicles. Chapter two will look in detail at the king’s relationship with the nobility, to
show how the two authors believed that the nobility had a natural role in the governance
of their kingdom, by right of their blood. Chapter 3 will look at the other responsibilities
the king had to society, including the peasantry and the church, to show how both authors
warned of the dire consequences for ignoring or oppressing their people. Chapter 3 will
also discuss the authors’ interpretations of issues such as martial prowess and deposition
in relation to kingship. Chapter 4 will bring all of these points together in a final
conclusion, to show the importance of kingship to both authors and to highlight how
similar their critiques were.

Adam of Usk in History

Before taking a detailed look at Adam’s chronicle, it is useful to have a basic
understanding of his life. As so many historians have used this chronicle, there are a
number of brief surveys of his life. The most in-depth studies of Adam have come in the
introductions to the two translations by C. Given-Wilson and Sir Edward Maunde

A brief background to Adam will be given below, but one should refer to the recent translation by Given-Wilson for a more detailed history of Adam of Usk. Adam of Usk was born in the mid fourteenth century, E. M. Thompson suggests around 1352. He was born in Usk, Monmouthshire in Wales and so his chronicle does reveal Welsh sympathies. Adam’s first patron was Edmund Mortimer (d. 1381) who sent Adam to Oxford to study law. Once he graduated he taught in Oxford until he worked under Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, who became his next patron after Mortimer’s death. He was a member of the secular church, as well as being a practicing lawyer. He practised in the court of Canterbury from 1392 to 1399. He was also involved in proceedings at the court of chivalry, and was even counsel for Henry IV until he fell out of favour. At the time of Richard II’s deposition in 1399 Adam travelled with Henry IV after he landed in England in search of Richard. However, a few years later Adam left England for Rome to further his ambitions for a bishopric and dispute a property case. But the Welsh rebellion made advancement increasingly difficult for a Welshman like Adam. In Rome he worked as papal chaplain and auditor, under Popes Boniface IX (pope 1389-1404) and Innocent VII (pope 1404-1406), but was excommunicated in 1407 for switching allegiance to the Avignon papacy. He left Rome and travelled to France and Flanders, hoping to return to England. He had to wait there


11 Chronicon Adae De Usk, ed. Thompson, vii.

for a few years to gain a pardon from Henry IV, due to suspicions of him collaborating with the continuing Welsh rebellion. Adam apparently won his pardon by pretending to side with the king’s enemy Owain Glendower, before he could be accepted back into England. Presumably, the king wanted Adam to gain the trust of Glendower and provide intelligence for Henry. After travelling back to Wales and keeping his side of the bargain he gained his pardon and lived in peace for the rest of his life, though without the political significance he once had. His career had stalled and his interest in his chronicle faded. Given-Wilson suggests that Adam began to write his chronicle around 1401, and then in fits and starts until 1421, but Adam lived another nine years, writing his will in 1430.\textsuperscript{13}

Adam lived a very colourful and eventful life, which makes his chronicle all the more interesting. His Welsh descent means the chronicle has an almost unique Welsh angle, but also Adam was heavily involved in English politics, having studied in Oxford and served in Canterbury. He was also an actor at the highest levels of society, accompanying Henry during the deposition of Richard II and being present at the infamous Parliament of 1397. However, he does also claim to represent the views of the peasantry in his chronicle. In addition, he also had a wider European perspective from having lived in exile, spending his time in the papal court and France. Though the date of Adam’s birth is unknown, historians do know that he died in 1430. If historians accept Thompson’s estimation, then Adam was 78 when he died. The best estimate for when the chronicle was written is Given-Wilson’s estimate provided above, but it should be

\textsuperscript{13} Adam Usk, ed. Given-Wilson, xix.
remembered that this cannot be known for certain. Adam’s personality and his strong opinions are evident in his social commentary. He was an intelligent man who thought a lot about the world around him, while at the same time dealing with his own personal ambitions.

**Thomas Walsingham in History**

Thomas Walsingham was the author of the St. Albans Chronicle. The life of Thomas is much more straightforward than that of Adam Usk. The best study on Thomas is the introduction to the translation of the St. Albans chronicle by Taylor, Childs and Watkiss.\(^\text{14}\) They traced the birth of Thomas to around 1340, and believe that he lived until 80, dying in 1420. Thomas was in the Church throughout most of his life, with the vast majority at St. Albans. The only occasions when historians have discovered him absent was when he studied at Oxford in his youth, and then when he was transferred to Wymondham in 1394, to the position of Prior. He does not seem to have been well suited to his new role, and so was recalled to St. Albans in 1396 at his own request, and never held a senior position again. He was a prolific writer during his life, devoting much of his early career to the St. Albans chronicle, though after being transferred to the Priorship of Wymondham he seemed to lose interest in the chronicle, as historians note a decline in his influence in the chronicle. However, he did write throughout his life right up until his last years. His last work was in 1419, and was dedicated to Henry V, though

during his lifetime he wrote on a number of themes including music, monasticism, and history. He also wrote four pieces of classical scholarship.

This study focuses on the St. Albans chronicle in the period from the Good Parliament of 1376, up to 1394, which has been attributed by historians to Thomas. Therefore the writings in these years can be recognised as representing one man’s understanding of events around him and the society in which he lived, which acts as a solid comparison with the writings of Adam Usk. These two men lived at the same time as each other, but lived very different lives. Thomas lived a very settled life in the church, whereas Adam was a very ambitious man who got caught up in many of the major events of his day. Both of their commentaries on this period offer historians a great deal in understanding their views of kingship.
CHAPTER II

THE KING AND THE NOBILITY

In both chronicles the king’s relationship with the nobility was an important concern. Both Adam and Thomas showed how the treatment of the nobility was critical to ruling successfully. The king had to respect the position of the nobility, and rule in consultation with them through parliament. The reign of Richard II is especially striking because his abuses of the nobility end up in him being deposed by one of his own noblemen. Both Adam and Thomas believed that the nobility had a right to keep the king in check. Yet because Richard ruled arbitrarily the nobility was unable to fulfil its natural role. The nobles who opposed Richard were not depicted as traitors but as martyrs, because they were trying to fulfil their duties as members of the nobility in keeping the king in check. Both chroniclers show how only when the king and nobility worked together could there be good governance. When the king overstepped his power it was disastrous to the kingdom, and the nobility could legitimately attempt to get the king back under control.

This chapter will highlight four major issues that Adam and Thomas raised regarding the king’s relationship with his nobility. One of their main criticisms was the

king’s reliance on favourites for council, to the exclusion of the rightful nobility. Not only was the king ignoring his most gifted councillors, but his favourites’ monopoly on royal patronage and attention caused great tension between the king and his nobility. This problem was attributed by both authors to the youth of the king, which was causing problems for the good governance of the realm. The second major issue was the king’s authoritarian manner. Not only were the most capable men of the realm being excluded from patronage by the king, but they were also having a lessening role in the governance of the kingdom. This came primarily from the king’s misrule of parliament; by ignoring this vital decision making body that brought together the nobility of the realm. The third issue was the king’s abuse of property and inheritance, by acting unjustly and disregarding the nobility’s rights to their land. The final issue was that of noble blood. This is at the heart of Adam and Thomas’ beliefs concerning the natural rights of the nobility. This section will highlight their belief in noble blood and the natural rights it entailed.

Before looking at how contemporaries viewed the nobility and their relationship with the king, it is worth looking at how historians currently understand this. Historians have seen Richard II’s reign as a period when the great titles of England were cheapened through overuse and the promotion of men unfit for high office. Christopher Given-Wilson sees the fourteenth century as a time when the granting of earldoms resulted more from royal favour than inheritance. Therefore, in the reigns of Edward II, Edward III, and Richard II there was a growing tension regarding royal patronage. Before this period

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the highest rank below the king in England was earl, and it was reserved primarily for royal family members. Edward II used this important title to promote his favourites, such as Piers Gaveston and Hugh Despenser, which had caused uproar at the time, and is seen by historians as being the main reason for his deposition. Edward III had expanded patronage even further by creating the title of duke, and in 1337 creating an unheard of number of new earls, six in total. Edward III’s use of patronage is seen as one of the most successful aspects of his reign, and partly explains his successful military campaigns with a new generation of war leaders.

Yet while Edward III was very successful at widening the titled nobility, this tactic was a disaster for Richard II. Both the chronicles of Adam Usk and Thomas Walsingham show how patronage of the nobility was an extremely important part of successful kingship. These two sources show that to Adam and Thomas Richard II was a complete failure in his handling of the nobility. Both Adam and Thomas recount exhaustively how Richard undermined the nobility by raising men of lower rank to the titled nobility. He disregarded rightful inheritance and noble blood, to raise his favourites to reward them for their political support.

The Young King and His Favourites

Adam and Thomas stressed the importance of the nobility’s role with the minority of Richard II (minority from 1377-1389). They both used this biblical quote from Solomon to illustrate the nobility’s heightened responsibility at this time to govern: “Woe to the
land whose king is a child.”  

Adam begins his book with the great misfortunes the realm had suffered due to the king’s youth: the peasant’s rebellion and the threat of Lollardy. The youth of the king meant that he was vulnerable to the “lasciviousness and greed of his familiars.” For ‘familiars’ read ‘favourites’ (familancium), which will better explain his misgivings of a young king. Adam therefore welcomed the Parliament of 1386 that entrusted the king’s welfare to twelve members of the nobility. The king was furious at this limitation of this power, and he continued to resist “at the prompting of his familiars.”

The issue of favourites and their sway over the king was not a new issue. It would always cause tension and jealousy in a royal court, yet it was the job of a monarch to keep this under control. Successful kings were able to balance the tension between nobility and favourites: yet previous to Richard, Edward II had been deposed mainly because of his excessive patronage to favourites. Other members of the nobility felt excluded if they believed the king’s favourites had too much influence. Adam argued that this was clearly the case with Richard; he did not blame the king directly, he blamed

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18 _Adam Usk_, ed. Given-Wilson, 9.

19 Ibid., 9.


it on his youth; yet he clearly stated that influence of favourites was negative and that it was the job of parliament to advise the king, especially when the king was only a boy. Adam’s feelings were represented through the voice of the king’s mother. She pleaded with her son to adhere to the twelve appointed advisors and to ignore his favourites, “for I foresee your downfall, on account of these accursed flatterers.”22 Adam’s point was that a good king would rule by consulting the nobility in Parliament; for a king to be led by his favourites was ruinous. Unfortunately, in Adam’s opinion a young king was too easily influenced.

The issue of favourites was also heavily present in Thomas’ account. He reveals, through the bishop of Rochester’s speech at Richard II’s coronation that it “would be very easy for a king to stray from the right path, and for the realm and the people to be in peril, if those who served him and his council zealously were men of bad character.”23 In the same speech he pleaded to the nobility to “abandon their vices” and “model themselves on the king’s purity and innocence.”24 It was therefore troublesome for a young boy to be counselled by men who involved themselves in acts “such as debauchery, and acts of fornication and adultery.”25 This was a warning of the dangers of a young and “innocent” king being led astray by his advisors. A young king had to learn

22 Adam Usk, ed. Given-Wilson, 11.


24 Ibid., 155.

25 Ibid., 155.
not to be led by bad counsel, while on the other hand the nobility had mend their ways so
that they would set a good example for the king. The bishop warned the king of his duty
to his people, while also warning the nobility of their duty to their king. However, as
Richard’s reign wore on it became clear that the nobility were being excluded from their
role of tutoring and advising the young king.

