

A MEDIEVAL LIFE: CECILIA PENIFADER AND THE WORLD OF ENGLISH PEASANTS BEFORE THE PLAGUE

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History is the story of what resulted from the acts of great men, directly and indirectly, buffeted by fortune. Thus, in the Middle Ages, as in every age, what the common people did in their daily lives never drove history. Nonetheless, their lives can be of interest, both to specialists and generalists. Moreover, studying the common people can sometimes deepen our understanding of how history unfolded. Judith Bennett's *A Medieval Life* is a very imperfect vessel through which to view one prototypical group of common men and women, English peasants of the fourteenth century, but it is still a modestly worthwhile change of pace from reading about the warriors, kings, priests, inventors, and industrialists whose actions created the West.

Bennett is a Boomer historian, whose entire career has consisted of exaggerating the importance of women in medieval history. She would no doubt not be pleased when I point out, as I often do, that the phrase "well-behaved women rarely make history" is entirely accurate, if you remove "well-behaved." Her core method is to use "feminist approaches" to highlight what she calls the "patriarchal equilibrium." This invented jargon simply means that the role of women has always tended to be essentially the same, private-facing rather than public-facing, in all non-ideologically driven societies, and that women's individual income and assets are always lower than men's as a result, if one ignores that all human societies are organized around households consisting of a partnership between men and women. No surprise, Bennett assumes, without discussion, that this differential is bad, though in reality, the natural inward-facing role of women makes it both inevitable and desirable.

Bennett's bogus prejudgments and naked bias therefore mean that you have to be very careful reading this book, because behind every paragraph lies Bennett's ideological aim, which is to "achieve a more feminist future" by rejecting the wisdom of the past and imposing an artificial pattern on society. Still, Bennett appears to be a competent historian in the technical sense. She analyzes difficult primary sources,

always the sign of a historian willing to do the work. Most impressively, she reduced to usability the shorthand Latin records of 549 manorial court sessions held in an English village, Brigstock, between 1287 and 1348, tracing and documenting families and events through the court's actions.

Unfortunately, beyond this primary research, which underpins only part of Bennett's writing, this short book offers zero citations, only offering brief reading lists of several related books after each chapter. The life of the English peasantry has been fairly well documented over the past hundred years, through the efforts of many historians, aided by that English records survive to a greater degree than for any other European country (though apparently most of the Scottish records sank with a ship in 1661). French records, for example, were almost totally destroyed by early leftists during the Revolution. But the result of no checkable references is that we are left wondering how much of what Bennett says, usually in a conclusory fashion with a grating authoritative tone, is actual supported historical fact, and how much is propaganda added to slant the reader toward acceptance of the author's ideology. The reader's grumpiness is exacerbated by Bennett, within the book's two hundred pages, repeating herself constantly, which annoys the reader by making the book feel as if it is directed at stupid people, such as undergraduates taking a remedial class.

In any case, Bennett's method is to center her narrative around one Cecilia Penifader, a resident of Brigstock (a town still existing in the Midlands), who lived from around 1297 until 1344, dying immediately before the Black Death swept through England. This mechanism serves to hold the reader's attention on the narrative, but is actually vaporous, because it soon becomes apparent that almost nothing is known about Penifader, except from occasional very brief technical references to her and her family in the records of the manorial court. Thus, what we get is a plausible intermittent reconstruction of her life based on what we do know about peasants of the time in the English Midlands, along with what is more specifically known about activities of the Brigstock peasantry from the court records. Most of it is plausible, and the narrative holds the reader's attention, but it's not really a history of Penifader herself, as this book is billed, in any meaningful sense.

The author's choice of Penifader is not accidental. It is apparent that more detail is available about other named peasants, but Penifader was that considerable rarity, a never-married female peasant, and focusing on her allows Bennett to use Penifader to beat historical plowshares into ideological swords. The author muses constantly about her special status, when what the reader wants to know is what happened in a more normal peasant's life. But, fortunately, we get an adequate amount of that along the way, so the focus on Penifader is not crippling to the book, though it certainly adds nothing to the reader's understanding or enjoyment, and the subtitle of the book is false advertising.

