

Caxton's *Canterbury Tales* at the Court of King's Bench

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In 1491, John Acton sued the prior of the Hospital of St. Mary and two associates for trespass *vi et armis*—by armed force—and accused them of taking “a printed book called *A Book of Canterbury Tales*.”¹ This was undoubtedly a copy of the *Canterbury Tales* printed by William Caxton in one of his two editions of 1477 and then 1483: the only editions of the *Tales* published before the incident in question. Acton's book of Chaucer was not all that was allegedly carried off by the prior and his party. Acton claimed that the men of the Hospital took possession of all of his household goods; among many other things taken were a “book upon the new statutes,” his mattress, and a wheelbarrow. Few identifiable, fifteenth-century readers of Caxton's *Tales* are known to modern scholarship, so this 1491 suit before the King's Bench warrants some scholarly attention. In a certain respect, the text of the lawsuit sets an exceptionally evocative scene for Acton's reading. This book of the *Canterbury Tales* appears amidst a reckoning of everything else that he owned of any value. Acton's household inventory reveals a great deal about him and his circumstances. To that end I transcribe and translate the suit in full. In other respects, the suit divulges little of Acton's life. A complaint of violent trespass like this one—written in rigid, abbreviated legalese—is a pragmatic document, and takes no interest in Acton outside of where he lived and what he had taken from him. Evidence from other documentary sources must fill out a picture of his family, his, career, and place in London society. My introduction gathers that evidence in order to understand Acton's appearance in court as one plot point in the longer story of this apparent reader of Caxton's

¹ “[U]num librum princtatum vocatum a Buk off Caunturbury Talles”; the suit is Kew, The National Archives [hereafter TNA], KB 27/918, m. 61f.

Chaucer. I then consider the suit as an informative episode in the book history of Tudor London, honing our sense of who exactly composed the earliest readership of these first print editions of the *Canterbury Tales*.

We can glean from other sources that John Acton made his living in the courts. He was evidently a member of Barnard's Inn in 1491, when its principal sued him for unpaid dues.² Barnard's was an inn of chancery; as such it would have provided an education in the law more basic than those of the "greater inns" of court like Lincoln's Inn or Inner Temple. (It makes sense, then, that one of Acton's two books should be a book of statute law). John Baker briefly notes Acton's suit of trespass in his comprehensive prosopography of London's late-medieval legal class, *Men of Court 1440 to 1550*; the suit is mentioned in an entry on John Acton I.³ Outside of this suit, Baker confirms little to nothing about this particular John Acton. He shared his relatively common name with many others. Among these John Actons, Baker proposes a few plausible candidates for this litigant. One, John Acton of Aldenham, was the scion of a family of landed Shropshire gentry. He became steward of nearby Kidderminster some time before 1472 and was dead by 1494.⁴ The suit of trespass describes Acton's London quarters in detail, however, and a wealthy Shropshire gentleman

² John Baker, *The Men of Court 1440 to 1550: A Prosopography of the Inns of Court and Chancery and the Courts of Law*, 2 vols., Selden Society Supplementary Series 18 (London, 2012), 200. Acton was one of thirty-one sued for the sum of £8 to cover dues for Trinity and Michaelmas terms. The Barnard's Inn suit is printed in *Men of Court*, I, 57.

³ Baker, *Men of Court*, 200. Baker makes a practice of mentioning evidence of book ownership in his prosopographic entries. As a result, his *Men of Court* is bound to become an indispensable reference work for book historians of the period. To my knowledge, Baker's passing mention of Acton's printed Chaucer is the only prior notice of its existence. Baker includes entries for multiple John Actons, and numbers them by earliest appearance in the documentary record; they do not indicate any direct paternal relationships.

