During the second half of the fourteenth century, a series of shifts seems to have taken place in representations of that perennial topic, the ignorance of the laity. The mass of baptized humanity lumped together as lay by ecclesiological theory, comprising more than nine-tenths of Christian society, had always been classified as ignorant, in the way their formal status as sheep, meek objects of the church’s “pastoral” teaching, required. Two synonyms for laicus (from Greek λαίκος, populace), used across a range of clerical settings, were illiteratus and idiotus. But despite the fact that it was constitutive of lay identity, ignorance was always also understood as a spiritual problem. From the late twelfth to the mid-fourteenth centuries in particular, it became a major concern of the English episcopate to find more systematic ways to push back ignorance by defining a syllabus of necessary truths for curates to teach their parishioners and encouraging their further dissemination by household heads, parents, godparents, and teachers. While there are others, the brief pulpit address known as The Lay Folks’ Catechism, written in 1357 by John Gaytryge for John Thoresby, archbishop of York, in order to disseminate knowledge of the “sixe thinges” the work defines as “the

lawe and the lore” of God across the whole of the archdiocese, is the vernacular text most closely tied to this movement at an institutional level.\(^2\)

In texts like *The Lay Folks’ Catechism*, there is no question that passing on knowledge is a good and lay ignorance an evil. Even the great thirteenth-century instructional works produced for aristocratic patrons, such as Pierre Pecham d’Avergnan’s *Lumere as lais* or Robert Gretham’s *Miroir*, quietly emphasize the lay status of their readers, even as they take pains to acknowledge their learning and privilege: even, in the case of the *Miroir*, to include significant materials that are, at least potentially, critical of the clergy.\(^3\) Written as though from the archbishop, *The Lay Folks’ Catechism* has no such need for such tact and explains its program frankly, in words taken from the prologue to Lombard’s *Sentences*, as a matter, literally, of pedagogical rehumanization. The “wisdom to knawe God” that *The Lay Folks’ Catechism* helps its lay listeners to attain through the knowledge it inculcates, is, after all, what distinguishes “angel and man” as “skilwise creatures” from beasts. Only by regaining the rational knowledge lost at the Fall can humans also regain the capacity to become “communers of that blisse that euermor lastes.”\(^4\) Even the laity, unfit as they are, must therefore participate in the arduous work of the catechetical schoolroom.

Yet what can they really be expected to learn there? Anxiously aware of the gap between rote learning and clerical education, Gaytryge, whose skilful alliterative semiverse is designed, like John Bunyan’s fictions, to “stick like burrs” in the mind of the hearer, is not quite sure.\(^5\) The last lines of *The Lay

---


4. *The Lay Folks’ Catechism*, lines 8–15: “He wold that som creatures of thas that he made / Were communers of that blisse that euermor lastes. / And for no creature might come to that ilk blisse / Withouten knawing of God (als that clerk techis, ubi supra), / He made skillwise creatures, angel and man, / Of witt and of wisdome to knaw God almyghten / And, thurg thair knawing, loue him and serue him, / And so come to that bliss that thai were made to.”

5. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, ed. Roger Sharrock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 8: “Then read my fancies, they will stick like burrs, / And may be to the helpless, comforters.”
"Folks’ Catechism" in particular stress the possible limitations of catechesis by way of their tortured use of the lexis of knowing: especially the verb “connen,” which Gaytryge is among the first on record to use in the sense “memorize / learn by rote,” but which he still also needs to carry the more elevated earlier implications it brings forward from Old English: study, attain, master. After offering a forty-day indulgence from the archbishop, “to gif yhou better will for to kun” (“learn by heart”) what it teaches, the work moves sharply back to these older senses of kun and its adverb, kunandly, in the process reestablishing the very distance between real or clerical knowledge and lay knowledge that it has ostensibly been attempting to undo:

For if ye kunandly knaw this ilk sex thinges
Thurgh thaim sal ye kun knawe God almighty,
Wham, als saint Iohn saies in his godspel,
Conandly for to knawe swilk als he is,
It is endeles life and lastand blisse.