Like Adam, Thomas was greatly concerned by the youth of the king. He cited
numerous examples of the young king being led astray by his favourites. One such case
was the dismissal of Richard Scrope as chancellor who had “carried out his duties
commendably.”26 Scrope was fulfilling his duty as chancellor by warning the king, “who
desired to ‘empty himself,’”27 of the dangers of lavishing money on his favourites.
However, the king was being bombarded by pleas from “knights, esquires, and retainers
of inferior rank,” to grant them the lands of the late Edmund Mortimer.28 Thomas
lamented that: “The king, being but a boy, did not hesitate, and granted what they
requested.”29 Due to Scrope’s insistence that the king should not grant these lands to
such people, the king dismissed his chancellor, much to the fury of Thomas. Scrope
refused to hand out Mortimer’s inheritance, claiming that the king needed these crown
lands due to his debt. However, men influenced the king into believing that Scrope was

26 Ibid., 621.

27 Ibid., 621. Phil. 2:7.


29 Ibid., 621.
“showing contempt for royal command,” and so he was “rashly deposed.”

He stated that because the king only “had the wisdom of a boy,” he was easily influenced by the “deceitful machinations of these informers than to the loyal arguments of his chancellor.”

Thomas believed that it was the responsibility of the chancellor to guide the young king in his spending. Richard Scrope “had been chosen royal chancellor by the commons of the realm and by the assent of the lords,” and so he could legitimately advise the king. Thomas believed that those appointed by parliament would act for the good of the realm, rather than the favourites who surrounded Richard, who were only concerned with lining their own pockets. The chancellor had been unjustly removed “contrary to the custom of the realm,” as he had been appointed by the commons and lords, and had only fallen from favour because of the words of men of inferior rank. In fact when “not only the magnates of the realm but also the commonalty… heard that the king had rashly deposed the chancellor, whom the whole of the nobility of the realm had appointed with the support of the common people, they were very angry.”

Yet no one dared to say

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30 Ibid., 623.

31 Ibid., 623.

32 Ibid., 621.

33 Ibid., 623.

34 Ibid., 623.
anything because of the “unreasoning youthfulness of the king.”\textsuperscript{35} The king’s favourites were causing increasing tension between the king and his loyal subjects. They were increasingly monopolising the king’s council, and so the young king not able to hear the best counsel that was available to him and so was now acting rashly. In this case the king had acted on the words of his favourites, and not on the authority of parliament, the result of this was that the kingdom lost an effective and loyal chancellor, only to be replaced by an inadequate one.

The bad counsel of the king’s favourites not only led the young king to make rash decisions, but also meant that he became increasingly indecisive. One of the major criticisms of the king was that he would often change his mind, breaking promises he had made to people. When the king pardoned the citizens of London against the wishes of his nobles in 1392, Thomas noted that the nobles “condemned the king’s fickleness and irresolution.”\textsuperscript{36} The king was incapable of acting decisively; this was compounded by how he could be easily influenced by flatterers. In this case it was not his favourites, but the citizens of London who offered the king “gold and silver tablets, cloths of gold and silk, basins and ewers of gold, gold coins, jewels and necklaces, that were so rich, so noble, and so splendid, that the value and the cost of them all could not easily have been estimated.”\textsuperscript{37} Thomas was concerned that the king had gone against the trustworthy advice of his nobles because of the flattery and bribes of the people of London.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 623.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 933.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 931.
Thomas saw it as a legitimate concern for the nobility to rid the king of his troublesome favourites, as it was for the good of the realm. The most infamous of these favourites was Michael de la Pole. In 1386 parliament was so concerned with this problem that they sentenced de la Pole to death. Thomas remarked that: “The king was very annoyed at the charges which had been made against Michael de la Pole and others whom he unwisely loved.” The king made sure that de la Pole was bailed, and once the parliament ended his favourites attempted to influence the king into annulling parliament’s acts. The king did not go that far, but from now on “held all the nobles in future under suspicion,” and so his hatred grew greater by the day against the “true and loyal nobles of the realm.” Thomas showed how the king’s favourites had driven a wedge between the king and his loyal nobles. As had occurred earlier with the dismissal of Sir Richard Scrope the loyal and effective men of the realm were running the risk of facing the king’s wrath. The king “disregarding his own words” allowed Michael de la Pole to roam wherever he wished, after he had promised that he would compel de la Pole to appear at the next parliament to answer his charges. de la Pole fled into exile so that problem had passed for now, but it was becoming increasingly clear that the young king being influenced by his favourites no longer trusted his loyal nobles, and the nobility felt that they could not trust their king. Thomas again demonstrated the king’s fickleness as

38 Ibid., 805.

39 Ibid., 807.

40 Ibid., 843.
Richard had once again gone back on his word by allowing de la Pole his freedom, after promising parliament that he would be brought to justice.

The main grievance of the parliament of 1387 according to Thomas was the king’s love of his favourites. Within the nobility was a “vile and inexorable hatred of the king and his evil counsellors.” Thomas reported how the members of parliament believed that it was these favourites who “fed, inflamed, and perpetuated the king’s anger against the Duke of Gloucester (the king’s uncle).”

Tension was so high that civil war almost broke out between the king and parliament; the nobility claimed they would “elect another to be king,” if Richard continued to allow these favourites to dominate his council. The nobility threatened that he must “banish all the trouble-makers, sycophants evil-willed useless gossips and idlers from his place and his company.”

Thomas made it clear that the issue of favourites was driving the country apart. The king’s narrow line of patronage was creating jealousy and hostility within the nobility, which put the welfare of the country in jeopardy. The threats from both sides were threatening the system of government that Thomas believed in. According to Thomas this situation had come about not because of the weaknesses of this system, but because of the young king being influenced by his favourites. To Thomas parliament was acting in the interests of the kingdom, whereas the king’s favourites were only influenced by their own greed.

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41 Ibid., 829.

42 Ibid., 849.

43 Ibid., 849.
Thomas never fully credited the king with being in full control of his government. One such example was when there were rumours of a plot by John of Gaunt. The plot proved to be false, but Thomas commented that, “these words would have been a capital offence, if the king had been in proper control of the reins of government.” When the king was deciding on his course of action after having discovered the plot Thomas noted how he was not surrounded by “those who had the most wisdom in the realm,” but his favourites who were closest to him who were also supporters of Gaunt. Throughout his reign Thomas depicts the king surrounded by foolish advisers, while the wise men of the realm are ignored.

In 1389 King Richard II declared himself of age, stating, “It seems to me unjust that my personal status is worse than that of the lowest person in the realm.” Even when the king came to parliament and declared that he was of age in 1389, at 20, Thomas claims that he was “egged on by the advice of certain troublemakers,” and so even at that age he still disputed the king’s ability to rule. Thomas continually discredits the king’s wisdom due to his age, and therefore saw it as parliaments role to guide and tutor the young king, unfortunately this system was being destroyed by these favourites of lower rank. At 20, Thomas dates Richard at 20, but Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss calculate Richard to have been 22 by now, so it seems interesting that Thomas was underestimating the king’s age.

44 Ibid., 727.


46 Ibid., 865.

47 Ibid., 865.
as Thomas believed, the king was still being influenced by the wrong men and so parliament still needed a guiding role. However, due to the king’s age parliament was powerless to prevent the king’s wishes: “the barons replied in their astonishment to these words that he should not be deprived of anything which was his rightful due.” Thomas’ fears were soon justified as the king’s first actions were to rid himself of his appointed tutors and appoint who he wished. He also demanded the chancellor’s seal from the archbishop of York and appointed a new chancellor. By the end of this episode a new chancellor was appointed, the king’s tutors, including the Duke of Gloucester and the Earl of Warwick, were deposed, and he appointed five new justices.

Now that the king was surrounded by his own men these, “malicious men beguiled the king and stirred in him such anger that he believed his uncle the duke of Gloucester had collected a force to attack him.” The rumours proved to be false, the king did not allow the duke to make charges against those of the king’s favourites who had spread these lies. Thomas commented that when the duke of Gloucester left, “distrust grew on both sides again, for the trouble-makers began expressing their own side of things.”

The king had failed to be tutored in the correct manner, and so even though he was now of age he was still acting rashly, and still at the behest of his favourites. It may be for this reason that he never fully lost the stigma of being a young and petulant child, as he is

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48 Ibid., 867.

49 Ibid., 867.

50 Ibid., 867.
continually described, even in later life. The king’s fickleness and indecisiveness can be found throughout Thomas’ text: “the king’s fickleness and the notorious treachery of the traitors,” and “the lords’ belief that the king was untrustworthy and fickle.” Thomas reveals many occasions when the king would change his mind at the behest of his favourites: “However, trouble-makers got at the king, saying that it was not proper, safe or honourable for him to go to Westminster, so he changed his mind.” Clearly, Thomas wanted to show that because the king had never received the correct tutoring in his youth due to the influence of favourites, he had lost out on the vital lessons he should have learnt in kingship. Therefore, even when he was of age the king still retained the fickleness and indecisiveness of his youth, which would go on to cause havoc between the king and his subjects for the rest of his reign.

**Tyranny and Parliament**

Historians have often described Richard II’s rule as tyrannical, especially by the end of his reign. Caroline Barron has most successfully dealt with Richard II’s tyranny. She attempted to get around modern conceptions of tyranny to understand what

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51 Ibid., 837.

52 Ibid., 841.

53 Ibid., 849.

54 Barron, “The Tyranny of Richard II.”
contemporaries would have meant by the term. This brought her to a definition that was based on the misuse of a subject’s property and inheritance. Barron highlights forced loans, fines for pardon, blank charters and oaths. This form of tyranny regarding property was an important part of Adam and Thomas’ critiques, and will be discussed later. However, there were other forms of abuse that Adam and Thomas concentrated on, including Richard’s authoritarian character, the misuse of parliament, and justice, as well as issues surrounding property and inheritance. Yet it is interesting that the loans, fines, blank charters, etc., discussed by Barron, were barely mentioned in the criticisms from Adam and Thomas. By ignoring parliament Richard bypassed the traditional structures of society and displaced the nobility.

Discussion of Richard’s tyranny centres on the last years of his reign 1397-99, when he sought revenge on the appellants who had tried to curb his power back in 1386. In 1397 Richard set about purging the advisors who had been appointed by parliament to repress his royal prerogative. Adam saw the means by which he went about this to be the illegal actions of a tyrant. According to Adam, Richard claimed that “the king’s power belonged solely and entirely to him, and that those who usurped it or deprived him of it deserved the penalties of law.” Adam was very much against this view of royal power, believing that the nobility were entitled to check the king’s power when he overstepped his authority. He certainly did not believe the king was an absolute ruler, but


56 Adam Usk, ed. Given Wilson, 21.
had to rule within certain boundaries that included the nobility. A statement such as this given by Richard showed how the king had an exalted notion of his own power and was growing arrogant.

During his tyranny Richard targeted primarily those twelve known as the appellants who had risen against him to curb his power in 1386. During the proceedings Adam stated that only the king’s retinue could bear arms at the parliament. Adam described how Richard’s feared Cheshire archers had surrounded the parliament as yet another scare tactic. The criminal proceedings began with the earl of Arundel; he claimed that “the faithful commons of the realm are not here,” indicating that Richard had packed the Parliament with his own supporters. Adam allowed the defendants long and stirring speeches against the tyranny of the king. This passage represents the plea attributed to the earl of Arundel by Adam, where he highlights that he was not a traitor, and that the king was now acting unjustly by breaking a pardon he had made many years earlier:

I can see perfectly well that these people presenting these appeals and accusing me of treason are all liars. I never was a traitor. I insist on claiming the benefit of my pardon, that pardon, which you (Richard II) of your own violation, within in the past six years, at a time when you were full of age and free to act as you wished granted to me… I know you and your crew well enough, and why have you gathered here? – not to act in good faith… But you (John of Gaunt), as I know only too well, have always been false.

It showed Adam’s sympathy for the appellant’s plight because a monarch who ruled in an authoritarian manner was disregarding the rights and the role of those born of noble blood. Adam later claimed that Arundel had “been admitted to the fellowship of the

57 Ibid., 29.

58 Ibid., 29.
saints,” which showed how he believed these men were martyrs for acting against a despotic ruler. Their only crime had been to try and limit his power; in Adam’s eyes this was not a treasonous offence, but a legitimate action by noblemen. Of the others accused the duke of Gloucester suspiciously died in custody at Calais and the Archbishop of Canterbury was exiled without being able to offer a defence. So Adam expressed concerns that the legality of these proceedings had been lost, due to the tyrannical nature of the king.

