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"The 'Simple' Life:
Wycliffite
Hermeneutics in
the Late
Fourteenth
Century"

May 2005

“The ‘Simple’ Life: Wycliffite Hermeneutics
in the Late Fourteenth Century”

by

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A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Lehigh University

April 29, 2005

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts.

27 APRIL 2005
Date

Thesis Advisor

Chairperson of the Department

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank Prof. Kate Crassons, without whose knowledge, comments, suggestions, patience and aid this project would not have been possible. I would also like to thank the faculty, staff, and community of graduate students in the English department, whose knowledge, good humor, and friendship made this work what it is. Finally, to my family, thank you for your constant support in every imaginable way – I wouldn't be here without it.

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ABSTRACT

Determining the orthodox Catholic church to be corrupt and therefore unfit for the mission of saving souls, the Lollards (also known as Wycliffites), a movement based on the teachings of the Oxford professor John Wycliffe, created a new movement of preaching and teaching that would, in their eyes, rectify the problems of the church. The key term in their movement was the word “simple.” To the Lollards, being simple of soul, body, dress, and worship would allow for the greatest possible understanding of the Bible and of God’s teachings. They looked for everyday, ordinary people to go out and preach the word of God, refusing to discriminate between the clerical class and commoners. Because of the focus on everyday people, it was imperative to the Wycliffites that the Bible be translated into vernacular English. The standard language of Scripture and of Church dealings was Latin, which no one without church or university training could understand. The church felt that the Bible should remain in Latin, as there was no way to assume that such “simple” people – people whom the church felt to be lacking in intellectual background, understanding, etc. – would be able to interpret Scripture properly, and that the translation of the Bible into the vernacular would therefore result in an enormous rise in heresies. The Wycliffites, despite objections, translated the Bible, and used that as an aid to their preaching. Because of the Lollard movement, the so-called “simple” people were seen as being a worthwhile object of evangelical efforts, and as having a message worth listening to.

“The ‘Simple’ Life: Wycliffite Hermeneutics in the Late Fourteenth Century”

*“So now in þese daies þei shewen hem faynet loueres and
vnrwe children of Crist þat pursuen symple peple for þei wolde
lerne, rede and teche þe lawe of gode in here moder tonge.”¹*

I. LOLLARD OBJECTIONS TO THE CHURCH

Arguing for the right to translate the Bible into English, an anonymous Lollard writer complained of the persecution of the church which, in his eyes, was undeserved.² Believing the clergy of the contemporary church to be corrupt, “untrue children of Christ,” he bewailed the mistreatment of “simple” people, people whose only crime in his eyes was that they wished to spread the word of God in their own language. “Simple” people were, for the author, the opposite of the church; in the hermeneutical model shared by the Lollards, to be simple was to live rightly and to have access to scriptural truths; indeed, the whole of Wycliffite hermeneutics – specifically the model of Biblical interpretation – can be understood as hinging upon that one, “simple” word.

The Lollards had some very basic critiques about the church as a whole. They felt that the church had forgotten the teachings of the Gospels, and instead used its incredible power to amass wealth, status, authority – everything that an organization whose sole purpose was supposed to be the promulgation of the word of God should not be doing. The mission of preaching and teaching had been forgotten, and when it

¹ “Biblical Translation,” 109.

² For the purposes of this paper, “Wycliffite” and “Lollard” will be used synonymously. It should also be noted that the gendered language is the result of the author’s inability to discover any evidence that would lead her to think that this, or indeed most other texts cited here, may have been written by women. Masculine pronouns will therefore be used.

was not entirely lost, it was carried out improperly. For one thing, very few of the people to whom the priests were supposed to preach and minister could understand Latin, and therefore understood little of the meaning of the Scriptures that were being said. Beyond that, when they preached, the sermons, in the Wycliffite view, had become overly ornate or elaborate, so filled with stories, jokes and the like that it was difficult to get to the true message of the Gospels. Preaching, felt the Wycliffites, was a way to teach and spread the word of God, and emphatically not a theatrical performance:

The two elements of the traditional church service to which Lollards attached importance were the readings from the bible and the sermon. Sermons which did not *ground* themselves in the words of scripture, and essentially in the gospels and epistles, were of no value; the friars' habit of using fables, poetry, or chronicles as major ingredients in their homilies, hoping thereby to win popular interest and applause, was to be deplored.³

Time in church that was spent performing the rituals of the Mass or in the entertainment of the masses was time that was wasted. Anything extraneous, that is, anything that was not directly meant to teach an understanding of the Scripture, was to be deplored and abandoned.

Also reviled was the practice of glossing, the side notes that often accompanied manuscripts, and especially common in manuscripts of Bibles or the Gospels. They were not indiscriminately opposed to glossing as a whole, but rather to the practice of glossing in a way that would obscure or interpret the Scriptures. Thus, anything resembling the aforementioned fables of the priests was wrong, as was anything that would impose the interpretations of humans, or otherwise obscure God's word. More

³ Hudson *Reformation*, 196. Emphasis in original.

