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LITERATURE AND HERESY IN THE AGE OF CHAUCER

After the late fourteenth century, English literature was fundamentally shaped by the heresy of John Wyclif and his followers. This study demonstrates how Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland, John Clanvowe, Margery Kempe, Thomas Hoccleve and John Lydgate, far from eschewing Wycliffism out of fear of censorship or partisan distaste, viewed Wycliffite ideas as a distinctly new intellectual resource. Andrew Cole offers the only complete historical account of the first official condemnation of Wycliffism – the Blackfriars Council of 1382 – and the fullest study of "Lollardy" as a social and literary construct. Drawing on literary criticism, history, theology, and law, he presents not only a fresh perspective on late medieval literature, but also an invaluable rethinking of the Wycliffite heresy. *Literature and Heresy* restores Wycliffism to its proper place as the most significant context for late medieval English writing, and thus for the origins of English literary history.

ANDREW COLE is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Georgia.

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For my parents,
Bill and Joan Cole

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We have to look for new words about God which express the old faith because we have to argue with heretics. Aquinas

You can destroy spontaneity and produce a literature which is orthodox but feeble, or you can let people say what they choose and take the risk that some of them will utter heresies. Orwell

The constructive use of riches is better than their possession.
Fortune Cookie, Golden Sun Restaurant, Athens, GA

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Preface

This book intervenes in a field that is as old as the earliest English literary biographers, such as John Bale and John Leland, and as new as the spate of recent work coming from scholars in departments of history, theology, philosophy, literature, and language.[1] The field concerns the study of late medieval English heresy, and the heresy in question is Wycliffism, a reformist movement oriented around the teachings of the Oxford theologian John Wyclif (d.1384). Wyclif and his followers sought great changes in the church's sacramental practices and ecclesiastical structures. They insisted, for example, that the eucharist – by far the most important of devotional forms – was needlessly mystified by the church. Specifically, they claimed that the church rationalized its own power by obscuring the significance and symbolism of the sacrament as Jesus had intended it in the Gospels: a sign of his imminent and lasting sacrifice, and not a priestly legerdemain that produces Christ's bloody, crucified body under the appearance of bread to be consumed in Mass. They also argued that the church was mesmerized by temporalities – worldly possessions, episcopal palaces, accumulated livings – and that the only way to bring that institution to a recognition of its spiritual charge would be to effect its complete disendowment at the hands of the secular arm, redistributing its resources to the poor and into the foundation of new grammar schools and universities. It comes hardly as a shock, then, that the church adjudged these and other teachings to be heretical and erroneous at a provincial synod in 1382, the Blackfriars Council – a modern name in reference to the location of the Council itself at the Blackfriars house in London. After this public condemnation, and from the mid-1380s on, many persons attacked Wycliffites in English and Latin sermons, poems, and prose texts by dismantling their ideas and calling their adherents "lollards" – a neologism to England that loosely meant "heretic." Yet despite all these attempts to quash Wycliffism, it was influential in an oddly unique way: somehow this academic heresy became popular from

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the mid-1380s on, spreading with increasing diversity among the peasantry and gentry alike. Wycliffite ideas were finding more and more expression in religious books written in English, as opposed to Latin. On account of the continued influence of Wycliffism among the laity, the church – specifically, successive archbishops of Canterbury – sought further measures to eradicate it, inaugurating the fifteenth century with morbid business: the execution by burning of a priest accused of eucharistic heresy, William Sawtre, in 1401. That ultimate penalty, which would be applied numerous times over the course of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, marked the beginning of the end of what some rightly call the "premature reformation."

Our summary of Wycliffism can stop here, for much of it will be challenged in this book – from the scholarly consensus about the first important ecclesiastical response to this heresy, the Blackfriars Council, to the very word used to harass Wycliffites in medieval England but still employed transparently by modern scholars as if it had little ideological, much less theological, significance: "lollard."[2] Indeed, this book offers a series of interventions on a number of topics within Middle English studies, including questions concerning the genesis of heretical identities out of the dialectic of the accuser and the accused (Chapters 1, 2, 3), the gray areas between orthodoxy and heterodoxy (Chapter 3), the limits of censorship and the politics of the vernacular (Chapters 1, 4, 5, 7), the importance of affective forms (Chapter 7), and the afterlife of Wycliffism within English literary history (Epilogue). Yet this book also presents some unnoticed literary, typological, and hermeneutic features of Wycliffism through a study of non-Wycliffite authors: William Langland, Geoffrey Chaucer, Thomas Hoccleve, John Lydgate, and Margery Kempe. The rationale for bringing together such a diverse set of writers is to fill a critical need: most of the work on late medieval English dissent, especially that which appears in monographs, either sidelines Wycliffism for the sake of continental traditions of prophetic dissent or views it as a subset of larger cultural problems.[3] Those studies that do focus specifically on dissent largely explore authors who are canonically minor within the teaching and, for the most part, research of English literature.[4] These are all important studies that have shaped the field, and there is no artificial charge here that such work should have been focused elsewhere. Rather, the canonical focus of this book encourages an opening out of questions about the relevance of Wycliffism to literary culture and, as I conclude in my Epilogue, to literary history – a relevance doubted by a number of scholars outside of Wycliffite studies looking in and asking, Why

