Peasant Anger and Violence in the Writings of Orderic Vitalis

Kate McGrath
Central Connecticut State University

Abstract: This paper examines the representation of peasant anger in the writings of Orderic Vitalis. In his texts, Orderic often associates peasant anger with divine vengeance and just violence. Peasants are propelled to act because there are no other agents to help restore order; faced with the unrestrained violence of bad lords, Orderic describes peasants using their anger to ensure justice. Moreover, the low status of peasants ensures an appropriately ignoble death for such lords. Understanding the customary norms around peasant anger reflected in Orderic’s work, then, is an important part of understanding medieval models of honourable violence.

In his twelfth-century Ecclesiastical History, Orderic Vitalis (1075–c. 1142) describes a conflict initiated by the savage, unprovoked attack on his Norman monastery of Saint-Évroul by Robert Bouet, an archer of a local lord named Richer of Laigle. According to Orderic, Robert Bouet already had a long list of crimes to his name, including committing outrages during Pentecost. Then on 18 May 1135, Robert and his accomplices descended ‘like wolves’ upon the monastery’s herds. When the shepherds, peasants, and townspeople realized what was happening, they rushed to defend the monastery and its livestock. In the ensuing confrontation, the ‘angry folk’ captured Robert Bouet and six of his men and then hanged them. News of the
executions soon reached Robert’s patron, Richer, and his men, who then ‘gathered together with too much fury demanding vengeance for their comrades’. They then led an attack on the town of Saint-Évroul and ‘set fire without warning to […] eighty-four houses’. Faced with the pillaging and total destruction of the town, Orderic’s fellow monks attempted to assuage the men’s fury. They approached them with tears and humble speech and offered to pay compensation for Robert’s death. According to Orderic, the monks assumed the role of penitents, begging Richer’s men to see reason and end their attacks. Nevertheless, the men refused to make peace. Instead, they ‘raged like madmen’, and, ‘blinded with fury, they threatened the monks and would not listen to words of reason’. In their anger, they went so far as to try to set fire to the monastery’s church. Orderic clearly condemns their actions: ‘Warfare of this kind, where men took up arms against helpless monks and their tenants and tried to avenge evil oppressors out to commit every kind of crime, rightly bought shame on the would-be avengers.’ Specifically, Orderic claims that Richer and his men became the subject of jokes by other knights who taunted their failure to avenge Robert and his men’s executions. He concludes, ‘[d]eservedly the men, who had fought against unarmed, simple folk and had not spared them out of fear of God, afterwards found valiant and warlike champions when they did not seek them, and often heard from the knights they encountered such mocking and derisive words.’

Stories in which individuals unleash their anger in acts of violence are ubiquitous in eleventh- and twelfth-century Anglo-Norman ecclesiastical narratives. One of the functions of such narratives was to provide their authors with a way to evaluate expressions of anger and to comment on whether the actions, often violent, taken in response were just or unjust. As in the previous example, Orderic Vitalis is able to use the peasants’ anger in order to criticize Richer and his men for their attacks on his monastery. What is noteworthy about the above episode, however, is
the description of the anger of the peasants and townspeople and Orderic’s clear praise of their actions in defence of the monastery and its herds. The ‘simple folk’ responded in self-defence to the attack with anger, which then propelled them to retaliate violently against the attackers, some of whom were punished as thieves were supposed to be — by hanging. In contrast, Orderic describes Richer and his men as displaying the animalistic fury of ‘evil oppressors’. Because of their excessive anger, Orderic implies, the men behaved shamefully, first, by retaliating so violently for the harm done to their evil associates, who certainly merited punishment for what they had done; next, by refusing to put aside their rage in response to the monks’ pleas and offers of compensation; and, finally, by madly attempting the horrific, sacrilegious act of setting fire to the monastery.

In this paper, I will explore the function of peasant anger in the historical writings of Orderic Vitalis by examining the cases in which he applies the label of anger — whether *ira* or *furor* — to peasants. In Orderic’s texts, righteous peasant anger usually falls into one of two categories: peasants acting because of a failure of other parties, usually kings or nobles, to act when required, or peasants acting so as to provide a particularly ignoble death to an excessively angry and violent individual. In his text, peasant anger, then, functions as a last resort in the maintenance of order and justice. It also serves as a political statement about the failure of proper and legitimate sources of authority to constrain violent individuals. The peasants’ anger — and their acts of violence — is necessary because the legitimate avenues of power for redress have failed. In actions involving peasant anger, Orderic suggests that God uses peasants as tools for the enactment of divine vengeance. Orderic’s selection of peasants over other agents — such as other nobles or clergy — to manifest divine anger in these scenarios makes sense given the ambivalent view of peasants in the High Middle Ages. Peasants, through their connection to manual labour, could be portrayed as simplistic and pious people;
their toils prevented them from being idle or materialistic.\textsuperscript{11} At the same time, their low social status could also be used to represent them as ridiculous and brutish.\textsuperscript{12} In his representation of peasant anger, Orderic takes full advantage of both motifs to laud peasant anger against violent oppressors while also condemning these oppressors. By associating their anger with divine justice, Orderic is able to imply that the peasants are acting righteously. At the same time, he is able to suggest that the necessity of their action is blameworthy, because those with authority should have intervened instead. In the end, however, Orderic’s descriptions of peasant anger conclude by shaming the target of their anger through the ignoble nature of their death at the hands of lowly peasants.