- than one line of *Pierce the Plowman's Crede* was devoted to anger at the practice:

“Wip glosinge of godspells þei Godes worde turnep...,”⁴ “þei” in this instance referring to the clerical (especially fraternal) practitioners of glossing. Lollards felt that inappropriate glossing “turned” the word of God into something else, into something where the main thrust of the message in question was no longer based upon God’s word, but rather on human interpretation. Such human interpretation was not truly needed, and God’s grace would provide ample understanding to any who was pure, open, and willing to learn the word of God.⁵ When they did gloss, Lollards tended toward simple explanations and many references to the teachings of Augustine and other church patriarchs.⁶

Along with the glossing and the church’s overall corruption, Wycliffite writers complained of the unchristian treatment to which the church subjected those that were perceived to be its enemies. William Thorpe, called by Archbishop Arundel in 1407 to answer to charges of heresy, preaching without a license, etc., gives a bitter indictment of the church’s treatment of the so-called heretics:

But, þoru3 her olde and her newe vnschamefast synnes, þese tirauntis and enemyes of truþe schullen be so blyndid and obstinate in yuel þat þei schullen gessen hemsilf to don plesyng sacrifice to þe lord God in her malicious and wrongful pursuyng and destroyng of innocent men and wymmens bodies, which men and wymmen for hei vertues lyuyng, and for her trewe knowlechyng of truþe, and for her pacient, wilful and glad suffryng of persecucioun for ri3twisnesse, deseruen þoru3 þe grace of God to ben eiris of þe eendles blis of heyene.⁷

⁴ *Pierce the Plowman's Crede* 585, qtd. in Hudson *Premature*, 275.

⁵ This is an important point that will be discussed in detail later in the paper.

⁶ See especially the sections of Biblical glossing in Hudson’s *Selections*, where multiple examples are given and worth a full examination elsewhere.

Thorpe, 28.

Thorpe describes the persecution of himself and other Lollards as though they were the victims of a sort of ritual sacrifice, an interesting charge to level at the church, given that Christians as a whole have never allowed any sort of animal or human sacrifices to be made in worship (or at any other time for that matter). He even talks of the sufferings of the Wycliffites in a very Christ-like way: they are “innocent” men and women living in the pursuit of “high virtues” who suffer their persecution gladly, thus becoming martyrs who have thus earned the rewards of heaven. The clergy are likened to tyrants, giving them a higher position of societal power (however abused that power may be) than anyone ever should have who supposedly lives their life in imitation of Christ’s ways and ministering in Christ’s church. This charge therefore lies at the foundation of Wycliffite objections to the church; the church is described as being overly powerful, corrupt, and blinded by their own false interpretations and conclusions to be able properly to minister the word of God.

II. THE CALL FOR REFORM AND THE “SIMPLE”

The Wycliffite hermeneutical model proposed to rectify these problems. The Wycliffite call for reform, and specifically the model hermeneutics deemed it necessary that all things be, simply put, *simple*. This meant simplicity in everything. They wanted church walls to be bare, free of images that might distract the mind from prayer and the contemplation of God. Salvation was thought to rest almost solely in the word of God and based on Scripture (though baptism was usually a requirement as well), rather than in the complicated traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. Priests

were meant to preach, a duty that took on almost sacramental importance. Not only to preach, but specifically they were to preach in the vernacular, as that would allow the simple people to whom they preached to understand what they were hearing. As simple, uneducated people knew no Latin, no Latin should be used. Furthermore, the Scriptures should also be available to everyone, but in the vernacular, not Latin. The ideal preacher for the Wycliffites was not the stereotype of the ornamented, tithes-collecting, corrupted representative of the church as often depicted in the anti-fraternal literature of the time, but rather a simple man – or woman, even, something unheard of at that time – who was open and true and humble in all possible ways: “Betere is a pore man gynge in his sympilnesse, than a riche man in schrewid weies... He that goith simpli, schal be saaf; he that goith bi weiward weies, schal falle doun onys”⁸ The ideas of “simpleness” and shrewdness are put here into direct opposition, as are poor and rich; being poor and simple is obviously preferable. This was important, as for the Wycliffites, *anyone* could be a preacher who had a basic understanding God’s word and was a good person: “euery man and euery woman being in good lyf oute of synne is as good prest and hath [as] mucche poar of God in al thing as ony prest ordred, be he pope or bishop.”⁹ In theory, the preacher need have no training, no church backing, no Latin, no actual *knowledge* per se of much of anything. Rather, a preacher needed only to be simple, true-hearted, and open, and the grace of God would allow for all necessary understanding to enter. The preacher could then work from that inner knowledge, and from knowledge of the Scriptures, to teach others. Scriptural

⁸ qtd. in Cigman 486

⁹ Confession, 35.

interpretation was not an issue for the Lollards as it was for the church, and they felt no need to develop a hermeneutical model of exegesis that would give way to a “correct” or orthodox view of the words. The view could be summed up in the following statement that specifically describes the phenomenon of inspired interpretation:

And he hap nede to lyue a clene lif and be ful deuout in preiers and haue not his wit ocupied aboute worldli þingis, þat þe Holi Spiryte, autour of wisdom and kunnyng and truþe, dresse him in his werk and suffre him to for to erre.¹⁰

If one were a true, open, simple person, then by the grace of God, Scripture could be understood, apparently with no problem whatsoever. Furthermore, even if one did err, the Spirit would allow the erring of a good, open, pure soul, rather than punish it.

The choice of the word “simple” as a keyword in their conceptions of proper Christianity was no accident for Wycliffe and his followers. As one critic, Gloria Cigman, comments:

while Lollard polemic does not invent vocabulary, it certainly usurps some concepts for its own purposes. In projecting themselves as the few true men among the false many, and as manifestations of light confronting the darkness of sin, the Lollards also appropriate the commonplace epithets ‘simple’ and ‘pore.’¹¹

Claiming the word “simple” as a sort of totem was in many ways a brilliant strategy for the Lollards, though not without a drawback or two. While Wycliffites could use the word to point simultaneously to many of the qualities they found important in ministers of any kind, it was not a word without some negative connotations as well, connotations that could be used against them. Though the Wycliffites vaunted the

¹⁰ Prologue, 71.