This was not the only example of Richard’s authoritarian rule. After these famous parliamentary proceedings Richard was criticised for his handling of a dispute between the Duke of Norfolk and the Duke of Hereford (the king’s cousin and later Henry IV). In this dispute the nobles had appealed to the king to do justice on their dispute. It shows that, as a higher authority, it was the role of the king was to settle disputes of the nobility, and so a good monarch had to act justly. Adam therefore placed great emphasis on Richard’s handling of the affair, especially as it came soon after his oppressive actions in parliament. The king had allowed this dispute to be settled by a duel. Adam reported that Richard had sought the advice of a fortuneteller who had informed him that the Duke of Norfolk would win, “which pleased the king greatly since he longed for the downfall

\[59\] Ibid., 31.

\[60\] For discussion of noble disenchantment and deposition, see Anthony Tuck, Richard II and the English Nobility (London, 1973).
of the Duke of Hereford.”

Adam revealed how the king’s jealousy of his powerful cousin, led him to rule important decisions of justice on childish whims.

Once the duel was under way Adam reported that the king halted the proceedings because “it seemed to him that the Duke of Hereford was going to win.” The king then ruled that the Duke of Norfolk was to be sent into perpetual exile, “planning, however, once a suitable situation arose, to recall him,” and that the Duke of Hereford would be banished from the realm for ten years. Adam is the only chronicle to report that the duel ever began. Others say that the king halted the duel before it started and ordered the banishments. But for Adam this served to highlight the unjust nature of the way Richard dealt with this matter. Richard did not want to do justice, but wanted to see the end of his main rival. In this case Richard had shown a complete lack of justice, he had once again wished to assert his royal power to authoritarian levels. A king could not rule in this manner, he had to be just, and could not override the rights of the nobility. In this case the nobility had appealed their case to the king for his superior judgement and Adam showed that Richard had abused his power for his own personal motives.

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61 The Chronicle of Adam Usk, 51.

62 Ibid., 51.

63 Ibid., 51.

Though the section of the St. Albans chronicle written by Thomas does not go up to these events, there are plenty of instances preceding Richard’s tyranny when Thomas expresses concerns over the king’s authoritarian manner. In 1385, according to Thomas, the king “burned with such anger” at the archbishop of Canterbury “with little justification.” He wished to deprive the archbishop of his temporalities, which would have happened if not for the intervention of the chancellor, who in turn incurred the king’s anger: Thomas commented that: “the insulting remarks that the king cast at both persons, remarks not befitting of royal dignity.” There were also a number of “dishonourable and outrageous” comments that the king made against Sir Thomas Trivet, and the “shameless and insulting” words against Sir John Devereux. The king was undermining his royal dignity by insulting the honour of good men of his realm, while acting at the same time in an authoritarian manner, with a complete lack of justice. The harsh language employed by Thomas to condemn this kind of behaviour by the king, showed the gravity of his concern about the way that this young king was spiralling completely out of control.

Thomas showed great concern over the king’s handling and use of parliament. Thomas’ concerns regarding parliament have already been discussed in relation to the king’s favourites, but these were not Thomas’ only concerns regarding the misuse of

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66 Ibid., 755.

67 Ibid., 755.
parliament. Historian Christopher Given-Wilson has downplayed the role of parliament in the Late Middle Ages, commenting that parliament was, “Not so much constitutional as occasional and corrective.”

However, Thomas believed parliament to be a very important body in handling important matters of the realm and in keeping the king in check. In 1377 parliament begged the king that “parliament should not be put off for too long to the detriment of the country’s welfare.”

In this year Thomas commented on parliament’s concerns over John of Gaunt packing the parliament in his favour to influence its decisions. The presence of his supporters was to frighten the commons from voicing their real views on the duke, for fear of recrimination: “the knights and the common people would be overawed by their grandeur and thus frightened to force their will too resolutely.”

Thomas believed that parliament was a body where the nobility of the realm could openly voice their concerns and beliefs regarding the welfare of the realm. He was greatly critical of 1377 when members were unable to openly voice their concerns because of the actions of an authoritarian ruler, in this case the king’s uncle, acting as regent.

Thomas had great belief in the validity and importance of parliament to the welfare of the realm. He was increasingly unhappy when parliament was only used by the monarch for his own means, such as to impose more taxes on the people and the church,

68 Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages*, p178.


70 Ibid., 73.
while ignoring the members’ other concerns. An example of this occurred in 1383: Thomas commented “As had often been the case already on many such occasions, nothing worth recording took place, except for the extortion of money from the clergy and the common people.”

Parliament in 1381 also did little, though Thomas stated “the members of parliament did not go without large banquets during their stay in London.” Thomas’ frustration was clear as he strongly believed in the good parliament could bring to the kingdom. It saddened him greatly to see the members wasting their time in leisurely pursuits, when they could be doing great work for the benefit of the realm.

However, when parliament resumed in 1382 much work was done, the allowance of foreign merchants to sell their goods without hindrance of English ones (which according to Thomas had been a tense issue in the preceding years), the prohibition of fur and silver workmanship in belts, the price of wine, etc. Yet, Thomas lamented, “what is the use of parliamentary statutes, when they have absolutely no subsequent effect?” Thomas was frustrated that the king and his council would change or abolish any statutes that had been passed once the parliament ended. The only decree that survived this parliament in 1382 was repressive on personal liberty, that if suspicious people were summoning assemblies of six or seven men on any occasion then any “loyal subjects of the realm” had the right

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71 Ibid., 733.

72 Ibid., 573.

73 Ibid., 579.
to hold them prisoner, without even a royal writ or higher authority. However, Thomas showed that parliament did not always bend to the king’s wishes; in 1386 the parliament refused to grant the king a tax because of debts owed to him from his favourites. In this case the king was displeased, but it showed how even in this period parliament could resist the king on taxation if they thought it to be right. Thomas was an avid supporter of parliament and was dispirited by the ease in which its good works could be discarded by the king. It was clear that Thomas was against authoritarian rule, and believed that parliament had an extremely important role to play in keeping the king in check for the good governance of the realm.

In 1380 Thomas recounted how parliament attempted to address the problem of the king’s excessive spending. The king was paying out a lot of money to advisers who were doing very little to sort out the problems, but were in fact draining the treasury. Parliament called for these men to be dismissed, and others appointed to fill the necessary positions without such a high burden on the treasury. Thomas is happy with these proceedings, and so includes them to show an example of when the king and parliament were working well together in their differing roles.

74 Ibid., 579.

75 Ibid., 801.

76 Ibid., 345.
Property and Inheritance

Property and inheritance were important themes in the chronicles of Adam Usk and Thomas Walsingham. It was not within the king’s jurisdiction to deal arbitrarily with the property or inheritance of the nobility. The constitutional historian G.A. Holmes saw a weakening of the king’s rights over inheritance from the time of Edward I to Richard II’s reign.\textsuperscript{77} There had been the development of the nobility splitting its lands into trusts to protect it from the encroachment of the crown. If such a development really took place then it is revealing that there was so much resistance to Richard’s handling of inheritance from Adam and Thomas. In Adam’s eyes the king was acting unfairly in his handling of inheritance. In support of Holmes’ theory Christopher Given-Wilson believes that 50 years earlier few would have complained.\textsuperscript{78} Richard confiscated the inheritance of the duke of Hereford while he was in exile for ten years, the king also took this opportunity to redistribute this land to his favourites and exile the duke indefinitely. This action led directly to the king’s downfall, as it was the duke of Hereford who returned to depose the king with the support of the nobility, who were united against the king’s abuses of inheritance. Adam commented that the king had brought “nothing but adversity” to his land with the way he handled this situation.\textsuperscript{79}


\textsuperscript{78} Given-Wilson, \textit{The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages}, 169.

\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Adam Usk}, ed. Given-Wilson, 51.
The worst example of abuse of the nobility came with the death of the earl of March. He died while loyal to the king, but secretly critical of him. Adam sees March as the champion of the realm, who was the kingdom’s only hope in its darkest hour: “The people welcomed him with joyful hearts… in the hope that through him they would be delivered from the king’s wickedness,” though it must be remembered that Mortimer (the earl of March) was a patron of Adam. The problem was that not only was Richard conspiring against Adam’s patron, but on his death he divided up the earl of March’s land between his own men: “Thus they did conspire secretly to condemn the earl… boasting that once it was done they would divide up his lands between them.” The rights of inheritance were affected here, which were of great concern to Adam. Mortimer’s lands were being broken up by the king who “according to the custom of the realm… should take possession of them.”

This was not the first attack on Mortimer’s inheritance. John of Gaunt had attempted to discredit the Mortimer claim to the throne back in 1376 while the ageing Edward III was alive. In 1376 the heir to the throne, Prince Edward (Black Prince) died, leaving John of Gaunt’s young nephew as heir to the throne. Thomas reported, “he (Gaunt) contemplated poisoning if he could not himself attain the throne any other way.”

80 Ibid., 39.

81 Ibid., 41.

82 Thomas Walsingham, The St. Albans Chronicle, 621.

83 Ibid., 39.
only other person who had a better right to the throne was Edmund Mortimer, who had
married a daughter of the duke’s second older brother, Lionel of Clarence. At this very
time Thomas relates how John of Gaunt was striving to pass through parliament a law
that prevented a woman from succeeding to the throne. He stated that John of Gaunt
“strove with all his might to prevent the heritance to the throne passing to him (Edmund
Mortimer, earl of March).” Thomas believed “the hereditary right to the throne
belonged to him (Mortimer) through his wife,” if the Black Prince’s son died. Thomas
saw Mortimer as “a good and just man,” as had Adam. This further cements the
contemporary reputation of Mortimer, as he was no patron of Thomas.

The earl of March’s case can be seen as a warning for what Richard would later do.
Disinheritance of the nobility had lethal consequences, which Richard would discover
with the death of John of Gaunt (the duke of Lancaster and the king’s uncle) in 1399.
Richard had already exiled John of Gaunt’s son, the duke of Hereford, in 1397. With his
father’s death the issue of his inheritance came up in his absence. Richard now decided
to permanently exile the Hereford and take his vast Lancastrian inheritance. Adam
reported this as “an evil hour,” and went on to say how it was prophesied that Richard
would now be deposed when “double Duke will come.” The prophesy of Bridlington

84 Ibid., 39.

85 Ibid., 39.

86 Ibid., 39.

87 Adam Usk, ed. Given-Wilson, 51.
referred to Philip VI and Crecy in 1346, which is a tenuous link; however, Adam used it to show how abuse of inheritance had terrible consequences. It was this act of confiscation that sealed Richard’s fate: he had first of all banished the duke of Hereford when he was winning a duel; he then permanently exiled him, “having first confiscated all his possessions.” Adam phrased it in this way to emphasise the confiscation to show Richard’s greed and also that it was the property issue that was the most important.

Thomas was dismayed in 1387 by the king, who wanted to hand back all the possessions gained by the kingdom from France: “He had sold him (the king of France) Calais, as well as the castle of Guisnes and all of the fortresses which his predecessors had possessed in those parts either by ancestral right or through acquisition in war.” This showed the king undermining his ancestral claims through birth, as well as his uninterest in war in general, for which Thomas seems critical. In this case the king was disrespecting his own inheritance, which his forefathers had fought for. This casual dealing of his ancestral lands clearly dismayed Thomas.

