

KANTIK GHOSH

The Wycliffite Heresy



Authority and the
Interpretation of Texts

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Authority and the Interpretation of Texts

Kantik Ghosh argues that one of the main reasons for Lollardy's sensational resonance for its times, and for its immediate posterity, was its exposure of fundamental problems in late medieval academic engagement with the Bible, its authority and its polemical uses. Examining Latin and English sources, Ghosh shows how the same debates over biblical hermeneutics and associated methodologies were from the 1380s onwards conducted both within and outside the traditional university framework, and how, by eliding boundaries between Latinate biblical speculation and vernacular religiosity, Lollardy changed the cultural and political positioning of both. Covering a wide range of texts – scholastic and extramural, in Latin and in English, written over half a century from Wyclif to Thomas Netter – Ghosh concludes that by the first decades of the fifteenth century Lollardy had partly won the day. Whatever its fate as a religious movement, it had successfully changed the intellectual landscape of England.

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Interpretation of Texts

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KANTIK GHOSH

Lincoln College, Oxford



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published in printed format 2001

ISBN 0-511-02909-8 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN 0-521-80720-4 hardback

To Anouk and Ingmar, for inspiration

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Acknowledgements

My first debt of gratitude must be twin: to my doctoral supervisor at Cambridge, Richard Beadle, for his advice, guidance and encouragement, and to Anne Hudson, for her immense generosity with her time and expertise, and her abiding patience with my numberless importunities. It is an equal pleasure to thank those who, over the years, have helped with criticisms, suggestions, references or general encouragement: in particular I must mention Helen Cooper, Douglas Gray, Sally Mapstone, Suzanne Reynolds, Michael Sargent, Wendy Scase and Fiona Somerset. Rita Copeland, Eamon Duffy, Alastair Minnis, James Simpson and an anonymous reader for Cambridge University Press have been invaluable commentators: to them I remain deeply indebted. Jeremy Catto and Maarten Hoenen kindly read and commented on Chapter 1, and Sir Anthony Kenny generously made time to discuss aspects of Wyclif's thought amidst many pressing demands. The munificent award of a post-doctoral fellowship from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Sciences enabled a crucial visit to Tokyo to examine manuscripts in Japanese collections. Toshiyuki Takamiya kindly provided access to relevant manuscripts in his personal collection, for which I remain very grateful. Nigel Wilson generously clarified some of the knottier points of scholastic Latin, while Andreas Janousch did the same for the finer points of academic German; I am much indebted to them for sparing the time from their own research. My fellow English tutors at Lincoln College, Oxford, Stephen Gill and Peter McCullough, have been unfailingly supportive: it is a pleasure to acknowledge their kindness and understanding. I must also thank Oxford University Press and the Editorial Board of *Poetica* for granting permission to reprint sections from two articles: 'Eliding the Interpreter: John Wyclif and

Acknowledgements

Scriptural 'Truth', which appeared in *New Medieval Literatures* 2 (1998), and 'Contingency and the Christian Faith: William Woodford's Anti-Wycliffite Hermeneutics', which appeared in *Poetica* 49 (1998). I am grateful to the various libraries whose manuscripts collections I have consulted; particular thanks must go to the staff of Duke Humfrey's in the Bodleian and of the Manuscripts Room in Cambridge University Library. Warm thanks are also given to the authorities of the Prague National Library for permission to use the photograph of one of the manuscripts in their collection on the cover. Finally, it is an especial pleasure to be able to thank St John's College and Jesus College, Cambridge, and Lincoln College, Oxford, for their many and varied generousities; this book could not have been written without their financial and other support.

Abbreviations

<i>AHDLMA</i>	<i>Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge</i>
BGPTM	Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters
<i>BRUO</i>	A. B. Emden, <i>A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to AD 1500</i> , 3 vols. (Oxford, 1957–9)
<i>CCCM</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum (Continuatio Mediaevalis)</i>
CIVICIMA	Comité International du vocabulaire des institutions et de la communication intellectuelles au moyen âge
<i>CHLGEMP</i>	<i>The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy</i> , ed. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, 1967)
<i>CHLMP</i>	<i>The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy</i> , ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge, 1982)
<i>HLW</i>	Richard Sharpe, <i>A Handlist of the Latin Writers of Great Britain and Ireland before 1540</i> (Turnhout, 1997)
<i>MED</i>	<i>The Middle English Dictionary</i> (Ann Arbor, MI, 1954–)
<i>MLD</i>	<i>Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources</i> (Oxford, 1975–)
MM	Miscellanea Mediaevalia (Berlin, 1962–)
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne
<i>RTAM</i>	<i>Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale</i>
SCH	Studies in Church History
<i>WBK</i>	G. A. Benrath, <i>Wyclifs Bibelkommentar</i> (Berlin, 1966)

