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Author
Martin, Carol A. N.

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Alys as Allegory: The Ambivalent Heretic

Although Chaucer's Alys of Bath hardly fits twentieth-century impressions of John Wyclif's followers, she could not have failed to arouse suspicions of Lollardy in a fourteenth-century imagination.[1] We may think of Lollardy in post-Reformation, heroic terms of martyrdom, piety, and personal conviction, but Chaucer wrote shortly after the death of Wyclif, before the death penalty for heresy was instituted in England (1401), and while gossip and rumor concocted some rather odd tales. Moreover, many of our perceptions about Alys have been colored by her consistently bad press. Actually, the constellation of particular details in Alys's character tailor her to popular contemporary notions of Lollards.[2] As weaver and many-times remarried widow, as aggressive, uneducated, unlicensed female preacher, she fits traditional stereotypes of heretics. Further, she discusses marriage and clerical incelibacy and misogyny, and she relies on reason and experience more than on traditional authority, embodying several points of tension between Wycliffites and English secular and ecclesial authorities. Alys's vernacular preaching and literalness reflect yet more central Lollard concerns. Her exegetical idiosyncracies begin a cycle of inquiry into interpretive practices which continues beyond her tale. The Lollard characteristics supply the metaphorical catalyst which transmutes Alys's exegetical peculiarities, her zest for sexual encounter, and her very garrulity into appropriate images of vernacular text generation.

Most scholars agree that the Wife's *Prologue* and *Tale* were probably composed in the early to middle 1390s,[3] a date which coincides with a second purge of Lollard sympathizers from Oxford University, the introduction of the Lollard Twelve Conclusions to Parliament, the completion of the reading version of the Wycliffite translation of the Bible, and a rising communal anti-Lollard hysteria. Even if composition of the Wife's texts predated these particular Lollard-related texts and events, Lollard themes, ideas, and figures of speech would have been familiar through tracts and by word of mouth: Oxford Wycliffites had preached publicly in Oxford and beyond since Wyclif's time at Oxford, Wyclif himself propagandized for John of Gaunt, and Lollards habitually preached—unlicensed—in pub-

lic places.[4] Chaucer's introduction of Alys and his description of her behavior include associations with Lollardy that a contemporary hardly would have failed to recognize.

In the *Man of Law's Epilogue,* the Shipman, himself no example of holiness, directly accuses the Parson of Lollardy. Harry Bailey neutralizes the potential danger of the charge, but the suggestion remains in our memories, along with the identification of preaching as the primary activity of the Lollards and the association of the name Jankyn with Lollardy. Anne Hudson draws on this same passage, remarking that even disqualification of the Parson as a Lollard does not mean that Wycliffite ideas disappear entirely from the text.[5] The accusation need not be reserved solely for the Parson; it transfers most immediately to the next tale, which is Alys's.[6] The connection is reinforced by the fact that Alys preaches and associates with two Jankyns. Even without the *Epilogue,* however, Alys's traits stir suspicion.

Jill Mann's explanation of Chaucer's characterization methods goes a long way toward explaining the ambiguity of the Wife's association with Wycliffite teaching and practice.[7] She writes that Chaucer introduces both positive and negative types, allowing them to coexist and work together to come to a definition or description. By means of contradictory detail and the absence of direct endorsement, he works against a complete correlation with any single, simple identification. Mann argues that, when no tradition of characterization existed, "vernacular estates literature must have drawn on popular prejudices and ideas when it wished to extend its range to new classes."[8] I suggest that Chaucer used popular caricatures of Lollards not to confine Alys's identity strictly to Lollardy but in order to explore some of the tensions between Lollardy and orthodox culture. The tensions are social and political as well as theological and philosophical, and they center in Alys's exegetical and authorial activity.

Besides being a wife, Alys is a weaver, a trade which had been associated with heresy since the Cathar movement of the twelfth century followed the trade routes of Flemish merchants. Heresy was so closely associated with weavers that heretics were denominated by the slang terms *textores* or *texerants* on the continent and in England.[9] The same tradition connects heresy with the ability to read or write and preach.[10]

The issue of lay reading was made more pregnant in contemporary eyes by the fact that, among the Lollards, the ability to read was extended to women as well as to men, as was the preaching office. Henry Knighton compared "Women who know how to read" the Bible to those "swine" who trampled on the "evangelical pearl."[11] The same point was made by an unnamed fourteenth-century preacher who stated in one of his sermons

that women as well as men were to be heard spreading the Word: "Behold now we see so great a dissemination of the Gospel, that simple men and women, and those accounted ignorant laymen in the reputation of men, write and learn the Gospel, and, as far as they can and know how, teach and scatter the word of God."[12] Thomas Netter states as fact that women did teach men in public, but the instances he cites, all connected to London, may have been based more on rumor than on substance; he reports from a distance in time, locating the practice as having taken place still under the reign of Richard II (1377–99).[13] Reginald Pecock, an anti-Lollard polemicist, expressly referred to the attitudes of Lollard preachers, women as well as men:

> . . . thilk wommen . . . maken hem silf so wise bi the Bible, that thei no deed wollen allowe to be vertuose and to be doon in mannis vertuose conuersacioun, saue what thei kunnen fynde expresseli in the Bible, and ben ful coppid of speche anentis clerkis, and avaunten and profren hem silf whanne thei ben in her iolite and in her owne housis forto argue and dispute agens clerkis. . . .[14]

