PART I

The vernacular oeuvre

I

Introduction

> . . . And so seculer power oweþ and is bounden to ponisshe by just
> peyne of his swerd, þat is, worldly power, try[u]auntis rebellinge
> aȝens God and trespassing aȝens man by what kyn trespas; and, þat is
> more, to chastise his sugetis by peyne or turment of here body. And
> no drede muche more he may ponisshe hem by takynge awey of here
> temporaltees, þat is lasse þan bodily peyne. Þerfore seculer lordis don
> þis riȝtfully, siþ þis is don by comaundement of þe apostoile and by
> ordinaunce of God. Þerfore it is pleyn of þes resouns and auctoritees;
> and seculer lordis may levefully and medefully, in mony causes, taken
> awey temporal godis ȝoven to men of þe Chirche.[1]

When Wyclif, and Wycliffites, appealed to the lay power to disendow
the clergy, in one sense their strategy was nothing new. In the late four-
teenth century it was not an innovation for argument couched in a
high-intellectual idiom and propounded by the highly educated to tell
power what it wanted to hear, and the practice has not fallen into disuse
since. Around the time of Wyclif in late medieval England, however,
this strategy takes on a particularly interesting form: for a short time, in

[1] 'A Petition to the King and Parliament', in T. Arnold, ed., *Select English Works of John
Wyclif*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1869–71), iii: 507–23; 516/31–517/4. Arnold has 'n' in place of
my reading 'u' in line 2; he does not recognize 'tryuauntis', a term frequently used by
Wycliffites to translate *discolos* or *trutannos*. The Latin version of the 'Petition' (I. H.
Stein, ed., 'The Latin Text of Wyclif's Complaint', *Speculum* 7 (1932), 87–94; see W.
R. Thomson, *The Latin Writings of John Wyclif: An Annotated Catalog* (Toronto, 1983),
258–9 for the title *Peticio ad regem et parliamentum* and a description) uses 'discolos'
(91/173), as does the *Testimony of William Thorpe*, where in a paraphrase of I Peter 2:18
and 2:20 Thorpe translates the bible's *discolos* as 'trowantis'. (See A. Hudson, ed., *The
Testimony of William Thorpe*, in *Two Wycliffite Texts*, EETS, o.s. 301 (Oxford, 1993),
48/816–49/825.) Thanks to Matti Peikola, who is writing about Wycliffite usage of
'tyrauntis' and 'tryuantis', for discussion of this point.

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between the beginnings of an extensive translation of Latin learning
into the vernacular from the mid-fourteenth century onward and the
growing legitimation of English as an 'official' written language of
government and administration during the reign of Henry V, this
strategy of argument requires what is temporarily a highly controversial
sort of translation.

The controversy arises because this appeal is written in English, at a
point when the written records of legal and government business are
still, except in very rare cases, written in French or Latin, and when the
deployment of 'resouns and auctoritees' within the structures of aca-
demic argument is overwhelmingly restricted – like the texts, commen-
taries, and treatises on which such argument draws – to Latin, and to
clerics trained at university.[2] Though trials and parliaments may have
been conducted partly or wholly in English, while certainly proclama-
tions and public sermons would have been delivered in the vernacular,
their textual forms in Latin and French were available to a wider
audience only through trained intermediaries.[3] And though scholastic

[2] J. H. Fisher provides the outline of a history of the transfer of official written language
from Latin and French to English briefly in 'A Language Policy for Lancastrian
England', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (hereafter *PMLA*)
107 (1992), 1168–80 (where he suggests that the change was a deliberate act of royal
policy aimed at widening the Lancastrian base of support), and at rather more length
in 'Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English in the Fifteenth
Century', *Speculum* 52 (1977), 870–99. Very little work has been done on the transfer
of academic argument to English, although A. Hudson (*The Premature Reformation:
Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford, 1988), 217–24) and M. Aston ('Wycliffe
and the Vernacular', in *Faith and Fire: Popular and Unpopular Religion, 1350–1600*
(London, 1993), 27–72, especially 66) have briefly discussed Wycliffite usage. On the
ways in which intellectual material more generally (and more loosely) was being
transferred to English see below, pp. 10–16.

