PART I

The invention of heresy

CHAPTER 1

The Blackfriars Council, London, 1382

> And so monye traveylon in veyn to wyte how heretykis schulden be knowone. anon. Wycliffite preacher[1]

A book on heresy and late medieval literature must deal immediately with a problem – namely, that it appears counter-intuitive to claim that authors would engage in any positive fashion with a heresy that was publicly and frequently deemed to be scandalous and, eventually, punishable by death. In handling what is fundamentally an historical problem, we are required to think historically and revisit that momentous occasion, 17–21 May 1382, when the Blackfriars Council in London condemned as heretical and erroneous twenty-four distinct ideas or conclusions that were advanced by a group of scholars at Oxford University. Literary critics have viewed this event as a defining moment for late medieval writing with the understanding that the Blackfriars Council is synonymous with literary censorship. After the ruling of the Council, so the thinking commonly goes, authors policed themselves, making sure that their statements about the church, its ministers, and its sacraments, would not draw notice to themselves – lest the authorities, in wishing to silence anything short of utter orthodoxy, step in and persecute these authors as heretics.[2]

William Langland has become the case in point. James Simpson, who has offered a compelling exploration of the intersection between ecclesiastical initiatives and late medieval writing, concludes that "royal and ecclesiastical legislation against slanderous rumour and heresy, as spoken or written, certainly did exist in the period spanning" 1378 to 1401. "We can go further and say," Simpson continues, "that the 30 years or so from 1378 witnessed the increasing intensity of such legislation. *Piers Plowman* B stands, that is, on the borders of a period of active repression."[3] Langland, he suggests, wrote within a context that put "constraints" on his satire, keeping him from exploring issues, Wycliffite or otherwise, that the church condemned. Simpson considers a range of ecclesiastical pronouncements including but not limited to those of the Blackfriars Council, and he seeks

to be provisional in his conclusions, but the upshot – especially in work after Simpson – is that ecclesiastical proclamations govern the poet's reflections on theological topics. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, for instance, amplifies Simpson's conclusion about "a period of active repression" in arguing that Langland revised his poem with the Blackfriars condemnations in mind:[4] "the creeping political and ecclesiastical intimidation . . . limited what he felt able to say on the subject of socio-political oppression and clerical abuse."[5] And what goes for Langland goes for all: "everyone associated with a censored work – author, publisher, even (in cases of heresy) an individual reader – could be punished by the authorities."[6] These are important contributions to Langland scholarship, but they seem to assume that the publication of ecclesiastical pronouncements wishing for uniform orthodoxy is the same as the enforcement of said pronouncements – a rare kind of enforcement that typically involves a committee of theologians tasked to read the usually academic writing of a single author (not groups of authors) to make sure it hews to theological correctness.[7] Enactment is not enforcement, in other words, nor is it an "illocutionary act" in which the saying is the doing (as we will see below, the saying is always in excess of the doing). Yet with such a generalized sense about the Blackfriars Council and its cultural work, it is not surprising that scholars regard enactment as "active and vigorous prosecution": "In the 1380s, Langland's entire enterprise looks altogether too much like the vernacular theologizing and unauthorized teaching of Scripture against which the ecclesiastical authorities directed not only heightened suspicion, but active and vigorous prosecution," writes Anne Middleton.[8] These critical ideas, it can be acknowledged, are parenthetical to other claims about Langland in context and are largely premised on impressions about what motivates the poet to move toward theological conservatism in each revision of *Piers Plowman* (a view to be questioned in Chapters 2 and 3). All the more reason, then, that a study that looks directly at the Blackfriars Council – its legal strategies, its ambitions, and its cultural work – is in order. Only after such an investigation can we be clear about the Council's impact on late medieval writing, Langlandian or otherwise.