And in his 1396 response to the Twelve Conclusions, Roger Dymmok charged that "*women* (whom [the Lollards] call virgins, but in fact their whores) have, I cannot say *celebrated, but rather profaned masses, of which they are publicly and manifestly convicted.*"[15] Thomas Netter referred to statements made by Wyclif and John Purvey, Wyclif's secretary, that women as well as men might fill the preaching office; unfortunately, the text he cites has been lost (or the statements were oral, perhaps made in sermons). As Aston observes,

> Rumor there certainly was at that critical moment in the development of the sect in the 1390s. . . . If the exceptional extremist (or extreme feminist) did resort to surreptitious female rites, the most likely time was then, the most likely place London. Having not a single name to go on, we must leave the record as it stands—as plausible gossip. Yet the talk itself is remarkable enough, and gossip is also part of history.[16]

The gossip clung tenaciously to public memory, for *Friar Daw's Reply* to *Jack Upland,* an explicitly orthodox/Lollard polemical exchange, contains the accusation that "your sect susteynes wommen to seie massis."[17]

That Alys is a preacher is evident, even apart from the *Man of Law's Epilogue.* She begins her *Prologue* just a few lines after Harry Bailey's an-

nouncement that "We shal han a predicacion; This Lollere heer wil prechen us somwhat" (II.1176–77), and when the Pardoner interrupts her, he calls her a "noble prechour" (III.165).[18] Alys objects to clerical glossing (26 passim) yet comments herself on Scriptural texts. She preaches, of course, without formal licensing; one of the tenets condemned by the 1382 Blackfriars Council was Wyclif's argument for the validity of unlicensed preachers.[19] Alys does, however, wring an informal "license" from the Friar just before she begins her *Tale*. A shrewd manipulator of men and language, when an opportunity presents itself, she uses it to obtain exactly what she needs:

> Oure Hoste cride . . .
> "Do, dame, telle forth youre tale, and that is best."
> "Al redy, sire," quod she, "right as yow lest,
> *If I have licence* of this worthy Frere."
> "Yes, dame," quod he, "tel forth, and I wol heere."
> (850, 853–56, italics mine)

Alys's aggressiveness fits contemporary (hostile) descriptions of Lollard women preachers. However, her scolding is strategic, a defensive tactic designed to prevent marital "war" (390).[20] Alys is not simply ill-natured.[21]

A number of the Lollard Twelve Conclusions suggest strong affinity between Alys and the Wycliffites. Conclusion XI[22] protests the vow of continence urged on widows and asks that they be encouraged to remarry.[23] The third Conclusion argues against the requirement of clerical continence because it is "in preiudys of wimmen" and because inability to maintain continence leads to sodomy; the basis of this judgment is an appeal to "resun and experience." "Syche men . . . the[i] like non wymmen" because of their own sexual preference.[24] Alys's arguments against continence are made on her own behalf, but the principles she argues apply generally, the saints and Christ excused. Her *Tale* begins with a sly joke about friars' inability to practice celibacy. She argues, too, by reason and experience rather than by authority, especially in the first 160 lines of her *Prologue*. By her direct avowals, she makes the appeal to experience a subject as well as a method. And she presumes that clerics, influenced by prejudice, dislike women:

> For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
> That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,
> But if it be of hooly seintes lyves,
> Ne of noon oother womman never the mo.
> (688–91)

> Therefore no womman of no clerk is preysed.
> The clerk, when he is oold, and may noght do
> Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho,
> Thanne sit he doun, and writ in his dotage
> That wommen kan nat kepe hir mariage!
>
> (706–10)

On the other hand, the Wife seems much better balanced than ecclesiasts or Wycliffites of her own day. Jerome's vicious polemics in *Adversus Jovinianum*—written in the context of dispute with a heretic and source of a good share of medieval misogyny—are rather difficult to reconcile with the church's later adoption of marriage as a sacrament and with the basic theology on marriage taught in contemporary manuals for parish priests (and so meant to be passed on to the laity).[25] And rejection of marriage was actually one of the recurring features of medieval popular heresies.[26] Alys's colorful rhetoric about virginity camouflages her generosity to those who differ with her. The Church asked all clergy and widows to be continent;[27] the Wycliffites wanted all the clergy to marry.[28] The Wife appears to be alone in affirming both the chastity of Christ and the saints (105–6, 135–41) and her own choice of marriage (which, at the age of twelve, would more likely have originated in her father's will than in free choice). D. W. Robertson, Jr., reasoned that Alys's argument against the necessity of keeping counsels of perfection proved that she was carnal and unspiritual,[29] but the same argument that one need not follow counsels of perfection to attain salvation is made as a serious point of theology in the "General Prologue" to the Wycliffite Bible:

> Whan Scripture spekith only by counsell, men moune be saued though they do not the counsell: As full many men and women moune be saued, though they take not virginitie neither continence, neither yeue all here goodis to poore men. And yet these bene counsellis of Jesu Christ in the Gospell. (Ch. 14, [Q viii])[30]

Alys's appeal to reason and experience over authority sounds dangerously challenging to the intellectual status quo, but Augustine himself specified "experience strengthened by the exercise of piety" and the "evidence of reason" as aids in interpreting Scripture, although he noted that the latter can be treacherous.[31] For all her complaints against prejudiced clerics, Alys does not indulge in much libel, especially in comparison with polemicists like Roger Dymmok and the writers of the Lollard Twelve Conclusions

and the "General Prologue" to the reading translation of the Wycliffite Bible.