Introduction

‘Non est finis potencie sic glosantis’ (‘There is no end to the power of glossing so’), says John Wyclif disapprovingly in his *De Apostasia* of a particular interpretation of a biblical passage relating to the Eucharist.¹ His statement invokes the twin counters of the following study: ‘power’ and ‘glossing’, ‘authority’ and ‘interpretation’. The ‘text’ to be glossed or interpreted is of course the Bible. Wyclif, and the heresy which arose from his dissident thought, placed the notion of an unglossed, indeed *deglossed* biblical text at the centre of both academic and popular politics.² Such a gesture both was premised on and implied various startling radicalisms. Preeminently, it involved the notion of reclamation: the Bible had to be reclaimed from the discourse of glossing. For Wyclif, this primarily signified a reclamation from contemporary academia and Church and the hermeneutic practices institutionalised therein. Equally importantly, such a reclamation would only be the prelude to the liberation of the deglossed text into discourses other than those traditionally empowered to deal with the Bible, discourses outside the institutionally demarcated ones of Church and University with their attendant mechanisms of control and security. Such a liberation is simultaneously also a reclamation: this was what Christianity had been like ‘originally’, the *fides antiqua scripture* referred to in *De Apostasia*.³

Indeed, the three elements I have just pointed to are central to the thought of Wyclif and his later followers: a Bible liberated from a corrupt academia and its associated intellectual practices, as well as its perceived values and norms; a Bible self-consciously made accessible to a readership considered – at least theoretically – to be ‘simple’ and unlearned; the above processes seen as culminating in, indeed constituting, a return to the lost truths of Christ, of the apostles, and of the *ecclesia*

primitiva. Wyclif's dissidence therefore has its roots in his alienation from what he perceived to be the contemporary academic world, and the place of the Bible in it, and as a result, is in its nature not merely theological, but also methodological. The hermeneutics arising out of his methodological revisionism forms in its turn the basis for a radical politics and ecclesiology, and accounts for the dense, if often confused and self-contradictory, intellectual content of what became a popular heresy.

However, though Wyclif rebelled against the interpretative practices that he felt characterised the academic milieu of his times, he remained sufficiently embedded within that milieu to invoke its hermeneutic categories and use its intellectual tools. Indeed, his rebellion is not predicated on a simple and facile rejection of the premisses and the superstructures of contemporary academic study of the Bible. What he instead attempts is a transformation, a reclamation of even academia from its present corrupt state into what it ideally should be: a devoted handmaiden serving the Word. As a result, Wyclif's thought involves major redefinitions of inherited intellectual discourses; these, he feels, must be realigned in correct ways. Lollardy is therefore not just an anti-intellectual heresy advocating a fundamentalist return to the Bible, though anti-intellectualism does form one of its major facets; it is equally an *intellectual* heresy struggling to come to terms with some of the most crucial late-medieval issues relating to the place of the intellect in the domain of faith,⁴ issues most problematically highlighted in the context of the logical study of God.⁵

One therefore recognises in the often exhilarating novelties of Wyclif's thought, and of that of his followers, some conceptual polarities of the most venerable Christian pedigree: reason and authority, *scientia* and *sapientia*, Aristotle and Augustine, Scripture and Tradition, philosophy and theology, logic and rhetoric, learning and revelation. These binaries come to the surface recurrently, and are subjected, in Lollard writings, to almost ceaseless redefinitions and reconfigurations in response to polemical and philosophical exigencies. In the works of those arguing against Lollardy – and these are given equal attention in the pages that follow – the reconfigurations are undertaken preeminently to confront the unprecedented Lollard achievement of converting into popular vernacular currency ideas traditionally confined to an academic Latinate mint.⁶ It is in such reconfigurations and in the context – intellectual, political, ecclesiological – underlying them that much of the

interest of the Wycliffite heresy lies. The following study accordingly finds its focus in a primarily synchronic vision of political and intellectual interaction, in which the importance of texts and ideas lies more in their engagement with one another, than in their individual diachronic histories. Indeed, it is one of my major contentions that the works produced in and around the Lollard heresy can be most illuminatingly studied when one gives conceptual centrality to the ongoing dialogue in which they participate. Instead of tracing intellectual genealogies – which in any case must necessarily remain dubious, given the state of our present knowledge of fourteenth-century hermeneutics after Ockham and before Wyclif – I have traced the outlines of a dialogue and its underlying ideological motivations. A history of textual interpretation cannot be isolated from a history of interpreters and their extra-textual aims, and the institutional and cultural contexts within which they operate.

