

The Saint, the Sinner, and the Scot:

*Wycliffite Philosophy & Scottish Literature,
14th Century to the Present*

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“History has left us an infinity of traces.”

-Antonio Gramsci

General Timeline

- 1372 - Wyclif earns his Doctorate of Theology at Oxford University
- 1377 - King Richard II takes power
- 1381 - The Peasant's Revolt
- 1382 - First Wycliffite Bible
- 1384 - Wyclif completes *Trialogus*
- 1384 - Wyclif dies
- 1386 - Composition of "St. Erkenwald"
- 1380's - Chaucer works on *The Canterbury Tales*
- 1380's - C-text of "Piers Plowman"
- 1399 - King Henry IV takes power
- ??? - Chaucer dies
- 1400 - Oldcastle is stationed in Scotland
- 1400 - Culross Bible travels from Oxford to Scotland
- 1401 - *De heretico comburendo* is passed
- 1401 - Wyclif's work travels to Prague
- 1406 - King James I of Scotland takes power
- 1407 - James Resby arrested in Scotland for preaching Lollardy
- 1410 - Epistolary exchange between Lollards and Hussites
- 1413 - St. Andrews University is established
- 1413 - King Henry V takes power
- 1413 - King James I of Scotland is held captive by Henry V
- 1414 - Oldcastle and the Scots attempt to destabilize the English government
- 1415 - Hus is executed
- 1417 - Oldcastle is executed
- 1424 - King James I of Scotland is released and coronated
- 1430's - Margery Kempe works on *The Book of Margery Kempe*
- 1438 - Margery Kempe dies
- 1440 - Printing press is invented
- 1530 - Augsburg confession
- 1536 - Calvin writes *Institutes of the Christian Religion*
- 1541 - Calvin comes to lead the Church of Geneva
- 1552 - Sir David Lyndsay's "A Satire of the Three Estates" is performed in Fife, Scotland
- 1555 - Knox arrives in Geneva
- ???? - Knox arrives back in Scotland
- 1560 - Presbyterian Kirk established
- 1579 - Geneva Bible is issued
- 1824 - James Hogg publishes *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*
- 2007 - James Robertson publishes *The Testament of Gideon Mack*

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§1

Introduction

In 1386, a poem by the name of “St. Erkenwald” was composed by an uncertain author. It is set at the end of the 7th century, when Erkenwald presided as Bishop over London. As the people of London attempt to construct a new cathedral to aide in the affirmation of the Christian victory over Paganism, a mysterious tomb is found deep underground. It is inscribed with a foreign language, and all the wise men puzzle over its meaning to no avail. The tomb is finally opened at the mayor’s behest. As the top is pried off, a corpse is revealed, clad in the garments of a king. More remarkably, though:

“Als welmes were his wedes withouten any tecche
Oþir of moulyng oþir of motes oþir moght-freten
And als bryzt of hor blee in blysende hews”
 (“St. Erkenwald,” lines 85-87)

The corpse and clothing are completely untouched by time. Puzzled, Erkenwald is summoned to the tomb. After a night of intense prayer, he urges the corpse to answer his questions, and the corpse obliges. He divulges his personal history to Erkenwald and the townspeople, calling to memory a time long before Christianity had come to Britain. The corpse had been the fairest judge of his time, a man so committed to justice that he would “Ne fals fauour to my fader, þaghe fele hym be hongyt” (“St. Erkenwald,” line 244). Against his wishes, his contemporaries had him don the clothes of a king in recognition of his fairness. As a Pagan, the corpse was never given the opportunity to attain true salvation, and he has thus been condemned to wait in limbo

for a grace that never comes. Horrified, Erkenwald bends over the body, a tear falling from his own face to that of the corpse's. Such a symbolic baptism is enough for the corpse to find salvation after all, and his body, as his soul is whisked off to heaven, disintegrates before Erkenwald's eyes.

A number of important themes arise in this *miraculum*. The boundaries of Christianity explored in "St. Erkenwald" are not of geography, but of time. What is to happen, the poet asks, to the souls of those that walked the earth before Christ died for our sins? There also exists in "St. Erkenwald" a tension between salvation that is based on a moral life alone and a salvation attained from the sacraments of the Church. Erkenwald is the authority to whom the townspeople appeal on the matter of the corpse, but he in turn spends time in deep prayer, seeking God's guidance. In addressing the corpse, he speaks from the authority of Christ, proclaiming that the corpse is "bone to His bode, I bydde in His behalue" ("St. Erkenwald," line 181). Having heard of the corpse's life as an exemplary judge, Erkenwald becomes something of a judge himself, deeming the corpse worthy of salvation. He fills a dual-role as both an independent authority and an instrument of divine command.

"St. Erkenwald" is one of many texts that define the Christian literary canon of the Late Middle Ages. The poem demonstrates a comfort with confronting big questions that underlie Christian theology. It is thought to have been written in 1386, just two years after the death of one of the 14th century's greatest Christian reformers: John Wyclif. Read in the context of Wyclif's treatises and the ensuing atmosphere of religious reformation, "St. Erkenwald" appears to be responding to growing unease about the logic of a theology that was manifesting as what many perceived to be an increasingly corrupt Church institution. In an age of ecclesiastical

materialism and a growing Church bureaucracy, St. Erkenwald was intended to be regarded as an example to clerics and a reminder to others that clerical authority was indeed desirable. Thus, it is perhaps no accident that this relatively well-known poem is thought to have been written just two years after Wyclif's death.

To many modern readers, John Wyclif's name will hardly be familiar. To be brief, Wyclif was born in Yorkshire, England in the 1320's.¹ He earned his Bachelor's degree in Theology in 1369 at Oxford University, where he was eventually ousted from the college by a monk, exemplifying the rivalry between the fraternal and secular orders. He was, on the whole, well-liked by those unthreatened by his work and well-known by those who were. One account of Wyclif reports that "he was of unblemished walk in life...and was regarded affectionately by people of rank, who often consorted with him, took down his sayings, and clung to him" (Schaff, 461). There is no excess of information about Wyclif's later life, though his vast reformist oeuvre landed him in increasingly hot water with a Church that was becoming ever more desperate to maintain its authority. As time went on, Wyclif would even come to inspire a reformist religious movement dedicated to his ideas: the Lollards.² Wyclif left behind a lengthy series of philosophical treatises and a legacy of profound influence.

Wyclif's confrontations with monks at Oxford found him aligned against the fraternal orders, or the friars, and he published numerous pieces to that effect. These marked the

¹ For a more detailed summary of Wyclif's life, see: Lahey, Stephen. *Wyclif*. 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. *Cambridge Books Online*. Web. 08 March 2016. <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/10.1017/CBO9780511843105> or Evans, G.R. *The Roots of the Reformation: Tradition, Emergence and Rupture*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012. Print.

² The debate over nomenclature regarding Wycliffites and Lollards is not treated in this paper. There is ultimately little resolution to be found in this debate, and for the this project makes little to no difference anyhow. The terms "Lollard" and "Wycliffite" will thus be used interchangeably and as they appear in primary sources.

“beginning of the last great phase of anti-fraternal conflict in the fourteenth century,” and constitutes one of the most prolific attacks on members of the clergy in Medieval England (Szittyá, 152). From 1379 on, Wyclif wrote a number of “scathing denunciations” of the mendicant orders (Szittyá, 152). Though Wyclif did not limit himself to anti-fraternalism; indeed, it represented only a “minor part of his broader, and extreme, anticlericalism,” which was ultimately committed to distinguishing the true from the false Church (Szittyá, 154). And his anticlericalism, in turn, represents only a larger section of his philosophically rich body of thought. In the impulse leading to the Reformation two schools of thought are differentiated: one which was “directed against the temporal and political power of the clergy, the other against the dogmas and superstitions of the Church” (Workman, *John Wyclif*, 107). These two movements, ultimately concerned with delivering religion from the “degrading” forces of materialism and heresy, were initially unified under Wyclif (Workman, *John Wyclif*, 107). Wyclif was a reformer of religious *and* social life. His followers penned a series of texts that carried on his philosophical tradition, one that grappled not just with anti-clericalism but with religious metaphysics, epistemology, politics, and more. Chapter 2 presents highlights of Wyclif’s radical philosophy relevant to this study. Some of these threads will be traced through hundreds of years of history, but to what end?

These shards of the past cast new light on more contemporary studies, and in particular the study of Scottish literature. The debate over what constitutes truly “Scottish” literature is ongoing. By what standard can a text be judged to fall within the bounds of this canon? Theology has long been rejected as a recognizably Scottish feature of text. Calvinism has been exiled from the Scottish canon for too long. The study of British literature revolves around the great works of

England, which have become increasingly secularized over time. The same should not be thought of Scottish literature. It is time to recognize that Calvinist literature is not only part of the Scottish literary canon, but that Calvinism acts as a dominant thematic mode in post-Reformation to contemporary Scottish writing. It is fair to wonder how Wyclif could possibly fit into this endeavor. Theology is a fascinating case-study in how human ideas spread, morph, come into conflict with and influence one another over time. As some of the longest standing bodies of human thought, it is not easy to grasp its nuances when evaluating it in a vacuum. We should not read popular Scottish literature, attempting to draw out themes and ideas which we suspect might have analogues in the old tenets of Calvinism or beyond. Rather, to realize a project such as this one, we should start in the beyond and from there move forward, such that by the time we arrive at Scottish literature our claims are founded in the certainty of centuries. We can be more sure that the appearance of certain themes or the mere utterances of certain characters exist in reference to something larger. By finding continuity, by tracing theological consistency, a meaningful critical intervention can be made about theology's place in Scottish literature.

My ultimate aim, then, is to elucidate a continuity in theology beginning with Wyclif, whose philosophical talents and influence have long been undervalued, through contemporary Calvinism. I seek to support two central claims: first, that such a continuity in philosophical threads exists and continues to influence a variety of fields today, and second, that the presence of such a continuity, which begins with Wyclif, forces us to regard him as a serious philosopher whose efforts crossed national borders and centuries. So, how did a 14th century theologian come to influence a 21st century novel in subtle ways, and what can it tell us about the Scottish literary canon in general? I hope to satisfy those inquiries.

Following the summary of some of Wyclif's most important ideas, Chapter 3 moves away from Wyclif's writing and toward an examination of Chaucer's most widely-read text, *The Canterbury Tales*. Wyclif's ideas are teased out of this text, and overt mentions of Wyclif and his followers in Chaucer's work and the work of others are highlighted as a means of demonstrating alternative ways for his philosophy and following to spread beyond his more formal theological treatises. Popular literature acts as an avenue by which Wyclif's work could be consumed *en masse* by a public increasingly receptive to such ideas. The appearance of Wyclif's philosophy in Chaucer's *magnum opus* demonstrates how widely Wyclif's ideas had spread by the turn of the end of the 14th century, and how they may be preserved by less formal means. Chapter 4 takes a more historical bent in order to make a similar claim: that Wyclif's work spread not only across England, but Scotland and the entire European continent. This sets the stage for Chapter 5, which bolsters the argument for Wycliffite influence in Scotland by asserting the possibility of John Calvin's and John Knox's exposure to Wyclif's work on the continent before Knox laid the groundwork for the new Scottish faith in the 16th century back in Edinburgh. Chapter 6 treats two well-regarded and more modern Scottish texts, one from the 19th century and one from the 21st, in an exploration of how Wycliffite debates remain alive today and are indeed essential to the Scottish literary canon.

The nature of this work, of tracking an intellectual lineage across disciplines and a substantial amount of time, finds parallels in a relatively small amount of recent scholarship. Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation* (2012) argues that modern sociology, anthropology of religion, and more are extensions of 16th century issues. Buc's *The Dangers of Ritual* (2001) follows a similar type of claim on a smaller scale, as does Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the*

Spirit of Capitalism (1905). Most recently, Eire's *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650* (2016) also posits that the turning point of the Reformation continues to affect us today in profound ways. All of these texts, as well as the one before you, represent an attempt to work against the flattening of history, the constraint inherent in the periodization of philosophy and, as is argued here, literature. In reality, these fields lack the clean lines imposed upon them by academia. The compartmentalization of philosophical and literary studies, a by-product of the establishment of academic departments and scholarly specializations, may now be viewed skeptically as fields become increasingly interdisciplinary. Philosophical fads may change and books may go out of print, but important ideas are sticky things. Despite alterations in nomenclature, patterns of thinking resurface time and again in different contexts. Assigning new titles to new bodies of thought is obviously useful in their study. But this practice tends to mask fundamental similarities over time that manifest across formal disciplines. One example of this is the subject of this project.