¹¹ Cigman, 485.

idea of “simpleness” as implying the many Christ-like things in a person’s character that would render him/her fit for God and God’s word and ministry, the church could take the same word and point out its flaws, such as the lack of intelligence or learning therein implied.

There are eight definitions of the word “simple” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) that have relevance to the Wycliffite controversy and which arise early enough to be applicable. I have divided them here into connotations that would apply to the Wycliffites’ conceptions of themselves and the Catholic conceptions of the same. The positive definitions are as follows:

- 1: Free from duplicity, dissimulation or guile; innocent and harmless; undesigning, honest, open, straightforward. (citations in OED go back to 1220, include citation of 1382 Wycliffite Bible “be 3e war as serpēntis, and symple as dowues”)
- 2: Free from, devoid of, pride, ostentation, or display; humble, unpretentious. (first citation 1290)
- 3: Free from elaboration or artificiality; artless, unaffected; plain, unadorned. (1330)
- 4: Of persons, or their origin: Poor or humble in condition; of low rank or position; undistinguished, mean, common. (1290)
- 6: Of persons or their attire: Not marked by any elegance or grandeur; very plain or homely. (1362)
- 11: With nothing added; considered or taken by itself; mere, pure, bare; single. (1340)

All of these definitions have positive connotations and apply directly to the conception of the ideal Lollard preacher and to the Lollard hermeneutical model of simpleness, openness and clear understanding. More importantly, all nearly all of the definitions are negative: that is, they imply a lack of some specific thing rather than the presence of it. By describing the ideal preacher as “simple,” the Wycliffites could not only describe the type of preacher that they felt should be out preaching – one that is

guileless, humble, unaffected, poor, pure, and open – but could also, with the same word, illustrate the problems they saw with the Catholic prelates, who were perceived as being: “prowde, enuyous, malicious, coueitous, lecherous and oþere ful vicious wordis and werkis” to use the hostile words of William Thorpe.¹²

Two negative connotations also come up in the OED that date from pre-Wycliffite times. These two words seem to imply something less than the honest, poor preacher that the Lollards esteem so greatly. Rather, these definitions lean more towards having the meanings that orthodox thinkers gives the word “simple” when discussing reasons that “simple” men are not fit for preaching or Scriptural interpretation:

8: Poor, wretched, pitiful, dismal. (13..)

9: Deficient in knowledge or learning; characterized by a certain lack of acuteness or quick apprehension. (1382)

The last meaning cited, definition number nine, is the one where the OED cites the Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible: “to a symple man wiþ Goddis grace and greet trauail...”¹³ This is extremely interesting because this is one of the only altogether negative definitions of the word, so why assume that this was the definition that the Wycliffites would have meant in the seminal justification of their translation work?

The complexity inherent in the word is immediately apparent. There are two possibilities for this. One: quite simply, the OED is misinterpreting. Two: this is the intended definition or meaning that the author was thinking of when he wrote the cited piece. The idea that this might be the specific definition meant by the author would be

¹² Thorpe, 44.

¹³ Prologue, 68. The quote will be examined in detail below.

quite intriguing, as it would point to the idea that the Lollards can turn Catholic anti-Wycliffite rhetoric around by claiming even the negatives present in the word. These negative connotations would seem to say that the preachers and other members of the Lollard movement would be unable to perform their functions properly or with understanding enough to preach and teach the Gospel with appropriate clarity and understanding, something that the orthodox clergy commented on, sometimes in very virulent language. Catholic rhetoric does point out the anti-intellectual aspect of Lollard thought, highlighting sort of precarious position the Lollards are in when relying on a spiritual force to interpret things for them. Yet for the Wycliffites, even the idea of being “deficient in knowledge” could be considered a worthwhile, even desired state (though it seems at first to be very disturbing), because it would allow the work of the preacher, translator, or whomever to acknowledge that his/her learning, ability, interpretations, etc., came from the grace of God and from pursuing a life of simple virtue, rather than from the learning vaunted by the church and thought by the clergy to be necessary to “proper” Biblical interpretation.

III. THE ROLE OF THE PREACHER

Preaching was the most important duty that every priest should perform, almost to the exclusion of anything else. As many Wycliffites denigrated or outright

rejected the importance of the sacraments, the clergy was freed to preach.¹⁴ They were quite specific on this, in Hudson's view:

there is complete unanimity amongst the Lollards about the primary function of all the clergy: this is the preaching of the gospel to all and, in so far as it contributes to that but no further, the study of the Bible... This duty is imposed on all Christians, according to Lollard thought, but the obligation falls particularly on the clergy.¹⁵

According to this statement, the study of the Bible is only important insofar as it would help the preacher to understand and further disseminate the word of God. To spend more time on it or study it for the sake of anything other than preaching seems to be considered wrong in some way. Also, there is again an emphasis on preaching being a duty for *everyone* who is Christian, and that everyone is otherwise unspecified. This potentially allows for both men and women, as well as people of every station in society, to be permitted to preach. Ideas such as this were behind the emergence of figures like plowmen as sources of spiritual information and guidance; *Pierce the Plowman's Crede* is a particularly good illustration of this trope, and one with obvious Lollard leanings.

