

# The Needle and the Tramp: Destructive Potential of Vagabondage in *Gammer Gurton's Needle*❖

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## ABSTRACT

Despite its crude scatological humor, *Gammer Gurton's Needle* presents Mid-Tudor socio-economic concerns by addressing such issues as poverty, unruly vagabondage, and clerical incompetence. However, none of the past critical endeavors have been invested in the relationship between the loss of the needle and the geographical mobility of the Bedlam beggar, Diccon. This article aims to associate the displacement of the lost needle with the wandering idle vagrant, Diccon, whose idleness allows him to spread destructive rumors in the alehouses he frequents. His unruly vagrancy destabilizes the economic foundation of the society and grows into a potential threat to the Commonwealth, just like the lost needle that loses its economic productivity by pricking Hodge's buttocks.

**KEY WORDS:** *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, vagrancy, idleness, commodity, labor

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# 繡花針與流浪漢： 《葛根婆婆的繡花針》裡流浪漢的潛在 破壞力

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## 摘 要

姑且不論其粗糙且淫穢不堪的幽默，《葛根婆婆的繡花針》一劇藉由對貧困、無法掌控的流浪漢問題及神職人員的無能等議題之探討，反映出對都鐸王朝中期社經情狀之關注。但是，在過去並沒有文學批評家探討過繡花針的遺失和離開瘋人院流浪的乞丐狄肯地理上移動性的關連。本論文的主要目的在於探討繡花針的遺失和流浪漢狄肯地理移動性的關連，尤其是狄肯的失業賦閒使他能夠利用他經常閒逛的小酒館來散佈具有破壞性的謠言。正如看似遺失，卻插在葛根婆婆學徒哈吉屁股上的繡花針一樣，狄肯失控的流浪生活，破壞了社會經濟安定的基礎，對都鐸王朝中期的英國構成潛在的威脅。

**關鍵詞：**《葛根婆婆的繡花針》、流浪、失業賦閒、商品、勞力

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The anonymous *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (1550-1553)<sup>1</sup> was written for the entertainment of the students at Christ's College at Cambridge. Though intended to be a schoolboy's farce replete with bawdy, scatological humor, the play also reflects the socio-economic anxieties of college intellectuals during the Mid-Tudor regime: poverty, vagrancy, rumor/libel spreading, and a corrupt clergy. Despite its serious social concerns, past critical studies of the play have been invested thus far, primarily, in the debate between its crude scatology and its aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> Though somewhat counter in their major arguments, both J. W. Robinson and N. Lindsay McFadyen focus on the needle-phallus dichotomy and the word play that is associated with it (Robinson 68; McFadyen 11). Gail Kern Paster reinforces the play's underlying male anxiety about a provincial society in which an older woman dominates (116-7). Only Curtis Perry mentions the close relations between the play's intended audience and the social ailments of 1540s and 1550s England. Despite pointing to the fact that the comic plots of the play were "designed to allude to contemporary reformist invective against an emergent commodity culture" (218), Perry fails to extend his scope to the play's thematic issue: the relationship between the lost needle and the Bedlam beggar, Diccon. Therefore, this essay aims to associate the lost needle with the wandering, idle vagrant, Diccon, and, in doing so, it attempts to examine the destructive potential of Diccon's unruly vagabondage.

For the Tudor authorities, vagrancy was one of the most serious social ills in England. Fearing that runaway apprentices would become idle vagrants, the Tudor authorities established "The Statute of Artificers" (1563), a strict labor law to keep England's apprentices under surveillance and to restrict their freedom of movement. It also stipulated that when apprentices wished to leave their masters, they had to carry testimonial letters otherwise they would be considered runaways and face prosecution as vagabonds (Beier 9; Manning 160). These severe requirements to keep apprentices in place indicate that the Tudor authorities viewed the vagrants' labor as a useful resource to be exploited, and they sought to devise means to control it.