Both Adam and Thomas believed that those in power, whether John of Gaunt or Richard II, were disrespecting the rights of property and inheritance. It was already discussed earlier how importance the issue of blood was to the two authors, and so it is clear how important it was to them when people purposely sought to disrupt natural claims. In both chronicles Edmund Mortimer was very highly regarded, and both authors preferred him to the young king and his uncle. The story portrayed by Thomas is full of

88 Ibid., 51.

89 Thomas Walsingham, The St. Albans Chronicle, 831.
situations where people tried to discredit the rightful claim of the Mortimers to the throne. This is especially interesting because Adam discredits Richard II’s birth, and Thomas discredits John of Gaunt’s. With this scenario the Mortimers had the best claim to the throne of anyone. The issue of inheritance was of dramatic importance to both authors, as it affected the very people who ruled the country. Both Thomas and Adam were very critical of those who were ruling, and they both went to great lengths to disprove their blood rights. The importance of blood to Adam and Thomas has already been discussed, so it is clear that they both felt that the Mortimers were the most capable to rule the country. They were being ruled by men who did not have the strongest claims, and who would subvert the real blood rights at every opportunity.

**Noble Blood**

Richard II and John of Gaunt’s misuse of parliament and authoritarian rule had disregarded those of noble blood; yet just as bad was to raise those of lesser blood to high positions. After Richard had purged many of the country’s leading nobles, he created a succession of new dukedoms to elevate his favourites. These new dukes were criticised by Adam because they were not noble enough for the positions they held. Historians such as Christopher Given-Wilson and K.B. McFarlane have discussed at length the creation of new titled nobility from Edward I, through Edward II, Edward III, and Richard II, to show that what Richard was doing was nothing new, but in fact was the
continuation of a successful ploy, especially by his grandfather Edward III. This may be a valid interpretation, but it was not what contemporaries Adam and Thomas believed. Many of the arguments made by historians to discredit the words of contemporaries, by challenging the belief that Richard was raising men of low rank, and showing that his patronage was not necessarily too different from his predecessors, but it is important to understand what message the contemporary authors were giving by criticising this policy.

Adam reported that Richard had raised “numerous simpletons” to bishoprics “who were later brought to ruin because of such unwarranted promotion.” This may have reflected jealousy on Adam’s part for not receiving a bishopric himself as Given-Wilson has suggested, but it certainly reveals the belief that people were born capable of certain positions. If people were elevated too high from what their birth allowed, then in Adam’s eyes they were destined for failure. “As a result of this the heroes of the realm, unable to bear such evils any longer, rose up against him (Richard II).” Adam made it clear that this was a great insult to those of noble blood who were capable of holding such a position, but also to the detriment of the realm. To Adam this was tyranny of the

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91 *Adam Usk*, ed. Given-Wilson, 61.

92 Ibid., xxii.

93 Ibid., 63.
highest calibre, for which the nobility was justified in taking action for the welfare of the realm.

Adam’s account shows that birth was of great importance to the nobility. This is reflected in Adam’s attempt to dispute Richard’s birth: “concerning whose birth many unsavoury things were commonly said, namely that he was not born of a father of the royal line, but of a mother given to slippery ways.”\(^\text{94}\) Though historians have not taken this point seriously, it is revealing that Adam says this. Richard was the second son of the Black Prince, who was an immensely popular figure at the time, and whose legend would develop ever further.\(^\text{95}\) If blood was so important to Adam it must have been hard to reconcile that such a poor ruler could come from the same blood as such a great man. Adam’s attack on Richard’s birth not only consolidated this dilemma, but also raised questions over Richard’s ability to rule. This was not a common rumour as it was dangerously treasonous, but Adam puts it forward to explain Richard’s poor leadership, because he had not been born for it and therefore incapable of it. It could also have been a way of further legitimising the post-Richard dynasty who were in power while Adam was writing. True or not, Adam’s comments show the importance of birth in the eyes of a contemporary. It further emphasizes that birth was such an important part of the legitimacy of the nobility; those not born to rule were not capable of doing so.

\(^{94}\) Ibid., 63.

As Adam claimed that Richard was illegitimate, Thomas used the same issue to discredit John of Gaunt, King Richard’s uncle who acted as regent in the early years of his minority. Thomas recounted a story that Edward III’s queen had told the bishop of Winchester on her deathbed that: “she had given birth not to a son but a daughter…fearing the king’s anger, the queen had ordered the baby boy belonging to a Flemish woman to be substituted for her baby girl.”96 Apparently the queen told the bishop that he should make this story public on the event that John of Gaunt might inherit the throne, as he was a “false heir.”97 As a result of this story John of Gaunt was looking for “an opportunity to harm him (the bishop of Winchester) in any way.”98 The duke found Winchester guilty of being disloyal to the king while he was chancellor. John of Gaunt “found him guilty without trial,” and so the aged Edward III deprived him of his possessions and temporalities.99 It is clear that Thomas was very much against John of Gaunt getting the throne, and so like Adam did for Richard, he discredits him by shedding doubt on his birth. The people of London were also displeased with John of Gaunt, fearing that he wanted the crown himself “Surely he does not want us to acclaim him king!”100 Thomas stressed how disastrous it is to go against the natural succession or


97 Ibid., 61.

98 Ibid., 61.

99 Ibid., 61.

100 Ibid., 107.
the right of birth. John of Gaunt was unfit to rule because he was not born of royal blood, and the people of London feared him overcoming the natural succession to the young prince Richard, to seize the crown for himself. Hence the uprising in London in 1377 against Lollardy had Gaunt as a principal target.\textsuperscript{101}

Thomas was not afraid to criticise those of noble birth; in fact it highlighted his belief that people of noble birth were above certain behaviour, as he attempts to come to terms with this and explain it. This can be seen in his condemnation of Lord Latimer. He described him as an evil and adulterous man, yet he could not deny that Latimer was of noble birth. He therefore stated, “Although he was of noble birth, an evil and perverse spirit had so possessed him that it was defiling his personality.”\textsuperscript{102} It reveals that Thomas believed that noble birth was supposed to be above such corruption, and therefore capable of governing the realm. His criticism of a man of noble birth would have destroyed this notion, except that Thomas explained it by blaming this behaviour on an evil spirit. It shows the belief people had in noble blood being good, and therefore the most deserving and capable of ruling.

Thomas was just as vehemently opposed to raising those of lower birth to high rank as Adam. This occurred in 1385 when Richard created the new title of Marquis of Dublin, for Robert de Vere, and then gave away the Dukedoms of Gloucester, York and the Earldom of Suffolk. In the case of de Vere, Thomas stated the displeasure of many in the realm because he had not gained this higher title because of “greater learning or

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 89.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 27.
military prowess.” For the new dukes the king had to give “sums of money from the royal treasury to suit the honour of their titles, lest there should seem little value in their receiving such a title.” Thomas is clearly very critical of these appointments, suggesting that de Vere only got promoted because he was in the king’s favour, and the new dukes were ill suited to their knew titles as well. He also sounds caution regarding the appointment of Sir Michael de la Pole as earl of Suffolk, because he was “more suited to the world of commerce than to knighthood,” suggesting that de la Pole was ill suited to such a title. De Vere was later created duke of Ireland by the king because the he greatly respected and loved him; however, the nobles and barons resented “such promotion in so unremarkable man,” Thomas further commented that he neither deserved to be in this position due to “the nobility of his birth or in his endowment of other virtues.”

So this shows in some ways noble blood was not always the major marker of ability, but in de Vere’s case he neither had noble blood or ability, and so had risen to his position purely because of the king’s love of him.

Another marker for the importance of noble birth can be seen in Thomas’ criticisms of Robert de Vere’s divorce. Thomas saw de Vere’s divorce as shameful as his first wife was a daughter of Edward III, while instead he married a “saddler’s daughter.” Thomas described Isabella, De Vere’s ex-wife as “a beautiful and noble girl,” whereas the saddler’s daughter was described as “low rank and ugly.” This not only showed Thomas’ belief that noble blood produced beauty, but more importantly Robert de Vere,

103 Ibid., 799.

104 Ibid., 823.
duke of Ireland, should not have been involved with a lady of such low birth. This mixing within the social spectrum was almost unnatural to Thomas. Thomas believed that de Vere had “grown arrogant because of his high office,” which restated Thomas’ belief that he was unsuited to such office, and that events like this occurred because of this.\textsuperscript{105} A noble lady had now been disrespected because of a lowly man who had been raised far beyond his natural rank. Because de Vere was unsuited to this office he became arrogant and made rash decisions, Thomas stated that de Vere “had jumped many ranks.”\textsuperscript{106}

The problems of low birth are revealed no better than in Thomas’ depiction of Alice Perrers. Alice Perrers was the infamous mistress of the ailing Edward III. There has been significant historical debate as to her background. Thomas described her as “a shameless, impudent harlot, and of low birth.”\textsuperscript{107} Recently historians have discovered that the long held view that Perrers was actually from a noble family were ill founded due to new evidence from the Petitions of Edward III’s reign from W. Mark Ormrod.\textsuperscript{108} Yet whether Thomas’ account is true or not matters less than his message that a king should not be surrounding himself with women of low birth. His portrayal of Perrers is a woman who was concerned more with the king’s money than the king himself, hence the story

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 823.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 935.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 43.

\textsuperscript{108} W. Mark Ormrod, “Medieval Petitions: An Introduction to Medieval Petitions,” 40\textsuperscript{th} International Congress on Medieval Studies, session 251, May 6\textsuperscript{th} 2005.
that she stole some of his rings after he died. Thomas revealed his belief that the nobility were meant to rule when he declared that Perrers was “raised by fortune.”\textsuperscript{109} It shows that she was not born to rule; all that had got her to the position she was in was fortune. This must have seemed dangerous to Thomas if the realm was ruled by people who were only there by fortune.

The importance of noble birth was revealed in Thomas’ writing no better than in his account of the Peasants’ Rebellion. Thomas was horrified by the breakdown of the social order and how the events of the rebellion destroyed many of the customs they were used to, especially the respect that should be shown to noble blood from those of humble birth. An interesting example of this was when the peasants entered the Tower of London. The peasants “dared” to enter the king’s chamber “and even his mother’s.” They even dared “to pull or stroke the beards of some of the noblest knights with their rough, dirty hands.” “One moment they dared to speak familiarly to them about being friends in the future.” They “had the insolence to sit down, lie down, or make jokes on the king’s bed.” “Some of them invited the king’s mother to kiss them.”\textsuperscript{110} That this humiliation of the nobility completely disgusted Thomas can be seen from his tone. Clearly birth was of major importance for these actions to have so horrified Thomas. The peasants were not stealing or murdering, but entering the king’s chamber and sitting on his bed. To modern eyes these events may seen amusing, but that is precisely why Thomas’ disgust is so revealing of a contemporary mindset. The peasants’ rebellion is a very rare occasion when we see

\textsuperscript{109} Thomas Walsingham, \textit{St. Albans Chronicle}, 43.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 425.
these positions being subverted, and so it is interesting to see the reactions of contemporaries.

Both Adam and Thomas felt strongly about the existing hierarchy of their society based on blood. Those born with noble blood had natural rights and roles in society that set them apart. Many of the examples listed above are not in direct relation to the issue of kingship, but they serve as examples to prove the strong beliefs of both Adam and Thomas in noble blood. Where the examples do relate to kingship they show that the king had to respect the rights of noble blood. Richard II had failed in this regard on a number of occasions, by excluding those of noble blood from his council and patronage. The country was therefore being governed by men of lower rank who were incapable of such high positions. It was this point that Adam and Thomas stressed repeatedly, the most capable men of the realm were being excluded from governance, while the king relied on man of inferior rank.