⁴ John Acton of Shropshire is involved in a lawsuit in this office of steward sometime between 1467 and 1472 in TNA, C 1/45/127. J. R. Burton notes that the office of steward passed to William Lord Hastings by 1476 in *A History of Kidderminster* (London, 1890), 36. For his death date, see *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem: Series 2, vol. 3, Henry VII* (London, 1928), item 924.

could be expected to keep a more comfortable London household in his old age. (And £8 for his dues might be more readily found.) Another candidate, John Acton of Middlesex—possibly a relation—appears (alive) in the King’s Book as a man of some substance in 1501 (he was worth at least £40).⁵ Baker presents both men as possibly the book-owning man of the 1491 suit, John Acton I. Baker also records a John Acton II, who entered Inner Temple sometime before 1505, and who Baker presumably rules out as the plaintiff. It suffices, for now, to say the litigant John Acton was likely a man on the rise, whose training at Barnard’s Inn might have served him well in a future career in the law or a life managing his land holdings.

John Acton, plaintiff, kept somewhat modest apartments in the parish of St. Mary Aldermanbury in the northwest of the City of London. From there, it was a short commute to the inns of Holborn in the City’s western suburb.⁶ His suit claims that a year earlier, in April of 1490, prior Richard Cressall of the Hospital of St. Mary came with two fellow canons, John Poleyn and Thomas Thecheware, and deprived him of property valued at £40. Acton uses the formulaic language for a suit of violent trespass: “with force and arms” they “seized and carried away both his goods and chattels” (*vi et armis ceperunt et asportauerunt et bona et catalla*). In suits of violent trespass like this, however, the violence was often invented as a convenient pretext to bring one’s case before the Court of King’s Bench or the Court of Common Pleas—venues of royal justice—instead of the local jurisdiction.⁷ By armed force or not, John Acton was somehow dispossessed of his dwelling in

⁵ Edward Walker’s transcription of Francis Thynne’s copy of the 1501 King’s Book is British Library, Additional MS 71001, ff. 266v–296v; John Acton appears on f. 282v. On the nature of this book and caveats about its evidence, see Baker, *Men of Court*, I, 50-1.

⁶ The suit identifies his lodgings as “in the parish of St. Mary in the ward of Aldermanbury.” Strictly speaking Aldermanbury was not a ward in a formal sense, but a neighborhood within the boundaries of Cripplegate ward.

⁷ For a recent overview, see Lindsey McNellis, “*Vi et armis*: Londoners and Violent Trespass Before the Common Pleas in the Fifteenth Century,” Ph. D. dissertation (West Virginia University, 2019), 15–7.

the course of a dispute over his rightful use of this property. His attorney then sued the Augustinians of the Hospital of St. Mary for trespass *vi et armis* before the King's Bench, and so bypassed local City courts.

For their part, Richard Cressall and company surely believed they had a rightful claim to the property in question. When he assumed his office in 1484, Cressall took charge of a relatively poor and somewhat mismanaged foundation.⁸ He was tasked with rescuing the finances of the Hospital of St. Mary without Bishopsgate, and therefore with collecting on any rents and debts owed to it.⁹ Repossessing the Hospital's rightful property would have seemed to him like good stewardship: a necessary measure done in service of the continued care for the sick and the poor at St. Mary Spital (as it was commonly known). Cressall also cultivated donors to support that mission. One of them was Thomas Acton, gentleman of London. Thomas died in 1489, and his will bestows annual legacies on the Hospital of St. Mary for masses and prayers for the health of this soul.¹⁰ He was not spectacularly wealthy, but his will suggests that he enjoyed personal relationships with the Hospital staff. Richard Cressall and "Master Poleyne" are named to receive payments from Thomas's executor and eldest son, John Acton. Cressall would have known the exact terms of these bequests, because Thomas appoints him an overseer of his estate. This 1489 will, then, clarifies a few things for us about the 1491 suit of trespass. First, this plaintiff and bookowner John Acton was actually Baker's unconsidered John Acton II, and the son of his Thomas Acton III. John had apparently moved from Barnard's Inn on to a more advanced legal education at Inner Temple sometime between 1491

⁸ See Chiz Harward, Nick Holder, Christopher Phillpotts, and Christopher Thomas, *The Medieval Priory and Hospital of St Mary Spital and the Bishopsgate Suburb: Excavations at Spitalfields Market London E1, 1991-2007* (London, 2019), 117-18.