In addition, unlike other models for aristocratic anger in his work, Orderic does not emphasize the importance of counsel and mediation in appropriate displays of peasant anger.\textsuperscript{13} This suggests that peasant anger served a different function than aristocratic anger in his texts. In cases of aristocratic and royal anger, Orderic often follows a conventional scenario in which one party harms or shames another, who often hears about it through the petitioning of a dependant. The injured lord then displays his anger and consults with his men about an appropriate response. This often results in violent action by the injured lord. Following, or in some cases pre-empting, this display of anger in violence, Orderic highlights the intercession of advisors and prominent men who calm the injured lord’s anger and help to mediate a peaceful resolution to the conflict. This process of mediation and reconciliation is notably missing from all the accounts of peasant anger in Orderic’s work. Instead, Orderic uses these representations of peasant anger in order to make a larger condemnation of kings’ and nobles’ failure to keep the peace, ensure justice, and protect their dependants. It is more a statement about the failures of appropriate authorities to act than it is a model for how anger should and should not be displayed and negotiated.
Many scholars have demonstrated the usefulness of studying the emotion of anger as a tool to gain insight into medieval understandings of honourable acts of violence. Much of this work has focused on how elites, whether ecclesiastical or lay, express anger in appropriate or inappropriate contexts and use that emotion to express their power. Scholars argue for the political nature of the expression of anger; it is tied to the display of power and exercise of authority. J. E. A. Jolliffe was the first historian to argue that royal anger was an important part of the exercise of kingship under the Angevins. He demonstrated how anger was a tool to express the king’s will, as well as a means to assert the legitimacy and righteousness of royal policies. More recently, Paul Hyams has confirmed the role of anger in Angevin kingship. Gerd Althoff has found additional evidence of such associations in the Holy Roman Empire, while Richard Barton has effectively argued for an earlier beginning of the association between royal and divine anger in eleventh-century northern France. Barton notably links the language of ecclesiastical historians to the contemporary rhetoric of theologians on divine vengeance. He notes that ecclesiastical writers prefer the word *ira* for the anger of kings and God, while *furor* is employed for demons or enemies of good kings. In addition, Barton argues for the power in the representation of anger, especially in Orderic’s work. He concludes that ‘emotions were not passive, nor merely descriptive of internal biological processes, but were instead active agents in the construction of social reality, particularly when threats or potential breaches of existing social harmony appeared or seemed imminent’. Finally, Stephen D. White reminds us that labelling someone as ‘angry’ is an inherently political act, as the term denotes a certain value judgement about the individual and their actions.

Much of this current work on medieval anger has concentrated on aristocratic and royal anger. Peasant anger is much less studied, which is surely a consequence of its rarity in the sources. Studies on it focus mostly on representations of peasant
anger in later periods, especially in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when peasant violence became a real danger for medieval society. The concerns over peasant unrest and revolt perhaps explain why there is more evidence for it, and it might also explain why the representation of it is much more negative and demeaning to peasants.\textsuperscript{20} This does not mean that we should ignore earlier evidence for peasant anger, as its rarity makes its appearance at all significant. The imputation of anger to eleventh- and twelfth-century peasants, then, still requires further analysis.\textsuperscript{21}

Anglo-Norman ecclesiastical histories are a good source for the study of the representation of eleventh- and twelfth-century emotions.\textsuperscript{22} The large number of histories composed in this area during the eleventh and twelfth centuries is the outgrowth of one of the most well-developed historical Latin prose traditions in Europe before the late Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{23} This is perhaps because of the long-standing tradition of historical writing in England, which stretched back to Bede.\textsuperscript{24} As others have suggested, it was also a necessity for monasteries to be concerned about confirming their properties as historical ‘fact’ after the disruptions of the Conquest.\textsuperscript{25}

Orderic Vitalis’ work is a particularly good representation of the strengths of Anglo-Norman histories from this period. Born in 1075 in Shrewsbury to an English mother and a French cleric, Orderic was given as an oblate to the monastery of Saint-Évroul in Normandy as a youth. After making continuations to William of Jumiège’s \textit{Gesta Normannorum Ducum} for a few years, he began around 1114 to compose his own history. His thirteen-book \textit{Historia Ecclesiastica} started as a local history of his own monastery, but he soon expanded it into a history of the Normans and the Church.\textsuperscript{26} Orderic’s history provides insight into the relationships between English, Norman, and Anglo-Norman nobles and into the governance of the regions in which they moved. He also provides modern scholars with critical information and commentary by discussing in his history the work of other contemporary historians,
such as William of Poitiers, John of Worcester, and of course William of Jumièges. Moreover, Orderic’s work provides scholars with a unique opportunity to investigate the context for meaning and function of medieval anger, because emotional discourse is so pervasive in his text. He regularly attributes feelings to individuals, and he often describes the public performance of internal emotions. While Orderic often imputes emotions like shame, fear, grief, etc. to his subjects, Richard Barton has demonstrated the most common emotion represented in Orderic’s text is the experience and display of anger. It makes his work particularly well-suited to a study of peasant anger.