The present essay explores just one small branch of a great genealogy, full of distant and near relations. In the most general sense, this project is motivated by situating the work of particular 14th-21st century authors and other important cultural figures as more direct descendents of Wyclif than previous scholarship has allowed. If this work sketches a family tree of Presbyterianism and Scottish literature, it would begin back in the 14th century, move on to prominent Lollards and Jan Hus, the Czech reformer, moving next to John Calvin and then John Knox, concluding with prominent Scottish authors, like James Hogg and James Robertson, the latter of which still lives in Edinburgh today. Theology is thereby reinstalled into Scottish literary studies, not as a random lense by which texts may be analysed and appreciated, but as a

necessary starting-point from which to begin reading texts which are inherently marked by a long history of theological struggle. Such a trajectory is not obvious, nor is it by any means popular. Still, the effort poured into the following chapters are an expression of hope that it will be taken by the reader as the true one, to the extent that any work of historical speculation can be true.

§2

Wyclif's Radical Philosophy

Before I seek to identify traces of prominent Oxford theologian John Wyclif's work throughout the historical record, it is first necessary to grasp a basic understanding of his most important ideas. These are, roughly in the order discussed below: his attitudes regarding the clergy and religious authority, his work on salvation and election, and his emphasis on individual communion with God and its implications for the translation of Scripture into the vernacular. Save for several omissions which delve into different branches of religious metaphysics (his treatment of the Eucharist, most importantly), these are the highlights of his radical philosophy. The reader should not conclude that the following summary is a comprehensive look at his work; instead, it represents only a few of his most contentious doctrines, as a more complete view of Wyclif's writing would fill countless volumes.

The rejection of ecclesiastical authority is arguably Wyclif's most lasting doctrine and revolutionary step. It is thus appropriate to begin with how he formulates his denouncement of clerical figures. True members of the church, Wyclif contended, were the elect, or those who were eternally joined by the grace of predestination. This grace is not necessarily incompatible with mortal sin, which may not impair elected status. Rather, "assisted by contrition for the deeds they had done, and remaining contrite through to the end of their lives," Wyclif writes, "it seems to me that they might finish their lives in a praiseworthy manner" (Leff, 517-518; Wyclif, *Trialogus*, 150). Likewise, those who are damned remain in mortal sin even if they are temporally in grace (Leff, 518). It is because of this that he is able to conclude that popes,

prelates, and priests are dubious figures. “Someone is not the vicar of Christ or a member of the church because of the election or rejection of such a cardinal any more than because of the chattering of a bird or any other sort of pointless portent that might occur,” Wyclif writes, as “Nobody who is chosen in one of these knows whether his nomination is confirmed by the Lord” (Wyclif, *Triialogus*, 353). Because no one can know who is elected and who is not, claiming authority due to election is nonsensical. Any ritual leading up to a claim of election is thus merely “chains invented by the Devil” (Wyclif, *Triialogus*, 353).

Similarly, in *Opus Evangelicum* (1384), Wyclif writes that priests are in name only and not *in re*, and thus ought not to be followed or obeyed (Szitty, 159). Each member of the elect is *ipso facto* “more priest than layman, ordained of God” (Leff, 520). Thus the notion of obedience to the clergy as being necessary for salvation collapses. Wyclif’s argument against the clergy is not merely one of identifying features of the clerical life that are inconsistent with the values espoused by Christ, which had by Wyclif’s time become common; instead, it is one that also revolves around an epistemic problem. This epistemic anti-clericalism, as it is termed herein, forms the backbone of Wyclif’s skepticism of the Church hierarchy. It is one of Wyclif’s most defining ideas, and will surface time and again in later chapters. Significantly, Wyclif’s claims regarding the uncertainty of predestination are not necessarily confined to the clergy. No one can be certain of their elected status, and no one can claim another’s elected status with any credibility.

Yet even if the status of clerics as elected or damned is inaccessible, there are various other reasons why their presence is inimical to the teachings of Christ. These are more in the vein of the common arguments waged against the clergy. First, clerics focus on outward, visible signs

instead of the invisible reality of Grace, the truth of Christ's goodness (Wyclif, *Triologus*, 354). Wyclif's rejection of the visible is not treated further here, but it is central to his rejection of the clergy as viable advocates for God's word. By involving themselves in the worldly affairs associated with clericalism they undermine their own cause. Wyclif abhorred the wealth of the Church. The way to Christ, he explains in *De ecclesia* (1378-1379), is by embracing the poverty of Christ and his apostles. In fact, Wyclif's first real foray into the politics of his day was *De civili dominio* (1375-1376), which called for the royal divestment of all church property. For Wyclif and many of his contemporaries, clerical life had long since departed from the Biblical ideal.

Because the lifestyle of the clergy is detestable, Wyclif accuses them of responsibility for the loosing of Satan (Szitty, 163). Satan was initially bound in Revelations by an angel descending from the sky with chain in hand. Wyclif apparently reads the binding of Satan allegorically. His *De solutione Sathanae* recalls not a physical restriction of Satan but a "suspension of his temptation" after Christ's ascension (Szitty, 162). Thus Satan's liberation comes not in the form of a literal visitation of Earth but in the form of evil men, the "instruments of his malice," who, as "members of the body of Antichrist, are loosed on this world" (Szitty, 162). The inherently misguided operations of the clergy and their involvement in unsuitable affairs is so dramatic as to ultimately manifest in the invitation of the embodiment of all evil to visit upon Earth.

Wyclif did not stop there, moving on to more practical claims regarding authority and faith. He formulated ten signs of the Antichrist which he contrasted to the true path of Christ. These include, among others already discussed, "arrogance and lack of humility," "seduction

away from Christ's teachings," and other violations of which the clergy were guilty (Leff, 537). To these he added a list of twelve abuses specific to the pope (Leff, 537). If clerics are falsely endowed with the authority of salvation and are, beyond that, actually inimical to Christ's teaching, then it should come as no surprise that Wyclif called for their dissolution all the way up to the pope himself. *De potestate pope* was designed to disprove the need for a pope at all (Leff, 532). His arguments against the pope follow much the same line of reasoning as his case against the lower clergy, but the conclusion is significant: that spiritual power derives exclusively from God (Leff, 532). What the clergy *did* do was only part of the problem — Wyclif was also deeply concerned about what duties they failed to fulfill. One of his most serious objections stems from the importance that Wyclif put on scripture. Scripture ought to remain the most fundamental authority on God's word, he believed. The lower clergy's failure to preach "provided Wyclif with one of his main weapons against the existing hierarchy" (Leff, 524). His commitment to scripture became a hallmark of his theology.

With the clergy thoroughly denounced, Wyclif emphasized individual communion with God. In short, he sought to deny the Church exclusive access to the divine. Central for Wyclif is the idea of the "personal responsibility of each believer to know the bible and to defend it"; every Christian had an individual "obligation to be a theologian" (Leff, 523). Such a theory excludes the Church from the dialogue between individual and God. If only scripture were properly embraced, "papal bulls could be put aside, as they should be" (Wyclif, *Trialogus*, 192). Wyclif instead opted to appeal directly to scripture, the ultimate source of God's true word. "Whenever...a false opinion has its origins in Scripture," he writes on the absolute truth of scripture, "the faithful should understand that either the books have been copied incorrectly, or

that there is some problem in understanding them” (Wycliff, *Triialogus*, 193). Wyclif went on to publish a major work concerned with his commitment to the truth of scripture: *De veritate Sacrae Scripturae*. He never claims that scripture itself is inherently holy, but instead that it can be called holy only “on account of the way in which it leads the faithful by hand into knowledge of heavenly scripture” (Dove, 374). Still, Ghosh notes that scripture itself “is identical with Christ and the will of God...the book itself is quite irrelevant” (Ghosh, 56). Scripture, for Wyclif, was instructive more than anything else. “Any truth of the faith...should come from the faith of Scripture,” he writes (*Triialogus*, 192). There was only one problem: scripture was in Latin, which few beyond the clergy had the privilege to learn. If scripture is so central to living a Christian life, then it must be accessible to the lay-folk, and from there arose a great conflict.

Wyclif’s “theoretical disjunction of human authority and scriptural interpretation” introduced the question of the “validity or otherwise of Biblical translations into the vernacular” (Ghosh, 86). Before Archbishop Thomas Arundel’s censorship laws settled the debate for the theologians,³ a number of papers were published on the issue. It was still at this time no indication of heresy to debate the validity of the vernacular Bible (Ghosh, 86). Common arguments against the vernacular Bible included such fears that it would be misinterpreted by the lay-folk, undermining its meaning and perverting the Christian faith; Jerome’s *Ad Paulinum*, Ullerston’s *determinacio* (though Ullerston was in favor of translating the Bible), Butler’s *determinacio*, Knighton’s *Chronicle*. and a handful of other surviving tracts express this fear.

³ For the negative effects of Arundel's Constitutions of 1409 and his condemnations of the Wycliffite Bible and Lollardy, see: Watson, Nicholas. "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409," *Speculum* 70 (1995): pg. 822-64.

The Peasant's Revolt of 1381 must have raised even more pressing questions about the increasingly prevalent intellectual emancipation.

Reading the Bible properly was not just a matter of gleaning literal meaning. Wyclif's literal sense is not merely confined to the strictly literal, but, since it is defined by intentionality, "may include 'valid' figurative readings" (Ghosh, 102). It may sound improbable that such a nuanced reading could produce consistently desirable results, but Wyclif either does not consider misreadings a legitimate threat or believes the benefits to be gained from scripture in the vernacular outweighs the inevitable costs. Wyclif advocated strongly for the vernacular Bible, citing that it would aid Christian men in studying the Gospel "in that tongue in which they know best Christ's sentence" (Robinson, 138). In *Triologus*, a later work of his (now dated, more uncertainly in light of recent scholarship, to 1382/1383),⁴ Wyclif explicitly argues for the vernacular Bible, writing as Phronesis, the embodiment of truth: "Since the Holy Spirit wants our interest not to wander amidst many distractions, but to be occupied with the one necessity, He wills that the books of the Old and New Testaments be studied and read in the vernacular" (Wyclif, *Triologus*, 192).⁵

It is widely recognized that Wyclif played a major part in the actual creation of the Wycliffite Bible, even if his role was only that of supervision and encouragement (Dove, 386).

There are a number of reasons why copies of the Wyclif Bible should not be attributed to Wyclif

⁴ While Wyclif refers to the Earthquake Council in May of 1382, Margaret Aston has noted that Wyclif's reference is in the fourth book, suggesting that much of the work was completed before this. Lahey points to Wyclif's failure to mention the sustained military campaign of Bishop Henry Despenser, which began May of 1383 (Lahey, 17).

⁵ This crucial passage as well as some surrounding text is cross-referenced in the original Latin here, as found in Gotthardus Lechler's essential *Triologus cum supplemento trialogi*: 'Sed quia Spiritus Sanctus vult intentum nostrum non dispargi in multa sed circum unum necessarium occupari, vult vulgares codices de lege nova vel veteri studeri et legi, et hominem non circos occupari, qui licet quandoque sint veri et fides scripturae sacrae implicate, Deus tamen non vult explicite eos credi.' (Lechler, Gotthardus, etc. Liber III, Cap. XXXI, 1869).

himself (Robinson, 138). Still, he is recognized as playing a central role in bringing the project to fruition. In order to facilitate proper interpretation, Wyclif (or his team of scholars) included explanatory glosses in the margins of this new vernacular Bible (Dove, 405). Finally, the lay-folk would have the access they need to scripture, and perhaps the notes on the side would confine interpretations to the “true” meaning of the text. The word of God would no longer be subject to clerical contamination.

