Magisterial Authority, Heresy and Lay Questioning in Early Fifteenth-Century Oxford

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Magisterial Authority, Heresy and Lay Questioning in Early Fifteenth-Century Oxford

A group of Latin-English macaronic sermons from the early fifteenth century collected together in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 649 offers suggestive insights into contemporary perceptions of Oxford University and of the compromised authority of its theological magisterium in the aftermath of the Wycliffite controversies in which the university had been fundamentally implicated. This essay argues that the sermons, in the epistemic ambiguity and indecision which lie at their heart, are characteristic of English “orthodox” discourses at this time which sought to negotiate the troubled relationship between unregulated lay questioning and academic theological enterprise.

Autorité magistérielle, hérésie et questionnement laïque dans l’Oxford du début du xv^e siècle

Un groupe de sermons macaroniques latin-anglais du début du xv^e siècle réunis à la Bodleian Library d’Oxford, MS Bodley 649, fournit un bon éclairage des perceptions contemporaines de l’Université d’Oxford et de l’autorité de plus en plus compromise de son magistère théologique à la suite des controverses wycliffites dans lesquelles l’Université était fondamentalement impliquée. Cet article maintient que les sermons, dans l’ambiguïté et l’indécision épistémique qui leur est propre, sont caractéristiques des discours anglais « orthodoxes » de cette époque, dont le but était d’arbitrer les relations houleuses entre le questionnement laïque non régulé et l’entreprise théologique universitaire.

Basing his exegetical flourishes on Revelation 12:1 (“the woman clothed with the sun”), an early fifteenth-century Benedictine homilist from Oxford, whose macaronic sermons are to be found collected together in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 649, embarks upon a consideration of his university thus:

Per illud mirabile signum, mulierem amictam ardenti sole, intelligo veram nutricem virtutis, omnium nostrum matrem, istam venerabilem universitatem que nutrit et produxit plures sapientes filios ad honorem Dei et indies produxit. [...] Et sicut per calorem solis herbe et flores excrescunt terram, arbores frondescunt, florescunt, et fructificant, sic per calorem solis sapientie perardent in lust and desire that me hath ad scienciam et clerimoniam. Pulchri flores, scolares, crescunt in omni facultate. Per hoc isti teneri grammatici frondescunt, acuti artiste, subtiles philosophi et discreti legiste pulcriter florescunt, set fructus omnis nostre sciencie qui est verbum Dei et cognicio nostri creatoris per firmam fidem precipue moratur cum theologis.¹

1. Sermon 8, *A Macaronic Sermon Collection from Late Medieval England: Oxford MS Bodley 649*, ed. and trans. Patrick J. Horner, Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2006, p. 210-211. All further references, unless indicated otherwise, are to this edition and translation and are indicated in parentheses in the text. (I have normalised u/v and silently replaced thorns and yoghs with “th” and “gh” respectively; I have also occasionally made silent alterations to Horner’s translation.) Bodley 649 contains, along with a second set of Latin sermons, a coherent group of twenty-five macaronic sermons some of which can be internally dated to the reign of Henry V (1413-1422); see this edition, p. 4. On the Benedictine authorship of this set, and further details about the manuscript, see Patrick J. Horner, “Benedictines and Preaching in Fifteenth-Century England: The Evidence of Two Bodleian Library Manuscripts”, *Revue Bénédictine*, 99 (1989), p. 313-332; also Patrick J. Horner, “The King Taught Us the Lesson: Benedictine Support for Henry V’s Suppression of the Lollards”, *Mediaeval Studies*, 52 (1990), p. 190-220; Siegfried Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections from Later Medieval England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 84-87 and p. 550-555. Much scholarly attention has been devoted to the sustained macaronic texture of these sermons; this, however, will not form the focus of analysis here. The classic study of English macaronic sermons is Siegfried Wenzel, *Macaronic Sermons: Bilingualism and Preaching in Late-Medieval England*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1994; recent studies of this aspect of the sermons include Helena Halmari and Timothy Regetz, “Syntactic Aspects of Code-Switching in Oxford, MS Bodley 649”, *Code-Switching in Early English*, ed. Herbert Schendl and Laura Wright, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2011, p. 115-153; Herbert Schendl, “Code-Switching in Late Medieval Macaronic Sermons”, *Multilingualism in Medieval Britain (c. 1066-1520): Sources and Analysis*, ed. Judith A. Jefferson and Ad Putter with Amanda Hopkins, Turnhout, Brepols, 2013, p. 152-169; also see Alan J. Fletcher, “Written Versus Spoken Macaronic Discourse in Late Medieval England: The View from a Pulpit”, *Multilingualism in Medieval Britain*, ed. Jefferson and Putter, p. 137-151.

By that marvellous sign, the woman robed with the burning sun, I understand the true nurse of virtue, the mother of us all, this venerable university which has nourished and has produced many wise sons for the honour of God and has produced them day by day. [...] And just as through the heat of the sun herbs and flowers grow on the earth, trees leaf, flower and fructify, so through the heat of the sun of wisdom they burn with pleasure and desire that one has for knowledge and priestly [/clerkly] learning. The beautiful flowers, the scholars, grow in every faculty. Through this, these tender students of grammar produce leaves, the sharp logicians, the subtle philosophers and prudent lawyers flower beautifully, but the fruit of all our knowledge, which is the word of God and the recognition of our creator through firm faith, dwells particularly with the theologians.