The issue of schooled versus unschooled clerics was part of the argument between Lollards and authorities on the advisability of making Scripture text available in English to the unlearned. The "General Prologue" to the Wycliffite Bible waxes indignant over Oxford's current requirement that preachers "by poysonyde wyth heathen mens errorys nyne yere eyther tenne," while those of quick minds who "euer lyve well and studye holy wryte by elde Doctouris and Newe: and preche truely and freely ayens open synnys" but are not officially schooled are silenced.[32]

Alys raises the problem within the first fifty lines of her *Prologue:* "Diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes. . . . Of fyve husbondes scoleiying am I" (44 c and f). In at least two instances, she implements her "schooling" when she appropriates her husbands' arguments and turns them against their originators.[33] The redirection of his opponents' arguments was apparently also one of Wyclif's favorite rhetorical techniques.[34]

Alys is not *only* a Lollard, and so she cannot be made to fit that mold squarely. Some Lollard teachings do not harmonize well with Alys, or with the *Canterbury Tales.* For example, Lollards did not approve of pilgrimages, prayers, and offerings made to crosses and images; and they especially disapproved of St. Thomas and Canterbury pilgrimages:

> But we preye the, pilgrym, us to telle qwan thu offrist to seyntis bonis enshrinid in ony place, qwethir releuis thu the seynt that is in blisse, or the pore almes hous that is so wel enduwid? For men ben canonizid, God wot how, and for to speken more in playn, trewe cristemen supposin that thet poyntis of thilk noble man that men clepin seyn Thomas, were no cause of martyrdom.[35]

One would not expect to find a Lollard engaging in a literary version of confession either, which is how the Wife's *Prologue* is often understood,[36] although moderate Lollards approved of confession to fellow lay Christians. Worse, in outright contradiction of the celebrative nature of the *Canterbury Tales,* the twelfth Conclusion urged Parliament to reduce the number of crafts, since

> the multitude of craftis [is] nout nedful, usid in oure chirche, norsschith michil synne in wast, curiosite and disgysing. . . . For nature with a fewe craftis sufficith to nede of man. . . . and alle manere craftis nout nedful to man aftir the apostle schulde ben distroyd for the encres of uertu.[37]

These two latter points would be enough, one might think, to disqualify any of the Canterbury pilgrims from association with Lollardy, but one can imagine Chaucer gleefully complicating his own issue; he, after all, was the one who introduced the first intimation of Lollardy. And non-fictional Lollards were not particularly consistent themselves because their identity and opinions were still forming. Chaucer embeds so much suggestive detail, along with the explicit suspicion of Lollardy, that the idea cannot easily or lightly be swept aside.

The Wife's intensive use of Scripture—Lawrence Besserman has located fifty biblical allusions in the 856 lines of the *Prologue* alone[38]—and her exegetical literalness align her with the Lollards. Wycliffite exegesis followed the tradition of Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Lyra. The Dominican Aquinas, basing his argument on Augustine's, emphasized the literal sense of Scripture as the basis for interpretation.[39] Lyra, a Franciscan scholar, attempted to remedy what he perceived as neglect of the literal level by writing about a "double literal sense," the "obvious" and the "figural," which built on the tradition of typology and allowed for metaphor.[40] Most of the commentary in the "General Prologue" of the Wycliffite Bible derives from Lyra's *Postilla litteralia,* Augustine, or the *Glossa ordinaria.*[41] Interest focuses clearly on salvation history, on typological application, and on the moral of each historical event for modern Christians.[42] The instructions on allegorical exegesis cover the four traditional levels of allegory and Tichonyus's seven points, but the practice of textual interpretation within the document stresses literal and moral interpretation, a habit thoroughly compatible with preaching tradition. Chapter 11 explicitly complains that "many Doctouris taken lyttle heede to the letter: but all to the gostly understondyng."[43] Traditionally, preachers concentrated on literal and moral levels, especially when speaking to a lay congregation; the Wycliffites simply radicalized the traditional practice. Moreover, they discounted any tradition or practice that could not be found in Scripture.

Alys's insistance on literalness—her demand for the "expres word" (61)—combines with her reliance on experience or common sense.[44] Her glossings have the character of aggressive certainty, yet through qualification they end as questions which are both challenges to established interpretive traditions and requests for information. The certainty of "Experience . . . is right ynogh for me. . . . Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve" (1–2, 6) proceeds to the qualifier, "If I so ofte myghte have ywedded bee" (7), to the question, "Why that the fifthe man Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan? How manye myghte she have in mariage?" (21–23). The church, after all, sanctioned all five of Alys's marriages. She asks thirty-one questions in the course of her *Prologue* and inspires the

Pardoner (167), the Summoner (837), and the Friar (840) to ask questions as well.

Alys's ribald references to patriarchal and royal bigamy in the Old Testament (35–43, 55–58) certify her exegesis as erroneous, or carnal, in traditional terms. The example of the Patriarchs' multiple marriages turns up frequently in discussions of allegorical exegesis; Augustine uses the passage in *On Christian Doctrine,*[45] and even Aelfric imagines with horror the exegetical distortions of unlearned priests whose imperfect Latin permits them to discover the Old Testament practice of bigamy but whose lack of historical and literary sophistication precludes correct understanding.[46] The passage seems to have become codified as the primary example of interpretive inadequacy. The "General Prologue" to the Wycliffite Bible shortens this example to a paraphrase of Paul's interpretation of Sarah and Hagar (Gal. 4:22–26), but only a paragraph or so later, the traditional warning against overly literal understanding issues in very pointed terms.[47]

Chaucer's Alys, an animated caricature of fourteenth-century English fears of Lollardy, launches an investigation of exegetical problems in the *Canterbury Tales.*[48] The *Epilogue* to the *Man of Law's Tale* already indicates what ideas Chaucer will pursue in the following tales: glossing and teaching of the Gospel are introduced as issues (1180); the commonplace comparison of Lollards to the tares in the Matt. 13 parable (1182–83) raises the issue of defining borders between heretical and authorized interpretation; Alys's question "Who peyntede the lion . . . ?" (692) points to the problem of authorial and/or exegetical partiality. Her exegesis is one-sided and literal, but so, for instance, is her husband Jankyn's. His book tells of the fall through Eve, but that account is not balanced by Mary's story. The book tells only of the evils done by women, true enough as far as it goes, but false because of its imbalance. Samson's lust, Hercules' faithlessness, and Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter are all left out of the accounts, from which Jankyn apparently gains some personal satisfaction—he thinks some of the ugliest tales are "swete" (734), and he reads the book "with ful good devocioun" (739).

