

A STUDY OF JOHN WICLIF:
HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
AND HIS INFLUENCE UPON GEOFFREY CHAUCER

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TO MY WIFE,
MARJORIE HALL,
AND
OUR THREE CHILDREN,
GERALD, RONALD, DIANA

PREFACE

Wiclif's place in the intellectual history of fourteenth-century England has not been fully understood or explored. Primarily, historians mention his temporary religious ideas of reform but fail to stress his lasting contribution to church history. Similarly, a study of Middle English briefly considers his vernacular prose, but he is quickly eclipsed by the concentration on more well established literary works. Undoubtedly, Wiclif suffers neglect in research without proper credit for his varied achievements and contributions.

The present study attempts to present Wiclif's involvement in the events of his age, to suggest some of his lasting contributions toward the development of the English language, and to explore the areas of influence upon his contemporary, Geoffrey Chaucer. A brief description of the society of England during the latter part of the fourteenth century has been included, for in this society Wiclif struggled for the religious principles that he courageously maintained. Since he chose to use the vernacular to take his religious ideas to the common man, his role in the resurgence of the English language as an acceptable medium

of literary and religious expression is traced. However, the major emphasis of this study is directed toward an explanation of Wiclif's influence upon Chaucer.

Unfortunately, the attempt to identify Chaucer as a follower of Wiclif has been so incisively rebuffed that the relationship of the Reformer and the Poet has been obscured. Nevertheless, many modern scholars have conceded that, in many of his ideas, Chaucer concurred with Wiclif's criticism of the religious system and practice of his day. In the personal copy of Thomas Arnold's The Select English Works of John Wyclif, John M. Manly penciled in the margins and in the back of the volumes some references to Chaucer. These references helped to focus attention upon comparative ideas, descriptions, and expressions of the two writers. In addition to The Select English Works of John Wyclif, the author included material from F. D. Matthew's The English Works of Wyclif and F. N. Robinson's The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer in an effort to determine the influence that the brilliant religious reformer, John Wiclif, had upon the foremost fourteenth-century literary figure in English, Geoffrey Chaucer.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE	iii
CHAPTER	
I. JOHN WICLIF AND HIS TIMES	1
II. JOHN WICLIF'S INFLUENCE UPON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE	24
III. WICLIF'S INFLUENCE UPON CHAUCER	45
IV. WICLIF AND CHAUCER: A SUMMARY AND REVIEW	92
BIBLIOGRAPHY	99

CHAPTER I

JOHN WICLIF AND HIS TIMES

A prevailing characteristic of the medieval age is the failure to record or preserve many important details necessary for a complete grasp of the period and the great men molding and reflecting its society. As one investigates the voluminous records, he may hear a voice, but may only see a shadowy spectre of the speaker. This voice may exuberate with ideas and events, but beyond a name, it has little to transmit about itself. For a knowledge of the person behind the voice, one must reconstruct his image from the varied writings.

Little is actually known about the person of John Wiclif. Perhaps, he is to be blamed, for he has little to say about himself, although it was a general characteristic of his age to omit almost all personal references.¹ Consequently, factual information such as the place and time of his birth, the identity of his parents, and his rearing may be lost forever. Recent scholarship assigns him to

¹J. H. Dahmus, "John Wiclif and the English Government," Speculum, XXXV (January, 1960), 58.

middle-class parentage and places his birth in Yorkshire about 1330.² Most of his life was associated with Oxford University as a teacher and preacher. The first certain fact known about him is that he was Master of Balliol College in 1360.³ Shortly thereafter in 1362, he was provided with the prebend of Aust, where he served as a parish priest. By 1362, he had gained a reputation as a great scholar and theologian, and, according to Knighton, a chronicler unfriendly to Wiclif, was "second to none in philosophy, and without peer in the learning of the school."⁴ Obtaining a license for non-residency on August 29, 1363, he subsequently returned to Queen's College at Oxford to complete his doctorate in theology, which he received about 1372.⁵ Scholars normally identify Wiclif as the Warden of Canterbury Hall in 1365. Canterbury Hall, a house for secular and regular clergy at Oxford founded by Archbishop Islip in 1361, was made entirely secular at the time of Wiclif's appointment as Warden; however, when Simon Langham, a monk, was appointed archbishop, the monk who had been removed was restored, and Wiclif's appeal to the Pope for

²J. H. Dahmus, The Prosecution of John Wyclif, p. 1.

³F. D. Matthew (ed.), The English Works of Wyclif, p. iii.

⁴Quoted in ibid., p. iv.

⁵Herbert B. Workman, John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval Church, I, 156; 21.

reinstatement was considered, but the decision was unfavorable.⁶ Wiclif was condemned for his failure to provide a vicar for the prebend at Aust in 1366, but in spite of this censure for neglect, he retained the prebend and was granted the rectory of Lutterworth on April 7, 1374.⁷ On February 19, 1377, Wiclif was summoned to St. Paul's Cathedral to stand trial for heresy; however, when nothing came of the trial, Pope Gregory issued on May 22, 1377, a series of bulls against Wiclif, forwarding what was considered to have been eighteen erroneous doctrines taught by the Reformer.⁸ Later, in March, 1378, Wiclif was tried before an episcopal tribunal at Lambeth. Once again, the trial was ineffective against Wiclif; however, he was requested to leave Oxford in 1382, returning to Lutterworth where he lived until his death on the last day of 1384.⁹

There can be no doubt that Wiclif stands as one of the great men of his time as well as in succeeding centuries. Dahmus' reference to Wiclif as "just another clerk" hardly does justice to a man whose ideas shook the foundations of his society.¹⁰ It is more conceivable to recognize him as

⁶Matthew, op. cit., p. iv.

⁷Workman, op. cit., I, 21.

⁸Ibid., I, 294.

⁹John Stacey, John Wyclif and Reform, p. 10.

¹⁰Dahmus, op. cit., p. 66.

a pioneer without predecessors: he is among the earliest of the great reformers; he is the first to translate the entire Bible into English; and he is among those scholars who wrote to the English nation in the vernacular.¹¹

Furthermore, his ideas continued to live and affect succeeding generations, both in England and on the continent. The Lollards, an ardent religious sect ascribing Wiclif as their leader, continued fervently to propagate the doctrines expounded by Wiclif until the movement eventually merged with the new Protestantism in the Reformation.¹² Moreover, in Bohemia, John Hus expounded Wiclif's ideas to his country.¹³ Later, Martin Luther, the great German reformer, was directly or indirectly influenced by the ideas of the English reformer.¹⁴ Furthermore, one concludes that in addition to being a respected schoolman, Wiclif was a great religious thinker, a powerful preacher, and an efficient organizer.¹⁵ As a schoolman, preacher, and reformer, Wiclif is rightly considered the foremost man of his age.

¹¹W. Mallard, "John Wyclif and the Tradition of Biblical Authority," Church History, XXX (March, 1961), 50.

¹²George M. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe, p. 350.

¹³Ibid., p. 352.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 353.

¹⁵Workman, op. cit., II, 321.

To understand Wiclif fully, one must understand the culture of his time. Unfortunately, for centuries historians classified the Middle Age as one lacking in vigor and in originality of thought; however, this view has changed considerably. The investigation and publication of texts in recent years have brought about a virtually complete reversal of the concept that life was dull, slothful, and unproductive. On the contrary, it maintains that man was struggling socially, politically, and religiously to alter the ills of injustice and iniquity, and to establish a new equilibrium in his increasingly restless world.

During Wiclif's public life, from about 1358 to 1384, most of the people were identified as nobles or peasants. Although a middle class of merchants, craftsmen, and landowners did exist, it had not developed into an influential force. The nobility, intrigued by politics and upper class behavior, fared well, but the peasants suffered because of their arduous tasks in the system of serfdom that suppressed the individual, forbidding him to leave the land.¹⁶ Furthermore, the peasant was socially dependent upon his landlord, who consented to marriages, assigned work, and decided educational opportunities for any peasant's son.¹⁷ Under

¹⁶K. H. Vickers, England in the Later Middle Ages, p. 254.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 254.

these rigorous conditions, many serfs fled from the country to the cities for freedom.¹⁸ The terrible Black Death, which afflicted heavy loss of human life in England, aided the tenants in their struggle against the dying system of serfdom by creating a critical labor shortage. With fewer workers, the peasants demanded more rights and, with moderate success, often organized to obtain redress of their grievances.¹⁹

In the cities, the workers were no more content, feeling the oppression of the manorial system.²⁰ Moreover, the status of a craftsman was changing from that of an independent worker to that of an employee of some wealthy person.²¹ These conditions and restrictions encouraged the employees to band together to maintain fair wages, thus generating the early formation of trade-unions. At the same time, mobs of unskilled workers, who in their dissatisfaction were always disposed against the vested interests, were prowling in the cities.

Politically, England was disturbed over the failure of the intermittent war with France, bad government, and

¹⁸Ibid., p. 253.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 255.

²⁰Loc. cit.

²¹Ibid., p. 265.

suspected corrupt leaders.²² The great Peasants' Revolt, which occurred throughout England in 1381, clearly substantiates the evidence of the latent, explosive dissatisfaction prevalent in the nation. Although this disastrous rebellion soon collapsed, there continued to be sporadic revolts throughout the reign of Richard II.²³

Similarly, church corruption, of which Wiclif was the most audible protestor, was keenly felt throughout England in the latter part of the fourteenth century. Outwardly, the religious "sects"--friars, monks, hermits--were pious, holy men, dedicated to a life of poverty for Christ; however, in reality, Wiclif considered many churchmen to be of unscrupulous behavior.²⁴ He believed that the churchmen enjoyed a life of ease, while the populace endured a life of hardship. Therefore, he first attacked the corrupt practices of the clergy.²⁵ However, he was not alone in denouncing these abuses.²⁶ There is a critical reflection in Langland's Vision of Piers Plowman (c. 1362), condemning the practice of elevating inferior men into the

²²Loc. cit.

²³Ibid., p. 260.

²⁴J. J. Jusserand, English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages, p. 69.

²⁵Mallard, op. cit., p. 58.

²⁶Jusserand, op. cit., p. 169.

church offices: "And sith bondemenne barnes han be mad
bisshopes,/ And barnes bastardes han ben archidekenes. . . ."27

Neither did the disastrous and degrading practices of the parsons, friars, and pardoners escape the apt pen of Chaucer, for his unstinted praise of the "poor parson" indicates his growing concern over needed reforms and, perhaps, his agreement with Wiclif.²⁸ Furthermore, the political literature which came into being at the close of the fourteenth century accused the parish priest of neglect in his duties and greed for wealth and ease.²⁹ Thus, during a turbulent moment in the social, political, and religious history of England, John Wiclif made his contributions to the English nation through the role of a religious reformer. He believed that, through the church, an answer for social and political ills could be found.³⁰ However, he believed that the church first had to be reformed in its practices, government, and doctrine; therefore, he advised that the government first should purge the church, and, in turn, the church would purge society.³¹

²⁷Quoted in Kenneth Sisam, Fourteenth-Century Verse and Prose, p. 92.

²⁸John S. P. Tatlock, "Chaucer and Wyclif," MP, XIV (September, 1916), 259.

²⁹Vickers, op. cit., p. 231.

³⁰Sisam, op. cit., p. xxviii.

³¹Loc. cit.

One may divide Wiclif's public career into three periods.³² His earliest activities, from 1358 to 1372, included his years as a scholar and schoolman, giving typical lectures at Oxford. Next, there is his ecclesiastical-political period, from 1373 to about 1379, during which he served the government in its dispute with the church. Finally, from 1379, to his death in 1384, he attacked the orthodox teaching of the sacrament and started the program to educate religiously the common people in the vernacular.³³

In his early years at Oxford, and, as late as 1374, Wiclif was not considered a threat to the established church.³⁴ In addition to his involvement at Oxford, he entered the King's service in 1371 or 1372, where his ideas reflected a gradual but firm resistance to the hierarchy of the church. His opposition follows a developmental pattern: the prelates, friars, orthodox theology, ecclesiastical scandals of the church system, and, finally, the dogmas upon which the church system was built.³⁵ Although a logical development of his opposition to the church is evident, one does not find evidence of a formulated plan. It is probable that, when Wiclif entered into the service

³²S. H. Thomson, "Philosophical Basis of Wyclif's Theology," Journal of Religion, XI (January, 1931), 92.

³³Thomson, op. cit., p. 92.

³⁴Ward and Waller (eds.), CHEL, II, 50.

³⁵Vickers, op. cit., p. 231.

of the crown, he had no thoughts as to where his unorthodox ideas would lead him, for in later life, he confessed frankly that he had committed mistakes in his youth while struggling to find the real truth.³⁶ Even though minor vagaries in his thoughts do appear, it is clear that the logical and trained mind of the great schoolman followed a consistent approach to his eventual conclusions of reform; that is, he proceeded from an attack on specific abuses to a challenge of the system that produced those abuses.³⁷

In making his earliest accusation against corrupt government within the church, Wiclif opposed the clergy receiving endowment and possessing property. Repeatedly, he stated that temporal lords were entitled to landed property, but that churchmen had no such right, because he felt they should serve in poverty on the gifts from loyal laymen.³⁸ Moreover, Wiclif argued that the church could only have dominion over land as alms from the state, and the secular government should have all civil dominion in the realm.³⁹ One observes that the motive in his attack against clerical ownership was evident: the possession of worldly property

³⁶Thomson, op. cit., p. 89.

³⁷Loc. cit.

³⁸Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 199.

³⁹H. Kaminsky, "Wyclifism as Ideology of Revolution," Church History, XXXII (March, 1963), 64; 67.

corrupts and hinders the church in its mission to preach the gospel. He charged the clergy with willful deception through rents from properties in his Of Feigned Contemplative Life: "And principaly þes ypocritis þat han rentes, and wordly lordischipes, and parische chirchis approprid to hem, a3enst Holy Writt boþe old and newe. . . ."40 Included in Wiclif's complaints were the abuses in granting indulgences, the prevalence of simony, the abuse of tithing, and the militant attitude of the church.⁴¹ Furthermore, he objected to the elaborate rituals in the church, the display of prayers, the intoning of priests, and the songs which appeal to the "lykyng in here bodely eris in sick knackyng and tatoryng, þan in heryng of Goddis lawe, and spekyng of þe blisse of heuene."⁴² Essentially, Wiclif advocated that the church should return to the simple preaching of the Scriptures.

Later, after Wiclif had received his doctorate of theology in 1372, he entered into the services of the government to oppose the sending of church money to Rome.⁴³ At this time, when money was desperately needed for the

⁴⁰Sisam, op. cit., p. 122.

⁴¹Hardin Craig, A History of English Literature, p. 125.

⁴²Sisam, op. cit., p. 124.