Before I begin, however, it would be helpful to set the parameters of this investigation. My account of the Blackfriars Council omits any extended consideration of the earlier attempts between 1377 and 1381 to condemn Wyclif, chiefly because Wyclif himself was never named in the proceedings at Blackfriars nor was he ever brought to trial during its sessions. Despite the fact that the Council condemned a set of conclusions drawn from his works, it had other fish to fry in the likes of persons at

Oxford who were defending Wyclif and advancing his views. I have omitted a full consideration of these early prosecutions for three other reasons. First, there remains barely any paper trail of these earlier events, besides chroniclers' accounts, which are not only uncorroborated by other primary texts but which at points fuse sources and thus confuse our understanding of what happened.[9] The documents that do survive – such as Pope Gregory XI's 1377 bulls to various English authorities urging them to arrest Wyclif and bring him to trial – themselves color the historical narratives about the heresiarch's casuistry and escape from persecution in these earlier episodes.[10] (Below and in subsequent chapters, I will discuss how chroniclers narrate, redact, or embellish ecclesiastical documents.) Second, owing to the paucity of documents, it seems close to impossible to present new information about Wyclif's travails between this period of time, 1377–1381, besides the helpful accounts already in print to which readers can be referred.[11] Third, and most importantly, the Blackfriars Council of 1382 got right what the earlier attempts got wrong: Archbishop William Courtenay and members of his council figured out a way to overcome the jurisdictional distinctions between church and university that always protected Wyclif, who in his lifetime was never condemned as a heretic. Indeed, they devised a method to attract even the king's attention to a group of Oxford men who were carrying Wyclif's polemic torch. To these events and persons we now turn.

WYCLIFFITE PREACHERS REDUX

We may approach the Blackfriars Council knowing that Wycliffism was an academic heresy, based in Oxford, and that this heresy somehow became popular outside of the university. The critical problem was well formulated by James Crompton – how do we "relate an intellectual movement to a popular movement"? – but we may now turn this formulation on its axis and point it to the English Middle Ages and specifically to the work of Archbishop Courtenay.[12] As the former Bishop of London, Courtenay himself was part of the processes after 1377 to stifle Wyclif, and it is his legal methods as archbishop – methods that were perfected after the failures of others – that will be the subject of study here. Here is my thesis: Courtenay understood that the best way to curtail academic heresies, which were up to this point yet another form of inter-faculty dispute at Oxford beyond the intervention of outsiders, would be to approach Wycliffism as extra-university dissent, using the anti-heresy images and ideas found in canon law to render the Oxford Wycliffites as

heretical preachers spreading doctrinal depravities outside of Oxford.[13] By this method, the archbishop brought Wycliffism onto his jurisdictional turf and in the process brought the heresy to what can be called the national attention – "national," in so far as the condemnation of Wycliffite teachings was circulated in every diocese, posted on church doors, and read out in sermons; "national," also in the sense that he succeeded in getting the king to issue a mandate against the university and parliament to issue a statute against Wycliffite preachers almost always identified as a core group of Oxonians: Nicholas Hereford, Philip Repingdon, John Aston, and Lawrence Bedeman. Indeed, the success of Courtenay's strategy to render these Oxford Wycliffites as poisoners of the entire realm can be measured by the enormous claims made by many chroniclers about the utter ubiquity of Wycliffites. Of the year 1382, the very same year of the Blackfriars Council, Henry Knighton observes: "Creuit populus credencium in ista doctrina et quasi germinantes multiplicati sunt nimis et impleuerunt ubique orbem regni, et adeo domestici facti sunt acsi essent de uno die procreati [The numbers believing in those doctrines increased, and as it were bred and multiplied greatly, and they filled the land, and peopled it as though they were begotten in a single day]."[14] Knighton's contemporaries saw things similarly. One observer explains that in 1382 these Wycliffite preachers were "unto the nowmbre of cc., some prechynge abowte Oxenforde and in diverse cuntres."[15] Something about Courtenay's strategies worked in shaping public opinion – particularly the opinion of those who would read the archbishop's mandates and elaborate on their ambitions, as most of the chroniclers did.