We need yet to consider Robertson's case against Alys, for his interpretation has been influential in her condemnation; he saw no redemptive possibilities for her, describing her as "hopelessly carnal and literal."[49] But Robertson's interpretation of the Wife's exegesis is based on the very textual authorities which Alys says she knows nothing about and on an interpretive tradition which Augustine's own principles do not endorse. Robertson claims, for instance, that the Wife's advocacy of sequential marriages argues that she has no perception at all of the sacramental nature of marriage.[50] But although Paul refers to marriage as a "sacrament" (Eph.

5:32), the ecclesiastical institution did not make marriage a formal sacrament until the thirteenth century, at which point new interpretations of biblical text were enlisted to justify the altered status; prior to this, marriage was a civil or private ceremony, performed at most at a church entrance.[51] Ironically enough, Alys's matter-of-fact concept of marriage is closer to more than a millenium of Christian practice than are Robertson's examples. In Chaucer's day, a rather surprising number of Wycliffites advocated a return to the earlier customs or even denied the legitimacy of any ecclesial or civil ceremony.[52] Robertson argues that Alys is unreliable because she is out of line with relatively recent authorities such as the *Glossa ordinaria* or Thomas Ringstede;[53] however, Augustine's criterion for validity was not whether a given interpretation agreed with earlier readings but whether it was contextually correct and charitable.[54] The Wycliffite "General Prologue" uses 1 Cor. 13:1 ("If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love . . . ") as its criterion for allegorical accuracy, very neatly combining the Augustinian standard with the Lollard issue of the amount of [foreign] language study required at Oxford.

Robertson's interpretation, while profoundly enlightening one aspect of Alys's makeup, yet reflects little of the flexibility which he finds in the Christian tradition of allegory in his own valuable studies.[55] In his *General Prologue*, Chaucer specifically invoked Christ's parables, an important part of Christian exegetical tradition, as a literary example (739–40). The first Christian explicator of allegorical method was St. Paul, whose interpretation of Abraham's bigamy concludes, "[such] things are said by an allegory" (Gal. 4:24). The important new emphasis in Christian allegorical practice (as opposed to classical allegory) was that the weight of meaning was not transferred from the literal level to another level but operated simultaneously on several levels. The task of the exegete was to penetrate beyond the "veil" of literal or fictive meaning to the "freedom" of more profound meanings. The medieval exegete did not attempt to organize meaning into a system but aimed at generating meaning; multiple interpretations merely demonstrated the great richness of the text. The old text, the Old Testament, was not destroyed by the coming of the New; the Old Testament "unveiled" became a part of the Christian text.[56] Alys certainly bungles badly when she deals with Scripture, out of partiality and ignorance, and she is both literally and exegetically carnal. But she does arrive at a charitable meaning, if we consider her *Tale*: a justly condemned rapist is spared, morally reeducated, and reintegrated into society—redeemed, with the full etymological associations of moral judgment and salvation. To assume that her perhaps dubious moral character disqualifies any

problem she raises from serious consideration is to take up a moral and intellectual position as dualistic and inflexible as the Lollards' position that no sacrament was valid if the celebrating priest was in a state of sin.

To return to issues of fourteenth-century England: The problem of vernacular lay preaching was leading to tensions over vernacular texts *per se*, an issue which directly and intensely concerned Chaucer as poet and as translator of such texts as the *Boece* and indeed of Scripture itself.[57] I believe Chaucer's reason for exploiting the popular caricature of Lollardy to be the opportunity it gives him to explore philosophical, moral, and cultural implications of that issue.[58] One indication pointing in this direction is Alys's preference of barley bread over wheat bread as a metaphor for her spiritual status. Robertson assumes that the allusion is to Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*, adding yet another piece of damning evidence of Alys's carnality.[59] But barley bread is also the image Dante chose in his *Convivio* to characterize vernacular composition.[60] Just as important is Alys's nature as herself a text as well as a character. She and her story beg for allegorical interpretation; Jankyn, we know, "glosses" her (509), and she invokes particular biblical passages associated with allegory and enigma. From the beginning of her *Prologue,* she is associated by denial with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:5–30). The Samaritan not only had a similar marital career but also had difficulty interpreting Jesus's enigmatic statements. She first accepted them as literal statements of magic, but when the statements were made plain, she became an agent of salvation to her whole community. Alys and the Samaritan woman have more in common than appears on the surface: both have had five husbands and their current marital status is unclear; both announce their findings—discoveries of meaning—to the men of their communities; both (if we accept Alys as partially Lollard) are representatives of a faith community which worships "in spirit and in truth" rather than in a fixed location or tradition; and, perhaps, both are redeemed—Alys's name, thoroughly English in its origins, etymologically suggests this possibility.[61] Alys also invokes and critiques the long medieval tradition of allegorical interpretation of Solomon's Song, based on Origen; she rightly observes that Solomon's many marriages and liaisons do, after all, indicate a marked inclination to erotic activity.[62] Her selective references to Paul's teaching on marriage quickly pass to a discussion of the bigamy of the Patriarchs, which provided the material for Paul's own practice of allegory in Gal. 4:19–31. The proximity of the two Pauline texts could hardly fail to arouse an expectation of allegory. Paul speaks of his own work in terms of human generation, crossing the gender barrier to do so ("I am in labour again," Gal.