⁹ Rental rolls from Cressall's tenure survive for 1496-97 (TNA, SC 11/795) and 1504-5 (SC 11/971). He also fundraised from benefactors near and far, as witnessed by his grant of spiritual benefits to a donor, Sir John Plummer in 1484 (Dorchester, Dorset History Center, DC/BTB/CD/96).

¹⁰ Thomas Acton's will is TNA, PROB 11/8/316.

and 1505. Like his father, he served as a filazer—a filer of writs—of the Court of Common Pleas for Kent, Surrey, and Sussex. Second, we can assume that this case before the King’s Bench grew out of a dispute over the execution of Thomas Acton’s will. Indeed, the deceased had made provisions in case his executor defaulted on his express bequests to the Hospital:

If the saide John Acton *performe* not the *paimentes* I will that the Aungell in temystreete remain to the prior and couent of saint Mary Spittel without Busshoppysgate duryng the seid xii yere to the *performyng* of the *paymentis* aforsaide.¹¹

This property, “the Angel on Thames Street,” cannot be the disputed one in St Mary Aldermanbury, for Thames Street runs south of the parish. It is possible that John Acton no longer owned the Angel, and therefore Cressall moved to claim whatever property of Acton’s he could. Despite their disagreements over London real estate, however, Acton and the Hospital appear to have patched things up, perhaps out of respect for the family’s long connection to St Mary Spital. Six or seven Actons were buried in the Hospital’s chapel of St. Anne by 1511.¹² John Acton himself willed his body to be buried in the chapel along with his father and mother in 1508, although his cash bequests to the Hospital were minimal.¹³

While the particulars of this property dispute pass unmentioned in Acton’s complaint, the particulars of his losses are thoroughly accounted for in the inventory of his “goods and chattels” claimed as damages. In addition to that small library of two books, Acton says he was deprived of

¹¹ TNA, PROB11/8/316.

¹² Harward *et al.*, *The Medieval Priory and Hospital of St Mary Spital*, p. 122. Christopher Thomas, Barney Sloane, and Christopher Phillpotts, *Excavations at the Priory and Hospital of St Mary Spital, London* (London, 1997), pp. 120, table 18, and 122.

¹³ John Acton’s will is TNA, PROB11/16/135. It is mistakenly described in the digital catalogue as the “will of John Keton” (<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/D973300>; accessed 29 March 2021). Thomas *et al.* cite PROB11/16/6, p. 122, though this is the reference for the will of a merchant, John Taylor. Most notable in John Acton’s will is his claim that his father-in-law owed him £100; his wife would receive nothing from his estate as long as that was unpaid. He makes his sister, Cecily, wife of Roger Mannys, his sole executor. It is not the will of a particularly well connected, or well off, man.

furniture, housewares, much of his wardrobe, and heavy building materials. He seems to have lived alone there; he owned one mattress, one chair, and two plates. His father's will names no grandchildren by John. He did have plans for expansion, however, as he had eight cartloads of stone, twelve rafter-beams, and twelve thousand bricks. (He claims, formulaically, that all of this was "carried off," but even with a stolen wheelbarrow, three Austin friars would have a hard time with twelve thousand bricks.) Any resolution to the dispute is postponed. The prior and his canons request more time to respond to Acton's suit, and that request is granted. This delay must have dismayed Acton, who was apparently squeezed for cash. He missed his payments to Barnard's Inn later that year (Trinity and Michaelmas terms of 1491). The principal of Barnard's Inn does not name John Acton in the few surviving suits for dues from subsequent years; at some point, Acton had managed to catch up.¹⁴

Because Acton specifies that he owned a printed book of the *Canterbury Tales*, it can be surmised that it was a product of William Caxton's press, in one of the two folio editions he had printed by 1490: his 1477 edition (*STC* 5082) or the revised 1483 edition (*STC* 5083). Caxton's 1483 edition adds a "prohemye" marketing his print *Canterbury Tales* to readers as a desirable item.¹⁵ It is promoted, first, as an improvement upon manuscripts of Chaucer's book then in circulation, which Caxton finds generally defective: "wryters have abrygyd it and many thynges left out" (sig. A2). Unlike those careless scribes, Caxton himself says he has "dyligently ouersen and duly examyned to thende that it be made acordyng to his owen [Chaucer's] makynge." Caxton advertises his edition as a more complete text of the *Canterbury Tales* than his customers would commonly find in manuscript,

¹⁴ He does not appear in the suits for dues in 1498 and 1501 printed in Baker, *Men of Court*, 57.