The Church, desperate to maintain its wide spectrum of influence, responded in turn. By the 1380’s just texts that were in the vernacular could be labeled as dissenting. Consider the inquiry into the *Speculum Vitae*, for instance, a well-known text that had its orthodoxy questioned only because it had been translated from its original Latin (Jones, 85). In 1395 Archbishop Arundel unsuccessfully introduced a bill to parliament to ban the translation of the Bible (Jones, 85). It never passed, but the message was clear: the vernacular was anathema to the Church, which was clinging to its authority and relevance. Still, despite the backlash, the vernacular was met with some support from all sides, much to the dismay of the Church.

Wyclif’s work was extensive and remarkably broad in scope. Several critical points can be drawn from this summary: first, that Wyclif asserted a rampant corruption both in the structure of the Church and in the operations of its individual clergy-members; second, and as a basis for the former, he was certain that the knowledge of elected status is unavailable to anyone at all, meaning it can never be claimed with any credibility; third, that the Bible ought to exist in the vernacular, emphasizing individual communion with God and downplaying clerics as a religious authority at all. Wyclif’s writings may strike the modern-day reader as particularly dangerous, and indeed he was declared a heretic posthumously by the Council of Constance in

1415 (though his followers were persecuted harshly far before), but he was not alone in denouncing the clergy. Criticism had come over the years from academics and clerics alike. After all, the monastic orders, the mendicants, and the parish priests all competed for the same pool of resources, meaning they were quick to denounce each other. Wyclif's wholesale rejection of ecclesiastics, from friars to priests to the pope himself, as well as his emphasis on unencumbered free inquiry into God's truth, was a subject explored by many past and contemporary authors other than himself. Wyclif's own brand of anti-clericalism, though, was more fundamentally epistemic than any of his predecessors or contemporaries. Such an idea would manifest in literary works to come, the popularity of such literature a testament to how primed the public would have been to receive a new vision of theology — one that found truth in the musings of Wyclif. More importantly, though, it serves to demonstrate how widely Wycliffite attitudes had disseminated by the turn of the end of the 14th century. There can be no doubt that Wyclif's radical philosophy spelled a changing tide for theology.

Wyclif and the Anti-clerical Tradition

Wyclif's work did not exist in a vacuum. Rather, he was a participant in a wider anti-clerical tradition which is discernible in all manner of texts, from theological tracts to popular literature. The appearance of the very questions with which Wyclif worked in pieces of popular literature indicate just how widespread these concerns had become and how familiar 14th and 15th century readers would have been with the anti-clerical canon and Wyclif's ideas in particular. Wyclif's participation in a canon that enjoyed common readership more generally only helps bolster the notion that he was indeed read quite widely. Even if his ideas were not encountered directly by means of his theological treatises, they still would have been found in popular literature, as in the work of Chaucer.

Such an abundance of scholarship has addressed Chaucer's work that it would be redundant to pay it any great amount of attention, but his tales are useful in understanding how authors would have incorporated such theological debates into their texts. The continuation of Wycliffite debates in literature acts as a conveyor of his ideas all over Britain. To the extent that these prominent texts were enjoyed for years after their conception, they also help to carry Wyclif's concerns into the future. The following chapter examines *The Pardoner's Tale* and several other supporting texts so as to further emphasize the frequency of the manifestation of Wyclif's work in popular literature in the late 14th and 15th centuries. In particular, this reading of Chaucer emphasizes the impossibility of ascertaining the goodness of a cleric. The Pardoner problematizes the notion of inherent clerical goodness a number of different ways, forefronting

not just the satirical anti-clericalism that Chaucer is known for, but the epistemic anti-clericalism that forms the basis of many of Wyclif's most controversial positions.

Many of Chaucer's ideas bear a recognizably Wycliffite bent. John Foxe writes that Chaucer was "a right Wicklevian, or else there was never any" (Kamowski, 5). Beyond the presentation of his ideas in the discussed works, we also find overt mention of his followers and even Wyclif himself, and for good reason. Without a doubt, Wyclif was relatively well-known. Chaucer's relationship with Wyclif was even more intimate, as they were both patrons of John of Gaunt. "Chaucer must often have met with Wycliffe in that princely household," as John of Gaunt sympathized, "as so many educated Englishmen did," with many of the reformer's opinions (Coulton, 308-309). Tatlock reflects that "it is certain that [Chaucer] would know and likely enough that he would sympathize with some of Wyclif's views" (Tatlock, 67). Indeed, Tatlock deems it "acceptable conjecture" that Chaucer should deliberately demonstrate Wyclif's influence (Tatlock, 67).⁶ The Pardoner is perhaps the best example of just that.

Understanding the philosophical nuances of *The Pardoner* and their Wycliffite foundations requires a deeper look into what the office of the pardoner actually was. If the legal record is any indication, his unapologetically questionable behavior is by no means uncharacteristic of the office. Chaucer's Pardoner is forthcoming about his sin to the point of boasting, engaging in the very activities that he preaches against. Of course, he preaches for "no-thing but for coveityse," employing a variety of devious tactics to dupe townspeople into surrendering their money (Chaucer, *The Pardoner's Prologue*, line 105). With his vernycle and taste for vanity, the Pardoner is clearly a man of some wealth. His riches are in part attributable

⁶ Kamowski offers another approach altogether to assert a connection between Chaucer and Wyclif, examining their shared reflections upon the alleged miracles and other spiritual empowerments of the Church in the fourteenth century and of the institution's pristine ancestor.

to the practice of selling pardons, or indulgences, a practice banned by the laws governing their function. In fact, “under the law which defined his duties and regulated his activities, the pardoner, or ‘*questor*’ as he is officially called, had no power to forgive sin or to sell the indulgences he carried about with him” (Kellog and Haselmayer, 251). In 1215 Pope Innocent III made it canon law that the *questor* must carry letters of license from the pope or a bishop, which Chaucer’s Pardoner is so quick to demonstrate: “And than my bulles shewe I, alle and somme. / Our lige lordes seel on my patente” (Chaucer, *The Pardoner’s Prologue*, lines 336-337). Of course, this same papal edict forbade the *questor* from preaching, limiting them only to reading out their letters (Kellog and Haselmayer, 255). It is thus particularly ironic when Chaucer’s Pardoner uses these letters — which he was legally bound to carry — to break the law by claiming authority to preach. Another papal edict in 1267 by Clement IV made it unlawful for the *questor* to intimidate village clerics into summoning local people to hear them preach (Kellog and Haselmayer, 255). Chaucer’s Pardoner ignores this provision, brandishing his papers so “That no man be so bold, ne preest ne clerk, / Me to destourbe of Cristes holy werk” (Chaucer, *The Pardoner’s Prologue*, lines 339-340). What the Pardoner is claiming is an authority that is illegal, yet still derived from the central importance of Christ’s holiness. Because such behavior was notorious enough to bring legislation against it, we can perhaps assume that readers of the time may have brought a deeper understanding of the legal context to the tales. That is, the Pardoner’s behavior would have surprised no one. The reader is then left to wonder if violation of Church laws is itself sufficient to undermine the goodness of a cleric. This concern over being uncertain about a cleric’s goodness becomes central to *The Pardoner’s Tale*.

Despite such breach of conduct, the Pardoner's arguably worst offence is the carrying of relics he knows are false. According to one Wycliffite sermon, the pardoner does sometimes come along "with...false relics," so the accusation is not unfounded, and indeed was perhaps even commonplace (Jones, 196). Again, the Pardoner's behavior may not have surprised readers at the time, who were familiar with a clerical role often considered to be the most dubious of them all. Here it is likely that Chaucer's illustrations found inspiration in something more personal than the written record, some direct experience with "living models" as a creative source (Royster, 254). Chaucer merely wrote what others already knew. By doing so, though, he asks the audience, now in the more evaluative position of audience-member, to assess the use of relics from an entirely outside perspective, allowing the reader to come to their own critique of their veneration.

While probably familiar to readers, the question of the authenticity of relics was not one about which there was much open debate. The Church had become more reluctant to acknowledge the possibility of fake relics over time, preferring to keep its own extensive collection — of which Canterbury held a part — free from suspicion. For whatever reason, having made the punishments clear once during the Synod of Exeter (1287), the Church apparently opted to stay relatively silent on the issue for years to come. Chaucer asks the same questions about false relics as he does about apparently false clerics. Does it matter that we *know* that relics are genuine? Does their power stem from the material object itself? Is their force contingent on their authenticity? Are they merely a symbol of God's holiness, an avenue by which God's holiness might be channeled? The problem introduced is, much like the question regarding illicit behavior and Christ's work, an epistemic problem. There is no way to know for

sure what is good and what is not beyond that which is directly associated with the divine itself, like scripture. Whether or not certainty regarding the goodness of a religious artifact or person is essential to its religious significance remains an open question, and is even more at the forefront of the tale when it comes to the Pardoner as a cleric himself.

With the Pardoner so forthcoming about his sins, the reader is forced to confront an important question very much associated with those of legality and authenticity: can an immoral figure offer legitimate moral advice? Are sacraments performed by a sinful priest, for instance, invalidated by the priest's own sin? Lollard theory suggested not. Richard Wyche, imprisoned for Lollardy, appeared at Christmastide to speak before the Prior of the Newcastle Augustinians around 1402, pushing a by-then typical Lollard doctrine: a sinful priest could not consecrate the Eucharist (Kightly, 14). Of course, the idea came from Wyclif himself. In fact, Wyclif asserted that a sinful priest could not ordain, consecrate, or baptize effectively (Izbicki, 46). This stood in direct opposition to Roman Catholic theory, which dictates that sacraments performed by a sinful priest are still valid. The character "V Wits" in the 16th-century morality play *Everyman* even denies that a sinful priest could exist at all: "Everyman," instructs V Wits, "God gave priests...dignity, And setteth them in His stead among us to be; Thus be they above angels in degree" (*Everyman*, lines 747-749). While traditional Roman Catholic beliefs dictated the inherent goodness of the clergy, Wyclif, as aforementioned, refused that humans may ascertain inherent goodness or divine election at all. This is his epistemic anti-clericalism. Determinations of goodness thereby depended good works. One of those good works was preaching, of which Wyclif was a particularly strong advocate.

The Pardoner's Tale is in many ways a sermon, carefully unified with biblical references and in many other ways structurally identical to medieval sermons, complete with a request for alms at its conclusion (Merrix, 235-249). If *The Pardoner's Tale* is taken as a moral tale — and, indeed, the morals that death is a universal inevitability and greed a universal evil strike the reader as meaningful — then Chaucer situates himself alongside the Roman Catholic Church in the debate. Despite his sin, the Pardoner may still encourage virtue, an ability that he claims himself: “For, though myself be a ful vicious man, / A moral tale yet I yow telle can,” the Pardoner tells the pilgrims (Chaucer, *The Pardoner's Prologue*, lines 131-132). Although, the interpretation rests on the perceived legitimacy of the Pardoner as a moral influence. If his sin is taken to undermine all that he says, then Chaucer's writing is steeped in irony and falls to the other side of the fence. How is the Pardoner to be interpreted? His boasting of sin can either be read as arrogance or confession. His tale can either be read as a moral exemplum or a backward justification for temporal sin. Is Chaucer siding with Lollardy or the Church on the matter? The ambiguity is characteristic of Chaucer, and perhaps another reason why his works were perceived as less threatening than they could have been to the church. Either way, acceptance of Church doctrine rests in this case on *perceived* legitimacy, a judgement that is altogether impossible to make with complete certainty and should be considered ultimately irrelevant. That is just the point: only the Pardoner may truly evaluate himself, and it is by coming to terms with his own faith and virtue that he can reconcile himself to God. This is independent of anything that he says or does — both actions and words are inadequate. Or, as Wyclif puts it: “if a man be

truly contrite, all exterior confession is superfluous and unprofitable to him” (Foxye, *An Universal*, 297).⁷ For Wyclif and for the Pardoner, self-reflection is at the core of goodness.