Readers will note my expansive use of the term ‘peasant’. The Latin use varies, from *rusticus* to *pauper* to *villanus*, and often includes a variety of different individuals, such as the poor, who are not strictly agricultural workers. By peasantry, then, Orderic includes a loose social group of lay people who are distinguished from those of aristocratic or ecclesiastical status and also from those who live in towns and/or cities. How peasant anger is represented is interesting because of the scarcity of peasants in his texts. If peasants are mentioned at all, it is usually brief allusions to their suffering at the hands of violent aristocrats. As Gerhard Jaritz argues, in general, peasants only appear in medieval sources when they were economically important, when they violated critical standards, when they were models for other individuals, or when they were entertaining aristocratic audiences. This means, then, that I am more interested in what representations of peasant anger can tell us about larger cultural expectations for the display of emotions than the reality of medieval peasant psychology. This will allow a better understanding of the relationship between acts of violence, which are here limited to acts of physical assault, and the structuring of social groups.

In Orderic’s texts, the most common representation of peasants is as the unfortunate victims of aristocratic anger and violence. Orderic condemns nobles
who vent their anger and frustration unjustly on the physical bodies of the peasantry. For example, in his description of an episode between Hugh the Great (898–956) and Louis d’Outremer (920–954), he implicitly criticizes Hugh the Great for taking his anger out on his peasants instead of the true source of his indignation, Louis d’Outremer. Hugh the Great had aided Louis d’Outremer in his conquest of Normandy during the minority of William Longsword’s son, Richard. In return, Louis had given him the lordship of Normandy. In Orderic’s account, one of Louis’s other lords, Barnard the Dane, incited Louis to anger against Hugh that was unjustified by insinuating that Louis had given Hugh too much authority in Normandy. Since he convinced Louis that Hugh was a potential threat to him, Louis ultimately demanded that Hugh raise the siege of Exmes and appear in his court to answer to the charge of presumption.

Upon hearing this order, Orderic writes that Hugh ‘flew into a rage and, on account of his anger, he was driven to fury’. As Richard Barton argues, Orderic’s choice of language here is noteworthy. He is making a distinction between *ira* and *furor*. While Hugh’s anger might have been reasonable given his unjust and shameful treatment by Louis, nonetheless, he fails to control it properly and descends into blameworthy fury. This way of reading these phrases is then confirmed by the passage in which Orderic describes how Hugh ordered his men to: ‘withdraw with all speed and sack the whole province. Wreck churches, burn houses, destroy ovens and mills, drive away flocks and herds, carry off booty of every kind, and, laden with plunder, turn your backs on these faithless men.’ Orderic writes, in response to this order, Hugh’s men ‘dispersed and spread over the province, falling without warning on the peasants who thought themselves safe under Hugh’s protection, and carrying out the duke’s orders without pity’.

The description of the suffering of peasants at the hands of oppressive and violent lords is not surprising given how common it is in Anglo-Norman histories.
What is noteworthy, however, is that Orderic does not reduce peasants simply to passive victims. Instead, Orderic includes a number of passages that represent justly enraged peasants. In his continuation of William of Jumièges’ work, Orderic relates a series of episodes involving the notorious sons of William Sor. When the Sor brothers captured the Church of St Gervais, which they turned into ‘a pit of thieves and a brothel for prostitutes’, the venerable Ivo became ‘very angry and sad’ at this turn of events, and he turned to other local nobles to help him liberate the church. They were unsuccessful because the Sor brothers were too firmly entrenched. Ivo then had the parishioners set fire to the place, which forced the brothers to flee for their lives. The text concludes that

the just and merciful God did not tolerate the violation of his church and the troublemakers were not spared the punishment they owed him. ... shortly thereafter while involved in robbery and plunder [they] were killed by God’s just judgment without the blessing of a last confession or the viaticum.

The first, Richard, was stopped by an angry peasant ‘whom he had formerly tortured in chains, [who] got in front of him, and hitting him on the head with an axe soon beat the life out of him’. His brother, Robert, died in a similar manner. The text notes, ‘some time later when his brother Robert with his followers was plundering the area he was wounded on his way back by pursuing peasants, and he too died instantly.’ In this instance, the text is explicit that the peasants’ anger and violence were manifestations of divine vengeance and just punishment. Orderic concludes this episode by citing the words of an unnamed poet:

You are wrong to rejoice for in the end
The fruit of wickedness will be your part:
Darkness, flames and lamentation –
God, merciful indulger, as a just avenger
Guards what is his and punishes evil.
The association of peasant anger with divine vengeance is particularly noteworthy because the execution of divine anger was traditionally reserved for the saints, and later for kings. Here, however, it is being exercised by ordinary peasants. The conflation of the peasants’ actions with divine vengeance provides a commentary on the Sor brothers. It is their somewhat ironic demise at the hands of the peasants they were attacking that served to restore order.