¹⁵ On this prologue, and Caxton's paratextual strategies in general, see Alexandra Gillespie, "Folowynge the trace of mayster Caxton": Some Histories of Fifteenth-Century Printed Books," in William Kuskin, ed., *Caxton's Trace* (Notre Dame, IN, 2006), 167–95. See as well Kuskin, *Symbolic Caxton: Literary Culture and Print Capitalism* (Notre Dame, IN, 2008), 148–53.

as well as the more faithful one to Chaucer's original. The printer's proem also emphasizes Chaucer's versatility of form, genre, and subject matter. He wrote in prose and rhyme; he was both a "grete philosopher" and "laureate poete." His pilgrims tell "tales whych ben of noblesse, wysedom, gentyllse, myrthe and also of very holyness and vertue." On the one hand, all this praise participates in the invention of Chaucer as England's laureate poet canonized by fifteenth-century writers, scribes, and readers.¹⁶ But, on the other, it might also appeal to more pragmatic concerns of shoppers, who could acquire all that philosophy and poetry, prose and verse, mirth and holiness bound together in a single book. Someone of John Acton's means and milieu might have found both of Caxton's arguments persuasive. As one of only two books in his possession, his printed *Canterbury Tales* conferred the prestige of high literary taste in a fashionable format, while its assortment of tales could answer to passing moods or varied social occasions. This was a smart, if safe, choice as a "desert-island book" among Londoners in 1490. And printed books of the *Tales* were about to become more widely available to them. Richard Pynson would soon publish his edition of the *Canterbury Tales* in 1492 (STC 5084), a sign of his confidence in its continued appeal in print.

Acton's "other book upon the new statutes" (*unum alium librum super nova statuta*) is harder to identify with any precision. Acton does not bother to note whether this book is printed or not. In the late fifteenth century, manuscript copies of the *Nova Statuta* were produced in relatively great numbers to meet demand from the inns of court and chancery as well as from aristocratic patrons like Margaret of Anjou.¹⁷ English scribes, by 1490, had competition from Continental printers, who

¹⁶ For Caxton's participation in this project, see Seth Lerer, "At Chaucer's Tomb: Laureation and Paternity in Caxton's Criticism," in *Chaucer and his Readers* (Princeton, NJ, 1993), 147–75, and Kuskin, *Symbolic Caxton*, 117–54.

¹⁷ On manuscripts of the *Nova Statuta* and its "varied readership," see Don C. Skemer, "Treatises, Tracts, and Compilations," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Law and Literature*, ed.

printed year books and statute books to serve the reliable market for English legal texts centered at Holborn.¹⁸ Acton's book could very well have been the *Statuta Nova* printed by John Lettou and William of Machlinia in London (c. 1484-5, *STC* 9264). There is an outside chance that this book was a copy of William de Machlinia's printing of the statutes of Richard III, *Statuta apud westmonasterium edita Anno primo Regis Ricardi tercii* (1485, *STC* 9347). But while these were indeed books of statutes, which were themselves new, they were not books of *nova statuta* as the vast majority of lawyers, clerks, and readers would have understood it: as the name for a specific compilation of statutes with a set arrangement of texts.¹⁹

Very few surviving copies of Caxton's *Canterbury Tales* can otherwise be attached to particular owners in the fifteenth century.²⁰ When they can, their owners outrank Acton in London society to a person. Roger Thorney, a mercer like Caxton, owned the 1483 edition of the *Tales* bound along with Caxton's *Troilus and Criseyde* (1483, *STC* 5094) and a manuscript copy of Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*.²¹ Thorney and his fellow mercers were members of a company whose wealth made them powerful players in City and national politics as well as in London book production. His copy was improved, at some expense, with purple ruling, decorated gilt initials, and painted woodcuts. In one other case, a lavishly decorated copy of Caxton's 1477 edition of the *Tales* can be associated with the

Candace Barrington and Sebastian Sobceki (Cambridge UK, 2019), 66-79: 70-73. On Margaret of Anjou's commission of New Haven, Yale Law Library MS G St11/1, see Rosemarie McGerr, *A Lancastrian Mirror for Princes* (Bloomington, IN, 2011).