The Pardoner himself seems aware of the debate over his status as a true cleric. In the last chapter of William of Saint-Amour’s *The Perils of the Last Times*, for instance, William offers a catalogue of forty-one signs of a “Pseudo” apostle, many of which apply to the Pardoner (Miller, 246). “True Apostles preach only for the sake of God and the salvation of souls, not for temporal profit,” he writes, and “True Apostles do not speak boastfully, and do not attribute to themselves anything except that which God performs through them” (Miller, 249, 247). The catalogue is a means by which one can identify a cleric as misbehaving, something the Church would contend was impossible and something that Wyclif would maintain was, as the Church was at his time structured at least, almost inevitable. In light of the tension between true and counterfeit apostles, the Pardoner ironically claims: “I wol noon of the apostles countrefete” (Chaucer, *The Pardoner’s Prologue*, 447). The Pardoner once more asserts his own goodness, this time self-consciously rebutting a critique that he anticipates.

A single theme underlies these various points: the impossibility of ascertaining the goodness of a cleric. On the one hand, the Pardoner blatantly breaks canon law, carries relics he knows to be fake, and generally situates himself as an immoral character. On the other, just as he claims, he appears to tell a moral tale and even carry out the work of Christ as a preacher. In a sense, the Pardoner denies the reader the possibility of characterizing him as either good or bad; instead, the audience is left suspended in uncertainty. Beyond leveraging this as a comic device, it is also an explicit instance of what I have termed Wyclif’s epistemic anti-clericalism. It is not

⁷ This quote comes not from Wyclif himself but from John Foxye’s “The Tenets of Wickliffe”, a list of tenets for which Wyclif was being condemned in 1385.

merely that the Pardoner is a caricature of a clergyman, as many of the other of Chaucer's characters are. *The Pardoner's Tale* addresses a different type of anti-clericalism altogether — a brand of anti-clericalism that goes beyond merely questioning the behavior of the clergy. The Pardoner, while engaging in immoral behavior, is scandalous for an even greater reason: his character problematizes certainty about the goodness of clerics. For centuries the Church had been meeting criticisms based on ecclesiastical materialism and the “worldliness” of the clergy. What Wyclif proffered was an even more troubling thought: even if a cleric acted the part of a commendable member of the Church organization, their authority meets a greater test at the hands of a God who refuses to communicate who is elect and who is not, or who is part of the true Church and who is merely masquerading as such. Unlike characters like the Friar, whose characterization merely draws from a series of common anti-clerical stereotypes, the Pardoner confronts anti-clericalism in more nuanced ways, a testament to how Wyclif's ideas found their ways into popular texts.

Having firmly situated Chaucer alongside Wyclif within the anti-clerical tradition that had become so well established, the discussion can now turn to the most convincingly Lollard character: the Parson. No character dispels doubts about Wyclif's influence over Chaucer so explicitly. The Parson emphasizes Chaucer's religious and political sympathies perhaps more than any other simply because it is in reference to the Parson that the only overt mention of Lollardy is included in the text. The Parson is a particularly idealized character; he is viewed rather favorably relative to his fellow travellers. He is poor of money but rich in holiness and works (Chaucer, *General Prologue*, line 480-1); kind and diligent (ibid. 485); his appearance is Christ-like, “in his hand a staf” (ibid. 497); his teaching are by precept and example (ibid.

520-22); he teaches by Christ in addition to following the examples set forth by Christ himself (ibid. 529-30). Three times Chaucer tells us that his Parson preached or taught Christ's "Gospel" (ibid. 483, 500, 529). Having stressed the goodness of the Parson, it is worth checking to see if the Parson is aligned with the traditional Roman Catholic Church or with a reformist movement. Sure enough, the Parson is accused of Lollardy. When the host makes a toast that involves cursing, the Parson condemns him, prompting the host to charge the Parson with adherence to Lollardy: "I smelle a Lollere in the wynd," he says, and "this Lollere heer wil prechen us somewhat" (Chaucer, *Man of Law's Tale Epilogue*, 1175, 1177). The host is right to accuse the Parson, as condemnation of cursing was a recognizably Lollard trait (Balmires, 224). The Parson is accused of Lollardy twice and never denies the charge. The Sailor even expresses condemnation for the Lollard Parson, bidding him to refrain from preaching lest he "sowen som difficulte" among the pilgrims (ibid. 1182). Others have noticed that Chaucer must have intentionally used Wycliffite texts as a model for the vocabulary he deploys within the tale itself.

⁸ Thus the Parson is not merely described as a Lollard, but done so in terms that are charged with Lollard undertones. And yet, despite all of this, the Parson is deeply respectable, a character who embraces Christ with greater sincerity than any other. Chaucer's appreciation for Wycliffite religious ideals is hardly subtle, and would have been even more apparent to readers at the time who were more familiar with the Lollard lexicon and attitudes.

This discussion of the manifestation of Wyclif's philosophy in popular texts allows for two serious claims to be made. The first is that Wyclif's work could be found outside of the formal venues in which such theological debate took place, situating them among the lay-folk in

⁸ Anne Hudson, Helen Barr, and others have proffered this point, which is critically engaged with in Frances McCormack's *Chaucer and the Culture of Dissent: The Lollard Context and Subtext of the Parson's Tale*, p. 252.

popular literature. This includes, but is not limited to, his epistemic anti-clericalism. Similar claims can be made about his approach to scripture and the Eucharist, but for the purposes of this project, it is precisely that the anti-clericalism of Chaucer's Pardoner revolves around an epistemic problem which deserves attention. Thus, through popular literature, readers could engage with the ideas of Wyclif — either to critique them or, as Chaucer's sympathies may dispose the reader, to adopt them. Secondly, because these texts enjoyed readership for centuries after Wyclif had passed, they plausibly acted as a significant force for maintaining the appreciation of Wyclif's contentious ideas. In *Piers the Ploughman's Creed*, a medieval alliterative poem printed through the 16th century, the unknown author commends Wyclif's work specifically: "Wytnesse on Wycliff þat warned...wiþ trewþe" (*Piers the Plough*, 528). Well after Wyclif's death, his "truth" met the song of praise via such texts. Much like the Lollards, this literature preserved and disseminated the concepts that Wyclif poured into his more formal theological treatises.

§4

A European Movement

Any effort to reform the Church helped pave the way for Luther who, in 1517, wrote *The Ninety-Five Theses*. The Reformation was well on its way. More than a century before Luther's *Theses*, though, the Lollards nailed their own document to a church door. The "Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards," nailed to the doors of Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral in 1395, helped establish the Lollards as a reformist force in England. The Lollards were Wycliffites, those educated by Wyclif or otherwise inspired by his writing. As time went on the term became further defined⁹ and synonymous with heresy. The Lollards were not the failed movement of religious and social protest that some have construed them to be. Lollardy even found strong support in prominent political figures, from John of Gaunt to Richard II.¹⁰ It was a prominent movement that generated persuasive literature in support of Wycliffite doctrine, and, as is argued here, a movement with a scope as wide as Europe itself.

Wyclif's influence over Reformed religion is only just beginning to be appreciated fully. A rich and relatively contemporary body of scholarship addresses Wyclif's influence over the Protestant Reformation.¹¹ Yet virtually none has concerned itself with the Scottish Reformation in particular. In fact, very little scholarship addresses Wyclif's ideas circulating in Scotland at all. Eyal Poleg's work, published as recently as 2013, offers a short list of evidence for the

⁹ Lawton reasons in "Lollardy and the Piers Plowman Tradition": "After the accession of Henry IV and the passing of the statute *De Haeretico Comburendo* in 1401, Lollards must have stood in progressively clearer definition" (Lawton, 269).

¹⁰ Much more on the prestige of the Lollard movement can be found in Anne Hudson's *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History*.

¹¹ G.R. Evans' *The Roots of the Reformation* contains a chapter on Wyclif that is particularly useful in looking forward from Wyclif's ideas to core Reformationist principles.

presence of Lollards in Scotland followed by the claim that “this is all that is known of Lollardy in late medieval Scotland” (Poleg, 227). However, more evidence of Wycliffites and Lollards in Scotland is merely buried deep in the historical record, due in part to the poor ecclesiastical records kept in the north. It appears in brief statements in the work of prominent historians and primary sources, sometimes seemingly as a side-note. Historians have suggested a Lollard presence in Scotland,¹² but the evidence has been thin. Assertions such as Poleg’s encourage a misplaced confidence in the limited extent of dissent in Scotland and elsewhere. A determined examination of the Lollards in Scotland paints a different picture entirely.

It is no wonder that this evidence can still be found today. Wyclif’s ideas spread widely, and some of his work anticipated the religious and institutional changes that would take place over course of the 16th century. From London to Geneva, reformers were familiar with the work of Wyclif and the Lollards. Why has his influence been constrained by academia to England? Over the course of two centuries, Wyclif and his followers would come to alter the course of Scottish history in small but discernible ways. Before making such a claim, though, it is necessary to track Wyclif’s ideas throughout space and time.

Wyclif was a dominant reformer during the 14th and 15th centuries. In the 16th century, new reformers rose to the challenge: Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, and John Calvin, among many others, advocated their own brand of Reformed Christianity, each with substantive differences from the Roman Christianity they had come to know and condemn. Lutheranism, Zwinglianism, Calvinism — all byproducts of the call for a reformed Christianity — “resemble[d] each other much more than any of them the faith of the Church to which they all

¹² W. Stanford Reid’s “The Lollards in Pre-Reformation Scotland” is perhaps the most explicit example.

opposed” (Beard, 229). The affinities between these movements are explicable not only as a reaction to a Christianity that had become so uniformly corrupted throughout Europe but also as derivations from the same reformist impulse laid out carefully in Wycliffite and Lollard writings and elsewhere. Their common qualities, to put it simply, were not a matter of coincidence.

The story of Wyclif and the Scottish Reformation is incomplete without an examination of the Lollards and their presence outside of England. Lollardy gained in popularity through the 15th century, and when Luther made his call for reform, it was Lollard congregations all over England which contributed to the triumph of the Reformation across the country during the 16th century (Workman, *John Wyclif*, 285). It became so widespread that, according to some accounts, “every second man that you meet is a Lollard” (Schaff, 132). Lollardy, itself an extension of Wyclif’s work, would be central to bringing his ideas northward to Scotland and over to the mainland to be discovered by Calvin and John Knox, a leader of the Scottish Reformation.

Sometime around the end of the 14th century, James Resby, an English preacher “of the school of John Wyclif,” fled to Scotland from the increasingly harrowing intellectual climate of England after the usurpation of Richard II (Workman, *John Wyclif*, 10). The elision of political and religious power under Henry IV and Archbishop Thomas Arundel, and in particular the passing of the statute *De heretico comburendo*, meant greater censorship and harsher punishment for heresy. The flood of Lollards into Scotland brought with them Wyclif’s work, and while some met the fatal punishments dealt to religious heretics, their influence “could not be burnt out” (Workman, *The Dawn*, 10). In 1407, Resby was arrested in Perth for teaching Lollard heresies (Lawton, 270). Resby was burned that year, but some of his writings were “preserved by

his followers and read down to the time of the Reformation” (Lawton, 270). In other words, if the preservation of Resby’s work is any indication of overall trends, then an interest in Lollard doctrines was maintained for approximately 160 years. And why not? The movement, as is argued here, was far more widespread and established than scholarship has hitherto allowed, presumably because governments were engaged in a continuous struggle to suppress its appearance. As a result of the work of Resby and other Lollards, an opponent of Wyclif’s work in Constance complained: “[heretics] who claim that their sayings are founded on holy Scripture and on its literal sense and who say that they follow and recognize Scripture are present in England, have destroyed the university of Prague, and have even reached Scotland” (Workman, *The Dawn*, 10-11). Conspiracies even arose out of the tension between heresy and orthodoxy: it was suspected, for instance, that one particularly loud Lollard, Paul Craw, was “sent by the heretical people of Prague to infect the realm of Scotland” (Workman, *The Dawn*, 11).

