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Medieval Lordship

By Thomas N. Bisson

My subject on this occasion goes uneasily with my piety. Lordship did not as such much interest my teachers William E. Lunt and Joseph R. Strayer, who were leaders in their turn of the Medieval Academy of America. In their presidential addresses of (respectively) 1954 and 1968 both scholars dealt magisterially with subjects each had studied for forty years. Lunt spoke on financial relations of the papacy with England, Strayer on the place of Normandy and Languedoc in the building of an administrative monarchy in France.¹ It is easy to see that in a considerable sense both historians were working on medieval government, and it is some measure of their achievement that even today no one wishing to be informed in this grand subject can do much better than read Lunt and Strayer.² I wish I could discourse on my own years of research as did those admirable scholars. If I cannot, it is not simply because I lack the accumulated erudition to reflect summarily on my work; it is also because I lack the conceptual serenity of my teachers in our common subject matter. Like Lunt and Strayer I have worked on justice, finance, and the beginnings of parliamentary life in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; unlike those mentors I became uneasy about the paradigm in which these studies were framed. I came to wonder how Strayer could have held students, myself included, spellbound with details about the deportment of judges or sergeants while saying nothing about the adequacy of concepts like “government” or “administration” to describe such behavior. Believing there was something timeless about the action of people in power, he was gifted at evoking the ways of modern bureaucrats in those “corridors of power” he knew from his own experience in Washington. He assumed with other historians of his day *and ours* that all societies have governments, so that he could speak of feudalism as essentially a “method of government,” of “political organization . . . reduced to the simplest possible terms.”³

This, I fear, is one of the reasons why feudalism has been discredited in recent historiography—and it may be the only good reason. Having defined feudalism a dozen ways, we have succeeded in turning it into a unicorn (which we can, at

This was a presidential address delivered at the annual meeting of the Medieval Academy of America in Boston on 31 March 1995. I have made some changes for the purpose of publication, but my treatment remains substantially a sketch of a vast subject.

¹ *Speculum* 29 (1954), 636; Joseph R. Strayer, “Normandy and Languedoc,” *Speculum* 44 (1969), 1–12 (reprinted in *Medieval Statecraft and the Perspectives of History: Essays by Joseph R. Strayer* [Princeton, N.J., 1971], pp. 44–59).

² As, e.g., in *The English Government at Work, 1327–1336*, 3 vols., Mediaeval Academy of America, Publications nos. 37, 48, 56 (Cambridge, Mass., 1940–50). See also J. R. Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State* (Princeton, N.J., 1970).

³ Joseph R. Strayer, *Feudalism* (Princeton, N.J., 1965), p. 13; idem and Dana C. Munro, *The Middle Ages, 395–1500*, 5th ed. (New York, 1970), pp. 113–24 at 124.

least, agree was a medieval beast); by refusing to define government and state we flatter ourselves that such things were never absent and simply improved from age to age.⁴ But I do not mean to flog historians, least of all revered teachers of mine, nor yet to rescue feudalism; only to explain why I had to seek a new direction. As I read in narratives and charters of the eleventh and twelfth centuries it seemed ever less plausible that concepts descriptive of France in 1300 could be of the slightest use in reference to west European lands three centuries earlier. So much that seemed characteristic of later monarchies—office, delegated administration, law-based justice, taxation—was feeble or, with a few exceptions, missing in the lay societies of the eleventh century. It came to seem pointless to stress law and justice as proof of the continuity of government when the realities of power were so manifestly bound up with force and constraint. Which was the truly “feudal”: vassallic courts amiably determining customs of fiefs in Flanders or England, or the abrasive societies of penurious knights in multiplying castles almost everywhere else? What was typical was surely not “government,” by any but the vaguest of definitions, but rather the personal exercise of power. Some years ago, taking comfort from knowing that I was not alone in my discontents with the old institutional history, I began to explore the implications of a more elemental stress on power in my teaching.⁵ This work has led me provisionally to the conclusion that the key to understanding the transformations of societies in which government (in a precise and useful sense) originated is to be found in the history of lordship. And when I looked into it I found, to my surprise, that lordship has been neglected by the historians who presumably knew most about it.

This becomes clear from a perusal of the older standard manuals. There is little or no discussion of lordship as such in the famous books on institutions and social change by Paul Guilhiermoz, Charles Homer Haskins, Heinrich Mitteis, Marc Bloch, F. L. Ganshof, and R. W. Southern.⁶ None of these writers,

⁴ In addition to works cited below in note 6, see Strayer, *Feudalism*; E. A. R. Brown, “The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe,” *American Historical Review* 79 (1974), 1063–88; Judith A. Green, *The Government of England under Henry I* (Cambridge, Eng., 1986). See now also J. M. W. Bean, *From Lord to Patron: Lordship in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 1989), a notably constructive critique of feudalism; and Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford, 1994). The relation between feudalism and (the?) unicorn was propounded by Fredric Cheyette, *Lordship and Community* (cited below, n. 8), p. 2, from whose plausible theory I respectfully dissent.

⁵ This exploration began with a course in Harvard’s Core Curriculum entitled “Power and Society: A Crisis of the Twelfth Century,” taught with helpful teaching fellows in 1988, 1990, and 1993. Some elements of my argument figure in “The ‘Feudal Revolution,’” *Past and Present* 142 (February 1994), 6–42. But others were already at work in this direction, notably French scholars studying *sociétés*, such as Georges Duby and Dominique Barthélemy, and English and American scholars interested in law, justice, and ritual, such as Paul R. Hyams, Janet Nelson, Patrick Wormald, Fredric L. Cheyette, Geoffrey Koziol, and Stephen D. White; and some of these persons took part in a conference sponsored by the Committee on Medieval Studies of Harvard University in May 1991 entitled “Power and Society in the Twelfth Century.” The papers there presented may now be read as *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status, and Process in Twelfth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia, 1995).

