Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409

By Nicholas Watson

The year 1400 is one of those loudly proclaimed milestones in English literary history in which the vagaries of human life and human chronological systems appear to come together with unusual appropriateness. The year not only of a new century’s beginning but of the death of the old century’s most important poet, 1400 has often been taken by Middle English scholars to mark one of those crucial transitions between an age of gold and one of brass: between the Age of Chaucer and the glories of Ricardian literature, on the one hand, and that of what is persistently taken, on the other, as the dullness and all-too-proper humility of fifteenth-century writing—dedicated as so much of it seems to be to the sterile elevation and imitation of the beloved “father and master” Chaucer.¹

So well naturalized has this model become, and so much has it consequently influenced the reading habits of Middle English scholars, that it is only now becoming possible to recognize the model as a construct inherited from the fifteenth century itself: a cultural formation, founded on half-truths, which deserves attention as an object, more than a tool, of critical analysis. Thus it has been only recently that serious reflection has begun both on the nature of the changes of which Chaucer’s death has been taken (in the fifteenth century

Emergent forms of this paper were given at the “The Medieval Translator: The Theory and Practice of Translation in the Middle Ages,” held at Conques in July 1993; “Historical Evidence and the Impact of Theory,” a conference held at King’s College, London, Ontario, in November 1993; and at the session “Vernacular Politics: Linguistic Change and Social Formation in Late-Medieval England,” Twenty-Ninth International Conference on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, May 1994. I would like to thank Roger Ellis, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Beckwith, organizers of the first and third of those sessions. I also thank Richard Green and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton for useful suggestions, and Anne Hudson and Michael Sargent both for further suggestions and for much practical help, which I acknowledge in detail below. The paper is intended as a companion piece to my chapter, “The Middle English Mystics,” to be published in The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature: Writing in Britain, 1066–1547, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge, Eng., forthcoming).

¹ For the epithet “Ricardian,” see John Burrow, Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the “Gawain” Poet (New Haven, Conn., 1971). For ways in which the transition from “golden” to “brass” has figured in scholarly narratives, see, e.g., Eleanor Prescott Hammond, ed., English Verse between Chaucer and Surrey (Durham, N.C., 1927), and a number of other works discussed in David Lawton’s fine article, “Dullness and the Fifteenth Century,” English Literary History 54 (1987), 761–99. See also A. C. Spearing, Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry (Cambridge, Eng., 1985); and Seth Lerer, Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England (Princeton, N.J., 1999), esp. pp. 3–21.

822 Speculum 70 (1995)
and now) as a symbol and on the ideological manipulations for which that year, as the sign of the end of an era, has been used as an only apparently natural substitute.2

This article is a contribution to the study of the shift from fourteenth-century "Ricardian" to fifteenth-century "Lancastrian" cultures. However, its concern is not with the aristocratic secular tradition but with the less well known body of vernacular religious writing represented by Langland, the "mystics," and numerous other writers and texts. In terms not only of quantity but of innovation the period 1340–1410 has as much right to be considered a "golden age" of religious as it is of secular writing: the age of Rolle, the Cloud author, Julian of Norwich, Langland, the Wycliffite Bible, and much else. With religious writing as with secular, moreover, this period ended abruptly, to be succeeded by an era that, again like its secular equivalent, explicitly characterized itself in terms of imitation, caution, and respect for fourteenth-century auctores. Taking their lead from Chaucer studies, scholars of the so-called "fourteenth-century English mystics" have tended to assume that the divide between fourteenth- and fifteenth-century culture is simply a given, needing no explanation. Indeed, so established has this assumption been that Margery Kempe, whose book was written in the 1430s, is often referred to as a fourteenth-century mystic, in unconscious acknowledgment of the axiom that "fifteenth-century" equals "inferior."3 My aim here is to argue for a more nuanced picture in which the transformation, shortly after 1400, of an impressively innovative tradition of what I shall here be calling "vernacular theology" into its derivative successor is seen not as a centennial coincidence, the product of a new zeitgeist, but as the result of specific historical forces and acts.4 In view of the close relation


3 See, e.g., the title of Valerie Lagorio and Ritamary Bradley's guide, The Fourteenth-Century English Mystics: A Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography (New York, 1981), which was an outgrowth of their journal, now called Mystics Quarterly but originally The Fourteenth-Century English Mystics Newsletter.

4 The term "vernacular theology" (which has also been used recently by Bernard McGinn) is intended as a catchall, which in principle could include any kind of writing, sermon, or play that communicates theological information to an audience. My use of the term in preference to any of the range of alternatives—"popular," "didactic," "devotional," "pastoral," "mystical," or "affective" writing, for example—has several interrelated aims. First, it makes possible the comparative discussion of various kinds of vernacular writing that tend to be studied in isolation or in groupings that are sometimes artificial (see my "Middle English Mystics" for more on this issue). Second, the word "theology" focuses our attention on the specifically intellectual content of vernacular religious texts that are often treated with condescension (especially in relation to Latin texts), encouraging reflection on the kinds of religious information available to vernacular readers without obliging us to insist on the simplicity or crudity of that information: that is, the term is an attempt to distance scholarship from its habitual adherence to a clerical, Latinate perspective in its dealings with these texts. Third, the term is intended to focus attention on the cultural-linguistic environment in which
between religious and secular writing in the period, my analysis may have implications (albeit ones that cannot be more than glanced at here) for the study of secular literature as well.

My argument moves around a piece of ecclesiastical legislation known as Arundel's Constitutions, which are well known to students of the Lollard heresy but which I argue also need to be regarded as the linchpin of a broader attempt to limit religious discussion and writing in the vernacular. After describing the relevant parts of the legislation and what seem to be its effects in sections 1–2 of the article, I go on (in the last four sections) to describe what I see as one of its most important contexts: a complex, wide-ranging argument—whose traces are discernible in many vernacular theologies of the period but which survives in its most explicit form in the Oxford debate on Bible translation—over the nature of vernacular theology and its readers. It is this argument that I suggest the Constitutions were designed to resolve. The main scholarly backdrops to the article are, first, the large body of codicological writing on the circulation of English religious texts that has accumulated over the last eighty years and, second, the research that has for more than a century been uncovering the tangled history of Lollard thought. In particular, I am indebted to the articles

---

religious writing happens and to act as a counterweight to the aura of otherworldliness that often surrounds terms like “devotional,” or indeed “spirituality” itself.

In principle, the term “vernacular theology” covers a very wide range of texts, from the catechetical to the speculative, and from the most scrupulously orthodox Passion meditation to the most outspoken Lollard polemic. In practice, of course, I have had to narrow things down a good bit by making a number of what I hope will not seem arbitrary exclusions. These include Lollard texts (for reasons explained below); works that were intended for public performance, not private reading—that is, plays and sermons (although I include written sermon collections such as Mirk’s Festial and try to be sensitive to the difficult distinctions involved here); most narrative texts, especially saints’ lives (although I do consider lives of Christ, which are a special case); and large numbers of brief, anonymous didactic texts. Another massive exclusion of a different kind is any proper consideration of the role of French in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English religious culture. In general, my emphasis is, for reasons that will become obvious, on the more intellectually challenging texts.

---

5 All work in this field for the last forty years is indebted to Ian Doyle’s thesis, “A Survey of the Origins and Circulation of Theological Writings in English in the 14th, 15th and Early 16th Centuries with Special Consideration of the Part of the Clergy Therein” (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 1954), and to the studies he has published since (some of which are cited below). Doyle’s most distinguished predecessor was Hope Emily Allen, much of whose work has not been superseded; see especially her *Writings Ascribed to Richard Rolle, Hermit of Hampole, and Materials for His Biography*, Modern Language Association Monograph Series 3 (New York, 1927). My special debts here are to several essays and studies by Michael Sargent and Vincent Gillespie cited below, as well as to Gillespie’s two seminal articles on vernacular theological writing: “*Lukynghe in haly bokes: Lectio in Some Late Medieval Spiritual Miscellanies*,” in *Spätmittelalterliche geistliche Literatur in der Nationalsprache*, 2, ed. James Hogg, Analecta Cartusiana 106 (Salzburg, 1984), pp. 1–27; and “Strange Images of Death: The Passion in Later Medieval English Devotional and Mystical Writing,” in *Zeit, Tod und Ewigkeit in der Renaissance Literatur*, 3, ed. James Hogg, Analecta Cartusiana 117 (Salzburg, 1987), pp. 111–59. I must thank Michael Sargent in addition for providing me with a draft of his handlist, “A Catalogue of Manuscripts and Early Prints of Late-Medieval English Contemplative and Devotional Literature, ca. 1400–1535.”

6 The most useful studies include Margaret Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible and Other Medieval Biblical Versions*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought (Cambridge, Eng., 1920; here cited as
Censorship and Cultural Change

and books that Anne Hudson has written since the 1970s; indeed, there is a sense in which all I say here can be taken as an extension of chapter 9 of *The Premature Reformation*. What makes my argument distinctive is that it focuses, not on Lollard writing in itself, but on the effects of the campaign against Lollardy on what are traditionally thought of as mainstream religious texts: devotional, pastoral, and "mystical" writing the orthodoxy of which is generally taken for granted. By emphasizing a body of writing at which Hudson's magisterial book can only gesture—and which, as a result of our unexamined assumptions about the nature of religious orthodoxy, is still often treated as though it was removed from the ideological and political struggles that Lollardy precipitated—my aim is to underline the implications of her work for our study of the intellectual culture of late-medieval England and the contested status of vernacular writing within that culture. In particular, I hope to show that analyzing the Constitutions as an outgrowth of a broader cultural conversation than the arguments between "orthodox" and "heretic" illuminates a situation in which all but the most pragmatic religious writing could come to be seen, by the early fifteenth century, as dangerous: a perception that led inexorably to a by and large successful attempt to inhibit the further composition of most kinds of vernacular theology.

1. The Constitutions, 1407–9

The Constitutions were issued by the aristocratic (and kingmaking) Archbishop Arundel in 1409, two years after their first drafting—which took place in 1407 at Oxford, one of their main targets—as the capstone of the increasingly systematic campaign of opposition to the Lollards. By 1409, some eight years after the sinister act of Parliament *De heretico comburendo*, and nearly thirty after


the first condemnation of Wycliffe in 1382, Lollardy was well on its way to completing its transformation into a sect whose doctrinal differences from orthodoxy were apparent to all—as they were to be (in theory) for the next century. Yet this process of heretication had taken a very long time and was never, perhaps, as clear-cut as orthodox commentary (then and since) would have it. As J. A. F. Thomson reminds us, Lollardy began life as a powerful expression of reformist tendencies inside the Church, whose status as a heresy was achieved as much by reactionary shifts within the definition of orthodoxy as by its own growing extremism. In its radical focus on interiority, Lollardy was and remained part of a larger European reaction in favor of personal simplicity and a focus on the word as well as the image, a reaction apparent not only in the Devotio moderna in the Low Countries but also, closer to home, in the works of Langland, Walter Hilton, and Julian of Norwich. It was thus inevitable that, in trying to eradicate the heresy—by censoring out of existence the discussion, writing, and preaching by which it was sustained both at its home base in Oxford and elsewhere—the Constitutions should have had considerable implications for texts and writers not aligned with Lollard views, and indeed for the whole intellectual life of fifteenth-century England. Indeed, despite the small attention that literary scholars (except Hudson and now Helen Spencer) have bestowed on it, the legislation as a whole constitutes one of the most draconian pieces of censorship in English history, going far beyond its ostensible aim of destroying the Lollard heresy and effectively attempting to curtail all sorts of theological thinking and writing in the vernacular that did not belong within the pragmatic bounds set by earlier legislation like Pecham’s Syllabus of 1281.

11 For a guide to the Devotio moderna, see Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings, ed. John Van Engen, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, N.J., 1988). For Langland’s relationship to Lollardy, see, e.g., Pamela Gradon, “Langland and the Ideology of Dissent,” Proceedings of the British Academy 66 (1980), 179–205; Premature Reformation, pp. 398–408. The Lollard interest in “interiority” is in many respects different from the concerns found in affective literature, but it shares with that literature at least an opposition to formalism and an insistence on individual integrity as the key to effective participation in the life of the church.
The Constitutions themselves consist of a series of articles that lay down new regulations for various aspects of the preaching and teaching life of the Church in general and the University of Oxford in particular. The articles of the legislation dealing with Oxford concern us here for the most part only as evidence of how detailed and broadly based Arundel felt his attack had to be. These impose limits on the discussion of theological questions in the schools, provide for a monthly inquiry (no less) into the views of every student at the university, and forbid the study not simply of Wycliffe's books but of all recent texts that have not been approved unanimously by a panel of twelve theologians appointed by the archbishop (articles 6, 9–11). Less detailed but as stringent are a set of articles (1–5, 8) dealing with preaching and with teaching in grammar schools and other contexts. These affirm the illegality of preaching without a license (to be granted only after examination of the preacher's orthodoxy); forbid preachers to discuss the sins of the clergy or the sacraments in their sermons, confining them to the topics listed in Pecham's Syllabus; extend this ban to cover schoolmasters and other teachers; and, finally, forbid all argument over matters of faith outside universities. The specific invocation of Pecham's Syllabus publishing and printing history (Cambridge, Eng., 1989), pp. 317–18, notes the importance of the similar legislation promulgated by the archbishop of York, William Thoresby, in 1357. See also his "Thy Will Be Done: Piers Plowman and the Pater Noster," in Late-Medieval Religious Texts and Their Transmission: Essays in Honour of A. I. Doyle, ed. A. J. Minnis, York Manuscripts Conferences: Proceedings Series 3 (Cambridge, Eng., 1994), pp. 95–119, at pp. 98–99.

13 Article 6 is especially relevant: "Item, For that a new way doth more frequently lead astray, than an old way, we will and command, that no book or treatise made by John Wickliff, or others whomsoever, about that time, or since, or hereafter to be made, be from henceforth read in schools, halls, hospitals, or other places whatsoever, within our province of Canterbury aforesaid, except the same be first examined by the university of Oxford or Cambridge; or, at least, by twelve persons, whom the said universities, or one of them, shall appoint to be chosen at our discretion, or the laudable discretion of our successors; and the same being examined as aforesaid, to be expressly approved and allowed by us or our successors, and in the name and authority of the university, to be delivered unto the stationers to be copied out, and the same to be sold at a reasonable price, the original thereof always after to remain in some chest of the university. But if any man shall read any such kind of book in schools or otherwise, as aforesaid, he shall be punished as a sower of schism, and a favourer of heresy, as the quality of the fault shall require" (Foxe, Acts and Monuments, 3:245). Note the careful provisions made here for the possibility of an approved text's being subsequently corrupted by interpolation and for the more or less systematic distribution of approved texts.