And infect they did. Scores of Lollards occupied Scotland — a 1494 account of the matter estimates “thirty persons” present in one region alone, dubbed the “Lollards of Kyle” (Workman, *The Dawn*, 11). The Lollards also occupied the “mountains and moss hags of Galloway,” well under one hundred miles from Scotland’s capital city (Workman, *The Dawn*, 11). Their presence was felt in the kirks, and a translation of Purvey’s revision of Wyclif’s version of the New Testament, together with parts of the Old Testament, were read aloud in the Scots dialect for all to hear (Workman, *The Dawn*, 11). Several known Lollard executions took place in Scotland during the late 15th and 16th centuries, and it is hardly likely that they represented isolated events (Barrel, 257). Some were exiles while others were plausibly political

refugees seeking safety in the north. Reid suggests, building on work by A.F. Steuart¹³ about English refugees during the Great Schism (1377-1418), that the increase in English names which appear in the Scottish kirk registries after 1380 may indicate that English Lollards were fleeing north in relatively large numbers (Reid, 270). One chronicler of the time, Bower, writes confidently that Wyclif still had followers in Scotland in 1440 (Barrel, 257). The Lollard heresy — a product of Wyclif’s work — threatened Scotland’s established political and religious authorities, as it stressed the need for reform at all levels of the Church hierarchy and flaunted the shortcomings of a government unable to completely stifle its opponents.

Universities played a central role in disseminating Wycliffite doctrine and defending Roman Catholicism from those very heretical beliefs. University of St. Andrews, the oldest of the four ancient universities in Scotland, was indeed established to act as a “bulwark against heretical views” (Barrel, 257). All Masters of Arts at University of St. Andrews were required to take an oath to “defend the church against the Lollards and their adherents” (Reid, 272). Laurence of Lindores, the first professor of law at the university, was eventually appointed *Haereticæ Pravitatis Inquisitor*, or Inquisitor of Heretical Improprieties (Knox, *Appendix*, 497). Not only were heretics streaming from the south up to St. Andrews to promulgate their Lollard doctrines, but Scottish students were also making their way to Oxford. The previous employer of Wyclif and a hot-bed for reform, Oxford must have had its own particular appeal to students who were attracted to doctrine that the English Church was increasingly defining as heretical. Reid suspects that between 1357 and 1389, students returning home to Scotland from Oxford had “become cells of heretical propaganda” (Reid, 270).

¹³ A.F. Steuart, “Scotland and the Papacy during the Great Schism.” *Scottish Historical Review*, IV (1906), pg. 147.

Sir John Oldcastle, who became a leader of the English Lollards, was such an important figure that he warrants his own investigation. Oldcastle was not only popular among the Lollards of England; there is reason to believe that he was responsible for importing Wycliffite doctrine to the north. Around the turn of the 14th century Oldcastle was on military expedition in Scotland. As was custom, preachers would have accompanied the soldiers and preached before battle. Oldcastle, a steady supporter of Lollardy, would have supported Lollard preachers. It is possible, and maybe even likely, that Lollard preachers made their way north from England at his behest. Furthermore, Oldcastle was stationed at Roxborough Castle in 1400, prompting Reid to suggest that he had “probably become acquainted with some of the Scottish lairds” (Reid, 273). It is therefore no surprise that by 1408 the Scots came to be allied with Oldcastle in the efforts to release James I, the Scottish King, from English captivity (Reid, 273). Negotiations to free James I were initiated as early as 1408 with no success. In 1414 and “in league with the Scots,” Oldcastle was involved in coordinating a more substantial effort to free the Scottish King (Reid, 273).

The Scottish-Lollard alliance maintained by Oldcastle becomes even more certain in 1417. Arrangements were made that year between Oldcastle and William Douglas, a Scottish laird, to restore the allegedly still living Richard II to his throne and hopefully, in doing so, securing the release of James I (Reid, 274). The Scots were to attack their southern border with England while Oldcastle would endeavour to raise a rebellion within the country (Reid, 274). The rebellion failed, but the alliance between the Lollards and the Scots of which Oldcastle was such a crucial part suggests that, at least for a few years, the Scottish Lollards would have

enjoyed a time of respite (Reid, 274). Why should the nobles permit the Scottish Church establishment to attack their few English political allies?

Tensions were rising all over England and Scotland. The Scottish battle against heretics and Lollards in particular was cemented in the Act of Heretics and Lollards in March 1424, even more severe than previous acts of parliament (Christie, 8). Paul Craw would be this act's first victim (Christie, 8). In England, Scotland, and elsewhere this movement of Wycliffite origin was a force to be reckoned with. Writing in Constance in 1414, Dietrich von Niehms tells of the Wycliffite doctrines being widely circulated in England, Scotland, Bohemia, and Moravia (Reid, 272). In the following year Jean d'Achery, representing the University of Paris, called upon the pope to address doctrinal errors "being sown most widely in the kingdoms of Bohemia and Scotland" (Reid, 272). Notes in the Culross Bible, a copy of the Bible that travelled from Oxford to Scotland in 1400, convey to the reader how certain passages may be leveled against the doctrines of the Lollards, a testament to how compelled the orthodox must have felt to rebut the growing heresy (Poleg, "Anti-Lollard Polemics"). Ironically, Wyclif's call for every pious person to be a theologian, to know the Bible well and defend it, forced the orthodox to do the same. Nobody could escape the all-important theological debates that took place from Scotland to England. Nobody could be sure who would ultimately win out between the traditional Roman Catholic orthodox and the increasingly loud cries for reform.

All of this supports the notion that "Wyclif's work was not the 'isolated movement'...which some historians have represented it to be," insists Workman (Workman, *The Dawn*, 12). On the contrary, Wyclif's ideas disseminated via a widespread movement of deeply committed followers. It was even said that "all over the kingdom...two men could not be found

together, and one not a Lollard or Wickliffite” (Foxe, 297). The Lollards developed a following across Europe, but “Scotland,” writes Reid, “was beginning to gain something of a reputation” as a haven for Lollardy (Reid, 272).

Beyond Scotland, it is certain that Wyclif’s ideas attracted followers abroad.¹⁴ Jan Hus, an early reformer at the University of Prague, “was regarded as a disciple of Wyclif” and was executed in Constance as a Wycliffite heretic (Thomas, 100). It has been argued by Josef Loserth that Hus derived much of his work from Wyclif, a “derivative thinker” of Wyclif who “copied large sections of Wyclif’s work” (Thomas, 99).¹⁵ Thomas documents the awareness and prominence of Wyclif’s beliefs in Prague even during the theologian’s own lifetime, which ended in 1384; Nicolas Biceps, a professor in Prague, was arguing against Wyclif’s doctrine on the Eucharist in the late 14th century (Thomas, 100). Jerome of Prague, who studied at Oxford from 1399 to 1401, copied Wyclif’s work to bring back to Bohemia. *De Eucharista* and *Triologus*, two texts central to the previous analysis, were presented in Prague among others to Hus and fellow reformers (Thomas, 100). *De Civili Dominio* and *Dialogus* were also translated into Czech around 1400 (Thomas, 120). Lollards had become “the instigators of all ecclesiastical disturbances in Bohemia,” so widespread was their influence (Loescher, 416).

¹⁴ Duffy’s *The Stripping of the Altars* makes an opposite claim: that the Lollards represented a minute fraction of people uncommonly invested in the rejection of the Church’s central tenets. He argues that the Roman Catholic faith was in very good health before the Reformation, a rebuttal of the common construction of the 16th century Church as a decaying relic of corruption and instability. Yet even if we grant his thesis that a majority of the people of England were entirely content with Roman Catholicism at the advent of the Reformation, how can he reconcile the deemphasis of Lollard importance when intense interest in Wyclif’s work spanned from one end of Europe to the other?

¹⁵ Thomas points out that these accounts are probably motivated by ethnic tensions between Germans and Czechs, the latter being eager to downplay the role of German masters at the University of Prague (Thoman, 98-118).

Ardent reformers followed Jerome of Prague's example, crossing Europe to seek out works by Wyclif and his followers. Thomas reasons that after the passage of *De heretico comburendo*, students from University of Prague must have had trouble establishing contact with Lollard communities in Oxford (Thomas, 100). As such, they ventured to more remote Lollard centers, bringing back to Prague a number of Wyclif's works, an "almost certainly fabricated" letter "purporting to be an official recommendation by the University of Oxford bearing witness to Wyclif's orthodoxy," and even a piece of Wyclif's grave (Thomas, 100-101). Back in Prague, German masters attacked supporters of Wyclif, appealing in 1403 to the Prague diocesan authorities "for action against Wyclif's works" (Thomas, 101). Much like the appointment of Laurence of Lindores in St. Andrews, an archepiscopal commission for the examination of Wyclif's works was launched, composed "entirely of anti-Wycliffites" (Thomas, 102). They found fifteen of Wyclif's books to be heretical. At the launch of an attempt to gather these heretical texts so as to censor them, Hus composed a short treatise entitled *De libris hereticorum legendis* (1410), in which he asserts the truth-value of heretical texts (Thomas, 102). Finally, after Hus preached a sermon at the Bethlehem Chapel seeking the support of the congregation, the audience responded enthusiastically to his plea: Wyclif's work, agreed his growing body of supporters, should be read and taught (Thomas, 102). Hus was excommunicated with his fellow pro-Wycliffite protesters. Still, Lollards continued to send supplies of books to replace those which had been confiscated and burned by the Church authorities (Thomas, 102).

The Lollards sought to support their Czech companions. Sir John Oldcastle sent a letter, dated September 8, 1410, from one of his holdings to a Hus supporter, encouraging steadfastness in the faith. The letter was sent on the same day as one sent by Richard Wyche, who wrote to

Hus himself much to the same effect (Thomas, 103). An epistle dated to the same year survives from known Lollard Quintin Folkhyrd, who writes in 1410 to Prague: “[I] started in the cause of God to ride through the land and to preach in the mother tongue to all who would reach a hand...” (Workman, *The Dawn*, 10). Such an intimate relationship between the Lollards and Hussites carries even more suggestive power when, a century later, Calvin, Knox, and remaining Hussites would convene in a city that was to become a veritable hub for reform. Before those matters are attended to, though, Knox’s personal experience with Lollards promises to be another crucial link, and maybe even the most important evidence for Lollard presence in Scotland, the nation of greatest concern to this study.

John Knox was responsible for writing the confession of faith for the Presbyterian Kirk in Scotland, thereby establishing a new national religion in partnership with the Scottish Protestant nobility. His account is thus particularly valuable. Knox acknowledges the Lollards of Kyle, the very group of reformers mentioned by Workman, in *The History of the Reformation of Scotland*, positing them to be forerunners of the Reformation that he would be a central figure in bringing about. He is able to name them individually, considering first the aforementioned character of Paul Craw, the accusation of his heresy consisting principally of his adherence to the beliefs of “Johnne Husse and Wyckleif, in the opinioun of the sacrament, who denyed that the substance of bread and wyn war changed be vertew of any wourdis; or that confessioun should be maid to preastis; or yit prayeris to sanctes departed” (Knox, *The History*, 6). Knox goes on to detail the “Lollardis of Kyle” and their beliefs, offering thirty-four different beliefs that were undeniably Wycliffite; these include the association of the pope with the “the head of the Kirk of Antychrist,” that clerics are “thevis and robbaris,” that “only God” may forgive sins, that the

promises of Indulgences are false, etc. (Knox, *The History*, 9-10). Knox even seems to revere the wit of Adam Reid of Barskemyng, a Lollard tried before the King.¹⁶ In fact, all of these Lollards were merely admonished and dismissed by King James IV. Knox's tone throughout this crucial section, as well as the royal leniency, hints at something larger: first, that Wycliffite beliefs were common in Scotland, and second, that there may have been a good deal of sympathy for the reformist cause, perhaps even from the King himself. Few pieces of evidence could be more convincing in asserting Lollard influence over the Scottish Reformation than Knox's own account, which is explicit in identifying Wyclif and the Lollards, who impacted his own thinking.