⁶ I refer to Paul Guilhiermoz, *Essai sur l’origine de la noblesse en France* (Paris, 1902); C. H. Haskins, *Norman Institutions* (Cambridge, Mass., 1918); Heinrich Mitteis, *Lehnrecht und Staatsgewalt: Untersuchungen zur mittelalterlichen Verfassungsgeschichte* (Weimar, 1933); Marc Bloch, *La société féodale*, 2

not even Bloch, conceived of feudalism in terms of lordly routines, of ways of managing households and dependents, of conceptions of power. Their interests lay chiefly in the structural and taxonomic elements of status, submission, and patrimony. It is true, however, that Marc Bloch viewed the *societies* he studied as typically stratified in relations of lordship and dependence, a position that proved exemplary in the French school of social history. And there are other instructive exceptions. F. M. Stenton's Ford Lectures, *The First Century of English Feudalism* (1932), examine the postconquest honorial baronage in what may be the best existing treatment of lordly practice in English.⁷ German scholars like Heinrich Dannenbauer and Walter Schlesinger did fine work on early-medieval lordly retinues as well as on the formation of dominations (*dominia*) as objectively defined patrimonies, while Otto Brunner, in his famous study of noble power in late-medieval Austria, elaborated the subject of lordship as a variable structure of personal and landed attachments.⁸ French scholars in company with Georges Duby have explained the rise of "banal lordships" in terms of a diffusion of powers of command in post-Carolingian generations.⁹ Jacques Le Goff took a different tack in his study of the symbolic ritual of vassalage, which he interpreted in familial terms as structure but not as process.¹⁰ Recently Malcolm Bean has shown that what has been called "bastard feudalism" in England makes better sense in light of a continuous history of household lordship.¹¹ One must also

vols. (Paris, 1939–40); F. L. Ganshof, *Qu'est-ce que la féodalité?* (Brussels, 1944); and R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (London and New Haven, Conn., 1953).

⁷ *The First Century of English Feudalism, 1066–1166*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1961). Recent studies have dealt incisively and technically with the customary and legal problems of tenure, property, inheritance, and warranty: e.g., J. C. Holt, "Politics and Property in Early Medieval England," *Past and Present* 57 (1972), 3–52; S. F. C. Milsom, *The Legal Framework of English Feudalism* (Cambridge, Eng., 1976); Paul R. Hyams, *King, Lords and Peasants in Medieval England: The Common Law of Villeinage in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Oxford, 1980); idem, "Warranty and Good Lordship in Twelfth-Century England," *Law and History Review* 5 (1987), 437–503; John Hudson, *Land, Law, and Lordship in Anglo-Norman England* (Oxford, 1994). Hyams ("Warranty," p. 439) speaks of Milsom's "liberating insight" into the importance of lordship in the (English) world from which the common law was formed.

⁸ Heinrich Dannenbauer, "Adel, Burg und Herrschaft bei den Germanen: Grundlagen der deutschen Verfassungsentwicklung," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 61 (1941); Walter Schlesinger, "Herrschaft und Gefolgschaft in der germanisch-deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte," *Historische Zeitschrift* 176 (1953), 225–75. Both studies were reprinted in *Herrschaft und Staat im Mittelalter*, ed. Helmut Kämpf, Wege der Forschung 11 (Darmstadt, 1956), still perhaps the most remarkable collection on lordship, while Schlesinger's article is translated by Fredric L. Cheyette, *Lordship and Community in Medieval Europe: Selected Readings* (New York, 1968). See also Otto Brunner, *Land und Herrschaft: Grundfragen der territorialen Verfassungsgeschichte Österreichs im Mittelalter* (Vienna, 1939; many later editions), trans. Howard Kaminsky and James Van Horn Melton, "*Land*" and *Lordship: Structures of Governance in Medieval Austria* (Philadelphia, 1992).

⁹ Georges Duby, *La société aux XIe et XIIIe siècles dans la région mâconnaise* (Paris, 1953; repr. 1971); J.-Fr. Lemarignier, "Structures monastiques et structures politiques dans la France de la fin du Xe et des débuts du XIe siècle," in *Il monachesimo nell'alto medioevo*, Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo 4 (Spoleto, 1957), pp. 357–400. See also J.-P. Poly and Eric Bournazel, *La mutation féodale, Xe–XIIIe siècles*, Nouvelle Clio 16 (Paris, 1980; 2nd ed., 1991).

¹⁰ Jacques Le Goff, "The Symbolic Ritual of Vassalage," in *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1980), pp. 237–87.

¹¹ *From Lord to Patron*, cited above, n. 4.

make exception for historians of words and language. The philologist D. H. Green explored the semantic range and shifts of three Old High German terms for lord in his *Carolingian Lord*, a wonderful study for all its bristling difficulty, evoking the forms of lordly action.¹² The works of Green and, amongst historians to their credit, of Bloch, Dannenbauer, and Schlesinger point to the special importance of medieval literature for getting at the character and culture of lordly power.

With due allowance for such salient exceptions,¹³ it remains true that lordship has seldom engaged the attention of historians of societies and institutions. It was so constant and pervasive a reality in medieval experience that it was easily assimilated to or subsumed under other themes: for example, kingship, feudalism, the landed estate; and it was just such themes that proved vulnerable to conceptual anachronism. Moreover, the discovery that land and endowments came to prevail over personal bondings during what Bloch termed the "second feudal age" tended to discourage the study of lordship as affective action in the only period for which we may hope to find the evidence thereof. Considered as a mode of personal power over human beings, lordship was deeply ingrained in the Roman legal and biblical cultures in which the Middle Ages began; it drew new life from the dynamics of Germanic war bands, flourished with the proliferation of systems of conditional tenure, and persisted tenaciously as an element of elite status and privilege. In this history two circumstances may be said to have precipitated fundamental transformations: the progress of Christianity from cult to culture, especially in the post-Carolingian centuries; and the multiplication of powerful men with the means to lordship. In time a third factor worked to impart longevity to lordship: its identification with nobility in the later Middle Ages.

The first two of these circumstances coincided in the period 850 to 1050, and I shall stress the consequences of this coincidence. But lordship was already a venerable institution in this age, endowed with attributes that powerfully influenced its later history. It rested on a theology of inequality itself rooted in the ancient world's experience of paterfamilial mastership, subservience, and slavery. That it was thought of in affectively personal terms was clear already in the Psalms, those songs of praise in submissive prayer to the Lord-God; and it was equally clear, as in John 15.15, that a familial lordship over "friends" was preferable to mastership of the slave who "knows not what his lord may do." Indeed, lordship, like God's house, had "many mansions" already in antiquity, ranging from the political, as in God's territorial-national domination (Ps. 102.22), to the arbitrary and penal subjection of slaves recorded in the Gospels and Roman law.

What mattered for the future was that the personal (familial) and arbitrary modes of lordship tended to be confused. This was so even though, very early,

¹² D. H. Green, *The Carolingian Lord: Semantic Studies on Four Old High German Words: Balder, Frô, Truhtin, Herrô* (Cambridge, Eng., 1965). The first of these words had no lasting resonance.