The passage is characteristic of much early- to mid-fifteenth century apologetics written in favour of Oxford University and its theological magisterium, after its compromised reputation – both nationally, because of John Wyclif and his hereticated followers, and internationally, because of Wyclif and his Bohemian adherents Jan Hus, Jerome of Prague and Peter Payne² – rendered such defences necessary.³ Indeed, Wyclif's English followers themselves, also known as the Lollards, were of peculiar intransigence: often emerging from within a learned university-milieu, they were, as their master had been, vehemently condemnatory of the perceived failings – *curiositas*, vanity, intellectual nullity and sodomy, among others – of their alma mater.⁴ Those writing in defence of Oxford's

2. The major work on Wyclif and the dissenting movement, known as Wycliffism or Lollardy, associated with him is Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988; on fifteenth-century English perceptions of Hussitism and its postulated links to Wyclif, see Michael Van Dussen, *From England to Bohemia: Heresy and Communication in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 86-121. The homilist of Bodley 649 is clear about the link between the heresy afflicting his own country and the considerably worse situation in Prague ("set multo peius circa Prage in regno Boemie", p. 507).

3. See, for example, the prefatory comments of Richard Fleming, Bishop of Lincoln, when founding Lincoln College, Oxford in 1427 as an institution specifically intended to train orthodox theologians in the fight against heresy: see my discussion in "University-Learning, Theological Method and Heresy in Fifteenth-Century England", *Religious Controversy in Europe, 1378-1536: Textual Transmission and Networks of Readership*, ed. Pavel Soukup and Michael Van Dussen, Turnhout, Brepols, 2013, p. 289-313.

4. Wyclif's critiques of Oxford's intellectual, and especially logical, vacuity and vanity are ubiquitous in his works; see for example his many comments in *De Veritate Sacre Scripture*, 3 vols., ed. Rudolf Buddensieg, London, Wyclif Society, 1905-1907, *passim*. The Prologue to the Wycliffite translation of the complete

magisterial authority, especially in theology, had therefore to tread a delicate polemical and diplomatic path: the traditional assumptions and privileges supporting the University and the forms of intellectual labour institutionalised therein needed to be upheld even while the body of criticism, both “heretical” and “orthodox”, directed against alleged academic corruptions and vanities, was too extensive to be entirely ignored.⁵ Sermon 8 in the Benedictine collection therefore proceeds to declare the all-encompassing magisterial grandeur of Oxford, in its unrivalled possession of *sapientia*, as superior to the more limited, particular *scientia* competences of Paris (in theology), Bologna (in law), Salerno (in physics) and Toulouse (in mathematics) before going on to acknowledge the current fallen state of the University: the “sovereyn clericus qui habent honorabile nomen doctoris, qui situantur in honore et gradu supra alios quod essent verum speculum boni regiminis, fidelis doctrine, et bone vite omnibus aliis” (“sovereign clerks [i.e. clerks of highest degree or rank] who have the honourable name of ‘doctor’, who are placed in honour and degree above others that they might be a true mirror of good rule, faithful doctrine and good life for all others”) are now obscured by “nubibus heresum et errorum” (“clouds of heresies and errors”), and the University regarded by all as a centre “hereticorum et lollardorum” (“of heretics and lollards”). The mother of virtue, the University, once decorated (“olim ornate”) is now scandalized and eclipsed by the moon of mortal sin, and the “vertu and cunnyngue que esset in studio” (“virtue and learning which should be in a school”) are in abeyance. The *domina* has been made *ancilla*. What is now required is the reformation of “quilibet lovyng filius, doctores, magistri, et

Bible into English ferociously laments Oxonian worldliness, sodomy, simony, and the University’s statute restricting the study of theology to those who had already been trained in the Faculty of Arts: see *The Earliest Advocates of the English Bible: The Texts of the Medieval Debate*, ed. Mary Dove, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2010, p. 71-73 (lines 2480-2538). The English Wycliffite tract known as *De officio pastoralis* argues against endowing the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, since university degrees are irrelevant to, indeed harmful for, the law of God: see *English Wyclif Tracts 1-3*, ed. Conrad Lindberg, Oslo, Novus, 1991, p. 50-51.

5. For an account of the protracted confrontation between the Church (especially in the person of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundel) and the University as a result of Wyclif’s radical thought, see Jeremy Catto, “Wyclif and Wycliffism at Oxford, 1356-1430”, *The History of the University of Oxford*, vol. 2: *Late Medieval Oxford*, ed. Jeremy Catto and Ralph Evans, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992, p. 175-261.

scolares” (“each loving son, doctors, masters, and students”); it is imperative that they all “emend” their lives (p. 210-215).

THEOLOGY, CLERKS AND THE LAITY

However, these gestures towards the reformation of the academic practitioners of theology (and of associated subjects) assume secondary place in this Benedictine collection; as with other “orthodox” writings emerging from the Oxford milieu at this time, the criticism of the University’s failings or the failings of academic theology as practised therein can be taken only so far and no further. This is partly the result of the bruising, decade-long, collision between Archbishop Thomas Arundel and Oxford University, as it tried to defend its traditional academic freedoms; but it is primarily the result of radical Wycliffite criticism of the entire academic enterprise of philosophical theology and its intellectual premises and methods.⁶ As the Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible warns:

[...] God bothe can and mai, if it likith [pleases] him, spede [help] symple men out[side] of the universitie as myche to kunne [know] holy writte, as maistres in the universite; and therefor no greet charge [great matter], though nevere man of good wille be poisoned with hethene mennus [men’s] errours ix. yeer or x. [...].⁷

As a result, our homilist’s main emphasis falls not on the problematics inherent in the institutionalised study of theology⁸ but

6. A similar dilemma was faced by English thinkers of this era who engaged with conciliar thought, for radical Wycliffite criticism of the papacy had rendered a direct espousal of conciliar ideology problematic: see Alexander Russell, “Conciliarism and Heresy in England”, *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Vincent Gillespie and Kantik Ghosh, Turnhout, Brepols, 2011, p. 155-165.