The Wycliffites were thus concerned first and foremost with the act of preaching, and the idea appears constantly in their writings: "prestis weren not ordeyned to sey massis or mateynes, but onli to teche and preche þe worde of God," for example.¹⁶ They believed, as said, that the primary duty of all men in the clergy was to preach. Failure to preach was considered an act of negligence on par with

¹⁴ Numerous sources attest to these views, though a full exploration of those views and their consequences need be done elsewhere. For some interesting testaments, see "Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards" from Hudson, *Selections*.

¹⁵ Hudson *Premature*, 354.

¹⁶ "Sixteen Points," 19.

sacrificing the souls of the men and women of their parish. Furthermore, the idea of simplicity in all things was again important. In opposition to the lazy, rich priests who failed to do anything other than collect their tithes, the Wycliffites vaunted their ideal of the simple priest who would preach to laypeople and thus repair the errors of the orthodox clergy:

Right so it fareþ nowadays, whoso takeþ good heed. Þer ben semple prestes þat prechen now Goddes lawe faste aboute, þorou3 grace of God, to plesse hym wiþ and profite of his peple, and to maken him knowen among his peple þer he hap be longe hid þorou3 negligence of curatis and worldeli ocupacion.¹⁷

Preaching, specifically the new preaching style now happening, would allow for openness in the word of God, rather than in a sort of “hiddenness” that the Lollards felt to be a factor in orthodox preaching. This author tells people that “simple priests that now preach God’s law” all around can profit the people and by so doing, please the Lord. Beginning with a phrase that announces that with the coming of this new style of preachers and preaching, things fare “right so” nowadays, the author talks of the preachers who tell others about God’s law in a way that will aid them in understanding the word of God. Additionally, they will make up for the negligence shown by the clergy in their failure to preach and in their worldly occupation.

Wycliffites seemed to view these preachers as a new order of priest, one ordained by Christ rather than by the church. As such, they would not be subject to the rules and orders of the orthodox church, but instead would receive dominion by grace: their right living in accordance with Scriptural principles confirms their spiritual authority. For them, this seems to have cleared them of any thoughts of the

¹⁷ Sermon 4 (220-5. From Cigman 483)

heresy alleged by the church, and gave them a higher calling. In one thought by

Thorpe, Lollard preachers are figured as the true disciples of Christ:

Euery preest þan whos presthode Crist appreueþ knowiþ wel and
confessiþ in word and in werk þat a dissciple owiþ not to be aboue his
maistir, but it suffisiþ to a dissiple to be as his maistir, symple, pore,
and meke and pacient.¹⁸

The wandering Lollard preachers felt that they were approved by Christ in their priesthood, which has slightly higher connotations than the word “preacher.” Indeed, by the sheer fact of their preaching, they were already priests: “true preachers of God’s law... [are] necessarily priests by virtue of the office of preaching.”¹⁹ Priests would be charged with the teaching and salvation of souls. Teaching people about the word of God was the first and foremost, and really only, thing that needed to be done.

Furthermore, having been ordained by Christ meant that they served him and not a Roman pontiff, and therefore, being proper servants, had different requirements of habit. The writer lists several desired characteristics of preachers, specifically saying that it “suffices” that a preacher/disciple of Christ be ‘simple, poor, meek and patient.’ “Simple” is somewhat of a synonym to all the other traits in this list, and thus placed in the primary position, being of extreme importance.

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF VERNACULAR SCRIPTURE

However, the importance of preaching resided not only in the person of the preacher, but also in the words of the preacher. When trying to disseminate the word of God, it was of primary importance that the audience be able to understand what

¹⁸ Thorpe, 71.

¹⁹ Fletcher, 356.

they were hearing. For this reason, the Wycliffites insisted that the Bible be translated into English for the benefit of the unlearned common people that were the object of the Wycliffite mission. The translation was in fact completed, despite heavy debate and many obstacles. In the words of the writer of the Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible: “siþen at the bigynnyng of feiþ so manie men translatiden into Latyn and to greet profyt of Latyn men, lat oo symple creature of God translate into English for profyt of English men!”²⁰ Knowing that the Latin Bible was itself a translation, it only made sense to the Lollards to translate it once more into a language which would actually help the laity understand what they were hearing. The translator counterintuitively proclaims himself to be a simple creature, something repeated often throughout the Prologue and, as said earlier, places himself in the light of all the implications that the term “simple” has.

In the present day where we are accustomed to many translations of the Bible available for every possible wish, it’s difficult to imagine that there could be any objections to such an aim. Yet the English Catholic Church vehemently opposed translation. They feared that by giving easy access to the Scripture to essentially anyone, the whole structure of society would collapse. The Wycliffites, on the other hand, felt that Scripture should be available to anyone and everyone who wanted access to it, in order to spread learning and understanding throughout England.²¹

Illiterate people could not understand Latin, and therefore had little or no knowledge

²⁰ “Prologue,” 71.

²¹ “Learning” is obviously a vexed term when dealing with a group that is so avowedly anti-intellectual. The distinction is that the Wycliffites wished to spread the type of learning that would help people to understand the Scriptures as they are, and thus further them in their faith only. They seem to have been against decidedly more intellectual pursuits, or rather anything that would make a person less “simple.”

of the content of the prayers they said, the Masses they attended, or anything with regards to the church that was not elucidated for them in vernacular sermons. Despite his university training, when put on trial for heresy by the Archbishop Arundel, William Thorpe wrote of his reliance on his Scriptural knowledge and the goodness of God to help him in his defense:

And also I preiede God for his goodnesse to 3eue me þanne and alwei grace to speke wiþ a meke and an esy spirit, and, whateuer þing þat I schulde speke, þat I mi3te haue þerto trewe autorite of scripture or open resoun.²²

When arguing against the Archbishop of Canterbury and trying to prove the correctness of his ideas over the orthodox stance of the church, Thorpe's major argumentation aids were grace, humility, open reason and the Scripture. An English version of the Scripture would then be important for others who, lacking Thorpe's education, would not have the Latin to read it in the "learned" language. Thorpe, meanwhile, was left in the paradoxical position of leaning heavily on the learning he otherwise repudiated in order to save himself.