¹³ Other important works on dynastic family and nobility seem less pertinent to lordship, as such; e.g. Otto Freiherr von Dungern, *Adelsherrschaft im Mittelalter* (Munich, 1927); and the revisionist studies of Gerd Tellenbach and Karl Schmid.

lordship was assimilated to office. From the fourth century, according to K. F. Werner, the imperial intitulation was “personalized and openly linked to a dynasty”: one spoke of “*Dominus noster Flavius*”; so that “all people were placed in a state of inferiority before the *dominus*, a word referring to the chief of the household and of slaves.”¹⁴ By the sixth century St. Benedict could speak of the abbot as “called lord and abbot, because he is believed to act in Christ’s place. . . .”¹⁵ These expressions of lordship promoted humility as a collective virtue in submission, a virtue that was portentously underscored when Pope Gregory the Great assumed the title “servant of the servants of God.” Meanwhile, another tradition of affective power was formed in the experience of tribal war bands. Here the dynamic lay in a followership besmirched by ambition and greed but also conducive to the associative virtues of largesse and loyalty. This sort of solidarity, which proved conspicuous and abhorrent in the ravages of Vikings after about 850, gave rise also to ideas of honor and fidelity such as found expression in the “songs” of Maldon and Roland.

All this is well known. Lordship was widely as well as diversely practiced by the ninth century. What is less well understood, and has not been much stressed, is that lordship was becoming more and more common and that it was progressing at the expense of what may be called public obligations. To the hagiographer at Saint-Bertin toward 900 it seemed that most men of standing (*nobilitas*) had taken lords whom they were obliged to follow—“dear lords,” moreover, which hints at the freshly affective character of such bondings—leaving but few who had sufficient patrimonies to avoid commendation while remaining subject only to “public sanctions.”¹⁶ It was clear in west Frankland that vassalage afforded a welcome means to the creation of new landed wealth; and that meant the multiplication of lordships. A generation later Bishop Rather of Verona deplored a new insistence on lordship, on the appellation “senior,” that seemed to justify the grasping for human precedence contrary to patristic assertions of human equality before God. God meant for people to dominate animals, not each other; yet things had got so that people had come to suppose that God himself dominated the way men did, jealous of the other’s advantage, avid for power and possession, swollen with greed and ambition.¹⁷

It is not accidental that Rather viewed lay lordship with moralizing severity. In his day lesser lay lords and castellans were increasingly addicted to self-promotion and violence. He also castigated an insidious striving for lordships among the canons of Verona.¹⁸ But he by no means rejected the God-given

¹⁴ K. F. Werner, *Histoire de France*, 1: *Les origines (avant l’an mil)* (Paris, 1984), p. 234.

¹⁵ *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. Justin McCann (Westminster, Md., 1952), c. 2.

¹⁶ Quoted in F. L. Ganshof, *Feudalism*, trans. Philip Grierson (London, 1961), p. 23.

¹⁷ *Ratherii Veronensis praeloquiorum libri VI*, ed. P. L. D. Reid, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis 46A (Turnhout, 1984), 4.15, p. 119. I owe this reference to John Van Engen, whose “Sacred Sanctions for Lordship,” in *Cultures of Power*, chap. 9, is a major contribution to my present theme.

¹⁸ *Die Briefe des Bischofs Rather von Verona*, ed. Fritz Weigle, MGH, Die Briefe der deutschen Kaiserzeit, 1 (Munich, 1949), no. 16, pp. 76–77; cited (without reference) by Heinrich Fichtenau, *Living in the Tenth Century: Mentalities and Social Orders*, trans. Patrick Geary (Chicago, 1991), p. 221.

reality of lordship. He admonished lords to discipline servants (*servi*) in patience not anger, and servants to be faithfully submissive. His letters show him interacting with lord-prelates and -princes whom he addressed in the obsequious rhetoric of clerical humility; they make an interesting contrast with the unlordly classicizing familiarity of Lupus of Ferrières's letters a century before.¹⁹ A deferential language of submissive service, buoyed by an unbroken tradition of conciliar precedence, spread through the clergy in the generations before the Investiture Conflict. For the bishops and priests who presided over the multiplication of altars and parishes were themselves nurtured in monastic and cathedral liturgies, drawn from the Psalms, Gospels, and Epistles, in praise of the Lord God while promoting, in the parables, a conception of official lordship and stewardship.

These conceptions, widely and deeply diffused, resonated with characteristic attitudes and procedures of petition and service. As Geoffrey Koziol has shown, one enacted, virtually performed, one's submission in petitioning for a lord's grace, thus confirming his power in God's image.²⁰ Count Bouchard labored to persuade Abbot Maieul to assume the task of reforming Saint-Maur. "Again and again he prostrated himself at the feet of the holy man, asking that the feeling [*affectus*] of his desire be accepted. Overcome by the many entreaties of the venerable Count," St. Maieul agreed so to serve.²¹ One petitioned for favor, for judgment; the lord-prelate or -prince acted, or reacted, responsively but passively. He had the power to act willfully, but the ritual that renders this mode of official lordship visible expressed only the rectitude of a quasi-biblical culture.

How far this extended in the ever more populous societies of the eleventh and twelfth centuries is far from clear. As a first approximation, I would suggest that the model of gracious quasi-biblical lordship entailing humble or reverential submission was powerfully influential in the construction of vassalic clienteles in the higher aristocracies. "The essence of the rite of homage," wrote F. L. Ganshof, "was the self-surrender (*traditio*) of one person to another."²² Vassals must often have kneeled before lords to do this, as we see in illuminations of the late twelfth century preserved in the *Liber feudorum maior* of Catalonia. But they did not always do so, as other illustrations, in the same manuscript and in others, show, which prompts me to wonder whether gestural submission was normally reserved to lords of high (or higher) estate.²³ Peter the Chanter implies that postulants would kneel before tyrants—that is, before anyone at all—to

¹⁹ Ratherius, *Praeloquia* 1.10.22–29, ed. Reid, pp. 22–31; *Briefe*, nos. 2–7, 16, 18, 19, etc. Cf. Loup de Ferrières, *Correspondance*, ed. Léon Levillain, 2 vols. (Paris, 1927).

²⁰ Geoffrey Koziol, *Begging Pardon and Favor: Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London, 1992).

²¹ Eudes de Saint-Maur, *Vie de Bouchard le Vénérable . . .*, ed. Charles Bourel de la Roncière (Paris, 1892), 3, p. 10.

²² Ganshof, *Feudalism*, p. 27. See also Koziol, *Begging Pardon and Favor*, p. 228: "The language of clamor and edict projected an image of divinely ordained lordship, to preserve an ideal that distinguished between the legitimate authority of kings and counts and the illegitimate power of castellans and vicars."