⁴³Vickers, op. cit., p. 231.

burden of war, of pestilence, and of the poverty-stricken economy, Wiclif was requested to participate in a debate in which he supported the popular cause in England.⁴⁴ In his alliance with the government, Wiclif preached in the churches of London against the wealth, luxury, and worldliness of the clergy, and, as a result, he achieved the sympathy of the majority of the citizens, who had long been aware of the abuses of the church leaders and the encumbrance of church taxation.⁴⁵ Whether Wiclif's participation in the debate over church taxation or the views he expressed in his De Civili Dominio precipitated his summons to St. Paul's, he nevertheless entered the cathedral to stand trial for heresy on February 19, 1377, accompanied by the Duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt.⁴⁶ However, this trial abruptly ended when Gaunt and William Courteney, Bishop of London, became involved in a bitter dispute that ignited a riot of the populace against Gaunt.⁴⁷ As a result, Wiclif was saved from the judgment of the council.

After the failure of the church to silence Wiclif at St. Paul's, Pope Gregory issued a series of bulls in the latter part of May, 1377, calling for the arrest of the

⁴⁴Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 54.

⁴⁵Workman, op. cit., I, 282.

⁴⁶J. H. Dahmus, The Prosecution of John Wyclif, p. 22.

⁴⁷Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 45.

Reformer.⁴⁸ While these edictions cited eighteen heresies perpetrated by Wiclif, the real struggle focused on the rivalry between England and Rome, between church and state.⁴⁹ Workman asserts that the Pope's proceedings against Wiclif was a deliberate attempt to establish the papal inquisition in England.⁵⁰ These condemned "Conclusions" reveal that most of them could be found in De Civili Dominio in which Wiclif advocated the superiority of the state in secular affairs and the purification of the church by civil authorities. In December, 1377, Bishops Courteney and Sudbury, two opponents of Wiclif, presented a papal bull to the authorities at Oxford demanding Wiclif's arrest.⁵¹ Desiring to acknowledge the edict, and at the same time remain favorable toward the Reformer, the officials at the University and Wiclif reached an agreement that Wiclif would be under house arrest at Black Hall at Oxford.⁵² Later, however, he was summoned by the Pope before an episcopal tribunal at Lambeth to answer, once again, the charges of heresy; nevertheless, although a popular demonstration in favor of Wiclif erupted in the early stages of the trials,

⁴⁸Workman, op. cit., p. 294.

⁴⁹Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 80.

⁵⁰Workman, op. cit., I, 295.

⁵¹Trevelyan, op. cit.,

⁵²Ibid., p. 84.

bringing them to an ignominious end, the king's mother sent word to the bishops forbidding them to take any action against him, thus assuring triumph for the Reformer.⁵³ On the other hand, Dahmus contends that the government did not protect or befriend Wiclif, but that the Reformer's governmental protection was almost entirely a result of the personal interest of Gaunt, who saved Wiclif at St. Paul's.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Dahmus speculates that Gaunt influenced the mother of Richard II to nullify the trials at Lambeth.⁵⁵ While Gaunt must be credited with an active role in Wiclif's defense, one cannot logically assume that Gaunt, alone, was giving support to the Reformer. Trevelyan indicates that Wiclif's popularity with the government, as well as with the people, is clearly illustrated by his service to the crown while under papal ban, for it was at the request of the King that Wiclif replied to the urgent question of papal taxation of the English churches.⁵⁶ Moreover, Dahmus carefully states that the rejection of Wiclif's arguments that were contained in his Responsio (1377 or 1378), was not a repudiation of Wiclif himself.⁵⁷ One notes that Wiclif

⁵³Ibid., p. 85.

⁵⁴Dahmus, op. cit., p. 68; 54.

⁵⁵Loc. cit.

⁵⁶Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 82.

⁵⁷Dahmus, op. cit., p. 61.

continued to enjoy the favor of the government, for he served the government in the fall of 1378, taking part in the debates over the right of Sanctuary.⁵⁸

Contending that Sanctuary was illegal, he strongly defended the right of officers to enter precincts to arrest criminals, but, regardless of his arguments and the endeavors of those concurring with his views, Parliament passed only an ineffective law concerning debtors taking Sanctuary.⁵⁹ With the conclusion of these debates, Wiclif's recorded royal services ended.⁶⁰ Dissatisfied with the law and agitated over the apparent reconciliation between church and state, he, consequently, published a pamphlet known as De Officio Regis (c1379) in which he argued that the church should be under the state, which, he proclaimed, must act as the guardian of the church, purging it of corruption and inefficiency. Furthermore, he proposed an English church governed by the king, rather than the international church ruled by Rome.⁶¹

Workman observes that Wiclif's service to the crown brought the Reformer into direct conflict with two principles of his own teaching: first, that clerics should not engage

⁵⁸Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 95.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 96.

⁶⁰Dahmus, op. cit., p. 64.

⁶¹Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 97.

in secular duties and, secondly, that absenteeism should be abolished.⁶² While Wiclif's neglect of his duties at the prebend at Aust is evident, Workman notes that his absenteeism may have been a result of the scarcity of vicars during these years.⁶³ Later, after his appointment as priest of Lutterworth, Wiclif was again an absentee, but, on this particular occasion, he obviously made the necessary provision for the parish. Although his actions and teachings were not always congruous, one can consider these situations relatively unimportant in the life of a man who was highly esteemed by his contemporaries, not for his intellect alone, but for his moral character and personal integrity as well.⁶⁴

While this is not primarily a theological study it is necessary to examine some of the theological influences that shaped his political ideas regarding the church. For the most part, Wiclif borrowed his doctrines of Dominion from Richard Fitzralph, Bishop of Armagh, who proposed an ideal society based upon the giving of possession and lordship by grace.⁶⁵ Expanding the ideas of Fitzralph, Wiclif advocated that no sinful man was entitled to hold dominion, but that everyone in the grace of God possesses lordship over the

⁶²Workman, op. cit., I, 217.

⁶³Ibid., p. 163.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 321.

⁶⁵Ibid., I, 31.

entire universe, and, the present laws, he maintained, were the results of sin, and they should be replaced by the simple law of the New Testament.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Wiclif is indebted to Fitzralph for his authority in denouncing the friars. Not only did Wiclif borrow from Fitzralph, but also from other churchmen of his day. For example, from Occam, he embraced the idea of the priest living in poverty; from Robert Grosseteste, the reforming Bishop of Lincoln, he obtained his denunciation of pluralities as well as an opposition to the papal power in England.⁶⁷ With Thomas Bradwardine, whom Wiclif proclaimed as "Doctor Profundus", the Reformer concurred in the doctrine of predestination as expounded by St. Augustine.⁶⁸ Although Wiclif accepted the doctrine of Bradwardine that nothing is evil per se, he did not agree with Bradwardine's interpretation that God is the cause of every action, including sin; on the contrary, Wiclif believed that man had some part in the determining cause of God's will.⁶⁹ Perhaps, the Bible was the greatest source of influence upon the ideas of the Reformer, because he held the Holy Scriptures to be his absolute authority.

⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 260; 262.

⁶⁷Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 172.

⁶⁸Workman, op. cit., I, 115.

⁶⁹Ibid., II, 125.

Toward the end of his ecclesiastical-political period, Wiclif came into conflict with the two basic doctrines which kept medieval man in the bounds of the church, the "power of the keys" and the doctrine concerning the Eucharist, both of which he came to oppose, thus striking at the very roots of the church; therefore, his opposition to the orthodox view of these cardinal tenets marked the beginning of his final endeavors.⁷⁰ According to the interpretation of the medieval Church, the doctrine of the keys refers to the claim of the Church to the successor of the Apostle Peter, to whom Jesus said, "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loose in heaven" (Matthew 16:19, King James Version). Hence, using the weapon of excommunication, the Church claimed to have power to save or damn.⁷¹ Tatlock states that Wiclif arrived at his rejection of excommunication because of the numerous abuses.⁷² At first, he only complained of the abuse of the doctrine, but soon he denied the power of priest, or pope, to bind or loose.⁷³

⁷⁰Tatlock, op. cit., p. 258.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 263.

⁷²Ibid., p. 264.

⁷³Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 141.

Although for several years Wiclif was outspoken against the "power of the keys," he continued to maintain the support of his many friends and his following among the masses until he attacked the orthodox view of transubstantiation. Even though he had struggled for some time with this basic tenet, his denial of this cardinal doctrine appeared to have been formulated during his two seemingly quiet years of 1379 and 1380 at Oxford.⁷⁴ Because of his realistic views, he did not believe that the substance of the Mass had changed; furthermore, he thought it blasphemous that any corrupt priest could effect the miracle of transforming the body of Christ, and, also, he objected to the idea that the power of the Church rested upon the ability of the priest to give or withhold the body and blood of Christ.⁷⁵ Moreover, Wiclif felt that the common people through ignorance would be diverted from true worship by believing in a corporeal presence in the Mass.⁷⁶

Therefore, in his attack on transubstantiation in 1380, Wiclif clearly repudiated the complete system of the Roman Church, resulting in a small council at Oxford in 1381 which examined him for his view of transubstantiation, and subsequently found him guilty; however, he remained firm in

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 98.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 174.

⁷⁶Vickers, op. cit., p. 262.

his opinions.⁷⁷ John of Gaunt visited him at Oxford to silence him on the new doctrine, but Wiclif continued his teachings. Then, on May 17, 1382, a special committee met at Blackfriars and found ten of the twenty-four "Conclusions" from Wiclif's works heretical and the rest erroneous.⁷⁸ Reluctantly, the authorities at Oxford asked him to leave. He retired to his prebend in Lutterworth, where he refined his ideas toward restoration of the simplicity of doctrine, as well as worship within the church. Moreover, his sympathy for the friars in their fundamental ideas of poverty had earlier led him to organize his "poor priests" about 1377.⁷⁹ One finds some discussion regarding the fact that Wiclif may have commissioned the "poor priests" or that some of his zealous followers at Oxford may have originated the movement; however, most scholars assume that Wiclif was directly responsible for the reform movement. For example, Trevelyan recognizes that the Lollards, the name by which the "poor priests" came to be known, preached Wiclif's doctrines, but he is not certain if these priests had Wiclif's approval or commission.⁸⁰ On the other hand, McFarlane suggests that

⁷⁷Emile Legories and Louis Cazamian, History of English Literature, p. 105.

⁷⁸John Stacey, John Wyclif and Reform, p. 49.

⁷⁹Ward and Waller, op. cit., p. 57.

⁸⁰Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 292.

the Lollard movement was the work of younger hotheads at Oxford.⁸¹ Regardless of Wiclif's active involvement in the movement, there is indisputable evidence that the inspiration behind it was his. These "poor priests", moving from place to place with staff in hand, barefoot, in long russet gowns of coarse woolen, entered any church which allowed them to pray or preach, or often they preached in churchyards, marketplaces, or any place they could gather an audience.⁸² Constantly, Wiclif urged his priests to preach the gospel, a duty he felt most praiseworthy for all ministers.⁸³ Furthermore, the Reformer stressed that the priest should strive more for simple piety than for scholarly learning.⁸⁴

One finds it difficult to determine the extent of the Lollard movement in England, but he can ascertain that it was extensive, for many of the nobles and merchants, as well as the peasants, supported the movement. For example, according to the Leicester monk, every second man in his area was a Lollard; although this reference cannot be treated as a statistical fact, it is, nevertheless,

⁸¹K. B. McFarlane, John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity, p. 101.

⁸²Henry Morley, English Writers, p. 69.

⁸³Stacey, op. cit., p. 82.

⁸⁴Ward and Waller, op. cit., p. 57.

indicative of the strength of the movement.⁸⁵ Lollardry rapidly grew in the western part of England, gaining strong followings in the dioceses of Hereford and Worcester, as well as in the districts of Monmouth, Gloucester, Wiltshire, Berkshire, and, extended its influence into the south in the district of Sussex.⁸⁶

Although Wiclif failed to achieve his reforms on a national scale, his ideas continued to find permanent support in the hearts of Englishmen for centuries to come. Furthermore, his influence reached outside England, and in many respects, was greater than in his own country. After the marriage of Richard II to Anne of Bohemia, scholars who came from the University of Prague to Oxford carried home manuscripts of Wiclif's theological works.⁸⁷ As a result, the Hussite movement in Bohemia was born when John Hus expounded Wiclif's doctrines until he was burned at the stake during the Council of Constance in 1415. In turn, the Hussite movement affected the German Reformation under Martin Luther, whose ideas later exerted a direct influence upon the Church in England. During his last years, Wiclif received a citation to Rome, but he was unable to travel

⁸⁵Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 319.

⁸⁶Workman, op. cit., I, 12.

⁸⁷Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 262.

because of a stroke that left him partly paralyzed.⁸⁸

Perhaps John of Gaunt protected Wiclif from severe persecution by the hierarchy of the Church, for he was neither excommunicated, imprisoned, nor martyred, but he died in peace on the last day of 1384, at his parish in Lutterworth where he was buried in consecrated ground.⁸⁹

⁸⁸Stacey, op. cit., p. 12.

⁸⁹Workman, op. cit., I, 279.

CHAPTER II

JOHN WICLIF'S INFLUENCE UPON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

For more than two hundred years after the Norman Conquest in 1066, the English language was considered to be the language of the ignorant; therefore, French and Latin were considered the literary languages of the country.⁹⁰ However, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in England, political and social conditions developed which fostered the re-establishment of English as the language of the country. Shortly after 1200, the English lost Normandy to France, and, as a result, many of the nobility who held estates in both Normandy and England were forced to decide which properties they were willing to surrender. The king of France confiscated the lands of several nobles who chose to remain in England, while some nobles were able to retain their holdings by dividing their estates among their families. Nevertheless, the separation between England and the continent continually accelerated until, by the year 1250, the nobility of England could no longer

⁹⁰Jusserand, op. cit., p. 213.

consider itself anything but English.⁹¹ Later, during the Hundred Years' War, the hostility between France and England produced a mutual feeling of animosity, and Englishmen recognized French as the language of an enemy country. Along with these developments, a national reaction arose in England against the many favors bestowed by Henry III upon foreigners who came into England. This national feeling, "England for the English," tended to create a respectability for English as opposed to other languages.⁹² In spite of the fact that the upper classes in England continued to speak French during the thirteenth century, English gradually became the native tongue of many of the nobility; therefore, by 1300, French had diminished to a cultivated language used in social circles, business, and administration. Thus, English became widely utilized not only by the peasantry but also by the gentility during the fourteenth century.⁹³

During this century, an improvement in the condition of the masses and the rise of a large middle class created a favorable atmosphere for the elevation of English. The Black Death caused such a shortage of laborers that those who remained demanded greater wages and better working

⁹¹A. C. Baugh, A History of the English Language, p. 160.

⁹²Ibid., p. 157.

⁹³Ibid., pp. 164-165.

conditions.⁹⁴ At the same time, the growth in the number of craftsmen and merchants formed a substantial middle class that was clothed with wealth and power. This rise in the status of the lower, English-speaking part of the population could only help recover some prestige for the English language.⁹⁵

Concurrent with the political and social changes affecting the resurgence of the English language, scholars and theologians, as well as governmental leaders, were turning from the widespread use of Latin to the vernacular.⁹⁶ For example, the King's oath, (1311) was to be taken in Latin unless the king was illiterate; however, in 1399, Henry IV chose to take the oath in English.⁹⁷ Although scholars in the fourteenth century retained Latin as the written language, there is evidence that they were ceasing to think in Latin.⁹⁸ Thus, the triumph of English as the language of England had been assured by the end of the fourteenth century.⁹⁹ Among the great literary figures of that time, Wiclif, Langland, and Chaucer reflected the trend

⁹⁴Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 187.