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequent citations from this play are from *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, ed. Charles Whitworth (New York: Norton, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Most recent criticism of the play has focused upon its crude bawdy humor and scatology: see Gail Kern Paster 113-62; N. Lindsay McFadyen 9-13; John. W. Velz 4-21; William B. Toole 252-58; J. W. Robinson 45-77. However, I am most indebted to Curtis Perry's discussion of commodity culture and the Mid-Tudor economic crisis.

What made this labor pool even more difficult to control in Tudor England was the problem of beggary. A. L. Beier points out that in the 1560s, beggars might collect six or seven shillings a week, a princely sum for most wage-laborers and even for some smallholders (112-13), so it is no wonder that many vagrants preferred to beg for their living and that a university play would turn its attention to an idle vagrant beggar's destructive potential to a small provincial community.

The play begins with a Bedlam beggar, Diccon, entering the stage and directing the attention of the audience to vagrancy. Positioning himself as a surrogate chorus and commentator on the plot, Diccon points out that the biggest threat posed by vagrancy is the vagrants' liquidation of geographical boundaries and their potential to be rumormongers:

Many a miles have I walked, divers and sundry ways,  
 And many a good man's house have I been at in my days,  
 Many a gossip's cup in my time have I tested,  
 And many a broath and spit have I both turned and basted.  
 Many a piece of bacon have I had out of their barks,  
 In running over the country with long and weary walks.  
 (1.1.1-6)

Diccon's words reveal that despite people's insults and assaults, vagrants enjoy their idleness because their geographical mobility exempts them from social and judicial bonds which aim to stop them from begging, stealing, or abusing charity. These opening lines also tell us why an idle vagrant beggar, such as Diccon, would be capable of spreading unconfirmed rumors so as to disrupt the tranquility of such a small provincial community. His idleness releases him from judicial surveillance and empowers him to exercise his petty vices among gullible country folk. Though the chaos he produces for the provincial community is marginal, it is not hard to gauge the scope of the potential damage vagrants can inflict on the Commonwealth. The beginning of the play, moreover, closely links the potential threat of the idle beggar to the loss of Gammer Gurton's needle, an imported domestic necessity. Gurton and her household servants are "sighing," "sobbing," and "weeping" for the loss of a "fair long straight needle," which may appear to be trivial and insignificant, but which is, in fact, an important and critical issue in this economically-deprived community (1.1.14, 1.4.5).

How can a missing needle become a public event and give rise to communal sensation? The needle's value as a luxurious domestic necessity explains why its loss can stir up such turbulence. C. G. A. Clay observes that because England was industrially backward in comparison to other countries in Continental Europe at the time, there were many domestic necessities that England could not produce locally and for which the country had to rely on imports. Needles were one of these items (6). The reliance on these luxurious imports was mandatory exactly because England still did not have the skills to supply local demand. Despite this fact, people in the Mid-Tudor regime strongly resisted these imports. In *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England*, Joan Thrisk surveys Sir Thomas Smith's list of luxurious imports in *Discourse of the Common Weal of this Realm of England* (1549) and argues that the Mid-Tudor Englishmen's irrational resistance to such imported items derived from the "frippery" nature of these products because they "were made from materials cheaply bought in their country of origin and cost their producers almost nothing but their labor" (13-14). Curtis Perry also maintains that imported needles symbolized "unproductive idleness" to Mid-Tudor Englishmen. They served as public denunciation of "England's lack of productivity for its dependence upon imported goods" (222). Gammer Gurton's treatment of her needle as a treasured commodity indicates her ignorance of its "mundane domestic practicality," and the loss of her needle implicates the abhorrence of Mid-Tudor Englishmen toward unproductive idleness (Perry 223-24). In the play, Diccon's idleness is immediately associated with the loss of the needle because both of them need to be "in place" so that their utility can be increased. They cannot be of any use when they are idle or lost.