²³ *Liber feudorum maior*, ed. Francisco Miquel Rosell, 2 vols. (Barcelona, 1945–47), 1, plates iv, ix, xi, xiii, xv–xvii; 2, plates i, iii, iv, viii, x, xiii, xiv; compare 1, plates v–vii, ix, xi.

secure favor, which seems likely enough. But in general the Chanter's reflections on prayer are of interest for showing how the virtue of humility, so plausible before God and his official servants, might be diminished before persons of lesser estate as less exalted motives came into play.²⁴

It is clear that new lordships, considered as social entities in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, were of different and less admired kinds. The multiplication of castles, knights, and fiefs held by knights was in many regions of France and Mediterranean lands an explosive phenomenon of the tenth and eleventh centuries. And every castle, if not quite every fief dependent on it, formed a lordship or (in the case of castles) a confusion of lordships. The intense and threatening solidarities of armed knights were coupled with the intimidating dominations of peasants and exchanges inflicted by knights so endowed and looking to exploit and extend their fiefs. I see no reason to minimize the impact of this phenomenon, which has been labeled a "feudal revolution." It transformed sooner or later the map of power everywhere. It put thousands of peasants under the lordship of untitled masters, many of whom treated them as virtually slaves, while for many more thousands of other peasants on the older domains of elite lords of the old aristocracy and the church, the proximity to penurious knights in threatening castles proved to be a harsh liability.²⁵ But benign lordships multiplied as well. José Angel García de Cortázar likens the appearance of the word *senior* from Catalonia to Galicia to the spread of a blanket across the whole of Christian Spain. The word refers not only to militant or personal dominations but also to elders of familial groupings and to agents of royal power.²⁶

For all its biblical and tribal roots, there was something profoundly novel about lordship in the twelfth century. Never had there been so many lords in Europe; never again would so many people seek or expect to be lords. People sang of their deeds, clerks wrote them down; the chansons de geste were essentially songs of lordship. The early crusades, one might almost say, were concocted for men in search of lordly reputation. What is more, favored clerks wrote of the deeds of kings or bishops—of Louis VI, Frederick Barbarossa, Diego Gelmírez—as if they were lords,—as indeed they were!²⁷ For it was symptomatic that in this age the traditions of office and proprietary power, hitherto distinct, were run together.

²⁴ Peter the Chanter, *De penitentia et partibus eius*, as edited in part by Richard C. Trexler, *The Christian at Prayer: An Illustrated Prayer Manual Attributed to Peter the Chanter (d. 1197)*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 44 (Binghamton, N.Y., 1987), pp. 192, 47; but see the whole text.

²⁵ The concept of "feudal revolution" I neither defend nor reject (see the article cited above, n. 5). What is beyond dispute is a massive multiplication of fiefs and lords in the years 950–1150, not only in Burgundy, the Massif Central, and Mediterranean lands, but also in western France, Normandy, and Flanders.

²⁶ José Angel García de Cortázar, *La sociedad rural en la España medieval* (Madrid, 1988), p. 47. See also Pierre Duparc, "La commendise ou commende personnelle," *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes* 119 (1967), 50–112.

²⁷ *La chanson de Roland*, ed. F. Whitehead, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1946); *Le couronnement de Louis*, ed. Ernest Langlois, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1966); *Raoul de Cambrai*, ed. Sarah Kay (Oxford, 1992); Suger, *Vie de Louis VI le Gros*, ed. Henri Waquet (Paris, 1929); *Ottonis et Rahewini gesta Friderici I. imperatoris*, ed. Georg Waitz and Bernhard von Simson, MGH SSrG (Hannover, 1912); *Historia Compostellana*, ed. Emma Falque Rey, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis 70 (Turnhout, 1988).

This point has been obscured for at least three reasons: first, because the dynastic appropriation of office was not in itself new in the twelfth century; second, because it has been supposed that the Gregorian reformers, having spotted the problem of proprietary office in the eleventh century, had substantially remedied it; and third, because historians have quite overlooked one critical aspect of the matter: the nature of delegated power in lay lordships. Yet even the most cursory reading of narratives, letters, and charters suggests that lordship had never been so grasping and invasive as in the twelfth century. Offices survived chiefly as functional ideals, hardly at all as objectively defined procedures; they no longer produced records as such. The reformers redefined offices, revived electoral procedures, and tried to free their entitlements from lay domination—all this with a mixed success we inevitably exaggerate owing to the relatively abundant production of clerical records. Popes, bishops, and most abbots were lords in their offices, which is why “elections” remained problematic, at best pitting revived Benedictine and Gregorian ideals of pastoral competence against familial and proprietary interest. Still less did it seem contradictory for lord-kings and -princes to function in offices, to exemplify and carry out God’s lordship according to a traditional model of kingship given classic expression by Jonas of Orléans in the ninth century. Steeped in this ideology, Galbert of Bruges wrote of Count Charles the Good of Flanders as “our natural lord and prince . . . supporter of the weak, advocate of God’s churches, defender of the fatherland . . .”; Louis VI appeared much the same to Suger, and these regalian attributes were widely recognized.²⁸

Nevertheless, lord-princes were slow to commit themselves to active programs of social utility. Legislation was a rare commodity in the years 1000–1150; codes like the *Leges Henrici primi* were drawn up on the periphery of official action, while charters of customs were by definition the lordly regulation of lordly privilege. Lord-princeship was a mode of being as much as of action, a way of expressing one’s status, of living and fulfilling expectations; it was, indeed, nobility in the fullest sense. That is why the *gesta* or chronicles written by clerks familiar with royal and princely courts or even songs of deeds are quite as nearly “official” records as charters and diplomas. It is in their celebrations and feasts, their hunting, and their agreements bearing on violence, protection, and peace that lord-princes acted—and these were lordly incidents of self-fulfillment.²⁹ Their justice must be understood in this context: it is the one attribute of their power easily misread as a prerogative of government when it was usually little more than a trait of ascribed and willful character. With success and repute came the appeals that some rulers doubtless learned to attend to in routines of responsive action; but it was the grace of lordship that Henry I or Charles the

²⁸ Jonas of Orléans, *De institutione regia*, esp. c. 4, ed. Jean Reviron, *Les idées politico-religieuses d’un évêque du IXe siècle: Jonas d’Orléans et son “De institutione regia”* . . . (Paris, 1930), pp. 145–47; *Histoire du meurtre de Charles le Bon, comte de Flandre (1127–1128)*, ed. Henri Pirenne (Paris, 1891), pp. 1–3; Suger, *Vie de Louis VI le Gros* 1, 2, pp. 2–14. See also *Le couronnement de Louis*, laisse 13.

²⁹ See what is said of the *rex maior* in *Ruodlieb* 138–222 (ed. C. W. Grocock, *The Ruodlieb* [Warminster, Eng., 1985], pp. 72–76).

Good dispensed in their writs and charters.³⁰ And the lord-ruler's wealth and favor determined the stresses of power amongst dependents and servants who shared in his lordship.