The ability of medieval peasants to embody divine anger is related to many of the theological understandings of the role of peasants in Christian cosmology. Many early Church theologians, such as Augustine of Hippo and Ambrose, associated the arduousness of peasant labour with penitential action and thus salvation. Manual labour could confer spiritual benefits and piety, as evidenced by its inclusion in early monastic rules, most notably in the Rule of Saint Benedict. It was thought to not only protect monks from the dangers of the sin of sloth, but also to teach the monk how to submit his individual will to something larger, just as his soul should submit to God. While it is true that Adam’s punishment for original sin was a lifestyle of toil in the fields, George Ovitt, Jr has demonstrated that most early Church theologians thought that it was the difficult nature of the labour that was the punishment, not manual labour itself. Adam would have still farmed in the Garden of Eden, though because he wished to, not because he had to do so. As Ovitt concludes, ‘[i]n deed, the real consequence of Adam’s sin was seen, by Augustine, Ambrose, and others, not as the necessity of toil but as the estrangement from a benign natural world.’ Through manual labour in the fields, peasants were better able to restore this connection to the natural world than those who were consumed by materiality. The spiritual benefits acquired from manual labour, therefore, allowed peasants to be viewed by medieval society as potentially pious agents, especially when empowered by God’s grace.
Orderic, like most positive representations of medieval peasants in didactic literature, tends to also emphasize the simplistic piety and honesty of peasants. For example, Orderic relates an episode from the time of Duke Rollo of Normandy where the duke announced that he would compensate anyone who had been robbed in his jurisdiction. Testing this, Orderic says, a certain peasant woman secretly hid her husband’s irons, and unaware, the ploughman went to Rollo to report the theft. When he returned, Orderic tells us that she was delighted to learn that they now had the irons and the money meant to replace them. ‘Hearing this and not wishing to act disobediently the ploughman returned the money to the duke and confessed what his wife had done.’ In punishment, Rollo ordered the wife to be blinded. Orderic concludes the episode by noting: ‘[w]hen the ploughman was allowed to return home, he found that his wife had been blinded and full of indignation he said: “I do not want you to steal anymore; from now on you shall learn to obey the duke’s laws”.’ For Orderic, the peasant is appropriately angry at his wife’s actions, which served to take advantage of the lord’s protection. The peasant’s honesty propelled him to act rightly, even though it hurt him financially and his wife physically. This, then, is similar to other medieval representations of the pious peasant. As Paul Freedman notes, the best example of this genre is Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, which makes an extended analogy between Christ and the plowman.

Like the episode with the Sor brothers, Orderic Vitalis provides other episodes in which peasants are able to embody divine wrath and righteousness, as in the case with a bad cleric, who had violated his duties to God and the Church. In this case, an enraged peasant acts to end the blameworthy tenure of a treasonous abbot. Robert, a monk from Saint-Denis, purchased the office of abbot of Saint-Pierre-sur-Dives from Robert Curthose. He then proceeded to sack the monastery, selling its goods for profit, and fortifying it with troops. After he had made it a ‘den of thieves,’ he helped Robert Curthose in an assassination plot against King Henry I.
Fortunately for Henry, he was able to foil the plot and capture the monk Robert. Orderic describes Henry as behaving honourably towards Robert; he offers him exile because of his clerical status. Orderic constructs Henry’s speech as: ‘Traitor, fly my realm. Only respect for the holy order whose habit you outwardly wear, vile wretch, prevents me from having you torn limb from limb on the spot.’

Once in France, Robert continues in his ignoble behavior, though now as a provost. Orderic says that justice is finally done when a peasant uses his anger to eliminate Robert. He writes, ‘[w]hen in the course of the same year he was harrying a man called John with accusations, and was violently demanding some customary due from him, the enraged peasant struck him down, and so the wretch perished unshriven as he deserved for his sins.’

His ignoble demise is reinforced by the low reputation of peasants in general. As Paul Freedman demonstrates, ‘[t]he rustic or vilain was a literary type for the base, the ridiculous.’ Orderic Vitalis surely meant for his readers to see how ridiculous it was that Robert should die at the hands of the very peasant he was accosting.

While it is outside the scope of this article, it is worth noting that Orderic’s representation of peasant anger is consistent with its representation in other Anglo-Norman histories, suggesting that it reflected a common understanding of the function of peasant anger in eleventh- and twelfth-century Anglo-Norman society. For example, Henry of Huntingdon, an archdeacon of Huntingdon from 1110 to shortly after 1153, associates divine punishment with the death of an evil noble at the hands of a peasant in his Historia Anglorum, an account commissioned by Bishop Alexander of Lincoln, with Bede’s history as its core. Henry condemns Earl Geoffrey de Mandeville for his opposition to King Stephen and for his assaults on local churches by commenting that his death was the consequence of ‘the splendor of God’.

Henry relates that Geoffrey was killed by the arrow of a peasant archer,
demonstrating ‘how the vengeance of God, of Him who is worthy to be praised, is made known throughout all ages’.59

Likewise, in his History of England, which recounts English history from 1066 to 1198, William of Newburgh (1136–c. 1201), an Augustinian canon, laments the failure of the English king Stephen to protect his subjects from attacks by King David of Scotland, which propels peasants to display their anger in violence for their own protection.60 In his account, William directly condemns David’s actions. He writes that ‘the fury of the Scots having revived, they burst forth and obtained possession of Northumberland, which they wasted with the most savage plundering […] sparing neither sex nor age; nor did they there fix the limit of their ferocity’.61 The peasants, William contends, waited for ‘assistance from the king or the provinces’, but when none arrived, archbishop Thurstan admonished them to ‘fight for their lives, their wives and their children’.62 While they would be outnumbered and outmatched, William says that they ‘were greatly superior to their enemies by confidence in the goodness and justice of their cause’.63 In the end, the people are able to turn the Scots back ‘by the assistance of God’. In many ways, this story fits into the standard scenario of saintly intercession. Faced with unprovoked violence, the religious figure calls on individuals to become agents for divine vengeance. At the same time, however, it also serves both to criticize Stephen and local lords for their failure to protect their people against attack and to legitimize the anger and violence of the common people. Their action was justified as evidenced by God’s participation on their behalf.