¹⁸ See John H. Baker, "The Books of Common Law," in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Volume 3: 1400-1557*, ed. Lotte Hellinga and J. B. Trapp (Cambridge, UK, 1999), 411-32.

¹⁹ It is even more unlikely that it is Caxton's *Statutes of Henry VII* (*STC* 9348), as scholarly consensus dates its publication date publication to 1491. For this date, in Paul Needham's checklist in *The Printer and the Pardoner* (Washington, D.C., 1986), 90.

²⁰ Seymour de Ricci, *A Census of Caxtons* (Oxford, 1909).

²¹ Oxford, St. John's College, b.2.21 (de Ricci 23.1). See A. S. G. Edwards, "Decorated Caxtons," in *Incunables: Studies in Fifteenth-Century Printed Books Presented to Lotte Hellinga*, ed. Martin Davies (London, 1999), 493-506: 500; Gillespie, "Folowynge the trace of mayster Caxton'," 174-5, 182-4.

Haberdashers' Company.²² To these two ownership cases, we may now add Acton. Caxton's other books generally found a market of elite readers drawn from the "merchant, gentry and noble classes," as Margaret Lane Ford's survey of early private ownership of Caxton's has shown.²³ An inscription in the Huntington copy of Caxton's *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* attaches it to Elizabeth Woodville, queen consort of Edward IV, and its frontispiece illustrates its presentation to Margaret of York. Yu-Chiao Wang has shown that this ownership inscription was added by someone else: possibly spuriously, possibly not. But either way, this Caxton book enjoyed royal associations whether real or imagined.²⁴ Among all Acton's possessions, his "printed book of the *Canterbury Tales*" stands out as an exceptional—even aspirational—luxury object. And conversely, John Acton, down on his luck and late on his dues, is rather exceptional among attested owners of Caxton books in the fifteenth century. This paper-pushing filazer of writs now steps on to a new, bottom rung of that social ladder, below Thorney and Elizabeth Woodville. There must have been more readers like him among Caxton's clientele. His suit is proof that some of England's anonymous middle class—minor gentry and lawyers-in-training converging on Holborn to join the legal ranks—wanted to own Caxton's print editions of Chaucer, and sometimes did.

The suit, then, provides further evidence of interest in copies of the *Canterbury Tales* among the legal professions. Men of the inns of court have long been connected to surviving Chaucer manuscripts. Robert Drury, admitted to Lincoln's Inn in 1473, acquired the deluxe Ellesmere

²² Now Merton College, Oxford, Sac. P.2.1 (*STC* 5082, de Ricci 22.2).

²³ Margaret Lane Ford, "Private Ownership of Printed Books," in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Volume 3: 1400-1557*, 205-28: 214-8.

²⁴ This copy of the *Recuyell* prospectively attached to Elizabeth Woodville is HEHLL 62222 (*STC* 15375; de Ricci 3.11). Yu-Chiao Wang gives a detailed account of this inscription's plausibility in "Caxton's Romances and Their Early Tudor Readers," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 67 (June 2004): 173-88; the inscribed flyleaf is reproduced on p. 179. On this copy's unique engraving depicting a presentation scene to Margaret of York, see Joseph A. Dane in the same issue, "Wanting the First Blank: Frontispiece to the Huntington Copy of Caxton's *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*," 315-25.