Perhaps “kunandly knaw” here still means “know by memorizing”; but “kun knawe” must mean “have the capacity to know”; while the transcendent and fully re clericalized sense “know wisely/deeply” is the only possibility for “conandly . . . knawe” when it reappears attached to the eternal knowledge of God. Even as Gaytryge hopefully suggests the diversity of levels at which the abstract knowledge of his “sex thinges,” or of “God almighty,” may be known—implying with his “sal ye kun knawe” that rote learning at least ought to be the first rung on a ladder to true clerisy—clerical learning and the prospects of lay salvation alike beat a hasty retreat through the course of this passage, as it reveals its continued uncertainty over the suitability of any learning attainable by the ordinary laity as a route to divine knowledge and hence “lastand blisse.”

An early episode of William Langland’s Piers Plowman, whose A-Text may have been begun only a decade after The Lay Folks’ Catechism was written, somewhat similarly depicts the laity as blundering beasts, incapable on their own of any sustained attempt to seek or find Truth: “Ac þere was wy non so wys þat þe wey þider couþe, / But blustrid forþ as bestis ouer

---

6. Hans Kurath and Sherman Kuhn, et al., Electronic Middle English Dictionary, s.v. “connen,” senses 1 (“To have ability, capability, skill”), 3 (“To have mastery of”), and 5 (b) (“To know by heart”). Examples given of this last use begin with Langland and Chaucer in the late fourteenth century, with a single exception, from another northern text, Cursor Mundi (c. 1300), lines 26566–67: “Þis es þe trouth man clepes ‘crede,’ þat ilk cristen man cun behous nede.”
7. The Lay Folks’ Catechism, line 565.
8. Ibid., lines 571–75.
baches and hilles,” looking for Saint Truth as though he could be discovered in the English landscape, instead of in the “herte” or the rationally illuminated mind.9 Speaking for Truth in much the way that Gaytryge speaks for Thoresby, Piers himself sets them right in an abstract sense, describing a path to Truth that lies through the internalization of catechesis, namely the two commandments of the New Law and the ten of the Old Law, followed by the works of penance and almsgiving.10

Yet to Langland’s imagined laity this simplified road map is a “wikkede weye.”11 As a result, it is uncertainly supplemented or replaced in the second vision by another road to Truth, through doing, not knowing; then again in the third vision (fragmentary in the A-Text) by the still more uncertain affirmation, and immediate, panicked denial, that the transformation of the intellect wrought by study may after all constitute the sole adequate response to the human condition.12 That is, of course, hardly the end of the story for Langland, whose B and C versions—taking off from the very crisis over the soteriological necessity of formal learning that somewhat abruptly ends the A version—richly extend the analysis in several directions at once. The second halves of these versions remain respectful of the figure of Clergy, but also inexorably leave the more abstract kinds of clerical knowledge behind.13 Yet if the poem ends with Conscience’s renewed search for the elusive Piers and the different Christian anthropology he has come to represent, no more than The Lay Folks’ Catechism is Piers Plowman able to abandon with confidence its initial premise that normative humanity is clerical while lay ignorance is a condition of lack.14

Despite their continuity with earlier pedagogical thinkers, Langland’s and Gaytryge’s sense of urgency about realizing an ideal of lay learning they understand as, practically speaking, unrealistic suggests a system under pressures at least relatively new. We can usefully compare their anxiety over how to understand illiterate knowledge, for example, with the relaxed attitude to

10. Piers Plowman A 6.48–117; Schmidt’s notes to the passage in vol. 2, pp. 546–47 identify the various injunctions, all of which belong to standard late-fourteenth-century catechesis.
12. For this reading of the third vision in its B-Text incarnation, see, for example, James Simpson, Piers Plowman: An Introduction, 2nd ed. (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2007).
the issue exhibited in a text both writers will have studied, Isidore of Seville's *Sententiae*:

So far as the Church’s little ones are concerned, the Creed and Lord’s Prayer can suffice for the entire law in the pursuit of the kingdom of heaven. For the whole breadth of the Scriptures is enclosed in brief in this Lord’s Prayer and Creed. On this matter, the prophet Isaiah says: *I have heard from the Lord God of hosts an abbreviation over all the earth. Listen, and hear my words.* This “abbreviation” is understood . . . in relation to the brevity of the Lord’s Prayer or Creed, in which . . . we discern the whole breadth of the Scriptures compressed together.  

By equating the two major components of the religious education offered catechumens with the pedagogical genre of the *abbreviatio*, Isidore dismisses any concern that, for the illiterate, the Creed and Lord’s Prayer may not really convey the entirety of divine law they contain. Such an attitude was viable as late as the twelfth century, when catechesis was still confined to these two items and the *Ave Maria*. Although attempts to expound the whole of Christian truth through a single text such as the *Pater Noster* continued,  

it was less viable after the spectacular expansion of catechesis to include the seven sins, virtues, works of mercy, and sacraments, and the ten and two commandments of the Old and New Law: the items laid out in Pecham’s *Syllabus* of 1281 and *The Lay Folks’ Catechism*.  

Not only do these new items, along with those already in place, describe in miniature a truly comprehensive pedagogical *cursus*. They do so, necessarily, in the form of *lists*, readily available to rote.

---


18. I hope to argue this point in more detail elsewhere; for what Pecham and others imply by their inclusion of the cardinal virtues, see, for example, István Pieter Bejczy, *The Cardinal Virtues in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).
learning but also productive of anxiety over the gap between rote learning and understanding. We can see signs of this anxiety as evidence of the success of the new catechesis in disseminating these lists. If so, however, Gaytryge and Langland bear witness to the sense of pedagogical failure that accompanies such success.

Vernacular texts from the period between 1370 and 1420, including literary texts, are as a matter of course preoccupied with the questions raised by the new catechesis and offer two classes of response. One of these, again most familiar from the B and C versions of Piers Plowman, is to recategorize lay ignorance as, after all, a good thing. Langland’s personification of threshold clerisy, Study, grumbles that the laity in the more gentrified parts of the poem’s multifaceted world have, in their callow way, become too knowledgeable in matters of clerical learning, not the reverse. By and large, despite its own obvious status as a clerical product, the poem continues to glamorize the mode of knowledge of God that Piers, the poem’s best expounder of catechesis, has gained through faithful service: kynde knowing, as distinct from Gaytryge’s commande knawing, never moving too far from the claims for the privileged spiritual status of the humble implied by Piers’s opening line: “I knowe hym [i.e., Truth] as kyndely as clerc doþ hise bokes.”

Positively, this class of response exploits the new value placed on the categories of feeling and experience in late-medieval intellectual life by claiming that the laity, while unsuited for debates on the Trinity and the Fall, may be equipped as well as or better than the clerisy in these other areas. As Langland exhaustively chronicles, renunciation, love, and service offer routes to divinity to all. Negatively, anxiety about lay learning nudges the poem toward the arguments soon to be launched, in response to the Wycliffite challenge, by opponents of vernacular Bible translation such as William Butler and Thomas Palmer in the Oxford debate on Bible translation around 1401. Laying the intellectual foundations for Arundel’s Constitutions, drafted six years later, these opponents advance what, in late fourteenth-century England, may have been a nearly new argument: that pastoral theology can be about limiting lay access to knowledge as well as promoting it. Since, as Aristotle notes, the ignorance of the laity is inherent in their nature, and since, as Dionysius implies, the laity should “depend utterly on the wills of Christians of higher