It is also noteworthy that representations of righteous peasant anger extend beyond Anglo-Norman borders to other parts of northern France, again hinting at a similar model of acceptable displays of anger. As but one example, Lambert of Ardres, in his History of the Counts of Guines, relates an episode when angry peasants hope for the gruesome demise of their bad lord, the prodigal count Ralph (c. 997–
1036). While travelling through his territory, Ralph disguises himself and goads a group of peasants into expressing their angry thoughts on their lord. Lambert suggests that they respond truthfully, ‘Alas, that man so deadly to his own land! While he strives to equal Hercules, Hector, and Achilles, he rampages among his followers, scourging and torturing and beating them. And although he is not ignorant of how to wage war against the proud, he little knows to spare his wretched subjects.’

It is not simply that Ralph extorts resources from his territory, or even that he wars against his own people. The peasants’ criticism is that Ralph does not make the required distinctions between those deserving of his wrath and those requiring his mercy. In this case, Lambert, like Orderic, deploys the common stereotype that because of their simplicity, peasants are given to speaking frankly and honestly. They represent, then, a kind of common wisdom. As the main victims of bad lordship, peasants are sometimes the best voices to condemn it. Their anger serves then as a warning to all lords about the exercise of their authority. A good example of this is the famous illustrated scenes in John of Worcester’s (d. c. 1140) *Chronicon ex chronicis* of the three nightmares of King Henry I. Each of the three orders, starting with a group of peasants, came and displayed their anger with Henry by threatening him if he did not change his ways. The angry peasants with their spades, pitchforks, and scythes raised defiantly loom large over the sleeping King Henry I. It served, then, as an instructive reminder of the dangers of peasant rebellion to contemporary kings.

Lambert then comments that Ralph left the peasants ‘much angered’. The peasants had continued, stating that they hoped that while away in France ‘he would drown in the depths of the Seine or the Loire before he returns, or that his eyes would be struck out by an ambush or arrow, so that he cannot come back to punish us further. Or may his guts be run through by the spear of some Romulus, so that his noxious blood will be shed and flow into the depths of Hell’. It is
worthwhile to note that Ralph becomes very angry in response to the truth of his excessive tyranny. Not long after this episode, the peasants’ prayers are answered, with Ralph suffering wounds to the stomach, having been shot with an arrow through the eye and thrown into the river Seine, just as the angry peasants had requested of God. For Lambert, it is not enough that Ralph simply dies for his previous injustices. He is repaid with a sufficiently gruesome demise. In order to reinforce this, Lambert writes, ‘thus, it often happens, that unjust and evil men, who earn the wrath of God and the curses of their people as payment for their just deserts, against their wills lose their lives through untimely death, as God’s just judgment demands.’ For Lambert and other medieval chroniclers, there should be some restoration of order, a return to measure from the displays of excessive anger. In this case, God’s anger ensures justice.

These episodes of peasant anger are in some ways similar to descriptions of episodes of aristocratic anger. In the case of Orderic, he likewise praises nobles who respond to tyranny and oppression with anger and violence. He, for example, holds no quarrel against the English nobles who resist King Harold Godwinson’s rule, saving his pejorative terms for Harold: ‘When the English learned of Harold’s presumptuous usurpation, they were moved to anger; some of the most powerful were ready to resist him by force and refused to submit to him in any way.’ According to Orderic, the nobles plotted rebellion and joined forces, either with William of Normandy or Harold Hardrada, against Harold. Orderic’s depiction of the suffering of those unable to resist again suggests that he implicitly acknowledged the legitimacy of the anger that triggered the rebellion. Orderic writes, ‘Others, however, not knowing how to escape his tyranny, which daily grew worse, and considering, too, that they were powerless either to dispose him or to establish another king to profit the kingdom whilst he was in power, bowed their necks to his yoke and so increased his power for evil.’ Orderic’s characterization of the
destruction wrought by Harold’s reign creates the impression that the nobles’ anger was justified and their rebellion was righteous. ‘In a short time,’ he writes, ‘the kingdom which [Harold] had nefariously seized was polluted with crimes too horrible to relate.’