Paul Craw's alleged mission from Prague to infect Scotland indicated a much larger trend: it reflected not just an intimate relationship between the Lollards and the Hussites, but Lollardy as a movement that encompassed Scotland and Europe. Lollardy likely remained influential in Scotland throughout the 15th century, or even into the years leading to the Scottish Reformation. Resby's work and other Wycliffite texts continued to be appreciated; charters for new academic institutions that would challenge heretical beliefs surface in the records, as do complaints that the Lollards were unceasingly sowing heresy across Scotland (Reid, 278-283). As late as 1490, one Lollard, Murdock Nisbet of Loudon, Ayrshire, was forced to flee from persecution but returned some time later armed with Wyclif's translation of the Bible, which he in turn translated into Scots (Reid, 280). Europe was bound from one end to another by a persistent commitment to Wyclif's work. In fact, the boundaries of Europe itself were — and arguably still are — nothing more than cultural. That culture was essentially Christian prior to

¹⁶ Knox gives a full account of his trial, remarking that Nisbet's rhetoric forced the "greatest part of the accusatioun...to lawchter" (Knox, 12).

the Enlightenment. Therefore, it is only appropriate that heresies such as Lollardy gained traction across political boundaries.

The pronouncements of the limited geographical scope of Lollardy has steered historians away from reconsidering the evidence. By all means, though, the Lollard heresy was pervasive in Scotland and elsewhere. Herein lies the crucial point: in all likelihood, Calvin and Knox were not only familiar with Wyclif's doctrines, but were in direct contact with it in the form of Lollards, their teachings, and their writing, so much so that Lollardy inspired their visions of Reformed theology.

§5

Lollardy to Theology

Presbyterianism and the work of 14th century theologian John Wyclif are rarely addressed in a single work. The two are assumed to be historically and philosophically insulated from one another. This understanding, though, is by no mean infallible. It is shown that the Lollards were in Scotland circulating their Wycliffite doctrines for decades leading up to the Reformation. In the interest of establishing continuity between Wyclif and the 17th century Presbyterians more directly, it is also appropriate to wonder at the extent to which John Calvin, the principal figure in the development of Calvinism, and John Knox, the conveyor of such beliefs to Scotland, would have seen exposure to Wycliffites and Lollards, their tracts, and their ideas. Calvin and Knox are the historical links to the doctrines associated with Wyclif. Of course, it is not necessary to discover direct contact of these reformist philosophies in the historical record; there is no doubt that Wyclif's work helped lay the foundations for each sect of Reformed Christianity that would emerge from the 16th century merely by challenging the existing doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. Still, it is useful to notice certain biographical facts regarding Calvin and Knox to help substantiate this central claim of continuity. Religious texts associated with Calvin suggest that he was familiar with the types of theological arguments associated with Wyclif and mirrored them in his own work. Knox would bring these ideas from

Geneva to Scotland. Thus the groundwork is laid to make a claim about Wyclif's influence over Scotland's post-Reformation faith, the Presbyterianism that remains in place today.

Born in France in 1509, Calvin was essentially forced to move to Switzerland in the face of a violent backlash against a public stint¹⁷ that rendered him an obvious target. Soon after he would go to Strasbourg, a known refuge for reformers. Finally he would fall into the ministry in Geneva, leading its church by 1541. His work there was extensive. He established a seminary to train and educate Reformers all over Europe, incidentally positioning Geneva as one of the greatest reformist print capitals. Over thirty printing houses published literature in various languages. There is no way to know precisely what was printed, but with such an investment in reform it is certainly possible that various Wycliffite texts, which continued to be popular in nearby Prague, could have been printed by those very institutions.

In fact, there is good reason for the Hussites, the reformers of Prague who have been shown to be so intimately connected with Lollardy in the previous chapter, to have been living and thriving in Geneva at the time. The 15th century was marked by five crusades against the Hussites in Bohemia. Hussite forces were represented by soldiers from Lithuania and Prague, as well as Czech population of the Kingdom of Bohemia itself. Thus the Hussites, and the Lollard texts they cherished, were not limited to Prague. Significantly, in October of 1431, the Council of Basel issued a formal invitation to the Hussites to take part in its deliberations over the banishment of heresies. The Hussites obliged, sending Hussites from all over Europe. There can be no certainty that Hussites remained in the area, though exactly a century later a statute passed in 1531 in Basel forbid the printing of anything that "could harm the city of Basel" (Basel

¹⁷ The Affair of the Placards, in which anti-Catholic posters appeared in public places in four major provincial cities of Paris overnight.

Printer's Statute).¹⁸ Clearly, heretical works were still circulating in the city. There is no reason to believe that these would not be of Hussite or Lollard inclination, and considering the Hussite investment in Wyclif's work, the distinction is potentially irrelevant. Lollards and Hussites were deeply invested in Wycliffite doctrine, circulating it both in Britain and on the Continent. Given that the Hussites were certainly in temporal and geographical proximity to Calvin's Geneva (to say nothing of the Lollards), it follows that Calvin was probably familiar, and maybe even intimately familiar, with their work. This is the theological climate that Knox would find when he finally arrived in Geneva in 1555.

Like Calvin, Knox was also forced to take political refuge in Geneva. A Scottish clergyman, theologian, and writer, he found himself in the thick of a number of controversies that threatened his life. And where else would such a reformist-minded person go but Geneva? There he met Calvin, who had effectively taken over the reformist movement there by that time (Foster, "Geneva Before Calvin"). Knox would return to Scotland firmly committed to Calvin's religious philosophy. If Calvin's work was influenced by Lollardy, then the communication between Knox and Calvin represents a relationship that could ultimately transmit threads of Lollard doctrine to Scotland.

When John Knox reached Scottish shores after his time in Geneva, he would have brought with him a copy of the by-then widely circulated Geneva Bible. Knox and Calvin were both involved in its creation, and while the challenges to the Vulgate differed in detail between the Geneva Bible and the Wyclif Bible — the former coming over a century later, around 1560 — "both translations...resemble each other in their questioning of the nature and authority of

¹⁸ Basel Printers' Statute of 28 October 1531, as laid out in the Basel "Statute Book".

translation in relation to the Vulgate original” (Su Fang Ng, 317). Both Bibles demonstrated a comfort with denying the unassailable sovereignty of the Vulgate which must be superseded by a vernacular text (Su Fang Ng, 317). Despite the clear differences between the two versions,¹⁹ one attributed to Wyclif and touted by the Lollards while the other is attributed primarily to Tyndale and was carried by a variety of reformers throughout the 16th-century, both clearly rose from the same impulse. It is perhaps significant, then, that the very first Bible printed in Scotland was a Geneva Bible, a Bible undeniably related to Wyclif’s original vernacular challenge to the Vulgate and worked on by Calvin. Murdoch Nisbet had translated the Wyclif New Testament into Scots around 1520, but his version remained in manuscript form until its publication by the Scottish Text Society in the early 20th century (Gribben, 75). The first Bible published in Scotland, then, was a printing of an edition of the Geneva Bible, published in England in 1562. The sales of the Geneva Bible were guaranteed by a law which stipulated that every household should possess a copy (Gribben, 75). A continuity becomes apparent not only in reformist text, but in the very text on which the foundation of Christianity is perched.²⁰

Knox wasted no time in seeking reform amidst an increasingly imminent break with the Papacy, amassing followers equally committed to Calvin’s theology. In 1560 the Parliament of Scotland agreed to religious reform, and in an effort to define the Reformed Faith appointed Knox the superintendent of a committee of five others, selected to prepare a new Confession of Faith. *The Confessions of Faith of the Kirk of Scotland* laid out precisely what Scotland’s

¹⁹ For a more complete discussion of these differences, refer to Su Fang Ng. "Translation, Interpretation, and Heresy: The Wycliffite Bible, Tyndale's Bible, and the Contested Origin." *Studies in Philology* 98.3 (2001): p. 318-320.

²⁰ Though outside of the scope of this project, a detailed examination of the textual differences between these different editions of the Bible would surely prove fruitful, and could perhaps serve to bolster this argument considerably.

Reformed Faith would look like. The document would remain the Confession of the Church of Scotland for nearly a century. Scotland had its new religion — but is there anything discernibly Wycliffite about it?

Such an inquiry is best answered by looking to perhaps the most famous text that Calvin ever penned: *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536). This text influenced Knox and Scotland's new Confession and enjoyed much readership in Scotland itself, where many people identified — and still identify — as Calvinists. The four volumes of Calvin's work present a rich opportunity for studies in theological continuity, but I will here treat only two concepts that have already featured centrally in my argument so far and are, I argue, discernibly Wycliffite: the importance of scripture and the particular epistemology regarding divine election that underpins epistemic anti-clericalism. These similarities were at the core of the foundation set for the tenets of the Presbyterian Kirk by Calvin himself, ferried over from the Continent by Knox. Aside from what I have argued was a prominent Lollard presence in Scotland, which must have exerted some influence over popular Scottish theology prior to the Reformation, it is possible to read Calvinism and, by extension, Scottish Presbyterianism as deeply influenced by Wyclif. The partitioning of these bodies of thought into distinct phenomena has only contributed to a more strained understanding of their relationships to one another.²¹ Where does one religious metaphysics end and another begin? The divisions set in place are not entirely arbitrary, but they can be misleading. At least in this instance, it is perhaps more useful to take a broader view of the philosophies that anticipated and arose from the Reformation.

²¹ J. Patrick Hornbeck's *What is a Lollard?: Dissent and belief in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 2010) is one piece of more recent scholarship that demonstrates an increasing awareness of the limitations of scholarly nomenclature which categorizes religious movements unhelpfully as static and confined systems of belief.

Like Wyclif, Calvin emphasizes the importance of scripture and the origins of its authority as separate from the Church. “God bestows the actual knowledge of himself upon us only in the Scriptures,” Calvin writes (Calvin, 69). This claim alone is somewhat insignificant — many reformers emphasized a turn to the Bible itself as a means of defining the true faith. Beyond that, though, is the question of scriptural authority. While the Church is itself grounded on scripture, scripture “has its authority from God, not from the church” (Calvin, 74). Calvin never goes so far as to explicitly demand that scripture be accessible to all in a tongue with which they are comfortable. Instead, he warns that “sacrilegious men, wishing to impose an unbridled tyranny under the cover of the church, do not care with what absurdities they ensnare themselves and others, provided they can force this one idea upon the simple-minded: that the church has authority in all things” (Calvin, 75). The caution implies that scripture ought to be read and interpreted by all those of the faith so as to avoid the influence of clerical contamination.²² As for Wyclif, the word of the clergy is tainted by materialism.

What is even more distinctly Wycliffite is his attitudes regarding divine election. On human ability to be certain about elected status, Calvin proffers that “when mere man attempts to break into the inner recesses of divine wisdom...in order to find out what decision has been made concerning himself at God’s judgement seat...he casts himself into the depths of a bottomless whirlpool to be swallowed up” (Calvin, 968). Any man who “tries by his own strength to rise to the height of divine wisdom,” thereby ascertaining personal election, will meet punishment (Calvin, 969). Instead, “election is to be understood and recognized in Christ alone”

²² Calvin was not alone among the reformers in denouncing the authority of clerics as tainted by materialism, thereby heralding scripture as the ultimate authority. Still, to the extent that others were drawn to the same argument, I would simply propose that they drew inspiration from the same widely-read source: Wyclif.

(Calvin, 970). The individual has no business meddling in the certainty of election, as it is futile and even dangerous.

As for Wyclif, Calvin must then negotiate the impossibility of ascertaining elected status with the presence of the clergy. Calvin was no friend of the clergy; in a letter to Roussel, a friend of his, Calvin accuses the clergy of pillaging, extortion, plundering, piracy, and theft (Eire, 592). The “violent and coercive extortions” of the Catholic clergy abhorred Calvin, as it did the other reformers (Eire, 592). Importantly, Calvin’s criticisms are not merely waged against individual clerics falling short of their duties. Instead, he is attacking the “ideology of monasticism” as a whole (Steinmetz, 605). Seeing as it can never be clear who is elected by divine authority, the priesthood should be wrested from the current clerical hierarchy and placed in more worthy hands. In line with that principle, Calvin felt that the priesthood “belongs universally to all of Christ’s faithful, not just to the ordained clergy,” who had proven themselves unworthy (Eire, 593). In the absence of being able to prove who is elect, the status quo clerical structure collapses, thereby compelling each individual person of the faith to be responsible for the Bible and to defend it.