It follows that the power bearing palpably on the masses of people was not so much that of lord-princes (kings and titled lay nobles) as that of the bishops, abbots, priors, castellans, knights, and all others called "lords" (*domini*). Their problems and routines have seldom interested historians disposed to represent kings as governors in the twelfth century. But a history of power would have to attend specially to lords of lesser estate, whose interests may be suggested by two examples.

The first is taken from the experience of a Mediterranean bishop struggling to keep the peace in a turbulent land of knightly violence. When Bishop Udalgar of Elne undertook to improve his city's fortifications toward 1140, there was protest from one Guillem de Salses, who claimed to hold the moats and towers from the bishop. They agreed to defer to a "judge," the archbishop of Narbonne, who decided that Guillem should renounce his claim, and so he did in a solemn charter of 10 May 1140, "King Louis reigning in France." Some years later by a similar procedure another lay lord, Gaucbert de Avalri, gave up his claims to "justices and regalian rights at Elne"; he ordered all his people (*homines*) aged twenty and over to swear fidelity to Bishop Artau III. Only a few weeks after that (February 1156) the same Bishop Artau granted the "good men" of Elne the right to construct further walls surrounding the upper and lower town on condition of making sworn recognition of the bishop's jurisdiction of violence. Much is concealed from us in this microhistory of episcopal muscle. The bishop's court was bypassed in 1140 to achieve disinterested judgment; his pastoral office doubtless passed chiefly unwritten. All we can see is how successive bishops reacted against encroachments by local castellans on St. Eulalia's protectorate of the peace. In a competition between expanding lordships, the result was to remodel a historically public power into an affective solidarity of lord-bishop and townspeople.³¹

My second example is taken from the Norman world of Orderic Vitalis. He tells how toward 1118 Ansold, lord of Maule, prepared for death by admonishing his son in the presence of his wife, monks of the priory, and many knights. His son was to love God above all; fear, honor, and obey the bishop and king as intercessor and protector; and do further as follows:

Treat your men with the loyalty you owe them, and dominate them not as a tyrant but as a mild protector. Keep prudently your domain lands, . . . and avoid dissipating them by gifts to others. Never plunder others; have nothing to do with thieves and pillagers. Keep what is rightfully yours, and never seize others' property by violence or invasion. For such things give rise to anger, then discord. There follow robberies, killing, and arson; injuries, homicides, and innumerable other evils are perpetrated. . . .

³⁰ See the records calendared and edited in *Regesta regum Anglo-Normannorum, 1066–1154*, 2: *Regesta Henrici primi, 1100–1135*, ed. Charles Johnson and H. A. Cronne (Oxford, 1956); and edited in *Actes des comtes de Flandre, 1071–1128*, ed. Fernand Vercauteren (Brussels, 1938).

³¹ Claude Devic and J.-J. Vaissete, *Histoire générale de Languedoc . . .*, 16 vols. (Toulouse, 1872–1904), 5, nos. 544, 606, 609 (records taken from the lost cartulary of Elne).

Revere . . . the monks who serve in this church. . . . Never try to deprive them of property and revenues, nor allow your men to do violence to them. . . .

Here again, although in a different key, the routine of a lordship is passed over in favor of a virtual definition, in this case of the moral imperatives of lay lordship. The stress is on affective fidelity, economic prudence, and disciplined restraint. Much of the text has a curiously negative purport. It reads like an inventory of bad lordship in reverse, as if good lordship consisted in renunciation and deprivation.³² This is hardly proof, but it is evidence of a characteristic circumstance of the eleventh and twelfth centuries: the prevalence of a peculiarly harsh and violent mode of lordship associated with the multiplication of castles, castellans, and knights—that is, of the persons (and their instruments) least capable of maintaining or achieving lordly status without violence or constraint. The habits of violence stigmatized by the peace movement—pillage, seizure, arson, extortion—not only corresponded nearly to Ansold's inventory but also informed a virtual custom of "bad lordship" widespread in the twelfth century. What may seem more surprising is that such habits also tainted the efforts of good lords to render their exercise of power respectably official.³³

The reason for this is simply that lords of every description and dignity—from kings down to knights, and not excluding most ecclesiastical lords—relied on the services of the very sort of men predisposed to violence. They needed stewards, bailiffs, and provosts to exploit their patrimonial justice and other revenues; vicars and sheriffs to command, exploit, and collect; and canons and monks commonly needed lay protectors, advocates, as well as bailiffs. Historians have not unreasonably assumed that these functionaries were deputies or officers in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, that they were appointed on terms of accountability and were subject to dismissal. This assumption must in some degree be correct. The biblical parables represented patrimonial service as accountable. Advocates were originally and often appointed to offices of protection. King Louis VI spoke of his provosts as "officers."³⁴ Sheriffs, viscounts (notably in Normandy), and (lay) vicars were entrusted with public powers of command and demand. Yet it was a case of (Aristotelian) transubstantiation. If the form of such service remained administrative or official, its essence had become proprietary or personal. The men sent out to collect and command were not so much agents as companions in lordship. Louis VI also spoke of "our provosts."³⁵ Of official appointment or election there is very little evidence before the later twelfth century; and of stipulated accountability on the part of bailiffs and provosts, none at all. This is a critical point. It does not mean that the servants Joseph Strayer described as "estate managers"³⁶ did not account;

³² *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. Marjorie Chibnall, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1969–80), 5.19, 3:194–96 (my translation above).

³³ The argument made here and in the next four paragraphs has been documented in "The 'Feudal Revolution,'" pp. 28–39; it is my hope to develop it elsewhere from much additional evidence.

³⁴ *Recueil des actes de Louis VI, roi de France (1108–1137)*, ed. Jean Dufour, 4 vols. (Paris, 1992–94), 1, no. 101.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 195; 2, nos. 321, 381; cf. no. 349 (*ministri mei*).

³⁶ Strayer, *Medieval Origins of the Modern State*, p. 28.

it surely means that accountancy was a matter of lordly or courtly sociability: that it was informal, remedial, and occasional.