4:19), and in terms of variety of narrative perspective ("I would willingly be present with you now, and change my voice," Gal. 4:20).[63] Alys's *Tale* culminates with the command to lift up the veil, revealing not the ugly old hag but the beautiful young woman; lifting or penetrating the veil is a frequently-used trope for figural or allegorical practice.[64]

Paul's figure of birth, or rebirth, provides an early precedent for the trope of sexuality as production of text, a figure that is particularly compatible with female speakers, certainly with Alys.[65] Lee Patterson has pointed out that the speech of Midas's wife resembles a pregnancy as it swells within her;[66] it also resembles Philology's travail, her vomiting of texts in many languages in Martianus Capella's *Marriage of Philology and Mercury* (perhaps vomiting rather than giving birth because Philology is virgin).[67] Dante associated the learning of speech with nurses and mothers,[68] and medieval feminists and anti-feminists alike assumed feminine associations with vernacular poetry:

> . . . Not only are the tensions that encompass the feminine at the heart of much medieval vernacular poetry, but they invest as well the very act of writing and reading itself. The language of poetry, as enacted by the poet and received by the reader, is habitually conceived in the Middle Ages in sexual, and specifically in feminine terms. . . . Anti-feminist literature represents woman as unceasing language; women, especially widows, and poetry in their speaking and embodying are simultaneously erotic and frightening in their attraction and threat of overwhelming.[69]

Alys's presence and speech are certainly both erotic and alarming; she suits very well the traditional characterization of vernacular composition. From this perspective, the Wife's sexual appetite and energy and her artesian flow of words beg us to detect not only Robertson's hopelessly carnal woman but also the beautiful and faithful new vernacular literature hidden by poets such as Chaucer under such unexpected coverings as the heavy ten-pound veil Alys wears.[70]

Carol A. N. Martin

Carol A. N. Martin is a doctoral candidate in English literature at the University of Notre Dame.

NOTES

1. The terms Wycliffism and Lollardy (and adjectival forms) are used interchangeably in this paper, following Anne Hudson's example and reasoning in *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 2–4.

2. D. W. Robertson, Jr., too, recognized the association of Alys with the Lollards, calling her *Prologue* "a kind of mock Lollard 'lay sermon' " in " 'And for My Land Thus Hastow Mordred Me?': Land Tenure, the Cloth Industry, and the Wife of Bath," *Chaucer Review* 14 (1980): 415. Robertson does not develop any further the implications of Alys's Lollardy.

3. Christine Ryan Hillary, notes to the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 864. All quotations of Chaucer in this paper will be taken from this edition.

4. Hudson, *Reformation*, 64–66, 69–81; K.[enneth] B.[ruce] McFarlane, *The Origins of Religious Dissent in England* (New York: Collier, 1966), 81ff, 89f, 94f, 110f, 115ff. McFarlane's book was first published in London, 1952, under the title *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity*. Of the two, Hudson's work is more reliable, because she has read Wycliffite documents more extensively than McFarlane and because she documents her sources, a matter about which McFarlane's book is careless.

5. Hudson argues that the Parsons' generosity to the poor and deliberate abstention from pressuring parishioners for tithes, combined with Chaucer's omission of any mention of the celebration of mass or of hearing confessions, should make us hesitate to dismiss the charge entirely (391–92). She also suggests that Alys uses characteristically Wycliffite language, and that Chaucer's explorations of predestination in *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Nun's Priest's Tale* indicate at least coincidence of interests between Wyclif and Chaucer (292–93).

6. The argument of this paper is not dependent solely on order. Indeed, the *Epilogue* does not appear in either the Hengwrt MS or in the Ellesmere MS. In "The Wife of Bath and Lollardy" (*Medium Aevum* 58 (1989): 224–42) Alcuin Blamires suggests that Chaucer abandoned this link "perhaps because, with the passage of time, outright jests concerning Lollardy no longer seemed to him amusing or prudent" (225). To this I would add that the imputation of Lollardy was rather more explicit and unequivocal than Chaucer usually was; perhaps he preferred to leave more room for conceptual play.

7. Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 14.

8. Mann, 9.

9. Milan Loos, *Dualist Heresy in the Middle Ages* (Prague: Academia [Czechoslovak Academy of Science], 1974), 117, 125 n. 93, 125–6 n. 97; M. D. Lambert, *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from Bogomil to Hus* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 62.

10. R. I. Moore, *The Birth of Popular Heresy* (London: Edward Arnold, 1975), 90.

11. Margaret Aston's translation, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon, 1984), 49–50. The remark is made in the *Chronicon Henrici Knighton vel Cnitthon Monachi Leycestrensis*, ed. Joseph Rawson Lumby, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores* Rolls Series No. 92, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1889–95), 2: 151–52.

12. Quoted in G. R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 5–6, 135.

13. Aston, 65–66.

14. Reginald Pecock, *The Repressor of Over Much Blaming of the Clergy*, ed. Churchill Babington, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores*, Rolls Series No. 19 (London: Longman, 1860), 1: 123.

15. Aston, 62, italics his.

16. Aston, 69.

17. *Jack Upland*, *Friar Daw's Reply* and *Upland's Rejoinder*, ed. P. L. Heyworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 99, l. 869. All three of the works are anonymous.