To be sure, the four volumes of *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and Calvin’s private correspondences compose a highly complex theology which cannot be done justice in such a small space. However, to the extent that the information offered paints a reasonable, abridged look at a couple details of Calvin’s theology, the parallels to Wyclif’s commitment to scripture and his epistemic anti-clericalism are convincing. For Calvin, scripture is the only true authority on God’s word, and its truth combats the malintentions of the sacrilegious, it is impossible to know one’s election, and the impossibility of such renders a wider take on the priesthood that

implies a distrust of the ordained clergy and emphasizes the active role of the pious individual in the faith. These are fundamentally Wycliffite themes.

These features of Calvin's theology help demonstrate the repetition of the ideas with which Wyclif was interested. Two more concrete clues from the 17th century emphasize the continuing importance of Wyclif and the Lollards in the Presbyterian tradition. In response to the praise that a prominent English historian gave to Wyclif and Hus, John Menzies, a Scottish Presbyterian, writes in 1680 that whatever their religious errors, "Yet Mr. Fox avouches them to be Faithful Martyrs of Jesus Christ, which he could not have done, if he had not looked on them as agreeing with us in Fundamentals" (Menzies, 185). That is, Menzies recognizes two crucial affinities. The first is between Wyclif and Hus, Hus having initiated a movement inspired by Wyclif that would perhaps make it to Geneva and the reformers therein, suggesting one way in which Calvin may have been familiar with Wyclif's work. The second is between both of those great reformers and 17th century Presbyterians, perhaps confirming the former suspicion. Seven years later, Alexander Shields makes a striking claim: "Christes Priestly Office...was transmitted from the *Culdees*²³ to the *Lollards*, And by them handed down to the Instruments of Reformation, in the following Period" (Shields, 7). Shields refers to the practice of rejecting episcopacy, situating the Lollards in a proto-Presbyterian tradition. He asserts an important sense of continuity between the Lollards and the Presbyterians, recognizing the relevance of Lollard doctrine in his own time.

Yet, the question of episcopacy hardly represents this continuity in its entirety. How might it be teased out of the historical record? In a time of relatively dwindling publication of religious

²³ Early medieval holy men who practiced their religion in cells and rejected episcopacy.

tracts, more contemporary novels are next used to demonstrate the prominence of the very debates that Wyclif confronted head-on throughout centuries of Scottish literary tradition.

Wyclif and The Scottish Literary Canon

In 1552, Sir David Lyndsay's "A Satire of the Three Estates" was performed for the first time in Fife, Scotland. Much like *The Canterbury Tales*, Lyndsay's morality play satirised social structures on which the public was casting an increasingly wary eye. The clergy bears the brunt of the strongest criticism, followed by the lords and burgh representatives, social classes that found themselves in almost as little favor as the strained Church powers. Within the next decade the kirks of Scotland saw their altars smashed, their icons and relics demolished, and their walls brought to a neutral monochrome. An elaborate, bloody, and expensive series of events married Scotland to Protestantism and Presbyterianism. Concerned with the "unspiritual tenor of the land," the Kirk set about an "ambitious programme of catechism to educate the population in the rudiments of the Reformed faith" (Gribben, 76). The Kirk initially adopted the catechism prepared by Calvin (Gribben, 76). Those who remained committed to Calvin's beliefs, as expounded in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and elsewhere, were appropriately deemed Calvinists. With the continuation of Roman Catholicism and the other varieties of Reformed Christianity, literature was rendered an essential forum for theological debate in Scotland, just as it had been in Chaucer's England.

Calvinism has exercised tremendous influence over Scottish literature since the 16th century. Historians have referred to Calvinism as a true "religion of the people" (Gribben, 65). Indeed, Calvinism forms the "foundation" of Scottish identity, and Scottish literature reflects just that (Craig, 37). The religious influence is obvious in many texts. Nevertheless, the Scottish

literary canon has been “forged in a climate deliberately opposed to the theological ideas” of Calvinism which “repeatedly appear at its heart” (Gribben, 65). In fact, it has been accepted by commentators almost without question that the Reformation had a deeply negative effect on the literary endeavours of Scotland. A handful of critics, Dunnigan and Gribben among them, call for a rethinking of the scholarly reception of the literary cultures of the Scottish Reformation, which they feel has deliberately rejected the prominence of Calvinism in Scottish literature.²⁴ This “canon-shaping rejection of Scottish Calvinism has not merely been to the detriment of theological texts” which are subsequently ignored, but also represents a “very self-conscious attempt by some literary scholars to construct the criteria of an 'essential' literary Scottishness” (Gribben, 65). A new consensus is emerging in historical and literary studies regards the Reformation as a more positive influence on Scottish literature, and even one that led to exciting new developments in Scottish literary culture.²⁵

The debate over what constitutes truly “Scottish” literature is ongoing. Some scholars identify modes such as a democratic viewpoint, unpretentious writing, and patriotic themes, among others, as characteristic features of Scottish literature that define the Scottish literary canon. This “myth of essentialism,” or the commitment to literary traits that are arbitrarily identified as those which are essentially Scottish, is charged with a history of theological dispute and the imposition of English literary paradigms (Gribben, 65). Furthermore, the rejection of theological threads in Scottish texts is often justified on the basis of an enlightened modernity (Gribben, 67). Calvinism has been exiled from the Scottish canon for too long. It is time to recognize that Calvinist literature is not only part of the Scottish literary canon, but that

²⁴ Dunnigan, Sarah. Review of T. van Heijnsbergen and N. Royan, *Literature, Letters and the Canonical in Early Modern Scotland* (East Linton, 2002): *Scottish Studies Review*, 4/2 (2003), 14. Print.

²⁵ Gribben and Mullan’s *Literature and the Scottish Reformation* (2009) has posited this most strongly.

Calvinism acts as a dominant thematic mode in post-Reformation to contemporary Scottish writing.

The reinvention of the Scottish literary canon as a deeply theological body of literature has only begun to be considered relatively recently. The interest in Knox and what is sometimes referred to as his canon — that is, the canon initiated by Scotland’s turn toward Calvinism— is largely restricted to historians and politicians, even though it is literary critics who, as Farrow puts it, “can lay fair claim to the largest part of Knox's canon” (Gribben, 71). It is not within the scope of this paper to consider in-depth the prominence of Calvinism in literature *per se*, but rather to focus on two texts that are deeply interested in Calvinism and the very debates that Wyclif generated centuries before. For practical reasons, a novel from between the Reformation and today is explored, followed by a novel of the last decade. Essentially, we find Wyclif’s epistemological concerns regarding religious authority and certainty surface time and again. Weary of making a claim of direct influence, the most I can do is put forth clear instances of Wyclif’s ideas in these texts and allow and allow the reader to make their own judgements as to their true derivations. The arguments made in the following pages serve to emphasize the lingering importance of Wyclif’s ideas in the theological fiction conceived within a culture wedded to Calvin’s theology.

Hogg’s *Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (hereinafter *Confessions*) did not enjoy a positive reception after its 1824 Publication. Some suggest that it was simply “too perverse for nineteenth-century tastes” (Hogg, Introduction). Yet, “after more than a century of neglect,” Hogg’s novel has seen a surge in popularity (Carruthers, 2). If any text adheres to the long Scottish literary tradition of a “creative exploitation of the supernatural,” it is *Confessions*

(Macdonald, 335). Craig has documented the way in which Scottish fiction after the republication of *Confessions* rediscovered something of the old Calvinist outlook of Scotland by again noticing the world as a fearful and fallen place (Craig, 492). Hogg does indeed draw much influence from Calvin's theology. In Hogg's novel, Robert Wringhim is declared a member of the elect by his fanatical Reverend father. A close relationship with Gil-Martin, the devil character, leads him to committing a series of murders in the name of purging the Church — a responsibility that is his, Gil-martin convinces him, because of his morally exempt status as a member of the elect. At first glance it is deeply critical of the concept of predestination, positioning its promise as a catalyst. On a deeper level, though, Hogg asks the reader to evaluate the validity of divine election and the ensuing moral responsibility. Ultimately, it is a demonstration that the truly elect should be expected to bear good works.

Robertson's *The Confessions of Gideon Mack* (hereinafter *Gideon Mack*) concerns itself, like the work of Chaucer, with the most lasting theme of Wyclif's work. It is, more than anything else, an interrogation of the legitimacy of ecclesiastical authority. The devil appears before an atheist pastor, Gideon. When his retelling of the encounter is met with doubt and ostracization, Robertson questions the validity of religious authority and the now waning inclination to receive new religious truth. In Hogg, Robert is persuaded to evil by the devil, Gil-Martin, thinking he will go to heaven regardless because he is one of the elect. Robertson reverses this, as Gideon makes no efforts to go to heaven because he does not believe in it. Gideon emerges from his encounter with the devil with uncertainty as to his status as Christ-like or Satan-like. He believes entirely in his own narrative of the devil encounter, and because the novel is written in the first person, the audience is inclined to as well. Still, his conviction destroys his community, and the

suspicious initials of the protagonist, which mirror those of Hogg's Gil-Martin, suggests he seeks nothing but trouble. Finally, in both *Confessions* and *Gideon Mack*, the authors ask: who can discern reality from illusion, and where can true religious authority be found? What does it mean to attain religious salvation, and is it possible to know when one has? Written approximately 500 and 700 years after Wyclif, 300 and 500 years after the Reformation, respectively, these texts exemplify the philosophical continuity in between Wyclif and the Scottish/Calvinist literary tradition. They address questions of religious authority with specific attention to Wyclif's brand of epistemic anti-clericalism and, like Lollard writings, encourage readers "to work actively to live a virtuous life, instead of thinking their actions predestined" (Craun), 1093.

Confessions is explicitly concerned with the possibility of knowing one's elected status and the ensuing moral logic. The bulk of Robert Wringhim's private memoir, which in turn makes up the majority of *Confessions*, begins at the moment he is made aware of his membership to the "society of the *just made perfect*" (Hogg, 88). The process by which he comes to this knowledge is unabashedly parodied by Hogg. Robert is welcomed as a member of the elect one morning as he enters a room in his home where his father and mother lay waiting. Bewildered more than anything else, Robert can "make no answer save by looks of surprise" (Hogg, 88). His father explains how he had "wrestled with God" for "days and years" but had "at last prevailed, and had now gained the long and earnestly desired assurance of [Robert's] acceptance with the Almighty" (Hogg, 88). Reverend Wringhim warns his son with a tone of foreboding: no transgression, not any future act of Robert, can alter the decree, though he should remain "strong and steadfast in the truth...against sin, and sinful men" (Hogg, 88). The warning is a seemingly trivial addition to the grandeur of his prior celebrations of Robert's new status.

It is then that Gil-Martin first appears to Robert. Gil-Martin is quick to report his agreement with Robert on the concept of election. “Aye,” Robert confirms, “what would signify all else that he believed, if he did not believe in that?” (Hogg, 90). The two become close, and the question of atonement quickly becomes central to their discussions. Robert poses the trouble of sins so great that they might convince “the Almighty [to] throw off the very elect” (Hogg, 96). Gil-Martin is unphased, convincing him beyond a doubt for the first time out of many that election is absolute and unalterable. When Robert expresses his problem with a member of the local religious community, Gil-Martin’s answer sets the stage for the rest of the novel: murder. Robert is easily convinced to participate in the murder of Mr. Blanchard, an act, as they see it, of cleansing.

As Hogg’s novel comes to a close, Robert comes across Gil-Martin for the last time that the reader is privy to. Robert, now worn down and psychologically damaged from his time on the run for his crimes, has slowly come to understand the horror that his life has become. Whereas earlier in the novel he was willing to attribute his lack of guilt to his divine election, he now laments that “it was in vain that I reasoned on the sinfulness of the deed, and on its damning nature; [Gil-Martin] made me condemn myself out of my own mouth, by allowing the absolute nature of justifying grace, and the impossibility of the elect ever falling from the faith...” (Hogg, 174). Finally Robert comes to terms with his earlier mistakes. Robert now understands that, even if we could know who is elect, that knowledge should not bear on the decisions we make about how we understand our own behavior and that of others. Notice that the grace to which Robert refers is not “divine” or “saving,” but “justifying”. In the context of the novel, which revolves around the justification of murders, the term seems doubly negative; first in that it lacks its

normal positive descriptors, and second, that it has failed to justify any desirable behavior and instead acted as the rationale for brutal crimes. Perhaps, even if we *could* know who is elect, we still ought to ignore that possibility, as its very unknowable-ness serves to render faith and a commitment to scripture all the more important.

