

OF CAPTAINS AND ANTICHRISTS

THE PAPACY IN WYCLIFFITE THOUGHT

J. A. F. Thomson, writing in the final chapter of his groundbreaking study *The Later Lollards*, argued that the heresy suspects whose trials he had examined were “strongly antipapal, not infrequently describing the pope as Antichrist, and in consequence may have helped to prepare the ground for the popular acceptance of Henry VIII’s break with Rome.”¹ The second part of this conclusion remains a bone of no small contention: the four decades since the publication of Thomson’s work have witnessed the emergence of formidable challenges to the traditional idea that the remnants of the movement of religious dissent inspired by John Wyclif helped to ease the reception of the Henrician reformation.² Whether there were individuals or communities worthy of the name “Lollard” in the early 16th century, and whether these groups exercised any discernible influence on the king and his advisers, remain important questions, but in this essay I will instead be interested in the first half of Thomson’s remark.³

¹ J. A. F. THOMSON, *The Later Lollards: 1414–1520*, Oxford, 1965, p. 249.

² The classic statement of the older position is A. G. DICKENS, *The English Reformation*, 2nd ed., London, 1989, and the classic challenges are those of Eamon DUFFY, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580*, 2nd ed., New Haven, Conn., 2005, and Christopher HAIGH (ed.), *The English Reformation Revised*, Cambridge, 1987. For a more nuanced argument, which seeks to map the regions where Wycliffite dissent had flourished onto the regions where the Reformation was accepted most quickly, see Diarmaid MACCULLOCH, *Tudor Church Militant: Edward VI and the Protestant Reformation*, London, 1999, p. 112–14.

³ The proper terminology for the religious dissenters whose views are the subject of this article remains problematic: see, for instance, Andrew COLE’s study *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer*, Cambridge, 2008. In this article, I will be using the term “Wycliffite(s)” to refer to individuals and texts which are indebted to the ideas of Wyclif and his academic followers. The semantic range of the terms “lollard” and “lollardy” remains to be fully explored, and I will employ them only sparingly (and always with implicit scare quotes) to describe broader communities of dissenters who may or may not have traced their origins back to Wyclif.