⁹⁵Baugh, A History of the English Language, p. 169.

⁹⁶Ward and Waller (eds.). op. cit., p. 51.

⁹⁷Jusserand, op. cit., p. 236.

⁹⁸Ward and Waller (eds.). op. cit., p. 51.

⁹⁹Baugh, A History of the English Language, p. 177.

toward the use of English. Chaucer saw this emergence of English for the English people and, therefore, turned to his native language.¹⁰⁰ Although Wiclif had an entirely different motive, he also turned from the traditional Latin to venture into the common language of the people and, in doing so, contributed to the resurgence of the English language.¹⁰¹

Until about 1380, Wiclif wrote only in Latin, but after 1380, he directed his ideas to the English nation in English.¹⁰² Apparently, when he addressed the learned world, he resorted to Latin; therefore, one could say that his Latin works were intended for the scholars at Oxford, while his English sermons were composed for the common people at Lutterworth.¹⁰³ Even though Wiclif was proficient in Latin, it was not his natural or thinking language, for many of his Latin treatises contain difficult passages that are less difficult to read if they are first translated into English.¹⁰⁴ At the same time, one finds many strong English expressions in his Latin works.¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, the same arguments

¹⁰⁰Jusserand, op. cit., p. 337.

¹⁰¹Baugh, A History of the English Language, p. 247.

¹⁰²Legouis and Cazamian, op. cit., p. 105.

¹⁰³Morley, op. cit., p. 67.

¹⁰⁴Jusserand, op. cit., p. 428.

¹⁰⁵Ward and Waller, op. cit., p. 51.

that Wiclif used in his Latin works are to be found in his English prose, indicating that Wiclif was taking his ideas of reform, which he had proposed to the learned world, from Oxford to the nation.¹⁰⁶

Following the trials at Lambeth, Wiclif turned his attention to purely religious matters, no longer seeking political help in his fight to reform the church.¹⁰⁷ He chose two methods by which to disseminate his ideas to the masses: the preaching of the "poor priests," for whose use his English sermons were written; and the translation of the Bible into English. The sermons reflect Wiclif's emphasis upon reaching the masses through the spoken word. He esteemed preaching as the "moste hye service þat men have in erthe."¹⁰⁸ But the priest should not "preche cronychis of þe world, as þo batel of Troye, no oper fablis, ne monnis lawes, founden to wynne hom þo money, ffor Crist biddes his clerkes prech þo gospel." (SEW, III, 147) Therefore, Wiclif instructs his "poor priests" to "studie wel Goddis lawe, and þe treuþe þat sueþ of it, and defende it booldli, -- boþe to preestis and to þe world." (SEW, I, 338) Since

¹⁰⁶A. C. Baugh, A Literary History of England, p. 271.

¹⁰⁷Sir Leslie Stephen and Sir Sidney Lee (eds.), Dictionary of National Biography, XXI, 1125.

¹⁰⁸Thomas Arnold (ed.), Select English Works of John Wyclif, III, 143. All references hereafter to the Arnold edition will be noted as SEW followed by textual designation.

Wiclif's love of the Scriptures led him to his unorthodox views, he insisted that only the gospel should be preached, thus rejecting the contemporary practice of the "exempla", which he labeled as dreams, fables, or lies. (SEW, I, 361)

He called for a simple explication of the Scriptures untainted by illustrations or stories that please the people:

Some men þer ben, professoures of divinyte, þat feynen lesygnis by lawes of men, and whan þei shulden preche Gods law to þe puple, þei tellen lesynges, or oþer fablis, þat be unpertynenet to þo lawe of God, and turnen hit oute of his kynde, to plese wiþ þo puple.

(SEW, III, 123)

An þis is an oþer note, how Crist bad hem þanne go and preche þe gospel freli to alle maners men. And wo be to hem þat letten þis, for jurisdiction or oþer cause: as wo is to hem þat leve þis, and prechen dremys, fablis, and gabbings.

(SEW, I, 361)

As a result of Wiclif's strong rejection of this contemporary methods of preaching, he formed the institution of the "poor priests" at Oxford about 1381, although there were individual preachers preambulating the country before 1380 spreading the ideas of the reformer.¹⁰⁹ From the beginning the "poor priests" were opposed by the church officials, for Wiclif argued against the bishops who demanded the right to suspend or permit preachers in their dioceses, and he claimed the rights of poor priests to preach anywhere as long as they held close to the gospel:

¹⁰⁹Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 363.

"For þei han lerned þat Crist bad his priestis preche þe gospel to all men for his lordship." (SEW, II, 173) He also affirmed that they did not need the permission from the bishops to preach, who, Wiclif charged, allowed the evil friars to preach fables, dreams, and lies. (SEW, II, 173) Undoubtedly, Wiclif's influence among the government officials, influential individuals, and the population as a whole prevented widespread persecution by church officials during those early years, for Wiclif stated that this secular favor prevented the "mālis of preestis þat ellis wolden to be wickid, and pursue trewe preestis, for treuþe þat þei tellen þe puple." (SEW, II, 69) Nevertheless, following the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, Parliament enacted a statute that described in unfavorable terms the wandering preacher and directed the sheriffs to imprison those priests without license. However, this order was to be rescinded after one year.¹¹⁰

There can be little doubt that the poor priests contributed to the spread and use of English, for they were not only presenting a popular cry for church reform, but also representing the views of the most respected schoolman and theologian of the age. That Wiclif urged them to preach in the vernacular is evident:

¹¹⁰J. J. Jusserand, English Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages, p. 161.

And þus bi authorite of þe lawe of God men shulden speke her wordis as Goddis lawe spekiþ, and strange not in speche from undirstondinge of þe puple, and algatis beware þat þe puple undirstonde wel, and so use comoun speche in þer owne persone.

(SEW, I, 78-9)

He further encouraged the nobles to assume the responsibility to teach and preach to the common people in their native language:

And 3if prelatys faylyn in þis, Crist seyde þat stonys schulde cry; and secler lordys schuld, in defawte of prelayts, lerne and preche þe law of God in here modyr tonge.

(SEW, III, 114)

Thus, through the use of the vernacular in the preaching of the poor priests, Wiclif contributed to the elevation of the English language.

Furthermore, the deep devotion that Wiclif gave to the Scriptures led him into his translation of the Bible into English. Because he believed the Bible to be the infallible Word of God, he deeply felt that every individual must have access to the will of God which it expressed. Although the translation of the Bible into English was not a new endeavor, Wiclif's plan to disseminate the Scriptures among the unlearned was an important departure from the traditions of both society and the church, for English was still considered to be the language of the ignorant, and, therefore, it was not thought acceptable as a proper written

medium for the Scriptures.¹¹¹ However, English translations of parts of the Bible, perhaps the entire New Testament, were in existence and could have been used by the Wycliffite translators.¹¹² These earlier translations were intended for the inmates of monastic houses, not for the wider public of Wiclif's translation. For example, Richard Rolle's translation of the Psalms was designed to be used in the monasteries by the clergy and not the laity.¹¹³ However, Wiclif departed from this contemporary tradition in his determination to translate the Scriptures into the vernacular for the average Englishman.

Wiclif clearly saw that the church officials were motivated in their duties by enticements of power and gain; therefore, he believed that they could not be trusted for a correct interpretation of the Scriptures. As a consequence, he raised the question that drove him to translate the Bible into English: "And how shulde he kepe þis (God's law), but 3if he knowe it on sum maner?" (SEW, II, 171) Since the Scriptures consisted not of ink or paper but in the sense of meaning, he further suggested: "And þus it helpiþ heere to Cristen men, to studie þe gospel in þat

¹¹¹L. Muir, "Influence of the Rolle and Wycliffite Psalters upon the Psalter of the Authorized Version," MLR, XXX, (July, 1935), 305.

¹¹²Ward and Waller (eds.), op. cit., p. 60.

¹¹³Stacey, op. cit., p. 74.

tunge in whiche þei knowen best Cristis sentense." (SEW, III, 184) While he admitted that it was easier to express complicated thoughts or doctrines in Latin than in English, he felt compelled by charity toward the average Englishman to write in English. He states:

All þes questions ben hard to telle hem trewly in English, but 3it charity dryveþ men to telle hem sumwhat in Englische, so þat men beste white bi þis English what is Goodis wille.

(SEW, III, 183)

Aware that part of the Bible had been translated into English, that sermons were preached in English, and that oral recitation of Scriptural passages in English were common, he argued for the use of English in translating other parts of the Bible and in religious writings:

And syþþe it [Pater Noster] is þe gospel of Crist, and Crist had it be preched to þe peple, for þe peple scholde lerne and kunne it and worche þerafter, why may we nou3t wryte in Englyssche þe gospel, and opere þynges declaryng þe gospel, to edification of Cristen mennys soules, as þe precheour telleþ it trewelyche an Englyssche to þe peple?

(SEW, III 98)

He logically reasoned that, since Christ had taught the Pater Noster in His vernacular, he had thereby set a precedent by which men should learn the Scriptures in the language they know best:

And here is a reule to Cristen men, of what language ever þey be, þat it is an heye sacrifice to God to kunne here Pater Noster, þe gospel, and oper poyntes of holy wryt nedeful to here soules, and þey to do þer-after, wheþer it be ytolde to him or wryten in Latyn, or in Englyssche, or in Frensche, or in Duchyssche, oper in eny oper language, after þat þe peple haþ understondyng.

(SEW, III, 100)

Whether he translated the entire Bible into English by himself or only supervised the translation is uncertain. The translation came in two versions, the first of which was completed during his lifetime; the second being revised by John Purvey in 1388.¹¹⁴ The first version (1384) was associated with Wiclif by John Hus, who declared that the English attributed the entire translation to him.¹¹⁵ The chronicler Knighton also recorded that Wiclif translated the Bible from Latin into English.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, Archbishop Arundel, writing to Pope John XXII, said that Wiclif was responsible for the translation of the Bible into English:

The son of the Old Serpent filled up the cup of his malice against Holy Church by the device of a new translation of the Scriptures into his native tongue.¹¹⁷

Wiclif translated the Gospels, and, perhaps, the entire New Testament, while one of his followers, Nicholas of Hereford, translated most of the Old Testament.¹¹⁸ Nicholas is usually given credit with translating all the Old Testament

¹¹⁴Stephen and Lee (eds.), op. cit., p. 1126.

¹¹⁵Ibid., p. 1127.

¹¹⁶Stacey, op. cit., p. 79.

¹¹⁷Quoted in Sisam, op. cit., p. 116.

¹¹⁸Legouis and Cazamian, op. cit., p. 106.

to Baruch iii. 20.¹¹⁹ Some unknown author, or, perhaps, Wiclif himself, completed the translation of the Old Testament. Unquestionably, the translation was the result of Wiclif's immense inspiration and participation.

Both the first translation and the later revision were made from the Latin Vulgate with perhaps some influence from current texts of isolated translations of some books from the Bible.¹²⁰ In the first version, an attempt was made to stay as close to a literal translation as possible, while the revision by John Purvey was translated into a more idiomatic English which was more readable.¹²¹ Therefore, the Wycliffite Bible was not intended as a literary work, but as an understandable version for the average countryman.

Wiclif's concern with ecclesiastical reform prompted the translation of the Bible. He advocated that the rituals, the myriad church laws, and the hierarchy should be abolished and replaced with the Scriptures. He believed that a proper study and a correct attitude toward the Bible would restore the church to its original simplicity, unity, and purity.¹²² An understanding of the Bible would reveal the wickedness of

¹¹⁹Stephen and Lee (eds.), op. cit., p. 1126.

¹²⁰T. Hardwood Pattison, The History of the English Bible, p. 24.

¹²¹Morley, op. cit., p. 65.

¹²²Mallary, op. cit., p. 58.

the clergy, exposing that office to the scrutiny of the people. (SEW, III, 99) Furthermore, the common man could learn to serve God better by a study of the Scriptures.

(SEW, III, 98)

The supreme authority of the church held that the Scriptures translated into the language of the uneducated would foster the freedom of interpretation, which would be dangerous among the ignorant. The proper procedure, advocated by the Pope, was for the people to be instructed by well-taught interpreters.¹²³ Nevertheless, while the church strongly discouraged the use of the vernacular Scriptures, the translation of the Bible into English was not strictly forbidden.¹²⁴ Some parts of the Bible had already been translated, especially the Psalms; however, Wiclif had to struggle against both tradition and the opposition of the clergy in effecting his translation.¹²⁵

Either Wiclif anticipated some resistance to the publication of the Bible in English or he had encountered some conflict with the church hierarchy, for he wrote: "For 3if men þenken Goddis lawe sharp, and to letter avantage of þis world, men of þis world, bi þe fend, wolen haten hem þat puplisshen it." (SEW, I, 339) It appears that, before

¹²³Morley, op. cit., p. 58.

¹²⁴Sisam, op. cit., p. 116.

¹²⁵Muir, op. cit., p. 305.

the translation was finished, Wiclif had some difficulty with a "greet Bishop of Engleond" over the English translation:

And þerefore oo greet Bishop of Engelond, as men seien, is yvel paid þat Goddis lawe is writun in Englis, to lewede men; and he pursueþ a preest, for he writip to men þis Englishe, and somonip him and traveilip him, þat it is hard to him to rowte.

(SEW, I, 209)

With his vigorous style, Wiclif logically argued for his translation. He pointed to other nations with the Scriptures in their native language, and asked, "Why not England?" He emphasized that Christ and the church fathers taught that the gospel should be given to all men. His arguments are summed up in his own words as follows:

And for þis cause Seynt Ierom trauelide and translatide þe Bible fro dyuerse tungis into Lateyn, þat it my3te be aftir translated to oper tungis. And þus Crist and His apostlis tau3ten þe puple in þat tunge þat was moost knowun to þe puple. Why shunden not men do nou so? And herfore autours of þe newe law, þat weren apostlis of Iesu Crist, writen þer Gospels in dyuerse tungis þat weren more knowun to þe puple. Also þe worþt reume of Fraunse, not-wipstondinge alle lettingis, haþ translaid þe Bible and þe Gospels, wip opere trewe sentensis of doctours, out of Lateyn into Freynsch. Why shunden not Engli3schemen do so? As lordis of Englund han þe Bible in Freynsch, so it were not a3enus resoun þat þey hadden þe same sentence in Engli3sch; for trowid for onehed of wit, and more acord be bitwixe reumes.¹²⁶

Rejecting the claim that the church had the sole authority to interpret Scripture, he advocated that anyone, by following his five-fold rule, could obtain the truth from

¹²⁶Quoted in Sisam, op. cit., p. 118.

the Scriptures: obtain a reliable text; understand the immediate meaning of the Scripture; compare or harmonize the Scriptures together; assume the attitude of a humble seeker; and rely upon the instruction of the Spirit.¹²⁷

Although the translation of the Bible into English was not in itself a great literary work, what it accomplished for the English language far exceeds any other consideration. For the first time, a prose masterpiece was translated into English, giving impetus to the trend toward the vernacularization of important literature.¹²⁸ Furthermore, it was influential in elevating the vernacular to a position of dignity and honor.¹²⁹ Moreover, because of its popularity and widespread use, the Wicliffite Bible helped establish for the first time, a national standard of English prose, replacing the various dialects.¹³⁰ Additionally, the translation in its early and revised versions, contributed many Latin words to the English language.¹³¹ Even though the influence of the Wiclif's translation upon the succeeding Bible translations is slight, the Wycliffite Bible did

¹²⁷Mallard, op. cit., p. 51.