Brigstock was a village, of about a thousand men and women, part of a larger manor. It was a royal manor, one owned directly by the king, though no king ever visited in more than two hundred years, nor, apparently, did high royal officials ever bother to drop in, even if plenty of lower-level ones did. In 1290, however, the queen of Edward I Longshanks, Eleanor of Castile, his wife of nearly forty years, mother of his sixteen children, and his constant beloved companion, died while the King was on royal progress in the Midlands. It took twelve days to transport her body to Westminster Abbey, and at each place her body rested for the night, the grieving king caused to be erected a large stone cross, which crosses were later collectively known as the Eleanor Crosses. One of the three which survive today is at Geddington, six miles from Brigstock, probably the closest any medieval king ever got to the village.

Bennett does an excellent job of drawing the physical surroundings of the peasants, as well as of describing the agricultural system within which they lived and worked. As with most English agriculture of the time, it was a mixed system, what would today be called regenerative farming. A combination of field rotation (the newer three-field system, involving a winter crop, a spring crop, and a fallow field each year) and grazing animals ensured that the soil was not exhausted, though by modern standards crop yields were low. Each family had its own personal fenced land immediately surrounding the family's house, together with a patchwork of strips of land elsewhere, along with rights to graze a certain number of animals on common land and to take fish from the river, Harper's Brook, which runs through Brigstock. Much of this is brought to life with black-and-white versions of illustrations from the famous Luttrell Psalter, created coterminous with the time

period covered here, and written at the order of the lord of a manor about thirty miles away.

The bedrock of life in this manorial system was custom. Many modern writers fail to understand the power of custom in medieval life, and either wonder how peasants could live without statutory rights protected by aggressive government regulation, or allege that custom was merely a fig leaf covering the arbitrary rule of the powerful. Neither of those is true, and in fact all those in authority in medieval times, from local lords to the king, were severely hemmed in and constrained by custom, which was enforced at the local level (as Bennett covers in detail) by manorial courts and other devices, and at higher levels by the jealous guarding of prerogatives by the nobility (exemplified by Magna Carta). Brigstock was somewhat of an exception to usual practice because it was a royal manor, so there was no local lord to administer justice. Therefore, the connection to royal courts was somewhat more direct. But the system was essentially the same everywhere in England.

The manorial court met every three weeks. It was not, as the judicial system is in modern America, an administrative tool of mandarins who saw themselves as above the people. It was in essence a system of self-government, one layer in a set of mechanisms to effectuate and enforce custom (even if some of those customs were actually ad hoc recent creations, similar to the way the common law once developed). Although overseen by low-ranking royal officials, its purpose was to organize the community itself to administer justice. A key element of this system was the organization of all men twelve or older into tithings, groups of around ten men who were held responsible for the behavior of each other. Tithings brought matters regarding their members to the court, and were required to do so by the larger community. Other matters were presented by various officials, or by anyone who had a grievance, complaint, or need. Women were not organized into tithings; the men in each household, father or husband, or sometimes brother, were responsible for supporting women and for ensuring their good behavior. Bennett is very offended at this, naturally, and assumes the reader is as well.

In connection with those various local officials, one item of interest I learned is the apparent derivation of my own last name. Bennett provides a helpful glossary of technical terms, one of which is "hayward," a

mid-level manorial official under the reeve, who himself was under the bailiff, the chief officer of the manor (our term “sheriff” derives from “shire reeve.”). The hayward was charged with administering all the fields in the manor, from fixing fences to catching crop thieves to rounding up loose sheep and cattle. Our family can trace the family name back to the seventeenth century in England (and other direct ancestors in England back to the twelfth century), but it has always been Haywood or Heywood. Presumably, however, this name evolved from Hayward. Interestingly, most Haywoods in America today are black; I am not sure if anyone has studied how this came about.

Gradations of class were not notably evident. Technically, some peasants in this time period were still serfs, bound to the land. But this did not in practice imply social debility, and many serfs owned more land than peasants not bound to the land. In point of fact, peasants did not actually own land; they technically held leaseholds from the king or from whomever had himself leased the land from the king. In practice, however, land was transferred just as if it were owned, either by sale between peasants (after a fictitious momentary transfer back to the landlord, administered by the manorial court), or by bequest. Understandably, many items of business in the manorial court involved disputes about the duties of peasants under their leases, which typically included paying over some crops, animals, or labor every season.