At the same time, however, peasants do provide an interesting and important contrast to the conventional models for the anger of nobles in Orderic’s work. In many – though certainly not all – of these episodes, Orderic depicts nobles becoming justifiably angry in response to attacks on their property, dependants, or honour, allowing their anger to propel them to violence, and finally putting away their anger in response to overtures of peace in order to make a concord that ends the violence. While Orderic represents anger in a variety of different ways, he consistently uses this model to represent appropriate displays of anger by people with power and authority. He suggests that this is the way in which kings should become angry for righteous causes. A good example of this process comes from Orderic’s account of how Fulk Nerra’s longstanding feud with the Normans came to an end through the intercession of counselors on both sides, who calmed the anger of William I so that he was willing to make peace. Fulk and his men had captured the royal garrison held by Turgis of Traci and William of le Ferté. When William I learned of the rebellion, ‘he flew into a rage and began preparations to drive back and subdue the invading enemies and disloyal rebels by force of arms and punish them as they deserved.’ Ultimately, William caught up to Fulk’s forces. Orderic then writes, ‘whilst both forces were preparing for the uncertain verdict of battle, and many were enduring the pangs of fear at the thought of death and the woes that come to sinners after death, there chanced to be present by God’s will a certain cardinal priest of the Roman church and some holy men who were inspired by God to approach the leaders of both sides and plead with them.’ Their efforts were then aided by secular counselors, especially William of Évreux and Roger of Montgomery. Faced with
this double assault by ecclesiastical and lay nobility, the leaders were compelled to put away their anger and reconcile. As Orderic explains, ‘Once the ambassadors of Christ had sown the seeds of peace, the arrogance of the bold evaporated and the pallid fears of the cowardly gradually subsided. Many parleys took place; various terms were proposed; there was a battle of words. But the final victory lay with God.’ Through the petitions and advice of counselors, the anger and fury of William and Fulk Nerra were restrained so that they might make peace with each other, as was God’s will.

What is interesting about the contrast in the representation of peasant and aristocratic anger is twofold. The first is that when peasant anger is referenced in these sources, the peasant is not really present in these descriptions. In addition to usually being anonymous, the peasant leaps into the narrative to display justified anger and then disappears again. The central focus of these histories remains their stated purpose: the deeds of great kings, dukes, and other aristocrats. It is, then, impossible to understand more than simply the image or representation of the angry peasant. In fact, the reduction of peasants to a type and the functional nature of their actions question the very authenticity of their actions.

The second is the lack of negotiation and compromise in the models for righteous peasant anger. It certainly suggests that Orderic Vitalis distinguished between aristocratic and non-aristocratic violence, both in terms of its execution but also in his expectations of its purpose. As Stephen D. White and Richard Barton both argue, displays of noble anger often functioned to facilitate the process of arbitration and peaceful compromise, in a way publicly propelling the other side to make peace and end the feud. For Orderic, anger was a social emotion — it was meant to be shared with an audience for a larger political purpose. It was a key component of demonstrating one’s power and agency. This is apparently not part of the rhetoric for peasant anger. Instead, peasants function more as tools for others’ purposes:
either as agents for the display of another’s anger, whether holy figures or God, or as convenient executors of rabid lords, whose low status taints the death of their targets. In other words, Orderic’s representation of peasant anger does not function in the same fashion as aristocratic anger; it is not a process for displays of power and authority, nor is it a political process for mediation and reconciliation. Rather, Orderic suggests that peasant anger and its resulting violence is only justified because legitimate avenues for redress have fundamentally broken down or been thwarted by nefarious people. It, then, serves as a condemnation of those in power who have ultimately failed in their responsibilities and duties to ensure peace, stability, and order.

Much of the current scholarship on peasant anger has focused on negative representations of it. In his landmark work on late medieval peasants, Paul Freedman noted that the anger of medieval peasants in the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries was usually depicted as either ridiculous or dangerous. He argues that this was probably a reflection of growing tensions in the medieval economy, which were famously witnessed in episodes like the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. Erwin Panofsky similarly noted this in his earlier work, writing: ‘The same lower classes that were cherished in paintings and book illuminations revolted, and their revolts were suppressed with a violence unparalleled before; and the literature of the time resounds with bitter accusations, outcries of fear and despair [...]’.

While peasant anger in the eleventh and twelfth century could still be characterized as ridiculous or dangerous, these examples from Orderic Vitalis suggest that it was more likely to be characterized as righteous. This is what perhaps sets it apart from the later period that Freedman and most scholars discuss. While Freedman notes the presence of exceptional displays of righteous peasant anger, he sees negative representations as more common. The more common presence of righteous peasant anger in the eleventh and twelfth centuries is important, then,
because it suggests that peasants were viewed differently and perhaps with less hostility. In these instances, Orderic Vitalis implicitly legitimized the violence taken by peasants as just and even righteous. He did so to implicitly criticize and condemn selected members of the contemporary aristocracy. In his work, Orderic represents peasants more as a type than as real people. In scenes of peasant anger, then, peasants are propelled to act because there are no other agents to help restore order; faced with the unrestrained violence of bad lords, who reject their responsibility to protect the weak and powerless, Orderic describes peasants using their anger to ensure justice. Moreover, the low status of peasants ensures an appropriately ignoble death for such lords. Understanding the models for peasant anger reflected in Orderic’s work, then, is an important part of understanding medieval expectations of honourable violence.

