

Medieval Estates Satire

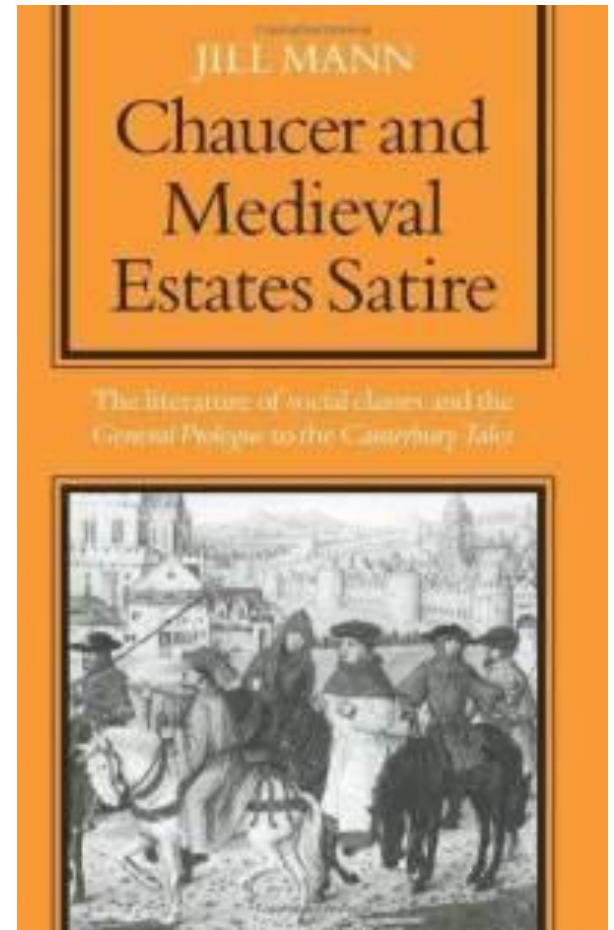
What are the medieval estates?

- Those who pray
- Those who fight
- Those who work
- And.....women



Literature of the estates...

- Examines society based on class, occupation, function, status, attire, etc.
- Usually criticizes the estates for their failings and may offer remedies for those faults
- Established in Latin by the 12th c and popular in England in the 14th c
- Big names in lit crit of the estates: Ruth Mohl and Jill Mann



Probably more theory than practice

- Especially in 14th c, and especially after Black Death, social order was shifting
- Rise of merchant class and intellectual classes
- Slow shift from agricultural to mercantile/trade economy meant that these orders were breaking down in the late 14th c— espousing them was a kind of nostalgia or conservatism

Literature of the estates

- Makes the question of audience very problematic...
- Part of the genre is to get listeners/readers to look inward and reflect on their own shortcomings
- Question is whether the writers are addressing like-minded moralists or those who really need a wake-up call



Authorship

- Many of our assumptions about the genre are taken from three writers (Chaucer, Langland, Gower), two of whom have known biographies, who were social critics but not revolutionaries
- Given that clergy are attacked so strongly, it seems possible that authors were secular.

Differing techniques

- Chaucer—gullible narrator can't distinguish between good and bad behavior, easily impressed by people's surface appearances, irony, humor
- Langland—exaggeration, personification, graphic and comic detail, sense of savage indignation (Swiftian)
- Gower—emerging middle-class sensibility, savage criticism of other estates, treats estates as if they were still social reality

Manuscript Portrayals



Ellesmere Chaucer illustrations



Ellesmere Chaucer
The Squire
c. 1405



Gower, *Vox Clamantis*

We recognize that there are three estates. In his own way, everyone in the world lives under them and serves them. No estate is accused as being at fault, but when estates transgress against virtue, their fault declares against them. ...There are the cleric, the knight, and the peasant, three carrying on three different things....

The poor lesser folk (who should stick to their work) demand to be better fed than the one who has hired them. Moreover, they clothe themselves in fine colors and handsome attire, whereas they were formerly clothed (without pride and without conspiracy) in sackcloth. Ah, World, I will not lie to you; if you cause these evils to come, I complain about your power. Ah, World! I know not what to say, but all the estates that I look at — from the first to the last — are getting worse, every one of them; the poor as well as the lordly are all full of vanity. The poor people are more haughty than their sovereign; everyone is pulling against the others. ...But the world, which fights against all good things, contends still more with itself. As people say nowadays, no one is content with his estate — neither the lords, nor the prelates, nor the common people. On the contrary, each one complains about the wrongs of the other. The common people blame the lords, and the burghers blame their rule, and those who are on top put the blame on the lesser folk. And so everybody is fighting.