7. *Earliest Advocates*, ed. Dove, p. 73, lines 2533-2537. For discussion of this and similar passages in Wycliffite writings, see Rita Copeland, *Pedagogy, Intellectuals and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages: Lollardy and Ideas of Learning*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 124-125; also Mary Dove, *The First English Bible: The Text and Context of the Wycliffite Versions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 109. For Wyclif’s own thought and its Czech posterity, see Olivier Marin, “*Les universités sont de fondation païenne et sont aussi peu utiles que le diable à l’Église*. Sens et fortune d’une proposition wycliffiste”, *Universitas scholarium: Mélanges offerts à Jacques Verger par ses anciens étudiants*, ed. Cédric Giraud and Martin Morard, Geneva, Droz, 2011, p. 123-147.

8. For a summary of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century responses to scholastic theology, see Monika Asztalos, “The Faculty of Theology”, *A History*

on the importance of *policing* the boundaries between academic theology and what is identified as inappropriate lay intellection. A recurrent, almost obsessive, theme of these sermons is therefore that of the “limits” or *termini* which the laity must not infringe. Basing his exegesis in Sermon 24 on Exodus 20: 18-21 (Moses speaking to God on Sinai while the people wait at the foot of the mountain), the homilist aligns Moses (as he speaks to God) with the clergy, and the populace (who withdraw in trepidation from such high communion) with the laity as it ought *ideally* to behave. The passage is dense in suggestion and is worth quoting at length:

Quidam qui tenerent se ad suum pater noster et credo intromittunt se de scripturis et clerimonia. Excedunt limites contra preceptum divinum [...]. Lego [...] quod quando omnipotens Deus descenderat in montem Sinai [...], Moises ascendit in istum locum sanctum [...]. Sed totus populus expectabat deorsum ad radicem montis. Steterunt ad limites que fiebant iussu divino [...]. Per istum montem Sinai [...] intelligo altas scripturas et contemplacionem altam, litteraturam et clerimoniam, alta misteria et subtilitates fidei. Iste mons est [...] adeo altus quod excedit humanum visum, excellit humanum sensuum, excellit omnem naturalem rationem. Omnes clerici a principio mundi nesciunt probare per naturalem rationem minimum punctum tui credo.

Some who should hold themselves to their pater noster and creed involve themselves in the scriptures and clerical learning. They exceed the boundaries contrary to the divine command [...]. I read [...] that when almighty God had descended on Mount Sinai [...], Moses ascended to this holy place [...]. But all the people waited down at the foot of the mountain. They stood at the boundaries that were ordained by divine command [...]. By this mountain of Sinai [...] I understand the deep [/high] scriptures and high contemplation, letters and clerical knowledge, deep [/high] mysteries and subtleties of faith. This mountain is [...] so high that it exceeds human sight, it excels human sense, it excels all natural reason. All the clergy since the beginning of the world do not know how to prove by natural reason the least point of your creed (p. 508-509).

of the University in Europe, vol. 1: *Universities in the Middle Ages*, ed. Hilde De Ridder-Symoens, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 409-441, esp. p. 420-438; on theologians' negotiation and promotion of their own authority, see Ian Wei, *Intellectual Culture in Medieval Paris: Theologians and the University, c. 1100 – c. 1330*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 174-184; Elsa Marmursztejn, *L'autorité des maîtres: Scolastique, normes et société au XIII^e siècle*, Paris, Belles Lettres, 2007; Catherine König-Pralong, *Le bon usage des savoirs. Scolastique, philosophie et politique culturelle*, Paris, J. Vrin (“Études de philosophie médiévale”), 2011. For the later period in France, see Serge Lusignan, *“Vérité garde le roy”: La construction d'une identité universitaire en France (XIII^e-XV^e siècle)*, Paris, Sorbonne, 1999.

Some classic themes are broached here: an indecorous and dangerous lay engagement with scripture and *clerimonia*; the violation of divinely ordered limits and boundaries between clergy and the rest; and we are provided with a definition of – it is implied – scripturally proscribed discourses, with the phrasing of the passage resonating with Romans 11: 20 (“noli altum sapere sed time”).⁹ Mount Sinai may be interpreted to encompass “high” scripture and high contemplation, *litteraturam* and *clerimoniam*, “high” mysteries and the “subtleties” of faith, all of which are held to transcend natural reason. Sermon 24 proceeds to justify this large proscription by outlining the ideal relationship of clerk and lay: the “common people”¹⁰ are held to be “illiterate” in great part, and it is the exclusive duty of “sovereign clerks” (who are distinguished from the populace through their learning and the perfection of their life) to treat of “clerical learning”, “move questions” in sacred scripture and thereby to teach and inform the “people”, who must confine themselves to the “limits” of the Pater Noster and the Creed.¹¹ The “circumstances and subtleties” of any of the points covered by the latter are not to be investigated; what is to be avoided above all is

9. For a concise analysis of the traditional distinction between lay and clerk, see Ruedi Imbach, *Laien in der Philosophie des Mittelalters: Hinweise und Anregungen zu einem vernachlässigten Thema*, Amsterdam, Grüner, 1989; see also Ruedi Imbach and Catherine König-Pralong, *Le défi laïque: existe-t-il une philosophie de laïcs au Moyen Âge?*, Paris, J. Vrin (“Conférences Pierre Abélard”), 2013; for an overview of the late-medieval situation, when these traditional distinctions were being rapidly eroded, see Klaus Schreiner, “Laienbildung als Herausforderung für Kirche und Gesellschaft”, *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung*, 11 (1984), p. 257-354.

10. On some of the socio-political valences of “common” terminology in England, see John Watts, “Public or Plebs: The Changing Meaning of ‘The Commons’, 1381-1549”, *Power and Identity in the Middle Ages: Essays in Memory of Rees Davies*, ed. Huw Pryce and John Watts, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 242-260; for a different but relevant set of associations of the word as applied to theologians or to doctrine, see Andrea Aldo Robiglio, “Christ as the Common Doctor and John Duns Scotus’s Place in the History of Hermeneutics”, *Vera Doctrina: Zur Begriffsgeschichte der Lehre von Augustinus bis Descartes*, ed. Philippe Büttgen, Ruedi Imbach, Ulrich Johannes Schneider and Herman J. Selderhuis, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2009, p. 85-113.