For the “officials” I have mentioned were in diverse ways not so much managing as exploiting the patrimonial lordship they essentially shared. The demise of openly official accountancy was the most telling symptom of the triumph of lordship. Historians a century ago could put this strongly while overlooking the procedural point. Achille Luchaire said that “the functionary disappeared to become the vassal. . . . The seigneurial family in which the office was transmitted by heredity replaced the State. The Capetian king had accordingly, in truth, neither officers nor administration.”³⁷

This was an overstatement, to be sure. It was not the fief as such that subverted office. Today we understand that offices could be remunerated by fiefs, that fiefs even in the twelfth century could indeed be fees.³⁸ But it was lordship—not fiefs, vassalage, or the regime thereof that may reasonably be called feudalism—that imposed affective trust and fidelity in place of an impersonal test of competence. Discerning clerics could see that advocates and provosts were appropriating revenues and obligations so as to create lordships. As early as 995 Abbo of Fleury condemned advocates “who think themselves lords.”³⁹ And one didn’t have to be an advocate to be tempted to impose on other lords’ peasants. In 1113 Abbot Adam of Saint-Denis protested the violent exactions and ransoms imposed by the king’s provosts of Château-Landon and Bellegarde, while at Chartres Bishop Ivo not only protested the rapacious exactions of the chapter’s provosts but likened their presumptuous demands to those of lords.⁴⁰

Two points must be underscored. First, the servants of lords at all levels held powers that were substantially seigneurial, that were not other than appointed shares in their masters’ lordship. Second, many of these servants—and above all, those entrusted with banal powers—were stationed socially so as to share the aspirations of knights and castellans to higher estate. The complaints lodged against all such men are found almost everywhere in the later eleventh and twelfth centuries (and indeed, beyond), and they are identical. It is not difficult to see why. The way to power (scil., lordship) in that period lay in service to lords—and preferably to lords of noble estate. Nobility as well as lordship was their ambition. That required them to put distance between themselves and the laboring people and tenants. It was not enough simply to impose new customs; one needed to dominate personally, even arrogantly, to attain the status that attached to powers of justice and command, to those powers that best created

³⁷ Achille Luchaire, *Histoire des institutions monarchiques de la France sous les premiers capétiens (987–1180)*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Paris, 1891), 2:206.

³⁸ From many studies; see, e.g., Pierre Bonnassie, *La Catalogne du milieu du Xe à la fin du XIe siècle: Croissance et mutations d’une société*, 2 vols. (Toulouse, 1975–76), chaps. 2, 3; T. N. Bisson, *Fiscal Accounts of Catalonia under the Early Count-Kings (1151–1213)*, 2 vols. (Berkeley and London, 1984), 1:35–36; 2, no. 1.

³⁹ Abbo of Fleury, *Collectio canonum* 2, ed. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 139 (Paris, 1853), col. 477. On advocacy see generally Félix Senn, *L’institution des avoueries ecclésiastiques en France* (Paris, 1903).

⁴⁰ *Actes de Louis VI*, 1, no. 91; *Cartulaire de Notre-Dame de Chartres*, ed. E. de Lépinos and Lucien Merlet, 3 vols. (Chartres, 1862–65), 1, no. 33.

a presumption of nobility. We are afforded a rare glimpse of this process in the indignant allegations of Catalonian peasants against one of their own named Arnau de Perella. Arnau had been put in charge of the lord-count's domains in two villages near Girona, had manipulated judicial rights arbitrarily, had created a solidarity of sub-bailiffs and other men in fidelity to himself, and had—not least—presumed with conspicuous arrogance to live at the peasants' expense like a lord.⁴¹

That is, like a noble. One could achieve lordship without being nobly born, as Arnau and so many other retainers, servants, and knights of his day tried to do; in German-speaking lands a whole class of low-born attendants (*ministeriales*) rose to the lordly status of nobles through loyal service. But the conviction grew and spread that birth and family were what genuinely qualified a person to dominate. "Great persons should dominate," wrote Abbess Hildegarde, as a human example to justify God's lordship.⁴² Lords possessed of powers to command, judge, and tax were deemed noble ipso facto. It became harder to dominate simply by possessing and rewarding while bad lordship incurred the contempt of an ever more influential church. Lord-kings were best placed to benefit from the assimilation of nobility to lordship. I think it beyond doubt that such thinking was itself a cause of the progress of dynastic monarchy at the expense of lesser lordships in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. People reveled at the birth of Philip Augustus without the least inkling of his capability or destiny. On the other hand, principates like Burgundy, Flanders, and Barcelona drew resilient ideological strength from being regalian lordships—the most prestigious kind—of impeccable dynastic ancestry. Dukes and counts were considered "natural lords," to whom people in need might defer regardless of their specific commitments of dependence.⁴³

* * *

The convergence of lordship and nobility was a powerful determinant of the European Ancien Régime. It dignified lordship by shedding the taint of violence inherited from the feudal revolution. This is the meaning of the charters of franchises, which multiplied after 1100 and defined the intersections between lordly prerogative and customary rights. It justified resistance to assertions of associative powers which, despite spectacular instances in the communal movement, made little headway in urban communities until, in the thirteenth century, doctrines derived from the political Aristotle and Roman law worked their ways into legal practice. Frederick Barbarossa thundered from strength as a lord-conqueror against the "babblings" of Roman ambassadors pretending to the rights of civic virtue.⁴⁴ Even after 1250 lord-bishops struggled to limit the cor-

⁴¹ Arxiu de la Corona d'Aragó (Barcelona), Cancelleria, pergamins Ramon Berenguer IV Ex-trainventari 2501.

⁴² *Scivias* 3.6.14, cited by Van Engen, "Sacred Sanctions for Lordship," in *Cultures of Power*, pp. 206–7. See also Benjamin Arnold, *German Knighthood, 1050–1300* (Oxford, 1985).

⁴³ Orderic Vitalis, *Ecclesiastical History* 9.15 (ed. Chibnall, 5:156).

⁴⁴ *Ottomis et Rahewini gesta Friderici I. imperatoris*, ed. Georg Waitz and Bernhard von Simson, MGH SSrG (Hannover, 1912), 2.29–30, pp. 135–37.

porate autonomy of their townspeople, as at Lodève and Lyons.⁴⁵ Yet even those who claimed to represent urban communities aspired to the nobility of lordship. That is why the second- and third-generation patricians built stone houses, even towers, in their towns; it is also why, contrary to Pirenne, some merchants, especially in Mediterranean towns, behaved unlike protocapitalists, purchasing lordships in the countrysides.⁴⁶ Red-garbed companions of the city's protector-saints, the *capitouls* of Toulouse were virtually elected lords in quest of *noblesse*.⁴⁷ The sensibility of power remained that of noble lordship.