For the purposes of a study of the Lollard heresy in its hermeneutic aspects, the central institutional context is provided by medieval academia in general, and more specifically, by Oxford University and its intellectual practices. One must of course begin with an acknowledgement of the immense diversity – in terms both of contents and of methodologies – of what we describe as late scholasticism, and of the consequent danger of hasty if attractive generalisations. Phillipe Buc has recently argued for an awareness of the polysemy of medieval clerical discourse, and its internal tensions and contradictions: ‘La polysémie des éléments du discours clérical rend possible une propagande politique présentant à chacun ce qu’il voulait entendre . . . Fonction d’un réel manque d’unanimité, la polysémie pouvait toujours se résoudre en ses éléments affrontés’ (‘The polysemy of the elements of clerical discourse made possible political propaganda allowing each to think what he wished . . . The effect of a genuine absence of unanimity, such polysemy could always resolve itself into its conflicting elements’).⁷ Buc also argues against the notion of a monolithic clerical discourse providing absolutist ideological control.⁸ The Lollard heresy needs to be placed against such a background of richly conflicting discursive traditions, as one of its primary polemical – one might even say existential – emphases was directed precisely against this perceived conflictual nature of contemporary academia. Indeed, it is a perception of fragmentation and ideological conflict which forms the core of Lollardy’s own generalising

vision of the medieval university and its discursive practices. The implications of such fragmentation and conflict for the study and, more importantly, for the *uses* of the Bible, are felt to be profoundly negative and constitutive of an effective eclipse of all that the Word of God should stand for. It is therefore no surprise that one of the major thrusts of Lollard anti-academic polemic should be directed against those medieval intellectual traditions which are inseparable from conflict: preeminently, those relating to dialectic, rhetoric and the associated uses of the Bible.

Dialectic had always been a problematic methodology. St Augustine saw in it 'une arme victorieuse contre toutes les cavillations des hérétiques' ('a victorious weapon against all heretical sophistries'), but it turned out to be a two-edged weapon, and as early as the eleventh century there were protests against its indiscriminate and impertinent use.⁹ Though in theory dialectic, and the disputational methodologies accompanying it, were meant to lead to the establishment and elucidation of 'truth', in practice it had assumed a rather different form:

the disputations . . . became more and more an exercise of dialectical skill for its own sake and less and less a method of presenting and reconciling diverse opinions on a topic of substantial import . . . There is a certain tension between the medieval ideal of 'demonstrative' science as a system of proofs deducing conclusions by ordered steps from first principles, and the actual forms of doctrinal disputation. The arguments adduced in a disputation have an almost fortuitous character and are certainly not always demonstrative. Their aim is principally to persuade the opponent.¹⁰

The interpenetration of the discourse of 'truth' (theoretically the province of dialectic) and of that of persuasion (theoretically the province of rhetoric) signalled in the above quotation was recognised and built into the disputative structures of medieval academia,¹¹ and occasioned the running criticism of 'sophistry'¹² (a criticism, we may note, which is almost a refrain in Lollard writings). Palémon Glorieux describes the background to this rhetorical quality of medieval disputation in a passage which bears quotation at length:

Dans ces disputes quodlibétiques en effet l'homme entier se trouvait intéressé: il y venait avec son tempérament, ses ambitions, ses travers, ses qualités; il y apportait sa personnalité scientifique avec ses animosités, ses décisions, ses préventions. Les débats . . . ne demeuraient

pas . . . dans les hautes sphères de la spéculation; ils abordaient presque infailliblement les questions d'actualité, provoquant par le fait toute une série d'actions et de réactions chez ces hommes qui vivent avidement la vie de leur milieu . . . le polémiste en particulier se laissera très vite entrevoir; la rapidité de pensée, la précision des idées présentées, la netteté dans les positions adoptées trahiront l'entraînement intellectuel et les qualités d'exposition.¹³

The entire man was involved in these quodlibetic disputes: with his temperament, his ambitions, his failings as well as his qualities. He brought to them his scientific personality with its animosities, its determinations and its prejudices. The debates were not confined to high spheres of speculation; they dealt, almost unfailingly, with questions of current interest, thereby provoking a succession of actions and reactions among men who lived the life of their milieu avidly. In particular, the polemicist would reveal himself most quickly [in such debates]; the rapidity of thought, the precision of the ideas presented and the clarity of the positions adopted would betray intellectual training and qualities of exposition.

As we shall see in the following chapters, for Wyclif and the Lollards, contemporary scholastic endeavour is reduced to a sterile game of vanity and power premised on the methodologies described above by Kenny and Glorieux. Most disturbing for them was the extent to which the Bible was implicated in such an academic milieu with its self-conscious accommodation of interested readings and 'distortions' of the sacred text.¹⁴ In attempting to confront such received uses of the Bible, Lollardy was of course taking on not just the disputative practices of medieval academia and the place of the Bible within such practices, but more generally, received notions of textual *auctoritas* and of accepted uses of biblical exegesis.