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Wycliffism? Have we not heard enough about "lollards"? The total argument of this book is that each author studied here supplies strikingly different angles from which to view Wycliffism as an ideologically diverse and aesthetically enabling feature of late medieval literary culture and politics. *Literature and Heresy* will not assess these authors' "response" to Wycliffism, which inevitably is a passive kind of claim involving Wycliffites who act and others who react, a claim undergirded by the mistaken idea that Wycliffism was somehow "outside" of mainstream literary and interpretive communities. Rather, it will seek to discover the making of Wycliffism and "lollardy" in the hands of authors who adopted Wycliffite terms and ideas that in many cases – such as Langland's – then became a cultural norm. In such appropriations can we see that Wycliffism, in its own right and by its influences, is one of the central forces that shaped English literary history.

The prevailing historical method of this book will involve what is perhaps an unfashionable kind of reading, given the recent tendency in criticism to dissolve periodizing distinctions between medieval and Renaissance, whereby continuities trump ruptures and become in themselves grand narratives. What I offer here instead is an argument for a certain "break" in late medieval writing – not in the effort to supply my own narrative about a fundamentally new historical period but rather to offer a more modest account that loosely conforms to what Fredric Jameson proposes as "a break without a period" – a way of assessing what is new in a given historic moment without rushing to announce larger periodizing ideas about what is "medieval," proto-modern, or even modern about a given set of texts or cultural practices.[5] I argue that when Wycliffism appeared in late medieval England, writers began to engage older topics in new ways, conferring onto the resulting literatures an indelibly post-Wycliffite character. Each author in this study offers testimony to that claim. In researching this book, I began with those pressing diachronic questions ranging from the history of mysticism to the history of translation theory, antifraternalism, and canon law and heresy persecutions – to name but a few examples. My considerations of these large topics are available both in the main text of this book and in the notes, but the diachronic evidence always in my mind pointed to the *difference* between an earlier, pre-Wycliffite moment and the one under study here – the post-Wycliffite age of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The relevance of Wycliffism asserts itself most forcefully through its difference and novelty, and such novelty in late medieval England was often seen as "heresy" and castigated in terms that attempt to mollify the shock of the new.[6]

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It should take no special pleading or argumentative periodizing to suggest that Wycliffism brings something new to late medieval writing that would not have been possible at a prior moment, before Wycliffism. Oftentimes, however, it does require constant positioning and qualification when arguing about – say – a Wycliffite influence in Chaucer. For it is so often the case that an objector stands up to ask, "Are you saying Chaucer is a 'lollard'?!" Let it be understood here that my goal is not to out any literary great as a "lollard," and, as will be clear in the discussion of "lollardy" below, the question itself is tiresomely simplistic and tangential. My task in this book is to end the special pleading and nuance the questions we ask. It is to open things up and posit the necessity of Wycliffism to the English literary canon. Indeed, this book shows that the authors who comprise not only our canon but the late medieval canons as well (Langland, Chaucer, Lydgate, Hoccleve, especially, were all popular authors) must be read in the Wycliffite context for us to gain a fuller understanding of the topics they explore in their works and the literary, intellectual, and ethical stakes in writing them. This book also recommends that we change our critical terminology in discussing English heresy and cease using a term that is both ideologically problematic and nostalgic – "lollard." As will be immediately obvious, my use of the terms "lollard" and "Wycliffite" departs from professional conventions (which see these terms as synonyms) on the conviction that the historical evidence suggests different meanings for each. If my phraseology, such as "Langlandian 'lollardy'" or "Geoffrey Chaucer's Wycliffite text," produces an estrangement effect long enough for us to rethink our critical paradigms and seek new ways to think about Wycliffism and its influence, then that is the most one can ask for.