18. I follow the standard citation convention of giving the fragment number in Roman, line numbers in Arabic numerals. Where context clarifies the tale or link to which a quotation belongs, only the line numbers are given. Identification of fragments by Roman numerals indicates my preference for the Ellesmere order of *The Canterbury Tales*.

19. Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages: The Relation of Heterodoxy to Dissent c.1250–c.1450* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), 2: 565.

20. I koude pleyne, and yit was in the gilt,
Or elles often tyme hadde I been spilt.
Whoso that first to mille comth, first grynt;
I pleyned first, so was oure werre ystynt. (379–82, 387–90).

21. Only coveitise, a form of distrust, seriously riles Alys. Her most outrageous utterances are made under this provocation, including her taunt that, if she chose to deceive her husband, she would be able to do so (leaving him uncertain of whether she has or not). Her tone is one of exasperation, not of malevolence. Her accusations are false, but they are flattering to the old men, who read them as expressions of "chierte" (396).

The "soveraynetee" (818) or "maistrie" (817, 1236) Alys covets does not work itself out as supremacy; as soon as "maistrie" is achieved by means of husbandly trust, the immediate wifely response is to become a pattern of harmony, faithfulness, and even obedience. This apparently fickle behavior need not be read as instability; the same behavior could be equally well accounted for by a Boethian philosophy of self-possession. Chaucer also may well be stretching the boundaries of definitions: A "sovereign," for instance, may be only a steward (*MED* 343), and the term may be used of particular astrological signs. "Soverainte" itself may only refer to excellence (*MED* 348). The denotation of "independent authority," as when used of a sovereign nation, may have been active or may come into the language

a bit later; the *OED* lists its first use in this sense in 1595 (78). "Maistrie" includes, beyond skills in strength or deceit, skills in a children's game (*MED* 49); the Wife has told us from the start that

> If that I speke after my fantasye,
> As taketh not agrief of that I saye,
> For myn entente nys but for to pleye." (190–92)

See the *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Sherman M. Kuhn and John Reid (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), vol. M–Metal; also ed. Robert E. Lewis, 1988, vol. Sm–Speche; and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, prepared by J. A. S. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), vol. 16.

22. *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, ed. Anne Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 28:

> The xi conclusiun is schamful for to speke, that a uow of continence mad in oure chirche of wommen, the qwiche ben fekil and vnperfyth in kynde, is cause of br[i]ngging of most horrible synne possible to mankynde. For thou sleyng of childrin or thei ben cristenid, aborcife and stroying of kynde be medicine ben ful sinful, get knowing with hemself or irresonable beste or creature that beris no lyf passith in worthiness to be punschid in peynis of helle. The correlary is that widuis, and qwiche as han takin the mantil and the ryng deliciousliche fed, we wolde thei were weddid, for we can nout excusin hem from priue synnis.

This Conclusion could add some rather sinister overtones to Alys's character. (Rather than unnecessarily complicate typography, I shall regularly convert thorn to th, yogh to g.)

23. The reasoning behind this is that "wommen . . .ben fekil and unperfyth in kynde . . . ," and find continence difficult to maintain. The Wife herself seems to acquiesce in this judgment: "Frelete clepe I . . . . He spak to hem that wolde lyve parfitly; And lordynges, by youre leve, that am nat I" (93, 111–12). But although Alys confesses to "frelete," she would bridle at an accusation of fickleness; she claims faithfulness as the specifically feminine virtue.

24. Hudson, *Selections*, 25, italics mine:

> The thirdde conclusiun sorwful to here is that the lawe of continence annexyd to presthod, that in preiudys of wimmen was first ordeynid, inducith sodomie in al holy chirche; but we excusin us be the Bible for the suspecte decre that seyth we schulde not nemen it. *Resun and experience* prouit this conclusiun. For delicious metis and drinkis of men of holi chirche welen han nedful purgaciun or werse. *Experience for the priue asay of syche men is, that the[i] like non wymmen*; . . . .

25. W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 201.

26. Lambert, 7, 14, 26–31 passim, 55, 61, 62, 109–10, 113, 268.

27. Michael M. Sheehan, "Family and Marriage, Western" in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984), 4: 612. Some evidence indicates that the position concerning widows was originally intended to shield them from unwanted pressures from male guardians to remarry.

28. Hudson, *Reformation*, 357–58.

29. D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), see esp. 324ff. I should make very clear that I am in basic agreement with Robertson's argument that Chaucerian characters are not psychological in a modern sense and that the temptation to analyze them in modern psychological terms will distort or short-circuit the meanings the text generates. I also have great respect for the breadth of Robertson's data. However, I very much disagree with his practice of attaching one specific iconographic significance to each character. To do so, one must choose among or ignore the multiple iconographic traditions that may be attached to any given sign, ignore or suppress the contradictory details Chaucer supplies, and privilege the allegorical level of interpretation over the literal level, a proceeding which violates Robertson's Augustinian guidelines and the concerns of late medieval exegetes (see later discussion of Alys's literality). Any of these flatten the moral rigor of Chaucer's text; it is far too easy to dismiss Alys's argument on the grounds of her carnality. (After all, none of her husbands was any less carnal than she.) As I see it, Chaucer challenges us to decline such easy choices.

30. [John Purvey], "Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible," *Short Title Catalogue* No. 25588, Reel 303. (Published London: Robert Crowley, 1550.) My research was done using the STC microfilms; "pagination" therefore is restricted to Crowley's limited use of folio numbers.

31. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. J. F. Shaw in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Ser. 1, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), III.24.34 and III.28.39.