How tenacious this was is incomparably shown by the Peasants' Revolt in England and its circumstances. To begin with, the Black Death brought on a crisis of service, as peasants and servants demanded higher wages. Then the Statute of Laborers showed perfectly how lordly the council and Parliament were, not only limiting wages, but imposing sanctions on those limits and referring to the "malice of servants who were idle and unwilling to serve after the pestilence without taking outrageous wages." In 1377 the Commons petitioned against rebellious villeins who "have refused to allow the officials of lords to distrain them for customs and services. . . ." Egalitarian ideas were on the loose, although we shall doubtless never know how widespread in the English peasantry they were or how influential John Ball's preaching was. John Gower spoke of a "lethargy" that "has put the lords to sleep."⁴⁸

And it is well known that in the crisis of June 1381 the peasants were said to wish to destroy lordship. "They said among themselves," according to the *Anonimale Chronicle*, "that there were more kings than one and that they would . . . [not] suffer any king except King Richard." The same chronicler had already noted how a tax investigator for Essex, although "a lord's steward, . . . was considered a king or great lord in that country because of his state." And he said that Wat Tyler urged the king to do away with all lordship except his own.⁴⁹ All this curiously echoed an ages-old nightmare of great lords, heard in Germany toward 1077, when Bruno recorded the suspicion that Henry IV, wishing "to be the sole lord of everyone, wanted no other lord to survive in his realm."⁵⁰

On the other hand, the peasants, in their terrifying and ill-planned charivari, had assumed the identity of lords themselves. According to Walsingham, they were insolent in the presence of the dowager queen in the Tower, where having

⁴⁵ *Cartulaire de la ville de Lodève*, ed. E. Martin (Montpellier, 1900), nos. 56, 58; *Les Olim, ou registres des arrêts rendus par la cour du roi*, ed. A. Beugnot, 4 vols. (Paris, 1839–48), 1:933, no. 24.

⁴⁶ Henri Pirenne, *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade*, trans. Frank D. Halsey (Princeton, N.J., 1925); Stephen P. Besch, *Barcelona and Its Rulers, 1096–1291* (Cambridge, Eng., 1995), pp. 87, 108–27.

⁴⁷ See the illustration from 1440 in Philippe Wolff, *Histoire de Toulouse*, 2nd ed. (Toulouse, 1961), frontispiece; also pp. 193–204.

⁴⁸ Texts translated by R. A. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 2nd ed. (London, 1983), nos. 5, 8A, 14. To save space I cite texts in this convenient form (with one exception); Dobson gives full references to the sources.

⁴⁹ *The Anonimale Chronicle, 1333 to 1381*, ed. V. H. Galbraith (Manchester, Eng., 1927), pp. 136, 134, 147 (Dobson, nos. 19, 25, pp. 127, 124, 164).

⁵⁰ *Brunos Buch vom Sachsenkrieg*, ed. Hans-Eberhard Lohmann, *Deutsches Mittelalter . . . MGH*, 2 (Leipzig, 1937), c. 60, p. 55. Cf. Orderic Vitalis, *Ecclesiastical History* 11.26 (ed. Chibnall, 5:122): "Soldanus dicitur quasi solus dominus. quia cunctis preest orientis principibus. . . ."

formerly “belonged to the most lowly condition of serf, [they] went in and out like lords. . . .” And in the decisive moment at Smithfield, in the presence of the king, the king’s retainers, and the rebels, Wat Tyler acted the part of a lord, refusing in any way to defer to the lord-king’s regality and bravely directing a pretense of prerogative vengeance when a royal valet dared to charge him.⁵¹

A pretense, I say, for the cause was absolutely hopeless. The mere sight of the peasant leader defying the young lord-king, with the sacking of London and the Savoy fresh in memory, must have restored the reality of lordship. “And when the commons saw that their chieftain, Wat Tyler, was dead in such a manner, they fell to the ground there in the grain-field, like beaten men, imploring the King for mercy for their misdeeds.” The reaction in the months ahead, famously vindictive, proved the depths of a collective fright. But the cause had been hopeless because virtually no one could *conceive* of a nonlordly order of power, not even the peasants who had tried to act out an affective familiarity with the queen mother, not even Tyler himself, who, having (by the best account) proposed a rationally revolutionary regime to the king, could only in the end reject a discredited humility for a desperate pride.⁵²

Never so much as in the later Middle Ages had people believed in the intrinsic superiority of those relatively few human beings who shone forth in prelaties, monarchies, and lordships. It is true that John Ball’s text “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?” had wide and traditional currency; but as Jan Huizinga long ago pointed out, it chiefly heralded a sobering equality in death.⁵³ Life’s reality had hardened into a static vision of hierarchy scarcely shaken by social convulsions precipitated by increased and inequitable taxation and the impatient envy of insufferable privilege. Could one trust the law? Not against one’s lord, for as an English poem of the early fourteenth century put it, “Yiff he goth to the law there is no helpe; for trewly lawe goys as lordship biddeth him.”⁵⁴ Not even the brutality of *remença* lordship in Old Catalonia would have been ended had it not become incidental in larger struggles between the king, the lords, and the patricians themselves.⁵⁵ Everywhere the pageantry of feast days was indistinct from the solemnities of parliaments, cort(e)s, and Estates, which never ceased to be celebrations of lordly majesty. Always the lord-ruler was petitioned, honored, deferred to; he tried to act by grace, not by concession or recognition, still less by persuasion in debate; lordly forms of curial action survived even as political discourse and confrontation transformed the assembly. He was served at court by officials who were none the less his

⁵¹ Dobson, *Peasants’ Revolt*, no. 26, pp. 171–72; no. 25, pp. 163–66 (*Anonimale Chronicle*, pp. 146–48).

⁵² Dobson, no. 25, p. 167; cf. p. 164 (*Anonimale Chronicle*, pp. 149, 147). See also Michel Mollat and Philippe Wolff, *The Popular Revolutions of the Late Middle Ages*, trans. A. L. Lytton-Sells (London, 1973), pp. 278–81.

⁵³ Dobson, no. 70A, pp. 374–75; Jan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, trans. F. Hopman (London, 1924), p. 53.

⁵⁴ Quoted by Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend*, rev. ed. (London, 1977), p. 172, cited by John Lehigh in an undergraduate paper, May 1988.

⁵⁵ See Paul Freedman, *The Origins of Peasant Servitude in Medieval Catalonia* (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), chap. 7, where the standard literature is cited.

commended *fideles*. So in the *Ordenacions* (1344) for the royal court of Pere III of Catalonia-Aragon, we find the four principal officials of the “court’s *regiment*” described as “the most lordly ones” (*pus senyoreyants*).⁵⁶ An exalted world of courtesy was rooted in the polite recognition of lordly estate: “‘Lordynges,’ quod he,” began Chaucer’s *Pardoner*; and writers were often petitioners to “rygth worschypfull . . . lord(s)” in the *Paston Letters*.⁵⁷

* * *

Domination is in fact a general structure of power whose ramifications and consequences can sometimes be found descending to the most recalcitrant fibers of society.