14 Article 1: "We will and command, ordain and decree: That no manner of person, secular or regular, being authorized to preach by the laws now prescribed, or licensed by special privilege, shall take upon him the office of preaching the word of God . . . whether within the church or without, in English, except he first present himself, and be examined by the ordinary of the place, where he preacheth. . . . Moreover the parish priests or vicars temporal, not having perpetuities, nor being sent in form aforesaid, shall simply preach in the churches where they have charge, only those things which are expressly contained in the provincial constitution set forth by John, our predecessor, of good memory, to help the ignorance of the priests, which beginneth, 'Ignorantia Sacerdotum.'"

Article 3: "Moreover . . . we will and command, that the preacher of God's word . . . shall be of good behaviour. . . . and chiefly preaching to the clergy, he shall touch the vices, commonly used amongst them; and to the laity, he shall declare the vices commonly used amongst them; and not otherwise."

Article 4: "Forasmuch as the part is vile, that agreeeth not with the whole, we do decree and
labus here (in article 1) is perhaps intended to imply that Arundel is returning the English church to a lost doctrinal purity: the Syllabus provided much of the impetus for the vernacular pastoralia of the fourteenth century by defining a minimum of religious knowledge that secular priests must teach their parishioners (incorporating the Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the names of the deadly sins, the virtues, and so on) as part of the great educational drive initiated by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Yet any suggestion that the Constitutions are simply reviving the force of earlier archiepiscopal legislation ignores a crucial difference: that here Pecham’s minimum necessary for the laity to know if they are to be saved has been redefined as the maximum they may hear, read, or even discuss. This revisionist version of the Syllabus shows how much seemed, to Arundel in 1409, to have changed since 1281. No longer was it the ignorance of the laity and their priests (ignorancia sacerdotum) that was a matter for concern; it was the laity’s too eager pursuit of knowledge.

So far, there is no mention of vernacular writing (as distinct from oral instruction), and it may well be that such writing was not as major a concern for Arundel as it is for us. Yet I think we can assume that written instruction was supposed to be included in the Constitutions’ discussions of preaching and teaching. For the single article that does deal explicitly with vernacular writing imposes even severer constraints than are applied to preaching. Arundel never attempted to prevent preachers from translating and expounding biblical passages in their sermons, even though he did drastically restrict the topics such expositions could cover; given the liturgical context in which much preaching occurred, this would not have been practicable, even had it been desirable. But article 7 forbids anybody to make any written translation of a text of Scripture into English or even to own a copy, without diocesan permission, of any such translation made since Wycliffe’s time. As Hudson has shown, the phrase “text-
tum sacrae scripturae" used here was intended in the widest sense, to include even single verses translated in written form as well as the Wycliffite Bible itself, often thought of as its main target. Thus it would seem that vernacular writers (whose translations of biblical quotations, unlike those of preachers, would be permanent and thus possible to use and misapply) were forbidden to extend their discussion even to the limits allowed to preachers. Hudson is right to conclude that "the expression of ideas gained from Latin books and expressed in [written] English" could be taken, as a result of this article and the Constitutions as a whole, as "ipso facto evidence of heresy."16

Hudson's concern in the article from which I have been quoting is to establish Lollardy as "the English heresy": to demonstrate how the close connections between Lollardy and the vernacular had come, by 1409, to be a major focus of institutional concern. But the much wider implications of the Constitutions—the intent (as Hudson says elsewhere) to suppress "all discussion of theological or ecclesiastical issues"17—are surely clear in the summary just given. While the legislation clearly has Lollardy primarily in mind throughout, it at no point distinguishes Lollard from other vernacular theological texts (as, for example, does the De heretico comburendo); rather, its regulations apply to writers and owners of all vernacular religious texts, except the simplest. At least in principle, the ownership of works as varied as Pearl, Cleanness and Patience, The Scale of Perfection, The Holy Book Gratia Dei, The Chastizing of God's Children, Book to a Mother, the works of the Cloud author, Pore Caitif, Dives and Pauper, and Piers Plowman—all of them written during or since Wycliffe's time and all of them making heavy use of scriptural quotation—was now forbidden for those who failed to obtain due permission. More significant still, the composition of any similar texts became, in principle, directly illegal: given their use of biblical quotation and their extensive treatment of an array of theological subjects, none of these works could have been written after the publication of the Constitutions...

always easily kept, as the same St. Jerome confesseth, that although he were inspired, yet oftentimes in this he erred: we therefore decree and ordain, that no man, hereafter, by his own authority translate any text of the Scripture into English or any other tongue ['aliquem textum sacrae scripturae auctoritate sua in linguam Anglicanam, vel aliam transferat'], by way of a book, libel, or treatise ['per viam libri, libelli, aut tractatus']; and that no man read any such book, libel or treatise, now lately set forth in the time of John Wickliff, or since, or hereafter to be set forth, in part or in whole, privily or apertly, upon pain of greater excommunication, until the said translation be allowed by the ordinary of the place, or, if the case so require, by the council provincial. He that shall do contrary to this, shall likewise be punished as a favourer of error and heresy" (Foxe, Acts and Monuments, 3:245).

16 "English Heresy," p. 148, drawing on a gloss on this article in Lyndwood's Provinciale, which explains the article as applying either to the composition of any treatise ("tractatum") using scholarly material ("de dictis doctorum, vel propriis") and translating any biblical texts into the vernacular or to any book or pamphlet using translations of biblical texts. I accept Hudson's view over that of Deanesly (p. 3, n. 4) particularly because, in medieval texts, "translatio" routinely refers to acts of interpretation or exegesis or to "the exposition of meaning in another language." See Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, c. 1100–c. 1375: The Commentary Tradition, ed. A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott with the assistance of David Wallace (Oxford, 1988), p. 374, quoting Huguccio of Pisa, Magnae derivationes (also n. 50 below).

17 Premature Reformation, p. 431.
without contravening several of the articles therein. It is, of course, true that even if the legislation was accorded the importance it claims for itself—as we shall see it was—there was always sure to be some gap between principle and practice. Biblical quotation, if not of extended passages then at least of single verses, does survive in some texts composed after 1410. The legislation seems not to have had its impact at once, and not to have come into fullest effect for perhaps five years or more after 1409, when (at around the time of Arundel’s death) the Oldcastle rebellion of 1414 united church, Crown, and aristocracy against Lollardy as had not been the case up to then. As we shall see, its effects did not coincide with its declared aims in certain other areas as well. Yet that this is so does nothing to alter the profound significance of the Constitutions in a far wider context than that of the battle between orthodoxy and heresy. Not many years before 1409, Arundel had been brilliantly successful in his efforts to engineer the rather tricky ideological adjustments that were needed to legitimate Henry Bolingbroke’s accession to a throne to which he had no right.18 Now, attacking a heresy he thought of as being as much the enemy of England as Richard II had become, he attempted no less than a wholesale transformation of the religious culture of his day. As I shall now try to show, in relation to vernacular theology, his attempt was again largely a success.

2. Effects of the Constitutions, 1410–1520

The Constitutions were notorious for over a century, taking a prominent role in Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue Concerning Heresies (written in the 1520s), where they are still assumed to be one of the causes of the rarity of vernacular Bibles and of the reluctance on the clergy’s part to disseminate biblical learning.19 Treated with special contempt by Lollard writers, they were also alluded to with undisguised enmity by prominent institutional figures such as Thomas Gascoigne, chancellor of Oxford, and Reginald Pecock, bishop of St. Asaph and Chichester—who almost went to the stake as a result of his repudiation of their restrictions on vernacular theology—as well as by the author of Dives and Pauper and the Longleat Sermons (about which I say more later).20 On the other hand,

18 See Peter Heath, Church and Realm, 1272–1461: Conflict and Collaboration in an Age of Crisis, Fontana History of England (Glasgow, 1988), chap. 8 (from which I have also derived the epithet “kingmaker” for Arundel); and R. G. Davies, “Thomas Arundel as Archbishop of Canterbury, 1396–1414,” Journal of Ecclesiastical History 24 (1973), 9–21. Aston’s biography of Arundel cited above (n. 6) does not cover his years as archbishop.

19 See Deanesly, pp. 1–17, for an extended analysis, and Premature Reformation, pp. 494–507, for a study of the broader context.

at least two vernacular theologies took advantage of the protection afforded by
the legislation by gaining the necessary approval. The Bridgettine text The Mirror
of Our Lady claims to have received permission for its English versions of various
biblical passages, while Nicholas Love’s Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ
(also discussed later) received an approbatio from Arundel himself a short while
before the Constitutions were officially published.21 No serious attempt seems
to have been made to restrict circulation of texts written before 1409 among
professional religious or the wealthier laity—and we shall see that it may have
been clear from the start that this would be the case (see below). But the leg-
islation was repeatedly used to identify lower-class owners and readers of non-
Lollard works as heretics. If the evidence of Lollard trials is to be trusted, it
remained dangerous throughout the century for those beneath the ranks of the
gentry and the urban elite to be known as a reader of texts as diverse as The
Canterbury Tales, The Prick of Conscience, Dives and Pauper, and The Mirror of
Sinners.22

The most important signs of the impact of the Constitutions for my purposes,
however, are to be found in two rather abrupt changes, first, in the nature of
the vernacular theology written before and after c. 1410–15, second, in the
levels of circulation of these two groups of works in the fifteenth and early
sixteenth centuries. These changes—which are described briefly here and tab-
ulated in an appendix at the end of the paper23—suggest that, once its effects
had taken hold, the commonest and most influential response to the legislation
among writers and their scribes was silent compliance. For the most part, it
seems the Constitutions worked (as was, no doubt, the hope), not by being
wielded in public, but by creating an atmosphere in which self-censorship was
assumed to be both for the common good and (for one’s own safety) prudent.

As to the first change: in the decades before 1410, theology in English was
as innovative as that in any vernacular during a comparable period of the Middle
Ages, boasting original thinkers of the order of Rolle, Hilton, Langland, Julian,
the authors of The Cloud of Unknowing and Dives and Pauper, and the Pearl poet,

21 Nicholas Love’s “Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ,” ed. Michael G. Sargent, Garland
xlvi, which draws on A. I. Doyle, “Reflections on Some Manuscripts of Nicholas Love’s Myrour of
the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ,” Leeds Studies in English, n.s. 14 (Essays in Memory of Elizabeth Salter)
(1983), 82–93 (for comments on which see also Premature Reformation, pp. 437–39); supplemented
(1994), 40–70, which announces an important new line of thinking about the development of this
text and suggests that it may not have been completed until 1412. See also The Myrour of Oure
forboden vnder payne of cursynge, that no man shulde haue ne drawe eny texte of holy scrypture
in to englysshe wythout lycense of the bysshop dyocesan [a close paraphrase of part of article 7 of
the Constitutions] . . . therfore I asked & haue lysence of oure bysshop to drawe suche things in
to englyshe.”

22 For confiscation of The Canterbury Tales and The Mirror of Sinners (both produced as evidence
in a heresy trial in 1464), see “English Heresy,” p. 142, n. 5. For Dives and Pauper, see Premature

23 The appendix also gives bibliographic information about works mentioned here, which are not
otherwise necessarily footnoted.
Censorship and Cultural Change

besides lesser figures such as Clanvowe and large numbers of mostly anonymous Lollard authors. During this period at least four large-scale works of versified theology (The Northern Homily Cycle, Cursor mundi, The Prick of Conscience, Speculum vitae) were also composed, along with prose texts such as Book to a Mother, the compilations Pore Caitif and The Chastizing of God’s Children, as well as the Rolle-inspired Contemplations of the Dream and Love of God, Mirk’s Festial, a variety of biblical paraphrases, the great Wycliffite Bible itself, and Love’s Mirror, published at the very cusp between the old order and the new, around 1409. While many of these works make use of an array of sources, most of them—like the religious poems of the Pearl poet and much not mentioned here—can in any terms be considered original vernacular compositions, some of them articulating distinctive, often daring theological ideas: Julian’s and Langland’s radical attempts at theodicy, Pearl’s theory of heavenly reward, the celebration of heterosexual eroticism (and highly explicit condemnation of its homosexual counterpart) in Cleanness, and Rolle’s insistence on the permanence of spiritual joy are cases in point chosen almost at random. Moreover, many of these works are difficult and involve the reader in an array of theological issues that go well beyond the brief list of topics in Pecham’s Syllabus. Hilton gives full accounts both of Trinitarian theology and of the Anselmian doctrine of redemption; there is a persistent and widespread interest in the theme of the “salvation of the heathen”; and the Cloud author (in The Cloud of Unknowing itself and also in his remarkable translation, Denis Hid Divinite) articulates a simplified, but by no means simple, apophatic theory of signs. Fourteenth-century theology in English is very far from meriting its present reputation for conservatism, pragmatism, and a preference for emotion over thought.

Yet from a few years after 1410 until the sixteenth century there is a sharp decline both in the quantity of large theological works written in the vernacular and in their scope and originality. Most of what is written in this period consists of translations from Latin, Anglo-French, or Continental vernacular texts or


26 For this reputation (which holds, at least, for scholarly views of works normally categorized as “mystical”), see, e.g., Jean Leclercq, François Vandenbroucke, and Louis Bouyer, The Spirituality of the Middle Ages, vol. 2 of A History of Christian Spirituality, trans. the Benedictines of Holme Abbey (Tunbridge Wells, 1968), p. 416.
else of compilations from earlier English material that deal cautiously with a narrow range of topics. The one writer comparable to the more ambitious writers of the fourteenth century is Pecock, whose remarkable creation of a body of systematic vernacular theology is congruent with contemporary works of secular learning, but whose attitude to lay education put him so out of step with the religious world of his time that he ended his career in disgrace, his works publicly burned. Apart from his works, almost the only other texts of real complexity that I know are either translations, such as *The Orchard of Syon*, versions of Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*, the translation of Suso called *Seven Poyntes of Trewe Love and Everlastynge Wisdome*, and several other works, or compilations, such as *Disce mori* and its offshoot *Ignorantia sacerdotum*. Most of even these works tend to simplify their sources. Moreover, all are carefully anonymous, as are simpler works of pastoralia such as *The Tree and XII Frutes of the Holy Goost*, the *Memoriale credencentium*, and *Jacob’s Well* (both the last early fifteenth century), none of which goes far beyond the topics set out by Pecham. For writers of English theological works whose names we know—apart from Pecock, hagiographic poets such as Capgrave, Bokenham, and Lydgate (who are somewhat marginal to my discussion here), and, of course, Margery Kempe—we have to wait until the early sixteenth century. There we find Simon the Anchor of London Wall (an eremitic writer as far as can be from the fire and daring of a Rolle) and two London writers associated with Syon and Sheen, John Fewterer and Richard Whitford, both of whom fought a rearguard action against religious reformation;27 but, like More and Tyndale, these belong in a world that is changing once again. Otherwise, the only equivalents to the likes of Rolle and Hilton are the Carthusians Richard Methley and John Norton, who wrote mainly in Latin.28 Langland, far from generating a long-lasting literary tradition like Chau-

---

27 For the milieu of Whitford and Fewterer see, among others, James Hogg, ed., Richard Whytford’s “The Pype or Tonne of the Lyfe of Perfection” with an Introductory Study on Whytford’s Works, 5 vols., Salzburg Studies in English Literature: Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 89 (Salzburg, 1979); and Veronica Lawrence, ed., A Looking Glace for the Religious, Salzburg Studies in English Literature: Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 92/18 (Salzburg, 1991), which tentatively attributes this work also to Whytford. Simon the Anchor’s compilation, *The Fruyte of Redempcyon*, was printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1514, and three times thereafter, while John Fewterer’s *The Myrrour or Glasse of Christes Passion* was printed by Robert Redman in 1534.