11. “[...] communis populus pro maiori parte est illiteratus [...] et peccatum regnat inter eos. [...] Qui assumitur a communi populo per excellenciam clerimonie et perfeccionem vite, qui est a soverayne clericus et eciam perfecte vivens figuratur per Moisem. [...] Ad illum pertinet tractare materias clerimonie, movere questiones de sacra scriptura, docere et informare populum in lege divina” (p. 509-511).

an inappropriate infatuation with “subtleties”.¹² The “real”, “true” knowledge required is that of oneself, not of the conclusions of geometry, judicial astronomy, the colours of rhetoric or musical harmonies, or indeed any of the seven liberal arts (p. 515-517).

These above passages outline a traditional, indeed paradigmatic vision of clerk-lay relations. The homilist is, however, uneasily aware that such inherited models have little to do with the contemporary religio-political situation in which the primary source of the conflict over authority is to be located *not* in the intellectual ambitions of “common”, supposedly illiterate people, but in clerical learning itself. This is because of the controversial Wycliffite innovations and critiques in the field of philosophical theology: ultimately, these emanate from the mother of all learning and the seat of theology, the University of Oxford herself. Sermon 13 therefore seeks to refine the category of proper *clerimonia*. Invoking Exodus 19, Moses is interpreted as referring specifically to those contemplatives and clerks “qui radicanur in bonitate et habent firmum intellectum in sacra scriptura” (“who are rooted in goodness and have a firm understanding of sacred scripture”). What is therefore required is holiness of life as well as learning, since, the homilist argues, the Lollards offer the contrary example: “sciunt legere scripturas et intelligere: plures illorum sunt multi literati” (“they know how to read and understand; many of them are very literate”, p. 344-347).¹³ Their unsuitability for being ministers of

12. “Subtleties” constitute a recurrent point of conflict in English controversial writings of this period, no doubt in part because of Oxford’s pan-European fame (or notoriety) for its “subtilitates Anglicanae”. For further discussion of Lollard usage, see Kantik Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 243 n. 19; for “subtilitates Anglicanae”, see Luca Bianchi and Eugenio Randi, *Verités dissonantes: Aristote à la fin du Moyen Âge*, Paris and Fribourg, Cerf and Éditions Universitaires Fribourg, 1993, *passim*; John E. Murdoch, “‘Subtilitates Anglicanae’ in Fourteenth-Century Paris: John of Mirecourt and Peter Ceffons”, in *Machaut’s World: Science and Art in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Madeline P. Cosman and Bruce Chandler, New York, New York Academy of Sciences, 1978, p. 51-86. A particularly insightful analysis of the “English subtleties” (Scotists and *formalizantes*) in connection to Gerson (but not only to him) is Zénon Kaluza, *Les querelles doctrinales à Paris. Nominalistes et réalistes aux confins du XIV^e et du XV^e siècle*, Bergamo, Pierluigi Lubrina Editore, 1988, esp. p. 14-64.

13. See in this context Anne Hudson, “*Laicus litteratus*: The Paradox of Lollardy”, *Heresy and Literacy, 1100-1530*, ed. Peter Biller and Anne Hudson, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 222-236.

God therefore lies not in the absence of learning but in the absence of goodness, which absence they cover over with hypocrisy and rhetorical colours. The sermon then addresses both clergy and laity,¹⁴ exhorting the latter not to infringe the limits of speculation. The clergy themselves, sections of whom are held to have long neglected their pastoral duties, are to dissuade them from doing so:

Clerus, qui est speculum sanctitatis, adeo sollicitatur circa mundum quod non respiciunt oves, non indulgent cure. [...] laici qui nesciunt litteras volunt se smater de profundissima clerimonia, movebunt altas materias, petent arduas questiones difficiles alicui clerico ad solvendum. [...] Ideo qui figuramini per Moysen, indulgete cure vestre [...].

The clergy, who are the mirror of holiness, are so concerned about the world that they do not look to the sheep, they do not pay attention to their cure. [...] [The] laity, who do not know letters, wish to busy themselves with the deepest clerical knowledge, they will move high matters, they pursue hard questions difficult for any cleric to resolve. [...] So, those of you who are symbolised [/figured] by Moses, look to your cure [...] (p. 346-347).

Once again, what is (almost) occluded in such a formulation is the real question at the heart of the current problems besetting Church and University: what ought to be the proper limits of speculation for the *clergy*? What, in fact, is the ideal definition of the “cognicio et contemplacio” (p. 347) appropriate to a magisterium devoted to the institutionalised academic study of the divine?¹⁵

LEARNING AND “HERESY”

This is the question that these sermons circle around; it is one they can neither address openly nor evade wholly. The Lollards, after all, were originally led by their “dux et capitaneus” (“leader

14. This is in itself worthy of note as evidence of the homilist’s recognition that the two “estates” need not be all that separate in practice. For discussion of the implied mixed audiences of the sermons in Bodley 649 as well as in other related homiletic collections, see S. Wenzel, *Macaronic sermons*, p. 51-61.

