CHAPTER 3

SOVEREIGNTY AND SEWAGE

Paul Strohm

Modernist opinion disparages medieval cities as random, unplanned, clogged, complicit in their own filth-choked self-strangulation, and unheeding in their courtship of contagion and disease. Arch-modernist Le Corbusier offers a low estimate of the medieval capacity for city planning. The harum-scarum cities of the Middle Ages allowed themselves, in his account, to grow up according to the “pack-donkey’s way,” the unplanned meander of the unreflective brute: “The pack-donkey meanders along, meditates a little in his scatter-brained and distracted fashion, he zigzags in order to avoid the larger stones, or to ease the climb, or to gain a little shade; he takes the line of least resistance.”¹ Even the most sympathetic modern commentators have been unable to resist moralization about this “fetid, messy town,”² and to hint that its inhabitants brought its woes—including contagion and plague—upon themselves. I want to suggest, in rebuttal, that medieval cities were not sordid because people wanted them that way; that, in fact, medieval persons thought a great deal about the conditions of town life, and were unceasing in their attempts to achieve clear sightlines, rational planning, cleaner streets, and better sanitation. Commoners no less than kings had a legitimate interest in flushing out their city, and the wish to have access to a good latrine or garderobe emptying into the Thames needs no symbolic explanation. One might say that this was a subject of some urgency, or even of public passion.

Given its affective urgency, the whole discussion of good plumbing and a cleaner city had an inevitable symbolic, as well as practical, side. Medieval sovereigns—so much of whose authority and efficacy relied upon their mastery of the symbolic—could hardly be oblivious of the political advantages of a high profile in relation to this area of concern. This is where

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Lydgate—rarely a city dweller himself—comes in: for in his *Troy Book* he not only reveals himself as a kind of proto-city planner, but also as something of a theorist about the deeper linkages between sovereignty and good plumbing.

**Lydgate’s Purified City**

Before turning to Lydgate, let me say that the subject of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century London’s continuing attempts to cleanse itself has its own modern laureate, Ernest L. Sabine of Muncie, Indiana, who wrote three brilliantly researched essays on medieval London’s unceasing efforts to dig itself out of its own muck: “City Cleaning in Mediaeval London,” “Butchering in Mediaeval London,” and my first, revelatory introduction to his works, “Latrines and Cesspools of Medieval London”—all published in *Speculum* between 1933 and 1937. I encountered “Cesspools” when I was writing on the incident when Hochon of Liverpool became enraged at Hugh Fastolf for exiting the Guildhall, cutting across the common ground of the city, and urinating against the side of St. Lawrence’s church. My surmise was that Hochon could not have become nearly so annoyed had other, publicly accessible privies, latrines (ME *gongs*, Lat. *cloaca*) not existed close at hand, and I learned from Sabine that late medieval London possessed many: some within a few yards of St. Lawrence’s church, and, most notably, a number of commodious latrines built upon London Bridge in order to take advantage of purgative tides. Sabine concludes that “[t]aking the evidence in its entirety, one gets the impression that latrines on London Bridge were conveniences of no inconsiderable size and importance.” London enjoyed a minimum of thirteen documented public latrines, together with a plethora of private arrangements: conduits brought water to numerous interior *garderobes* throughout London and Westminster, underground sewers carried away filth, drainpipes extended to cesspools, to ditches and rivers, and to the Thames itself, and other *garderobes* were built over Walbrook and the Fleet. In addition to problems of human ordure, particular sanitation problems emerged from the butchering and tanning trades. The former were addressed by parliamentary legislation and the king’s Council itself, including the Statute of Westminster (1391–92) designed to move most slaughtering (and thus certain forms of death itself) outside the City. When complaints about inconvenience and rising prices led to the reentry of butchering trades to the City, special arrangements for cartage and disposal of waste mitigated complaint about “infection of the air.” A final arrangement involved extended piers on the riverfront, whence offal was taken at ebb-tide to the center of the river where the influx of waters would carry it away. Ingenuity and technical innovation