—Michel Foucault⁵⁸

To say that lordship persisted vigorously in later-medieval Europe is to lay stress on its forms of power, prestige, and inheritance; on its conspicuous nobility. It changed as do all such things, but what surely changed most significantly and least visibly was its infrastructure. We glimpse this in a flickering autumnal light in Bernard Guenée’s masterly evocation of justice at Senlis, where judges, *avocats*, and *procureurs* fed on the procedures whose worth and repute they shared with the lords.⁵⁹ A new expertise at law had created a paraseigneurial office in a new complex of customs and rights. May we not suppose similar tendencies in other zones of lordly power: in money and coinage, in procurement and the estate, in the recording of the lord’s grace, even in written culture? Froissart brilliantly sketched Lord-Count Gaston-Fébus of Foix supping (at midnight!) in his great hall, surrounded by noble retainers, welcoming the accomplished, encouraging cultivated talk—and, not least, engaging actively in a fiscal oversight assigned in rotation to notables of his land.⁶⁰

What is new in this ages-old scene is government. Lord-kings and -princes now habitually reckoned with their peoples’ interests (as well as their own) through offices of justice, finance, and war. Office had ceased to be theoretical, had become functional. Moreover, having disengaged itself from the lordly persona, it could be thought of objectively, could be delegated or described. We can see this happening in the *Dialogue of the Exchequer*, the first great administrative manual of medieval Europe, and in the proliferation of functionally

⁵⁶ Ed. Próspero de Bofarull y Mascaró, *Colección de documentos inéditos del Archivo General de la Corona de Aragón*, 5 (Barcelona, 1850), p. 9. On honorific service by nobles, Bernard Guenée, *States and Rulers in Later Medieval Europe*, trans. Juliet Vale (Oxford, 1985), pp. 78–80.

⁵⁷ The *Pardoner’s Prologue*, line 329, ed. F. N. Robinson, *The Poetical Works of Chaucer* (Boston, 1933), p. 179; *The Paston Letters, A.D. 1422–1509*, ed. James Gairdner, 6 vols. (London, 1904), 2, no. 78 (and *passim*). For Spain, see, e.g., Luis Suárez Fernández, *Relaciones entre Portugal y Castilla en la época del Infante Don Enrique, 1393–1460* (Madrid, 1960), no. 11: “e paresceme señor, sy a la vuestra señoría pluguiese, que la vuestra meçet devia enbiar mandas e declarar. . . .”

⁵⁸ “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8/4 (1982), 795.

⁵⁹ Bernard Guenée, *Tribunaux et gens de justice dans le bailliage de Senlis à la fin du moyen âge (vers 1380–vers 1550)* (Paris, 1963).

⁶⁰ Jean de Froissart, *Chroniques* 3, ed. S. Luce et al., 15 vols., Société de l’Histoire de France (Paris, 1869–1975), 12 (1931), pp. 94–100 (trans. Geoffrey Brereton, *Froissart, Chronicles* [Harmondsworth, Eng., 1968], pp. 263–66).

oriented oaths after 1150. Equally important, the lord's will had been tamed; his grace became negotiable; lordship was politicized.

These events were more novel in the later twelfth century, and more disruptive, than historians have generally allowed. They were consolidated because they enabled the greater lords to extend their domination over the masses of smallholders and peasants. Their power was diluted, to be sure, as they lost familiar control of servants in justice and finance who had to be rewarded for competence as well as for loyalty; hence the importance of households to princely rulers of the thirteenth century, their last bastions of affective lordship. No less characteristically, retainers and lesser lords lost the freedom to aggrandize their powers willfully; their way to prosperity lay henceforth in disciplined dependence. In England people began to think of lordship as authority reserved to the great, whose patrimonies, households, and retinues were glittering proofs as well as assets.⁶¹ What survived, from the present point of view, was an ideal of lordship sustained by the conviction that deeds justified power. "By God's bonnet," exclaimed the count of Soissons to Jean de Joinville, hard-pressed at the Battle of Mansourah (1250), "we shall talk of this day yet, you and I, sitting at home with our ladies!"⁶²

Lordship existed finally, and long survived, in its spaces and sociability. From the great hall of Bede's sparrow to that of the castle of Foix, people experienced their lord in state, as they imagined God enthroned. The symbolic ritual of vassalic submission, witnessed or even celebrated, was a public affirmation of power.⁶³ Deference led to spatial politeness, *curialitas*, to go with that tamed horseliness that became a way of life in the later Middle Ages. Lordly power remained social, associative, pervading, and (yes) "ramifying" in courts, offices, armies, tournaments; coexisting uneasily with administration and the *ragione di stato*. For it was imagined as moral space, assured of itself, so to speak, in its affective attributes. "Fy / Upon a lord," said Chaucer's Theseus to himself,

that wol have no mercy,
But been a leon, bothe in word and dede,
To hem that been in repentaunce and drede,
As wel as to a proud despitous man
That wol mayntene that he first bigan.
That lord hath litel of discrecioun,
That in swich cas kan no division,
But weyeth pride and humblesse after oon."⁶⁴

Wisdom (*discrecioun*) was the measure of justice and mercy. It mediated between the official and the personal, the lawful and the willful. But such attributes jostled like ball bearings. Insistent on the elemental subsistence of law, we have

⁶¹ See, e.g., G. L. Harriss, introduction to K. B. McFarlane, *England in the Fifteenth Century: Collected Essays* (London, 1981), p. xxii; Holmes, *The Estates of the Higher Nobility in Fourteenth-Century England*; Bean, *From Lord to Patron*.

⁶² Jean de Joinville, *Histoire de Saint Louis*, c. 49, ed. Natalis de Wailly (Paris, 1874), p. 134.

⁶³ Le Goff, "Symbolic Ritual of Vassalage," pp. 273–74.

⁶⁴ The Knight's Tale 1773–81, ed. Robinson, *Poetical Works of Chaucer*, p. 40. Charles Muscatine reminds me that The Clerk's Tale is quite specially devoted to noble lordship.

not always allowed for the contingent primacy of mercy, near kin of grace in this religious world, in the discharge of justice.⁶⁵ Mercy (*misericordia*) projected the uneasy ambiguity of will. The peoples of medieval Europe served, feared, and (sometimes) loved their lords. Their fidelity, tenements, and fiefs have preoccupied historians as much as their lords, rather to the neglect of their experience of lordship. But fidelity defined lordship as well as vassalage, nor were fiefs without lords. The regimes of fiefs conventionally labeled “feudalisms” or “feudal societies” were preeminently regimes of lordship. That is how most contemporaries viewed them in the twelfth century, when they were new and when they coincided with (and influenced) traditional modes of domestic and agrarian domination. Then and for long thereafter most people must have equated lordship with the exercise and sufferance of power. Most were not rebellious. It is time to hear them better.

⁶⁵ Cf. Hyams, “Warranty” (above, n. 7), p. 483.