Censorship and Cultural Change

cer, has to compete in the fifteenth century with translations of two of his much less intellectually challenging catechetical sources, Deguileville’s *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* and the *Pèlerinage de l’âme*. And the nearest we can come to Julian of Norwich or to the visionaries whose experiences are theorized by *The Chastizing of God’s Children* are Margery Kempe, who was often suspected of heresy, and Elizabeth Barton, the “holy maid of Kent,” who was burned for it.29 (Syon abbey is the home of impassioned readers, like Joan Sewell, not of further visionary writers, while the women writers we do know of, Elinor Hull and Margaret Beaufort, are translators, like many of their male contemporaries.)30

I am not suggesting that fifteenth-century theological writings are homogeneous or that they lack interest, for both are far from being true. But that they are simpler, more cautious, and less numerous than fourteenth-century theological writings—that they do not succeed in building on the achievements of those writings, even in the limited sense that Hoccleve and Lydgate, for example, can be said to build on Chaucer’s achievements—cannot, I think, be a matter for doubt.

The second change in the climate in which English theology was produced after 1410—a change that is perhaps the most suggestive indication of the long-term importance of the Constitutions—has to do with the circulation of texts. Not only did the writing of original theology decline in the fifteenth century; most of what was written (including many purely pragmatic texts) seems with few exceptions to have been less widely copied than religious works of all types from the fourteenth century. In the fifteenth century, that is, it was fourteenth- and not fifteenth-century works that were much the most widely read. Those of the writings of Pecock that survive at all do so in single manuscripts, and most of the other works that I mentioned from after 1410 were hardly better known, circulating in carefully limited numbers in milieus like the Bridgettine house at Syon and the Charterhouse at Sheen.31 With the important exceptions


31 For the role of the Carthusians in the circulation of religious texts, see Michael G. Sargent, “The Transmission by the English Carthusians of Some Late Medieval Spiritual Writings,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 27 (1976), 225–40. For further comments on circulation, see Gillespie, “Vernacular Books of Religion”; and two chapters of *Women and Literature in Britain*, 1150–1500, ed. Carol M. Meale, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 17 (Cambridge, Eng., 1993): Carol M. Meale, “... Alle the bokes that I haue of latyn, englisch, and frensch': Laywomen and Their Books in Late Medieval England” (pp. 128–58), and Felicity Riddy, “Women talking about the things of God: A Late Medieval Sub-culture” (pp. 104–27). Syon would seem to have been a major focal point of (and perhaps justification for) religious writing in English between c. 1415 and c. 1450.
of the Deguileville translations (written between 1413 and the late 1420s) and the *Seven Poyntes of Trewe Love and Everlastyng Wisdome* (a product, like Love's *Mirror*, of the Mount Grace Charterhouse, perhaps finished in 1419), it is hard, indeed, to find any theologically complex texts written after 1410 in free circulation among the laity, at least until the last years of the century; lay readership of the complete translations of Catherine of Siena or Mechtilde of Hackeborn (the last of which has not been dated) can never have been large. In contrast, as much evidence suggests, a good many works by fourteenth- and early-fifteenth-century writers—Rolle, Hilton, Langland, the authors of *Dives and Pauper*, *Pore Caitif*, and *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God*—remained staple reading until well into the sixteenth century, usually across a spectrum of audiences. The same is also true of *The Prick of Conscience*, the *Speculum vitae*, *Cursor mundi*, *The Abbey of the Holy Ghost* and *The Charter of the Abbey of the Holy Ghost*, various versions of the *Revelations* of Bridget of Sweden, and, most important of all, the Wycliffite Bible itself. And the rule even holds both for many of the simple catechetical works written in the fourteenth century and (albeit in more restricted environments) for the specialized works of the *Cloud* author and *The Chastizing of God's Children*. There was plenty of vernacular theological writing available in the fifteenth century for professional religious and laypeople of rank: intellectually challenging texts, which were no doubt eagerly studied by readers who had become used to having a constantly expanding array of choice in almost every other field of literary endeavour. But to a remarkable extent these texts dated from what had clearly been canonized as a theological golden age, an age of vernacular auctores, not from the age of brass in which fifteenth-century readers were actually living. It was evidently an inadvertent side effect of the Constitutions to help precipitate this creation of a canon of theological writing by simply sealing it up, making it so hard for later writers to contribute further to this literature that it is fair to say that original theological writing in English was, for a century, almost extinct.

---

32 For the Deguileville translations, see Pearsall, "Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes*," p. 408; see also *The Pilgrimage of the Soul*, ed. Rosemarie Potz McGerr, vol. 1, Garland Medieval Texts 16 (New York, 1990); *The Pilgrimage of the Lyfe of the Manhode*, ed. Avril Henry, vol. 1, EETS OS 288 (London, 1985). For the dating of *Seven Poyntes* and its association with Mount Grace, see Doyle, "Reflections," p. 85, and the remarks by Sargent, *Nicholas Love's *Mirror*," pp. lvi–lvii, both of whom cite as evidence the fact that Love's *Mirror* (drafted by 1409 and certainly completed by 1412) quotes from the work (i.e., from the Middle English) and the existence of a colophon stating that it was "Scriptum finaliter in monte gracie ultimo die Mensis Maij Anno domini MCCC. xix Deo gracias." Sargent comments that, in view of the decade or more the *Seven Poyntes* took to finish, "the translation must have been a desultory piece of work at best" (p. lvii), but it seems to me likely that work on the text was, rather, actively suspended in the years between 1409 and 1419; that would explain both the delay and the force of "finaliter" in the colophon.

33 On the circulation of Mechtilde, see *The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechtilde of Hackeborn*, ed. Theresa A. Halligan, Studies and Texts 46 (Toronto, 1979), pp. 47–59. Possibly the work entered England only in the fifteenth century, conceivably, as Halligan suggests (p. 52), with the Flemish monks drafted to help fill the new Carthusian house of Sheen after 1414 (although this is very uncertain). One work with an aristocratic lay circulation at the end of the fifteenth century was Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*; see Roger Lovatt, "The *Imitation of Christ* in Late Medieval England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 18 (1968), 97–121.
3. THE ARGUMENT OVER VERNACULAR THEOLOGY, 1300–1390

This account of the effects of the Constitutions has, of course, been highly generalized, riding roughshod over numerous details, offering a single piece of legislation as the cause of a historical process of which it was likely also an effect, and describing the tenor of the theological era this legislation helped to initiate in largely negative terms. Any study of the processes of canon formation runs a risk of merely repeating the gestures of exclusion such processes make, and I have at least come close to doing that here. It would be logical at this point, then, to try to provide a more nuanced account of fifteenth-century vernacular theology and its place in the intellectual culture of late-medieval England. One question that (in justice to Arundel) clearly needs asking, for example, is the extent to which the production and circulation of religious texts in the fifteenth century differed from those of secular texts, whether poetry, philosophy, or advice literature. The failure of Pecock’s attempt at theological synthesis to achieve a readership is in eloquent contrast to the brilliant success of Lydgate’s (in its way equally ambitious) Fall of Princes, written at about the same time; the popularity of John Walton’s Boethius translation, Hoccleve’s Regement of Princes, or Peter Idley’s Advice to His Son are almost equally striking beside the obscurity of their nearest religious equivalents. Nonetheless, there may have been more common ground between the circumstances of religious and secular authors than those examples suggest. Another question the answer to which should not be assumed concerns the extent to which writers after 1410 managed, despite all, to address theological concerns. The Orchard of Syon, for example, frames a translation of Catherine of Siena’s sophisticated visionary theology, the Dialogo, with a prologue that presents the entire work as mere pious meditation, “a fruitful orchard” divided by the translator into pleasant alleys and walkways which the reader can savor as she will; we could read this as an instruction to readers to feel, not think, their way through the text, but also as an attempt to shield a theologically adventurous translation from suspicious eyes. Nor is the Orchard the only meditative work with real theological content: unless (as I guess) it predates 1410, the Middle English pseudo-Augustinian Soliloquies (with its ruminations on grace and predestination) is one of several other possible cases in point. It might be possible to argue for the existence of an “underground” fifteenth-century theological tradition, carried on mainly through the processes of translation and compilation themselves.

So far as this paper is concerned, however, I have to leave those and similar

---

836

Censorship and Cultural Change

3. THE ARGUMENT OVER VERNACULAR THEOLOGY, 1300–1390

This account of the effects of the Constitutions has, of course, been highly generalized, riding roughshod over numerous details, offering a single piece of legislation as the cause of a historical process of which it was likely also an effect, and describing the tenor of the theological era this legislation helped to initiate in largely negative terms. Any study of the processes of canon formation runs a risk of merely repeating the gestures of exclusion such processes make, and I have at least come close to doing that here. It would be logical at this point, then, to try to provide a more nuanced account of fifteenth-century vernacular theology and its place in the intellectual culture of late-medieval England. One question that (in justice to Arundel) clearly needs asking, for example, is the extent to which the production and circulation of religious texts in the fifteenth century differed from those of secular texts, whether poetry, philosophy, or advice literature. The failure of Pecock’s attempt at theological synthesis to achieve a readership is in eloquent contrast to the brilliant success of Lydgate’s (in its way equally ambitious) Fall of Princes, written at about the same time; the popularity of John Walton’s Boethius translation, Hoccleve’s Regement of Princes, or Peter Idley’s Advice to His Son are almost equally striking beside the obscurity of their nearest religious equivalents. Nonetheless, there may have been more common ground between the circumstances of religious and secular authors than those examples suggest. Another question the answer to which should not be assumed concerns the extent to which writers after 1410 managed, despite all, to address theological concerns. The Orchard of Syon, for example, frames a translation of Catherine of Siena’s sophisticated visionary theology, the Dialogo, with a prologue that presents the entire work as mere pious meditation, “a fruitful orchard” divided by the translator into pleasant alleys and walkways which the reader can savor as she will; we could read this as an instruction to readers to feel, not think, their way through the text, but also as an attempt to shield a theologically adventurous translation from suspicious eyes. Nor is the Orchard the only meditative work with real theological content: unless (as I guess) it predates 1410, the Middle English pseudo-Augustinian Soliloquies (with its ruminations on grace and predestination) is one of several other possible cases in point. It might be possible to argue for the existence of an “underground” fifteenth-century theological tradition, carried on mainly through the processes of translation and compilation themselves.

So far as this paper is concerned, however, I have to leave those and similar

---


Censorship and Cultural Change

questions aside, in order to look more closely at the intellectual environment out of which Arundel's frontal attack on vernacular theology emerged, of which it was an effect, and to which it was a response. For the Constitutions were the peroration of an intense, approximately sixty-year cultural argument over the whole role of the vernacular in religious culture: an argument that took in larger questions about the intellectual capacities of the laity, the role of the clergy in ministering to them, and the suitability of vernacular language as a vehicle for religious truth. In what follows, I sketch parts of this argument, both as it was conducted in various phases of the history of vernacular theological writing during the period and as it was discussed in Latin by scholars who not only systematized it but may also have helped provide Arundel with his rationale for quashing it. Focusing (as earlier) on non-Lollard texts I am especially concerned to highlight the strength of a tradition of what we should probably think of as "orthodox" writing but which was nonetheless antipathetical in its attitudes to the Constitutions, even in the years immediately leading up to 1409. By emphasizing the extent to which this diverse group of works shares common ground with Lollard writing (despite major doctrinal differences), I hope to throw more light on the reasoning behind Arundel's decision to conduct his campaign against heresy on so broad a front, as well as on the consequences of that decision.

The early history of what was ultimately to become a clearly articulated argument over vernacular theology can here be described only in much abbreviated form. However, to cut a very long story short, its beginnings (in its fourteenth-century English context) seem to be traceable to a change that took place during the second half of the fourteenth century in collective assumptions about what was implied by writing a religious work in English.36 Before about 1350 the majority of such works (especially the more complex ones) were written for professional religious, often nuns or anchoresses, many of whom were personally known to the writers, and to write in English was thus to write for a smaller imagined audience than was addressed in the language of universal (clerical) access, Latin. When Rolle abandoned Latin for English to compose a rule for his friend Margaret Kirkeby in 1349, he also abandoned the prophetic stance of the hermit exhorting the whole of the earthly Church and adopted the intimate epistolary style that had for a millennium been considered appropriate to the situation—just as he abandoned the language in which (presumably) he primarily thought.37 It is true that there was already a strain of writing for the laity that emphasized the breadth of its own appeal (albeit in comparison with French rather than Latin): biblical paraphrases like the Ormulum, Cursor mundi, and the Northern Homily Cycle (which are all cases in point) are in this sense harbingers of things to come.38 But most early English religious writing

36 In this and the next paragraph, I am summarizing a discussion given in more detail in my "Middle English Mystics."
37 See Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority, pp. 248–55.
38 See John Thompson, “The Cursor mundi, the 'Inglis Tong,' and Romance,” in Readings in Medieval English Romance, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge, Eng., 1994), pp. 99–120; for the Northern Homily Cycle, and its "second career" in the late fourteenth century, see Thomas J. Heffernan,
is in the relatively uncomplicated position (which it shares with Anglo-French literature) of being able to express a concrete relationship between a defined author and a defined audience. While its assumptions about its readers are certainly contradictory at times (especially when these were women)—and while there was, of course, potential for all kinds of slippages—this body of writing grew up under conditions in which it rarely had to become more than moderately self-critical, to conduct the searching examinations of its own role that are so familiar a feature of works written even a few decades later.

But from the 1350s on, as the use of French declined and as lay interest in religious writing in English began its rapid rise, writing in the “mother tongue” increasingly implied writing for an indeterminate and socially mixed group who had in common only the fact that they were not literati. And while both Pecham’s Syllabus and biblical paraphrases like Cursor mundi offered models for texts directed at such an audience, these models came in some quarters to be seen as inadequate to the concerns of vernacular readers—as to the thematic concerns of writers, which were also undergoing major developments. There thus emerged, in vernacular texts themselves, an increasingly overt sense that what they were doing in presenting an ever wider array of theological concerns to an ever larger and less clearly defined group of readers needed justifying. It is in this situation—which predates the Lollards by approximately twenty years, although Lollard writings often reflect it—that I would locate the beginnings of the late-fourteenth- and early-fifteenth-century argument over the vernacular as a vehicle for theology.