Marie-Dominique Chenu has acutely pointed out that 'la "scolastique" commence dans la manipulation des dossiers que le théologien a rassemblés' ("scholasticism" began with the manipulation of dossiers assembled by the theologian).¹⁵ Textual *auctoritas* is above all a question of manipulation: biblical and other 'authoritative' passages provide an occasion for an interested, reinventive hermeneutics which can be rhetorical (when affective or persuasive) or dialectical (when argumentative, confrontational or ludic), or both.¹⁶ Roland Barthes describes this hermeneutics as a process wherein the 'authoritative' text is

‘used, and in a sense *managed*, like reinvested capital’,¹⁷ a modern version of Alan of Lille’s celebrated *aperçu* that ‘an authority has a wax nose, which means it can be bent into taking on different meanings’.¹⁸ A culturally central text which also happens to be the product of ancient, and very different, milieux must necessarily be reinvented to accommodate later needs; however, what is extraordinary about medieval academic discourses is the extent to which this process of reinvention is acknowledged and worked into the very fabric of highly self-conscious exegetical *mentalités*.¹⁹ Such an acknowledgement gives rise to its own peculiar tensions: sceptical awarenesses of various orders coexist with equally varied rationalisations of biblical reinvention in liaisons of greater or lesser happiness. But one must stress the happiness, and if one allows oneself a single generalisation about ‘medieval scholasticism’, it would be one that would stress the working accommodation of contradiction and conflict within an intellectual framework which is at ease with, and indeed valorises – one might almost say finds its *raison d’être* in – the notion of dialogue. Alain de Libera underlines its importance; after a discussion of humanist mockery of the perceived medieval predilection for disputation, he adds: ‘la charge humaniste touche juste sur un point proprement médiéval: la pensée ‘universitaire’ est une pensée agonistique, la loi de la discussion s’impose à tous’ (‘the humanist accusation precisely touched on one properly medieval point: “university-thought” was agonistic, for the discursive imperative imposed itself on all’).²⁰

The *agon* of medieval academia finds its institutionally sanctioned expression not only in the disputative methodologies so central to its functioning,²¹ but also, as I pointed out above, in one of its most important intellectual tools: the exegesis of ‘authoritative’ texts, preeminently that of the Bible. Textual ‘authority’ exists in a relationship of dialogue with the interpreter: a source-‘authority’, seen as the repository of value, is ceaselessly reinvented through a process of hermeneutic supplementation.²² The medieval vocabulary for this process is varied: the verbs commonly used are *adaptare*, *applicare*, *supplere*.²³ Such supplementary readings are theoretically acceptable when the text in question is the Bible, because of its status as the Word of God, infinite in signification.²⁴ In practical terms, such hermeneutic strategies began with early Christian apologetics, and therefore retained, for later ages, patristic sanction.²⁵

The basic tension in Christianity as the evolving religion of a (constantly reinterpreted) text – a tension between source and supplement, between the divine Word and human glossing – assumes overt prominence in self-conscious academic textual discourses which are centred around reading and exegesis. In particular, ‘correct’ modes of the study of the Bible came to be a charged area of debate in the fourteenth century, with a perceived falling-off from dedicated, properly oriented biblical studies, into extraneous vanities.²⁶ Lollardy therefore seeks to restore the Bible to the position of centrality that is its due, and finds one of its primary concerns in the notion of ‘right’ reading. As a result, its fundamental anxiety is, in general terms, about the threat of discourses based on biblical studies suffocating the text they are in theory meant to elucidate, and specifically, about the threat of the realm of ‘glossing’ taking over the realm of the ‘text’. Evidently, such a disjunction implies a positivistic, essentialist notion of the ‘text’ and its possible meanings. An important conceptual polarity in Wycliffite writing – one that I choose as a governing paradigm for the following study – therefore opposes a dialogic, interested and, by implication, corrupt ‘glossatorial’ hermeneutics institutionalised in Church and University, to a (in theory) monologic apprehension of the divine mind through a transparent ‘open’ text. Such a vision is necessarily a chimera, but that is beside the point. What is important is that Lollardy finds its self-definition in the notion of disinterested reading, which in Lollard theory is identified with reading in accordance with God’s intention. One of its central polemical thrusts is therefore in the direction of a denial of the inevitable dialogism of hermeneutics; indeed, as we shall see, much of Wyclif’s own thought and that of his followers is actively uneasy with the very notion of a systematic textual hermeneutics, and all that it implies.

Wycliffism’s theoretical postulation of an ‘open’ biblical text which offers meanings to readers both within and without sanctioned discourses of Church and University, meanings which are *essentially* those informing Christ’s teachings and the *ecclesia primitiva*, necessitates an engagement with some of the inherited Gordian knots of the academic study of the Bible.²⁷ For Lollardy, as I pointed out earlier, is not predicated on an outright rejection of the academic superstructures of the study of the Bible. Instead, its affinity to a theoretical monologism

results in a tormented involvement with received intellectual categories and methodological dichotomies.