32. [Purvey], Ch. 13, [P v]. The expanded version of the complaint runs as follows:

> But alas, alas, alas. The moste abomination that euer was hearde among chrysten clerkis: is now purposid in Englond, by worldli clerks and feynede relygiouse. And in the chife universitye of oure rewme (as mani true men tellen wyth gret weylyng) thys horible and deuilys cursydnes is purposid, of Christis enymies and traytourys of all chrysten puple: that no man shall learne diuinitie neyther holy wryte, no but he that hath done hys fourme in arte, that is, that hath commencyd in arte, and hath be regente twoe yere after. This woulde be .ix yere or .x before that he learne holy write, after that

> he can commenlye well hys gramer: though he haue a good wytte and traueile ful sore and haue good findyng .ix yere eyther .x after hys grammer. Thys semith utterli the Diuils purpose: that fewe men eyther none shulen learne and kun Goddis law. (Ch. 13, [P iii])

33. In 434–42, she turns her husband's claims for the moral superiority of men on him to demonstrate how reasonable it would be for the reasonable and patient party to be the one to give way in an argument—not exactly the conclusion desired by the husband, but certainly a consistent application of his assumptions about the nature of women. Earlier, in 105–14, she had used reasoning against practicing continence that was commonly current as applied to voluntary proverty (for example in the Wycliffite "General Prologue"); she simply applied the argument to her own subject.

34. Pantin, 130.

35. Hudson, *Selections*, 27.

36. Hillary, 864.

37. Hudson, *Selections*, 28.

38. Lawrence Besserman, "Chaucer and the Bible: Parody and Authority in the *Pardoner's Tale*," in *Biblical Patterns in Modern Literature*, ed. David H. Hirsch and Nehama Aschkenasy (Chico, Cal.: Scholars Press, 1984), 47.

39. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, trans. and ed. A. J. Minnis in *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.11–c.1375: The Commentary Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 242.

40. Alastair J. Minnis, "Exegesis, Latin" in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984), 4: 44. See also Nicholas of Lyra, *Literal Postill on the Bible*, trans. and ed. A. J. Minnis in *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, 268–70; and [Purvey], "General Prologue" Ch. 14, [D ii].

41. Minnis, "Exegesis, Middle English," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 4: 546.

42. The author first summarizes human history, beginning with Adam and Eve, but skips almost immediately to the sojourn of Israel in Egypt as fulfillment of the prophecy made to Abraham. The story picks up with Moses, then the kings and the prophets follow. Then the author begins again with Genesis and gives a synopsis of every book in the Old Testament and most of the Old Testament Apocrypha. Chapters 10 and 11 consist wholly of very brief digests of the moral lesson of each Old Testament book.

43. [Purvey], [M vi].

44. Men may devyne and glosen, up and doun,
But wel I woot, *express*, withoute lye,
God bad us for to wexe and multiplye. (26–28)

Eek wel I woot, *he seyde* myn housbonde
Sholde lete fader and mooder and take to me. (30–31)

> Wher can ye seye, in any manere age,
> That hye God defended mariage
> *By expres word*? (59–61)
>
> Men may conseile a womman to been oon [a virgin],
> But *conseillying is no comandement*. (66–67)
>
> What that he mente therby, I kan nat seyn;
> But that I axe, why that the fifthe man
> Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan?
> How many myghte she have in mariage? (20–23)
>
> . . . if ther were no seed ysowe,
> Virginitee, than wherof sholde it grow? (71–72)
>
> The experience woot wel it is noght so. (124)

On Alys's demand for the "expres word," see Blamires, especially 228ff. I was unable to make more extensive use of the Blamires article because it was not in print until this article was already in production.

45. Augustine, III.12.20. In Wycliffite Middle English texts, Augustine's treatise went by the title *Cristene Teching* (Hudson, *Selections*, 71).

46. Aelfric, "The Preface to Genesis," in *Bright's Old English Grammar and Reader*, ed. Frederic G. Cassidy and Richard N. Ringler (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 250–54. Aelfric stresses the spiritual danger to one's soul of carrying the responsibility for having made available to unskilled interpreters such an obscure text; he is afraid that such a reader might take the text literally and assume that patriarchal polygamy was morally normative. Aelfric is not merely scaring up phantoms; as a young man, he was taught the details of Jacob's domestic establishment without discriminating social and cultural differences. For Aelfric, the major failure lay not in failing to perceive historical differences (important to Augustine) but in failing to understand the ground rules of figural interpretation. Aelfric as mature leader of a monastery sounds from his tone as if he must have grown weary of answering such questions as why monks might not marry in imitation of St. Peter.

47. [Purvey], Ch. 12, [N vi]:

> It is to be ware in the begynyng: that we take not to the Letter a figuratyfe speach. For than (as Poule seythe) the Letter Sleayth: but the Spirite, that is Gostly vnderstondyng, quyckennythe For whanne a thynge whyche is seyed figuratyfely is taken so as if it be seyed propirly: me understondyth fleshly. And none is clepyd more couenable the Death of Soull: than whan vnderstondyng that passith Beastis, is made sogette to the fleshe in suyng the Letter. Whateuer thyng in Gods worde may not be referrid propirli to

honestie and vertuis, neither to the truth of feyth: it is figurative speach.