Fifty more years were to pass before the argument acquired a standard shape: fourteenth-century texts generally articulate it in inchoate and even contradictory ways, at different points implying different paradigms to explain themselves and define their readers. Thus Langland (a prophetic figure who in many ways resembles Rolle, but for whom English is now the language of universal address and, for most purposes, surely of thought) castigates lay theologizing through the figure of Study, who inveighs against casting pearls before lay swine and satirizes the aristocrats who “carpen as thei clerkes were of Crist and of hise myghtes.” Yet the poem is itself a potent source of just the questioning Study condemns. Moreover, the second vision’s presentation of a model of vernacular theology as catechesis has the effect of exposing the dangers of restricting lay education to a program like Pecham’s, and thus implies that the reader (with Piers or Will) must go further. With a similar lack of obvious consistency, the


Cloud author is vehement in insisting that few should have access to The Cloud of Unknowing, despite its being written in English, yet states (in The Book of Privy Counsel) that even the simplest soul ought to be able to understand him. Cloud author is vehement in insisting that few should have access to The Cloud of Unknowing, despite its being written in English, yet states (in The Book of Privy Counsel) that even the simplest soul ought to be able to understand him. Book to a Mother, in its efforts to universalize a work that was intended in the first instance for the author's actual mother, makes the "mother" who is addressed into "euerchyn man and womman and child" and is then saddled with inconsistent assumptions about both the level of education (and wealth) of its audience and about what is necessary for them to do to achieve salvation. Pearl and Cleanliness attempt to combine the rhetoric of radical purity with an address to aristocratic lay readers of whom such purity cannot in any literal sense be expected. And even The Prick of Conscience (a far more theologically complex work than, say, Cursor mundi or the Northern Homily Cycle), on the one hand, offers itself to the use of readers whose primitive state of soul requires them to terrify themselves into virtue and, on the other hand, presents an account of the Day of Judgment and of the cosmology of hell and heaven that is sufficiently elaborate and up-to-date to attract (in some manuscripts) a body of Latin commentary, and even to be translated into Latin. It is far from clear that there is any one answer to the question of why and for whom even this work was written. For the most part it is only in works written after the turn of the century—under pressures generated by the Lollard controversy—that the contradictions evident in such earlier texts are distilled into two mutually irreconcilable views: a conservative one, which held that, because vernacular religious writings were accessible (at least potentially) to everyone, their circulation and content needed to be carefully restricted; and an evangelical one, which held that the Gospel was too important to be "claspid vp, ne closid in no cloyster," and that truth should be available to all.

The discussion over the nature of vernacular theology and its uneducated readers (illiterati) conducted in many of these highly self-conscious theologies written between 1350 and 1390 is of great importance. Indeed, in my view, it needs to be seen as equivalent in significance to Chaucer's parallel ruminations (especially in The House of Fame) on the nature of secular literature and on the problems of creating a courtly style in the English vernacular. Yet while it is in this body of writing that the discussion can best be observed as it evolves, for a more schematic look at the issues raised by the argument, especially in the

41 See Book to a Mother, an Edition with Commentary by Adrian James McCarthy, S.M., Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Studies in the English Mystics 1 (Salzburg, 1981), pp. 1, 18, 20. For the date of this work, see pp. xxx–xxxiv, which argues for the 1370s on the basis of references to "cracowes" (a kind of footwear not known in England before the reign of Edward III) and of what may be (and I think is) an allusion to Alice Perrers.
42 See my "Gawain-poet as a Vernacular Theologian."
43 The Prick of Conscience, ed. Richard Morris (Berlin, 1863), prologue; for an "interpolated" manuscript with Latin commentary, see, e.g., Manchester, John Rylands Library, MS English 90, described in R. E. Lewis and A. McIntosh, A Descriptive Guide to the Manuscripts of the Prick of Conscience, Medium AEvum Monographs, n.s. 12 (Oxford, 1982).
44 See the "Sermon of Dead Men" in Lollard Sermons, ed. Gloria Cigman, EETS OS 294 (London, 1989), line 1152 (early fifteenth century); the passage is quoted in full below, p. 859.
years leading up to the Constitutions, we have to go elsewhere. After all, even though the Constitutions profoundly influenced the future development of the theological projects represented by these late-fourteenth-century works, it is unlikely that any of them had a reciprocal impact on the legislation. Arundel was once Hilton’s employer and, years later, approved Love’s Mirror; but it would be odd if he had been an avid reader of vernacular texts or if he had condescended to learn from them.45 I will come back to vernacular texts later, taking up some of the developments that took place in the crucial years between 1390 and about 1415. First, however, I want to turn to an academic arena in which fierce arguments over the vernacular were articulated in Latin: an arena much closer to Arundel and of which (in view of his concern with Oxford) he likely knew. Discussion of the vernacular in Oxford must go back at least to the late 1370s, when Nicholas Hereford and others dared to give several academic sermons in English; and there are signs of similar discussions at Cambridge in 1384, focusing on a specific text, the Speculum vitae.46 Such discussions no doubt formed a backdrop to all the defenses of translation in texts like the prologue to the Wycliffite Bible, the Longleat Sermons, and Trevisa’s Dialogue—as they may have done to the English works of Hilton, who seems to have been in Cambridge in 1384 and who had a more systematic sense of the implications of the vernacular than his predecessors.47 But they are most clearly present in a series of formal arguments from around 1401 that have a direct bearing on the Constitutions and may have had a tangible influence on them. The name usually given to the three sets of determinationes in which these arguments still primarily survive is the “Oxford Debate on Bible Translation.”

4. THE OXFORD TRANSLATION DEBATE, 1401–7(?)

The Oxford translation debate, like the Constitutions, is usually discussed as part of the history of Lollardy: rightly so, since it was presumably sparked by controversy over Lollard attitudes to the vernacular, in particular by the most ambitious vernacular project of the age (probably written in Oxford), the Wycliffite Bible.48 The focal point of the debate was Bible translation, and one

45 For Arundel and Love, see below; for Arundel and Hilton, see Hughes, Pastors and Visionaries, pp. 183–86, etc.
determination (attributed to Thomas Palmer) calls the defenders of translation "heretics"; moreover, one of the two other surviving determinationes (the one not written by William Butler) was known until recently only in a vernacular paraphrase that is clearly a Lollard product. Yet there is good cause to look at the debate in a wider context—for, with the exception of Palmer’s (perhaps late) contribution, it was not conducted as a clash between orthodox and heretical views. As Hudson discovered, the Lollard paraphrase just mentioned is a version of a determinatio in favor of translation written in 1401 by an orthodox colleague of Wycliffe’s at Queen’s, Richard Ullerston. Ullerston adopted a stance as distanced from Lollardy as it is from the conservative views that he opposed; moreover, he took the topic of Bible translation in a broad sense, as including secondarily both biblical paraphrase and any other kind of vernacular instruction. His contribution to the debate suggests, first, that it was recognized as implicitly involving all types of vernacular theology; second, that until the Constitutions decided the debate in favor of the conservatives, both sides could claim to represent the orthodox position. Those facts help account for the common ground between arguments made by the protranslation party and vernacular theologians like Langland, Hilton, and Julian. Indeed, I hope to make it clear that, besides offering a detailed prospect of the formal arguments that Arundel could have cited to justify his thinking about the vernacular, the debate also provides us with a theoretical tool kit for studying much of the history of vernacular theology during this period. The analysis of the two sides of the debate I give here is a synthetic and necessarily abbreviated version of a sophisticated intellectual exchange, which does not attempt to take its internal history into proper account. All I can do here is to suggest the larger issues at stake and to sketch the opposing pictures of vernacular theology and of the readers for whom it was written that the debate implies.

The attacks on translation are not always self-consistent, but they are still deeply revealing. For Butler, making the Bible available to illiterati is a foolish disruption of the order of things. Just as knowledge of God is mediated through the orders of angels (each receiving it from the one above), even so “the passive illumination given to Christians of a lower order should depend utterly on the wills of Christians of higher order.” Even apart from that principle, Butler argued that in practice the laity cannot overcome the problems presented by

49 See “Bible Translation,” which establishes Ullerston’s role in the debate; the Lollard version is edited by Deanesly, pp. 437–45 (where she ascribes it, without evidence, to John Purvey). I am most grateful to Professor Hudson for sending me a transcript of the Latin determinatio from the Vienna Hofbibliothek manuscript (4133) in which she discovered it, and for photocopies of the relevant folios, to which I have referred whenever I quote from the text. Responsibility for any errors is my own.

50 This rather broad definition of translation is implicit in his definition of translatio as any act of interpretation or mediation: thus “translaatores dicuntur interpretes et e contra” (fol. 196v). For this definition (which is wholly conventional), see Minnis and Scott, Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism (above, n. 16), p. 374.

51 “Illuminatio passiva viantium de ordine inferiori dependere debet complete a volitiva viantium in ordine superiori” (Deanesly, p. 407). As Deanesly notes, the argument is from Pseudo-Dionysius. In another analogy (pp. 415–16) the clergy represent the eyes of the mystical body of Christ, the laity its members, who should no more read the text of the Scripture than can a foot or hand.
the Bible, which include textual deficiencies only scholars can assess as well as
the interpretative problems of ambiguity and obscurity—which lead to confu-
sions (e.g., over the persona speaking at a given moment [p. 402]) and more
serious errors or heresies. Nor are such problems avoidable: since the clouding
of the human intellect at the Fall, only the elite have had access to clear thinking;
for Aristotle says, "the more people there are, the smaller or feeblower are their
minds," a truth that demands that the Scripture be kept from the "populus
vulgaris." For that sort of people, thought, prayer (p. 406), the sacraments,
and knowledge that is gained through hearing—less dangerous than reading,
since it involves the testimony of "living holy books" (i.e., preachers)—must
remain the only legitimate means of access to the divine.

Palmer was more dependent on Scripture itself, focusing his attack on the
impossibility and uselessness of Bible translation. "Nothing useless to the people
[vulgo] ought to be available in our vernacular [vulgari], since it does more
harm than good; but much in the Scriptures falls into this category." The
Bible contains archana verba, which are not for common people (p. 422). Palmer
read several biblical references to secrets as instructions coded in the Bible itself
as to how it ought to be disseminated: it is the Bible that is the "hidden sign"
in Revelation (p. 422); the secret God reveals only to friends (p. 423; Isa. 24.16,
John 15.15); the sanctuary where only Aaron and his sons could go (p. 424;
Num. 4); the meat for which the common people, as spiritual children, can
never be ready (p. 423; 1 Cor. 2.14). Moreover, if "faith has no merit when
the human reason proves it by experiment," it is crucial to safeguard the laity’s
simple faith by keeping hidden the truths God conceals from his enemies (p.
429). Do not throw bread to dogs or pearls to swine (p. 434; Matt. 7.6). Rather,
the laity should think on "things to avoid, that is, the seven deadly sins; things
to fear, that is, the pains of hell; things to believe, found in the creed; things
to do, the ten commandments; things to hope for, everlasting reward; these are
all needed for salvation." Nor does the vernacular itself fare any better than
those who speak it. Error is seen as an inevitable result of translation into a
barbarous tongue like English, with its small vocabulary, its lexicographical odd-
ities, tendency toward monosyllable, and lack of inflection, which make it gram-

52 The definition of “error” here is noteworthy: “Nam Augustinus, epistola 58, describit errorem,
dicens: Non mihi videtur aliquem errare, cum aliquis nescire se scit, sed cum putat se scire quod
nescit” (Deanesly, p. 403).
53 “Secundum Philosophum, pauci sunt vigentes acumine intellectus; et ideo ponit, tertio Rhetho-
ricae, quod quanto maior est populus tanto minor vel remotior est intellectus” (Deanesly, p. 405).
54 Deanesly, p. 410, accepting her addition of “viventes.”
55 “Nulla vulgo inutilia sunt in vulgari nostro habenda, quia nocerent plus quam prodestess; sed
multa in scriptura sunt huismodi” (Deanesly, p. 421).
56 “Qua, secundum Gregorium, fides . . . non habet meritum cum humana ratio praebet experi-
mentum” (Deanesly, p. 422); proverbial, but originating in Gregory’s Moralitas, PL 76:1398.
57 “Quae sunt fugienda, videlicet septem peccata mortalitae; quae sunt timenda, videlicet, in[fernales
poenae]; quae sunt credenda, in simbolo contenta; quae sunt facienda, decem mandata; et quae
sunt speranda, praemia aeterna; omnia ista sunt necessaria ad salutem” (Deanesly, pp. 425–26).
Here as elsewhere, Palmer is deriving ideas from the commentaries of his Dominican colleague
Nicholas Gorham (d. 1400), on whose glosses his arguments frequently depend.
Censorship and Cultural Change

matically and rhetorically inadequate as a vehicle for truth (pp. 426–28).\textsuperscript{58} To translate the Bible is clearly to go against charity (p. 423).

The attack on translation summarized by Ullerston, finally, contains much we have already heard but also makes a number of new points. Again, there is much about technical difficulties: 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 (Vienna, Hofbibliothek, MS 4133, fol. 195r); since logical and philosophical terminology does not exist in the vernacular, any attempt to translate these must be incomprehensible (fol. 195r–v). More important, though, is the apocalyptic account given of the social consequences of translation. Translation into the mother tongue will allow any old woman (\textit{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 (\textit{mulierculae}) talk philosophy and dare to instruct men—in which a country bumpkin (\textit{rusticus}) will presume to teach.\textsuperscript{59} 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.\textsuperscript{60} Even the laity will not benefit, since their devotion is actually improved by their lack of understanding of the psalms and prayers they say (fol. 196r). Translation will mean the demise of a major component in the unity of Christendom, the Latin language (fol. 196r). 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.\textsuperscript{61}

In these attacks on translation we see both the intellectual and the emotional foundations of the Constitutions’ harshly repressive regulation of vernacular theology in the process of being laid, as a number of the problems that emerged

\textsuperscript{58} This passage turns on an interesting argument that the Bible’s rhetorical figures themselves are integral to its truth, since they protect it from misreading: “The Holy Scriptures can in many places be read only as incongruous and false except with the aid of its figures and grammatical rules. . . . Thus it cannot be translated into any language that is not regulated by such grammatical rules and figures” (Deanesly, p. 426: “Sacra scriptura in multis locis salvari non potest aliquando incongruitate et falsitate, nisi per figuras et regulas grammaticales. . . . Igitur in nullam linguam quae non regulatur regulis et figuris grammaticalis est ipsa transferenda”).