[3] The difficulty in determining the language in which a text was spoken is always of
course that the language of record may differ from the language of delivery. For a
general introduction to this difficulty (though focused on the period 1066 to 1307) see
M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1993), 197–223. For a
judicious practical discussion of difficulties in determining the initial language of
Wycliffite works see A. Hudson, 'William Taylor's 1406 Sermon: A Postscript',
Medium Aevum 64 (1995), 100–6; 101–3. Where English words difficult to translate are
interspersed or English sections included in a document, use of English on the occasion
it records may safely be deduced. On some occasions, too, it is specified that English
was used. Fisher collects together occasions where the language of Parliament or of
legal process was clearly English, in 'Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written
English', 879–80. Leaving aside more mundane occasions where English words are

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clerics were frequently employed to defend the actions and policies of secular power, as when Wyclif was employed to defend royal officers' breach of sanctuary in a parliament held in Gloucester in 1378,[4] only other educated clerics would be expected to have the ability to evaluate, rather than simply to accept, their arguments.

Whereas if presented in Latin as a justification of the views of the king or certain lords, the passage with which we began would have amounted to no more than an argument for the disendowment of corrupt clergy on which those few to whom it was accessible might or might not choose to act, the English version cast as exhortation carries the potential for a much further reaching redistribution, if not dis-endowment, of social power. When made available in the vernacular the tract becomes potentially accessible to every person who can read English, and through those readers to an even wider audience of listen-ers. Along with the monetary disendowment of corrupt clergy that would ensue if lords acted upon its recommendation, this tract itself if presented to unprecedented audiences has the potential to redistribute intellectual capital by teaching lay audiences information previously inaccessible to them. There is even the possibility, if lay people learn from reading this sort of material how to formulate arguments them-selves and how to evaluate critically arguments presented to them, that it might accomplish a 'disendowment' of previously exclusively clerical intellectual skills. Further, as the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 was perhaps especially important in bringing to public notice, the presentation of polemic argument in English carries with it by virtue of its possible influence on even the lowest of the laity the potential for a redistribu-tion of secular power as well.[5]

probably included for no reason more significant than awkwardness of translation, S. Justice suggests that some clerics include material in English in their Latin writing out of extremes of outrage (*Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley, CA, 1994), esp. 13–66) or boredom ('Inquisition, Speech, and Writing: A Case from Medieval Norwich', *Representations* 48 (1994), 1–29; reprinted in R. Copeland, ed., *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1996), 289–322).

[4] See, most recently, A. Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 64, and the references to contemporary records and scholarly discussions of this incident cited there, nn. 28 and 29. On the sorts of public role clerics might play in political controversy see, most recently, J. Coleman, 'The Science of Politics and Late Medieval Academic Debate', in Copeland, ed., *Criticism and Dissent*, 181–214.

[5] On the importance of vernacular writing in the Peasants' Revolt see S. Justice, *Writing*

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Reserving for the moment the question of how the writer of this tract, and others like him, confront the potential implications of their unprecedented mode of address, it is worth considering what can be discerned about the actual dissemination of his tract, and the usefully characteristic methodological difficulties that question raises. There are two manuscripts of the English version of the 'Petition'. Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 296 (hereafter C) has the ending of another tract spliced onto it at Arnold's 520/18, whereas its own conclusion has been attached to the end of that other tract.[6] Dublin, Trinity College 244 (hereafter T) breaks off unfinished at Arnold's 520/17.[7] In addition, there is a single copy of a Latin version of the tract in a Florentine manuscript (hereafter F).[8] The English copies have been used as the basis of speculations about Lollard book production that would suggest the work was at minimum circulated amongst an audience of Lollard sympathizers: noting that the 'Petition' was added to the end of

and Rebellion; R. F. Green, 'John Ball's Letters: Literary History and Historical Literature', in B. A. Hanawalt, ed., *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context* (Minneapolis, 1992), 176–200; A. Hudson, '*Piers Plowman* and the Peasants' Revolt: A Problem Revisited', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 8 (1994), 85–106; S. Crane, 'The Writing Lesson of 1381', in Hanawalt, *Chaucer's England*, 201–21; and P. Strohm, '"A Revelle!": Chronicle Evidence and the Rebel Voice', in *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton, 1992), 33–56. R. Hanna III suggests in *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Stanford, 1996), 67–8, 239–41, that the possibilities of reaching a broad lay public, rather than a small coterie audience, by writing in the vernacular were first brought home to polemical writers following the Peasants' Revolt. Of course the extent to which writers may consider the potential consequences of vernacular audience continue to vary widely, and are not always congruent with practical possibility: for an object example compare chs. 4 and 5, and for a useful warning about the dangers of universalizing the experiences or perceptions of particular writers (with reference to the Oxford transla- tion debate of the early fifteenth century) see N. Watson, 'Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409', *Speculum* 70 (1995), 822–64; 847.