The fun in this farce is to let the idle vagrant, Diccon, search for the lost needle. The audiences of the play were definitely amused to see a vagrant who neglects his social obligations and forgets his role as a producer in society now become the key figure in retrieving the needle back to its proper place and allow it to perform its proper function. Curious about what is happening in Gammer Gurton's house, Diccon inquires about the situation of a workman, Hodge, wondering why the household is in such distress. Hodge, however, does not know what has happened. It is Gammer Gurton's maid, Tib, who delivers the sad news: as Gammer Gurton sat mending Hodge's breeches, she tried to prevent her cat, Gib, from stealing some milk she had courteously set

aside for Hodge's supper, and in the ensuing chaos she had lost her precious needle. The household diligently searches, both indoors and out; yet, the fruitless search leads only to further vexation and distress.

Here, we have to further explore Tib's narratology to realize what kind of impact the loss of Gammer Gurton's needle represents. Tib tells Hodge how upset Gammer Gurton became as the search for her needle fails: "She is undone, she shaith, alas, her joy and life is gone. If she hear not of some comfort, she is, faith, but dead; [s]hall never come within her lips one inch of meat ne bread" (1.3.16-18). For Gammer Gurton, the loss is so tremendous that she feels like the dead and does not have any appetite to eat. When Hodge tries to lighten the agony by suggesting that losing the needle is not as bad as if Gammer had fallen from her stool and broken her rump, Tib then tells Hodge that they shall "feel" that the "grief" Gammer Gurton is experiencing now is much "greater" than breaking her knock-bone (1.3.21-23).

Tib's narration reveals that these country folks dwell in an extreme material impoverishment. Gammer Gurton lost her needle when she tried to prevent her cat, Tib, from stealing the milk, which had been kept and set aside as Hodge's supper. This is surely not a rich supper, but later in the play when Hodge encounters Diccon again in Dame Chat's tavern, the first thing he complains about is that he is left with virtually nothing to eat except for a "poor piece of barley bread" which he sarcastically describes as "dry horse-bread" (2.1.14, 2.1.17). Tib's discourse lets us know why the loss of an imported needle produces such turbulence in Gammer Gurton's household. It also illustrates how the loss of a precious domestic necessity and the loss of its productive power are here paralleled with the idleness and unproductivity of a vagrant beggar and his shameless depletion of communal resources.

Diccon's dawdling idleness and his shameless abuse of Christian hospitality was a developing social ailment in Mid-Tudor England. In the Middle Ages, because of the traditions of holy charity, beggars were sought out as objects of Christian charities. Due to their small numbers, they tended to remain in their village or parish and were treated as members of a local community. This attitude changed drastically in the early sixteenth century. Both Protestant and Catholic authorities agreed that "sturdy" (able-bodied) beggars deprived the genuinely needy poor of relief and were no better than thieves (Beier 4-5; Halpern 73). The Tudor government devised two ways to

stop sturdy beggars from abusing hospitality. Initially, badging was devised to check vagabondage. A beggar wearing a badge indicated that he was authorized to beg (Beier 154). However, this utopian vision of stopping the able-bodied from evading work and preying upon charity never came to pass because fraudulent badges were easily counterfeited; thus, badging failed to eliminate vagabondage and failed to significantly reduce the numbers of unlicensed beggars (Carroll 39).

Thus, a stricter method was employed to restrain vagabondage: sending supposedly-lunatic vagrants to Bedlam and Bridewell Hospitals. These institutions were granted to the City Mayor and citizens of London at the Dissolution of the Monasteries and were conceived as temporary social schemes to solve vagrancy (Robinson 54; Carroll 106-7). Though designed for the aid of the poor during their sickness, these institutions were soon transformed into houses of correction that imprisoned the vagrant poor in order to extract their labor (Carroll 58; 97-8). In part, this was because the Tudors were aware that most inmates in Bedlam and Bridewell feigned madness and used it to abuse social charity. In the Elizabethan popular rogue literature, "A Caveat for Common Cursitors" (1566), Thomas Harman labeled Bedlam beggars as "Abram-men" and noted that they made use of their feigned madness to beg, steal or even threaten victims to demand money (83-84).