One of the academics in the debate over Biblical translation was Richard Ullerston, an Oxford colleague of Wycliffe. Ullerston was highly involved in the translation debate, arguing that Scriptural translation into the vernacular should be permitted. Despite this, however, his orthodoxy was seemingly never called into question (possibly because he was addressing the question in Latin in an academic debate, something theoretically permitted by church authorities), making him

²² Thorpe, 36-37.

extremely interesting when considering the issue of vernacular translation.²³ He set up his discussion of the translation question as a sort of debate between two fictional academics, though he seems to give more rational sense to the pro side of the debate. Because of his discussion of both sides of the issues in a fairly concise, yet detailed manner, Ullerston's views make compelling material for examination.

When it comes to arguing for translation, Ullerston makes a case that, in a typical Wycliffite move (perhaps surprising from someone of ostensibly orthodox views), comes in part directly from the Bible, rather than from church tradition. He can therefore claim Scriptural authority, rather than the authority of orthodox clergy, a move that makes sense given it is the clergy who so vehemently oppose translation. For Ullerston, the defense of translation runs roughly as follows:

[he] positions his defense as an inquiry into the history of pastoral theology and the vernacular from the destruction of Babel (when the learned and vernacular languages become differentiated) onwards...Ullerston can find no signs that either vernacular instruction derived from the Bible or Bible translation itself have ever been forbidden. No more can he see anything about English itself that renders it an unsuitable vehicle for such translation: translation is always out of more into less prestigious languages; English cannot properly be called "barbarous"; and the limitations in its vocabulary are solved by borrowing.²⁴

Ullerston focuses instead on Biblical history and on the English language itself as a vehicle for Scriptural understanding. He discusses the tower of Babel and the resulting destruction and differentiation of learned and vernacular languages, which

²³ Cole and Somerset.

²⁴ Watson, 845. The original contains manuscript notes which were not included to increase ease of reading. Those interested should refer to his article. Actual quotations are Watson's words, translating and summarizing Ullerston's positions as expressed in the manuscripts.

would be the absolute origin (in Scripture) of a debate over the vernacular as a proper arena for translation. Looking closely at the Scriptural history after that, he does not find anything that makes him think that vernacular dissemination of the word of God, through either the Scriptures themselves or through preaching and teaching, has been forbidden anywhere in the Bible. In response to charges that English would be an unsuitable language for translation, he sees no truth in such assertions. English is not as prestigious or learned a language as is the Latin he is writing in, but it is equally not “barbarous” or unfit for such a task, and the problems encountered in the lack of proper lexicon can be fixed by borrowing from the Latin.

Ullerston’s summation of the orthodox views against Bible translation is interesting because in its blatant overstating of the Catholic side, it is possible to understand both sides of the debate relatively clearly, as though part of his defense of translation is contained in his supposed arguments against it:

Since translation can only be of the literal sense of Scripture, which, so far as the Old Testament is concerned, has ceased to apply, it should not be attempted; since logical and philosophical terminology does not exist in the vernacular, any attempt to translate these must be incomprehensible... Translation into the mother tongue will allow any old woman (*vetula*) to usurp the office of teacher, which is forbidden to them (since all heresies, according to Jerome, come from women); it will bring about a world in which the laity prefers to teach than to learn, in which women (*mulierculae*) talk philosophy and dare to instruct men – in which a country bumpkin (*rusticus*) will presume to teach. Translation will also deprive good priests of their prestige. If everything is translated, learning, the liturgy, and all the sacraments will be abhorred; clerics and theology itself will be seen as useless by the laity; the clergy will wither; and an infinity of heresies will erupt. Even the laity will not benefit, since their devotion is actually improved by their lack of understanding of the psalms and prayers they say. Translation will mean the demise of a major component in the unity of Christendom, the Latin language. And even if these arguments do not

convince, translation ought to be banned simply on the grounds that most clerics think it should be – as many of them have said personally to the disputant.²⁵

Ullerston writes in a satirical mode, no doubt, but in doing so raises nearly all of the salient orthodox points in the debate. He claims that the church believes that the English language will be able to translate only the literal words of the Bible, but in translating these words, it will somehow not accurately convey the truth behind them. Ullerston begins by saying that translation can only be literal but that literal meanings no longer apply. He applies this to the Old Testament, which, after the coming of Christ, no longer applies to Christians in the literal sense and must therefore be interpreted to be correctly understood. It should be noted here that the main reason Biblical translation was such a volatile issue on both sides actually had nothing whatsoever to do with the literal meaning of the words and phrases contained in the Scriptures, either in the Old or New Testaments. The concern was rather over the resulting interpretations and various misunderstandings, errors and heresies that could result from an incorrect translation. However, because interpretation was something that, for the church, required training rather than the openness of simple people, having the Bible available to everyone in the vernacular meant that the possibility of incorrect interpretations, regardless of whether or not they were a result of incorrect translation, was extraordinarily high.