One of the most important of these relates to the traditional polarisation of the two kinds of knowledge of the Bible: *scientia* and *sapientia*. As Tullio Gregory has pointed out, the terms are subject to a variety of conflicting uses, in a manner going back to Augustine.²⁸ In this study, however, I will be using *scientia* to designate the academic, philological study of the Bible, involving, roughly, the following elements: a knowledge or at least an awareness of the importance of Greek and Hebrew, close rationalist attention to the text, a reliance on context to clarify dubious points of interpretation, an awareness of the centrality of textual criticism, an acknowledgement of the different cultural circumstances in which the Bible was written and compiled. *Sapientia* involves a non- or supra-rational apprehension of divine meaning, perhaps as a result of direct inspiration from the Holy Ghost, and aligns itself with tradition and authority rather than with reason.²⁹ While *scientia* stresses the intellectually accessible aspects of biblical language, *sapientia* emphasises its abiding opacity and mystery. Though Wyclif and the Lollards use the actual terms in a variety of ways, the polarisation I have sought to underline is central to their thought. I will therefore use the words in the rather schematised senses outlined above as a convenient conceptual tool to clarify certain recurring motifs in the writings of the Lollards and their antagonists.

Sapientia, as I pointed out above, aligns itself with authority and tradition. In this scheme of things, relevant textual meaning is the product of much more than the text. The exegete must take into account what Heiko Oberman calls Tradition 1: Tradition as the history of scriptural interpretation.³⁰ A crux of Lollard polemic therefore consists in the determination of the extent to which 'Tradition' is acceptable as a valid means of determining biblical meaning. As with the Lollard treatment of the *scientia-sapientia* dichotomy, there is much variety in their handling of the notion of 'Tradition'. One comes across the entire range of opinions from Wyclif, who had a stated predilection for early tradition and biblical commentaries from the first millennium after Christ, to later followers such as Anne Hudson describes, who considered even the exegesis of the four major Fathers as 'glossatorial' and corrupt.³¹ However, though there is much difference of opinion within the Lollard camp

regarding the precise limits of acceptable early exegetical tradition, there is a general emphasis on the rejection of contemporary glossing, and on the need to go back to the *originalia* of the Fathers. The positivist historiography underlying such a 'back to the *fons religionis*' approach, and the implied vision of the 'essence' of Christianity is only another aspect of what I have described as Lollard monologism. The contrasting dialogic approach to tradition is well described by Joseph de Ghellinck in the course of his explanation of why, despite the availability of the works of the early Fathers, 'on voit la grande majorité des auteurs, S. Thomas excepté et quelques autres, se contenter habituellement des textes patristiques fournis par ces trois séries de recueils, les *Quatuor Libri Sententiarum* de Pierre Lombard, la *Concordia* de Gratien . . . et la *Glossa Ordinaria*' ('the great majority of authors, excepting St Thomas and some others, is seen habitually to be satisfied with patristic texts provided by these three anthologies, Peter Lombard's *Quatuor Libri Sententiarum*, Gratian's *Concordia* . . . and the *Glossa Ordinaria*).³² De Ghellinck proceeds to explain 'cette espèce d'insouciance' ('this kind of carelessness'), this avoidance of 'la question du passé' ('the question of the past') in the tranquil possession of tradition:

Cela est dû à la manière dont on concevait l'argument de tradition ou d'autorité. Car, sans être nullement synonymes en théorie, les deux genres d'arguments se confondaient concrètement. C'est là croyons-nous que réside le vrai motif de cette apparente pénurie de l'argument patristique. Comme on l'a fait remarquer plus haut, l'on avait conscience de vivre de la tradition. Mais ce n'était pas directement à la tradition qu'en appelait l'argumentation technique, mais plutôt à une 'auctoritas', prise sans doute à un représentant de cette tradition . . . il [the authoritative author] est envisagé comme dépositaire des mêmes prérogatives que les autres auteurs admis au rang d'auctoritates.³³

It was due to the way in which arguments from tradition or from authority were conceived of. For, without being at all synonymous in theory, the two kinds of argument became mixed in actuality. It is here that the true reason behind the evident poverty of patristic argument lies. As we have noted earlier, one was conscious of living from tradition. But technical argumentation did not directly invoke 'tradition' but rather an 'authority', taken doubtless from a representative of this tradition . . . [The authoritative author] was envisaged as

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a repository of the same prerogatives as the other authors admitted to the rank of 'authorities'.

De Ghellinck clarifies the intimacy of arguments from authority and arguments from tradition: both are seen to be changing and developing through time, and not historically resident at one particular moment which must therefore be recovered without adulteration or indeed interpretation. 'Authority' and 'Tradition' are dialogic – waxen-nosed, if one demands a sceptical formulation – and adapt themselves to changing circumstances and requirements.³⁴ This received approach to 'Tradition' implies an acknowledgement of the dependence of relevant biblical meanings on extra-textual imperatives operating within time and historical processes. Lollard thought categorically denies this dependence. As we shall see, the idea of a supernal Bible which is independent of the temporal and yet incorporates all that is spiritually relevant to the temporal, necessitates a troubled and recurrent Lollard engagement with the authority of 'Tradition'.