Just as the notion that one can know who is elect is earlier parodied by Reverend Wringhim's overblown celebration of Robert's ascension into divine grace, some of Robert's final words are: 'What I now am, the Almighty knows!' (Hogg, 178). Robert now admits that he himself cannot ascertain whether or not he has been granted salvation. Following this outburst he turns to a rare confession of faith, concluding the journal entry with an "amen" (Hogg, 178). Now understanding the value of behaved piety, Robert gives in to prayer.

In *Confessions* are two issues central to Wyclif's writing: first, the impossibility of ascertaining one's status as elect, and second, the inextricable link between election and moral behavior, or good works. Hogg, echoing Wyclif's idea that knowledge of election is unavailable to human faculties, emphasizes Reverend Wringhim's fringe convictions by allowing him to access the "truth" of Robert's election. Reverend Wringhim continues to act throughout the novel as a fanatic and sensationalist. As a parody of the intensely pious, he allows the reader to come to understand how problematic it is that election be an event communicated to human subjects by divine authority. Of course, as a member of the clergy himself, Hogg raises a larger objection to the notion that religious truth is best mediated through human religious 'authority'.

That very theme is central to *Gideon Mack*. Robertson's novel, far more recent than *Confessions*, is nevertheless undeniably influenced by Hogg's work; both texts exhibit a similar frame narrative with a character who finds a story personally written by a man driven to possible

insanity and ultimate disappearance. The two novels are based on a double timeframe in which part of the story takes place in the past, while part takes place in the present. Robertson also references Gil-Martin, as addressed below. Paying conscious homage to Hogg's novel, Gideon is born to a stern minister with a curiosity for religious truth. He concludes in primary school that God does not exist. He maintains an "air of piety" at home, but in truth "had abandoned [his] faith" (Robertson, 87). In the process of being prepared for his first Communion by his father, Gideon chances up a book in his study shelf: it is a book about elves, fauns, and fairies, with a note tucked inside signed "G.M.," the initials of Gideon and Gil-Martin. (Gideon's initials are significant a second time as they make him eligible for additional funds from the George Mylne Foundation bursary to study Divinity, a fund with significant but bizarre requirements. Is it the devil himself that desires Gideon a member of the clergy?) The book that Gideon finds, a reminder of superstitions and "other worlds," is the first event in the novel that places superstition and religion in direct conversation (Robertson, 89). When Gideon leaves for University of Edinburgh with the intent of studying English Literature, he thinks little of the possibility that he would follow in his father's footsteps.

Gideon does eventually settle on Divinity in hopes of becoming an "imposter" minister with no religious faith at all (Robertson, 125). "It's like Pascal," Gideon says, referencing the famous wager, "only when you toss the coin and call *heads* you know that's how it's going to land" (Robertson, 133). By this he means that he outwardly expresses piety despite certainty of God's non-existence, an idea that gives him great comfort. After a number of twists, Gideon finds himself in a small cave deep inside Black Jaws, a cavernous gulf of great depth through which roars a massive river. He had fallen in while rescuing a friend's dog. Living out an old

Scottish folk story entitled “The Legend of the Black Jaws,” Gideon meets the devil, who had plucked him from the rushing waters and tucked him away in his hidden cave. At least, he reports that he met the devil. Robertson, having originally begun the novel in the third person, opted instead for the first in order to introduce the possibility of Gideon as an unreliable narrator (Robertson, 10/7/15).

Gideon’s credibility is a matter of great importance to the novel’s ultimate conclusions about faith and truth. In a final act of bravado Gideon confesses to his congregation that he met the devil and, denying accusations of insanity, he recounts his ultimate conclusion from the episode: “we had all sinned...there was no redemption, no salvation, no system of debts and payments. But there *was* another life. There was more to come” (Robertson, 342). What Gideon has received is some sort of religious truth. As a minister, he feels compelled to share the information with his congregation. Yet he is not received well. Encounters with the devil may have been common centuries before, but no longer. The whole world is no longer primed to receive religious truth, though the reader might doubt the validity of that truth. Perhaps religion cannot function as a received truth at all.

A single text serves as a backdrop to the entirety of *Gideon Mack*: “The Legend of Black Jaws.” It is in some way like scripture, handed down through the generations and read popularly. Gideon lives out the legend in some ways, meeting the devil in Black Jaws and allowing him command over his psyche. Did Gideon invent the devil episode based on that legend? As the devil himself says of “The Legend of Black Jaws”: “it’s a legend. It’s a metaphor.” (Robertson, 292). Maybe Gideon’s own narrative is mere metaphor as well. Even if that is the case, has he been truthful to his congregation? That is, if he thinks he met the devil, did he? What duty does a

minister have to convey truth to his congregation, and does that responsibility change based on the quality of that truth? Gideon is first an atheist member of the clergy, but after encountering the devil he does take on some kind of faith. It is possible to have faith in the wrong thing, or an evil thing, Robertson suggests. Who can be qualified to properly convey religious truth? Not the minister.

Significantly, “The Legend of the Black Jaws,” a text that appears to exert great influence over the trajectory of the entire novel, is in Scots. Just as pre-Wyclif versions of the Bible hid their meaning behind a language reserved for academics and theologians, “The Legend of the Black Jaws” is only revived and then realized by Gideon, a Scottish minister himself. Scots, unlike Latin, is itself a vernacular, but “The Legend of Black Jaws” is, if not an unreadable text, at least an unread one, not reserved for academics and theologians but apparently “reserved” in some way for Gideon, a cleric, who seems destined to live out its story. While the vernacular Bible was an attempt to reinvent who it is that can mediate God’s word, Gideon’s “experience” of the supernatural peculiarities of “The Legend of the Black Jaws” and the ensuing uncertainty turns the debate on its head. No longer is the truth of one arcane text assumed and then its dissemination approached as a matter of religious importance. Rather, the truth or reality of “The Legend of the Black Jaws” is widely denied and perhaps even parodied in a local art show, in which a model of Gideon in his study at the manse depicts him gazing out his window and into the depths of Black Jaws. It is *prima facie* a call for absolute transparency, but even that proves detrimental to Gideon and his community. Gideon has faith, but a faith that drives him not to good but to evil works. Does that qualify as religious faith at all? The collective outrage in Monismaskit suggests not.

Thus Gideon, like Chaucer's Pardoner, has faith, yet lacks the essential element of good works. Instead of knowing that he is elect, he is convinced that he is not elect, or that election itself is impossible. This status renders him an impossible candidate for the clergy, as he is especially susceptible to false or non-traditional beliefs. And even if he is not elect in the orthodox sense, the devil's apparent interest in him does mark him out as special — or elect — in some way. Of course, it is that very belief that he has achieved such election that leads to his eventual ostracization and downfall. Taking a move from Chaucer, Robertson cleverly hedges his bet on this point. The first interpretation is that Gideon *did* meet the devil, but his election leads to negative circumstances because of his bad behavior, in which case elected status is ascertainable but necessitates good works, or the dismissal of the clerical worldlines of which Wyclif was such a critic, to generate the desired outcome of personal salvation and the spread of God's true word. The second interpretation is that Gideon does not *really* meet the devil, but the sense of election he gets and the associated consequences from thinking that he did is a caution against or refusal of the notion that elected status can be known by humans at all. Both readings, equally plausible, yield an understanding of election and religious authority similar to *Confessions*; that the knowledge of election is either practically useless in that it must maintain no bearing on temporal behavior or practically detrimental in that it exerts a negative influence on those who "know" that they have attained eternal salvation.

These conclusions should seem familiar. Through *Confessions* and *Gideon Mack*, one text from between the present day and the Reformation and the other from within the last decade, a certain continuity becomes apparent. The same questions and answers arise again and again. Do good works exist alongside faith or manifest as faith such that election entails moral

behavior? Is it possible to have human religious authority, and can they possibly be a source of truth? Wyclif answered these questions, helping to inspire a revolution which in turn birthed a religious movement fascinated by those same issues; a literary movement that gave way to a literary tradition steeped in a history of philosophical debate. This is the theological literature of early modern Scotland which generated an “immense cultural authority” (Gribben, 81). The conflict in these texts are all particularly Calvinist, and thus particularly Scottish. The very idea of opposition rife in each — belief and disbelief, authority and doubt, piety and criminality — are all related to the Caledonian antisyzygy, or the notion that Scottish literature includes “a reflection of the contrasts which the Scot shows at every turn,” the dueling polarities of “political and ecclesiastical history” (Smith, 11). In short, the concept of binary opposition within a single entity. By doing so, Scottish literature carries out a unique dialogue with a past that is itself marked by extreme opposition between competing theologies. And while it would take a wider survey to say so with greater authority, it seems that at least two prominent Scottish texts defer definitively to the ideas of Wyclif and Calvin.

The Scottish Reformation birthed a new literary movement in Scotland. Up until today, its literature has been deeply invested in Calvinist theology, itself an echo of Wyclif’s profoundly influential work. It is no longer justifiable to exclude theology from the understanding of Scottish literature, which is essentially theological. The Reformation was not a negative influence on Scottish literature, but *the* defining moment of what we can now understand as Scottish literature today. This critical intervention represents a dramatic departure from the ways in which we tend to understand English literature. James Woods’ *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief*, no doubt with the English novel in mind, asserts that the

modern novel is the “enemy of superstition, the slayer of religions, the scrutineer of falsity” (Singh, 1). When approaching Scottish literature, though, I propose an alternative perspective: the modern Scottish novel is the result of hundreds of years of theological dispute. It is not secular at all, but interested in the continuation of Wyclif’s and Calvin’s study of the perfection of human faith.

§7

A Brief Conclusion

Such a wide swath of history, philosophy, and literature has been covered that it is now useful to take a brief tour through the claims I have made throughout this paper. I began by positing the importance of Wyclif and his radical contributions to reformist theologies. These included his work on clerical authority, election and salvation, scripture, and the vernacular. I then attempted to situate Wyclif within a wider anti-clerical tradition by means of a critical reading of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. I showed that Chaucer was directly inspired by Wyclif and his followers, which helps demonstrate how widespread Wyclif's work was and how it manifested in popular literature at the time. A look at other texts helped make this point. I then sought to defend the claim that Wyclif's work and his followers were present all over Europe before the Reformation, and in particular was present in two critical places: in Scotland itself to a great extent, and in Geneva, where Calvin and Knox worked and studied. These two figureheads of the Scottish Reformation played arguably the largest part in establishing the new Reformed faith of Scotland in the 17th century. Finally, I explored two prominent Scottish texts, one from between the Scottish Reformation and today and another published just years ago. I highlighted Wycliffite themes in these works, revealing the prominence of the very same debates with which Wyclif grappled in Calvinist texts. In doing so I hoped to defend the reinstallation of theology into Scottish literary studies.

Herein is elucidated a continuity that extends for centuries on either side of the Reformation, one that has left its mark on theology, philosophy, literature, and arguably the whole of Scottish culture. Beyond its critical intervention in Scottish literary studies, this project demands that Wyclif be taken seriously as not just a theologian, but as a philosopher and cultural figurehead. More generally, it rebels against the customary division of labor in academic circles, urging instead that the reader adopt a broader view of historicism so as to properly contextualize and appreciate timeless stories. Finally, for all of its scope, it represents merely the smallest sliver of a rich intellectual lineage that ought to be valued for what is is: not individualized events and cultural products, but a great genealogy of human action and reaction. In conceding to the conclusions throughout this essay, or at least in entertaining them as a distinct possibility, the reader has already become a participant in this genealogy. Its study is its realization.

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