6 Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 296, ff. 288–297v line 20, continued at 170 line 35–172. The textual accident has been described by both Arnold, *Select English Works of Wyclif*, iii: 507–8, and F. D. Matthew (who prints the other tract involved), *The English Works of Wyclif Hitherto Unprinted*, EETS o.s. 74 (London, 1880), 187. An explanation has been suggested by R. Hanna III, 'Two Lollard Codices and Lollard Book-Production', *Studies in Bibliography* 43 (1990), 49–62; reprinted in R. Hanna III, *Pursuing History*, 48–59.

7 Dublin, Trinity College 244, ff. 141v–148v.

8 Florence, *Bibl. Laurent. Flor. Plut. xix cod. xxxiii*, ff. 23v–26v. For the most recent des- cription see I. H. Stein, 'The Wyclif Manuscript in Florence', *Speculum* 5 (1930), 95–7.

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C by a different scribe when the book had been completed, Hanna suggests that the exemplar the T and C scribes both used was made up of booklets at least some of which could be detached for separate circulation, and that the 'Petition' had in fact been separated for copying elsewhere when the main part of C was being copied.[9] The single copy of the Latin version appears, as its editor Stein pointedly mentions, in a manuscript that otherwise consists of what are certainly authentic works of Wyclif.[10] But neither internal evidence within the copies themselves nor annotation in the manuscripts gives us any precise indication of title, occasion, and date, or any ascription to an author.

Which came first, the English or the Latin? Who wrote the original version? Who translated and adapted it? When was each written? What audience did each reach, and does that audience differ from the projected audience addressed from within the tract? Here as so often, the questions that immediately arise require careful evaluation, and may finally be unanswerable.

Although the usual assumption in late medieval European studies is that Latin versions precede vernacular versions, since many Wycliffite texts were exported to Hussites in Europe after composition in England this assumption is never a safe one for Wycliffite works.[11] The evidence available for determining priority of composition among Wycliffite versions is, however, seldom easy to interpret. That the Latin version gives chapter and verse for the authorities it cites while the English merely names them may, for example, show that an English translator was simplifying for an audience that would not have access to the books named, but it might just as well show that a Latin translator was specifying sources for the benefit of a new audience abroad. Nor is Latinate syntax in an English text a reliable indication of clumsy translation from Latin: the language in which educated writers would have been trained in argumentation was invariably Latin, so that any English rendering of such idioms would involve at the very least mental translation. T and C, like most English Wycliffite tracts, include no form of ascription to an author or translator. And the

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[9] See R. Hanna III, 'Two Lollard Codices', esp. 56–9.
[10] See Stein, ed., 'Wyclif's Complaint'.   [11] See n. 3.

evidence for F is inconclusive: F ends 'Explicit bonus et utilis tractatus secundum magistrum Iohannem <erasure>'; but even if Stein is correct that the erasure removed 'Wiclefum', whether the force of *secundum* is to ascribe the text to Wyclif, to note that it was good and useful according to Wyclif, or to claim its goodness and usefulness are in accord with what Wyclif thought, is unclear.

What it is certainly safe to say is that there is no warrant, external or internal, for the nineteenth century title 'A Petition to King and Parliament', still less for the assertion, repeated by all the work's editors, that Wyclif presented the work to Parliament in 1382. None of the copies has a medieval title, and even C's sixteenth to seventeenth century title 'A complainte to the king and parliament' avoids any suggestion that the work was a petition presented formally in Parliament.[12] There is no record in any chronicle or in the Parliament rolls that Wyclif or anyone else presented any such petition; while the petition if presented and rejected might well be struck out of the official record, the incident would surely be notorious and could scarcely escape being reported somewhere.[13] The tract begins with the address 'Plese it to oure most noble and most worþi King Richard, kyng boþe of Englond and of Fraunce, and to þe noble Duk of Lancastre, and to oþere grete men of þe rewme, boþe to seculers and men of holi Chirche, þat ben gaderid in þe Parlement, to here, assent and meyntene þe fewe articlis or poyntis þat ben seet wiþinne þis writing, and proved boþe by auctorite and resoun . . .', but the tone throughout, and even here, is far more assertive and contentious than that conventionally found in a parliamentary petition. Like the

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12 Hanna dates the title written in the margin of C s. xvi to s. xvii ('Two Lollard Codices', 60).