This was, as it existed in real life, the idealized medieval system of three orders—fighters, clerics, and workers. In practice, there were other people, such as merchants and townsmen, who never fit neatly into this ideal. Bennett carps that women did not fit into this system, but that is obviously false—she just doesn’t like how they fit into the system, where when attached to a man, as unmarried daughter or husband, the man’s role largely determined her role. Women not attached to a man, typically widows but occasionally a spinster such as Penifader, also had a defined role, which was largely independent, with most of the customary rights that a man had. Bennett does not mention it, but both widows and wives of knights or noblemen who went to the Crusades, for example, exercised most of the rights of their husbands, and nearly all of their rights over property, and the same was true, *mutatis mutandis*, for women of lower social status. The limitations on women who were connected to a man were simply the natural result of women adopting

an inward-facing role, not some scheme of patriarchal oppression. Nonetheless, Bennett repeatedly tries to import modern leftist agitprop, wailing about the “matrix of oppression,” in a feeble attempt to discredit the entire system, without ever actually arguing that the system was bad. We are just supposed to assume it was, because feminism.

Brigstock was not isolated. It was part of a web of several villages, each easily within walking distance and each of which held its market on a different day of the week, so that many people constantly visited other villages. Moreover, strangers frequently passed through, from pilgrims to merchants to itinerant workers. There were no immigrants from abroad, of course; the fiction put about today that England “has always been a nation of immigrants” is pure malicious invention. England received almost zero immigrants for a thousand years, until its rotten rulers in the past several decades deliberately imported wave after wave of destructive aliens.

The common idea, fed by modern films, that medieval peasants lived in a cloud of ignorant fear, uncertain and afraid of what lay past the edge of their fields, is far from the truth. Their lives, at least the lives of English peasants, who were rarely subject to the immediate effects of war, were very secure. The only threats they faced were from nature—weather, failed crops, and disease. During Pennifader’s life, from 1315 to 1322, England suffered from famine—in part because England at the time had around five million inhabitants, a figure it would not reach again for four hundred years. Famine tested social ties, and increased minor disputes in the court, such as illicit boundary marker movements and theft of crops, and it killed old people and the young. But this was nothing new, and the system was robust and high-trust enough to withstand such problems without collapsing (something probably not true about modern England, or America).

The security of the peasantry consisted in part of a robust and reliable system of justice. Most arguments, complaints, and crimes were settled in the manorial court. But the king and the nobility administered many other levels of courts, all of which were available at need to the people. Serious crimes, for example, had to be tried by specially-designated agents of the king, who also employed coroners to investigate any death that seemed out of the ordinary. The rule of law, in other words, was ubiquitous and strong.

This justice system was much better in many ways than ours. In no area is this more apparent than in trials by jury, where for the residents of Brigstock the jury of one's peers was exactly that. Today, most jurors are ignorant members of the underclass, with little in common with anyone not in the underclass, easily swayed by politically-motivated prosecutors and often eager to advance their political goals or release their co-ethnics from punishment. No better example exists than the gross injustices, yet to be punished with extreme punishments as they must be, perpetrated by the Regime against the heroes of the January 6th Electoral Justice Protest. All trials were held in a type of kangaroo court with judges openly biased against the defendants, using jurors from the District of Columbia, one hundred percent leftist government clients, many of sub-retarded intelligence, manipulated by tyrannical prosecutors spending hundreds of millions of dollars to unleash political terror. Peasants in Brigstock, transported to the twenty-first century, would be appalled at how our rulers have eroded the rule of law, and would probably deem our system a mechanism instituted by Satan to destroy society.

Punishments for infractions were mostly small fines, and sometimes, Bennett says, imprisonment. Bennett does not expand on the latter; I would have been interested to know how that worked, given that there were no jails and any lengthy imprisonment would have imposed a significant burden on the community. To my knowledge, imprisonment was almost never used in medieval times for minor crimes. This may simply be an error by Bennett, though that seems odd given her granular focus on the data. Nor does she mention corporal punishment, which was generally in medieval times often used, and much easier to administer for mid-level crimes than imprisonment, as well as providing an immediate salutary lesson to the community. Neither is capital punishment mentioned, but it must have also been used by royal officers for significant crimes—although those apparently were extremely rare, house burglary being the only major crime mentioned.