How Orderic Vitalis represented peasant anger remains very valuable, even if these texts cannot inform our knowledge of peasant anger in practice, because they highlight the ideal structuring of medieval society and Orderic’s views of the role of violence in the maintenance of order. By looking at these accounts, we have a greater appreciation for how Anglo-Norman clerics in general expected lay individuals to express their anger, namely in acts of violence. Orderic Vitalis praised the peasants of his village for rising up to thwart the activity of Richer of Laigle. In the same way, he suggests that it was an act of divine vengeance when the angry peasants murdered the Sor brothers. In all the previous examples, Orderic brings in the peasants because someone has distorted or ignored contemporary models for the appropriate display of anger by misusing violence. In some cases, lords have failed to become adequately angry and protect their dependants. In others, lords have become excessively angry, losing their grasp on proportionality and committing atrocities. In both, the presence of peasant anger alerts the reader that some part of the conventional scenario for appropriate anger is missing. And it is this failure to
abide by common expectations of how to express one’s anger that allows these ecclesiastical historians to posit that the anger experienced and expressed by the peasants was not only appropriate but just and righteous. As a consequence, the study of peasant anger provides an important resource for defining the boundaries around legitimate and illegitimate use of violence by aristocrats in eleventh- and twelfth-century Anglo-Norman society.
Notes

1 This article is based on a paper originally presented at the 2008 Midwest Medieval History Conference. I am extremely grateful for the very insightful feedback that I received there, especially from Daniel Lord Smail and Matthew Philips.


4 ‘Quod Aquilensese ut ipso die audierunt, pro ultione sociorum cum nimio furore conglobati sunt subitoque uticim convolarunt, ac ex improviso burgum Sancti Ebrulfi succederunt, ibique lxiv domus in puncto temporis in cineres conversae sunt. Monachi flentes campanas pulsabant, psalmos et letanias in basilica cantabant, quia monasterii excidium mox instare sui formidabant. Alli, obviam militibus egressi, supplicabant, cum lacrymis sese de punitione reorum excusabat, et humilibus verbis obsecrabant, rectitudinem quoque et satisfactionem pro reautu legitimam offerebant.’ Ibid.

5 ‘At illi ut amentes furebant, excaecati furore in monachos fremebant, et nihil sanae rationis inteudebant, imo quidam eorum religiosos Dei servos de caballis dejectos laedere volebant.’ Ibid.

6 ‘Hujusmodi militia vindicibus latronum merito in opprobrium conversa est, quae contra innocentes monachos et eorum homines armata est, et pessimos plagiarios, qui omne nefas perpetrare sategebant, ulta est.’ Ibid.

7 ‘Merito qui contra nudos et simplices dimicauerunt, nec eis pro diuino metu pepercerunt, postea fortissimos et pugnaces athletas non querentes inuenerunt, a quibus cum opprobrio et derision a militibus sibi obuiis frequenter audierunt […]’ Ibid., p. 463.


11 Examples can be found in sermons, such as Jacques de Vitry’s commentary on manual labour; literature, such as Piers Plowman; and art, such as the labours of the months, as in Queen Mary’s Psalter, the Isabella Breviary and the Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry.

12 There are a few genres that served to ridicule peasants, such as Bauernschwank in Germany or certain French fabliaux, such as Bérangier au lonc cul. Vernacular examples can also be found in certain Chansons, such as Roman de Renart, or poems, such as the works of Neidhart.

13 For additional examples of aristocratic anger in Orderic’s work beyond those discussed see Orderic, I, 355–58; II, 137–38; II, bk. 4, 307–12; V, 83–84; V, 299–300; VI, 15–16; VI, 61–66; VI, 87–90; VI, 213–14.


21 Paul Freedman, ‘Peasant Anger’.

Kate McGrath, ‘Peasant Anger and Violence in the Writings of Orderic Vitalis’


28 Emotional discourse in these sources is much more prevalent than it is in the Icelandic sagas, for example, and therefore provides an important chance to understand the Anglo-Norman texts as both an evaluation of social practice and as an embodiment of an interest in individual emotion. See William Miller, Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 43–76.

29 Barton, ‘Emotions and Power in Orderic Vitalis’, p. 43.


31 It is, nonetheless, important to note that while medieval peasants might have been grouped together into one homogenous group by contemporary writers, the reality was much more varied. Judith Bennett notes that ‘peasant’ itself is not a Middle English term, and historians have perhaps focused too much on the plowman as the model for peasants. Judith Bennett, ‘The Curse of the Plowman’, The Yearbook of Langland Studies, 20 (2007), 215–26. See also Miriam Müller, ‘A Divided Class? Peasants and Peasant Communities in Later Medieval England’, Past and Present, supplement 2 (2007), 115–31 and Judith Bennett, Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).


38 ‘His ita dictis dissoluti predones per prouinciam diffusi sunt improuisos pagenses qui iam sub tutela Hugonis tuti esse putabant circumdederunt, et absque misericordia ducis iussa peregerunt.’ Ibid.
44 ‘Vos male guadetis, quia tandem suscipietis/ Nequitie fructum, tenebras, incedia, luctum,/ Nanque pius dultor iustusque tamen Deus ultor/ Que sua sunt munit, que sunt hostilia punit.’ Ibid., pp. 116–17.
48 Ibid., p. 79. ‘Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground ….’ (Genesis 3.17).
49 Freedman, Images of the Medieval Peasant, p. 229.
50 ‘Quo audito, ne infideliter ageret, reportauit comiti denarius, quos ei dederat eique retulit, quid sua uxor fecisset.’ van Houts, Gesta Normannorum Ducum, II, pp. 288–89.
51 ‘Cum itaque rusticus domum redirect, inueniens uxorem suam merita pena multatam, cum
indignation dixit ei: “Nola amplius furari et amodo disce obseruare precept comitis.”’ Ibid., pp. 288–89.