\textsuperscript{59} “Item prebere occasionem mulieribus docendi. ubi docere prohibitum est illicium. sed hoc fieri euidenter. si scriptura sacra in lingwam ulugi esset translasta, tunc enim quelibet uetula docendi officium vsurparet. qui inpromptu haberet scripturam sacram in lingua materna” (Vienna, Hofbibliothek, MS 4133, fol. 195v); also on heresies (with reference to “audacia hereticis nostri temporis”). The world-turned-upside-down passage (ibid.) quotes Jerome, Epistola ad Paulinum (PL 22:544).

\textsuperscript{60} “Tolleret honorem debitum bonis presbiteris . . . .” (fol. 195v); “. . . qua sacer canon esset transferendus in uulgare. et totum missale . . . tunc enim uilescret totus clerus. uilescret cultus diuinus. uilescretque omnia eclesie sacramenta. tunc enim laici reputarent clericos inutiles. quemadmodum modo theologi a residua parte cleri inutiles iudicantur. tunc enim prorecti clericis deficerent. statuaretque multitudo heresium infinita” (fol. 196r).

\textsuperscript{61} “Illicium est promulgari quod multitudo periciorum clericorum illicium iudicaret . . . ac vniuersis filiis huius seculi iudicaret qua[m]libet translacionem esse illicitam. a uerisimili cum multi et magni inter eos iamdudum super ita mihi murmurarent prout uisum est tam in publico quam ad partem” (fol. 196r).
Censorship and Cultural Change

in inchoate forms in English writings from the 1350s on are suddenly brought into focus. On one side, a set of associations between a barbarous mother tongue, an uneducated readership with a “carnal” understanding of truth, and the danger that this readership will rebel (like the flesh against the spirit, the members of a diseased body against the head) serves to link the undoubted linguistic difficulty of translation with its hypothetical consequences—so that a lack of grammatical regulation in the vernacular comes to imply the unruliness of those who speak it. This linkage makes of the whole body of the laity a brute and headless mass—Palmer (by implication) calls them “God’s enemies”—who, as soon as they gain direct access to truths that ought to be mediated to them by the clergy (thinking for them), will turn on their betters in pride and confusion, like the dogs and pigs they are. (The reminiscences of Gower’s *Vox clamantis*, in its depiction of the rebels of 1381 as brutish animals, are striking.) On the other side, the remedy for this situation—to confine lay learning (as Palmer suggests) to catechesis—directly anticipates the solution imposed by Arundel, with its narrow definition of the truths considered “necessary” for the illiterati to know. In all this, pastoral concern for the laity is in an ambiguous relation to a fear and contempt of the “populus vulgaris” and their desire to encroach on clerical turf: the generalized suspicion of all who are not educated clerics is reminiscent of monastic texts written well over two centuries earlier (before Lateran IV), such as Honorius of Autun’s *Elucidarium*. The call to clerical solidarity implied by the end of the determinatio summarized by Ullerston is an appeal to self-interest that goes far toward accounting for the success of the Constitutions. It may well be true that by 1409, many highly educated clerics did think that translation should be banned and welcomed the decisive clarification of the issue Arundel provided.

Yet it needs stressing that the conservative revolution that these attacks on translation propose only instantiated itself as the English church’s solution to Lollardy because Arundel and his advisers decided it should be so, not because the conservatives were in any sense more rigorously orthodox than their opponents. Indeed, the attacks on translation are in many ways as radical (in a conservative direction) as most of what the Lollards themselves proposed. The ultraconservatism of their stance is made amply clear by Ullerston’s defense of translation, which is far the most searching document produced by the debate and is indeed the most interesting medieval discussion of the status and nature of the English vernacular that I have encountered (in its way, almost an insular religious equivalent of Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia*). Ullerston 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. In the Old Testament, in Christ and his apostles’ practice in the New, in the use of the vernacular in the Armenian church, and in many English examples (from Bede to Grosseteste, Rolle’s *English Psalter*, and Gaytryge’s *Lay Folks’ Catechism*), Ullerston can find no signs that either

---

vernacular instruction derived from the Bible or Bible translation itself have ever been forbidden (fols. 197r–198v). 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 (fols. 201r–202r). Indeed, so convinced is Ullerston that it is not possible to attack Bible translation moved by the spirit of God that he devotes space to the motives of those who oppose translation, in the process providing more evidence of how clerical ranks were closing around the repressive stand about to be taken by Arundel. While some do so out of anxiety over the vernacular works, which are already sowing heresy through the kingdom—who say, “Let us do evil so that good may come” (Rom. 3.8), denying that Christ himself taught in the vernacular (fols. 198v–199r)—others are moved only by a desire for fat benefices or argue out of institutional solidarity, agreeing with those in authority from ignorance or through peer pressure: when one pig grunts, all grunt; when one dog barks, the rest bark as well. Ullerston himself (prudently) submits to the will of the church and identifies that will with the decisions of prelates, but he is clear that both precedent and truth are on the side of vernacular theology as a legitimate instrument of lay instruction.

Perhaps most interesting, however, are the passages in which Ullerston responds to his opponent’s vision of Bible translation as a likely cause of social and intellectual breakdown. Such a picture, he argues, underestimates the laity’s willingness to learn and their understanding of Scripture. Where Moses praised his people and foresaw the nations of the earth exclaiming at the “wise and understanding people” who follow God’s laws, opponents of translation invert this and laud the stupidity and blindness with which the nations credit the English laity in their ignorance. In doing this, they give way to an unnecessary (and

---

63 The mention of Gaytryge (probably John of Catterick) is a shrewd move on Ullerston’s part, since his was perhaps the first vernacular theological work that was episcopally commissioned, by the archbishop of York, William Thoresby, in conjunction with the pastoral legislation promulgated in 1357. For discussion, see Vincent Gillespie, “Vernacular Books of Religion,” pp. 317–18, and “Doctrina and Predicacio: The Design and Function of Some Pastoral Manuals,” Leeds Studies in English 11 (1980 for 1979), esp. 36; R. N. Swanson, “The Origins of The Lay Folks’ Catechism,” Medium AEvum 60 (1991), 92–100; and Sue Powell, “The Transmission and Circulation of The Lay Folks’ Catechism,” in Late-Medieval Religious Texts and Their Transmission, pp. 67–84.

64 Ullerston proves this from 1 Cor. 12.3: “Quod nemo loquens in spiritu Dei, dicit anathema Ihesu,” which those who would ban Bible translation are in effect saying (fol. 199r).

65 “Ut pote quia talis talia asseuerans. est aut fuit de ordine meo. de religione mea. de familiaritate mea. seu de collegio modo ideo sustineo que sustinuit. siue uera siue falsa”; “quid quid audierint ab his qui magno reputant, cito credunt”; or, worse, “Ex condicione bestiali mouentur illi ad premissa concedenda, qui quod est rationis aut consciencie non auertunt ... sicut enim grummente vno porco, omnes grumment, latrante eciam vno cane ceteri mxi sibi colatrant” (fol. 199r). Presumably this last is Ullerston’s response to “pears before swine.”

66 “Quod si contingat ecclesiam aliter me docere ... sibi obediam indililate” (fol. 197v).

67 The two false conjectures from which his opponents reason are “Primum viz. quod populus esset minus pronus ad docendum, secundum quod esset minus intelligens in scripturis” (fol. 203r).

68 See Deut. 4.6: instead of “En populus sapientes et intelligentes gens magna,” the “zelantes” say “hec est enim stulticia nostra et cecitas coram populis. ut audientes vniuersi precepta hec dicant. En populus stultus et ignarus. gens infima” (fol. 203r).
unscriptural) fear of lay learning. The actual result of the dissemination of such learning would not need to be social dissolution; it would be the task of prelates to impose such ecclesiastical discipline as might be necessary (fol. 202v). Women would not try to preach, but they would be enabled to perform their proper canonical function of teaching other women—while to allow them knowledge of Scripture would be the best way to prevent them from creating heresies. Rustics would not presume to teach, except in the performance of their paterfamilial duty to teach the law to their wives and children (fol. 202v). Against his opponent’s apocalypticism, Ullerston places an idealistic, but canonically correct, picture of Christian society as a harmonious, hierarchic community where knowledge is accessible to all without threat to truth, propriety, or social discipline (it is the kind of picture Langland sets up, only to demolish, throughout Piers Plowman). For Ullerston, the laity are not swine undeserving of the pearls of knowledge (fol. 204v) but the people of God to whom Christ preached in the mother tongue (fol. 207r) and who both need and are fit to receive God’s law translated into that tongue.

To sum up, then, I see four major questions at issue in the Oxford debate: the nature and capacity of English; the nature and capacity of the (mostly but not exclusively lay) readership of vernacular theology; the definition of truths that are “necessary” to know; and the role of the clergy as communicators or, alternatively, guardians of knowledge. Arundel, of course, met all these questions with resoundingly decided answers, appealing to Jerome on the difficulty of translation, Pecham on the question of necessary truth, and making the principle of hierarchic unity the only overt basis of his other restrictions. But Ullerston offers an alternative reading both of Jerome (who, after all, did go on to translate the Bible into a vernacular) and of the pastoral theology symbolized by Pecham: a reading that contains none of the radical theological or social implications evident in Lollard thought and that, before about 1380, would surely have been generally accepted as legitimate. (Witness the steady “leaking” of biblical material into English through the fourteenth century, from Rolle’s English Psalter to Book to a Mother, The Lyfe of Soule, the text edited as Fourteenth-Century Biblical Versions, and others.) Ullerston’s defense helps us see the Constitutions as they must have been seen by numbers of moderates, who did not accept that the fight against heresy justified reversing the great program of education whose foundations had been laid at Lateran IV two centuries earlier and built on by Pecham and others ever since. From the viewpoint of this (ill-defined and little-studied) group, the Constitutions must have seemed a huge mistake, a setting back of the clock two hundred years: a premature Counter-Reformation.

69 “Non enim oportet tamen timere. ne populus excellat in sciencia. sed longe plus de ignorancia testanta prophetari populus inquit meis perijt. eo quod non habuit scienciam” (fol. 203r).

70 According to Ullerston, this is why Jerome wrote twenty-eight long letters dealing with high matters of theology to holy women: “Beatus Ieronimus scripsit ad sanctas mulieres. unde circa uiginti octo magnas epistolas. in quibus sunt satis alte questiones grauesque difficultates. Mulieres igitur sicut etere persone iuxta qualitates suas sunt tractande” (fol. 203r).
5. The Oxford Debate and Vernacular Theology, c. 1385–1415

The Oxford debate is an extremely useful resource for the study of issues surrounding vernacular theology in the whole period covered by this paper, and particularly for the twenty years between 1390 and 1410. It is, of course, necessary that we use it with care and not succumb to the temptation to universalize it. The issues were not always seen in the same way at Oxford, the heart of the Lollard movement, as they were elsewhere. (Thus the debate does not even touch on visions, an important theme in some vernacular contexts, especially after the canonization of Bridget of Sweden in 1391, while its generalizations about the “laity,” as though this were a homogeneous body, are paralleled by the language of the Constitutions but are less than helpful in considering actual situations in which, as we shall see, social and other hierarchies were in practice of great importance.) Nor were these issues stable even for the five or so years in which the debate occurred: differences in attitude between the main surviving documents suggest that it had its own internal history (perhaps one of increasing polarization). The debate is, as we saw, only part of a larger argument, one whose logic works rather differently in different contexts. Less than a decade before 1401, writing under the influence of a Cambridge religious milieu, Hilton (for example) still thought in terms that can only with difficulty be mapped onto the views of Ullerston or his opponents. In relation to much of what had come before (from Rolle to Langland to the Cloud author), book 2 of The Scale of Perfection is a conservative text, which may be an attempt to create an “official” vernacular theology: one that addresses a much wider range of issues than Pecham’s Syllabus but seeks to discourage a dangerous tendency toward speculation by offering the reader the prospect of contemplating heavenly truths instead of abstruse matters of theology. But a mere five years after Hilton’s death in 1396 even this text might have been seen (from the viewpoint of later conservatives) as posing a potential threat (perhaps that is why Love’s Mirror uses material from Hilton’s less theologically informative treatise On Mixed Life without mentioning the Scale). And less than a decade after that, the debate on translation itself was obsolete, the freedom to argue about this and many other topics legislated out of existence.

Yet having taken the specificity of the debate into account, it is still notable how often the issues it raises are reflected elsewhere. This is true even in texts written many years before it occurred; Piers Plowman (a poem so prescient about much of what was to follow) is full of moments reminiscent of the debate. And it is still more true in works written in the 1390s or later. To take an obvious example, The Chastizing of God’s Children (datable between 1391 and 1409)
encourages vernacular Bible reading but also asserts the importance of Latin for liturgical purposes, in terms recalling arguments used by both sides in the debate. This underrated work—a compilation largely drawn from Continental texts dealing with visionary experience, which is thus concerned both with translation and with the apprehending of truth without clerical mediation—is remarkable for its evocation of a world in which men and women who are granted true visions are inspired by them to “deuout speche or prechyng” and to “hooli teermes in writying and makynge of booke in latyn or in ynglisshe” (p. 182, l. 19—p. 183, l. 1, emphasis mine). While the Chastizing also sets out a fierce set of criteria by which clerics can assess the validity of visions (chaps. 18–21), we are close, here, to the world of relatively unregulated preaching and writing by women and rustici, which Ullerston’s opponent evoked so dystopically and which Ullerston himself struggled to portray in a more socially acceptable light.

We get another picture of the same world a few years later (as late as 1415) from Thomas Hoccleve, who took an opposite stance to the Chastizing in asserting—in language that recalls both the Oxford debate and the Constitutions—that such a world has actually come into existence and must be stamped out:

Lete holy chirche medle of the doctryn
Of Crystes lawes & of his blyeue,
And lete alle othir folke ther-to enclyne,
And of our feith noon argumentes meeue.
For if we mighte our feith by reson preue,
We sholde no meryt of our feith haue.
But now a dayes a Baillif or Reeue
Or man of craft wole in it dote or raue.

Some wommen eke, thogh hir wit be thynne,
Wole argumentes make in holy writ!
Lewde calates! sittith doun and spynne,
And kakele of sumwhat elles, for your wit
Is al to feeble to despute of it!
To Clerkes grete apparteneth bat aart,
The knowleche of bat, god hath fro you shit;
Stynte and leue of, for right sclendre is your paart.