Michel Foucault observes in *Madness and Civilization* that starting from the late sixteenth century, England built houses of correction to accommodate the unemployed, the poor, the insane, prisoners, and even vagabonds. These houses of confinement were designed as medical establishments to provide necessary medical attention to the insane, but they gradually turned into a semi-judicial and administrative structure to help exercise the sovereign's absolute power over the inmates. In comparison with the medieval Englishmen's attitude of demonstrating Christian neighborliness to the poor, these institutions represented the Renaissance Englishmen's new attitude toward poverty and the economic crisis in their period. The realignment of the unemployed, the insane, and the vagrant within a confined social space represented the sovereign's desire to control as well as to categorize people for the purpose of extracting their labor so as to increase the economic productivity of the nation state (42-46).

As Foucault's research indicates, the interaction between Diccon and

Hodge reveals the Tudor authorities' hostility towards idle, unproductive beggars. Unaware that it is Diccon who stole the piece of bacon hung on the beams, Hodge complains to Diccon that he has come home too late, and the cat, Gib, not only licked the milk cleanly, but also ate the bacon (2.1.24-30). Hodge and Diccon's conversation clearly shows that the beggar is stealing food from the hardworking, yet poverty-stricken, Hodge. A pan of milk or a piece of bacon is merely part of the side dish of an informal meal for contemporary audiences, but for Hodge and Diccon, it constitutes the centerpiece of their supper. Thus, this dialogue also tells the audiences that vagrancy, the idleness of potential productive power, was a significant issue in Tudor society because idle vagrants are squandering food from a society under economic depression.

The economic as well as productive value of the needle closely links Hodge's financial embarrassment and Diccon's thievery. Upon hearing the sad news from Tib about the loss of Gammer Gurton's needle, Hodge's first response is: "And is not then my breeches sewed up, tomorrow that I should wear?" (1.3.38). Later in the play, when Hodge meets Diccon again in Dame Chat's tavern, he explains to Diccon why tomorrow is such a big day for him and why he badly hopes that the "shameful hole" can be fixed in time: "Kristian Clack, Tom Simson's maid, by the mass, comes hither tomorrow. Cham not able to say between us what may hap; She smiled on me the last Sunday, when ich put off my cap" (1.2.7, 2.1.62-64). Hodge hopes that the shameful hole in his breeches can be mended by the next day because he is going to have a chance to meet his prospective marriage partner. Of course, he wants to present his very best in front of the girl and does not want to expose his economic difficulties. Hodge's anxiety about this possible exposure of his poverty is evident when he whines to Gammer: "Gog's death, how shall my breeches be sewed? Shall I go thus tomorrow?" (1.4.18). We can surmise from Hodge's anxiety that the leather breeches he is wearing now are very possibly his best pair of pants or even his only pair (the plot seems to indicate that he has no alternative breeches). Hence, for Hodge, the needle is not only a means of economic production for Gammer Gurton's needlework, but also a means of production for him to find a suitable marriage partner with whom to reproduce productive manpower. This tiny needle will help cover up Hodge's financial distress and also produce a marriage opportunity for him. The needle, then, is not merely an economic instrument to mend holes, but also a



social tool to knit relationships.

Diccon's depletion of social resources and his habit of abusing charity serve as a sharp irony to the country folks' extreme poverty. There is obviously no lighting in Gammer Gurton's house, as everybody kneels on the ground, groping for the lost needle. When Hodge complains to Gammer Gurton that it is virtually impossible to locate a lost needle in the darkness, she sends her boy servant, Cock, to retrieve a one-inch-piece of white tallow candle hidden in the backyard:

Go hie thee soon  
 And grope behind the old brass pan, which thing when those  
 hast done,  
 There shall thou find an old shoe, wherein if thou look well,  
 Thou shalt find lying an inch of a white tallow candle.  
 Light it and bring it tite away. (1.4.39-42)

Though deliberately made funny for slapstick effect, the way in which Gammer Gurton has hidden the candle exhibits the domestic manager's grinding poverty. Though a one-inch-piece of white tallow candle is inexpensive and so it is not necessary to hide it, we can tell from the manner in which Gammer Gurton hides it—in an old shoe behind an old brass pan—and come to realize its economic value to her. The play is set in the cold winter season, but the audiences clearly know that there is no fire in the house. Cock complains to Gammer Gurton that he cannot find the candle in darkness because there is no fire in the house (1.4.46). They very possibly cannot afford firewood. In addition to the fire and the lighting, the audiences can also appreciate the degree of the family's impoverishment by the size of their house. Unable to distinguish Gib's sparkling eyes shining in the dark from her tail catching fire, Hodge exclaims to Gammer Gurton: "Gog's heart, help and come up! Gib in her tail hath fire, and is like to burn all if she gets a little higher!" (1.4.32-33). Hodge's exclamation not only stresses the darkness of the house but also lets us know that the ceiling of the house is likely very low, signaling that the house itself may be quite small.