15. For the important and influential near-contemporary negotiation of this troubled subject by Jean Gerson, see the discussion by Zénon Kaluza, “La doctrine selon Jean Gerson”, in *Vera Doctrina*, ed. Ph. Büttgen *et al.*, p. 115-140; also Palémon Glorieux, “Le Chancelier Gerson et la réforme de l’enseignement”, in *Mélanges offerts à Étienne Gilson*, ed. Callistus Edie, Paris, J. Vrin, 1959, p. 285-98; Christoph Burger, *Aedificatio, Fructus, Utilitas: Johannes Gerson als Professor der Theologie und Kanzler der Universität Paris*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1986.

and captain”), the erstwhile *flos Oxoniae* John Wyclif, “qui fuit armatus in heresi ad omnem partem” (“who was armed in heresy in every way”, p. 156-157). As a result, not only are common men and women infected by their malice, but also the clergy itself: “plurimi vacillant in fide, tam mares quam femine, tam eruditi¹⁶ quam laici. Plures rectores et curati qui essent speculum sanctitatis populo et seminarent inter eos purum semen verbi Dei seminant falsam zizania frequenter laicis” (“Many waver in faith, men as well as women, learned as well as lay. Many rectors and curates who should be a mirror of holiness for the people and should sow among them the pure seed of God’s word often sow false weeds among the laity”, p. 420-421). One must therefore make a distinction between such false clerks and the true ones – only these latter may be understood by the Moses of Exodus 19 who communed in secret with God: “Per Moysen [...] intelligo istos contemplativos, istos sovereyn clerkis qui radicanter in caritate et bonitate vite et habent solidum fundamentum in sacra scriptura”¹⁷ (“By Moses [...] I understand these contemplatives, these sovereign clerks who are rooted in charity and goodness of life and have a solid foundation in sacred scripture”). *Neither* lay *nor* lettered may ascend the mountain of faith unless a good life and learning go together: “nullus laicus ascenderet in montem fidei, nec litteratus nisi sua vita esset concors sue sciencie” (“no layman should climb onto the mountain of faith, nor a literate man unless his life be in accord with his knowledge”, p. 420-423).

The uneasy recognition that is repeatedly almost acknowledged and then deflected has to do with the fact that Lollardy was not the exclusive province of an unlearned and impertinent laity but was root and branch implicated in high theology and philosophy, as developed in the thought of Wyclif and his academic followers at Oxford. The Bodley 649 homilist therefore attempts to make

16. On some (mainly Aquinian) connotations of “eruditio”, see François-Xavier Putallaz, “Eruditio”, *Mots médiévaux offerts à Ruedi Imbach*, ed. I. Atucha, D. Calma, C. König-Pralong and I. Zavattero, Porto, Fédération Internationale des Instituts d’Études Médiévales, 2011, p. 245-254.

17. The vernacular phrase “sovereign clerks” here seems to indicate an inner, spiritual superiority and a true grounding in Scripture in contrast to its connotations in Sermon 8 (see above), where the emphasis clearly falls on superior academic rank and attainment: “sovereyn clericus qui habent honorabile nomen doctoris”, p. 213.

curious distinctions between the “substance” of religious “points” which are appropriate for the laity to know, and the “circumstances” of these points which must be relinquished to those trained in academic theology. The layperson must know the twelve points of the Creed, but must not enquire beyond what is explicitly stated therein: “Non teneris cognoscere subtilitatem, nec circumstanciam, set substanciam fidei qui est ipse punctus” (“You are not bound to know the subtlety, nor the circumstance, but the substance of faith which is the point itself”, p. 422-423). For instance, devotion to the Eucharist requires only that one accept that the body and blood of Christ are present under the species of bread and wine through the power of the words of Christ as recited by the priest, an interpretation which, we are assured, is in consonance with the opinion of all saints from Augustine onwards. But the “subtilitates et circumstancie istius puncti”, i.e. matters of philosophical theology related to the sacrament, are not of relevance to the laity. “Ideo ne subtilies intus [...], cape substanciam puncti et linque subtilitates clericis” (“So do not be overly subtle [“subtilize”] about it [...], seize the substance of the point, and leave the subtleties to the clerics”, p. 422-423). Both literate and illiterate laypeople must therefore stay “infra limites fidei” and not pose “high” questions. Having thus seemingly outlined a clear framework in which to place the relationship of the laity with learning, the sermon suddenly, and unexpectedly, gives up on this attempt, apparently recognising the impracticability, indeed irrelevance, of its nostalgic vision of hierarchy and authority.¹⁸

Sed creditis quod populus stat stil ad suas metas? Necquaquam laicus qui nescit litteras intromittet se as fer sicut magister in theologia, non in parvis materiis set in altissimis et maxime periculosis. Et non solum homines, verum eciam mulieres cum suis Anglicis libris smateren hem of clergi cum gaudio et movent pluras questiones.

18. Cf. Sermon 10, p. 263, which invokes the old model of the three estates in its elaboration of the ship of faith: “nostre navis gubernatores, devotum clerum; navis defensores, the manful miliciam; remiges et ministros infra navem, fidelem communitatem”. Compare the (unsuccessful) efforts of the mid-fifteenth century English bishop Reginald Pecock to forge a viable model of appropriate clerk-lay relations in an environment where the laity was no longer unlearned and certainly not uncritical: see James H. Landman, “‘The Doom of Resoun’: Accommodating Lay Interpretation in Late Medieval England”, *Medieval Crime and Social Control*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt and David Wallace, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 90-123.

But do you think that the people stand still at the boundaries? The layman who does not know his letters vainly involves himself as far as a master in theology, not in small matters but in the highest and the most dangerous. Indeed not only men, but true enough women with their English books busy themselves in clerical matters with delight and move many questions (p. 422-423).

Elsewhere in the collection, the homilist attempts to be more pragmatic in his advice to priests. Sermon 10 exhorts preachers to be circumspect in their preaching, especially public preaching, where even a “modica indiscrecio” (“small indiscretion”) can, as it were, “upset the pot of broth”; it is essential, says the homilist, that preachers confine themselves to affective matters stirring devotion rather than dealing with “high matters” of faith:¹⁹

Si docebis aperte plebem tuam, hewe not supra caput tuum, ne capias altas materias que transcendunt ingenium tuum [...]. Cape tales quas sentis et scis farewith, et precipue tales que edificant populum et movent eos ad devocionem. Alias materias que magis ledunt quam edificant, tracta eas aliis temporibus. Set pro apertis sermonibus iacta eos a latere.