(To Sir John Oldcastle 137–52)75

Like Ullerston’s opponent, Hoccleve denounced the confusion of lay and clerical roles that results from the laity’s taking too much interest in theology. Yet he also, surely, participated in that confusion: despite its appeal to Hoccleve’s

74 The Chastising of God’s Children and the Treatise of Perfection of the Sons of God, ed. Joyce Bazire and Eric Colledge (Oxford, 1957). For the date, see my “Composition of Julian’s Revelation,” n. 40 (p. 655), although (in view of the argument presented here) I would no longer urge a date before 1400. For the discussion of Bible translation, see Chastising, p. 221.

canonical duty to help instruct a fellow Christian, even this poem (with its paraphrases of Augustine [stanza 5] and comments on the books of the Bible a knight may read [stanza 26]) impinges on clerical prerogatives, as Ullerston’s opponent conceived of them. Despite Hoccleve’s desire (until his marriage in 1410–11) to enter the ranks of the beneficed clergy, this poem, too, exemplifies the laicization of religious instruction—the erosion of hierarchy described by Butler—which was so feared by clerical conservatives.

Hoccleve’s engagement in the issues of his day led him close to adopting a clerical voice even while he asserted the need to keep secular and religious roles distinct—in the process inadvertently highlighting the way almost any vernacular text can be seen, in the overheated atmosphere of the early fifteenth century, as containing radical potential. Other writers, with different priorities, blurred the distinction between cleric and noncleric deliberately, in a manner that helps account for the apocalyptic overtones evident in parts of the Oxford debate (not to mention the drastic consequences of the Constitutions themselves). I know of no clearly orthodox works after Piers Plowman in which a rusticus acts as a teacher, as Ullerston’s opponent predicts will happen if the Bible is available in English. Yet similar inversions are a defining characteristic of several vernacular theologies written in the two decades between (approximately) 1390 and 1410, which evolve a “horizontal” mode of address that seems precisely designed to displace existing notions of religious (and, in some cases, secular) hierarchy by implying that common humanity and desire for truth make writer and reader fully equal, whatever their worldly status may be. The treatise Pore Caitif (perhaps compiled before 1390) is only one of several works that evoke Ullerston’s vision of Christian community, in which a people learned in God’s law instructs itself—and indeed does so in considerably more egalitarian terms than Ullerston’s:

This tretyse suffisith to eche cristen man & womman
This tretyse compiled of a pore caitif. & nedy of gostly help of al cristen peple. by þe gret mercy & help of god: shal teche simple men & wymmen of gode wille, þe right way to heuene, yf bei wille besye hem to haue it in mynde. & to worche ther after, wiþouten multiplicacion of many bokes. And as a child willing to ben a clerk, begynneþ first atte grounde, þat is his. a.b.c., so he, this desiring to spede þe betir, begynneþ atte grounde of helthe, þat is cristen mennes bileue. (Downside Abbey, MS 26542, fol. 94r)

76 Piers the Ploughman’s Crede (ed. Helen Barr in The Piers Plowman Tradition: A Critical Edition of “Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede,” “Richard the Redeles,” “Mum and the Sothsegger” and “The Crowned King” [London, 1993]), which might be a candidate here (and is usually dated c. 1395), is generally considered a Lollard work.

77 I am grateful to the abbot of Downside for permission to see this manuscript and for the community’s hospitality. The treatise has been edited from London, British Library, MS Harley 2336, by Sister Mary Teresa Brady (diss., Fordham University, 1954). Further work is needed on the treatise’s date before it can confidently be ascribed to a period before 1390, but I tentatively place it in the 1380s (against the interests of my argument here) on the much less than satisfactory grounds that the absence of any trace of Hilton would be surprising in a compilation of this kind written much after 1390. The latest writer used by the compiler is Richard Rolle (d. 1349), but the earliest manuscripts of the text, according to Brady, appear to be late fourteenth century.
Presumably the writer of these words was a cleric, but the image of a "child willing to ben a clerk," which one would expect to refer to the process of education that readers undergo by means of the book, is made to refer, rather, to his own self-education, as he instructs himself in the course of his writing. No hierarchic relation between writer and reader—no essential difference between them—is admitted. A more complex but somewhat similar effect is achieved in *Dives and Pauper* (written in 1405 or 1410), in which a poor man and a rich converse about the Ten Commandments, the poor man being "principal techere" (p. 51, l. 7), though the rich man—as the voice of the book's imagined aristocratic reader—has much to say, too. Here Pauper "semyst to been a lettryd man and a clerk" (p. 53, ll. 22–23) so far as Dives is concerned, and there is some effort on the latter's part to set up a relationship based on antagonism, such as we find in Trevisa's radical *Dialogus inter clericum et militem*. Yet Pauper never identifies himself as a cleric: his authority derives not from a place in a hierarchy but from his attitude of inner poverty and his ability to convince Dives that he, too, must cultivate this attitude despite his wealth. The author of this work was probably a friar, but his persona is a more deinstitutionalized figure, a Piers or a Patience—or, indeed, one of those preaching irregulars whose activities the Constitutions were soon to try to quash.

Yet the best-known example of a nonhierarchic relationship between writer and reader is the one established in the revised version of Julian's *Revelation of Love*, which was begun after 1393 and completed at some time in the ensuing twenty years, or perhaps even later, after 1413. Julian's book provides the most striking confirmation of the worst fears of Ullerston's opponent (and of Hoccleve) over the effects of religious education on women while at the same time offering a contemporary instance of the account of visionaries as writers given in the *Chastizing*. Here is a text in which a woman indeed teaches (and

---


80 For these dates, see my "Composition of Julian's *Revelation*," which argues that the text is likely to be at least as late as the first years of the fifteenth century. It might be thought that the case presented in this paper precludes a date after 1409, but I do not think this need be so, in view of how slowly the legislation took effect and of what would have been the advanced state of Julian's project when the Constitutions were promulgated. While the evidence for dating the work as late as 1413 is not conclusive, my argument here does, indeed, in some ways support that evidence. The fact that the text never reached a wide public (there are no medieval manuscripts of Julian's revision) may suggest a late date, while several features of the text itself could be taken as responses to the Constitutions. The most striking of these is the careful way the revised text begins (as the earlier draft does not) by giving the date of Julian's original revelation (May 8, 1373), a move that places the insights on which the text is based firmly before the rise of Lollardy and thus outside the period covered by Arundel's ban. While there are no doubt several reasons for giving this date, its position in the text parallels suggestively the way copies of certain Lollard works circumvent the Constitutions by prominently displaying impossibly early dates for their own composition.
teaches men, among others) and advances, if not heresy, then unusual religious teaching. Julian addresses her book to all Christians and speaks of herself, not as an authoritative recipient of grace, but as a "simple creature that cowde no letter" (a persona parallel to that of "pore caitif" and "pauper"), who, as such, can act as a representative for everyone: "And that I say of me I sey it in the person of all mine even cristen." This gesture ameliorates suspicions that she is usurping a clerical role, but does so only by wholly dissolving the hierarchic distinction between cleric and noncleric on which the Oxford debate was based and substituting for it one between God and humankind in general. Where Butler writes of a procession of knowledge from God to the learned and thence to the uneducated, these last having no direct access to the divine, Julian states that God reveals himself to all according to the depth of their love of him, privileging not even the recipient of the revelation herself; like the compiler of Pore Caitif, she situates herself with (not over against) her readers, a learner, not a teacher. Nor is this the only brilliant variation she plays on one of the Oxford debate's themes. Another is her depiction of her book as, on the one hand, a revelation of God's essential nature and, on the other, a mere catechetical ABC of the truth that is to emerge at the end of time (see chapters 86, 80). This paradox has the effect of undoing a further distinction, between "necessary" truths and the matters of theology, that Butler, Palmer, Ullerston's opponent, Arundel, and Hoccleve were united in proclaiming must be kept from nonclerics. For Julian, God has revealed only necessary truths, concealing from angel and saved soul, noncleric and cleric alike his "privy counsel," consisting of "all that is bisiden [irrelevant to] our salvation" (p. 31, ll. 15–16). Hence all revealed truths are necessary truths, and God decides what humans need to know, not a Latinate elite. In the intricate logic of Julian's Revelation, truth is much more widely available than it is even in Ullerston's account of a world where the Bible is known to all. Despite its gestures of obedience to Holy Church, the Revelation is in clear opposition to the hierarchic model of Christian society developed by the Oxford conservatives and articulated in less theoretical terms in the Constitutions.

6. Vernacular Theology and the Constitutions, 1409–c. 1415

These examples of how the Oxford debate resonated in the English theologies of the period should be sufficient to indicate both the connections and some of the gaps between academic arguments about the vernacular and vernacular works themselves. Obviously, Oxford scholars, living in a clerical and Latin-speaking community, viewed matters in a somewhat different light from clerics who lived among the laity and wrote in English as well as from writers like Julian and Hoccleve. Thus Julian and the authors of the Chastizing, Pore Caitif, and even Dives and Pauper (despite its explicit appeal to an aristocratic readership)

all accepted the egalitarian implications of vernacular theology more openly than Ullerston—while Hoccleve’s brand of conservatism might not have been agreeable to Ullerston’s opponent. Equally obviously, however, all surveyed a similar scene and reflected on it in varying, but coherently related, ways.

Something of the same relationship between the Oxford debate and vernacular texts is discernible in the works to which I turn in the final section of this paper: *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, a translation of the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi* by Nicholas Love, prior of the Carthusian community of Mount Grace, in Yorkshire; and the *Longleat Sermons*, a series of expositions of Gospel passages, written after 1409 by the author of *Dives and Pauper*. But there is also a major difference between this opposing pair of vernacular theologies and all of the works mentioned in the previous section, except Hoccleve’s. Julian and all the other authors I discussed must have been aware on some level of working in a controversial cultural space, their attitudes to themselves and their readers hotly contested by certain of their contemporaries. Yet whereas slightly earlier writers like Langland and the *Cloud* author, preoccupied with the implications of the vast new territory vernacular theology was opening up, responded somewhat defensively to this situation, Julian and her contemporaries seldom allowed it to enter their writings in explicit form; indeed, Julian took care to edit the self-justificatory passages from the first version of her book (perhaps finished c. 1388) out of her revision. This feature of a number of theologies written between about 1390 and 1410 (including book 2 of Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection*) is surely to be regarded as a mark of confidence, and thus as further evidence that Ullerston was in as close accord as his opponents with at least some orthodox vernacular writers of the time. But the texts discussed here, by contrast, are openly controversial and self-justificatory—and no longer in the inchoate, often confusing manner of Langland and the *Cloud* author but with all the schematic clarity of the Oxford debate. This is because both these works were written in the ambit of, or in response to, the Constitutions, which in the years after 1409 progressively (as we saw) made a particular view of vernacular theology a matter of obedience. To juxtapose these works with those written just before the Constitutions made their presence felt is thus to return to where I began: to the constrained circumstances under which fifteenth-century theology was composed and how these were manufactured by Arundel’s massive act of intervention in a vibrant tradition of vernacular writing.

Love’s *Mirror*, which was the first work to take advantage of the protection offered by the Constitutions, seems to embody their ideology so well that it is tempting to speculate (with Jonathan Hughes) that it was written in part to

---

82 For Love, see Sargent’s introduction to his edition; and A. I. Doyle, “Reflections.” My account of the *Longleat Sermons*, which is currently being edited by Adrian Wilmot, owes a good deal to Hudson and Spencer, “Longleat Sermons,” the only description of this text so far in print. I am grateful to the Marquess of Bath and to Dr. Kate Harris, the librarian at Longleat House, for permission to view the manuscript and to transcribe passages from it (note that the manuscript has been refoliated since Hudson and Spencer’s article, the former fol. 2 now having become fol. 1).
Censorship and Cultural Change

The work has been portrayed as a conservative response to the Wycliffite Bible, which attempts to provide the substitute of devout meditation for the increasingly widespread (and by now suspect) lay practice of Bible study. Given its lofty didactic tone and its use of Hilton's *On Mixed Life*, it may also be legitimate to regard it not only as a response to the nonhierarchic instructional mode exemplified by works like *Pore Caitif* and *Dives and Pauper* but also as an attempt to institutionalize a narrower model of lay instruction than the one powerfully articulated hardly a decade earlier by Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*. Love describes the lay readers for whom he writes in much the terms suggested by Palmer or Butler, as "symple creatures whiche as childryn hauen nede to be fedde with mylke of lyȝte doctryne & not with sadde mete of grete clargye & of hye contemplacion" (p. 10, ll. 14–17). Moreover, many of his strategies (for example, his interpolation of Gospel narrative with "devoute ymaginacions" of what might have been done or said, or his omission of most of Christ's actual teaching) seem to be designed to divert lay readers from doctrinal inquiry and to remind them of their childlike dependence on clerics who think for them. After all, as Love states, in advocating unquestioning submission to the orthodox view of transubstantiation, it is safer to abandon one's "kyndely reson" and believe "with a buxom drede" what Holy Church teaches, *even if it should turn out to be wrong*, than to persist in asking doctrinal questions and risk becoming a heretic. Again, the assumption that, for the laity, thought and error are virtual synonyms aligns Love with the conservatives in the Oxford debate.

The ideal lay reader whom Love has in mind is best summed up, however, in a much earlier passage that reflects on the account in James of Voragine's *Legenda aurea* of the virtues of St. Cecilia:

Amonge oþer vertuese commendynges of þe holy virgine Cecile it is writen þat she bare alwey þe gospel of crist hidde in her breste, þat may be undirstand þat of þe blessed lif of oure lord Jesu criste writen in þe gospele, she chace certayne parties most deuoute. In þe which she set her meditacion & her louht niȝt & day with a clene & hole herte. And when she hadde so fully alle þe manere of his life ouer gon, she began aȝayne. And so with a likyng & swete taste gostly chewyng in lat manere be gospell of crist; she set & bare it euer in be priuyte of her breste. In þe same manere I conseil þat þou do. For among alle gostly exercyses I leue þat þis is most necessarie


84 See, most suggestively, Sargent, *Mirror*, p. lxiv, on how the text circulated in an "official version," carefully copied in what was clearly a highly organized way in a Central Midlands dialect, the dialect in which the Wycliffite Bible was also copied, chosen for its maximum comprehensibility to people all over England.

85 "For þouh it were so þat it were in doute, wheþere þe teching & þe beleue þat holy chirch hap, of þis holy sacrament were soþe or nouht; or elles also sette case þat it were not soþe; sit þe sikere part were to byleue as holy chirch teþeþ with a buxom drede. For in þat we leuyn oure kyndely reson, & bene obeshant to god & holi chirch as him self biddeþ vs . . . if it so were þat it were not soþe as we beleuen, & þat were litel perile or rþere none bot mede to vs in alle partes for oure gude wille to god & holy chirch" (*Mirror*, p. 228, ll. 3–13).
Censorship and Cultural Change

& most profitable, & that may bring to the highest degree of good living without speciality in perfect despising of the world, in patience, suffering of adversities, & in increase & getting of virtues. (Mirror, p. 11, ll. 24–38)

Cecilia lives her days in a repetitive round of devout meditation on episodes from Christ’s life selected for their affective impact, and she derives from that exercise a form of perfection that consists in otherworldliness and the interior, wholly unintellectual virtues of patience and strength against tribulation. Responding to the complexities of the world by refusing to notice them—her heart is so filled with Christ that “vaneeties of the world may not enter into her” (p. 12, ll. 8–9)—her energies are entirely directed within, where the endless sweetness of her thoughts about Christ seals her soul from external worry and danger. Such is the dubiously flattering picture of the devout reader offered the actual readers of the book, for whom Love provides a version of the “gospel” where the “certaine parties most devout” are preselected. If lay readers will but submit with “buxom drede” to their role as mere spiritual children, incapable of understanding matters of “grete clargye,” and follow a round of affective exercises from which all doctrinal difficulties have been removed, they, too, can achieve a perfection (it is implied) that is somehow akin to the heroic virtue of the virgin martyr.