---

20. Piers Plowman B 5.338.
order,” only such knowledge as clerics think useful (that is, the catechism) should be taught the laity. Knowledge of “God’s law” in its complex entirety should be confined to those capable of true understanding, not sacrilegiously fed, like pearls, to lay swine.21

Here we are suddenly in a world where theological knowledge, increasingly available in a mass of what Fiona Somerset calls “extraclergial” writing and thus no longer the precious commodity it is for Gaytryge, is, if anything, in excessive supply, but now in forms inimical to lay virtue and ecclesiological order.22 The gap between lay and cleric that Gaytryge understands as problematic, even tragic, is emphasized, indeed radicalized, while an old optimism about the value of learning constitutive of the didascalic tradition faces unexpected but politically powerful opposition.

The other class of response to the problems raised by the new catechesis, this one aligned with the Wycliffite challenge, takes Gaytryge’s high view of the necessity of divine learning but transforms his conventional representation of the ignorant laity themselves. In a wide variety of late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century vernacular texts, the laity shed their aura of incapacity to emerge, unexpectedly, as already well on their way to becoming adepts: knowledgeable, if still eager to learn, mature, and ready to fulfill the role of ethical agents, full participants in religious government, assigned to them as graduates of the new catechesis, not its dunderheaded pupils. This model of lay identity, which has some of its roots in patristic lay manuals such as Augustine’s *Enchiridion* and antecedents in French and Anglo-Norman works for the aristocratic laity, was not new.23 But it may not have been used before to construct so ambitious a normative representation of part or all of the great social miscellany that is the laity as a whole.

---


Sometimes, the competent layperson of this second type of representation seems designed to advertise a text’s efficacy. A trenchant example is *Dives and Pauper*, a weighty exposition of the Ten Commandments in which the friar-author and knight-reader speak as ostensible equals, but where the friar is always really in discreet control, moderating, shaping, educating, and so demonstrating the value of the dialogic mode of pastoral instruction that his text represents.²⁴

Often, however, a second factor is centrally in play: justification of the existence of the vernacular text. In the ambit of the Wycliffite Bible and the controversy that grew up around it, images of relatively educated and religiously eager laypeople were especially likely to form, not only to advertise the vast new pastoral project but also to counter representations of the laity as essentially ignorant advanced by some opponents of the translation. John Trevisa’s *A Dialogue Between a Lord and a Clerk*, possibly made close in time and space to the Wycliffite Bible, is a famous case in point, although here we are not allowed to think of the Lord as needing to learn himself.²⁵ But there are others, in most of which the layperson is not Trevisa’s intellectually commanding aristocrat but a humbler figure, such as the layman whose well-argued demand that his “broþer” teach him saving truths, is used to justify the series of translations of the Epistles, Acts, and Matthew that is the *Fourteenth Century English Biblical Version*:

Seþe euerych man is y-holde by Cristis lawe of charite to louen his broþer as hym-selfe, þe, þat han of Godes grace more knowynge þan we han þat bep lewedyd & vn-kunynge, bep y-holde to teche us þinges þat bep nedful to þe hele of oure soules; þat is to seye, what þing is plesynge to God, & what displeseþ hym also. & y preye þe, pur charite, to techen us lewedyd men trewelyche þe soþe aftur oure axynge.²⁶

---


As though in reproof of reductions of the laity to passive recipients of doctrine, the “lay” voice here initiates the exchange—demanding teaching, not waiting to be given it—while the “clerical” voice retains his learned expertise but has been deprofessionalized, so that the dialogue takes place between equals under God, one more learned than the other, not between cleric and lay.