Furthermore, as the language for argumentation (“logical and philosophical terminology”) does not exist in English to the extent that it does in Latin, any

²⁵ Watson, 843. The original contains manuscript notes which were not included to increase ease of reading. Those interested should refer to his article. Actual quotations are Watson’s words, translating and summarizing Ullerston’s positions as expressed in the manuscripts.

translation will automatically be so faulty as to hinder understanding (even if one discounts the possibility of heretical thinking). Translation always comes with a set of problems like the ones mentioned, but these particular problems seem not to have been remarked upon in earlier eras of biblical translation. Many of the people who urged translation commented on this, noting that Jerome had no qualms about his translation into Latin from the original Greek and Hebrew.²⁶

The translation problems have many further social and political implications, as they directly feed not only into biblical interpretation, but specifically into how the interpretation is done, who is allowed to interpret it, and what the consequences are of that interpretation. Many of these fears are so intertwined that it is difficult to enumerate them individually. They all seem to have a common base, which is to say that there are many fears that Biblical translation will lead to a disruption or dissolution of the dominant social hierarchy.

One of the biggest questions is over who is allowed to teach or interpret the Bible. The Wycliffites felt that it was the duty of everyone (broadly interpreted) to preach. Ullerston expresses the fear of the Church in particular over the idea of women teaching; Jerome (often cited by both sides in the translation debates) contributes here the idea linking women and the spread of heretical ideas; women are seen as naturally unfit for philosophical and theological thought and are therefore unable to teach properly, though they no doubt would – specifically frightening is the idea that women might dare to instruct men, some of whom may then be able to

²⁶ See Watson for a list of such comments.

become clergy and thus aid in the spread of the women's heretical ideas.²⁷ Also disturbing is the idea that a rustic, country man might try to preach and teach others of belief and their proper roles in society. This, of course, forcefully brings to mind the trope of *Piers Plowman* and all of its imitators, featuring the namesake rustic plowman whose simple teachings form the core of the story. Though *Piers Plowman* was, at its heart, profoundly concerned with keeping the social hierarchy, others with more openly Wycliffite leanings, such as *Pierce the Plowman's Crede*, were not. The main fear underlying all of this is that the church would lose its place as the repository of knowledge and that the Estates system of medieval society would cease to exist. Given that it held such supreme power in the Middle Ages, it is perhaps understandable that the church would not want to see too much dissent or rebellion, or indeed anything that would give the Third Estate of plowman and the like any power.

Underlying the fears of plowman preachers and teachers is an orthodox hermeneutical concern that the laity, when given the Bible to read, would no doubt interpret the vernacular Bible wrongly, regardless of what language it was. It is surprising that such a concern is not more explicit in Ullerston's reading, especially given the church's incredibly complex methods of exegesis of the church, and of the training required by the church for a clergyman to be allowed to interpret the Bible at all. So church fears on this subject make sense: not only, in the church's view, would untrained laypeople make many errors if they tried to understand Scripture, these could naturally give rise to heresy. Furthermore, the argument goes that the laity are

²⁷ Hawisia Moone, mentioned earlier in relation to her heresy trial, was one of the women who made such fears a reality rather than a theoretical exercise.

actually *better off* if they *do not* understand the Latin prayers that they recite, or anything else in the church. This is an unbelievable claim, and possibly has a basis in Ullerston's distaste of the idea that the laity should not be able to educate themselves on matters of such supreme importance. Ullerston therefore expresses in characteristically caustic terms the belief that people outside the church should *not* know what the basis is for the rituals which are so much a part of their daily life.

Strangely, the idea that people should not understand church affairs sort of parallels the Wycliffite privileging of a lack of intellectual skill in preachers; though rather than assuming that the grace of God will fill the holes of understanding, Ullerston writes of the Church's claim that a lack of understanding will improve the laity's devotion, being their emotional/affective beliefs in Christianity, which seems more important than intellectual knowledge. The main idea seems to be that representatives of the church regarded themselves as the infallible keepers of Scriptural knowledge, keepers who would have to explain Biblical matters to the populace for their own good. This last idea of the infallible church is supported by another orthodox commentator, William Butler, who claimed that such problems are unavoidable: "since the clouding of the human intellect at the Fall, only the elite have had access to clear thinking... a truth that demands that the Scripture be kept from the "populus vulgaris."²⁸ Because post-lapsarian, "simple" humans are unable to understand the Bible, it falls to the "elite" – the clergy – to understand it for them.

The orthodox method of Biblical interpretation at the time followed a four-fold model, an adaptation of the method of Augustine. Part one was the literal sense, part

²⁸ Watson, 842.

two, the spiritual-doctrinal (or allegorical) sense; part three, the moral sense; and part four, the anagogic sense, which looks for revelations of Heaven and the afterlife.²⁹ The literal sense was considered the lowest of all interpretations, and, as mentioned, was generally disregarded. The complaint that Ullerston ascribes to his opponents – “since translation can only be of the literal sense of Scripture, which, so far as the Old Testament is concerned, has ceased to apply, it should not be attempted” – is interesting because it conflates the literal and typological interpretations of the methods mentioned above. He restricts his comment about the literal sense being inapplicable to the Old Testament only, yet seems to comment at the same time that the orthodox belief was that translation of the Bible as a whole should not be attempted because translation is only of the literal sense. One major result of the complaint that Ullerston ascribes to his opponents is that one would not be able to read the English translations of the Old Testament, and by extension the rest of the Scriptures, typologically. This would be a bigger problem than Ullerston allows it to be in his litany of reasons, where he steadily moves on to other objections. It would mean that no one reading the Bible in English translation would be able to understand the full range of meanings found therein, and would therefore be open to all the aforementioned problems of error and heresy. The Wycliffites seemed not to feel the need to respond to such accusations in detail, believing as they did that exegesis took place through a simple person with the help of God’s grace; it would be blasphemy of the highest degree to assume God would or could be wrong.