While the circumstances under which Love’s Mirror were written are a matter for controversy, the work was nonetheless clearly of importance to Arundel during the very years when the Constitutions were being drafted and published. Quite apart from the approbatio he bestowed on the work—which orders it to be as widely copied and distributed as possible—he was also admitted to the confraternity of Mount Grace in 1409 and granted other privileges in 1412; and it is suggestive that the rise both of Mount Grace itself and of the Carthusians as the fifteenth century’s major copyers and guardians of vernacular religious texts dates from roughly this time.86 I would argue that one reason for Arundel’s interest in the Mirror is that, besides providing a counterweight to the Wycliffite Bible, it also presents a clear model of vernacular theology which, despite its narrowness, offers the uneducated reader more than catechesis: substituting the rational and social concerns it so scrupulously shuns with an offer of a life of affective intensity (and in that respect going beyond the Oxford conservatives in the process). The Mirror—which seems to have been distributed more systematically and more widely than any other fifteenth-century religious work

86 Sargent, Mirror, pp. xlv–xlv; see also his “The Transmission by the English Carthusians of Some Late Medieval Spiritual Writings,” Journal of Ecclesiastical History 27 (1976), 225–40. The text of the memorandum in which the approbatio is preserved is as follows (in Sargent’s translation [slightly modified], Mirror, p. xlv): “Memorandum: that around the year 1410, the original copy of this book ... was presented in London by its compiler, N, to the Most Reverend Father and Lord in Christ, Lord Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, for inspection and examination before it was freely communicated. Who, after an inspection of the same lasting several days, returning the book to the abovementioned author, commended it and approved it personally, and further decreed and commanded by his metropolitan authority that it rather be published universally for the edification of the faithful and the confutation of heretics or Lollards.” For the original Latin, see Sargent, Mirror, p. 7.
Censorship and Cultural Change 855

except the work it was written to counteract—provided Arundel with a means of putting a positive face on the draconian restrictions he was imposing. Its generalization of a devotional mode that had long been associated with women religious implied, satisfyingly, that the developments of the preceding decades were, after all, no more than an episode, a brief hiatus in the timeless round of devotion and instruction that was the church’s unchanging duty. It must be for those kinds of reasons that the Mirror was granted its quasi-official status as an approved vernacular theology, a status it retained for over a century. Indeed, the work is so successful an embodiment of the type of spirituality the Constitutions endorse that it remains hard to this day to see it as thoroughly implicated in the creation of the restrictive culture of which it makes an appropriate symbol.

Love’s model of vernacular theology is in sharp contrast with what I have argued was one of its most significant modes in the decades before he was writing. Love’s version of Cecilia, whose meditation brings her devout sweetness in unvarying round, is a poignantly different figure from the Cecilia on whom Julian meditated (long before, in the 1360s), who proved to be a starting point for such searching intellectual inquiries.87 Yet the institutionalization of the Mirror did not occur without protest. Shortly after it was finished, the author of the Longleat Sermons provided a radically different model of lay access to theological knowledge, one that in effect (and perhaps intention) acts as a response to the Mirror, much as the latter responds to the Wycliffite Bible. The Sermons consists of the English text of, and a series of lengthy postils on, the Gospel passages for most Sundays and major feasts of the year. Unlike the Mirror (though like Pore Caitif, the Chastizing, Dives and Pauper, and especially Julian’s Revelation) it presupposes a reader capable of, and interested in, concentrated study. Opening with a defense of Bible translation whose terms closely resemble those used in the Oxford debate, the work rejects the attitude of obedience to ecclesiastical authority advocated by Love, stating that prelates like Arundel have no right to forbid the preaching or the study of the Gospel.88 In the “persecucion of deoclician & marimian” it anticipates the Constitutions will initiate, the work sets before its reader its own picture of Cecilia:

Also be 3e besi to connyn & to meyntenyn goddys lawe & takyth example of seynt katerine of seynt lucye & of seynt margarete of seyn agneys & of many oler whiche

88 “And perfore leue frend sitthe crist bad hese discipls & ophere prechouris & techeris of godys lawe techn pe gospel to evey man & womman in ecury language pe may non pretat artin ne lettin prechung & techn of pe gospel in englych. but every prelate & prechour is boundin to prechung & techn pe gospel of crist & hys lawe to pe peple afyr pe conyngh bat god hath sent to hem. And perfore po3u it be hese days defendit & inhybyst be somme pretat bat men schulde techn pe gospel in englych. I answere & sey to hem as pe apostelis seydin to annas & cayphas & to pe pretats & to pe buschoppys & pe mysters of pe Jewis whyche defendedin pe apostelis for to prechung pe gospel. Obedire oportet deo magis quia jam hominibus. it behouith in pis cas more to obeysin to god þanne to men. actum v. c.” (Longleat MS 4, fol. 1r). Compare Dives and Pauper 4, which has extensive discussions of obedience and of its legitimate limits.
in here souythe were wol connyng in crists lawe. And take heed of seyn cecyle that holy maydin whiche as we redin in here lyf baar alwey be gospel of crist in here brest in here herte & in here mende & cesid neyber be day ne by ny3t for to spekin of god & of goddes lawe & bope ny3t & day sche 3af here to holy pray3ere. And so leue frend I pray3e sou3at 3e don. Hauith be gospel of crist in meende & whanne 3e monn spekith of crist gospel & of goddys lawe as 3e ben wone to done. (Longleat MS 4, fol. 1r; italics mine)

Given the rapid dissemination of the Mirror, it seems likely that this passage is actually a reply to Love’s portrait of the ideal vernacular reader. Here, Cecilia’s internalizing of the Gospel is the result, not of devotion, but of the youthful study of “goddys lawe,” which affects not only her heart but also her mind and empowers her, not only to fight temptation in herself, but to teach others, while continuing her life of prayer and study. The reader idealized by this Cecilia is intellectually independent and performs the social role of disseminating her or his knowledge to others. As a student both of the Sermons and of Dives and Pauper (to which the former often refers), this reader is aware both of complicated theological issues and of their social ramifications. While she or he submits to clerical instruction—the narrative voice (unlike the one in Dives and Pauper) is here that of the preacher—this reader is imagined as part of a community such as Ullerston describes, in which instruction is also a lay activity and in which the reader thus has the clear obligation of passing on what she or he learns.

Yet by the time the Longleat Sermons was written, such an ideal of community was already in danger. The ideal would survive in some orthodox contexts: in religious houses like Syon; among the users of common profit books; in the career of Margery Kempe; and, above all, in those aristocratic and wealthy urban households where copies of the Wycliffite Bible and many texts discussed here were kept. Cecily, duchess of York, would be celebrated for a female version of it, listening not to the Bible but to the revelations of Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Siena, then passing what she had learned on to her gentlewomen. But the far wider dissemination of religious knowledge across the whole of the body politic dreamed of by Ullerston and, in more radical form, in vernacular theologies from Piers Plowman and Book to a Mother to Julian’s Revelation would not occur. Moreover, despite the courage shown by the author of the Longleat Sermons in defying the Constitutions, this work, too, is part of the process that to a considerable extent (against the intent of many of the writings themselves) restricted the reading of vernacular theology after 1410 to a social elite; this is not a text that seems to envisage its own circulation beyond that elite even as

89 For the reading culture at Syon, see, e.g., Michael Sargent, *James Grenehalgh as Textual Critic*, 2 vols., Analecta Cartusiana 85 (Salzburg, 1984); for “common-profit books,” see Sargent, *Mirror*, p. lxii and notes; for aristocratic readers of religious material, see Hughes, *Pastors and Visionaries*, and Gillespie, “Vernacular Books of Religion.”
90 See “The Piety of Cicely, Duchess of York: A Study in Late Mediaeval Culture,” in *For Hilaire Belloc: Essays in Honour of His 72nd Birthday*, ed. Douglas Woodruff (London, 1942), and the discussion by Felicity Riddy in “Women talking about the things of God” (above, n. 31).
Censorship and Cultural Change

a forlorn hope. Threading a course through a number of the vernacular theologies mentioned in this paper is an implied alternative to the way some of these works come to envisage their audience as socially mixed, even symbolically universal: the notion that the lay audience for vernacular theology should rather be the aristocracy than society as a whole. It is aristocrats who devote their time to matters of theology in Study’s attack on lay learning in Piers Plowman, who seem to be the exclusive target audience for the Pearl poet (if we consider the term “aristocrat” broadly), and whose concerns are largely addressed by Dives and Pauper—which at one point seems to distinguish its own readers from the “lewed” who comprehend truth only through nonintellectual means like images.91 In the Longleat Sermons—written when the ideal of universal access to a broad theological education had been definitively repudiated by the authorities—this alternative has become explicit, and the writer addresses an aristocratic reader to the exclusion of any other, as a matter both of expediency and even, apparently, of choice. It is not only, as the text’s prologue notes, that the aristocratic reader is beyond the reach of ecclesiastical interference, living “in swych sekyrnese þat non prelat may lettin 3ou ne dischesin 3ou for connynge ne for keping of þe gospel” (fol. 1r)—a remark that is perhaps our earliest sign that the Constitutions would not be used to target aristocratic book owners. In this text the aristocratic audience has become the only audience worth considering; making a virtue out of necessity, the writer notes that “þe pore prechour of Goddis word” is right to “sekin his mete amongis men of value,” who are more interested in matters of religion than lay people of lower class.92 Where Dives and Pauper (despite its focus on wealthy lay readers) is still prepared to envisage a broader audience of people who desire to become learned in God’s law, the Longleat Sermons attests to a narrowing of those horizons, a willingness on the part of one of Arundel’s non-Lollard opponents to concede crucial ground in the very text that constitutes his gesture of defiance. By the time this text was completed, the Constitutions were well on their way to achieving their dramatic transformation of English religious culture; the “persecucion of deolician & marimian” had not only begun but had indeed already partly achieved its objectives.

When Chaucer’s comic image of a laicized teaching community, The Canterbury Tales, came into being during the 1390s, it did so in an intellectual and theological environment in whose febrile variety and shifting tensions the poem is fully engaged. From the relative security of a cosmopolitan style (which invites readers to view its narrative as though de haut en bas), it constructs a world in

91 See Dives and Pauper 1.1, images as “a token and a book to þe lewyd peple.” However, whether or not “lewyd peple” includes Dives remains ambiguous; while Pauper opposes them to “clerkys” (implying that they comprise the whole of the laity), Dives (1.3) refers to “[þe peple]” in such a way as to exclude himself and to include (so it seems) only those of lower social status. It will be clear that I am not in agreement with those scholars who believe that Pearl and its companion poems were written for a primarily clerical readership.

92 Quoted in “Longleat Sermons,” p. 228, from fol. 99r (previously fol. 100r).
which hierarchies of learning and teaching authority are quite as chaotic as they are in the dystopic pictures painted by opponents of Bible translation. Here women do indeed assume teaching authority and (in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue) display—with all the crudity that clerical misogyny associated with the term muliercula—not only a “carnal” understanding of Scripture but the drastic consequences of allowing such understanding to flourish. Here, too, are unlicensed preachers, rustici in a variety of forms (though the Plowman’s Tale itself had to be ghostwritten by a Lollard redactor), and a mixing of lay and clerical voices that is as far as can be from the rigid distinctions made by Butler and Palmer. Even the Parson’s Tale, at the end of the collection, uses a “horizontal” mode of address like that of Pore Caitif rather than bringing an overtly ecclesiastical authority to bear. The Canterbury Tales is not theologically daring in any explicit way, and it would indeed be foolish to assign to it any single one of the positions concerning vernacular theology and its audience outlined in this paper: covertly Lollard, Ullerstonian, and trenchantly conservative readings of the poem are all, to my mind, equally imaginable. What should be clear by now, though, is that the Tales itself—playing, as it so disruptively does, with the most important contemporary arguments over teaching and religious authority—was a product not simply of a Ricardian world (with all that has been made to imply) but also of a world that was crucially pre-Arundelian. As suggested by the heresy trial mentioned before (n. 22 above) that featured a copy of the poem, the Tales, too, could not have been written in anything like its present form after 1409. The Constitutions did not leave their scar only on the intellectual and theological evolution of vernacular culture. However hard this may be to track in specific terms, they surely had implications as well for that culture’s aesthetic development—for the process of “narrowing” that in the fifteenth century is often said to have befallen the Chaucerian tradition.