In Adam’s text the nobility had a clearly defined role. They were subservient to the monarch, and open disapproval of the monarch was not acceptable, yet they did have a role in keeping the power of a monarch in check. Richard’s weaknesses were extremely evident in Adam’s writing concerning Richard’s treatment of the nobility. Richard was not a just monarch and ruled tyrannically over his nobility when it came to matters of justice and honour. This was especially evident in Richard’s handling of the parliament of 1397 and the dispute between the duke of Norfolk and the duke of Hereford. Richard also disrespected noble blood, when it came to raising lower people into positions that ill suited their blood, and also listening to favourites, ahead of the noblest members of the realm. Part of Richard’s tyranny was his misuse of parliament. This was where Richard
could consult with the noblest men of the realm, yet he shunned parliament and ruled arbitrarily. This was particularly evident in Adam’s criticism of Richard’s purging of his appointed advisers and replacing them with his own favourites. Adam, as will be discussed later, had great misgivings about the deposition of the monarch, yet he clearly felt it was for the benefit of the country for Richard’s tyranny to end.
CHAPTER III

THE KING’S RESPONSIBILITIES TO SOCIETY

The two contemporary chronicles are not only dominated with the kingship’s responsibilities to the nobility. Kingship had many other responsibilities. A king also had to handle successfully the common people of the realm, as well as the church. This chapter will look at the relationships that the king needed with these other sections of society, as laid out by Adam and Thomas. It will also highlight a few other factors regarding kingship, such as martial prowess and deposition. Finally, this chapter will highlight the two authors’ great respect for kingship. It has to be noted that while both authors were very critical of the kings they lived under, they had great respect for the position of the monarch. Their criticism was because they believed the title was being misused, not because they were critical of kingship generally.

Treatment of the Poor

Another equally important flaw in Richard’s rule was his oppression of the poor. Though the nobility were the rich and influential in the country Richard had responsibilities to the poor that were of equal importance, in both chroniclers’ eyes. The poor were the king’s responsibility, and part of the reason for Richard’s downfall was the
fact that he had oppressed his country as a whole. He continuously described Richard as persecuting the people and comparing him to other such rulers who had suffered misfortune for it.\footnote{Adam Usk, ed. Given-Wilson, 37.} His passage on the king’s Cheshire guard was very revealing as to the treatment of the people by Richard. They were hated and feared because they raped, stole, assaulted the king’s people; these were “men of the utmost depravity.” Adam declared that they were the “chief cause of his ruin.”\footnote{Ibid., 49.}

Adam saw taxation as the main way in which Richard II oppressed the poor. He shows how divine judgement goes very much against any ruler who makes great exactions from his people; it was the duty of that ruler to protect his people, not exploit them. Many accidents befell people who oppressed the poor through taxation: Sir John of Arundel was killed in a shipwreck in 1379; Adam commented that the ‘accident’ had occurred because of money exacted from the people.\footnote{Ibid., 17.} When the earl of Pembroke went on campaign to France, funded by extortionate taxation, he was captured and taken to Spain.\footnote{Ibid., 17.} When King Edward III collected taxes to fight France the wind turned against him and prevented him from sailing.\footnote{Ibid., 17.} These misfortunes were not accidents, they had

\footnote{111 Adam Usk, ed. Given-Wilson, 37.}

\footnote{112 Ibid., 49.}

\footnote{113 Ibid., 17.}

\footnote{114 Ibid., 17.}

\footnote{115 Ibid., 17.}
occurred because of the exploitation of the poor. Adam wanted to show that there was a price for oppressing the people, for which no one could escape, even the king.

A major theme throughout the chronicle was that there was a price to pay for harsh exactions on the poor. Writing of England’s failures in the Hundred Years War, which coincided with the heaviest taxation, Adam commented, “ever since exactions, known as taxes, the country has suffered great misfortunes.”116 It is also clear that taxation of the poor made a monarch very unpopular with his people. Adam commented that after the tax collectors left the people “silently cursed.”117 Adam wanted to give a voice to the masses and believed that a king could not rule arbitrarily for their own personal gain, but had duties to those they governed. Adam’s message was clear that kings were ruling for their own purposes and were taking advantage of their people; he believed that as a ruler their duty was to their kingdom and not to themselves. Ruling was not taking advantage of their position, but taking caring for the commonweal: not oppressing the people, but governing them and protecting them.

In Adam’s chronicle Richard II was not the only king to be criticised for bad treatment of the poor. Adam also took a dim view of Henry V, who historically is one of the most popular English kings. It is important to note that Shakespeare’s Henry V created most of this legend, but Henry V is very appealing to historians, such as Christopher Allmand and Edward Powell, who have sought to get behind the myth and

116 Ibid., 17.

117 Ibid., 39.
reveal the real man. This makes Adam’s criticism of Henry all the more interesting and important, because it goes against the rosy picture most people have of England’s most popular king.

Most of Adam’s criticism of Henry V was with regard to taxation of the poor. This is revealed most clearly at Henry’s coronation, which is one of the most important sections of the book. Henry V’s coronation was marked by storms and snow, which was an indication by Adam that all was not well. To begin with Henry dropped a noble offering to the Church, which would represent his treatment of the Church. To Adam’s dismay, Henry also offered pardons to criminals, even those who had committed treason, “in return for which he received a great deal of money.” He also kept annuities for himself for the first year and doubled payments made to him at the beginning of his reign. Another way in which he gained money at this time was to expel all the Welsh and Irish from England unless they paid for licences. This passage set the tone for Adam’s criticism of Henry’s reign.

Henry V was portrayed as greedy and willing to go to any lengths to exhort money from his people. Even Adam seems to get carried away with the campaigns in France, though he does note that the king scoured the country for loans; importantly at this point they were from the rich. He commented that these further taxes were “no more than he

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119 *Adam Usk*, ed. Given-Wilson, 243.

120 Ibid., 243.
deserved as a recognition of his achievements.”\(^{121}\) Adam turned on the king as these extortions continued, and especially when he took money from the Church and the poor: “the lord king is now fleecing everyone with any money, rich or poor, throughout the realm, in readiness for his return to France in great force.”\(^{122}\) By this time war weariness had overcome Adam, “I fear, alas, that both the great men and the money of the kingdom will be miserably wasted on this enterprise.”\(^{123}\) “The unbearable impositions being demanded from the people to this end are accompanied by dark--though private--mutterings and curses.”\(^{124}\) Adam hoped that the king would not “incur the sword of the Lord’s fury” like other kings who had made the same extortions.\(^{125}\) Adam believed that the king was overstepping his bounds with these continual exactions from his people. As already noted earlier Adam had given many examples of the demise of those who oppressed the people for money. The bad omens of Henry’s coronation clearly warned of the new king’s greed, and were proved to be correct.

Thomas’ criticism of Richard’s handling of the poor was less stinging than Adam’s, but many of the same themes were present. There are many cases in his text of good treatment of the poor, as well as bad treatment. In 1385 Thomas actually praised Richard

\(^{121}\) Ibid., 259.

\(^{122}\) Ibid., 271.

\(^{123}\) Ibid., 271.

\(^{124}\) Ibid., 271

\(^{125}\) Ibid., 271.
II for the way in which he cared for his army on the Scotland campaign. The army had reached Edinburgh, but was running short of supplies. A dispute broke out between the king and his uncle; John of Gaunt wanted to carry on, but King Richard wanted to turn back thinking of the condition of his men. The king declared, “many of my men have perished from starvation, so are you urging us to cross into more remote regions, where no food could be brought to me or my men?” The result of this decision was that the campaign was a military failure. Richard was leading the largest army England had ever seen, so Thomas believed, yet it achieved nothing. However, Thomas praised the king for his decision because unlike his uncle who did not care about the people in the army, Richard as king did and so based his decision of their welfare.

Thomas’ treatment of the peasant’s rebellion further solidifies his belief in society’s structure, and that there would be anarchy without it. Thomas was completely against the peasants’ rebellion, “the government would have been utterly destroyed, and England a mockery and laughing-stock to the whole world.” Yet he did other sympathy for the plight of the peasants who were being unfairly taxed. He believed that the unrest caused in the peasantry was due to the misrule of Richard II at the top. The poor were forced into revolt due to the continual exactions made on them. In many ways he tried to portray the peasants as the innocent victims in the whole affair. He stated that many of the peasants were forced to join the rebellion by troublemakers: “such terrible threats


127 Ibid., 411.
impelled all to make haste to join them.”

Also, at no time were the peasants acting in a treasonous manner. They all took an oath of loyalty to King Richard II, and vowed to prevent John of Gaunt from stealing the crown, as they (and seemingly Thomas) believed he was attempting. They also refused not to pay any taxes in the future except for “fifteenths which their fathers and their predecessors were accustomed to and accepted,” showing the importance of customary law. This also showed that one of their main grievances was the exactions being made on them. Clearly the peasants’ believed they were being harshly treated.

The peasants were not the main actors in this; the rebellion was divine punishment. Thomas did not blame the poor for the rebellion, but believed it was “punishment for its (England’s) sins.” Their intention was only to “search out those traitors to the kingdom, and after that cease their activity.” Thomas also noted that they did not steal, but paid a fair price for everything: “indeed, if they discovered anyone stealing they executed him, as if those who were thieves were particularly detestable.” However, Thomas seems to be implying that the punishment England was suffering for was the huge exactions made on the poor people. Thomas made it clear that when the monarch oppressed the poor people he suffered consequences, the exact same message that Adam

128 Ibid., 413.

129 Ibid., 411.

130 Ibid., 417.

131 Ibid., 417.
Usk was making. The monarch clearly had duties to his people, they were not merely there for his benefit, he had to protect them and treat them fairly, otherwise society would break out into anarchy as it did in the Peasants’ Rebellion of 1381.

Thomas put the earl of Arundel forward as a good example of treatment of the poor. In Arundel’s French expedition in 1387 he declared, “Such was the earl’s generosity shown in his gifts to various people who stood by him, that not one tun, it is said, remained for himself.”

This selfless generosity meant “The earl’s reputation grew immensely amongst the common people for he had disregarded any gains he could have heaped up for himself, and instead had sold to others the wines he had seized.”

“Thus he had put the general welfare above his private profit, and the common people were especially aware.” Unlike with the peoples grievances in 1381 towards the king’s advisors Thomas shows that the peasantry were not against society’s structures, but had respect for members of the nobility who treated them as the earl of Arundel did.

This behaviour was of marked difference to Thomas’ recounting of the king’s treatment of the poor. Throughout most of the text the poor were cursing the king’s continual exactions from them. An obvious example of this was the 1377 poll tax. Thomas stated that this tax was levied “without the cognisance of the common people,” and that it caused great resentment from the people, “for the whole populace thought

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132 Ibid., 813.

133 Ibid., 813.

134 Ibid., 813.
these men (Parliament who voted the tax) deserved to be imprisoned.”  Thomas lamented at the lack of representation the people had in parliament, believing that the knights acted out of no consideration for the common people of the realm: “We have recorded these events to make it clear to posterity, first what power the duke (John of Gaunt) possessed not only to commit wrong but also to commit injustice, and secondly, how weak-minded the knights were who should have stood up for the commonality.”

In Thomas’ eyes the problem was not that the people were unwilling to give what they owed the king, but because this was an “unusual and unheard-of a tax.”

Thomas used the bishop of Rochester’s speech at Richard II’s coronation to put forward the ideal for how a king should treat the common people. In this speech the bishop pleaded with the king “not to impoverish the people in future with heavy taxation when there was not reason for it.” It showed how great an issue this was to people at the time, especially churchmen, that the poor should not be impoverished by taxation from their rulers. There were taxes that they were accustomed to pay, but above and beyond these was an unjust burden on the poor. If there was a reason for the taxation then it was the duty of the people to support their king: “if there was good reason why they should help the king and the realm in every way they could, they should do their

135 Ibid., 101.

136 Ibid., 101.

137 Ibid., 101.

138 Ibid., 155.
duty patiently, without complaint or hint of discord.”¹³⁹ This represents well many of the themes that ran through Thomas and Adam’s work, that people had their duties to the realm. The king and his government should not impoverish the poor for their own benefit, but if there was a real need it was the duty of the people to support their rulers. Rulers who took advantage of this suffered the consequences in Adam’s work, yet in times of need the poor should not grumble or complain, but give to the king what they owed for the good of the kingdom.

This reciprocal relationship could be seen in 1377 when further demands were made for taxation by the king. The taxation was granted, but only on the condition that in the future, “the king did not burden the people with such requests, nor force his subjects to pay him money, but lived and conducted his war from his own resources.”¹⁴⁰ Thomas showed that there were reasonable limits to what the monarch could demand. The people did have a duty to pay taxation to the king, but Thomas noted when these demands were getting excessive, especially when it concerned foreign wars, which Thomas described as “his [i.e. the king’s] war.”