My contribution to our understanding of Archbishop Courtenay's strategy can be stated specifically against the background of scholarship in history and literature. Scholars agree that the Blackfriars Council met, in large part, to curtail Wycliffite preaching outside the bounds of the university. Versions of this idea characterize the best scholarship on Wycliffism – from H. G. Richardson's earlier paper on the official responses to Wycliffism to J. H. Dahmus's *The Persecution of John Wyclyf*; from Anne Hudson's research in "Wycliffism in Oxford 1381–1411" to Jeremy Catto's substantial contribution to *The History of the University of Oxford*; from A. K. McHardy's findings in "The Dissemination of Wyclif's Ideas" to Margaret Aston's study.[16] All of these opinions were once themselves revisionist in their modification of the earlier claims of H. L. Cannon and H. B. Workman, who held that Wyclif beckoned into Oxford "poor priests" to train in the ways of Wycliffism and send out as evangelical foot soldiers.[17] Yet something of Cannon's and Workman's

older theses remains in modern criticism. While we now know that Wyclif's many references to "poor priests" in his sermons and tracts are not motivational speeches for his squads of "lollards" waiting in the wings to do their master's bidding, we still accept that Wyclif's Oxford disciples took their message out of the university on "notorious preaching tours" at a time when they were still comfortably situated there.[18] That opinion has stood as fact largely because scholars have not explored the purposes of, much less challenged the assertions of, the archiepiscopal and episcopal prohibitions (or "inhibitions") against heretical preachers that went out during and after the first important session of the Blackfriars Council. I would submit that the documents related to the Blackfriars Council, even what is left of them, urge us to reconsider precisely how, and why, academic Wycliffism was viewed as a dangerous heresy infecting the realm entire through errant preaching activities. Simply, the documents ought to be read in a way that is attentive to the processes and politics of canon law, the memorability of canonical images and phrases, and major avenues of publication available to ecclesiastical pronouncements.[19] They beg for such a reading.

ARCHBISHOP COURTENAY'S HERETICS AND USURPERS

Hardly a day after he received the archiepiscopal pallium, William Courtenay issued a summons on 6 May 1382 calling for a convocation at the Blackfriars (or Dominican) house in London.[20] Bishops, friars from the four orders, doctors of canon and civil law, masters and bachelors of theology from Oxford and Cambridge, and the warden of Merton Hall assembled on 17 May to assess the orthodoxy of twenty-four Wycliffite conclusions – though no person's name was attached to them. On 21 May, the Council determined ten propositions to be heretical, and fourteen to be erroneous. England got its heresy. Courtenay ensured that there would be widespread knowledge about the Wycliffite heresy because, on 30 May, he circulated, through the many channels of publication at his disposal, the signal document that reports on the deliberations at Blackfriars. It is a rhetorically powerful document, as its preamble betrays:

> Ecclesiarum praelati circa gregis dominici sibi commissi custodiam eo vigilantius intendere debent, quo lupos intrinsecus, ovium vestimentis indutos, ad rapiendum et dispergendum oves noverint fraudulentius circuire. Sane frequenti clamore et divulgata fama, quod dolentes referimus, ad nostrum pervenit auditum, quod, licet secundum canonicas sanctiones nemo prohibitus, vel non missus, absque sedis apostolicae vel episcopi loci auctoritate sibi praedicationis officium usurpare

debeat publice vel occulte; quidam tamen aeternae damnationis filii, in insaniam mentis producti, sub magnae sanctitatis velamine auctoritatem sibi vendicant praedicandi, ac nonnullas propositiones et conclusiones infrascriptas haereticas, erroneas, atque falsas.[21]

[The prelates of churches in protecting the lord's flock committed to them should endeavor to be watchful for those [eo] who, dressed in sheep's clothing, deceitfully wander about to seize and disperse the sheep. Truly, according to frequent cry and widespread opinion [*fama*], which we address with sorrow, it has come to our attention that, even though according to canonical sanctions no one who is prohibited or not sent ought to usurp to themselves the office of preaching, in public or in private, without the authority of the apostolic see or the bishop of the diocese, some sons of eternal damnation, nevertheless, led by insanity of mind, assume for themselves the right to preach, under pretense of great sanctity, certain propositions and conclusions listed below, heretical, erroneous, and false.]