Chaucer, likely through his connections to the de Vere family.²⁵ The arms of Edmund Knyvett, admitted to Lincoln’s Inn in 1477, appear in the Devonshire Chaucer.²⁶ It then passed to his daughter, Catherine, and her husband John Walpole of Gray’s Inn. Nicholas Gaynesford, another member of Lincoln’s Inn, then wrote his name and motto on ff. iii^v and iv^r of the Devonshire manuscript. Lawyers, being good at paperwork, often documented their Chaucerian investments in wills and booklists. Thomas Stotevyle, yet another member of Lincoln’s Inn, records his ownership of thirty-six books in 1459-60; among these are many lawbooks, a French book of *Alisaunder*, *Piers Plowman*, and “*narrationes cantuarensis*” (tales of Canterbury).²⁷ The 1479 probate inventory of a twenty-two-room manor belonging to Thomas Urswyck, a grandee of Gray’s Inn and London politico, takes stock of “an Englysche boke of Canterbury Talys” in his chapel.²⁸ And finally, John Goodyere of Clement’s Inn left his wife Margaret “the caunterbury tales in parchment” along with seven other books and an extensive collection of devotional images in alabaster and cloth in 1504.²⁹

This suit before the King’s Bench, then, allows us to trace another book of *Canterbury Tales*—Caxton’s printed Chaucer—into the possession of another legal professional, although John

²⁵ See A. S. G. Edwards and Ralph Hanna III, “Rotheley, the De Vere Circle, and the Ellesmere Chaucer,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58 (1995), 11–35.

²⁶ New Haven, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Takamiya MS 24, f. 274^v.

²⁷ Ralph Hanna, “Medieval Lay Libraries: The Examples of Thomas Stotevyle’s Books,” *Journal of the Early Book Society* 22 (2019), 149–176.

²⁸ TNA, E 154/2/2, printed in Francis W. Steer, “A Medieval Household: The Urswyk Inventory,” *Essex Review* 63 (1954): 4–20. The inventory lists a debt of £10 to Avery Cornburgh, another London heavy with Dagenham connections. Cornburgh was a brother-in-law of John Shirley, who inscribes Cornburgh’s name in the Huntington’s MS EL 26.A.13 (f. v), which later passed to Nicholas Gaynesford.

²⁹ Goodyere’s will (TNA, PROB 11/14/176) is printed in full in F. C. Cass, *The Parish of Monken Hadley* (Westminster, 1880), 140–3, but its booklist has received relatively little attention. Remarkably, it witnesses to a substantial collection of books, in various genres, passing to a widow upon her husband’s death. He stipulates that his second wife, Margaret Goodyere, was to receive his best primer, as well as: “Itē a boke of regimen principum in parchment Item a boke of diues et pauper in printe Item a boke of the knyght of the tower in print Item the caunterbury tales in parchment Item an olde boke of the cronycles of yngelond Item an old boke of bonaventure Itē a queyr of phisik of the secretes of women.”

Acton could only dream of a career like Robert Drury's or Thomas Urswyck's. John Acton's relative obscurity makes his inventory of goods distinctly valuable to us, as it situates the *Canterbury Tales* in a humbler household. Acton was a small-time judicial clerk, who was having some trouble managing his father's estate. John Acton has attracted my special attention here as a newly identified participant in early Tudor print culture owing to his loss of a personal copy of Caxton's Chaucer. But in his suit, he attended to that loss of a printed "buk off caunturbury talles" in much the same way he attends to any other material item of value, tallied up to £40. His book gets little more attention there than his gold chain or his shovel: something desirable perhaps as a precious object, to draw attention and signal status; or maybe something to be handled, to do things with.

Transcription

Court of King's Bench, KB 27/918, m. 61f, Hilary Term 1491.