¹²⁸Samuel Pendleton Cowardin and Paul E. More, The Study of English Literature, p. 341.

¹²⁹W. V. Moody and R. M. Lovett, A History of English Literature, p. 52.

¹³⁰William J. Long, English Literature, p. 83.

¹³¹Baugh, A History of the English Language, p. 222.

establish the tradition of an English Bible.¹³² Therefore, at a time when English was gaining acceptance in secular literature, Wiclif also made it the popular language of religious thought and feeling.¹³³

Because the translation of the Scriptures contains many more Latin borrowings than Wiclif's English writings, it is apparent that Wiclif, in his English prose, borrowed sparingly from the vocabulary of other languages.¹³⁴ Obviously, in the translation, the Latin word suggested a formation of an English word. With Wiclif's effort to produce as close a literal translation of the Latin Vulgate as possible, the tendency to accept the Latin word as a model was natural and expedient. Since the Bible had widespread appeal to the common Englishman as well as to the scholars, many Latin words were borrowed directly into English; thus, Wiclif and his associates are credited with bringing at least a thousand Latin words into the English vocabulary.¹³⁵

In addition to translating the Bible into English, Wiclif is also important to the history of English language and literature because of the approximately three-hundred

¹³²Ira Maurice Price, The Ancestry of Our English Bible, p. 238.

¹³³Sisam, op. cit., p. 365.

¹³⁴George P. Krapp, The Rise of English Literary Prose, p. 51.

¹³⁵Baugh, A History of the English Language, p. 222.

sermons and numerous evangelical pamphlets that he composed in the vernacular.¹³⁶ Because the sermons were intended for the use of the poor priests and not for the general public, they are short, averaging about one thousand words, more like skeleton sermons than complete discourses. These outlines usually contain long translated passages of Scripture with a literal and a spiritual explication, and sometimes suggestions for further development of the sermon thought. For example, he suggested at the end of one sermon that the preacher could continue the explanation of the text: "Sum of þes wordis þat Poul seiþ here shulden trewe preestis declare more, as it is profit to þe puple, after þat God techiþ hem." (SEW, II, 209) Further, in another sermon he explained how to expand the text:

Paul's words ben also plentenous; for ech treuþe þat Poul spekiþ is knyttid wiþ ech point of bileve, and so after speche of oon may come speche of another, after þat it profitiþ to þe heerers. As þe laste word of þis epistle biddiþ us be cloþid wiþ Jesus Crist; and siþ þis is goostly cloþing, in whiche mannys soule shulde be cloþis, al þe vertues of Jesus Crist may fittingly be brou3t hereynne. And siþ al vertues ben his, al vertues may here be tau3t. And vices þat ben contrarie to vertues may be declarid, to flee hem; as men þat taken privat sectis, or putten not Cristis sect alone, siþ þis cloiþ bi it silfe woulde suffice, ffailen of þe clioþ of charite.

(SEW, II, 224)

In the language of the sermons, Wiclif indicated that he is writing to the poor priests: "Ech preest þat haþ witt shulde

¹³⁶Jusserand, op. cit., p. 434.

first knowe þis parable, and after þes wordis þat here ben seid, and þanne may be li3tli knowe what þis parable would meene." (SEW, II, 196) Since the masses, those the Reformer was trying most to reach, could not read, even in the English language, the sermons would have to be read to them or used as guidelines in the act of preaching. The sermons, which are arranged in such a manner as to provide topics for the important feasts of the year, were probably written to replace the contemporary festival books, legendaries, collections of exempla, and anecdotes that Wiclif fervently opposed.¹³⁷ With the aid of these sermons, a poor priest could easily expand the compressed thought into a bold discourse on the designated text for the particular Sunday.

While Wiclif has often been acclaimed the "father of English prose," a title to which he has some claim, it is certain that he is one of the founders of modern English prose.¹³⁸ Since his English writings reached large audiences through the spreading of his works by the Lollards, it can be assumed that his sermons, pamphlets, and his translation of the Bible helped to establish the predominance of the East Midland dialect.¹³⁹ Furthermore, he was the first prose

¹³⁷Krapp, op. cit., p. 38.

¹³⁸Morley, op. cit., p. 76.

¹³⁹Although English prose had its origin in the ninth century under the inspiration and work of Alfred the Great, the Norman Conquest brought an interruption of all forms of

writer to use the English language as a means of conveying his ideas in a direct and forceful manner to his readers.¹⁴⁰ Because this precedent had an immense influence upon the development of English prose, Crawshaw states that Wiclif influenced directly or indirectly the style of prose for two hundred years.¹⁴¹ However, Wiclif's importance in the development of English prose style was more attributable to the ideas that he promulgated than to his own example and practice.¹⁴² He never sought artistic form in his English; there were few attempts to be ornamental in diction and no conscious use of alliteration or figures of speech. Rejecting the established and admired prose rhetoric, which was based on balance in phrasing, use of alliteration, rhyme, and other devices, Wiclif made use of short, but well

(continued)

English literature until about the year 1200 (Baugh, A Literary History of England, p. 81). However, English literary prose was not revived until the fourteenth century. Richard Rolle of Hampole, who lived in the first half of the fourteenth century, has been credited as the first original prose writer after the Conquest (Jusserand, op. cit., p. 218). While Rolle and others had made some English prose translations and had written a few devotional books, Wiclif still must be considered the greatest prose writer of his century (Krapp, op. cit., p. ix). Fortunately, Wiclif wrote in the East Midland dialect from which "standard" English descended (C. G. Osgood, The Voice of England, p. 86).

¹⁴⁰Krapp, op. cit., p. ix.

¹⁴¹W. H. Crawshaw, The Making of English Literature, p. 57.

¹⁴²Krapp, op. cit., p. 53.

constructed sentences with little appeal to humor.¹⁴³ His style has been described as simple, vigorous, clear, logical, accurate, and picturesque; on the other hand, some consider it graceless or repellent. Nevertheless, one cannot fail to sense the intense religious spirit, the spirit of a reformer.

¹⁴³Ibid., p. 37.

CHAPTER III

WYCLIF'S INFLUENCE UPON CHAUCER

During the years in which Wiclif was prominent on the religious horizon, the affairs of the church were at best chaotic. Not only did the widespread corruption of church officials bring confusion in England, but also, the Great Schism divided the entire structure of Christendom into two diplomatic camps, each hurling excommunications at the other.¹⁴⁴ Political considerations, to a great extent, determined the alignment of the nations with Urban VI of Rome or Clement VI of Avignon.¹⁴⁵ During this period of church disorganization, many abuses were committed against religion by fraudulent pardoners, mercenary friars, and worldly monks.¹⁴⁶ Additionally, during Wiclif's time, there was much disagreement as to the credibility of various church doctrines.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 181.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁴⁶Stacey, op. cit., p. 47.

¹⁴⁷E. K. Maxfield, "Chaucer and Religious Reform," PMLA, XXXLX (March, 1924), 71.

Among the controversial tenets was the doctrine of predestination, which Thomas Bradwardine had so ably championed.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, the discussion of Sanctuary, in which Wiclif participated as an active debator for the government, was unsettled.¹⁴⁹ The failure of unanimity in doctrine probably contributed to Wiclif's challenge of the cardinal doctrine of transubstantiation which, although widely accepted at this time, had only been incorporated into the dogma of the church since the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.¹⁵⁰

Since matters of the church were important facets of medieval life, Chaucer, being the observer of contemporary life that he was, could not have been completely unaware or disassociated from the widespread circulation of Wiclif's writings, the stormy controversy over the church doctrines, and the personal conflict which developed between the church officials and Wiclif. Furthermore, the writings of Chaucer reveal a man deeply interested in the practice of religion and sympathetic with humanity, yet, on the other hand, critical of the inconsistency and sham of his society. With Chaucer's religious sentiments in mind, Maxfield suggests

¹⁴⁸Carleton F. Brown, "The Author of the Pearl," PMLA, XIX, (1904), p. 143.

¹⁴⁹Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 95.

¹⁵⁰Maxfield, op. cit., p. 66.

that it would be strange if some evidence of the influence of Wiclif could not be found in the writings of Chaucer.¹⁵¹

Modern scholarship does not generally accept the supposition that Chaucer was a Lollard or a personal follower of Wiclif; however, Wiclif's views and activities would very easily have appealed to Chaucer, who, critical of the church himself, must have been sympathetic toward its contemporary critic, who vigorously, earnestly, and boldly proclaimed his dislike of similar church corruption. Although Chaucer's definite position toward the church had not been conclusively established, he probably remained loyal to the church.¹⁵²

At the same time, his loyalty would not have prevented him from reflecting in his works many of the views advocated by Wiclif.¹⁵³ Other contemporary writers, such as the orthodox poets, John Gower and William Langland, used their skills to criticize church failures; even a staunch Catholic like Bishop Brunton could be critical of church abuses.¹⁵⁴ Thus, an attempt to discredit the influence of Wiclif upon Chaucer on the assumption that Chaucer remained faithful to the orthodox creed is not valid. Compared with the later radical

¹⁵¹Loc. cit.

¹⁵²John S. P. Tatlock, "Chaucer and Wyclif," MP, XIV (September, 1916), 259.

¹⁵³Maxfield, op. cit., p. 68.

¹⁵⁴Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 111.

views of the Lollards, Wiclif would even be viewed as a loyal Catholic. In fact, Maxfield argues that the heart of Wiclif's reform movement was not so much anti-Catholicism, as it was simple conservatism.¹⁵⁵ With much the same observation, Matthew comments at length on the moderate aspect of Wiclif's writings.¹⁵⁶ Apparently, scholars have failed to differentiate adequately between the strictly Wiclifian creed and that of Wiclif's more radical followers whose zeal, devotion, and enthusiasm contributed to the fanatical excesses of the movement.¹⁵⁷ Ironically, Wiclif felt that he was the orthodox Catholic and that the "sects," prelates, popes, and other church officials were unorthodox. Even the Pope referred to Wiclif's early views as "errors" rather than heresy.¹⁵⁸ It is true that many of Wiclif's teachings were eventually condemned, and his denial of the doctrine of Transubstantiation clearly places him as a reformer, not just a critic. Although Wiclif's ardent and fanatical followers soon abandoned the moderation of his doctrines, one can, nevertheless, maintain that, with the exception of the denial of the doctrine of Transubstantiation,

¹⁵⁵Maxfield, op. cit., p. 65.

¹⁵⁶Matthew, op. cit., p. xi-xiii.

¹⁵⁷Maxfield, op. cit., p. 69.

¹⁵⁸Stephen and Lee (eds.), DNB, p. 1124.

Chaucer could reflect Wiclif's critical views of the church without becoming unorthodox or a Lollard.

The opposition toward the Lollards needs clarification, however. After the committee had condemned Wiclif's doctrines at Blackfriars in 1382, Courteney successfully obtained assistance from some civil authorities to suppress the growing influence of Lollardy.¹⁵⁹ At first, the Lollards were only prohibited from preaching.¹⁶⁰ Later, at Oxford, the supporters of Wyclif's doctrines were suspended from all scholastic duties.¹⁶¹ Although the tide of persecution rose rapidly, prominent followers of Wiclif such as Sir Lewis Clifford and John Purvey continued to fill important positions in the state and church until the turn of the century.¹⁶² It is evident that during the lifetime of Chaucer persecution of the Lollards was not too vigorous and did not extend into the society of the nobility.¹⁶³

There is little doubt that Wiclif and Chaucer were well acquainted.¹⁶⁴ Wiclif, recognized as the most eminent doctor of theology in his day, was not only an outstanding

¹⁵⁹Stacey, op. cit., p. 12.

¹⁶⁰Ward and Waller (eds.), op. cit., II, 73.

¹⁶¹Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁶²E. P. Kuhl, "Chaucer and the Church," MLN, p. 332.

¹⁶³Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 330.

¹⁶⁴Robinson (ed.), op. cit., p. xxvii.

preacher in the city of London where Chaucer could easily have heard him preach, but also a leader in the party of John of Gaunt, who was the patron and life-long friend of Chaucer.¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, Chaucer was intimately acquainted with many of the prominent supporters of Wiclif, notable among them being the so-called Lollard Knights--Sir Lewis Clifford, Sir William Neville, Sir John Clanvowe, and Sir Richard Stury, the latter serving with Chaucer on a diplomatic mission to France.¹⁶⁶ Sir Lewis Clifford and Sir William Neville also formed intimate friendships with Chaucer.¹⁶⁷ Although there appears to be no positive proof that Chaucer and Wiclif personally knew each other, the strong ties and connections of important personages as well as the relative prominence of the two men themselves, present strong evidence that if they were not personally acquainted they at least knew of each other by reputation.

In considering the association of Wiclif and Chaucer, one must recognize the mutual patronage of the royal family, especially John of Gaunt and Lord Percy. John of Gaunt and Lord Percy had invited the popular Oxford teacher to speak in the churches in London.¹⁶⁸ It is not surprising, then,

¹⁶⁵Loc. cit.

¹⁶⁶Loc. cit.

¹⁶⁷Loc. cit.

¹⁶⁸Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 42.

that both Gaunt and Percy went to Wiclif's defense at the trial at St. Paul's in February, 1377. Later in October of the same year, Wiclif presented his views to the House of Commons, the members of which were overwhelmingly on his side, and as a result, the young King Richard II requested Wiclif to formulate an answer to the Pope's claim of the power to tax the church in England.¹⁶⁹ However, when Wiclif denied the doctrine of Transubstantiation in 1380, he lost the active support of the government.¹⁷⁰ In respect to this new heresy, Gaunt was the instrument to caution Wiclif; it appears that the warning was firm but not violent, for, although banned from teaching at Oxford, Wiclif continued to develop and teach his views unaided, though likewise untroubled, by the government.¹⁷¹ Obviously, with the exception of the denial of the doctrine of Transubstantiation, he was in essential agreement with the royal family. At the same time, Chaucer, who spent several years in governmental service and who enjoyed a close friendship with his patron, John of Gaunt, probably concurred in his views with the crown.¹⁷² Since the political views during this period in English history inevitably included attitudes

¹⁶⁹Ibid., p. 82.

¹⁷⁰Ibid., p. 174.

¹⁷¹Stacey, op. cit., p. 12.