The play's recurrent emphasis on the downright poverty of the country folk (the lack of lighting and firewood as well as the smallness of Gammer Gurton's house) further leads its audiences to associate Diccon's idleness with the lost needle. The loss of a luxurious imported needle will not only lead to

the “sighing,” “sobbing,” and “weeping” of Gammer Gurton but also will jeopardize a potential opportunity for marriage and the subsequent possibility of producing heirs for the economically-disadvantaged Hodge. Gammer Gurton’s search for her lost needle ends as Hodge accidentally touches a cat’s turd in the dark (1.4.53). Though not explicitly stated, the anonymous playwright suggests that as long as it does not stay in its right place, the use value of the needle will be as identical to that of a cat’s turd. In *Vagrancy, Homelessness, and English Renaissance Literature*, Linda Woodbridge points out that in order to keep themselves warm in the severe winter in London, wandering vagrants often slept in piled-up dunghills (187). The fact that vagrants are always foul-smelling as well as disease-ridden and cannot provide any productive value to the society closely resonates with the notion of a lost needle. In Act II, scene i, Diccon joyfully tells Hodge how he enjoys his life as a happy beggar: “Now were he a wise man by cunning could define which way my journey lieth or where Diccon will dine. But one good turn I have, be it by night or day, south, east, north or west, I am never out of my way” (2.1.7-10). He is a merry beggar because vagrancy allows him the freedom to relocate himself whenever and wherever he likes. Yet, for the Tudor authorities, social order could only be maintained if everything remained in its proper place.<sup>3</sup> The vagrants’ displacement deeply worried Tudor magistrates because their geographical mobility made it harder for the government to take advantage of this cheap labor pool.

Aside from their idleness and unproductivity, the other destructive potential of vagabondage lies in rumor-spreading. In early modern England, public opinion was spread and circulated via personal exchanges in alehouses which vagrants used as convenient venues for temporary lodging. Because of their idleness and geographical mobility, vagrants could take rumor-spreading as sport and then always wander away to set themselves apart from the consequences. In “Rumour, News and Popular Political Opinion in

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<sup>3</sup> As Keith Wrightson notes in *English Society 1580-1680*, early modern English society was highly stratified and tended to place everyone in his appointed social place. Hierarchical distinctions of status were reflected in styles of speech, dresses, and even the parish church seating plans (17). Wrightson also points out that the Tudor accounts of the “Tree of the Commonwealth” and those of the “body politic” tended to present English society as an organism of functionally interdependent parts and such accounts expected every constituent of the society to stay in his designated place (19). See also Wrightson, “The Politics of the Parish in Early Modern England.” *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*. Ed. Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox and Steve Hindle. London: Palgrave, 1996. 10-46.

Elizabethan and Early Stuart England,” Adam Fox points out that one of the principal motives behind the official surveillance of vagrants and wandering beggars throughout the Tudor regime was to police the potential for vagrants to spread seditious rumors against the stability of the nation (603). Aware of the danger of rumor-spreading and fearful that seditious news would lead to disruption and rebellion, the Tudor authorities imposed severe punishments upon libel- and rumor-mongers (599-600). In the play, Diccon’s name is similar to the Latin word, *dictum*, which means an expression of opinions or judgment.<sup>4</sup> As a university play written for college-level audiences, it would not have been hard for its elite viewers to glean the association between the name Diccon and its Latin implication of spreading rumors. Although the Tudors were aware of this danger, they failed to curb it. Though Hodge twice in the play warns Gammer Gurton of Diccon’s unreliability, he still fails to stop the neighborly dispute between the old country matron and her alewife neighbor (3.2.10-11, 3.2.65).