Bennett reasonably competently covers most important aspects of peasant life, among them religious belief. The author's skepticism is on display, but at least she doesn't evidence contempt for her subjects, and manages to convey how religious belief saturated the daily lives of European peasants. She does get some facts wrong. For example,

Christian churches, then and now, are not oriented toward the East because that is the direction of Jerusalem (though a mosque, or rather the *mihrab*, is oriented toward Mecca, which may be her confusion), but primarily because the East is the direction from which Christ will appear at the Second Coming. (Among the Eastern Orthodox, at least, this is also why the heads of those buried are set so when they sit up at the General Resurrection they will face the glory of Christ—except for priests, who are sometimes buried so they will face their flock when they rise.) She also halfheartedly endorses the ludicrous claim, pushed by a handful of modern-day homosexuals to justify their practices, that the Church offered “liturgies for uniting two men.”

Other than this, we also get an explanation both of the importance of kin, the extended family, and of the household, which included both family members and servants, either long-term or short-term (young unmarried people often worked as either seasonal field hands or household servants to other peasant families). Naturally, any household with a man was headed by that man, or one of the men within it. Bennett outlines inheritance customs as well; Brigstock had the “unusual custom” that “the youngest son inherited the lands his father had himself inherited, and the eldest son inherited the lands his father had purchased during his life.” Contrary to the popular perception, primogeniture was far from universal in England. In practice, however, parents took great care, if at all possible, to ensure that all children (and female children if unmarried) received some inheritance, often giving them “animals, furnishings, cash, or other commodities,” as well as dowries for the girls.

We also get a good exposition of the household economy, which overlaps quite a bit with Mary Harrington’s historical analysis in her excellent *Feminism Against Progress*. In short, both men and women participated actively in the household economy, with each performing tasks best suited to his or her sex, creating a flexible interdependence that made it very difficult to be unmarried. For example, ale was extremely important, consumed in large quantities by every family, and women did most of the brewing, both for home consumption and for sale. Women also administered childbirth, which Bennett bizarrely complains meant “even the first moments of life were a gendered experience.” Men did the harder and dangerous tasks, which is why records show their frequent deaths by accident, just as today.

The system Bennett describes sounds almost idyllic. Not to Bennett, of course; she has to lecture the reader “there is no reason for us to wax nostalgic about the ‘community of the [village]’ in Cecilia’s day,” without giving us a single reason not to wax nostalgic, other than we are to assume that patriarchy is bad, even when all the evidence leads inexorably to the opposite conclusion. Thus, Bennett whines that “Cecilia lived outside the peacekeeping mechanisms of the community,” because she was the rare example of a woman not under the governorship of a man. That is, she was not part of the usual system of coverture, where the woman was “covered” by the man, although in practice she relied heavily on her brothers after her father died. Nor was she in a tithing. Bennett’s conclusion is both false and silly; the manorial records themselves show Penifader was very much within the peacekeeping mechanisms, and that any complaint or dispute she had was dealt with no differently than any other. Bennett’s real complaint, weak sauce, is that Penifader wasn’t treated as if she were identical to a man, able to “expand her social relationships” by being a juror or being required to stand as security for someone who had been fined, as men were for relatives or men in their tithing.

The author, in her concluding chapter, does at least say that patriarchy “is *not* women versus men.” The reader imagines that maybe we are turning to a realistic view, but then we learn that this is because, you see, male homosexuals are also harmed by patriarchy, the poor dears. Again and again, she returns to the supposed “pay gap,” and tries to show the “patriarchal equilibrium” dominates social relations. Any non-ideological observer, though, knows perfectly well that the reason some women make less money than men today is women’s choices, and that women otherwise make more than men and have far more rights than men, due to laws that force active discrimination against men at every level and in every aspect of our society. The less said about this chapter, the better. Just skip it.

In sum, I can’t really recommend this book. On the other hand, if you’re trapped on a desert island with only this book and some trashy fiction, it’s probably worth reading between trying to spear fish or collect rainwater. That’s your life tip for today.