[*Heading:*] Ad huc de Termino sancti Hillarij Tempore Willelmi Huse

[*Margin: Londonium*] ¶ Ricardus Prior Noui hospitalis beate marie extra Bysshoppysgate london' in misericordia pro pluribus defaltis *et cetera* ijdem Ricardus ac Iohannes Poleyn Concanonicus Eiusdem Prioris *et* Thomas Thecheware Concanonicus Eiusdem Prioris attachiati fuerunt ad respondendum Iohanni Acton de placito quare vi et armis clausum et domos ipsius Iohannis Acton apud Londonium fregerunt *et* bona *et* catalla sua ad valenciam quadraginta librarum *ibidem* inuenta ceperunt *et* asportauerunt Et alia enormia *et cetera* Ad graue dampnum *et cetera* Et contra pacem domini Regis nunc *et cetera*. Et Vnde idem Iohannes Acton per Thomam May attornatum suum queritur quod predicti Ricardus Iohannes Poleyn *et* Thomas Vicesimo die aprilis anno regni Regis Henrici septimi post conquestum quinto vi et armis Videlicet gladiis baculis *et cetera* clausum *et* domos ipsius Iohannis Acton apud London' videlicet in parochia beatemare in warda de Auldurman Bery <london'>

[*Margin: Hae parochia et wardo retornantur per curiam sine rasura <et cetera> et defendentes plaxitant*

non culpabiles et cetera.] fregerunt et bona et catalla sua videlicet quinque pannos tinctos vocatos stayned
 clothes quatuor Scanna vocata Furnes duas lanceas quatuor Bankeres sex puluinaria vocata Cochyns
 vnam Cathedram vocatam a Cheyar tria Shelffes quinque Ipoporgia vocata aundyrnes duas obbas de
 corio sex Cistas vocatas Chestes quatuor lecturas vocatas Bedsteddes duos baculos vocatos Gleuys
 vnum capicium panni lanij coloris de Tawney liniatum cum Chamlett vnum Colrake de Ferro vnum
 par de Townges de Ferro duos clauos de Ferro vnam ollam electram vocatam a peweter pott vnam
 penulam de Blaklambe quinque mensas vocatas Bordes duas Bassekettes de Ferro duas Cruettas
 electras vocatas Cruettes off peweter duas Ollas eneas vnam magnam Tryvvett de Ferro duas magnas
 patellas eneas tres Craturas de Ferro vocatas Gredyrnes vnum veru de Ferro vocatum a Spytt vnum
 librum princtatum vocatum a Buk off Caunturbury Talles vnum alium librum super nova Statuta vnum
 Calendorium liniatum cum panno auri vnam Baggam de albo Corio cum nonem libris in eadã Bagga
 contentis vnam Bursam de panno auri cum viginti et sex solidis et octo denarijs in eadem Bursa
 contentis duas vncias auri vnam Catenam de auro vocatum a Chayne off Golde vnum Culcitraum
 vocatum a Materas vnum Torallum vocatum a Bolster duas lodices vocatas Blankettes quinque
 lintheamina duodecim Millia de Breek octo bigatas lapidorum vnum vectum vocatum a whelebarowe
 vnam Scalam vocatum a Ladder viginti aparedia vocata Rafturs vnum par de Pynsons de Ferro
 quatuor Tripodes vocatos Trestulles vnam ligonem vocatam a Mattok vnum Rastrum vocatum a Rake
 vnam vangam vocatam a Spade vnum pareyngyrne vnum mortorium vocatum a Morter vnam
 Pressuram liniatam cum panno linij vocatam a Presse et vnum quarterium Carbonum ad valenciam et
 cetera Ad tunc et ibidem inuenta ceperunt et asportauerunt Et alia enormia ei intulerunt contra pacem
 domini Regis predicti vnde dicit quod deterioratur est et dampnum habet ad valenciam Centum
 marcarum Et inde producit sectam et cetera.

Et *predicā* Ricardus Iohannes Poleyn *et* Thomas *per* Iohannem Smalle *attornatum suum* *veniunt et*
defendunt vim et iniuriam quando et cetera Et petunt inde diem *interloquendi vsque et cetera*. Et eis
conceditur *et cetera* Et *super* hoc dies inde *datur* est *partibus predicāis* coram *domino* Rege vsque a die
pasche in xv dies *vbicumque et cetera* Videlicet *prefatis* Ricardo Iohanni Poleyn *et* Thome ad
interloquendum et cetera Et tunc ad *respondendum et cetera*

Translation

Note: I translate all Latin into modern English; I retain Middle English when it reiterates Latin already given (e.g., “a spade called *a spadē*”). Middle English is modernized when no Latin equivalent is given in the original, with the Middle English supplied in brackets (“tria Shelffes” becomes “three shelves [*shelffes*]”). Punctuation and capitalization have been regularized. Occasional clarification is provided in brackets, where a translation is uncertain or the original text calls for some explanation.