²⁹ Painter, “History of Interpretation.”

The Bible was and appeared in roughly 1382, though the debate continued for years afterward. The Prologue is fascinating, a translator's justification of his task in full Wycliffite hermeneutical style:

At þe bigynnyng I purposide wiþ Goddis helpe to make þe sentence as trewe and open in English as it is in Latyn, eiþer more trewe and more open þan it is in Latyn... And no doute, to a symple man wiþ Goddis grace and greet trauail, men mi3ten expoune yche openliere and shortliere þe Bible in English þan þe elde greete doctouris han expounid it in Latyn, and myche sharpliere and groundliere þan manie late postillatouris eiþer expositouris han don.³⁰

The anonymous author uses the most important terms in Wycliffite rhetoric for his justification. Focusing on the question of language, he announces his intention to make it as “trewe and open” as possible, either commensurate with Latin or even more so. The translator refers to himself as a “symple man,” and claims the translating to be done through hard work and God’s help. The sheer fact of being simple works in a couple ways. The author of the tract is “simple,” but seems also to refer to the people doing the actual exegesis as being simple as well. They are therefore able to be more concise, more precise in their explanations than the “old great doctors” who have written about the Scripture previously. “Simpleness” has its benefits in that everything can be more “trewe and open” and therefore, based on other references to the word simple in Wycliffite writings, closer to holiness and God. Merely by being simple and by leaving oneself open to grace during exegesis, rather than by following the rules of the church for Biblical interpretation, one’s explanations can be more open, short, sharp, and down to earth, and thus comprehensible to the folk who are (or

³⁰ Prologue, 68.

at least should be) the focus of evangelical efforts on the part of the clergy (or other would-be preachers).

Finally, even though there were, as illustrated by Ullerston, many complaints and worries about the suitability of English for the task of translating the Bible, the translator here has no scruples whatsoever. He seems quite confident that English will be at least as capable as is Latin for the task of relating the Scriptures. Possibly because English does not have the intellectual reputation of Latin and is instead a much more simple language, it will be easier to explain Biblical lessons in it, in a more open manner than otherwise. God's grace may be the means for excellent exegesis, but the language matters as well. An open, non-learned language seems the obvious vehicle for simple, understandable teachings that could be apprehended by everyone of all levels, and not just those able to have a university education.

IV. IMPLICATIONS OF LOLLARD IDEAS

Translating the Bible would thus open up a new audience for Scripture, allowing anyone and everyone the opportunity to read or hear the texts in a language they could understand. By doing this, the formal teachings of the church, especially in regards to exegesis, could be brought into question in ways that they had not been previously. It was the idea of simpleness and the rejection of formal church learning as exemplified above that constituted one of the major reasons for the ecclesiastical persecution of the Lollards. Before heresies like those propagated by Wycliffe became increasingly popular, the church had enjoyed a very high social position, often

having at least as much power as did the king. The authority of the church in most matters was unquestioned, and as at least one critic has claimed, the institution had dogmatic force in society at large. Alan Fletcher believes that the church's position of moral authority made it the unquestioned ruler of Europe during the Middle Ages:

The concept in which social unanimity was enshrined, and to which society at large was beckoned by the Church to assent, became almost a credal orthodoxy in its own right which, in the manner of any tacit assumption, would in all likelihood be simply unavailable for negotiation.³¹

During the early medieval period, the church had force in society on the level with church creeds: not always fully understood by those who recited those creeds, but unquestioned nonetheless.³² In Fletcher's view, society had not yet fully developed the concept of a nation in the way it would later be known during the early modern period, and so the church constituted the only true centralized authority in Europe. Though this meant, among other things, that the church was more open and accepting of ideas that would later likely have been called heretical, it also led to a gain of power and wealth that were early factors in what the Lollards viewed as the burgeoning corruption of the clerical orders.³³ It also meant, just as importantly, that the church had few viable opponents to their hermeneutics, and that their methods of exegesis would be equally unquestioned. By fighting so vigorously for a vernacular Bible and against many of the methods and instructions that informed church hermeneutics

³¹ Fletcher, 345.

³² Both the Apostles and the Nicene Creeds were in Latin and would not have been understood very well by the majority of churchgoers, who had little or no Latin.

³³ See Leff p. 40 and following for a more detailed discussion of the dissolution of papal and church authority after the reign of Innocent III.

(many methods of which were based on the writings of the church patriarchs), the Lollards were fighting nearly 1,000 years of scholarship and tradition.

The problem that the Lollards constituted for the church was therefore not really the fact of their supposed heresy at all, but rather that they formed a movement popular enough to comprise a significant threat to the power of the church, and thus one that needed to be stamped out as quickly and efficiently as possible. When removed from church authority, the emphasis on vernacular preaching, teaching, and Scripture, combined with a renewed effort to educate the laity on matters of faith was a direct challenge to the social order. When figures such as Pierce from *Pierce the Plowman's Crede* were allowed, in literature at least, to have Scriptural authority and clear, moralistic, convincing arguments as to the state of the human soul and the role of God in the life of the individual, the threat to clerical orders was obvious. After all, if a figure like Pierce could do the preaching work usually relegated to the priest, what need was there for an organized church in all its functions?