If you will teach your people publicly, hew not above your head, lest you take on high matters that transcend your understanding [...]. Take such things that you feel and know well, and especially such as edify the people and move them to devotion. Other matters, those that damage more than they edify, deal with at other times. But for your public sermons put them to one side (p. 270-271).

But even the cleric must be careful not to be self-willed – “noli operari secundum proprias fantasias” – and instead be guided by “true doctrine” when looking to his flock:

19. The emphasis by the politico-ecclesiastical establishment on the appropriateness of affective devotion for the “simple” is commonplace in England at this time: see, for instance, Nicholas Love’s preface to his early fifteenth-century translation of the Pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, ed. Michael G. Sargent, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2004, p. 10 (lines 9-39). Also see Jeremy Catto, “Religious Change under Henry V”, *Henry V: The Practice of Kingship*, ed. G. L. Harriss, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 97-115; Vincent Gillespie, “Chichele’s Church: Vernacular Theology in England after Thomas Arundel”, *After Arundel*, ed. V. Gillespie and K. Ghosh, p. 3-42; *The Pseudo-Bonaventuran Lives of Christ: Exploring the Middle English Tradition*, ed. Ian Johnson and Allan Wesphall, Turnhout, Brepols, 2013; Ian Johnson, *The Middle English Life of Christ: Academic Discourse, Translation and Vernacular Theology*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2013.

[The true guide is] sana doctrina veterum doctorum qui admittuntur et approbantur ab Ecclesia. Ista <...> sana doctrina is bright et clara ab omni errore et heresi et stabilis velud the lodester. [...] Memento iudicii et discrecionis antiquorum doctorum, cape libros eorum and overstudi hem [...].²⁰

[The true guide is] the wise [/healthy] doctrine of the old doctors who are allowed and approved by the Church. This wise [/healthy] doctrine is bright and free from all error and heresy, and steady [/stable] as the lodestar [...]. Remember the judgement and the discretion of the old doctors, take their books and study them [...] (p. 270-273).

However, acknowledges the homilist, contemporary preaching has been vitiated by the hypocrisy and fantasy of the Lollards, and the true example offered by the doctrine of Christ and the holy doctors obscured. Sermon 10 then embarks upon an elaborate allegory of “ritus et religio que regnat in populo” (“the ritual and religious practice that rules among the people”, p. 274-275) as a sea of which the shallow safe waters of true (if basic) doctrine are marked off from the dark dangerous waters of Lollardy and “falsas opiniones” by the altar of the Creed. But, laments the homilist, many lay people wade beyond the altar into “clerimonia scripturis et consuetudinibus Ecclesie” (“clerical knowledge in the scriptures and the customs of the Church”, p. 278-279): the dangerous waters have now become an allegory not of the false opinions of Lollardy but of *clerimonia* itself! Yet again, there is an uneasy if oblique acknowledgement that Lollardy may not be distinguished from healthy clerical learning and doctrine with as much clarity as one might wish, that, indeed, there might be systemic problems in clerical learning itself.

Indeed, the homilist remains fundamentally unsure as to where the precise evil of Lollardy may be located. Sermon 11 appears

20. Note here the close relationship in which are placed “sana doctrina”, the authority of the Fathers and the necessity of the priest to imitate their “discretion”. On the renewed emphasis on patristics which is characteristic of fifteenth-century English establishment religion, see Sheila Lindenbaum, “London after Arundel: Learned Rectors and Strategies of Orthodox Reform”, *After Arundel*, ed. V. Gillespie and K. Ghosh, p. 187-208; R. M. Ball, “The Opponents of Bishop Pecock”, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 48 (1997), p. 230-262; Mishtooni Bose, “The Opponents of John Wyclif”, *A Companion to John Wyclif, Late Medieval Theologian*, ed. Ian Christopher Levy, Leiden, Brill, 2006, p. 407-455. On the earlier (twelfth- and thirteenth-century) history of “discretion”, see Mary E. Ingham, “Discretio”, *Mots Médiévaux*, ed. I. Atucha *et al.*, p. 211-219.

to assert that Lollards prey exclusively on the simple, vulnerable unlearned laity since they are easily vanquished by the learned:

Et supra non audent frangere extra eruditis et bene viventibus, non audent revelare suos errores, partim pro timore, partim quia non expedient. Quid faciunt? Transiunt ad simplices quia nesciunt ipsos intelligere. [...]. [Their errors] circulantur in gay verbis, in derke sentens sacre scripture, et hoc excecatur plures homines.

And they do not dare to break out above, among the learned and upright, they do not dare to reveal their errors, partly for fear, partly because they do not succeed. What do they do? They go over to the simple for they do not understand them [...]. [Their errors] are circulated in gay words, in dark sentences of sacred scripture, and this blinds many men (p. 304-305).

And yet the basic fear that it is the clergy and their learning which are the prime target of the heretics emerges repeatedly: “thai schope hom fecisse Loldariam de clero” (“they planned to make Lollard/y of clergy”, p. 156-157). The tree of faith may indeed flourish through learning, but as there is the implication that this learning has to be of the right kind to be efficacious, an important uncertainty remains. Faith, says the homilist, may flourish either “per honeste talkinge, per sanctorum vitas et bonam exercitacionem” (“through edifying talk, through saints’ lives and good training [/effort]”) or “[per] veram doctrinam et sanctam informacionem” (“[through] true doctrine and holy knowledge [/instruction]”). If our conversation is full of “flores fabulares de immundicia et stulticia” (“fanciful [/fable-like] flowers of impurity and foolishness”), errors and heresies, then we may be sure that our faith is corrupted at the root. Once again, therefore, the homilist asserts that the *full* measure of faith is to be found in its fundamental formulations in the Creed: “credo est pleno mensura fidei” (“the Creed is the full measure of faith”, p. 160-163).