¹⁷²Kuhl, op. cit., p. 324.

toward the church, it is very probable that Chaucer's religious ideas conformed, more or less, to those of Gaunt and, consequently, to Wiclif's.

There are also some apparent doctrinal parallels between the two writers. For example, one of the cardinal doctrines upon which the medieval church was founded is the belief that the church had power to excommunicate offenders and to absolve the penitent. Unfortunately, this potent weapon, used to keep the church free from heresy and in a position of power, fell into the hands of unscrupulous and degenerate individuals, who, as officials of the church, used this "power of the keys" to their own selfish advantage in accumulating wealth and position for a life of ease. Bound by the unalterable position of the church with its ecclesiastical courts, which could affect both the spiritual and material aspects of his life, medieval man felt the lashing bite of this whip of excommunication.¹⁷³

It may be of interest to observe a brief example of one formula of the curse of excommunication used in England during the Middle Ages. The curse proceeds as follows:

. . . þei ben acursed of god of al holichurch, fro þe sole of her fote to þe crowne of her hede, slepyng and wakyng, sytting or stondyng, and al her workes workyng and in al her wordes spekyng, And but 3if þei have grace of god for to amende hem here by her

¹⁷³Stacey, op. cit., p. 48.

lyfe, for to dwelle in þe payne of helle for
ever with-out ende. . . .¹⁷⁴

It is evident that this curse was used in many petty and fraudulent incidents, especially in the matter of tithes. This frivolous use of the anathema caused many contemporary intelligent men, including Wiclif and Chaucer, to disdain the practice; however, Wiclif by his logical thinking and reformative spirit completely denounced the doctrine, claiming it had no efficacy.¹⁷⁵ Perhaps, at first, the Reformer only complained of the abuse of the doctrine, but he soon denied the power of priest or pope to bind or loose.¹⁷⁶ The power to excommunicate and absolve belonged to God; the priest could only announce the verdict when God explicitly revealed it to him: "For it is an open blasfeme þat preestis forzyven þis synne in God, but 3if God forgeve it first, and sei to preestis þat þei shewen it." (SEW, II, 100)

Wiclif's attack on the use of the power of the keys reached its height approximately six years before Chaucer wrote the "Prologue" to The Canterbury Tales.¹⁷⁷ While Chaucer apparently expressed no direct reformative motive

¹⁷⁴Quoted in James A. Work, "Echoes of the Anathema in Chaucer," PMLA, XLVII, 421.

¹⁷⁵Thomas Arnold (ed.), Select English Works of John Wyclif, II, 159.

¹⁷⁶Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 150.

¹⁷⁷Tatlock, op. cit., p. 264.

and did not go so far as to deny the doctrine of the keys, he viewed the contemporary use of excommunication in a manner similar to that of Wiclif.¹⁷⁸ For example, the Summoner's scorn at excommunication and absolution supports Wiclif's denunciation:

And if he foond owher a good felawe,
 He wolde techen him to have noon awe
 In swich caas of the ercedekenes curs,
 But if a mannes soule were in his purs,
 For in his purs he sholde ypunysshed be.
 "Purs is the ercedekenes helle," seyde he.
 But wel I woot he lyed right in dede;
 Of cursyng oghte ech gilty man him drede,
 For curs wol slee right as'assoillyng savith,
 And also war hym of a Significavit.
 ("Prologue," 653-662)¹⁷⁹

It is important to understand that the word, Significavit, is the first word of the De excommunicato capiendo, a writ directing the sheriff to enforce a punishment of imprisonment upon anyone who has been excommunicated.¹⁸⁰ Chaucer's meaning is clear: one should beware of the temporal punishment of excommunication regardless of his attitude toward eternal punishment.¹⁸¹ Obviously, Chaucer's Summoner expresses a skeptical attitude toward the doctrine of the power of the keys. Furthermore, Robinson states that this

¹⁷⁸Ibid., p. 265.

¹⁷⁹All quotations from The Canterbury Tales are taken from The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, edited by F. N. Robinson.

¹⁸⁰Tatlock, op. cit., p. 261.

¹⁸¹Ibid., p. 262.

passage from Chaucer can only imply a doubt as to the efficacy of absolution--a position in spite of the guarded expression, that could be interpreted as heresy; thus, Robinson believes that Chaucer, in this instance, was reflecting the influence of Wiclif's teaching on the "power of the keys."¹⁸² While many references to the use of the anathema in The Canterbury Tales are light and ironic, there is a serious criticism of the abusive use of the power of excommunication in the description of the Parson: "Ful looth were hym to cursen for his tithes." ("Prologue," 486) Since the bishop had sole authority to invoke this terrible punishment of excommunication, a parson could only declare that the person was liable to the excommunication. However, the parson could enforce what was known as the "lesser excommunication" which excluded a person from the church services and the sacraments, and, as a result, bring suit against the offender in the church courts.¹⁸³ There can be little doubt that Chaucer, in his description of the parson, condemns the frivolous employment of the solemn curse.¹⁸⁴ Tatlock supposes that other prominent men in the fourteenth century held such liberal views of the power of the keys, but he found no parallel similar to that between Chaucer and

¹⁸²Robinson (ed.), op. cit., p. 667.

¹⁸³Ibid., p. 664.

¹⁸⁴Work, op. cit., p. 427.

Wiclif.¹⁸⁵ Since Wiclif boldly declared his stand about six years before Chaucer wrote the "Prologue," and since Chaucer is known to reflect contemporary ideas, one may logically assume that Chaucer, here, reflects Wiclif's denunciation of the current abusive use of excommunication.¹⁸⁶

The theologio-philosophical issue of predestination, which was fervently disputed during the fourteenth century, attracted both Wiclif and Chaucer.¹⁸⁷ Wiclif was greatly influenced by the teaching of an earlier theologian, Bishop Thomas Bradwardine.¹⁸⁸ After some years of indecision, Wiclif eventually upheld an almost absolute predestination: "For God haþ ordeyned whiche men shall be saved and which shal be dampned, and boþ þese noumbres mote nede be fulfilled." (SEW, I, 6) In the "Nun's Priest's Tale," Chaucer briefly discusses the doctrine of predestination and mentions Thomas Bradwardine by name. He professes that he is unable to arrive at a definite conclusion concerning the doctrine and prefers to let the clerks struggle with it; however, he again deals with it at some length in Troilus and Criseyde.¹⁸⁹ Although this philosophical discussion

¹⁸⁵Tatlock, op. cit., p. 263.

¹⁸⁶Ibid., p. 264.

¹⁸⁷Robinson (ed.), op. cit., p. 754.

¹⁸⁸Brown, op. cit., p. 45.

¹⁸⁹Troilus and Criseyde, op. cit., IV, 955-1078.

follows closely that of Boethius, Chaucer does not conclude that all human action is controlled by absolute necessity.¹⁹⁰ While one may assume that the doctrine of predestination contributed to the tone of this narrative and was used as a poetic device, he may also assume that Chaucer's conclusion is a definite clue to his belief.¹⁹¹ Indeed, Bloomfield believes that Chaucer accepted the position of predestination advocated by Bradwardine, a position very similar to Wiclif's.¹⁹²

The Wiclifian challenge of the vital Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation created a stormy controversy in which Chaucer had at least a passing interest. The realistic mind of Wiclif denied that the bread had changed, but he believed that in a spiritual sense Christ was present.¹⁹³ He rejected the orthodox doctrine advocated by the friars that the bread had changed--that it had become "accident without substance." In reality, Wiclif's belief approximates the Luteran doctrine of Consubstantiation. He contends that the substance of the bread, as well as the physical appearance remained, but he also affirms that the bread was the

¹⁹⁰Robinson (ed.), op. cit., p. 830.

¹⁹¹S. H. Thomson, "Philosophical Basis of Wyclif's Theology," Journal of Religion, XI (January, 1931), 114.

¹⁹²Morton W. Bloomfield, "Distance and Predestination in Troilus and Criseyde," Chaucer Criticism, p. 205.

¹⁹³Stacey, op. cit., p. 106.

body of Christ. (SEW, III, 443) This unorthodox posture of Wiclif toward the Eucharist created such a controversy that the Reformer lost most of the active support of the aristocracy and a large segment of his followers among the masses.¹⁹⁴ The resulting turmoil in the church over the Eucharist obviously caught Chaucer's attention, for while there is no evidence that Chaucer ever embraced Wiclif's views, he refers to the subject upon at least two occasions, both times reflecting rather frivolous and sceptical attitudes. For example, in the "Pardoner's Tale," Chaucer has the Pardoner say: "Thise cookes, how they stampe, and steyne, and gaynde, And turnen substaunce into accident." ("Pardoner's Tale," 538-539) Robinson states that Chaucer's use of the phrase, "turen substaunce into accident," indicates a direct reference to the current Eucharist controversy.¹⁹⁵ Evidently, Chaucer is expressing a not-too-orthodox attitude toward the Eucharist.

Again, in Troilus and Criseyde, Chaucer uses the terms, substance and accident: "And thynk that folie is, whan man may chese, For accident his substaunce ay to lese." (Book IV, Lines 1504-1505) Although Robinson observes that Chaucer does not often play upon words, he does not deny

¹⁹⁴Trevelyan, op. cit., p. 174.

¹⁹⁵Robinson (ed.), op. cit., p. 730.

that the poet has done so here.¹⁹⁶ Chaucer could hardly have used these terms without referring to their philosophical distinction, and the sense of the passage indicates that accident is given the additional popular meaning of uncertainty. While the present study does not assume that Chaucer became unorthodox in his views of the Eucharist, it does propose that he was influenced in his approach and ideas on the current controversial doctrines (including the doctrine of Transubstantiation) by Wiclif, who had a most active voice among the controversialists.

Occasionally, one finds an analogy in the expression of ideas in Wiclif and Chaucer: Wiclif argues at some length that man has nothing about which to boast concerning his forefathers, since all men, along with worms and beasts, share the common ancestry of the earth, and since all men, both nobles and servants, are sinful and, consequently, in bondage to sin and the devil; only a virtuous man, whether a nobleman or a servant, is free in the sight of God. (SEW, III, 125-126) Thus, he proposes that a man should not be proud of his earthly, sinful relatives, but should strive for and rejoice in those virtues which come from Jesus Christ, who himself chose not the nobility and riches but humble parents and poverty. (SEW, III, 125-126) Similarly, Chaucer has the Wife of Bath attack effectively the same pride. She

¹⁹⁶Ibid., p. 831.

refutes the idea that nobility of character is inherent in wealth or derived from the noble deeds of one's ancestors. In the defense of her own poverty, she alludes to the poverty of Christ, contending that one need not be ashamed of being poor. Although the idea that nobility of character is indivisibly associated with Christ and not with one's ancestors was a commonplace of Christian literature during the fourteenth century, it is equally significant that both Chaucer and Wiclif wove this idea with the same thread into the same pattern.¹⁹⁷

Another reference common to Wiclif and Chaucer is idleness, which they both compared to the devil's net:

And for þis skille, men and wynmen schulden be
wel occupied in good werkis, and not ydel; for
ydelnesse is þe develis panter, to tempte men
to synne.

(SEW, III, 200)

Chaucer's analogue is projected through the "Second Nun's Prologue":

For he that with his thousand cordes slye
Continuelly us waiteth to biclappe,
Whan he may man in ydelnesse espye,
He kan so lightly cache hym in his trappe
Til that a man be hent right by the lappe,
He nys nat war the feend hath hym in honde.

("Second Nun's Prologue," 8-13)

It appears that either the association of idleness with a devil's net was common during the fourteenth century or

¹⁹⁷A reference to the "Wife of Bath Tale" is penciled in the margin of John Manly's personal copy of Select English Works of John Wiclif.

Wiclif's expression was adopted by Chaucer. While the basis of Wiclifian influence in this incident is rather tenuous, there can be little doubt that the two men agreed in the use of the same expression to attack the common sin of idleness.

As indicative as are these references and similarities of ideas found in Wiclif and Chaucer, the present study of the affinities between the two writers will of necessity focus upon corruption in the church. It is well-known that, in his attack on the church, Wiclif singled out the corrupt practices of the clergy; but it is often overlooked that Chaucer, a person deeply interested in the practices of religion, also criticized the same sham and corruption.¹⁹⁸

Whereas, Wiclif wrote exclusively on religious matters, Chaucer's concern with contemporary religious conditions is expressed in the characters as well as the stories of The Canterbury Tales. The characters, apparently devised to represent classes of the English society, reflect the various areas of learning of the day in medicine, law, polite social behavior, scholarship, and religion.¹⁹⁹ Loomis believes that the ideal characters--the Knight, the Clerk, Plowman, and the Parson--all reflect the ideas of

¹⁹⁸Tatlock, op. cit., p. 264.

¹⁹⁹J. R. Hulbert, "Chaucer's Pilgrims," PLMA, LXIV (September, 1949), 823.

Wiclif.²⁰⁰ For example, the Knight meets the characteristics of the so-called Lollard knights, and the knights in general were held to be sympathetic toward Lollardy; the Clerk is from Oxford, at one time the center of Wiclif's influence; the Plowman, who is a brother to the Parson, further reflects Wiclif's view of poverty--that the poor can best serve Christ; the Plowman lives in peace, loves God supremely and his neighbors as himself, and diligently does his duty toward the church. Although not a church official, the Plowman, in his simple and earnest devotions, contrasts with the sham and hypocrisy of the friars, monks, and pardoners.²⁰¹ Wiclif also makes this contrast:

And as anethis masse or preieris,
 Cristene men shulden wel wite þat
 Good liif of a plowman is as myche
 worþ to þe soule as preier of þis frere,
 alþif it profite sumwhat.

(SEW, II, 213)

Chaucer's sketch of the virtues of the "good liif of a plowman" could well serve as a commentary of Wiclif's statement.

All the characters in The Canterbury Tales are "religious," for they are going on a pilgrimage; but at least eight are directly associated with the ministry of the church--the Prioress, Nun, Friar, Nun's Priest, Pardoner, Summoner, Parson, and Monk. Noticeably, there is a

²⁰⁰Roger S. Loomis, "Was Chaucer a Laodicean?" The Canterbury Tales, I, Chaucer Criticism, 305.

²⁰¹Ibid., p. 301.

representation among these church workers of the various orders within the structure of the church. A careful comparison of the criticism of these religious personages in The Canterbury Tales with the criticism found in Wiclif's writings will reveal a striking parallel and agreement, not only on the general level, but also in the detailed analysis of the various representations.

