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# Book Reviews



Anne Hudson, ed., *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Pp. xii, 234. Bibliography, Glossary, Notes.

Vernacular writings by the followers of John Wyclif, the controversial late fourteenth-century English theologian and heresiarch, would seem to be of obvious interest and value to students of medieval church history and English prose. As Anne Hudson points out in her introduction: "they used, in a way that had not been systematically attempted since the days of Aelfric, the vernacular for the discussion of theological and political topics."

In view of the importance of these writings, it is rather surprising that selections from them have only now been edited and published with commentary sufficient to make them comprehensible to those outside the small circle of dedicated specialists in Wyclif studies. In fact, even historians

of the Lollard (Wycliffite) movement have largely (until recent decades almost completely) neglected the vernacular evidence—in part, perhaps, because of confusion over the attribution of the texts: could any be assigned to Wyclif himself, or to his disciples John Hereford and Nicholas Purvey? The arguments were never conclusive and tended to obscure the value of the material itself. Nor did problems of attribution end with questions of authorship: on what basis might a text justifiably be labelled “Lollard”—the term being more a general insult used in polemic than a label for any group holding a very clearly defined set of doctrinal positions? As Miss Hudson herself has shown (*English Historical Review* 90: 1-18), positions on such an important question as biblical translation were not completely polarized until Archbishop Arundel's Constitutions of 1407. One text, considered for many years to be a Lollard defense of Scripture translation written by Nicholas Purvey turns out, upon the discovery of convincing new manuscript evidence, to have been written (in Latin) by one Richard Ullerston, long a vigorous opponent of other Wycliffite ideas at Oxford. But the piece was later reworked and translated by the Wycliffites for their own purposes. Such complications illustrate the difficulty of distinguishing between “Lollardy” and orthodox reformism. The wary attitude of historians toward these texts becomes more understandable.

In spite of these difficulties Anne Hudson has managed to show that if one performs careful manuscript and source studies and ‘asks the material the right questions,’ the English writings can tell us a considerable amount about the financial and intellectual resources behind the Lollard movement (at least from Wyclif's death to the Oldcastle Rebellion), and about its numbers and organization. Her organization of the selections in this little anthology helps us to ask the ‘right questions.’ Part I, “The Nature of Wycliffite Belief,” brings together for the first time the confessional statements most certainly from Wycliffite circles. These include three progressively more extreme lists of doctrinal positions: “Wyclif's Confessions on the Eucharist” (as reported by the chronicler Knighton), the Lollard answers to “Sixteen Points on which the Bishops accuse Lollards” (perhaps derived from a text used in a Wycliffite school), and the “Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards” which caused a sensation when they were posted on the doors of Westminster and St. Paul's in 1395. To connect these statements with actual Lollard practices we have two later selections: William Thorpe's remarkable memoirs of his encounter with Archbishop Arundel in 1407 and the “Confession of Hawisia Moone of Loddon” who in 1430 admitted that she had allowed Wycliffites to keep, hold, and continue “scoles of heresie in prive chambres and prive places of oures.” Part II, “The Lollards and the Bible,” presents for comparison excerpts from what are currently considered the best texts of both the earlier and later versions of the English Wycliffite Bible, together with Wycliffite sermons on the passages excerpted and exegetical remarks on

these same passages from the Wycliffite glossed gospel commentaries. Part III, "Lollard Polemic," provides us with a sampling of controversial literature which demonstrates quite a range of interests and a variety of attitudes on such subjects as images and pilgrimages. The notes warn us of the uncertainty of the Lollard attribution of some of these texts, such as the polemic against miracle plays. This section also includes an interesting Lollard version of the common satire, "The Epistle of Satan." Part IV, "Lollard Doctrine," collects doctrinal statements—chosen with an eye to their demonstrable connections with the Latin writings of Wyclif and his followers—to exemplify the development of Wyclif's doctrines by his followers as theory was turned more and more to polemic purposes.

Miss Hudson's notes frequently point out the relationships between the selections and make it clear that the Wycliffite Bible does not stand alone as a literary monument to the movement, but rather forms the heart of a complex and ambitious network of religious literature. Perhaps most impressive is the collection—actually a cycle—of English sermons covering the entire liturgical year, preserved in some manuscripts as large, expensively produced and opulently bound as the best of the Bibles. Miss Hudson is now collaborating on a new edition of these works to replace Thomas Arnold's edition of 1869-71, and she presents a sample of them here in her sections on the Bible and on the transmission of doctrine. Of special interest is one sermon on the Eucharist which dares to assume in its audience an understanding of Wyclif's-realist philosophy.