Thomas continued to decry the recurring demands made on the people by the crown. In the 1380 parliament more taxes were granted on the condition that there would be no other parliament for a year after this. Yet as Thomas lamented, “that condition was not observed.”¹⁴¹ The next parliament met in the winter of 1380 “but against the will and

¹³⁹ Ibid., 155.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 171.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 349.
without the consent of almost all of the magnates of the realm.”\textsuperscript{142} A new tax was levied, “but it was not without dire curses being invoked upon them that they had these taxes levied.”\textsuperscript{143} “Indeed, this action was the cause of extraordinary evil in the land as will later be made clear.”\textsuperscript{144} Thomas’ disillusionment continued in 1384 when parliament convened, but “nothing worth recording took place, except for the extortion of money from the clergy and the common people which was diligently carried out, but was not used to maintain the royal war.”\textsuperscript{145} This is another example of exactions being needlessly made on the people, which was a continual issue for Thomas throughout this period. More money was demanded of the clergy and the people, but did not seem to be used for the good of the realm.

In 1386 parliament was successful in blocking the visit of the king of Armenia, “the nobles reckoned he was a charlatan,” “he desired gifts more than peace, loved money more than he loved the people, and the gold of the kingdom more than the king.”\textsuperscript{146} Thomas made it clear that taxation had to be used wisely, where the people could clearly see that it was for the good of the realm. It always caused tension when money fell into foreign hands. Thomas showed how parliament was able to protect the kingdom’s

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 401.

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 401.

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 401.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 733.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 805.
spending from lavish kings. Clearly if kings had been more thoughtful of their spending they would not have to exact so much taxation from the poor. While parliament was able to keep the king in check, a good king would have been more careful in his spending so that his people would suffer less.

As Thomas’ chronicle continued he got increasingly frustrated by the king’s continual demands for money. He commented that in the 1393 parliament, “no profitable decisions were made at all except that the king extorted a half-tenth and a half-fifteenth.”147 The 1394 parliament was little different: “After a few matters of general benefit were dealt with, other not so welcome demands were made, namely aid for the king, who wanted to sail across to Ireland.”148 Thomas clearly believed that parliament had a very important role, but that it was all too often undermined as being a revenue raising exercise by the king.

The Church and Religion

The Church and religion were ever present in the commentaries of Adam and Thomas. One of the most intriguing aspects of the chronicles was how this links to the role of kingship. The lesson that stands out above all else was that God was the ultimate power from which no one could hide. All the kings discussed in Adam’s text suffer in the end, Richard dies, dethroned and imprisoned, Henry IV suffers a long, festering death,

147 Ibid., 937.

148 Ibid., 957.
and Henry V dies prematurely. It is no co-incidence that all the monarchs in Adam’s text die like this, because they had all led their country astray. It showed that even kings could not avoid being called to justice: Richard II was a tyrant, Adam had never been able to fully forgive Henry IV for the deposition of a monarch, and Henry V had fleeced every man in the kingdom for money. Ultimately even kings were called to justice.

Whenever a tax was levied by Parliament for a king, Adam would always state that it was on the Church and the people: “Exacted from the clergy and the people.” This seems obvious (this was where the taxation came from), but the fact that Adam continually repeats this suggests that it was for the purpose of emphasis. It was a constant reminder of who was paying for the king’s taxes, as a warning that this money should not be wasted or misspent. Taxation caused conflict throughout the chronicle. The Archbishop of Canterbury reproached Richard II for his heavy taxation of the church, for which the king responded with a violent physical attack on the Archbishop.

Not only did a king have to be careful with his exactions from the church, but also had to act as a model of piety. Adam was very critical of the lack of piety in Henry IV’s court, commenting on the, “inconstancy and fickleness of heart.” He used the visit of the Byzantine Emperor to England in 1400 to demonstrate this. Though Adam uses this case to lament the situation in the East, with the lack of a crusade, it is also interesting that he sees the Greeks as being much more pious and devout than the English. He talks about how “no razor had ever touched the heads or beards of his priests,” which reflects

\[\text{149} \quad \text{Adam Usk, ed. Given-Wilson, 17.}\]

\[\text{150} \quad \text{Ibid., 121.}\]
poorly on the lavishness of the English king’s court, which was obviously otherwise. He also mentions, “these Greeks were extremely devout in their religious services,” as both the knights and the clerics took part in their chanting. Adam used this visit to reveal the spiritual failings of the king’s court, in both his clergy and his knights. This obviously reflects badly on the king, who should be seen as a very devout individual in Adam’s eyes. This is revealed by the fact that Adam is in such awe of “this great Christian leader” on his visit to England, and is able to make this comparison to his own king, who obviously cannot be seen in such a positive light. Adam used the Welsh rebellion to launch a stinging attack on Henry IV to show God’s displeasure of the king. He compared Owain Glendower, the leader of the revolt, to Isaiah, calling him “the rod of God’s anger.” This graphically demonstrates that the English king was going far astray in his protection of the poor and the needy in God’s eyes. The Bible passage he referred to was a powerful lamentation on kings who ignore those in need and allow them to greatly suffer. Through this comparison Adam showed great displeasure for the way the kingdom is being governed and suggested that the revolt the king suffered from Glendower had been sent by God as punishment for his poor rule. Adam may have believed that condemnation of the monarch should be kept silent, but a monarch could not avoid judgement from God. In this case the rebellion of Owain

151 Ibid., 121.

152 Ibid., 121.

153 Ibid., 161. Isaiah 10:5.
Glendower was a sign of God’s judgement on the king, even though to the historian it shows Adam’s own concerns about the kingship of Henry IV.

Adam also showed God’s judgement on the kings at their coronations. At all three coronations Adam revealed that there was symbolism that reflected the future of the monarch. At Richard II’s coronation there were three signs that Adam believed reflected three misfortunes that Richard would suffer. Firstly, he lost a coronation shoe, which meant that the peasantry would rise up against him, and would hate him the rest of his life. Secondly, he lost a golden spur, which meant that the knights would rise up against him. Finally, a gust of wind blew the crown off his head, which showed that he would be deposed. Adam made it clear that Richard’s deposition reflected the wishes of God. His interpretation of these coronations showed his belief that God was ever present to warn kings of their actions. Adam commented on Richard II, “had you been guided in your affairs by God and by the support of your people, then you would have been deserving of praise.”

The same can be seen in the coronations of Henry IV (r.1399-1413) and Henry V (r.1413-1422). Henry IV’s “festering death was foreshadowed at his coronation, for as a result of his anointing then, his head was so infected with lice that his hair fell out.” Henry V’s money grabbing was represented at his coronation, because during the service

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154 Adam Usk, ed. Given-Wilson, 91.

155 Ibid., 91.

156 Ibid., 243.
“the king dropped one of his oblatory nobles on the floor, and both he himself and others who were present had to search carefully to find it before it could be offered.”¹⁵⁷ This symbolism is very important because Adam uses it to show divine warnings during such important proceedings. It reflected both his belief that the king was chosen by God, but also that God warned that he could also punish them. Adam used these coronation stories to show that kings were not beyond the judgement of God, and if these warnings were not heeded, then many evils would befall that king.

In Thomas’ chronicle the role and importance of the Church was always central to his discussion. Therefore it was the job of the king to respect the church and to treat it fairly. It was also important for the king to be a God fearing man, and not to fear earthly matters over those of God. In his chronicle Thomas used John of Gaunt as a model of poor kingship when it comes to the Church and God, whereas he shows King Richard to be a pious man who had great concern for protecting the church in his adulthood. The duke was an enemy of the church who “did not cease plotting with his accomplices ways of enslaving the Church and of subjugating the kingdom in some other way.”¹⁵⁸ Thomas believed that John of Gaunt as regent cared little for the welfare of the Church and was interested more in its wealth. As regent John of Gaunt should have been protector of the Church, instead he had little respect for the Church and its liberties: “He went to great pains especially to overturn the liberties of both the Church and the city (London).”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 243.

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Walsingham, The St. Albans Chronicle, 75.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 75.
Thomas also linked the duke to John Wyclif and the Lollards, as he was highly critical of the Lollards, who at times dominated his discussion. He believed Lollardy to be heresy and so was quite willing to implicate John of Gaunt with them because in his eyes they were both enemies of the church.

Thomas suggested that John of Gaunt was in league with John Wyclif, and that he would “protect him with their secular arm against being prosecuted for what he was doing.” In the council concerning Wyclif’s beliefs John of Gaunt stood as his chief defendant and threatened the bishop of London for condemning Wyclif, while also making the old bishop stand throughout the whole of the proceedings. Gaunt went as far as to declare that, “he would break not only the bishop’s arrogance, but that of all the bishops in England.” So while John of Gaunt should have been protecting the church in his position as regent, he was in fact threatening members of the church, who were attempting to protect the true religion from heresy.

One of Thomas’ greatest criticisms of John Wyclif, and therefore the duke of Lancaster’s support of him, was that he undermined the protection of church property. Wyclif believed that temporal lords had control over it if need be, saying that such a precedent has been set since of the time of William Rufus. He believed that gifts to the

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160 Ibid., 79.

161 Ibid., 77.

162 Ibid., 83.

163 Ibid., 77.
Church were not permanent, as temporal lords were able deprive people (including the Church) of property if they did wrong with it, if it had previously been granted due to good service. Thomas declared this to be absurd, as it went against his belief that the monarch’s role was to protect the Church, not plunder it at will. Thomas clearly feared that John of Gaunt’s support of Wyclif was because he had his greedy eyes on the property of the Church.

In his criticism of John of Gaunt Thomas provides many examples of the duke’s crimes against the church. In 1378 the duke had men arrested in the sanctuary of Westminster Cathedral. In the ensuing confusion these men were slain within the cathedral, which then had to be reconsecrated. To make the image even more striking Thomas reported that one of the men was taking part in Mass at the time he was killed. They even threatened the monks at knifepoint when they protested against this violence. Further more, the mutilated corpse was dragged out of the cathedral and “defiled everything with blood and brains.”

This episode was laid solely at the door of John of Gaunt: “all the crimes we have described as having been committed at Westminster were said to be at his behest and connivance.” Thomas could not have made his beliefs any clearer, that John of Gaunt had little respect for the church, and would ignore all the ancient privileges of the church to suit his purposes. John of Gaunt was responsible for the murder of men in the sanctuary of Westminster Cathedral, and for threatening men of

164 Ibid., 241.

165 Ibid., 247.
the church with violence. This was especially horrifying to Thomas as John of Gaunt, as regent, was the very man who should have been protecting the church from abuses.

Thomas criticised the Church for allowing the tax that was placed on “both religious as well as secular clergy for the service of the king.”

“This was an unusual and unheard-of tax.”

He believed that the tax was a punishment on the clergy for their sins, as they feared the duke more than they feared God. Though the Church was in sin for not fearing God above all, Thomas made it clear that the clergy had reason to do so because of all of John of Gaunt’s crimes and injustices against the Church. Thomas stated that while John of Gaunt had been in power, “the Church was accustomed to pay unjustly.”

The Church was suffering greatly at the hands of John of Gaunt.

In the end John of Gaunt repented for his errors while he stared defeat in the face while on campaign in Spain. Obviously he had not learnt his lesson from the Scotland campaign, and had stretched his forces too far until they had mostly died of starvation and disease: “first through hunger and afterwards through dysentery.”

In this time of last resort John of Gaunt finally turned to God for assistance. After all the occasions in which Gaunt had disrespected God and the Church, he finally repented and admitted the errors of his ways. The duke “wept bitterly on his horse, quietly pouring out his prayers

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166 Ibid., 101.

167 Ibid., 101.

168 Ibid., 101.

169 Ibid., 893.
to the Almighty God.” He recognised that in “previous times of good fortune and abundance of things he had not acknowledged God as he ought.” He “vowed in future to reform his life.” So even the mighty Duke of Lancaster, who had acted as regent in the king’s youth was humbled in the end, after a lifetime of misrule of his people and the church.