[*Heading:*] Still from Hillary term, in the time of William Huse

[*Margin:* London.] Richard, prior of the New Hospital of St. Mary without Bishopsgate, London, in mercy for many defaults *etc.* This Richard and John Poleyn, fellow canon of this prior, and Thomas Thecheware, fellow canon of this prior, were attached to respond to John Acton, in a plea of why with force and arms they broke into the close and houses of the same John Acton at London, and seized and carried away his goods and chattels, to the value of forty pounds, found at that place, and other wrongs *etc.* to the grave damage *etc.* and against the peace of the present king, *etc.* And, as a result, the same John Acton, through his attorney Thomas May, complains that the said Richard, John Poleyn, and Thomas, on the twentieth day of April in the fifth year of the reign of King Henry the Seventh after the conquest [20 April 1490], by force and arms, that is to say with swords, staffs *etc.*, broke into the close and houses of the said John Acton at London, that is to say in the parish of

St. Mary in the ward of Aldermanbury, London [*Margin*: This parish and ward are restored by the court without erasure, *etc.*, and the defendants plead not guilty, *etc.*]³⁰ and then and there seized and carried away his goods and chattels that they found, namely: five painted cloths called *stayned clothes*; four benches called *furmes*; two lances; four *bankeres* [tapestries or bench-covers]; six cushions called *cochyns*; a chair called *a cheyar*; three *shelffes*; five andirons called *aundryrnes*: two flasks of leather; six chests called *chestes*; four bedposts called *bedsteddes*; two staves called *gleyys*: a woollen hood of tawny color lined with camlet [a silken fabric]; an iron *colrake*; a pair of iron tongs; two iron keys; a pewter pot called *a peweter pott*; a cloak of black lambswool; five tables called *bordes*; two baskets of iron; two pewter cruets called *cruettes off peweter*; two greater copper [or brass] pans; a large iron *tryvvett*; two large copper plates; three iron gridirons called *gredyrnes*; an iron spit called *a spytt*; a printed book called *a Buk off Caunturbury Talles*; another book upon the new statutes; a calendar [account-book] lined with cloth-of-gold; a white leather bag with the nine pounds contained in that bag; a purse of cloth-of-gold with the twenty-six shillings and eight pence contained in that purse; two ounces of gold; a gold chain called *a chayne off golde*; a mattress called *a materas*; a cushion called *a bolster*; two blankets called *blankettes*; five linen sheets; twelve thousand bricks [*breek*]; eight cartloads of stone; a vehicle called *a whelebarowe*; a ladder called *a ladder*; twelve beams called *rafturs*; a pair of iron pincers [*pynsons*]; four tripods called *trestulles*; a pick-axe called *a mattok*; a rake called *a rake*; a spade called *a spade*; a paring iron [*pareyngyrne*]; a mortar called *a mortar*; a clothespress lined with linen cloth called *a presse*; a quarter of coals worth [blank] *etc.*, and inflicted other enormities on him against the peace of our lord the said King, wherefore he says that he is damaged and has loss to the value of a hundred marks, and thereupon he brings suit *etc.*

³⁰ Apparently, a blank space was initially left in the original document, where a later hand adds the name of the parish and ward. At this point the later enters the defendant's plea. I am grateful to Carlin for deciphering this note, and to Sobecki for pointing out the subtle change of scribal hand in the line in question.

And the aforesaid Richard, John Poleyn, and Thomas, by John Small their attorney, come and deny force and injury when *etc.* and therefore they ask for day to imparl *etc.* And it was granted to them *etc.* And thereupon a day is therefore given to the aforesaid parties until the quindene of Easter, before the Lord King wherever he may be *etc.* that is to say, to the aforementioned Richard, John Poleyn and Thomas to imparl *etc.* and then to answer *etc.*