48. Robertson, too, sees Alys as the first of a string of flawed exegetes (*Preface*, 331). Peggy Knapp's *Chaucer and the Social Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1990) considers at length the relation of Lollard issues and preaching to Chaucer's Pardoner, Nun's Priest, and Parson (61–94). As partial and problematical as Alys's textual exegesis may be, she does not nearly as much violence to her text and to charity as many of her colleagues. The *Friar's Tale* is told to provoke the Summoner, who immediately retaliates. The summoner in the *Friar's Tale* has a fraudulent oral text, a false accusation, which he refuses to commit to writing (1595–99). The Summoner's fictive friar preaches a sermon based on "hooly write" (1790), but he quotes only the convenient half of what Scripture he does use; "lettre sleeth" (1794) should be completed by "but the spirit quickeneth" (2 Cor. 3:6). And his sermon on "charity" would be hard pressed to find a scriptural base at all. The Clerk of Oxenford's Walter controls words, oral and written, and therefore Griselda's access to truth; he even induces the Vatican to cooperate with him in composing a fraudulent writ. January in the *Merchant's Tale* carefully chooses his authorities, avoiding the self-knowledge that his primary motivation is lust. The *Franklyn's Tale* turns on the validity of oral promises. The Physician features male interpretation of tradition to a dependent woman. Virginius has plenty of authorities but is devoid of both reason (he bases his action on an either/or fallacy) and common sense (why did he not simply leave the country with Virginia?). The *Pardoner's Tale,* a word-perfect sermon, may momentarily shake his own spiritual indifference, but his blasphemous intention angers fellow pilgrims. Chaucer appears to be asking: where does meaning reside? in the words themselves? in the intent of the preacher? perhaps in the intent of the hearer?

49. Robertson, *Preface*, 317.

50. Robertson, *Preface*, 319.

51. Sheehan, 611.

52. Hudson, *Reformation*, 141, 142, 292, 343, 385.

53. Robertson, *Preface*, 319–22.

54. Augustine, III.12.15.

55. I have in mind here both *The Preface to Chaucer* and his 1980 *Chaucer Review* article. The article ought to be of interest to metacritics, because there Robertson departed from "exegetical criticism" and provided secular historical substantiation for his earlier interpretation of Alys.

56. Cf. Robertson, *Preface*, 289–93, 298, 303. I have deliberately drawn my summary of the method from Robertson's in order to facilitate conversation.

57. By 1388 investigations of Lollards inquired into possession of vernacular writings, and Archbishop Arundel was requiring ecclesial licenses for the possession of any biblical translation except Rolle's translation of the Psalter which incorporated Peter Lombard's glosses. In fifteenth-century heresy trials, even

orthodox texts such as *The Prick of Conscience* or *Dives et Pauper* might be used as evidence of Lollardy if they were translated into English; *The Canterbury Tales* itself was admitted as evidence of the owner's Lollardy in one 1464 trial. See Aston, 206ff.

58. The question is one which needs more research, but I would like to raise at least the possibility here. I am continuing to expand my work on this point.

59. Robertson, *Preface*, 328–29.

60. Dante Alighieri, *The Banquet*, trans. Chirstopher Ryan (Saratoga, Cal.: Anma Libri for the Dept. of French and Italian, Stanford University, 1989), 21. The image is introduced at Book I, Chapter 5 and continues throughout the text.

61. Both forms of the name, Alys (320) and Alisoun (804), share origins in the Old English *alysan*. See Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 35–6. In its Old English verbal form, *alysan* means "to let loose, free, deliver, liberate, to pay for loosing, to pay, redeem, ransom"; it is the term used in the Old English Lord's Prayer for "deliver us from evil" (35). In nominal forms, the word (*alysednys*, *alysing*, *alysnes*, *alysend*) invariably carries the connotation of redemption, ransom, or loosing from bonds, most frequently in a spiritual sense (36). The *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath and Sherman M. Kuhn, vol. 1 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1956) indicates that the term preserves primarily these meanings, although *alesen*, similar or even identical in form to Middle English variants of OE *alysan* (*alesen*, *alysen*, *alisen*, *aliesen*, *alusen*) adds the refractory definition of "to lose, fail to preserve" (186).

62. Chaucer's use of Solomon and his books is heavy throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. This characteristic is remarkable because the *Canterbury Tales* is his only work in which Solomon appears (cf. George A. Plimpton, *The Education of Chaucer* [Oxford University Press: London, 1935], 155).

63. Quotations are from the Douay Rheims translation because of its proximity to the Vulgate.

64. See for instance Robertson, *Preface,* 303 and 317ff., and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa,* 239.

65. Much critical comment on Alys assumes that she is barren because no mention is made of her children (cf. Robertson, *Preface*, 322, 328–29). However, such an assumption builds on silence. Margery Kempe's many children do not figure largely in her autobiographical narrative, either, which may indicate that children figured less than we moderns might think in some medieval womens' self-awareness. Moreover, childlessness results as easily from male impotence as from female infertility, surely a detail of particular relevance to Alys, given the age and description of her first three husbands. It seems naive to assume that a woman who prefers not to have children would be able successfully to prevent conception; Margery Kempe could not.

66. Lee Patterson, " 'For the Wyves Love of Bathe': Feminine Rhetoric and Poetic Resolution in the *Roman de la Rose* and the *Canterbury Tales*," *Speculum* 58 (1983): 657.

67. Martianus Capella, *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts*, trans. William Harris Stahl and Richard Johnson with E. L. Burge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 2: 47–48.

68. Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia*, trans. A. G. Ferrers Howell and Philip H. Wicksteed, in *Classical and Medieval Literary Criticism*, ed. Alex Preminger, Leon Golden, O. B. Hardison, Jr., and Kevin Kerrane (New York: Ungar, 1974), 412–13. Translation originally published in *A Translation of the Latin Works of Dante Alighieri* (London: Dent, 1904).

69. Patterson, 659, 662–63.

70. *General Prologue,* 447–48, 453–55.