“NOVA LECCIO THEOLOGIAE”

If the Creed is the “pleno mensura fidei”, what then of the entire superstructure of theology as practised at Oxford? The homilist is characteristically undecided and less than pellucid in his engagement with academic theology. Sermon 3, for example, offers us a complex passage which plays with the word “magister”. The

Fall is described in terms of intellectual overreaching rather than disobedience, with the use of *magister* in this context inevitably suggesting university training:

[Man] voluit fuisse magister, primo die voluit fuisse equesciens cum omnisciente. Set quia voluit esse magister fuit diu apprenticius [...], perdidit altam sapienciam quam ei Deus dederat, et indies <inceptit>²¹ laicari magis et magis [...].

Set magister celestis, fons sapiencie, Christus Iesus, dolens stulticiam tam rationalis creature, descendit in scholas Ecclesie ad docendum nos novam leccionem. [...] Neque de grammaticis, neque de logica, nec de astronomia, vel musica. [...] set docuit nos leccionem theologie, nostram fidem. Ista leccio est magis necessaria humane anime quam Oracius vel Ovidius, vel omne poete [...]. Licet non respicias Terencium vel Scotum potes pervenire ad regnum celorum, licet ignoreris Euclidem nec <...> poteris salvari, si nesciveris leccionem fidei indubitanter dampnaberis.

[Man] wanted to be *magister*, on the first day he wanted to have been equal in knowledge with the all-knowing. But because he willed to be *magister* he was an apprentice for a long time [...], he lost the high wisdom that God had given to him, and day by day <began> to be made more and more lay [...].

But the heavenly *magister*, the fount of wisdom, Christ Jesus, lamenting the foolishness of such a rational creature, descended into the schools of the Church to teach us a new lesson. [...] Not of grammar, or logic, or astronomy or music. [...] but he taught us the lesson of theology, our faith. This lesson is more necessary to the human soul than Horace or Ovid, or all the poets [...]. Even if you have never looked at Terence or Scotus you can enter the kingdom of heaven, even if are ignorant of Euclid or <...> you can be saved. If you are ignorant of the lesson of faith you will undoubtedly be damned (p. 90-93).

This passage performs a rather clever intellectual sleight-of-hand. The Fall is first described in terms of inappropriate intellectual (as well as professional) ambition, with the repeated use of the word “magister” gesturing in the direction of the institutional structures of the medieval university. The Fall results in man being “laicised”, being, as it were, expelled not just from Paradise but from the ecclesiastical-scholastic hierarchies of the university.²² The heavenly magister then takes pity on this misguided yet rational creature

21. I have emended the MS “laicari” to “inceptit laicari” here.

22. Note that the word “apprenticius” seems to have had a connotation at around this time as referring specifically to non-clerical professions: see the c. 1420 citation from “Miscellanea relating to Archbishop Scrope”, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975-.

and decides to “descend into the schools of the Church”. At this point, the reader might be forgiven for thinking that the argument would now embrace that venerable old strategy of defending the liberal arts and associated disciplines – since they all, in theory, serve the supreme faculty of theology as devoted *ancillae* – as a necessary, divinely endorsed propaedeutic to the appropriate study of divinity.²³ However, the *nova leccio theologiae* here turns out *not* to be related to such scholastic trajectories – on the contrary, it is polarised *against* the study of grammar or logic, and is identified here with *leccio fidei*. That vast discursive arena of the identity of theology as a science (or otherwise)²⁴ is blandly sidestepped. The homilist is thus rhetorically able simultaneously to defend the *scholas ecclesiae* – since God, the first magister, informs them – and to dismiss their intellectual or curricular content as irrelevant to “faith”. The precise status of institutionalised scholastic theological endeavour in relation to the “faithful” apprehension of God remains, in this suggestive sketch, wholly ambiguous.²⁵

The homilist’s conflicted attitude to learning, arising out of a simultaneous desire to defend the larger framework of clerkly authority and the awkward necessity to address the burgeoning problems therein, informs an extended passage on the boundary between learning and curiosity. Commenting on Ezekiel 1: 1-28, the homilist offers an exegesis of the four beasts:

Aquila que est acuto visu et volatu designat summos clericos qui alis clerimonie et sciencie volant in cognicionem Dei, et clarius aliis intuentur solem continue volans. Homo designat contemplativos, sanctos homines qui fugiunt et despiciunt bestialem vitam, vivunt per racionem et virtutem ut homo. Domini qui miscent interdum

23. See Ilsetraut Hadot, *Arts libéraux et philosophie dans la pensée antique: contribution à l’histoire de l’éducation et de la culture dans l’Antiquité*, Paris, J. Vrin (“Textes et traditions”), 2006.

24. On which subject, see Ulrich Köpf, *Die Anfänge der theologischen Wissenschaftstheorie im 13. Jahrhundert*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1974.

25. Compare Wyclif’s own complicated musings on this subject in *De statu innocencie*: see *Tractatus de mandatis divinis et de statu innocencie*, ed. J. Loserth and F. D. Matthew, London, Wyclif Society, 1922, p. 495-498. For discussion, see Kantik Ghosh, “Logic and Lollardy”, *Medium Aevum*, 76 (2007), p. 251-267. Also worth mentioning here as a point of contrast are the more straightforward academic sermons in praise of theology (sometimes referred to as *introitus*) delivered at Oxford in this period: see Siegfried Wenzel, “Academic Sermons at Oxford in the Early Fifteenth Century”, *Speculum*, 70 (1995), p. 305-329.

pietatem cum crudelitate figurantur per leonem. Set artifices et operarii figurantur per bovem.

The eagle, which is sharp of sight and flight, stands for the highest clerks who with the wings of priestly [/clerkly] learning and knowledge fly high into the understanding of God and they, flying continually, see the sun more clearly than others. Man stands for the contemplatives, the holy men who flee and despise the bestial life, they live by reason and virtue as man. The lords who sometimes mix piety with warfare [/cruelty] are represented by the lion. But the artisans and workers are represented by the ox (p. 170-171).