For all of Thomas’ criticism of Richard II he did at least commend the king for his pious nature, even if at times he gave in to greed. In the parliament of 1385 the king was once again demanding taxation from the people and the Church. The Church, however, refused to grant the king’s demands, which led to the criticism of the Church from the knights in the parliament. The knights called for the Church to be deprived of its temporalities, declaring that the Church had become “so arrogant that they lacked piety and charity.” The knights claimed that removing the Church’s temporalities would instil in them a new “spirit of humility.” However, the king in this instance was not so easily influenced, and “did not agree to such madness,” rather he took back his demands for taxation on the Church, because “it was his intention during those times to maintain the proper standing of the Church in England.” The Church’s response to this was that

170 Ibid., 893.

171 Ibid., 893.

172 Ibid., 779.

173 Ibid., 779.

174 Ibid., 781.
the king “deserved a generous reward” and so offered him a tax of a tenth instead. The king was reportedly delighted when he heard of this declaring “he preferred this present voluntary grant to others which, though four times as valuable, had been forced upon them.”\textsuperscript{175}

Thomas’ account of this parliament shows the tensions and jealousies between the Church and the commons, and is a great example of how a king should act, by holding his kingdom together and protecting the Church. It was clear from this situation that the wealth of the Church was always ready to be plundered by people if they got the opportunity, so it was critically important for the king to protect the Church and its wealth from those who would take advantage of it. While John of Gaunt was acting as regent he did not show any regard to the protection of the Church and its wealth, rather his time was marked with threats to the Church regarding its liberties. In this case Richard acted with wisdom and justice, which was not present in his handling of the nobility and the people. The nobility were quick to side against the Church hoping for its rich spoils, yet the just leadership of the monarch maintained the harmony of the kingdom. The key aspect of this was that the king was perceived as the protector of the Church, and it showed how important that role was, as the nobility would jump on any chance they would get to plunder it. Thomas concluded: “for the time being the insatiable greed of the enemies of the Church was frustrated.”\textsuperscript{176}

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 781.

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 781.
Richard’s pious nature was enhanced by his dealings with the pope in 1391. The correspondence concerned the schism, and the king’s relations with France. At the end of it Thomas commented, “It is clear from these representations made by the pope that our king at that time enjoyed considerable respect and prestige, in that the pope had especial hope of being protected and defended by his resources.”

However, as Richard’s reign wore on Thomas became increasingly suspicious of the king’s demands on the Church. This can be seen from Thomas’ report on the king’s 1383 monastic tour. Thomas recounted that the king made huge monetary demands on the monasteries he visited. He commented that the king and his entourage did “not pay their way, but take away.” Not only did Thomas highlight the king’s exactions from the Church, he also highlighted the king’s indecisiveness. At Bury St. Edmunds the king had been involved in the election of a new abbot. He had earlier promised not to elect John Timworth, who the Pope supported, but was not who the monks wished to elect. However, on his visit Richard changed his mind and went along with the Pope’s request. Thomas commented: “After such action the king’s unreliability, and that of his council, became known far and wide.” Thomas was infuriated because he believed the actions to be short sighted: “it was not only damaging to the Church in England but it produced considerable grounds for the pope and the curia to act in an arrogant manner.”

177 Ibid., 911.

178 Ibid., 691.

179 Ibid., 691.
king had set a worrying precedent for the monks, which left them concerned about the liberty of the Church in England.

The king had also demanded huge gifts, which the people would not have complained about, “if those gifts had been kept prudently for their royal use.”\textsuperscript{180} This was obviously not the case, as the people believed that these gifts were “bestowed in great abundance upon the foreign countrymen of the queen.” Thomas obviously believed that it was unacceptable for the king to burden his people for the benefit of foreigners. The issue of foreigners came up time and again. The visit of the king of Armenia was refused by parliament because they believed the huge expenses that it would entail were falling into foreign hands. One of the reasons behind chancellor Scrope’s dismissal was because he refused to “exalt foreigners,” with the king’s money.\textsuperscript{181} The people understood the need to give gifts to the king “out of consideration for the king’s high office,” yet if this money was wasted on foreigners then it caused resentment.\textsuperscript{182} The result of this tour was that the king and his entourage “returned more impoverished then they had been when they set out.”\textsuperscript{183}

The king’s exactions continued in 1391 when he demanded taxation from the people and the church again. The king asked for horses from all the abbeys of the realm “as

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., 691.

\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., 621.

\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 691.

\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 691.
would befit a king to sit upon,” if not then they had to send an equivalent sum of money. The Abbey of St. Albans sent the king a horse, yet the king demanded the sum of money anyway. Thomas mentions how only a short time before this the Abbot had given the king a grant of 5,000 pounds. He requested these sums of money throughout the realm, “and he received them, though many grumbled.”

By the end of the text Thomas was becoming ever more suspicious of the king’s treatment of the Church. In 1394, just before the end of this part of the chronicle, the king visited St. Albans. The Abbot asked that the king should confirm the ancient privileges of the monastery, in return for their favour. The king agreed to this, but as Thomas pointed out “Yet so far that concession has not been fulfilled.”

After a promising beginning Thomas was increasingly concerned about Richard II’s handling of the Church. Richard had shown promise after the horrors the Church had experienced under the regency of John of Gaunt. However, Richard was now acting in a manner that was reminiscent of his uncle, culminating in Thomas’ final comment concerning the ancient privileges of his own Abbey of St. Albans.

Adam and Thomas saw the handling of the Church as an extremely important aspect of kingship. The king was the Church’s main hope of protection in a world where there were always people ready to plunder the Church for its wealth. However, both Adam and

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184 Ibid., 905.

185 Ibid., 907.

186 Ibid., 959.
Thomas showed concern for the exactions made on the Church by the kings they lived under. They feared that the very people who needed to protect the Church were also trying to plunder the Church’s wealth for their own benefit. Adam believed that no one could get away with fleecing the Church, and recounted numerous divine warnings to prove his point. Though divine judgement was not as strongly present in Thomas’ text, he did show how even the strongest enemy of the Church, John of Gaunt, was humbled by God in the end.

Martial Prowess

The issue of martial prowess is much more evident in Thomas Walsingham’s account than in Adam Usk’s chronicle. Adam never mentioned the issue of martial prowess, and so one must assume that it was not so important to him. However, Thomas’ account places great value on martial prowess. Richard II’s lack of interest and respect for martial prowess was criticised by Thomas on a number of occasions.

Historians have often exaggerated the importance of military prowess too strongly, compared to how it was viewed by contemporaries. In Elizabeth Longford’s book on the English monarchy she states, “The individual sovereign has always been expected to be a father and protector of his people, ‘lord and warrior.’”187 J. L. Kirby’s assessment of Henry IV as “a valiant soldier and leader, strong, handsome, religious and cultured,” “qualities which should have ensured success,” certainly put a lot of emphasis on martial

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abilities being an essential aspect of good kingship.\textsuperscript{188} This suggests that in modern eyes there is a notion of importance of a king’s military ability. Certainly kings like Henry V have been praised throughout history for their martial prowess, which has dominated any historical discussion on them. Historians such as Christopher Allmand have sought to re-address this balance by highlighting his success with law and order,\textsuperscript{189} national unity and suppression of heresy.\textsuperscript{190} Margaret Aston commented that “military success being an established part of the conventional image of the successful monarch.”\textsuperscript{191} Yet she argues that our modern understanding of medieval kings such as has Richard II is “largely a literary construction.”\textsuperscript{192} She argues that much of Richard’s historical reputation can be traced back to historians of the Tudor period who were seeking to create a usable history, and then became immortalised in Shakespearian plays. This includes much of the criticism of Richard’s “effeminate weakness,” and “unmanliness”.\textsuperscript{193} Comments such as “he was the lover of minions instead of those feats of martial prowess appropriate to his estate” cannot be found in the many pages of Adam’s criticism.\textsuperscript{194} Therefore it is

\textsuperscript{188} Kirby, \textit{Henry IV}, 254.

\textsuperscript{189} Also see Powell, \textit{Kingship, Law, and Society}.

\textsuperscript{190} Allmand, \textit{Henry V}, 1.


\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., 316.

\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., \textit{310}.
important to treat with caution assertions such as M. H. Keen’s: “respect and confidence a king could obtain by proven martial ability more readily than in any other way.”

However, Thomas Walsingham was very interested with military affairs. His text was packed full of detailed accounts of English battles in Scotland and on the continent. Thomas was interested in war and martial prowess and takes every opportunity to glorify English military leaders, and criticise those who failed. His text is very useful for any military historian looking at any English military campaign of the period. Thomas also reports on jousting tournaments, describing how “In these the English were to display their courage for everybody, and their prowess before the queen’s fellow-countrymen.” He was very enthusiastic regarding tournaments believing that “These men gained glory.”

Thomas had a very special interest in military affairs, so it is unsurprising that he comments on the king’s military abilities.

Thomas was very critical of the king’s lack of interest in military affairs. He blamed the king’s favourites, as they were more “knights of Venus than of Mars, showing more prowess in the bedroom than on the fields of battle.” Thomas believed that the young king was not being tutored by the right men, as they did not instil in him the right

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194 Ibid., 310.
195 Keen, England in the Later Middle Ages, 22.
197 Ibid., 577.
198 Ibid., 815.
qualities befitting of a king: “Those who spent their time around the king made no effort to inculcate in him the qualities (martial prowess) that befit a great king.” He was not just referring to warfare, but also “skills that befit a noble king in peacetime” such as hunting and falconry “through which a king’s reputation is enhanced.” Thomas believed that it was important for a king’s reputation that he be seen as a strong warrior, well versed in feats of arms if he was to win the respect of his men.

The very men that Thomas believed brought glory to England through their martial feats were ignored by Richard because of his lack of interest in military affairs: “The king was so influenced by these men (his favourites) that he took a great dislike to those who had been involved in this campaign.” Therefore when the earl of Nottingham returned to the king he expected “enthusiastic thanks, far from being welcomed cheerfully by the king, he was met with sullenness.” Thomas believed that the king was shunning the very men who brought prestige and glory to the realm. The king was losing out on their tutorship and council, and so was not learning from their example the skills that Thomas thought a good king needed. A king uninterested in war, and not even interested in hunting or falconry, was lacking in abilities that made a good king.

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199 Ibid., 815.

200 Ibid., 815.

201 Ibid., 815.
The king’s ineffectiveness to rule was underlined when the bishop of Norwich was in need of help while on crusade in Flanders. 202 In one of the most striking passages in Thomas’ text, when the king hears of the dire situation that the bishop was in, “He immediately pushed his table away from him and rose with great anger and haste. Seizing his horse, he rode throughout the night at great speed, often changing his horse, as though he were going to kill the king of France that very night.” This showed a king devoted to his people, and willing to go to any lengths to save them from foreign armies. Rather than the indecisive king that Thomas had described repeatedly throughout his text, this was a man of action who would act decisively for the good of his kingdom.

However, after this great effort and determination “he was exhausted and from his hard riding and, overcome by sleep… After he slept, he saw that rest would be a good thing, and decided to deal more gently with his enemies, and to send others to repel them. And so it happened, after this fine words and this intemperate exhibition, nothing was done by him.” 203 To sum up these events Thomas offered these words from an unnamed poet ridiculing the king: “The mountains are in labour, but will give birth only to a ridiculous mouse.” 204 Richard was not a man of action, in Thomas’ eyes, but a man of only pomp. He made a great exhibition, but eventually did nothing. It also showed that the king was unwilling to put his life on the line for his country and his men. Thomas

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203 Thomas Walsinghman, The St. Albans Chronicle, 703.

204 Ibid., 703.
believed that a king had to be a strong military leader, well versed in feats of arms.

However, no such discussion formed any part of Adam’s text, although both agreed on many other issues concerning kingship, such as treatment of the nobility, the poor and the church.