These two classes of response—to emphasize lay ignorance, arguing for the policing of lay instruction; and to emphasize lay competence, arguing for its ambitious vernacular promotion—might appear to be so opposed that there could be no easy negotiation between them: only the pitched battles represented by the Oxford translation debate, the Constitutions, and so on. Yet, as work on the vernacular politics of the period over the last twenty years has made clear, this is not the case at all. Attempts to achieve a flexible working model of the laity and the teaching they need is everywhere in the vernacular theology of the period, whether in heated arguments over their access to the scriptures or in the wide variety of explorations of the implications of doctrine found in catechetical commentaries aimed at lay readers. Rather than bifurcating into two camps under pressure from the Bible translation controversy, vernacular discussions of lay ignorance and understanding instead broadened out in all directions, generating a range of positions, many of them highly nuanced, that reflect both differences of principle and a steadily increasing awareness of the inherent social artificiality of the category of the “laity” itself.

The Twelve Tracts on Bible Translation, a carefully assembled anthology of short defenses of the vernacular Bible, are an interesting case in point here, presenting an array of different, in some cases perhaps even incompatible, discussions of the issue notable both for their articulacy and for the equal attention they pay to theological theory and observable social realities.27 Although six of these mostly brief “tracts” are also found in at least one other manuscript, the collection itself, linked by a series of simple compiler colophons, is found in only a single, early fifteenth-century book, Cambridge, University Library MS I.i.6.26. Here it is found alongside surviving portions of the unique copy of a second work with an equally careful interest in the laity: Lucidarie, a rewriting of Honorius’s Elucidarium.28 The editor of the

28. On the manuscript, see Dove, Earliest Advocates, p. xxxiv. For the Lucidarie, some seven quires of which (the bulk of the work) are missing in the manuscript, but once seem
Twelve Tracts, Mary Dove, suggests we should see the collection as a response to the Constitutions, and this may be right, although the collection could also belong to a slightly earlier moment. The latest tract in the collection is likely the substantial Tract I, “Alle cristine people stand in þre maner of folke,” which shares material with Dives and Pauper (1405–10) and which might be by the same author. Discounting the parts of Tract XI, “A comendacioun of holy writ in oure owne langage,” that draw on the opening of the mid-fourteenth-century English translation of Gretham’s Miroir, none appears likely to predate 1390. The tracts thus seem to belong to a twenty-year moment during which questions surrounding lay learning and capacity were undergoing intense examination, as a result of their hypercharged relationship to the Bible translation debate.

Taken as a whole, the Twelve Tracts fiercely combat the challenge to the view that lay religious knowledge is an inherent good. Responding to the claim that Bible reading will lead to social breakdown, Tract I insists that “igno-raunce of Goddis lawe is cause of alle meuynge and vnstabilte in þe comoun pepel, þat þei drenen neiþer God ne man as þei schulden do.” Responding to the claim that Bible reading will turn those who should be learners into teachers, Tract V, “Another sentens schewynge þat þe people may haue holy writ in her moder-tunge lefully,” draws on an established pastoral model of Christian community to argue that even the ignorant have a duty to pour out the “litil cuppes” of their “streyte kunnynge” for the salvation of their fellows. Similarly, Tract II, “Pis preueþ þat þei ben blessed þat louen Goddis lawe in þere


29. Dove, Earliest Advocates, p. xxxiv, citing Tract I, 472–74 as a likely reference to Arun-del’s third canon. This is certainly possible though not certain.

30. Ibid., p. xxxvi.

31. Tract XI. For the probable date of the Middle English Mirror (before 1330), see Hanna, London Literature, pp. 20–24. For a sustained discussion, see Fiona Somerset, Feeling Like Saints: Lollard Writings after Wyclif (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), chap. 6, “Moral Fantasie: Normative Allegory in Lollard Writings” (pp. 205–34).


owen langage,” argues that to teach God’s law is more meritorious even than to perform those mainstays of lay piety, the works of bodily mercy, affirming that “every christian man or woman hath taken state, autorite and bonde of God in his cristondom to be a disciple of holy write”—that is, to perform the works of spiritual mercy, often understood as the special duty of clerics. The tract also opposes a view directly expressed in the Oxford translation debate, that “holy writ in Englische wolde make men at debate, and sougtis t o be rebel aijens here souereyns.”