While Wiclif's criticism were directed against all levels of the church hierarchy, this study will focus on only five church personages: the friar, the summoner, the pardoner, the monk, and the parson. Of these, Wiclif most often aimed his invectives at the friar. He contended that the friars were not of the sect of Christ, that their professed holiness was false, that they preached for money, that they were vain, lewd, and worldly. A comparison of Wiclif's criticism of the friars with Chaucer's description of his Friar reveals striking similarities of vivid details. Both writers criticize the friar's voluminous clothes. Chaucer's Friar is dressed as a noble or a pope:

For there he was nat lyk a cloysterer
 With a thredbaree cope, as is a poure schler,
 But he was lyk a maister or a pope,
 Of double worstded was his semycope
 That rounded as a belle out of the presse.
 ("Prologue," 259-263)

While Chaucer satirically objects to the friar's expensive clothes, revealing the friar's vanity of dress in the fashion of a lord or pope, Wiclif makes the same point,

except that he compares the friar's clothing to that of kings or emperors: "For men seen þat þe Kyng or þe emperour mystte wiþ worchipe were a garnment of a frere for goodnesse of þe cloþ."²⁰²

Moreover, Wiclif can also season his comments with sarcasm and ridicule:

What resoun shulde move freris to learge þer cloþis
and docke þe gospel, men kissen boþe bokes and
wallis, but sick reverence þei don not to frere
cloþis, but 3if þei ben woode.

(SEW, III, 216)

Although Wiclif seldom writes with any humor, his reference to kissing friar's clothes has a humorous undertone.

Irritated by the friar's failure to preach the true message of the Scriptures, Wiclif assails them for flattering and preaching fables and falsehoods in order to obtain money from the people. One should note that he also charges them for begging after they preach:

And wiþ þis synne ben freris bleckid þat shapen
to preche synnyng here; and herefore þei prechen
þe people fablis and falshede to plesen hem. And
in tokene of þis chaffare, þei beggen after þat
þei have prechid; as who seiþ, 3yve me þi moneie,
þat y am worþi bi my preching.

(SEW, I, 288)

Chaucer has his Friar in the "Summoner's Tale" admit that he did not closely follow the Scriptures in his preaching:

²⁰²F. D. Matthew (ed.), The English Works of Wyclif, p. 50. All references hereafter to the Matthew's edition will be noted as EW followed by textual designation.

I have to day been at youre chirche at messe,
 And seyde a sermon after my symple wit,
 Nat al after the text of hooly writ;
 For it is hard to yow, as I suppose,
 And therefore wol I teche you al the glose.

("Summoner's Tale," 1788-1794)

Chaucer's Friar also begs from house to house after he
 preached:

Whan folk in chirche had yeve him what hem leste,
 He wente his wey, no longer wolde he rest.
 With scrippe and tipped staf, ytukked hye,
 In every hous he gan to poure and pryde,
 And beggeth mele and chese, or elles corn.

("Summoner's Tale," 1735-1739)

Chaucer's criticism of the friar's failure to adhere to the
 Scriptures and his obviously mercenary motive in his preach-
 ing and begging conform to Wiclif's charges. Both writers
 depict the friar as an aggressive crowd-pleaser, unashamed
 in his begging. It was probably customary for the friar
 to have a servant to follow him and carry the bag in which
 the friar collected the items which he begged; at least,
 Chaucer mentions such a man following the friar on his
 rounds:

A sturdy harlot wente ay him bihynde,
 That was hir hostes man, and bar a sak,
 And what men yaf hem, leyde it on his bak.

("Summoner's Tale," 1754-1756)

Wiclif, also, makes reference to "Scarioth," a man who bore
 a bag in which offerings were put:

But see now hou freris don openly a3enst þis
 reule and testament. Also in takynge money many
 weies; for þei leden wiþ hem a scarioth stolen
 from is eldris by þefte to robbe pore men bi
 beggyng dampnyd of goddis lawe.

(EW, p. 49)

That the friars persuaded parents to give their sons to them as servants is frequently lamented by Wiclif, whose hostility toward the practice is intensified by the servant's participation in the friar's begging. Although there does not appear to be any expressed condemnation in Chaucer's description of the cooperative servant who carried the bag, it is plausible to suppose that Chaucer in the servile attendant, has added another objectionable feature to his unfavorable presentation of his Friar.

In particular, the friar is accused of begging for his cloister, and he is commended more for his ability to obtain funds and goods for his cloister than for exerting any godly influence. As a consequence, the friar often resorts to flattery and unscrupulous methods in soliciting for his brotherhood. Wiclif, as well as Chaucer, made several references to the purpose of the friar's begging, noting that the friar was judged according to his ability to raise funds:

For great hondre and costlewe housis and greet
dispensis of þis world, wiþ reulynge or worldely
causis, tellen what ende þei worchen fore.

(SEW, I, 20)

And þei comenden more a frere þat can sotely
and thicke gete þis worldly dritt, þen anoper þat
con do and teche myche virtuous lif.

(SEW, III, 399)

Chaucer's Friar pleads with Thomas to contribute to the building of a house for the cloister. The Friar says:

"Yif me thanne of thy gold, to make oure cloystre,"
 Quod he, "for many a muscle and many an oystre,
 Whan othere men han ben ful wel at eyse,
 Hath been oure foode, oure cloystre for to reyse."
 ("Summoner's Tale," 2099-2102)

It is evident that the main qualities of Chaucer's Friar center around his ability to flatter the people into giving goods to him, for he was "the beste beggere in his hous" and could always obtain something wherever he went. ("Prologue," 252)

The friars had various fraudulent means of obtaining their ends. They often made men fraternity members by way of letters, which were given by the cloisters to those who contributed. Wiclif claims that such letters were given only to the peasants because the nobility would readily recognize the fraud:

Feyned lettris of fraternite wolen þei 3yve
 to symple men, but to lordis and to men þat þei
 Seyn þat þei loven more, wolen þei not profre
 siche lettris, lest her falsheed by perseyved.
 (SEW, I, 67)

Chaucer also noted the practice of giving "letters of fraternity" in the "Summoner's Tale." Thomas, a farmer and hence a "symple" man, asks the begging Friar whether he is his "brother."

"Ye, certes," quod the frere, "trusteth weel.
 I took oure dame oure lettre with oure seel."
 ("Summoner's Tale," 2127-2128)

The friars also claimed that their prayers were better than others because of their greater devotion. In his

enumeration of the falsehood of the friars, Wiclif bluntly makes this accusation:

Be þriddle deceyt of þise ordris is þat þei
 passen oþere in preyeris, boþe for tyme þei
 preyen and for multitude of hem.

(EW, p. 317)

Furthermore, the proud boasting among the friars of their good deeds caused Wiclif to charge them with peddling their self-righteousness rather than directing the people to repentance and faith in Christ:

Bot freris maken no mencyoyn, nouþer
 of contricioun ne schriff, ne of meryt
 of Cristis passinn, but onely of her owne
 gode dedis.

(SEW, III, 378)

Chaucer's Friar similarly boasts to Thomas of the efficacious prayers of friars:

And therefore may ye se that oure preyeres--
 I speke of us, we mendynantz, we freres--
 Been to the hye God moore acceptable
 Than youre, with youre feestes at the table.

("Summoner's Tale," 1911-1913)

In addition to making the claim that his prayers are more acceptable, Chaucer's Friar had much to say for himself: he claimed more powers of confession, more spiritual revelations, a greater concern for the souls of men, and a deeper devotion. He proclaims:

Therefore we mendynantz, we sely freres,
 Been wedded to poverté and continence,
 To charite, humblesse, and abstinence,
 To persecucioun for righwisnesse,
 To wepynge, misericorde, and clennesse.

("Summoner's Tale," 1906-1910)

However, in spite of their claim of a life of abstinence and holiness, the friars frequented the tavern to engage in pleasurable pursuits. Chaucer's Friar was well-acquainted with the owner and barmaids in the taverns in his district:

He knew the tavernes wel in every toun
 And everich hostiler and tappestere
 ("Prologue," 240-241)

On the same point, Wiclif lashes out at the clergy who came to the cities, not to destroy sin, "but rapere encesse it be traverne goyng, pleiying at þe tablis, chees, and opere vanytees." (SEW, III, 286) Therefore, both Wiclif and Chaucer unmasked the pretentious friars, exposing their unholy social activities associated with the tavern; moreover it is significant that both writers selected the same point in making the exposure.

Wiclif and Chaucer also agree upon the friars' boastfulness concerning their religious authority. Here, one finds a close similarity in the wording between Wiclif and Chaucer in their criticism of the friar's boasting of his powers of confession. Wiclif states:

And þei cryen faste þat þei [friars] haf more
 power in confessioun þen oper curatis; for þei
 may schryve alle þat comen to hom, bot curatis
 may no ferþer þen her owne parischens.
 (SEW, III, 374)

Chaucer makes the same point:

For he hadde power of confessioun
 As seyde hymself, moore than a curat;
 For of his ordre he was licenciati.

("Prologue," 218-220)

Both writers use the phrase, "power of confession," and compare the friar's authority to that of the curate. Neither attributes greater authority to friars, but merely indicates that the friars claim such power.

Sometimes, friars carried with them small articles to use as presents to gain women's favors. Wiclif's lively description of this method agrees remarkably with Chaucer's. Wiclif derides a friar in this practice, calling him a peddler:

3if þei becomen pedderis berynge knyves, pursis,
 pynnys and girdlis and spices and sylk and precious
 pellure and forrouris for wymmen, and þerto smale
 gentil hondis, to gete love of hem and to have many
 grete 3iftis for lital good ore nou3t; þei coveiten
 euyle here nei3eboris goddis.

(EW, p. 12)

Chaucer is also careful to note this trickery of the Friar:

His tyyet was ay farsed ful of knyves
 And pynnes, for to yeven faire wyves.

("Prologue," 233-234)

While Wiclif enumerated many more objects than Chaucer, both cited knives and pins as articles to be given to women.

Moreover, there is an implied lewdness in Chaucer's "faire wyves" as well as in Wiclif's phrase, "to gete love of hem." Wiclif accused the friars of courting the favor of women in order to obtain their husbands' wealth:

"And þus fendis wilis of freris aqueynten hem
wip ladies, and þei ben meenes to lordis to have
þat þes feudis oxen.

(SEW, I, 389)

Chaucer's Friar in his flattering appeal to Thomas's wife for a large gift echoes Wiclif's view; his Friar also appears to be lustful in his affectionate salutation of Thomas's wife:

The frere ariseth up ful curteisly,
And hire embraceth in his armes narwe,
And kiste hire swette, and chirketh as a sparwe
With his lypes: "Dame," quot he, "right well,
As he that is youre servant every deel,
Thanked be God, that you yaf soule and lyfe.
Yet saugh I nat this day so fair a wyf
In al the chirche, God so save me."

("Summoner's Tale," 1802-1809)

Wiclif would refer to this act as "uncleve kissingis:"

For as aneutis gloterie, þei [friars] gendereu
Ofte fatte gobettis, and as anentis lecherie,
þei synnen ofte in unclene kissingis.

(SEW, II, 214)

However, both Chaucer and Wiclif accuse the friars of sexual practices beyond mere kissing. Chaucer describes his Friar as being immoral:

He hadde maad ful many a mariage
Of yonge wommen at his owene cost.

("Prologue," 212-213)

The meaning appears to be that the friar had arranged the marriage of many young women whom he had formerly seduced. Wiclif indicates that friars seduced women through the private confession:

And þus freres and religious wymmen mai soone
assente to leccherie.

(SEW, III, 357)

Moreover, Wiclif viciously charges the friars with open fornication with the women in the district:

And here-wip don fornycacioun and avoutrie
wip wyves and noones.

(EW, p. 6)

He, also, charges them with rape:

3if þei waiten hem in feldis alone or gardyns
and sleen hem þer by keruyng to moche
Vsyng of lecherie.

(EW, p. 12)

Wiclif apparently charges the friars with murder, although it is not definitely clear whether Wiclif is speaking of physical or spiritual murder. If his comments refer to physical murder, they are probably directed toward some well-known crime, for Chaucer comments upon similar practices of friars as being quite harmless, except for the risk of physical dishonor:

For ther as wont to walken was an elf,
Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself
In undermeles and in morwenynges,
And seyth his matyns and his hooly thynges
As he gooth in his lymytacioun
Wommen may go now saufly up and down.
In every bussh or under every tree
Ther is noon oother incubus but he,
And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.

("Wife of Bath's Tale," 873-881)

It is clear, then, that both writers charge friars with adultery and rape. The similar description of the place of these acts--fields, gardens, trees--by the two writers point to their agreement on small details concerning friars.

Chaucer's Friar took a leading role in the frolic and business of "love-days," a festival for settling disputes

by arbitration:

In love-days ther koude he muchel help
 For ther he was nat lyk a cloysterer.
 With a thredbare cape, as is a povre scoler.
 But he was lyk a maister or a pope.

("Prologue," 227-230)

Wiclif complained that the nobility and church officials, in settling these disputes, took advantage of the poor and ignorant peasants:

Also lordis holyngre grete lovedaies, and bi here
 lordischip menytenenge þe fals pert, for money
 frendschip or favour, fallen opynly in þis
 curs, . . .

(SEW, II, 322)

However moral the original intention of the love-days, which had obviously fallen into misuse and error, Wiclif sternly rebuked the iniquity which he saw being perpetrated upon the poor. Although Chaucer's reference to love-days is not in itself critical, he does portray the foolish pride and opportunistic attitude of the Friar on such occasions. It is a possibility that Chaucer's Friar could be one of those whom Wiclif accused of deceiving the poor, for both writers reveal that the friar's interest was directed toward the rich and not the poor. The friars, Wiclif maintained, would not rebuke "myghty men of þe worlde but flatren hom and glosen and norischen hom in synne." (SEW, III, 376) Therefore, "myghty men hire by grete costis a fals traytour to lede hom to helle." (SEW, III, 377) Chaucer's Friar, who associates himself with the rich, is described in terms similar to those used by Wiclif:

For unto swich a worthy man as he
 Acorded nat, as by his facultee,
 To have with sike lazars aqueeuntaunce.
 It is nat honest, it may not avaunce,
 For to deelen with no swich poraille
 But al with riche and selleres of vitaille.
 ("Prologue," 243-248)

Thus, both writers' denunciation of the selfish unscrupulous designs of the friars further emphasizes their agreement.

Religiously, the most serious charge against the friars was that of giving spiritual favors in return for money. Wiclif states:

And for esy penaunce of money þat þei enyoynen
 men, for trentalis and masse pens, and makyng of
 gaie wyndowis and grete housis, þat þe world may
 see and preise.
 (SEW, III, 299)

Chaucer's description of his Friar parallels Wiclif's:

Ful swetely herde he confessioun,
 And plesaunt was his absolucioun:
 He was an esy man to yeve penaunce,
 Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce
 For unto a povre ordre for to yive
 Is signe that a man is wel yshryve;
 ("Prologue," 221-226)

Moreover, both Chaucer and Wiclif indicate that the money so collected by the friars was designated to go into the construction of a religious house. The similarity of Wiclif's words reflected in Chaucer's description, thus, constitutes an echo of the Reformer.

Although neither writer said as much about monks as they did about friars, there are some pertinent parallels to be found in their references to members of this religious order. Both criticized the monk for his worldly orientation:

e.g., he was not interested in the rigorous discipline of his order, but acted as a secular lord. Wiclif, who endorsed the original idea of poverty among the monks, lamented that poverty was no longer a way of life for them:

Sum tyme weren mounkes lewede men, as seintis in
Jerusalem; and þanne þei kept hem silf fro symme
as seynt Bernard berip witesse; but monkes ben
turned into lordis of þis worlde moost ydel in
goddis travaile, and seyen þat þei ben betre monkes
þan weren þe first seintis.