The Lollards thus forced a re-examination of the importance of the lower classes in the social hierarchy and of the relative position the church within the same. In the type of society that the Lollards would have created, there would be no real need for the church at all:

Direct personal experience of God and its propagation through preaching, unless adapted to the sacramental life of the church, constituted [a] threat; for, carried to its conclusion, it meant nothing less than entirely renouncing the arbitrament of the church and denying its *raison d'être* as the expression of God's saving will on earth.³⁴

³⁴ Leff, 42.

The Wycliffites denied the concept of transubstantiation, which was the main reason for the importance of the sacrament of the Eucharist in orthodox theology. Other sacraments, especially ordination, were not required either, or were at least not as important (baptism usually being an exception here; the Eucharist was also usually deemed important, though there were differing views on the nature of the sacrament). Because everyone who preached was in essence a priest, anyone who was a good person (as according to the Wycliffite model of good being simple and open) could perform them as necessary.³⁵ The Lollards even believed that many of the hierarchical positions of the church should be dissolved, and that a bishop had no more power or authority than did a simple parish priest. In a document discussing the various points upon which the Lollards were accused of heresy, one point is that “þer schulde be but oo degre aloone of prestehod in þe chirche of god, and eury good man is a prest and haþ power to preche þe worde of God.”³⁶ Everyone could be a priest, and everyone could perform the necessary duties (primary of which was of course preaching). There was therefore no real way to fit the ideas of the Lollards into traditional church teachings or sacramental life, because the importance of the sacraments was for the most part lessened or denied. If everyone could be a preacher, and every preacher was, for the Wycliffites, a priest, why bother with the church at all?

Even more striking than the idea that a plowman could be an adequate, if not admirable, preacher and teacher, was the idea that a *woman* could be. This was another implication of the doctrine of the Lollards, who felt that access to Scripture

³⁵ It should be noted, however, that even the necessity of baptism as a requirement for salvation was called into question by Hawisia Moone. See her Confession in Hudson, *Selections*.

³⁶ “Sixteen Points,” 19.

should be unrestricted. There were many women who were associated with Wycliffism who found in the movement a source of education and agency otherwise usually denied them:

The most striking aspects... are the references to women's involvement in celebrations of a Lollard Eucharist, and to the erudition which many female adherents of Lollardy acquired. The former shocked the orthodox conveyers of the stories; the latter led to the sort of snide comments exemplified by Pecock who noted 'namelich thilke women whiche maken hemsilf so wise bi the bible' but could not *ground* many of their actions there.³⁷

Even today in the Roman Catholic Church women are not allowed to be ordained and therefore unable to celebrate the Eucharist. That they were able to celebrate it in this movement in the 1380's and onward is striking, and an excellent example of the type of more equal status women were given. Many women were also able to learn the Bible quite well, even though, as mentioned by Pecock, there is little mention of them within it. Importantly, however, is that the status of women shows the Lollard's commitment to ensuring that *everyone* was given access to the Scriptures, and that everyone who could preach, would and did.

V. THE REACTION OF THE CHURCH

Because of the challenges to the church hierarchy, its beliefs, its hermeneutics, and its elite status in society, the orthodox church under Archbishop Arundel was vehement in its persecution of the Lollards, with punishments for convicted heretics including imprisonment and excommunication and, after the 1401 proclamation "De heretico comburendo," burning. Arundel, tireless in his fight against the heretics, also

³⁷ Hudson *Premature*, 137.

issued a document in 1407, known as the Constitutions, designed specifically to stamp out the heresy as quickly and effectively as possible. The Constitutions of Arundel made provisions against the ownership of any unapproved book, meaning anything in the vernacular with religious overtones; limited theological discussions in academic (and other) realms; allowed questioning of the views of Oxford students on at least a monthly basis; prohibited preaching without a license (only granted after the orthodoxy of the preacher's views had been confirmed); forbid clerical errors, sins, etc., to be the topic of sermons; and forbid all argumentation of theological matters outside of a university (where, as said, the students were subjected to frequent questioning to make sure that their views, and the views therefore expressed in those debates, would be to the liking of the church).³⁸ There is unfortunately not space here for a full exploration of the effects of these acts. They were extreme, heavy handed, and calculated to ensure that the church would retain as much control as possible over the spiritual lives of its adherents. Vernacular literature was approved only for a select few in the church whose orthodoxy had been assured, and religious writing in the vernacular was put almost entirely on pause after the Constitutions were put into effect. Suffice it to say that the Lollard movement had essentially died out within the next fifty years.³⁹

The writer bewailing the persecution of “simple people” by the “feigning lovers” and “untrue children of Christ” possibly did get to see the word of God taught and written in the vernacular, but he would not have seen the movement take hold of

³⁸ Watson, 827.

³⁹ See Watson especially for a compelling interpretation of the Constitutions and their effects on both the Wycliffites and on English vernacular literature as a whole during the fifteenth century.

the whole of England. These “simple” people did, however, have an important role in the history of late-fourteenth century England. Simple people, in their meek, open, true, humble, unornamented, uneducated, and possibly even unintelligent, ways, managed to translate the Bible, create preachers out of women and plowmen, and illustrate in often blunt terms the perceived corruption of the church they no longer felt was able to minister to them. Admittedly they had university and noble backing in places in order to accomplish their aims, and it seems clear that anyone overtly lacking in intelligence would be patently unable to translate Latin into any kind of English, much less English that is intelligible, clear and concise. But though it may have taken such doctors and learned people to undertake and accomplish such a task, the learning that got them there was (however ironically) deemed unnecessary in their perspective; the task was, to them, accomplished rather through the work of simple people and the grace of God. And so was their work dedicated to the same – “simple” people.

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