The Deposition

The shadow of the deposition hangs over the discussion of Adam Usk’s chronicle. His criticism of Richard II’s kingship culminates in Richard’s ultimate failure, his deposition. The deposition was a critical part of Adam’s presentation of Richard, and yet Adam’s view seems conflicted. This is reflected in one of the most eloquent passages in the book when Richard gives up the throne: “this is a strange and fickle land, which has exiled, slain, destroyed, and ruined so many kings, so many rulers, so many great men, and which never ceases to be riven and worn down by dissensions and strife and internecine hatreds.” This seems confusing considering that Adam agreed that Richard deserved to be deposed due to his poor ability to rule, which was resulting in the ruin of the kingdom. However, it is more of a reflection on how regrettable this situation was. Adam was dealing with the lesser of two evils, but was still saddened by the whole state of affairs. This may be a sad reflection of the system as a whole if England had to suffer the deposition of its monarch, due to a continued succession of poor kings. This may be

a reflection of his belief that Richard’s birth was in doubt, or it could just be an attempt to justify these horrid events.

Though Thomas’ account does not go up to the deposition his discussion of the previous years revealed a similar state of mind. He believed in what he saw to be the natural structure of society, yet at the same time was very critical of Richard’s handling of the church, the nobility, and the poor. Both authors recognised the weaknesses of the kings they were discussing, but neither doubted the importance of kingship. They both demonstrated similar ideals for a monarch to abide by and included similar criticisms of the monarchs they lived under.

Adam and Thomas did not express any desire for social change. Adam’s main criticism of the peasants rebellion was that “they would transform -- which meant, in fact destroy -- this whole island and its existing society.”206 The outcome of the situation, which he stated was not an isolated occurrence, saddened him: “this is a strange and fickle land… never ceases to be riven and worn down.”207 This quote is a fine example of Adam’s disillusionment at what was going on, showing that it is not only the historians job to be cynical of these actions, but in fact people at the time recognised the hypocrisy just as well. Contemporaries were just as able to understand the contradictions in their society as historians are. In this case a monarch being deposed by strength and then attempting to justify it through birth or abdication, contemporaries recognised these hypocrisies. This renders E. F. Jacob’s comment, “the historian’s continual problem of

\[206\] Adam Usk, Given-Wilson, 5.

\[207\] Ibid., 65.
understanding the minds of men in a period of contradictions,” meaningless, as contemporaries had just as tougher time coming to terms with the contradictions in their society.\textsuperscript{208} Even though Adam tried to justify what had happened, this passage shows that he recognised the problem. Overall, Adam believed that the king deserved to be deposed; he had oppressed his people and his nobility, yet it was a sad reflection on society that this had to, and continually, occurred. His stories of deformed boys and cows being born at this time were a reflection on the troubled nature of society.\textsuperscript{209}

**Respect for Kingship**

This paper focuses on Adam and Thomas’ criticisms of kingship, yet it is important to remember the respect both men had for the authority of the king. They did not want the role of the king to be limited, only that the position should not be abused. The king should protect the nobility, the people, and the Church. In return he would get the respect and loyalty that he deserved. Both Adam and Thomas believed in an ideal of kingship where this two-way relationship works for the good of the kingdom. They become critical of the king when he abused his position.

There are many places in the text where Adam revealed his respect for the crown. In his career Adam crossed the crown on a number of occasions. However, in writing of this he never expressed pride. Adam was a ringleader for the Welshmen in riots at

\textsuperscript{208} Jacob, *The Fifteenth Century*, v.

\textsuperscript{209} *Adam Usk*, ed. Given-Wilson, 87.
Oxford in his early years, and was indicted as one of the chief instigators of the trouble. The jury, in the presence of one of the king’s chief justices, set him free. Adam stated, “before this I had lived in ignorance of the power of the king, but henceforth I feared him and his laws.” Adam later spent many years in exile during Henry IV’s reign. He openly admitted to his actions against the king, but always sought a pardon. During this exile the king had confiscated all of his property, but there was never any sense of criticism for this because he had deserved such punishment. These cases show that Adam did not criticise the king for merely punishing people; an important part of kingship was applying justice, and in these cases the king had acted justly. When Adam was critical of the king’s handling of justice it was when he believed the king had acted unjustly, outside of the law and his power.

The peasants’ rebellion was a challenging issue for Adam because although he was very critical of the king throughout his life, he felt that this rebellion was completely against the order of society, and was seeking to destroy the very society that Adam believed in. Adam was highly critical of this event; he disliked the destruction, the violence and especially the aims of the revolters. As discussed earlier, Adam was highly critical of Richard II himself; but it is important to understand that he was criticising the king personally and not the institution of the monarchy. He had great belief in the system of government he lived under, only that there were many regrettable problems. Even though he was highly supportive of the rights of the peasantry, he was critical of the rebellion: “in brief, that they would transform—which meant, in fact, destroy—this whole

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210 Ibid., 17.
island and its existing society.” He reported with horror that they “would kill all those in
the kingdom who were nobler-born than them, and elect a king and lords from
themselves.” It was an extraordinary example of the horrors that would befall a
kingdom if the people did more than silently curse and actually rose up in rebellion. It
was not their role to lead, which is made clear by Adam, but also open resistance was not
allowed either. This event highlighted that Adam lost all sympathy for the common
people if they rose up in open rebellion, even if it was against a tyrannical king. This
rebellion ended “through God’s intervention,” showing that to Adam this kind of
behaviour was unnatural to a proper society.

Thomas believed in the hierarchical structure of society, even though he was greatly
critical of Richard II. He believed that the existing social structures gave stability to
society, and that it was when this structure was not functioning properly that problems
occurred. This was revealed in 1385 when King Richard fell out with the duke of
Lancaster. Thomas commented, “The fear now was that the commons would achieve
what they had long desired, namely that out of the dispute between these two magnates
they would gain freedom to roam about and plunder with impunity as they had done once
before when they were under no proper rule.” Thomas feared another peasants’
rebellion if these two men were divided, leading to a period without “proper rule.” It was

211 Ibid., 3.

212 Ibid., 5.

the hierarchical structure of society that kept peace and stability, as the nobility were born to govern and so keep the peasantry in line. Infighting within the highest echelons of society led to anarchy in Thomas’ eyes.

Thomas also believed strongly in obeying the king whether one believed his actions were right or wrong. In 1392 the king had a great dispute with London over money he had asked for. The people of London were so against paying the king that they beat a man who was willing to give him money. Though Thomas was against the king’s continual demands for money he was critical of the people of London for being hostile to their king in this way: “They refused him in an insolent and extraordinarily disrespectful manner.” People should give the king his money out of respect for his office, even if they did not agree with it.

Adam also showed respect for monarchical power with his portrayal of the earl of March. It is obvious that open disapproval of the monarch was not desirable, so though the earl of March was against the king he was never openly critical. Rather he stayed loyal to the king and dutifully carried out his orders: “pretending when he was with the king that he approved of what he did, whereas in fact he strongly disapproved of it.” Adam may have been distancing his patron from the evils of Richard’s rule; yet it showed what Adam believed to be the correct way of acting in this situation. It was clearly

214 Ibid, 925.

215 Ibid, 925.

216 Adam Usk, ed. Given-Wilson, 39.
unacceptable not to obey or to openly criticise the king. There are many examples of this in both Adam’s and Thomas’ chronicle. One striking case was the example of the William Clerk, a scribe from Canterbury from Adam’s chronicle. He was condemned by the court of chivalry for voicing derogatory comments concerning Henry IV in 1401. He was sentenced to have his tongue cut out, for speaking “disrespectfully of the king,” then to have his right hand cut off for writing these comments down, and then to be beheaded at the Tower.²¹⁷ Obviously, speaking against the king was harshly punished, but Adam agreed that to openly voice anger at the king was wrong.

Thomas’ chronicle also includes a number of examples. The barons and nobles were unhappy at the raising of Robert de Vere to the dukedom of Ireland. However, they did not voice their concerns openly, but “secretly grumbled.”²¹⁸ It is clear from Thomas’ chronicle that open dissent from the nobility to the king was wrong. Of course the nobility did make their hostility open in 1387 when the king took things too far, yet Thomas showed how far the nobility was pushed before they openly rebelled against the king. Many times they had bitten their lip while the king had ruled in an unwise and authoritarian way, so open hostility was only a measure of last resort.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 123.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

The Chronicle of Adam Usk and The St. Albans Chronicle give historians a first hand view of how two contemporaries viewed kingship. It is important to realize that both Adam and Thomas believed that a king’s duty was to the peasantry as well as the nobility. The case of Richard II showed how a monarch could receive justice from his nobility for abusing his position. Both Adam and Thomas also showed how a tyrannical king would suffer for oppressing the poor. In the end the king was answerable to God for how he treated his subjects. This was an important lesson in kingship that both authors stressed. A successful king had to care for all of his subjects, and could not abuse the power vested in him.

Both authors strongly believed in society’s structure, but at the same time did recognise that there was a point when the people could rise against a tyrannical king. This was only a measure of last resort, but as Thomas especially noted, the nobility had fought for many years to get the king away from the influence of his favourites, for the king’s tyranny only to grow worse. Adam and Thomas highlighted two major sources of tyranny in Richard II’s reign: abuse of birth and exploitation of property/inheritance. Richard abused birth in three ways. Firstly, he excluded the nobility from government of the realm, by giving his personal favourites too much influence at court. When favourites
gain a monopoly on the king, then it is detrimental to the realm, because those who
should be advising the king are excluded, and because these favourites are often raised
from a lower caste. Secondly, birth is abused when those of lesser blood are ennobled
into positions that ill suit them. To both Adam and Thomas men of low birth were not
capable of handling high positions, and it is also to the exclusion of those who were
capable. The final abuse of birth came from Richard’s lack of justice. When it came to
important legal matters Richard both did not give justice and dishonoured those involved,
by making decisions based on his own jealousies. This occurred in the Parliament of
1397 where the king ignored previous pardons and failed to allow those accused to make
their defence. Also, he had the duke of Gloucester murdered before he could offer his
defence and packed Parliament with his own men.

Richard also abused the property and inheritance rights of the nobility. He divided
the earl of March’s inheritance between his own men and also broke up the Lancastrian
inheritance, while excluding the duke of Hereford who was fully of age, by banishing
him indefinitely on dubious grounds. This ultimately cost him his crown and united the
nobility against him. In the view of Adam and Thomas the nobility were justified in
removing the king because of these abuses.

The greatest abuse of the poor was through taxation. Both authors renounced the
burden that the poor had to carry for the expensive plans of lavish monarchs. Adam
recounted the demise of many men who oppressed the poor with massive exactions: from
the earl of Pembroke to Henry V. It is important to understand that unlike Given-
Wilson’s claims, Adam does not see Henry V as “something close to the model of a
perfect king.” Henry did not act as tyrannically as Richard II, but he had bled his country dry of money to fight an excessive war. His abuse had not been from taking loans from the rich gentry, but from heavily taxing the peasantry as he got more carried away and desperate. Adam forewarned Henry of his early demise in the last passage of his text, because of the young king’s excessive demands on his people. In the last sentence of his chronicle Adam forewarned of Henry’s demise because of his excessive exactions from the poor. The importance of this message is clear as it acts as the climax to Adam’s chronicle. Adam stressed time and time again that ultimately justice lay with God, from which no king could escape.

These chronicles help to define the contemporary ideal of kingship. Historians, such as Given-Wilson and Thompson have dealt effectively with the accuracy of Adam’s narrative, as have Taylor, Childs and Watkiss for Thomas Walsingham. However, Adam and Thomas’ own message has long been overlooked; whether these accounts are historically accurate is less important than the message that they were trying to make regarding their times. This study has revealed one part of that message: kingship. But there is still much more to be learned from Adam and Thomas about England in the Late Middle Ages, as well as from many more contemporary commentators of the Middle Ages.

219 Adam Usk, ed. Given-Wilson, lxxx.
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