In the middle of the play, Diccon rumors to Dame Chat that Gammer Gurton’s yellow-legged red rooster has been stolen and that he overheard Gammer Gurton’s maid, Tib, accuse Dame Chat of the theft (2.2.36-42). Seeing Dame Chat become infuriated, Diccon adds spice to the rumor and is proud that he is “the author of the tale” (2.2.60-66, 2.2.50-52). In thanks to Diccon for conveying this news, Dame Chat awards him a cup of the best ale in the tavern (2.2.80). Delighted with his mischief, Diccon next turns his efforts to the disconsolate Gammer Gurton and reports that not twenty hours before, Dame Chat picked up a needle or a pin at the gate, and there can be no doubt that it was the lost one (2.4.15-18). Watching Gammer Gurton’s anger rise, Diccon playfully anticipates a big quarrel between two suspicious neighbors.

In Tudor England, alehouses were considered hotbeds of vagrancy, prostitution, and other criminal behaviors, such as rebellion and sedition. The Tudor authorities invested a lot of energy policing these tipping houses. They licensed them and issued stringent regulations forbidding them to accommodate the vagrant poor (Beier 81-2; Manning 164). Most alewives in Tudor England made their profits by illegal ale-selling, prostitution, and

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<sup>4</sup> See “dictum.” Entry 2. *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2008. Web. 11 Sept. 2008. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dictum>>.

providing the forbidden room and board to traveling vagrants. According to Judith M. Bennett, such women were always labeled as “unruly, disruptive and troublesome” members of the community (122). The fact that Diccon hangs out with Hodge in Dame Chat’s tavern would definitely make the play’s Tudor audiences aware of the potential disruption that his idleness and rumor-spreading could bring to the community.

As expected, Gammer Gurton and Dame Chat launch into fierce combat featuring violent exchanges of verbal and physical abuse. Coming to realize that their rowdy squabble can decide nothing and certainly will not help locate the needle, Gammer Gurton decides to send her boy, Cock, to Hob Filcher’s alehouse to seek the curate, Dr. Rat. Grumbling at being disturbed while drinking and feasting at Hob Filcher’s, Dr. Rat listens as Gammer Gurton, Hodge, and Diccon each tells his or her version of the loss of the needle. Unable to solve the dilemma on the spot, Dr. Rat decides to secretly investigate the case, with the promise that he will bring them news shortly. Diccon then embellishes the rumors he has already told by telling Dr. Rat that he has seen Dame Chat sewing with Gammer Gurton’s needle with his own eyes, and that, moreover, if Dr. Rat will take off his gown and creep through a hole in the wall, he will be able to see it for himself. Dr. Rat thereupon pokes his head through the hole to pry into Dame Chat’s yard. He is seen and beaten by her with a stout oaken door bar and his head is broken. In his rage, he sends for the village bailiff, Master Bailey, to punish the evildoers. Master Bailey listens patiently to all complaints. Dame Chat denies that she broke Dr. Rat’s head in the dark; instead, she reports to Master Bailey that the person she intended to sabotage was actually Hodge, who, according to her source, Diccon, was planning to steal hens or roosters from her yard. Hodge, now a suspect, is sent for and proves to be innocent and unharmed. Gammer Gurton accuses Dame Chat of stealing her needle, but Dame Chat vigorously denies this. After witnessing such chaos, Master Bailey concludes that this chaotic situation has originated from Diccon’s lies, and he calls for Diccon to explain everything. Everybody now turns upon Diccon, who confesses readily and shows no trace of repentance. Diccon says: “Five hundred such have I seen within these seven years. I am sorry for nothing else but that I see not the sport which was between them when they met, as they themselves report” (5.2.221-23). Diccon’s reaction suggests that vagrants feel no obligation to take responsibility for the rumors they spread. They can easily escape

punishment because they are always idle and on the move.

