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Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer. By Andrew Cole. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. xx + 297.

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by Joseph L. Kelly

England in the late 14th and early 15th centuries endured an almost perfect storm of convergent cultural elements affecting language, thought, and ideas that left a highly refracted field of evidence. The single most significant phenomenon within that tumult of cultural change must be the appearance of the first English heresy and the equally unprecedented efforts to countermand it. The most coherent records available are neither contemporaneous nor trustworthy. Some two decades after the events of the 1380s chroniclers Knighton and Walsingham reconstructed the heretical Ricardian moment from a revisionist Lancastrian perspective. Determined institutional suppression left very few documents to bear witness to the central flashpoints of the period: John Wyclif, his followers, and the members of a sect whose identity and practices to this day remain unclear known as "lollards." Previously located at a distance from the woof and warp of outright involvement in Wycliffite heresy, today Langland, Chaucer, and fellow poets draw ever closer to positions of credible eyewitnesses regarding lollard and Wycliffite heresy that so dominated the time.

Andrew Cole's provocative, compelling, albeit uneven, study entitled *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* masterfully demonstrates how the works of Langland, Chaucer, Hoccleve, Lydgate, and Kempe may contain authentic, real time testimony that pertains to the religious turmoil that defined this period. *Literature and Heresy* is itself a study of how we can expose surviving literary texts in a way that casts authentic light on the fragments of the non-literary records that remain. The Blackfriars Council of 1382 forms the study's thematic core and point of beginning. Led by Archbishop William Courtenay, prelates from the realm met to condemn some 24 heterodox "conclusions" espoused in the writings of Oxford don John Wyclif. Cole explains how this commenced "the invention of heresy" wherein the Council managed to make Wycliffism infamous and "pursued a course of canonical action that ushered in a cultural hysteria about the ubiquity of heresy and the multitude of heretics doing illicit things anywhere and everywhere" (20). "The invention of lollardy," by contrast, appears much more complicated (26). Confusingly presented by the Lancastrian chroniclers as an established equivalent to Wycliffism as of the Blackfriars Council, such association did not in fact exist.

Because the earliest known use of the term to identify heretical Wycliffism occurred in a single sermon in 1387, Langland's significant revisions of Piers Plowman in the C-text that includes multiple iterations of the term offer authoritative evidence as to the genesis or "invention" of the term "lollare." Cole meets the claim that certain

excisions from the B-text, such as Piers's tearing of the Pardon in the face of a priest, suggest Langland's turn toward theological conservatism with an emphatic "nothing could be further from the truth" (71). Cole's enthusiasm serves him well in sustaining interest and in challenging the reader through his exposition of the fluidity of the term "lollare." Cole invites us into *Piers Plowman* as a snapshot of converging traditions tending toward intersection—the one, academic Wycliffism, which had its own progenitors in William Fitzralph and theological reformers that sourced Augustine and Ambrose; the other, ascetic reformers, focused on poverty and discipleship typified by the original Franciscan fraternal ideals. After the soaring analysis of the formation of lollard typology, Cole's discussion of how Chaucer enters the conversation is almost a disappointment. Cole's pithy but brief comment on the lollard laden exchanges in the Man of Law's Endlink gives way to Chaucer's "heresy of the vernacular" exemplified by the apparent similarities in Chaucer's Prologue to his *Treatise on the Astrolabe* and the Prologue to the *Wyclif Bible*. The claim that "[w]hen Chaucer thinks of vernacular translation, he thinks of Wycliffism" remains unclear (186).

While lollard sympathies are not apparent in the work of Hoccleve and Lydgate, Cole argues that they were indeed sympathetic and also significantly interested in the treatment of heresy and heretics. Cole views Hoccleve's deviation from official accounts of the prosecutions of John Badby and Sir John Oldcastle in *The Regiment of Princes*, as a critique of the manner in which heresy is persecuted (130). While Lydgate is an

unwavering supporter of the crown's punishment of heretics and lollards, his religious poetry, in the context of similar religious writing of the period, reveal a perspective "far more flexible, experimental, and . . . even unorthodox" (133). Cole finds that in one poem in particular, *Procession of Corpus Christi,* the poet even espouses Wycliffite models of the eucharist in that Lydgate "works his way to a Wycliffite idea about the centrality of figural meaning in sacramental theology" (152). A stretch, perhaps, but one I found compelling. With *The Book of Margery Kempe* Cole's study comes full circle. Kempe's very religious identity prompted acts of misidentification on the part of power that caused a kind of judgment to fall upon the accusers. Cole demonstrates how Kempe's testimony, as recorded in her *Book,* teaches the need for reform in thinking about religious identity that transcends controversy over correct and incorrect faith (158-59).

Cole's study displays prodigious research, with well over one-third of the total text devoted to detailed notes. Clear and plentiful, the textual citations present a fair survey of the range of views against which Cole tests his hypotheses. Cole's enthusiasm is engaging as is his lush writing style. Occasionally, Cole's enthusiasm gets the better of him such that he carries the reader to the odd emphatic and rousing conclusion, but all too often leaves us with some uncertainty about how we arrived there. Then too, while Cole insists that lollardy is not the equivalent of Wycliffism, the two terms are

incessantly paired and the actual theological positions of John Wyclif are never identified, *per se*.

In an admittedly brief study of a massive subject, Cole marshals a staggering amount of detailed primary documentation and wide range of modern critical commentary that tease out of the examined works (and authors) a satisfying appreciation for the depth and subtlety of the cultural contention that informed the intellectual and literary life of the period, namely the heresy that we generally and interchangeably refer to as "lollardy" and "Wycliffism."