(SEW, I, 40)

Chaucer's Monk was obviously one of those whom Wiclif cited, for he did not hold to the old ideas of the order. One notes the close parallel between Chaucer's description and Wiclif's:

Ther as this lord was kepere of the celle,
The reule of seint Maure or of seint Beneit,
By cause that it was old and somdel streit
This ilke Monk leet olde thynges pace,
And heeld after the newe world the space.

("Prologue," 172-176)

Both accounts of the monk refer to a change from the original practice of a dedicated holy life to one of worldly orientation; apparently, the monk no longer adhered to the disciplined, sinless path, but readily accepted the path of luxury. At any rate, Wiclif assails the monks for acting like idle worldly lords. He further extends his criticism to include their worldly love of eating and the obese physical appearance:

And so þes irreligious þat have possessiouns, þei
have comunly rede and fat chekis, and fatt and
greet belies.

(SEW, III, 171)

Chaucer's description of his Monk's physical appearance concurs with Wiclif's:

His heed was balled, that shoon as any glas,
 And eek his face, as he hadde been enoynt.
 He was a lord ful fat and in good poynt.
 His even stepe, and rolynge in his heed,
 That stemed as a forneys of a leed;
 His bootes souple, his hors in greet estaat.
 Now certainly he was a fair prelaat:
 He was not pale as a forpyned goost.
 A fat swan loved he best of any roost.

("Prologue," 198-206)

While Wiclif is forcefully blunt in his criticism, Chaucer lets his reader draw the obvious inference as he craftily assumes the position of an agreeable observer of his rather resourceful Monk.

It is also to be noted that both writers criticize the monk for his love of hunting. Chaucer's Monk is an avid hunter with horses and hounds:

Therefore he was a prikasour aright
 Grehoundes he hadde as swift as fowel in flight;
 Of prikyng and of huntynge for the hare
 Was al his lust, for no cost wolde he spare.

("Prologue," 188-191)

Wiclif charged that the monks robbed the people to support their own hawks, hounds, and horses:

And þe ende for whiche þei ben þus robbid is many
 tymes to fynde haukis and houndis, and riche pelure,
 and proude hors, to hie prestis and curatis, þat
 shulden be myrroure of mekenesse and chastite and
 gostly traveyle and hevenly lif.

(SEW, III, 320)

The only difference in these passages from Chaucer and Wiclif lies in the fact that Wiclif traces the iniquity of the monks

to the unscrupulous practice of gaining money under the guise of religion.

In connection with hunting, Wiclif describes the monk's horse as "proude," a description indicating the manner in which the horses were adorned. In another place, Wiclif referred to them as "fatte hors, and jolye and gaye sadeles." (SEW, III, 519) This concurs with Chaucer's Monk who had "Ful many a deyntee hors" that were well-equipped. ("Prologue," 168-203) Both writers, furthermore, specifically refer to the ringing of bells on the horses' bridles. Wiclif's reference occurs among a catalog of the evils perpetrated against the people by the monks:

A, Lord God, where þis be resoun, to constreyne
þe pore puple to fynde a worldly preest, sumtyme
unable boþe of lif and konnyng, in pompe and
pride, coveitise and envye, glotonye and dronkenesse
and lechene, in symonye and heresie, wiþ fatte hors,
and jolye and gaye sadeles, and bridelis ryngyng
be þe weye, and himself in costly cloþes and pelure,
and to suffre here wyves and children and here pore
ney3boures perishesce for hunger þrist and cold, and
opere mischieves of þe world.

(SEW, III, 519-520)

Chaucer's Monk also had a bridle that rang as he rode by:

And whan he rood, men myghte his brydel heere
Gynglen in a whistlyng wynd als cleere
And eek as loude as dooth the chapel belle.

("Prologue," 169-171)

In fact, the Host claims that the travelers would have all fallen asleep during the Monk's tale had it not been for the ringing of the bells on the horse's bridle. Chaucer's description of the Monk's horse with its ringing

bridle may be interpreted as a critical censure of the worldly-mindedness of monks and, in this particular point, his description and criticism agree with those of Wiclif.

Wiclif's monk is said to wear costly "pelure" clothes made of fur. Chaucer is specific in his description of his Monk's clothes:

I seigh his sleeves purifiled at the hond,
 With grys, and that the fryeste of a lond;
 ("Prologue," 193-194)

The monks were obviously vain in their dress, but for Chaucer and Wiclif to attack this vanity by naming identical items of fur seems more than merely coincidental.

The two writers further agree on the description of the monk's desire to participate in the worldly leisure of the nobility rather than in the contemplative life of the cloister in their use of the related similes, "fissh that is waterless" and "fishis wipouten water." Chaucer's Monk disdains the popular criticism that censured him for being out of his cloister:

He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,
 That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men,
 Is likned til a fissh that is waterless,
 This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre.
 ("Prologue," 177-181)

While Wiclif's criticism is much more pointed, the figure of speech remains:

And so þes þat swarmen out of þer cloistre
 tellen how þere is þer lyf, and how þei weren
 out of þer cloistre as fishis wipouten water.
 (SEW, II, 15)

Assuming that Chaucer's use of the word text and Wiclif's phrase, "For as þey sey," refer to a common saying about the monks during the fourteenth century, it may be argued that there is no direct association between the Reformer and the poet in their references. On the other hand, it can be asserted that in his use of the figure of speech to refer to worldly monks as fish out of water, Chaucer chose an expression in familiar use in the Wiclifian movement.

The parallel criticism of the summoner by Wiclif and Chaucer centers around the greed for money. As a church officer who cited offenders to appear before the ecclesiastical court, Chaucer's Summoner, in cooperation with the Archbishop, abused his position by threatening arrest to obtain a bribe:

Withouten mandement a lewed man
 He koude somme, on peyne of Cristes curs,
 And they were glade for to fille his purs.
 And make hym grete feestes atte nale.

("Friar's Tale," 1346-1350)

Apparently, the Summoner's bride was not too prohibitive for, "He would suffre for a quart of wyn/ A good felowe to have his concubyn/ A twelf month, and excuse hym afte fulle. . ." ("Prologue," 649-651) But he is the villain who attempts to gain some money from an old widow by pretending that he had a case against her:

And so bifel that ones on a day
 This somnour, evere waityng on his pray,

Rood for to somne an old wydwe, a ribibe,
Feynyngge a cause, for he wolde brybe.

("Friar's Tale," 1375-1378)

Any church officer, including summoners, who would make false arrests and take bribes, are vigorously denounced by

Wiclif:

Also somenors bailies and servauntis, and opere men of lawe, kitten perelously mennus purses, for þei somonen and aresten men wrongfully to gete þe money out of his purse, and sumtyme suffren hem to meyntene him in wrongis for money.

(SEW, III, 320)

Chaucer's vivid description, then, of the Summoner's venality corresponds to Wiclif's blunt assault. Thus, both writers accuse the summoner of false arrests and bribery.

L. A. Haselmayer concludes that Chaucer's description appears to be more unfavorable than that of other contemporary literary writers; however, he notes that other writers are critical of the summoner's corrupt practices and conjectures that the bitterness to be found in Chaucer's description may be due to a personal acquaintance.²⁰³ While Haselmayer's comments may be valid, it is also apparent that the focus of Chaucer's criticism of summoners concurs with Wiclif's criticism.

Chaucer's unfavorable presentation of the fraudulent and corrupt Pardoner clearly illustrates scorn of the corruption associated with relics and indulgences. Whereas,

²⁰³L. A. Haselmayer, "Apparitor and Chaucer's Summoner," Speculum, XII (January, 1937), p. 57.

Chaucer expressed satirically the indignation of his contemporaries over the sale of indulgences, Wiclif bluntly denounced the pretentious practice which was only a cloak for the pardoner's greed. Obviously, Wiclif could not countenance the histrionics and called for an end to the prevalent hypocrisy among the clergy. He charged that: "For comuly þei shapen her wordis after þe ende þat þei coveiten." (SEW, I, 178) Chaucer confirms Wiclif's charges by having his Pardoner admit that financial success is his only objective in preaching:

For myn entente is nat but for to wynne,
And nothyng for correccioun of synne.

("Pardoner's Prologue," 403-404)

It is evident that Chaucer used his depiction of the Pardoner as a means of unmasking the greedy practices of some pardoners, the same practices that aroused Wiclif's indignation.

Furthermore, Chaucer revealed the fraudulent and superstitious practices associated with relics through his confiding Pardoner:

For in his male he hadde a pilwe-beer,
Which that he seyde was Oure Lady veyl:
He seyde he hadde a gobet of the seyl
That Seint Peter hadde, whan that he wente
Upon the see, til Jhesu Crist hym hente.
He hadde a croys of latoun ful of stones,
And in a glas he hadde pigges bones.
But with these reliques, whan that he fond
A povre person dwellynge upon lond,
Upon a day he gat hym moore moneye
Than that the person gat in monthes tweye;

And thus, with feyned flaterye and japes,
 He made the person and the peple his apes.
 ("Prologue," 694-706)

Moreover, Chaucer's Pardoner claims that he has authority from popes, cardinals, patriarchs, and bishops to pardon the sins of any offender. By using relics, false documents, and bulls, the Pardoner boasts that he could easily convince ignorant people to give him more money in one day than a parson receives in two months. With this money, the Pardoner lives sinfully, indulging in the greedy practices he condemns in others:

Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice
 Which that I use, and that is avarice.
 ("Pardoner's Prologue," 427-428)

He is also immoral:

Nay, I wold drynke licour of the vyne,
 And have a joly wenche in every toun.
 ("Pardoner's Prologue," 452-453)

Wiclif, who had little sympathy for pardoners, denounces the same repulsive, fraudulent practices criticized by Chaucer:

Bere comeþ a pardoner wiþ stollen bullis and
 false relekis--and þis pardoner schalle telle
 of more power þan evere crist grauntid to petir
 or poul or ony apostle, to drawe þe almes fro pore
 bedrede neiþeboris þat ben knowen feble and pore,
 and to get it to hem self and wasten it ful syn-
 full: in ydelnesse and glotonye and lecherie.
 (EWW, p. 154)

Bulls, false relics, taking money from the poor, and the act of living a life of ease and sin are attacked, therefore, by both Wiclif and Chaucer.

It is evident, as well, that Chaucer's Parson reflects many of Wiclif's ideas of the priesthood. Many scholars view the striking parallel, here, as being more than coincidental, although modern scholarship does not generally recognize the Parson as representing Wiclif or even one of his followers.²⁰⁴ Ives, however, sees in Chaucer's use of the phrase, "man of religion," a direct reference to the Lollards.²⁰⁵ Further, she points out that the Parson's description coincides with a portrait of Wiclif in the following details: the parson is a learned man; he comes from a family of farmers; his character traits correspond to the Lollard's view of a priest; he stresses the preaching of the gospel of Christ; he is a man who lives by his teaching; he dislikes "cursing for tithes"; he has a concern for the poor in his parish; and his parish is, like Lutterworth, wide "with houses for asunder."²⁰⁶

In addition to traits of character and other similarities between the Parson and the Lollards, Loomis states that the phrase, "Christ and his Apostles," is a hint that the Parson is a Lollard. He points out that, while the

²⁰⁴Robinson (ed.), op. cit., p. 766.

²⁰⁵Doris V. Ives, "A Man of Religion," MLR, XXVII April, 1932, 145.

²⁰⁶Loc. cit.

phrase is absent from contemporary writing, it is used frequently by Wiclif and his followers.²⁰⁷ Furthermore, he argues that the Parson's rebuke of the Host for swearing concurs with the ideas set forth by Wiclif.²⁰⁸ Chaucer, moreover, has one of the pilgrims indicate that the Parson is a Lollard who would corrupt his religion.

One of the objections to accepting the Parson as a Lollard is noted in the fact that Wiclif did not approve of pilgrimages. Possible answers to this objection are that the pilgrimage is only a literary device; that the Parson may not have been on a pilgrimage, but may have been going to Canterbury for other reasons; or that Chaucer may not have been aware of Wiclif's dislike of pilgrimages.²⁰⁹

While most of these answers are valid, it seems incredible that Chaucer would have been unaware of Wiclif's opposition to pilgrimages. In his rejection of pilgrimages, Wiclif specifically mentions those made to Canterbury: "And 3if men foololy avowen to go to Rome, or Jerusalem, Canterbury, or oþer pilgrimages." (SEW, III, 283) Moreover, the Lollard's opposition to pilgrimages was so persistent that, when later some of them renounced their heresies, they

²⁰⁷Loomis, op. cit., p. 299.

²⁰⁸Ibid., p. 303.

²⁰⁹Ives, op. cit., p. 148.

had to affirm their belief in the usefulness and sanctity of pilgrimages.²¹⁰

Robinson contends that the sketch of the Parson is not representative of a Lollard because the Parson does not hold some of the sect's most distinctive beliefs.²¹¹ Maxfield supports this view, pointing out that the Parson was not opposed to any of the rights of the Church and asserting that the Parson is not unorthodox in his sermon.²¹² On the other hand, Maxfield does feel that there may be some significance in the Parson's frequent quotes from Saint Augustine, a distinctive characteristic of Wiclif's sermons.²¹³ Robinson cannot accept the supposition that Chaucer would present such a sympathetic sketch of a Lollard when he was certainly aware that Wiclif had been repudiated as a heretic, or at least tending toward heresy in his last years before death in 1384.²¹⁴ Nevertheless, he admits that the sketch praises the virtues emphasized by the Wicliffites and condemns particular abuses which they attacked.²¹⁵ He, also, suggests that more explanation on

²¹⁰Jusserand, op. cit., p. 209.

²¹¹Robinson (ed.), op. cit., p. 664.

²¹²Maxfield, op. cit., p. 72.

²¹³Ibid., p. 73.

²¹⁴Robinson (ed.), op. cit., p. 664.

²¹⁵Loc. cit.

the relationship between Chaucer and Wiclif may help illumine the portrait of the Parson.²¹⁶

A close comparison of the characteristics of the Parson with Wiclif's ideas of the priesthood strengthens the supposition that Chaucer intended his Parson to exemplify many of the Reformer's views. For instance, Chaucer's emphasis on the poverty of the Parson contrasts with his descriptions of his other church officials, who seemingly had a life of ease and plenty. Wiclif writes: "And so ech man shulde wite þat preestis shulden lyve a pore liif." (SEW, II, 203) Moreover, Chaucer's Parson echoes Wiclif's reliance on the Bible, especially on the gospels. Chaucer says on three occasions that the Parson took his doctrine exclusively from the Scriptures: "That Cristes gospel trewely wolde preche" ("Prologue," 481); "Out of the gospel he tho wordes caughte" ("Prologue," 498); and "But Cristes loore and his apostles twelve/ He taughte," ("Prologue," 527). Wiclif's sermons typically start with the words, "þis Gospel telliþ," denoting his emphasis upon the Bible, particularly the gospels. He stresses that the priest should stay within the Scriptures in his preaching:

Here shulden trewe prestis and cunnyng
holden hem in boundis of þe gospel, and
preche noo þing but witt of it, and þing
þat falliþ as knowen to men.