Alluding to Matthew 7.15 ("adtendite a falsis prophetis qui veniunt ad vos in vestimentis ovium [Beware of false prophets, who come to you in the clothing of sheep]"), Courtenay draws up the memorable figure of the heretic or heretics whose deceptive infamies are known far and wide (*fama*). There is, however, no clearer indication of Courtenay's interest in the canonical definitions of heresy than in the opening claim of his mandate: "according to canonical sanctions no one who is prohibited or not sent ought to usurp to themselves the office of preaching, in public or in private, without the authority of the apostolic see or the bishop of the diocese."[22] Here, Courtenay cites a cliché from canon law about heretics, as found under the title, "De haereticis," of the *Decretals*:

Quia vero nonnulli sub specie pietatis virtutem eius, iuxta quod Apostolus ait, abnegantes, auctoritatem sibi vendicant praedicandi, quum idem Apostolus dicat: "Quomodo praedicabunt, nisi mittantur?" omnes, qui prohibiti, vel non missi, praeter auctoritatem ab apostolica sede vel catholico episcopo loci suspectam, publice vel privatim praedicationis officium usurpare praesumpserint, excommunicationis vinculo innodentur, et nisi quam citius resipuerint, alia competenti poena plectentur.[23]

[In truth, as the Apostle says, there are some who under the form of piety, yet denying that piety, recommend for themselves the authority to preach, whereas the same Apostle says, "How shall they preach unless they are sent?" [Romans 10.15] Let all who have been forbidden or not sent to preach, without the authority of the apostolic see or the catholic bishop of the diocese, but who still presume publicly or privately to usurp the office of preaching, be fastened by the fetter of excommunication and, unless they speedily repent, be punished by another suitable penalty.]

In applying to the Wycliffites the canonical formula concerning those who "usurp to themselves the office of preaching," Courtenay is not necessarily accusing Wyclif and the Wycliffites of reviving heresies of a distinctly academic or scholastic kind à la Berengar, as many of his contemporaries were wont to do. Rather, he is affiliating Wycliffism with a different and potentially more troublesome sort of heresy – the sort of heresy traditionally seen to proliferate among the laity by means of illegal, unlicensed preachers. Such a heresy, not surprisingly, can be found in the *Decretals* under "de haereticis." For instance, in the early thirteenth century, the Bishop of Metz, Étienne Bourbon, complained to Innocent III about Peter Waldo and his so-called Waldensian usurpers in his dioceses, preaching scripture in the vernacular; the pope replied to him at length in a letter that was compiled in "de haereticis."[24] If there was ever a theme of this title within the *Decretals*, it would be concerns about persons "usurping the office of preacher."[25]

There is no doubt that Courtenay is addressing outrages at Oxford – particularly some scandalous sermonizing at that university.[26] Legally speaking, however, his declarations about Wycliffites "usurping the office of preacher" are off target: there never would be "usurping" preachers within the university because there is no office of an episcopally licensed preacher to usurp, nor are there the limits of a parish within the university to violate. All matters of preaching at Oxford are subject to university statutes, which govern where sermons are to be delivered and the kinds of sermon to be preached, be they a *sermo examinatorius* (given by bachelors before inception to the master's degree) or a *sermo generalis* (an assigned public sermon preached by both bachelors and masters).[27] Indeed, there was always plenty of polemic preaching at the university, but such preaching was seen as disputation and was authorized by sources other than a bishop, such as the university chancellor.[28] It is also worth noting, in order to flesh out this inquiry, that there are no reports of Oxford Wycliffites disrupting sacramental ceremonies within chantries in town, as later reports would have it, nor are there accounts of any academic Wycliffites administering the sacraments in a patently heretical way, such that this canonical language would apply. And despite the fact that contemporaries would lament that Wycliffites have overtaken Oxford (with armed men assisting them and intimidating the archbishop's representative), Courtenay never spoke of Wycliffite secret societies or "conventicles" at Oxford – another precise canonical term used to describe covert church services within a diocese but outside the parish church.[29] Nor did he respond to preaching and disputational