A fundamental problematic underlying Lollardy's ambiguous response to 'Tradition' is its Augustinianism. The role played by the works of St Augustine in late-medieval thought is still imperfectly studied, but there can be no doubt that it was a major one.³⁵ Augustine's hermeneutic writings were peculiarly problematic. They had been written at a time when the very nature of the new faith was being defined against various opponents, and as a result, apologetics or polemics is central to their significance.³⁶ Augustine's exegesis therefore incorporates various, often conflicting elements; most important for our purposes is his equal emphasis on the study of the biblical text for a proper understanding of it (and the associated valorisation of rhetoric and dialectic), and on the importance of a correct ordering of one's inner life for the right apprehension of biblical meanings. The biblical text, in Augustinian hermeneutics, is both centrally important and displaced. As Brian Stock has pointed out, 'The final lesson of Augustine's education as a reader is that nothing is learnt from reading itself'.³⁷ One of the most important conceptual loci of Augustine is therefore not scripture but *caritas*. Readings are right only in so far as they lead to *caritas*, and indeed, if one possesses *caritas*, one does not even need the scriptural text.³⁸ The definition of *caritas*, which is both extra-textual and crucially

important, is assumed to be understood. Significantly, it can and does accommodate, throughout the Middle Ages, various extra-textual imperatives: the individual's inspired (and 'charitable') understanding of the Bible, as also the authority of an exegetical tradition encompassing 'charitable' readings which may not be evident in the actual biblical text. The potential for contradiction and self-contradiction arising out of the profound late-medieval devotion to Augustine, and the general failure to acknowledge the importance of the fact that Augustine wrote in very different cultural circumstances, was immense. As Karl-fried Froelich has pointed out of late-medieval disputes over Augustinian hermeneutics:

this was a fight over the words of St Augustine that once, in a world of religious fervor, of spiritual enthusiasm, of optimism and of oneness of purpose, had made eminent sense but now failed to do so . . . Students of Augustine in the early fifteenth century had no choice but to end up in a dilemma.³⁹

As we shall see, some of the most important hermeneutic tangles of Wycliffism – revelation and inner inspiration as opposed to scriptural study, 'authority' as opposed to 'reason' – have roots in a troubled engagement with Augustine.

It is now time to point to the basic hermeneutic emphases of the Lollards. The most immediately noticeable is their theoretical celebration of the 'literal sense' of the Bible as the source of relevant hermeneutic discourse. In its engagement with the nature of the 'literal sense', Lollard thought is particularly indebted to Wyclif, who in turn drew on varied intellectual traditions. The 'background' to Wyclif's thought is vast and one suspects often unstated; it would therefore be foolish to attempt to chart definitive hermeneutic genealogies. However, in the matter of the 'literal sense', Wyclif's thought can be productively placed in relation to that of some of his major scholastic predecessors, preeminent among whom are Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Lyra and Richard Fitzralph. Here I will provide a rough intellectual trajectory of late-medieval involvement with the 'literal sense'. For the student of Lollardy, such a trajectory must necessarily be somewhat tentative, as Oxford thought in the decades immediately preceding Wyclif's remains imperfectly known.⁴⁰

Beryl Smalley pointed out in her magisterial study that there was, over the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a growing emphasis in exegesis on the 'literal' sense of the Bible.⁴¹ Aquinas and others were concerned with the superior value of the 'literal' sense (as opposed to the 'allegorical' or 'spiritual' senses), and Smalley suggests that this was a stepping "through the looking-glass" out of their world of reflections into everyday life'.⁴² However, Smalley's radiant formulation demands qualifications so large that it scarcely stands any more. The late-medieval involvement with the 'literal' sense shows clearly the unsolvable problems raised by the academic study of the interpretative bases of a religion grounded on centuries of the exegetical reinvention of a text. The work of Aquinas, Lyra and their successors betrays, first, a deep unease with inherited modes of textual reinvention as encapsulated in the traditional four-fold exegetical model; second, an attempt to address this unease by advocating a reliance on the 'literal' sense as the desired hermeneutic norm; and third, a resultant attempt at the redefinition of the 'literal' which does not substantially alter the prevailing exegetical situation.