(SEW, II, 173)

²¹⁶Ibid., p. 766.

Furthermore, he repeatedly denounces the friars for not preaching the gospel, but preaching "fablis and dremes and lesyngis." (SEW, II, 173)

Not only did Wiclif reprove the clergy of taking goods from the poor so as to live in luxury, but also he counseled the rich to give generously and wisely to relieve the distressed poor. (SEW, III, 170) He, also, strongly advocated that the priests should live moderately, distributing among the poor their excessive money and goods:

And siþ God and trewe prestis han axid þus many
 tymes, þat curatis shulden lyve in mekenesse
 symplenesse and sobernesse, and spende al þat
 leveþ over here resonable susteynaunce in
 relevyng of pore men.

(SEW, III, 335)

Chaucer's Parson lived in simplicity with only a meager substance in order to give to the poor in his parish:

But rather wolde he yeven, out of doute,
 Unto his povre parisshens aboute
 Of his offryng and eek of his substaunce.
 He koude in litel thyng have suffisaunce.

("Prologue," 487-490)

Not only does Chaucer's Parson reflect the Wiclifian contention that the clergy should aid the poor, but he, also, reflects Wiclif's views on the use of the curse against the poor who fail to pay tithes. Chaucer says of his Parson: "Ful looth were hym to cursen for his tithes." ("Prologue," 486) Obviously, the contemporary practice of excommunication was obnoxious to Chaucer, who portrays his Parson as a

compassionate priest who willingly shares his own offerings with the poor. Wiclif's view is identical:

And 3if þei [clergy] cursen pore men for tipes,
Whanne þei may not paie for poverti, and whanne
curatis shulden 3yve hem of here owene goddis.
(SEW, III, 311)

It is notable that Chaucer's Parson in his poverty, walking with a staff in his hand to visit his parishioners, is a contemporary description of Wiclif's "poor priests." In fact, Wiclif instructs the "poor priests" to travel by "goynge on feete, takynge stafes in hondes, receyvynge þo state of pore men, in 3yvynge ensaumple of holynes."
(SEW, III, 457)

Sometimes, the priest would pay an understudy, who was not always well-qualified, to take care of his benefice so that he could seek greater opportunities in London; however, the Parson did not leave his low estate to seek riches and luxury in the city:

He sette nat his benefice to hyre
And leet his sheep encombred in the myre
And ran to Londoun unto Seinte Poules
To seken hym a chaunterie for soules,
Or with a bretherhed to been withholde;
But dwelte at hoom, and kepte wel his folde,
So that the wolf ne made it nat myscarie;
He was a shepherde and noght a mercenarie.
("Prologue," 507-514)

Wiclif blamed not only the priests for negligence of their assigned duties but also the lord who would enlist them in his service. He views the entire practice as simony:

And herefore þei biheten to serve lordis and
prelatis in worldly office on here owene cost,

and dwellen in here courtis absent fro here
chirchis; and þis is cursed marchaundise wip
temperal servyce and benefices of þe Chirche.

(SEW, III, 280)

Furthermore, Wiclif contends that the priest should remain
at home diligently caring for his charge:

Ffor prest is a spyere in his castel, to loke ofer
perels of schepe; and if he be blynde in his soule
for powder of temporal goodis, or slepe for lust,
as swyne done, and þus perel come to schepe, þo
Lord þat owis þo schepe by skil schulde dampne
hym for negligense.

(SEW, III, 150-151)

Typically, in his sermons, after explaining the
scriptural text, Wiclif makes some charge of clerical cor-
ruption. He usually suggests that the texts be enlarged
in include the sham, hypocrisy, and immorality of friars,
monks, priests, bishops, and other church officials.
Chaucer's Parson, also, includes some criticism on un-
scrupulous priests:

And this figure he added eek therto,
That if gold ruste, what shal iren do?
For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste,
No wonder is a lewed man to ruste;
And shame it is, if a prest take keep,
A shiten sheperde and a clene sheep.

("Prologue," 499-504)

Wiclif also insisted that the priest must be an
example of the gospel which he preaches, since Christ was
the perfect example for his followers:

þerfore Crist dide first in dede þat þing he
tauzte aftir bi word, and whanne Crist hadde
waschyn his disciplis feet for mekenesse, he
saide þus I 3eve to 3ov ensaumple, þat 3e do
as I have don.

(SEW, III, 274)

Chaucer's Parson concurs with Wiclif's view for:

"He taughte, but first he folwed it hymselfe." ("Prologue," 528) and "This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf,/ That first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte." ("Prologue," 496-497) Thus, both Wiclif and Chaucer insisted that the priest should first practice his belief before he should teach it to others. In fact, Chaucer refers to the Parson's being a good example to his parishioners four times in the "Prologue."

The most pointed evidence that the Parson was intended to represent a follower of Wiclif occurs in the "Epilogue of the Man of Law's Tale" when the Host refers to the Parson as a Lollard. When the Parson rebukes him for swearing, the Host replies:

"O Jankin, be ye there? I smelle a
Lollere in the wynd," quod he.
"Now! goode men," quode our Hoste, "hearkeneth me;
Abydeth, for Goddes digne passioun,
For we shal han a predicacioun;
This Lollere heer wil prechen us somewhat."
("Epilogue of the Man of Law's
Tale," 1172-1177)

Immediately, the Shipman, as a defender of the church, objects to a sermon from the "lollere," because the Parson may start some controversy or corrupt the orthodox religion. Tatlock asserts that the term, "Lollere," means practically nothing in identifying the Parson.²¹⁶ However, Robinson

²¹⁶Tatlock, op. cit., p. 259.

states that the word, "Lollere," was a contemptuous term for the followers of Wiclif, but he contends that the sketch of the Parson should not be taken to represent Wiclif or one of his followers.²¹⁷ Furthermore, the Parson's objection to the Host's language does not conclusively identify him as a Lollard, because, although swearing was strongly condemned by the Wiclifian party, it was also an orthodox sin expressly forbidden by the church.²¹⁸ Even the Pardoner in his homiletic patter declaims at some length against it, referring to the common practice of swearing by the various parts of the body of Christ such as his heart, blood, arms, and bones.

Regardless of how one interprets Chaucer's use of "Lollere" and the Parson's rebuke, the parallel between Wiclif and the Parson is significant. For example, Wiclif has listed the common subjects of profanity, at least one of which the Host uses:

also alle comyn swereris bi Goddis herte, bonys,
nailis, and sidis, and opere menbris, and false
and veyn swereris, wiþ lecchours, and alle opere
þat comynly don agenst ony of Goddis hestis, for
þei ben comyn mysdoeris, rennen fully in þis
sentence.

(SEW, III, 322)

Wiclif contends that each man should rebuke the person who wrongs him as the occasion merits:

²¹⁷Robinson (ed.), op. cit., p. 697.

²¹⁸Maxfield, op. cit., p. 73.

And so, what tyme þat þou knowist þat any
 man synneþ in þee, þou shuldest snybbe him
 bi þou silf, whanne tyme and oþer þingis wolen
 suffre.

(SEW, II, 76)

The Reformer also cites the friars for failure to reprove a man if he were of social importance: "And whanne synne rengneþ among grete men, and þei dreden of worldli harm, þei doren not snybbe men of þis synne, lest þer ordre lesse wordli helpe." (SEW, III, 350) However, the Parson would "snybbe" both the rich and poor as Wiclif proclaimed one should:

But it were any persone obstinat,
 What so he were of heigh or lough estat,
 Hym wolde he snybben sharply for the nonys.
 ("Prologue," 521-523)

It is apparent, then, that the Parson concurs with Wiclif's view of reprovng sin in others regardless of their social status.

While it is contended that Chaucer was only advocating conventional reforms in the church, the evidence favors the supposition that Chaucer was influenced by the ideas of Wiclif in projecting these reforms.

CHAPTER IV

WICLIF AND CHAUCER: A SUMMARY AND REVIEW

During the lifetime of Geoffrey Chaucer, John Wiclif played a controversial role in the political and religious affairs of his country. He was not only the acknowledged leader among his colleagues at Oxford, but also he was a powerful preacher, an important political debator, a prolific writer of Latin and English treatises, the inspiration for the translation of the Bible into English, and an effective leader and organizer of a popular movement for church reform. As a reformer, he voiced his opposition to the sham and hypocrisy he saw among church officials and denied two fundamental doctrines of the medieval church. The force of his character, the depth of his convictions, and the tremendous energy with which he pursued his objectives made him one of the foremost influential men of his time. His following included scholars, politicians, knights, and a multitude of common men. So persuasive were his arguments that, for years after his death, men were willing to be martyred for the ideas he championed. John Wiclif had a profound effect upon his age.

As the preceding chapters have suggested, there is convincing evidence that Chaucer was not disassociated from Wiclif or his activities. Indeed, the two men probably knew each other by reputation if not personally. Among the prominent followers of Wiclif were intimate friends of Chaucer, and the two men had the mutual patronage and friendship of John of Gaunt. Furthermore, Wiclif and Chaucer were critical of the hypocritical pretensions among ecclesiastical orders and the abusive practices found among the church officials. Although Chaucer never participated in controversial doctrinal debates, he revealed his awareness of the issues involved and, to some extent, sympathized with the ideas of Wiclif. For example, Wiclif's views on the controversial doctrine of predestination are shared by Chaucer in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" and in Troilus and Criseyde. Moreover, while he was careful not to embrace Wiclif's unorthodox view on the Eucharist, Chaucer alluded to the controversy concerning this vital Catholic doctrine in at least two of his works. However, a more revealing criticism of an established doctrine is found in the Summoner's scorn at excommunication and absolution. Although one cannot assume that Chaucer would express his serious views on such a vital church matter through the most repulsive member of the pilgrims, there must be some significance in the fact that this heretical idea was presented at all. In the ideal character of the Parson, Chaucer, again, criticized the

abusive use of excommunication. Therefore, although he did not go so far as to deny the cardinal doctrines of Transubstantiation or of the keys, his criticisms so parallel Wiclif's that one can assume that Chaucer, in his concepts of the controversial doctrines of his time, was influenced by him.

While the evidence does not indicate that Chaucer became unorthodox in his doctrinal views, he joined with Wiclif in criticizing corrupt contemporary religious practices. In The Canterbury Tales, the ideal characters--the knight, the clerk, the Plowman, and the Parson--all reflect a close association with the ideas of Wiclif. On the other hand, the church officials against whom Wiclif most often directed his invectives--friar, monk, summoner, and pardoner--are satirically criticized in points similar to Wiclif's.

There can be little doubt that Chaucer's Friar represents the corrupt practices among the medicant orders which Wiclif so fervently denounced.²¹⁹ Chaucer and Wiclif agree in their criticism of the friars in the following areas: the expensive clothing they wore; their failure to follow the scriptures in their preaching; the practice of begging; their interest in obtaining money in order to build houses for their cloisters; their use of "fraternity letters";

²¹⁹Robinson (ed.), op. cit., p. 656.

their claims of greater spirituality and holiness; their pursuit of unholy social pleasures and immoral acts including "unclean kissing" and fornication; the use of trickery in presenting presents to women; their catering to the wealthy instead of helping the poor; and the practice of giving "easy penance" for money. Furthermore, the examination of their criticism reveals striking parallels in the details they used. While some scholars contend that Chaucer's criticism of the friars is not particularly Wiclifian,²²⁰ nevertheless the identification between Chaucer's lively presentation of his friar and the forceful, incisive criticism of Wiclif is too evident in too much detail to allow serious doubt that the two writers were attacking the same corrupt mendicant practices. Therefore, this study invariably leads to the definite conclusion that the detailed descriptions of the friars in the writings of Wiclif and Chaucer clearly establish an affinity of ideas between the two writers.

That parallels exist between Chaucer's detailed description of his Monk and Wiclif's criticism of monks in

²²⁰Arnold Williams, "Chaucer and the Friars," *Speculum*, XXVIII (July, 1953), p. 511. Williams contends that many English and Latin manuscripts between 1380 and 1420 contain criticism of the friars that is not Wiclifian in doctrine or tone. Williams argument is weakened, however, by his admission that Chaucer does agree with the Wiclifites in denouncing the friars violation of their vows of chastity.

general can hardly be denied. Chaucer's description agrees in the following points with Wiclif's views: the monk no longer lived in poverty under the strict disciplines advocated by his founder; he was idle, living in luxury; he was fat, indicating a tendency toward gluttony; he was vain in his dress wearing fur-trimmed clothes; he took great pride in the equipment of his horses, especially fancy saddles and bridles with ringing bells. It is difficult to suppose that Chaucer would agree in so many details with Wiclif without reflecting some of the Reformer's views.

The greed and fraudulent practices of the clergy were exposed by both writers in their attack upon pardoners and summoners. It is of significance that Chaucer revealed the corrupt practices of the Pardoner in using illegal bulls and false relics to deceive the peasants into donating money so that he could maintain his sinful and immoral life. Not only do Chaucer and Wiclif agree upon the precise corrupt practices of pardoners, but also they agree in their emotional temperament toward these practices. Furthermore, Chaucer's unfavorable presentation of his Summoner concurs in identical details with Wiclif's denunciation of greedy churchmen who resort to false arrest and bribery.

While it is possible that Chaucer's Parson was only an ideal priest conscientiously performing his duties according to the orthodox expectations, there is convincing evidence that Chaucer intentionally patterned his Parson after

reforms advocated by Wiclif. The use of the term, "Lollere," to refer to the Parson may not be conclusive enough in itself to identify him as a Lollard, but the Parson's description coincides with Wiclif's views of the priesthood in the following additional details: the Parson lives in poverty, giving his unnecessary goods to the poor in his parish; he walks with staff in hand; he stresses the gospel in his preaching; he is not negligent, nor does he hire out his office; he denounces corruption in the clergy; he lives an example of his teaching; he rebukes those who sin; and he is opposed to swearing. While it is contended that Chaucer was only advocating conventional reforms in the church, the evidence presented favors the supposition that Chaucer was influenced by Wiclif's ideas in projecting these reforms in the character of his Parson.

Although this study does not assume that Chaucer was a follower of Wiclif, it does reveal that Chaucer concurred with many of Wiclif's views. For example, the Parson, despite his many similarities to Wiclif's ideal priest, is going on a pilgrimage, a practice Wiclif opposed. This situation would indicate that Chaucer, though in agreement with many of Wiclif's reforms, was by no means his disciple. There are, however, significant affinities between the contemporary controversial doctrinal views of Chaucer and Wiclif. Moreover, since the similarity in Chaucer's and Wiclif's criticism of the corruption among

church officials is so striking as to indicate that Chaucer was aware of and in sympathy with the views of Wiclif, it is logical and credible to attribute the affinities between the two writers to the influence that the brilliant but controversial Reformer, John Wiclif, had upon the observant and talented poet, Geoffrey Chaucer.

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