13 Compare Walsingham's account of a proposal for disendowment put forward by knights of the shire and lords in the 1385 Parliament; Walsingham is pleased to report that Richard rejected the proposal and ordered that it should be destroyed rather than recorded (*Historia Anglicana,* 2 vols., ed. H. T. Riley (London, 1863–4), ii: 139–40). Walsingham and other chroniclers hostile to Lollardy would surely not have missed an opportunity to recount Richard's rejection of a petition by Wyclif: indeed it is surprising, given that there was a written version of a text by Wyclif or a Wycliffite that ostensibly addressed Parliament, that no account of its presentation was manufactured. On Walsingham's account see M. Aston, ' "Caim's Castles": Poverty, Politics, and Disendowment', in *Faith and Fire*, 95–131; 109, and see also 108, where she briefly discusses the 'Petition' and notes its indeterminate dating.

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Introduction

Wycliffite *Twelve Conclusions* of 1395, the 'Petition' seems designed for and perhaps even brought to the attention of Parliament, yet not cast in the accepted supplicatory form of documents officially presented to Parliament.[14] Rather than describing a wrong and seeking a remedy as a parliamentary petition conventionally would, the writer seeks to prove to the king and nobles that they are bound to act as he recommends.

Still, the purpose of recognizing the flimsiness of the nineteeth century assertions made about this tract is not to substitute for them a series of corrosive denials leading to the conclusion that there is no reason to give the tract any further attention. Rather, the aim is to pursue another set of possibilities that previous false certainties have tended to obscure, by giving due attention to the distance between the tract's actual and projected audiences, and to oddities and inconsistencies in its address to its projected audience. The tract's address to the king and influential laity breaks with the conventions of parliamentary petition, and indeed is rather too assertive even for the general designation 'complaint' assigned it by the title in C; further, what we know of its dissemination seems to indicate that it circulated amongst another limited vernacular circle entirely. Even if the gap between the tract's actual and projected audiences can never be accurately measured, acknowledging that it must be there – that even if the audience addressed is identical to the text's first audience, the writer cannot fail to be conscious of the possibilities of writing in the vernacular – opens up a space for us to consider other questions.

Why does the tract use such thoroughly academic language in its attempt to convince this ostensibly parliamentary audience? How does the writer's mode of address function to place the tract, and even its writer, in a novel social position? Why should this writer, or a group of Wycliffites, have chosen *this* tract, with its relatively narrow scope of address, to be disseminated in two languages in connection with what

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[14] On the *Twelve Conclusions* see ch. 4, esp. pp. 103–6. A comprehensive introduction to procedures and formats for parliamentary petitions may be found in J. Roskell, *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1386–1421*, 4 vols. (Stroud, 1992), i: 76–102; the proceedings of parliaments held during the reigns of Richard II and Henry IV are edited in J. Strachey, ed., *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, 6 vols. (London, 1767–77), iii.

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seems to have been a well organized system for textual distribution and copying? Questions like these – to do with the kinds of academic material imported into English in argumentative contexts and the kinds of audiences explicitly or implicitly projected by writers for that material; with how writers position themselves in relation to their audiences and opponents; and with the conjunction or lack of it between those factors and what we know about the dissemination and readership of a given work – are the ones with which this study will chiefly be concerned.[15]

I locate this study at the point when the transfer of official legal and administrative information from French or Latin to English had scarcely begun, and when the translation into English of any scientific or philosophical material, let alone the academic topics 'extraclergial' writers draw on, was still far from routine. Much interesting work has been done on the larger historical processes amid which I place this study, and much yet remains to be done. While Fisher has traced the emergence of English as the official written language of government in the fifteenth century, and has linked this emergence with the pro-motion of Chaucer as the pre-eminent late medieval English poet that began from about 1400, he ignores entirely the unofficial and even illicit dissemination of controversial material in English before as well as after 1400, and discounts records of lay ownership of English works and translations before 1400.[16] Increasingly, however, it is recognized that the 'official' written language Fisher traces emerged oppositionally: the legitimation of some kinds and contexts of written English tended to suppress or delegitimate others. And we know a great deal more about those other kinds of written English than we did. Evidence for Wycliffite production in English has been extensively studied by Anne Hudson and Margaret Aston.[17] Ralph Hanna, as well as Anne

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[15] For further discussion of the 'Petition', see ch. 3, pp. 80–1.

[16] See 'A Language Policy', 1170.

[17] See especially Hudson's 'Lollardy: The English Heresy?', *Studies in Church History* 18 (1982), 261–83, reprinted in A. Hudson, *Lollards and Their Books* (London, 1985), 141–63; as well as 'Wyclif and the English Language', in A. Kenny, ed., *Wyclif in his Times* (Oxford, 1986), 85–103; and Aston's 'Lollardy and Sedition, 1381–1431', and 'Lollardy and Literacy', in *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London, 1984), 1–47 and 193–217, and 'Wycliffe and the Vernacular', in *Faith and Fire*, 27–72.