Thanks to Miss Hudson's careful arrangement and annotation, we can understand how a Lollard preacher might have had a chance of finding such understanding in a congregation outside the university setting—if it was in an area served by a secret school such as the one held in the house of Hawisia Moone. The anthology includes four treatises of the kind probably used in such schools, treatises which list a wide range of traditional authorities in support of Lollard positions, and which were thus sometimes used by Lollards defending their orthodoxy before episcopal tribunals.

In addition, the "gospel men" (as the Wycliffites often called themselves) who wrote sermons and treatises had large and comprehensive reference works available to them—sometimes in both English and Latin. (To clearly understand the importance of these reference works, as well as the significance of the sermon-cycle mentioned above, one should read Miss Hudson's notes in conjunction with her three articles listed in the bibliography.) Besides the English glossed gospel commentaries (based on the *Catena Aurea* of Thomas Aquinas and revised with reference to dozens of his sources), there was the extensive Wycliffite alphabetic reference book the *Floretum* and its abridged form, the *Rosarium*, "a collection of authorities biblical, patristic, scholastic and canonistic, on a range of moral and ecclesiastical topics." There were a few English versions of this work and more than one revision of it (again with reference to many of its sources). No one outside Oxford, as Miss Hudson observes, would be

likely to have had the knowledge or access to library holdings that such scholarly enterprises as these required, but the evidence from manuscript and other sources indicates that the impact of those who used them was felt in areas throughout England. The dons who compiled them may have been remote, but they were not ineffectual.

In view of what seems to be the prime goal of this anthology—the arrangement of key texts in such a way as to show their probable relationships and, with the application of necessary information on background, sources and manuscripts, to help them gloss each other—it is unfortunate that Miss Hudson's very valuable notes on background, sources and manuscripts have been stuck by the publishers in the back of the volume. Many of the source and manuscript relationships are complex enough that one may lose the thread in the process of flipping back and forth. One cannot help wondering why, if footnoting proved difficult or expensive, the appropriate notes could not have been placed at the end of each selection. One certainly hopes that Miss Hudson's major work on the sermon-cycle will appear in a more convenient format.

These annoyances, however, do not obscure Miss Hudson's point: the Wycliffites were at least organized enough to use the resources of their more privileged supporters to considerable effect—both the intellectual resources of their Oxford adherents (which we may see in the reference works) and the financial resources (and to some extent the political protection) of the Lollard knights (which we see demonstrated in the large and carefully copied sermon-cycle volumes). From the viewpoint of literary history it is interesting to note that Chaucer was linked to both these groups—to Oxford by his friendship with Ralph Strode (former Oxford philosopher and debate opponent of Wyclif himself) and by his interest in astronomy, a specialty of Merton (the college of Wyclif and Strode), and to the Lollard knights (John Clanvow, Lewis Clifford, Richard Sturry, *et al.*) by even closer ties: shared enterprises and interests in business, diplomacy and literature.

Miss Hudson often points out in her notes the parallels between the complaints in these writings and those expressed in the religious poetry of Langland and Gower and in anonymous works like *Dives et Pauper*, but prudently enough, she leaves it to others to puzzle out the relationship between these genres. Her efforts may stimulate scholars to investigate other questions as well. How, for instance, did Chaucer react to his friends' involvement in these religious disputes? To what extent were the Wycliffites influenced by the devotional and mystical writings in English that predated them and which they sometimes copied and revised for their own purposes? What relationship does the sermon-cycle occupying Anne Hudson's attention bear to the "early Lollard" sermons now being edited by Gloria Cigman at Oxford? To what extent can modern insights from anthropology and the sociology of religion help us find our way through the seemingly endless ambiguities of our data on late medieval piety?

Questions like these may seem as daunting as they are intriguing, but Miss Hudson has set an example. She has gone a long way toward answering an equally daunting challenge laid down twenty years ago by the late K. B. McFarlane, then the leading authority in this field, when he wondered whether historians would ever be able to explain

how a logical system of the most academic ingredients was so speedily vulgarized that within a couple of decades this gospel of the Schools had become widely diffused among the laity as well as the non-graduate clergy, right across the English midlands from Kent and East Anglia to the marches and mountains of central Wales.

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