There is an implicit hierarchical ordering in this passage: high clerical *sciencia*, aligned with the eagle (and St John), is seemingly placed above contemplative holiness in its access to an appropriate *cognicio Dei*. Yet, this apparently clear endorsement of *clerimonia et sciencia* is immediately followed by a passage quite different in suggestion. The wings of the allegorical beasts stand, we are told, for “racio” and “intellectus” by means of which man “volare potest in cognitionem et amorem Domini Dei” (“can fly in the knowledge and love of the Lord God”). But however capable one’s wings, one must abide by the limits, for however swiftly one might be able to fly, one would not be able to transcend the limits of natural reason: “non potes transire firmamentum per rationem naturalem” (“you cannot pass beyond the sky by natural reason”). When the ordained limits of natural reason are transgressed, i.e. when one attempts to leave behind the seven sciences which have been ordained “ad occupandum humanum sensum” (the author suggests as examples what we would call biology, meteorology and astronomy) and engage with the higher mysteries of divinity, our senses would be dulled by the least of the sciences: “minima scienciarum vult ipsum hebetare”. The least point of the Creed is far beyond the limited capacities of our intellect (“meta humani intellectus”); hence one must then desist from argumentation and reason, here reprehensibly aligned with “fantasias”. The Lollards, laments the homilist, failed to do this, and thus fell into uncertainty:

Quid fecit, queso, omnes istos hereticos et Lollardos certe mobilitum, waveryng, et instabilitum in fide? Noluerunt [...] stare determinacioni Ecclesie. Sed ad magnificandum nomen sumpserunt singulares opiniones, [...] mountid so hye in litteratura et clerimonia quousque deciderunt in manifestam heresim et errorem.

What, I ask, made all these heretics and Lollards so changeable, wavering, and unstable in faith? They would not [...] stand by the

determination of the Church. But, to magnify their name they espoused singular opinions, [...] mounted so high in letters and priestly [/clerkly] knowledge that they fell into open heresy and error (p. 172-173).

Once again, the sermon seems unclear as to whether the current problems besieging the faith have to do with the “misuse” of *litteratura et clerimonia*, or whether, much more troublingly, such learning and knowledge are, in their essence, to be aligned with *fantasia*. In other words, is the basic problematic one of hierarchy, of a violated religio-intellectual order, or is it epistemic, to do with the fundamental project of academic theology itself?

As with some other controversial writings produced at this time in a similar milieu,²⁶ there is a thwarted socio-epistemic endeavour at the heart of the sermons. They make a recurrent attempt to suggest a rigorous distinction between an idealised *clerimonia* and a pure, reformed clerical establishment on the one hand and an unlettered, unquestioning, pious, faithful realm of lay devotion on the other. At the same time, they cannot but acknowledge that neither of these above categories exists in practice: there is no uncompromised realm of clerical learning since Wycliffism began at its very heart; neither is there a pious and unquestioning laity who can be expected to confine themselves to the limits of faith so obsessively invoked across the collection. The rhetoric of these sermons therefore repeatedly and inevitably results in an impasse; they invoke ideal models (of a pure theology; of social and intellectual limits; of clerk-lay relations) which they have to dismantle almost immediately. Their favoured vocabulary, which they themselves at times recognise as archaic – for example, in the association of *laicus* and *illiteratus*, of *clerimonia* and a stable, certain faith – raises as many problems as it attempts to circumvent. The category of “heresy”, too, increasingly turns out to be a two-edged sword; once invoked as a weapon against those who appear to dissent from inherited hierarchical and epistemic norms and models, it can very easily be turned against its deployer – where, after all, does “heresy” end, and “true” learning begin, in the murky sea of faith (to recall the homilist’s image from Sermon 10)? The University of Oxford

26. Compare the long cycle of English Wycliffite Sermons: for discussion, see K. Ghosh, *Wycliffite Heresy*, p. 112-146; see also Nicholas Watson’s discussion of Hugh Legat, a Benedictine from St Albans, in “A clerke schulde have it of kinde to kepe counsel”, *After Arundel*, ed. V. Gillespie and K. Ghosh, p. 563-589.

and its theological magisterium (those “sovereyn clericus qui habent honorabile nomen doctoris”, p. 213) can therefore neither be straightforwardly lauded as defenders of the faith – too much has happened for that particular idealism to be sustained without irony – nor dismissed outright, for that, after all, is what one’s “heretical” opponents have been doing. “Reform”, too, proves elusive the moment one leaves behind the crudities of religious and social hierarchy, and its associated coercions, and enters into the open-ended *dubia* of faith; and in any case, the sermons seem undecided as to which reform is required – that of an overreaching laity, that of the clerical practitioners of theology, or far more complexly and intractably, that of theology itself? The last question is of course the most problematic in its epistemic implications, and one with which Jean Gerson famously tussled. Indeed, one could argue without too much exaggeration that the phenomenon of John Wyclif had made impossible the emergence of an English Jean Gerson. A direct, systematic and sustained theoretical and polemical engagement with scholastic theology and its methods on the Gersonian scale would have been likely perceived, in a post-Wyclif England, as too close to “heresy” for comfort (as indeed Reginald Pecock would later discover to his cost). Instead, what we witness in writings from this fraught period of English religious and intellectual controversy is a profound and suppressed anxiety which can neither be evaded nor, given what is at stake, confronted directly.²⁷ For what is at stake is nothing less than the scholastic theological enterprise itself and its vast and powerful institutional formations. The *flos Oxoniae* had finally given rise to some very strange fruit indeed.

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27. The one remarkable exception, as indicated above, was Bishop Reginald Pecock, and he was condemned for heresy for his pains: for an introductory account, see Wendy Scase, “Reginald Pecock”, *Authors of the Middle Ages, III: nos. 7-11*, ed. M. C. Seymour, Aldershot, Variorum, 1996, p. 75-146; Vivian Green, *Bishop Reginald Pecock: A Study in Ecclesiastical History and Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1945.