controversies by issuing preaching licenses to certain members of the university, as did Archbishop Arundel some years later so as to facilitate investigations into heresy.[30] This is all to say that Courtenay had a different concern – namely, to overcome the restrictions that jurisdictional differences between the church and university had always imposed on him and his predecessors. He did so by rendering the academic heresy of Wycliffism, as fully articulated in the condemned twenty-four conclusions, as primarily a heresy espoused by preachers, as suggested in his preamble: "some sons of eternal damnation . . . assume for themselves the right to preach, under pretense of great sanctity, certain propositions and conclusions listed below, heretical, erroneous, and false." Whereas traditionally the canonical phrasing about persons "usurping the office of preacher" was aimed at either keeping the laity from preaching or defending the rights of parish priests against unlicensed friars, Courtenay is applying the phrase in order to declare that the Wycliffites were heretics within his jurisdiction and subject to his authority and correction ("the authority of the apostolic see"). He, simply, had had enough of scholastic heretics, and the limited denotations of "heresy" and "heretic" within the university context.[31] And for his actions against the university to be successful, he had to raise the stakes above and beyond the university itself.

It would seem that what I have highlighted here so far about "usurping preachers" would confirm the usual story – that the Blackfriars Council met, in part, to curtail Wycliffite preaching beyond Oxford. Yet the facticity of that claim begins to blur when we examine precisely how Courtenay offered the documentary or evidentiary "proof" about the reports (the aforementioned "fama") concerning the usurpers, Wycliffites. Enter the bishops. If Peter McNiven is right to characterize the Blackfriars Council as a "hand-picked synod" – and, of course, it was – then we must wonder why there were bishops present at all, since the task of judging conclusions would be left to the many qualified academics at the meeting itself.[32] It falls short to speculate that "the bishops happened to be in the neighborhood of London" and were "asked . . . to sit in with the council in order to lend impressiveness to the decisions."[33] If Courtenay were hand-picking participants, then even a superficial knowledge of English politics would indicate that he chose wisely in tapping, among others, Bishop William Wykeham, a man who would join Courtenay in placing the Wycliffites beyond Oxford and raising the stakes so high that the secular arm itself could not help but respond.

BISHOP WYKEHAM AT BLACKFRIARS, WYCLIFFITES AT ODIHAM

Wykeham was no stranger to the largest matters of the realm, serving as Chancellor of England and Keeper of the Privy Seal under Edward III.[34] Perhaps it is inevitable that an ecclesiast of his stature in the 1370s would find himself drawn to the notoriously vocal Wyclif, as had already been the case with Archbishop Simon Sudbury and the then Bishop of London, Courtenay. Granted, Wykeham's confrontation with Wyclif draws us to an area of English history that still needs greater study, but some reference to the relevant events can shed light on the problem of why Wykeham would end up being a key figure in Courtenay's efforts at the Blackfriars Council.

The backstory on Wykeham pertains to the controversies involving the circumscription of Edward III's power at the Good Parliament of 1376. Wykeham was a member (one of four bishops) of the new royal council formed at the Good Parliament and apparently led an effort, in council, to pursue charges of corruption against the king's former councilors (such as William, Lord Latimer). Yet John of Gaunt and his sympathizers in the same council sought to limit Wykeham's influence by bringing eight charges against the bishop concerning the abuse of the office of chancellor. In November, Wykeham stood trial before a commission of peers, privy councilors, and fellow bishops.[35] Charged with one offense, his temporalities were seized.[36] Our William Courtenay, then a bishop, intervened on behalf of his colleague and at a February convocation persuaded the bishops that "the attack on Wykeham" was "an attack upon themselves and upon the church."[37] Courtenay, in retaliation, began to trouble a man that contemporaries perceived to be one of Gaunt's own, a theologian who would endorse the seizing of church temporalities and impugn the excesses of princely bishops like Wykeham. That theologian was John Wyclif, who would likely be pleased that Wykeham was dispossessed.[38] Wyclif was summoned to appear before Courtenay and convocation at St. Paul's on 19 February. Gaunt himself, in what is now a well-known ploy, called four doctors of theology to assist the Oxford theologian's defense.[39] The trial – if it can even be called that – was abortive: Gaunt and Courtenay exchanged unpleasantries, riots broke out in London, but Wykeham eventually got his privileges back, thanks eventually to Archbishop Sudbury's mediation.[40]

So much for Wykeham's earlier involvement in the affairs of Courtenay and Wyclif. It would seem too convenient to say that Wykeham owed