This book begins with a foundational episode in English politics and religion – something of an originary moment for Wyclif and his followers, whose assorted views were condemned as heresy: the Blackfriars Council of 1382. There are many introductions to Wycliffism dealing with this event, and an infinite number of references to this Council in Middle English studies. Yet the plurality of studies and references has led to a narrowing familiarity with this Council and, consequently, has either mystified its political and legal implications or reduced them to one buzz word: censorship. The first chapter, therefore, offers what has long been needed in historical and literary scholarship – a description of how Archbishop William Courtenay used the resources of his administration to bring the Wycliffite heresy to national attention. Chapter 2 explores Langland's relation to the most visible form of anti-Wycliffite polemic in

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the wake of the Blackfriars Council – namely, the discourse of "lollardy." Langland, I argue, ranks among the first authors to neutralize this polemic and offer in the C text of *Piers Plowman* what remains the most searching case study of "lollardy" as a construct and social form. In Chapter 3, this investigation continues with an assessment of the poet's relationship to the Wycliffite appropriation of "lollardy," whereby the typology of the "lollard" becomes idealized and shared among a number of Wycliffite and non-Wycliffite authors alike. Chapter 4 evaluates the Wycliffite significances of Chaucerian vernacularity. In arguing that Chaucer was a close reader of a specific Wycliffite text on translation, this chapter considers some adjacent but important questions. Did the Blackfriars Council place a pall upon vernacular writing itself? Did the authorities consider English writing as inherently heretical such that non-Wycliffite authors feared retribution from censors if they chose English as their medium? After surveying the evidence, I answer "no" and elaborate on this claim by discussing how Chaucer's circle presented the poet opportunities to read and cite English Wycliffite texts with impunity.

Chapters 5 and 6, on Hoccleve and Lydgate respectively, turn to later ecclesiastical (and secular) events. Chapter 5 reassesses Hoccleve's relation to two major persecutions in the fifteenth century – the burning of John Badby in 1410 (the first layperson to be executed for eucharistic heresy) and the trial of Sir John Oldcastle in 1413, the subsequent hunt for the escaped heretic, and his execution in 1417. Hoccleve, it will be argued, differs from the legal and chronicle publications that portray these events as orthodox triumphs. Engagingly, he cites but revises the public record about the trials and persecutions of Wycliffites and, in so doing, assumes postures of pity and mercy that are authentically sympathetic with Wycliffism but foreclosed in the recorded orthodox staging of these trials. Chapter 6 attends to Lydgate's handling of the most problematic theological issue of his day – the eucharist – and shows that the poet explores the possibilities of eucharistic theology by rejecting the mainstream, juridically orthodox interpretation and adapting a uniquely historically informed model that reasserts the relevance of form and figural interpretation. The final chapter on Margery Kempe brings this book nearly full circle, returning us to the issues of Chapters 2 and 3 – "lollardy" – but viewing this typology as an affective form. Kempe embraces the identity of the persecuted "lollard" in order to make salient her own affective investments in being "shamed" for Christ through persecution. This chapter then moves to expand these affective considerations in an examination of what is perhaps the most topically loaded

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moment in the *Book*: Kempe's encounter with the former Wycliffite, Bishop Philip Repingdon. Kempe appears to be fascinated by Repingdon, whose own status as a recanted heretic serves as an example of how the categories of orthodoxy and heterodoxy can be productively fused and intentionally confused within a larger discourse of shame.

Collectively, these chapters suggest that the major anti-Wycliffite persecutions from the Blackfriars Council to the burning of Badby, to Archbishop Thomas Arundel's Constitutions, do not produce the cultural effects we would assume – a dampening down of ideas, a disinterest in vernacularity, and a quashing of experimentation in theology and literary form. Indeed, much of the evidence suggests that the major ecclesiastical and secular initiatives against Wycliffism did not succeed as planned and in some instances had the opposite effect of making this heresy an item of great and lasting interest.

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Cathy Dailey – artist, best friend, and fellow-traveler with whom life is always full and fun – helped me complete this book with her unquantifiable forms of support and love. My family supported me in all things for many years. My brother and sister, Wes and Harriet, have always at the right time been more like friends than family. And my parents, Bill and Joan, gave me a good upbringing primarily by letting me learn in my own way and wander to places both real and imaginative. To these two sweet, gentle souls, I dedicate this book.

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Abbreviations

EWS	*English Wycliffite Sermons*, 5 vols., ed. Anne Hudson and Pamela Gradon. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983–96.
FZ	*Fasciculi Zizaniorum Magistri Johannis Wyclif cum Tritico*, ed. Walter Waddington Shirley. London: Longman *et al.*, 1858.
MED	*The Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath *et al.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1956–2007.
OED	*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
PL	*Patrologia Cursus Completus: Series Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne. 221 vols. Paris, 1844–64.

NOTE

References to the Vulgate Bible are from *Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, 3rd edn., ed. Robert Weber (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983), with translations from Challoner's text, *The Holy Bible* (Baltimore, MD: F. Lucas, Jr., 1837).

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