53 ‘Tunc Rodbertus traditor captus est et transuersus super equum sicut saccus coram rege adductus est.’ Orderic Vitalis, Historia Ecclesiastica, VI, p. 82.

54 ‘Cui rex ait, “Perfide, de terra mea fuge. Nisi pro reuerentia sacri ordinis cuius habitum exterius fers miserrime facerem te continuo membratim discerpere.”’ Ibid., p. 82.

55 ‘Dimissus itaque apostata protinus ad Francos unde erat cum dedecore aufugit et preposituram Argentolii quia monachatus quietem cum paupertate in claustro ferre neglegebat optimit. Cumque in eodem anno quendam anno quendam Ioanannem placitis constringeret, et nescio quas consuetudines ab eo violenter exigeret ira furente a prefato pagense percurrus est et ita exigentibus culpia sine poenitentia miser trucidatus est.’ Orderic Vitalis, Historia Ecclesiastica, p. 82.

56 Freedman, Images of the Medieval Peasant, p. 133.

57 Partner, Serious Entertainments, p. 16.


59 ‘Ecce Dei laudabilis omnibus seculis predicanda eiusdem sceleris eadem uindicta!’ Ibid., pp. 744–45.

60 Partner, Serious Entertainments, p. 55.


62 Stevenson, The Church Historians of England, p. 409. ‘Provinciales vero, sum nullum, vel a rege vel a Transhumbranis provinciis, speraret auxilium, bonae memoriae Thurstini archiepiscopi monitis animati, pro duxerunt, atque unanimiter conglobati contra multitudinem immanitatem terribilem, non longe a flumine Tesa in campo steterunt: numero quidem longe impares [...].’ Howlett, Chronicles, p. 34.

63 Stevenson, The Church Historians of England, p. 410. ‘[…] sed piae justaeque causae fiducia multum praestantes.’ Howlett, Chronicles, p. 34.


65 Herman Braet, ‘“A thing most brutish”: The Image of the Rustic in Old French Literature’, in


70 ‘Audientes autem Angli temarariam inuasionem, quam Heraldus fecerat, irati sunt et potentiorum nonnulli fortier obsistere parati a subiectione eius omnino abstinerunt.’ Orderic Vitalis, II, p. 139.

71 ‘Alii uero nescientes qualiter tirannidem eius quae iam super eos nimis excreuerat euaderent, et e contra considerantes quod nec illum dieiere nec alium regem ipso regnante ad utilitatem regni substituere valerent colla iugo eius summiserunt, uiresque facinori quod inchoauerat auxerunt.’ Ibid.

72 ‘Mox ipse regnum quoq nequither inuaserat horrendis sceleribus maculavit.’ Ibid.


74 ‘Magnanimus rex Guillelmus diris rumoribus de trucidatione suorum auditis iratus est ac ad compescendam hostium inuasionem et proditorum rebellionem armis meritam ultionem facere molitus est.’ Orderic Vitalis, II, p. 307.

75 ‘Gratanter his iunguntur Guillelmus Ebroicensis et Rogerius aliique comites strenuique optimates, qui sicut erant prompti et audaces ad legitimos agones sic nimium perhorrebant per superbiam et inquietiam subire conflictus detestabiles.’ Ibid., p. 311.


77 In his discussion of the presence of peasants in medieval parodies, Paul Freedman makes the point that it is because peasants are already ridiculed by society that the parodies work. Such an analogy perhaps works in this case as well. See Freedman, Images of the Medieval Peasant, pp. 134–36.

78 Stephen D. White, ‘La Colère de Guillaume d’Orange’, in Entre histoire et épopée, les Guillaume d’Orange, Xe-XIIe siècle, ed. by Laurent Macé (Toulouse: Publications de l’Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, 2006), pp. 239–53; Richard Barton, ‘“Zealous Anger”’, pp. 153–70. For more on ecclesiastical writing on violence and peace see also Jehangir Malegam, The Sleep of Behemoth: Disputing Peace and


81 For a discussion of the early period see Jacques Le Goff, Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages, pp. 87–100.

82 There is a general consensus that representations of medieval peasants became predominantly negative during and following the thirteenth century. See Gadi Algazi, ‘Pruning Peasants: Private War and Maintaining the Lord’s Peace in Late Medieval German’, in Medieval Transformations: Texts, Power and Gifts in Context, ed. by Esther Cohen and Mayke de Jong (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 245–74; and Lee Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 118–43.

83 It should be noted that such a portrayal was perhaps only possible in a period before significant peasant revolt. For representations of peasant violence in the later period, see Stephen Greenblatt, ‘Murdering Peasants: Status, Genre, and the Representation of Rebellion’, Representations, 1 (1983), 1–29.

84 Kate Dimitrova, ‘Class, Sex, and the Other: The Representations of Peasants in a Set of Late Medieval Tapestries’, Viator. 38.2 (2007), 85–125 (p. 96).