Thomas Aquinas devotes much attention to the 'literal' sense in his *Summa Theologica* and in his *Questiones quodlibetales*. The details of his thought on the issue have been extensively studied;⁴³ here I will only point to what is immediately relevant to Wyclif's own theorisations. According to Aquinas, the words of scripture necessarily pertain to the domain of the 'literal'; 'even rhetorical figures – metaphor, fictive similitude, and parable or rhetorical allegory – as linguistic phenomena, are assimilated to the literal sense'.⁴⁴ For it is not the figure which constitutes the 'literal' sense, but that which is figured; in his classic example, when scripture speaks of the 'arm of God', the 'literal' sense is not that God has an arm, but that God has the power generally attributed to an arm.⁴⁵ The underlying principle is that of intentionality: it is the intention lying behind a figure which is its 'proper' sense. As a result, as Gilbert Dahan points out, the christological interpretation of Psalm 29.4 (*Domine eduxisti ab inferno animam meam*) can be defended as the 'literal' sense.⁴⁶

The problem at the heart of Aquinas's redefinition of the 'literal' is well-stated by Dahan: 'la théologie est une science, mais le texte sur lequel elle se fonde n'est pas un texte "scientifique"' ('theology is a science, but the text upon which it is founded is not a "scientific" text').⁴⁷ As a result,

the proponent of a 'scientific' biblical hermeneutics has also to accommodate the 'non-scientific' needs of those reading the Bible; in other words, the advocate of a 'literalist' hermeneutics has to make space for the extra-literal. A similar tension informs the work of Nicholas of Lyra. In his celebrated prefaces to the *Postilla literalis*, Lyra simultaneously complains of the suffocation of the 'literal' by proliferating allegories, and redefines the 'literal' so that it incorporates much that would formerly be classed as 'spiritual'. As Spicq points out, 'Il insiste fortement sur la nécessité de faire reposer le sens spirituel sur le sens littéral; et il reconnaît qu'on ne peut argumenter à partir du sens allégorique . . . Par ailleurs, dans le Prologue *De intentione auctoris et modo procedendi*, Nicolas de Lyre, commentant la troisième règle de Tychonius, admet explicitement deux sens littéraux' ('He insists strongly on the necessity of basing the spiritual sense on the literal sense; and he recognises that one cannot argue from the allegorical sense . . . Furthermore in the Prologue *De intentione auctoris et modo procedendi*, Nicholas of Lyra, in commenting on the third rule of Tychonius, explicitly allows for two literal senses').⁴⁸ Lyra emphasises what William of Nottingham had called the *duplex sensus literalis*, the 'two-fold literal sense'. Such a 'literal' sense encompasses both the surface, immediate meaning of the scriptural words as well as the figurative or christological meanings. As part of the intention informing the words, these other senses are also 'literal'.⁴⁹ As Spicq points out, Lyra attributes the double literal sense to passages from the Old Testament cited in the New to counter Jewish allegations that Christian readings distort the original sense of Old Testament passages. Once again, we see the recuperation – here for Christian apologetic purposes – of the domain of what would have been traditionally called 'spiritual' through a redefinition of the 'literal'.

Richard Fitzralph⁵⁰ continued in the direction of this semantic reclassification of the various senses of the Bible. He may have been exposed 'to the foremost biblicist of the day, Nicholas of Lyra'.⁵¹ His political career and his role in the Armenian disputes led him to compose his 'most important and influential contribution to medieval theological literature', the *Summa de Questionibus Armenorum*.⁵² According to Walsh, 'Fitzralph took as his guideline the literal interpretation of Scripture, both Old and New Testament, as the one source of authority which would be accepted without question by all parties',⁵³ for arguments

based on the ‘literal sense’ would persuade those who would not accept the traditional spiritual superstructure of the Western Catholic Church. But as with Aquinas and Lyra, Fitzralph’s exegetical theory identifies the ‘literal’ sense with meanings intended authorially:

Sweeping aside all objections to the definition of the ‘sensus litteralis’, Fitzralph maintained that the main clue to the interpretation of the Scriptures was to know the mind of the author: ‘non refert quis sensus proprie dici debeat litteralis alicuius scripture, dum tamen scias mentem auctoris’, and then stated the guiding principle of his *Summa*, namely that the literal interpretation of scriptural passages would be determined by the obvious meaning of the author.⁵⁴

The polemical potential of what Walsh calls ‘the subjective manner in which [Fitzralph] chose to interpret the literal sense’⁵⁵ would later, as we shall go on to see, be exploited fully by Wyclif.

What emerges from the work of Aquinas, Nicholas of Lyra and Fitzralph is, as I said before, a redefinition of the ‘literal’ which does not substantially alter but instead ‘repackages’ inherited exegetical norms. The older distinction between the ‘literal’ and the ‘spiritual’ is recast as a distinction between two aspects of the ‘literal’. This species of casuistry was in a sense inevitable. Christianity was a religion which had developed through varied and incessant exegeses of its central text; abiding by what its words seemed to suggest ‘literally’ as both a theoretical and a practical imperative was not feasible. The Bible being ‘Jewish scripture in Greek guise reflecting a much older culture and state of consciousness’,⁵⁶ the recovery of the ‘literal’ (in the sense of a hypothetical original meaning intended by the author(s) of scripture), even if possible, would be at best irrelevant and at worst harmful to the faith as actually practised and believed. Moreover, one had always to guard against ‘judaising’.⁵⁷ Above all, biblical exegesis did not take place in an isolated realm of the ‘spiritual’, but existed in relation to contemporary theological, political and doctrinal needs. Verger stresses the fact that ‘l’exégèse des grands docteurs dominicains et franciscains n’a rien de la paraphrase pieuse – *Scriptura sola* – à quoi aurait pu mener par elle-même la pratique de la vie apostolique’ (‘the exegesis of the great Dominican and Franciscan doctors is quite unlike the kind of pious paraphrase – *sola scriptura* – to which the practice of the apostolic life could have led by itself’).⁵⁸