It would be tempting to end with this return to the aesthetic and the realm of canonical literary texts: by speculating, perhaps, on the differences between Chaucer’s story collection and some of its fifteenth-century successors, such as the Fall of Princes, and the possibility that Lydgate’s career in particular may have been discernibly influenced by ecclesiastical events of his time. But I want to conclude instead with a final example of what could be a direct response to the Constitutions, which directs attention not at court poetry and its milieu but at the less privileged parts of late-medieval English society: the society that, in Eamon Duffy’s influential recent study, The Stripping of the Altars, seems so idyllically preoccupied with the round of “traditional” devotion, so unconcerned with hard religious questions or the desire for theological knowledge. The passage occurs in an account of the vision of God near the end of an early-fifteenth-century funeral sermon, which was presumably written in a milieu influenced by the Lollards (though in what sense the text is actually a Lollard product is unclear) and which is no doubt to be read in part as a riposte to

Censorship and Cultural Change

orthodox descriptions of images of Christ and the saints as “books for the unlettered” (see n. 91 above). A fine mix of devotion and indignation, the passage differs from the other anti-conservative texts we have considered by assuming that Palmer, Butler, and Arundel have won the day so far as this life is concerned but that vindication will come in the next, where God will provide the knowledge that has been kept hidden by clerics here. Whether or not the Constitutions are alluded to in the words about “deynous doctouris” who “letten . . . lewid men to lerne here Lordis lawe” is impossible to ascertain without a firm date for the text. But in any case, both as a late example of the tradition of vernacular theology it represents and for what it says about how the intellectual aspirations of “the lewidest knaue of the kylyn” are thwarted by clerics, the passage is a moving testimony to what Arundel and the forces he mobilized disrupted: a nascent vernacular religious culture with a depth and range of interest in matters of theology that would not be equaled again for well over a hundred years. The passage can stand as a reminder of the extent to which Duffy’s “traditional religion”—which he sees as having been forced out of existence in the sixteenth century by the self-interested reformism of powerful men—was itself the creation of a movement of reform, a movement that was equally imposed on English society from above, equally held in place by decades of religious repression:

This appendix provides a lengthy (though by no means comprehensive) list of vernacular theologies composed in the period 1300–1500, in approximately chronological order, with a very brief description of each text that includes the number of complete (or once complete) manuscripts and early printed editions in which it survives. The main purpose of the list is to support my argument for the significance of the Constitutions by demonstrating how much more widely texts written before c. 1410–15 circulated than did texts written after then and by contrasting the richness of the early period with the relative poverty of the later one (with respect to original composition, at least). The list does not on the whole include Lollard texts, nor hagiographic ones, and also excludes numbers of brief, anonymous didactic discussions of the sins, the uses of tribulation,
Censorship and Cultural Change

and so on (which are generally undatable and not germane to my argument)—although I allow exceptions to all these rules where there seems good reason to do so (see n. 4 above). Entries are highly abbreviated but refer to sources where more information is readily available: either to the relevant entries in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050–1500*, gen. ed. J. Burke Severs and Albert E. Hartung, 9 vols. published (New Haven, Conn., 1968–), or else to more recent works. References to the *Manual* employ these abbreviations: “R” is Robert R. Raymo, “Works of Religious and Philosophical Instruction,” vol. 7 (1986), chap. 20; “L/S” is Valerie Lagorio and Michael Sargent, “English Mystical Writings,” vol. 9 (1993), chap. 23. In addition, “MSS” refers to medieval manuscripts and “P” to early printed editions; original authors of translated works are given in parentheses.

In offering evidence for the scale of the damage wrought by the Constitutions here, I would make four preliminary points about its interpretation. (1) On an individual basis, manuscript survival is, of course, far from being necessarily a reliable guide to the circulation (let alone the actual impact) of medieval texts, and ideally its evidence would be supplemented here by that of wills and other evidences of book ownership, a topic on which there has been much recent work. However, such supplements would also complicate matters excessively, and my hope is that the cumulative evidence presented here may convince where scattered instances would not. (2) In theory, it would be useful to distinguish between manuscripts produced before and after 1410, since that would make possible a “fairer” comparison between, say, a text written in 1350 (nearly two hundred years before the Reformation) and one written in 1450, whose active life was a century shorter. In practice, however, there are so many problems with manuscript datings that I have thought it better to avoid this distinction. In most cases the number of manuscripts of a given work from the fifteenth century is far greater than that from the fourteenth (and I think it would be fair to add that many more than half the manuscripts of the works mentioned here also postdate the Constitutions). (3) I enumerate only substantially complete (or perhaps once complete) texts but adopt a generous definition of completeness, including both fragments and abbreviated versions (thus my figures will often differ from those of editors); in most cases I do not distinguish different versions of the same work. (4) Many works are undated or have been dated only approximately, sometimes with a high margin for error. I adopt standard datings without comment, except in the case of the works that may have been written before or after 1409, which I list as “‘1400s” to denote their uncertain status; my own guess is that more than half of these are likely to predate 1410 (see especially the Middle English *Mirror of Simple Souls* and pseudo-Augustinian *Soliloquies*). Further work on the dating of many texts is needed; I would appreciate any corrections or suggestions.

c. 1270 Robert Mannyng of Brunne, *Handlyng Synne*: R 1; translated poetic manual based on *Manuel des pechiez*; MSS 8, 3 excerpts

c. 1300 *Cursor mundi*: R 31; poetic Bible paraphrase; 3 versions; MSS 896

c. 1300 (Robert Grosseteste), *Castle of Love*: R 182; translated poetic allegory; MSS 3

c. 1300s *Lay Folks’ Mass Book*: R 195; poetic treatise on the mass; MSS 9

c. 1315 *Northern Homily Cycle*: poetic Gospel paraphrase; MSS 20

---

95 See, e.g., Meale, “... Alle the bokes that I haue” (above, n. 31).

1340  Dan Michel of Northgate, *Ayenbite of Inwyt*: R 4; translation of Lorens d’Orleans’s *Somme le roi*; MS 1

1340s  Richard Rolle, *English Psalter*, *Ego dormio*, *Commandment*, *Form of Living*, *Emendatio vitae*: L/S, 2, 9, 10, 11, 14; commentary, 3 epistles, 1 Latin treatise; MSS 38, 12, 15, 29, 16 (as well as c. 100 in Latin).

c. 1350  *Prick of Conscience*: R 18; poetic treatise on Last Things; MSS c. 127, including many excerpts

c. 1350  *Charter of Christ*: R 187; poetic allegory; 3 versions; MSS 44

pre-1359?  William of Nassington (?), *Speculum vitae*: R 7, L/S 43; poetic version of *Somme le roi* and other works; MSS 40

1357  (Archbishop John Thoresby), John Gaytryge, *Lay Folks’ Catechism*: R 19; catechetical translation; MSS c. 20

1370s  *Book to a Mother*: R 16; treatise on holy life; MSS 3

1370s  *Book of Vices and Virtues*: R 5; translation of *Somme le roi*; MSS 3

pre-1380  *Abby of the Holy Ghost*, *Charter of the Abbey of the Holy Ghost*: R 184, 186; allegorical treatises; MSS 24, 24; P 1

1370–90?  William Langland, *Piers Plowman*: A, B, C texts; poetic allegory; MSS 10, 14, 18, plus 10 composite texts (52 total); P 1

1370–90  *Cloud of Unknowing*, *Book of Privy Counsel*: L/S 21, 26; treatises on prayer; MSS 16, 9


1370–1400  (Edmund of Abingdon), *Mirror of Holy Church*: L/S 72; translated treatise; several versions; MSS 12

1370–1400  *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*: didactic narrative poems; MS 1

1370–1400  (Guigo II), *A Ladder of Foure Ronges*: L/S 69; translated treatise; MSS 3

1370–1400  (Pseudo-Bonaventure), *Prickynge of Love*: L/S 35; attributed to Hilton; translated devotional treatise; MSS 15

1370–1400  *Holy Book Gratia Dei*: L/S 85; compilation; MS 1, with excerpts

1385–1413?  Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love*: S and L versions; L/S 39; visionary theology; MS 1 (S); L, excerpts only

c. 1380s?  *Pore Caitif*: L/S 87; didactic compilation; MSS 32 plus excerpts

1390–91  John Clanvowe, *Two Ways*: R 133; didactic treatise; MSS 2

c. 1390s  *Contemplations of the Dread and Love of God*: L/S 41; devotional treatise; MSS 16; P 2

---

97 *Emendatio vitae* is included because it was often translated into English. For the seven independent translations of the work (most undated, although that by Richard Misyn is mid-fifteenth-century), see Margaret Amassian, “The Rolle Material in Bradfer-Lawrence MS 10 and Its Relationships to Other Rolle Manuscripts,” *Manuscripta* 23 (1979), 67–78. Many manuscripts of the *English Psalter* contain one of two interpolated versions, for which see Dorothy Everett, “The Middle English Prose Psalter,” *Modern Language Review* 17 (1922), 217–27, 337–50, and 18 (1923), 381–93. A further eighteen manuscripts of the *Form of Living* contain fragments and abbreviated versions.


100 See n. 80 above for the date. The three complete manuscripts of L, and the printed edition, belong to the seventeenth century. The section on Julian in the *Manual* was contributed by Ritamary Bradley.
Censorship and Cultural Change

c. 1390s  Speculum Christiani: R 15; pastoral manual/compilation; MS 1

c. 1390s  Wycliffite Bible: MSS c. 250, many now fragmentary\textsuperscript{101}

1380s–90s  John Mirk, Instructions for Parish Priests: R 233; poetic treatise; MSS 7; Festial: homily collection; MSS 11\textsuperscript{102}

c. 1390s  Chastizing of God’s Children: L/S 83; compilation on prayer and religious discretion; MSS 11; P 1

c. 1400  Richard Lavynham, A Litil Tretys on the Seven Deadly Sins: R 106; treatise on the sins; MSS 16

c. 1400?  Clensyng of Mannes Sowle: R 84; didactic treatise; MSS 7\textsuperscript{103}

c. 1400s  (Deguileville), Pilgrimage of the Lyfe of the Manhode: R 192; allegory of Christian living; MSS 6

c. 1400s  Pater Noster of Richard Ermyte: R 35; expository treatise; MSS 6

c. 1400s  Jacob’s Well: R 9; sermon collection/compilation; MS 1

c. 1400s  Myrour to Lewde Men and Wymmen: R 8; prose version of Speculum vitae; MSS 4

c. 1400s  Memoriale credencium: R 17; pastoral compilation; MSS 5

c. 1400s  Sacerdos parochialis: R 22; catechetical treatise; MSS 12\textsuperscript{104}

c. 1400s  (Bonaventure), To d.t. his derworpe broţer: L/S 60; translated epistle; MS 1

c. 1400s  (Bonaventure), These ben the preisinges: L/S 60; paraphrase of De triplici via; MS 1

c. 1400s  (Anselm), Meditations I–III: L/S 58; MS 1

c. 1400s  (Pseudo-Gerard of Liège), Doctrine of the Herte: L/S 66; translated treatise; MSS 4

c. 1400s  (William Flete), Remedies against Temptations: L/S 75; translated treatise; 3 versions; MSS 14; P 1

c. 1400s  (Bridget of Sweden), Liber celestis: L/S 76; translated visionary work; 2 versions; MSS 2, with very many often independently translated excerpts\textsuperscript{105}

c. 1400s  (Marguerite Porete), Mirror of Simple Souls: L/S 73; translated speculative theology; MSS 3

c. 1400s  (Jan Ruusbroec), Treatise of the Perfections of the Sons of God: L/S 79; translated treatise; MS 1


\textsuperscript{103} Certainly written before 1419 and possibly before 1401, this text either draws on The Chastizing of God’s Children (clearly written before 1409) or vice versa, and uses material from The Holy Book Gratia Dei, which itself draws on A Ladder of Four Ronges, The Charter of the Abbey of the Holy Ghost, The Mirror of Holy Church, and other works (see the excellent study by Sister Mary Luke Arntz, S.N.D., Richard Rolle and De Holy Boke Gratia Dei: An Edition with Commentary, Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 92/2 [Salzburg, 1981]). While it may be later than 1400, it is probably earlier than 1409.

\textsuperscript{104} It is not clear whether this, or the previous three items, dates from before or after the publication of the Constitutions; the Pater Noster of Richard Ermyte I would date before 1409.

\textsuperscript{105} For Bridget, see Roger Ellis, “‘Flores ad Fabricandum ... Coronam’: An Investigation into the Uses of St Bridget of Sweden in Fifteenth-Century England,” Medium Ævum 51 (1982), 163–86.
Censorship and Cultural Change

*c. 1400s* (Pseudo-Augustine), *Soliloquies*: L/S 78; translated meditations; MSS 2

1405–10  
*Dives and Pauper*: R 34; treatise on Commandments; MSS 12; P 3

pre-1409–19  
(Henry Suso), *Seven Poyntes of Trewe Love and Everlastyng Wisdom*: L/S 80; translated treatise; MSS 9 plus excerpts; P 1

1409 (or 1412)  
(Pseudo-Bonaventure), *Nicholas Love, Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*: L/S 61; translated devotional biography; MSS 56; P 9

1410  
*Boke of Craft of Dying*: R 216; treatise on death; MSS 15

1413  
(Deguileville), *Pilgrimage of the Soul*: R 193; allegory of Christian living; MSS 13; P 1

1420  
(Catherine of Siena), *Orchard of Syon*: L/S 74; translated visionary theology; MSS 3, plus excerpts; P 1

1426  
(Deguileville), *John Lydgate, Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*: translated poetic allegory of Christian living; MSS 4; P 1

1410–40  
(David of Augsburg), *Formula noviciorum*: L/S 67; treatise; 2 versions; MSS 2, plus excerpts

1410–40  
(Pseudo-Bonaventure), *Speculum devotorum*: L/S 63; translated devotional biography (from *Meditationes vitae Christi*); MSS 2

1410–50  
(Mechtild of Hackeborn), *The Book of Ghostly Grace*: L/S 65; translated visionary treatise; 2 MSS plus excerpts

1420–50  
*Disce mori, Ignorantia sacerdotum*: R 11, 12; lengthy devotional compilations, the second derived from the first; MSS 2, 1

1420–50  
*A Tretyse of Gostly Batayle*: R 173; allegorical compilation; MSS 7

1434–35  
(Richard Rolle), *Richard Misyn, Fire of Love, Mending of Life*: L/S 13, 14; translated treatises; MSS 3, 3

1430s–50s  

late 15C?  
*Tree and XII Frutes of the Holy Goost*: L/S 42; treatise on the gifts of the Spirit; MSS 3; P 1

late 15C  
(Anselm), *De libero arbitrio*: R 240; translated treatise; MS 1

late 15C  
*Exornatorium curatorum*: R 23; catechetical treatise, possibly related to *Sacerdos parochialis* above; P 7

late 15C  
(Ludolph of Saxony), *Vita Jesu Christi*: L/S 64; translated devotional biography; MS 1

late 15C  
*Treatise of Love*: L/S 88; affective compilation; P 1

---

106 There are also numerous brief excerpts; see, e.g., R 139.


108 One version of this text was written at Syon, after 1420; the other is earlier, and possibly precedes 1410. For this and the next item see Michael Sargent, “Bonaventure English: A Survey of the Middle English Prose Translations of Early Franciscan Literature,” in Spatmittelalterliche geistliche Literatur (cited above, n. 5), pp. 145–76.

109 *Ignorantia sacerdotum* may be considerably later than *Disce mori*, the sole surviving manuscript dating from c. 1475–1500. It seems sensible to date ( provisionally) both *Disce mori* and the *Book of Ghostly Graces* to c. 1420–30, in the early years after Syon and Sheen were founded, when they were clearly England’s major center of vernacular theological translation.

110 The manuscripts of this work are all late, but it is possible that the treatise itself is a good deal earlier.
late 15C (Thomas à Kempis), *Imitation of Christ*: L/S 82; translated treatise; 3 versions; MSS 5

No text listed here and published after 1410 survives in more than fifteen manuscripts; no text finished after 1415 (except for the *Seven Poyntes*, and conceivably the *Sacerdos parochialis* and Flete's *Remedies*, though both are probably earlier) survives in more than seven manuscripts. By contrast (counting the *Abbey* and the *Charter of the Abbey* as separate works), twenty-five works that were written by 1410 survive in ten or more manuscripts, while thirteen survive in twenty or more.