Inevitably, Diccon's haughty attitude angers Dr. Rat, who insists upon the most severe punishment: "Nay, fast in fetters, false varlet, according to thy deeds;" "His punishment, if I may judge, shall be naught else but the gallows" (5.2.236, 5.2.239). However, the more merciful Master Bailey suggests a lighter punishment and holds the opinion that punishment should be fair and should not go to the extremes (5.2.237, 5.2.240). In demanding that Diccon express his apologies, Master Bailey orders him to kneel down and take an oath on Hodge's leather breeches—a rustic way to demonstrate a pledge on the Bible. As Diccon unwillingly seals the oath by giving Hodge a good blow on the buttocks, the screaming ditcher discovers the lost needle that Gammer Gurton left in her mending. Here again the needle in its misplacement can be compared to the wandering vagrant. Though it does no real harm, the needle pierces the skin and makes Hodge scream. Just like the rumors the idle vagrant beggar Diccon spreads, though they will not lead to any significant catastrophe, the painful prick of the needle still manages to disrupt the harmony of this small provincial community.

The debate between Dr. Rat and Master Bailey represents the opposing attitudes held by Renaissance humanists with regard to the problem of idle vagrant beggars: severe punishment vs. leniency. In the play, Gammer Gurton's generous forgiveness and invitation for everybody to come have a drink in the tavern to celebrate the discovery of her needle suggests that everybody in the play, or maybe the anonymous playwright himself, agrees that a more lenient attitude should be adopted towards vagrant beggars. Yet, Renaissance humanists tended to consider idle vagrant beggars as bloodsuckers who preyed on hard-working laborers, and they hoped that the Tudor authorities would force them to work.

In "Beggar Talk," one of his widely read colloquies, Desiderus Erasmus argues that although European cities should support their own beggars, they should not be allowed to "roam at will" in the streets because vagrant beggars would use beggary as a pretext to commit "prodigious crimes" (254). Seeing the destructive potential of vagabondage, Erasmus considers beggary to have its origins in idleness and wishes to disclose "impostor" beggars who feign disability (251). In *A Dialogue between Reginald Pole and Thomas Lupset* (1533-35), Thomas Starkey also displays his strong disapproval of vagrancy and idleness. Starkey complains in this tract that England is swollen with "idle

and unprofitable persons” because most English youths only want to be apprenticed in the easiest craft and a deplorable number of them wish to learn no craft (79, 147). To solve this social problem, Starkey advocated that the Tudor authorities establish compulsory trade schools so as to force every youth to learn a craft. Despite the fact that Juan Luis Vives was highly sympathetic to the vagrant poor, he also considered idle beggars as parasites in comparison with hard-working laborers, and he asserted that the idle poor should be placed to work, based on their age and their health condition. In his treatise, *De Subventionem Pauperum* (1526), he urges the authorities to consult the learned opinions of professional physicians so as to distinguish real madmen from impostors. He further recommends that these “imposter” beggars be given the most severe punishment (14). Although these Renaissance humanists were relatively sympathetic to vagrants displaced by the dissolution of feudalism, they unanimously agreed that idle vagrant beggars not only squandered communal resources but also presented potential threats to the security of the nation state. According to these authorities, the feigned madness of such vagrants should be exposed so as to prevent them from committing serious crimes, and they should be forced to work.

The Tudor authorities also understood that the loss of the vagrants’ productivity was a waste of the nation’s productive power, and the best way to correct this social illness was to curb vagabondage. Yet, the vagrants’ geographical mobility made this an almost impossible task. Richard Halpern rightly notes that, for the Tudors, vagrants “were a kind of volatile fluid, coursing irregularly through the social body and visible everywhere in it, representing the possibility of a total and anarchic breakdown of existing social mechanism of order and control” (74). As a university play staged for elite intellectual viewers, *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* displays the college intellectuals’ divided attitudes toward idleness and vagabondage. Through the search for a lost needle—a symbol of luxurious imports and unproductive idleness, the anonymous playwright demonstrates the serious conflict between severe punishment and humanitarian leniency—a debate that undoubtedly sustains the interest of his intellectual viewers.

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