The problems thus inherent from the beginning in the redefinition of the 'literal' sense came to the surface in a particularly troubling fashion with the Lollards. Interested – and to us, highly 'arbitrary' – interpretations of the Bible are adduced and defended by both the heretics and their opponents as part of the divine intention and therefore 'literal'. The details of this process will emerge in the course of the individual chapters, and tell a fascinating story of a hermeneutic deadlock. However, what transforms a learned hermeneutic crisis into a cultural crisis on a much larger scale, and what makes Lollardy unique for its times, is its combination of university training and (successful) popularising aims. What needs to be kept in mind always, therefore, is the academic nature of the Lollard heresy, and its embeddedness in traditions of self-conscious intellectual endeavour. By its unprecedented placing, at the centre of a scrutiny which was both academic and popular, of learned discourses of hermeneutic engagement with the most important text of medieval culture, it radically problematised issues fundamental to the very definition of Christianity, and to the perceived validity of the social, political and intellectual discourses traditionally enjoying its sanction. In the intellectual sphere in particular, Lollardy problematised, by throwing into uncomfortable and uncompromising relief, all that Damasus Trapp has described as characteristic of fourteenth-century thought: 'historical and logical criticism, interest in language, in liberty of conscience, and liberty of research'.⁵⁹ For the purposes of this study, one of the most important aspects of this process of problematisation consists in the radical enlargement of the range of those empowered and equipped to deal with matters of philosophical theology. A criticism of perceived intellectual degeneracies, however sharply articulated, would by no means have had an impact comparable to that of Lollardy, had it been confined to the Latinate club of academics and churchmen. Though my study will not examine the transformation of academic dissent into popular heresy – for that the reader is referred to Anne Hudson's oeuvre, in particular to her *Premature Reformation* – an abiding awareness of the implications of such a transformation informs the following chapters.

This study looks at a range of texts, Lollard and anti-Lollard, in Latin and in English, academic and extra-mural. These texts, written over a period of half a century and often addressing one another, are examined as they engage in a dialogue in which certain contested ideas and

emphasises surface repeatedly: the 'literal sense', God's intention, the normativity or otherwise of the *ecclesia primitiva*, the exegetical role of the Fathers, the limitations and definitions of 'Tradition', the uses of *scientia* and indeed of the whole range of academic discourses, the nature and reliability of *sapientia*, the uses of revelation, the rewards and dangers of biblical textual criticism. The focus of my study, as I have stated before, is less the diachronic histories of the ideas pointed to above than the understanding of how they form part of a synchronic interaction of ideologies. It is the twists and turns given to the waxen noses of received authorities and inherited paradigms that interest me, as these are deployed in a specific warfare over hermeneutics. Part of the fascination of Lollardy lies in the extent to which both the propagators and opponents of the heresy are explicitly aware of, utilise, and indeed lay bare the ideological motivations of religious and intellectual discourses. A synchronic study highlights the confrontation of discourses, and thereby throws into relief their internal structures and interrelations. Of course, any historical narrative inevitably suggests its own diachronic perspectives, and mine, as I will now explicate, is no exception, but the reader needs to bear in mind that the overarching *histoires* which do emerge in the course of the following study must be regarded, in the light of the significant lacunae in our knowledge of late-medieval intellectualities, as provisional, more correctly seen as helpful conceptual frameworks which enable us to 'place' some of the varied riches of the time, than as definitive accounts of 'intellectual history'.

The diachronic narrative of the following study I see as emerging from the juxtaposition of three distinct temporal frames within my chosen fifty-odd years. The first consists in the Latinate scholastic debates from the 1370s and 1380s of John Wyclif and his Oxford contemporaries, preeminently William Woodford. The second moves on to the 1390s and the 1400s, when vernacular Lollardy had already become a recognised and threatening presence. I examine scholastic debates at Oxford over the desirability or otherwise of biblical translations, Lollard vernacular hermeneutical discourses as exemplified in the English Wycliffite Sermons, and Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, an orthodox vernacular meditative text the contents of which are explicitly and pervasively anti-Lollard. The third frame focuses on the 1420s and later, when Lollardy had already been subjected to massive civil and