For the most part these arguments oppose the topos of lay ignorance by stressing its inverse, lay capacity, aligning themselves with the optimistic view of the laity usually integral to pastoral theology and ignoring the anxieties about lay understanding expressed by Gaytryge or Langland. Participating in the broad reformist tendency to minimize differences between laity and clergy on display in the Fourteenth Century English Biblical Version, Tract V argues that laypeople must offer spiritual ministry to others, taking to themselves Christ’s dictum “where I am, þere also my mynyster schal be,” instead of understanding it to pertain only to “good bishopis and clerkis,” and assuming the responsibilities that go with such ministry. Many of the tracts repeat a standard defense of the vernacular Bible, that the scriptures themselves, not some paraphrase, constitute “Goddis lawe,” sent humankind as a sealed letter that demands to be opened, read, and obeyed. Most, especially Tract III, “Many croniculus ben fals but al þe gospel is trwe,” assumes a sufficient level of lay literacy that the superior spiritual value of Bibles to “cronyculis,” a “seyntis lijf,” and the “techynge of þe philosofris and clerkis” have to be affirmed. Stylistically and conceptually sophisticated and taking the view that matters of religious politics are a proper subject for the laity, the collection fits the profile of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century “exatraclergial” vernacular literature produced for lay consumption by scholars.

The two long tracts that open and close the collection, however, take a more complex view, qualifying the collection’s optimistic picture of lay capacity in different ways. As its incipit, “Alle cristine people stand in þre maner of folke,” suggests, Tract I recasts the ancient division of Christians into clerical and lay by subordinating it to a second, slightly less venerable model of the “three estates” in an apparent attempt to broker a compromise between

34. Tract II, lines 43–45, 48–49.
35. Tract V, lines 103–4.
36. For a recent account of the theory and practice of Wycliffite biblicism, see Somerset, Feeling Like Saints, chap. 5, “Lollard Parablicism” (pp. 167–202).
37. Tract III, lines 19, 25, 32–33.
38. Somerset, Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience.
proponents and opponents of Bible translation.39 Appealing to the powerful institutional interests that align the first and second estates against the much larger third, the tract argues that the benefits or perils of Bible translation need to be considered in light of a prior division of the “lewed peple” into two groups: the ignorant laity “þat kan no lettrur, as ydiotis þat neuer wenten to skole”; and the “lettrid” laity, that is, anyone of sufficient education to have attained vernacular literacy.40 Once such a distinction is made, it becomes clear that English Bibles need to exist, but only for use by people of virtue, intelligence, and social standing. To all others, Christ’s injunction against casting “ȝourne margaritis aforn þe swyn” cited by opponents of vernacular translation still applies.41 Such “ydiotis” “lerne to loue God and drede hym and kepe his comauendementis” by encountering him, not through the scriptures or religious images but through the book of nature, and should be taught only “comoun þingis nedful and speedful”: the items outlined in *The Lay Folks’ Catechism*, whose ready availability and use in the vernacular the work defends.42

In one sense, this division of the laity into two categories is no more than a redeployment of a common distinction between the ordinary laity and their rulers that always assigned the latter spiritual responsibilities arising from their duties as administrators of the law. The relevant chapters of *Lucidarie* are missing from the Cambridge MS in its current state, but *Elucidarium* works with the same distinction, treating princes and judges as equivalent to abbots and bishops—as does Tract I, which cites Augustine’s argument that “ech man in his owne houshold schuld do þe office of a bisshop in techynge and correctynge of comoun þingis.”43 Tract I’s use of this citation aligns the work with what Amy Appleford argues was a contemporary turn to the household as a locus of religious education, which demanded the creation of books and works of spiritual instruction specially produced for the lay *paterfamilias*.44 Honorius’s “reges et judices” thus here expand out into the tract’s long, masculine list of those whose state of education and life is such that Bible translation is needful, not harmful: “kyngus, princis, dukes, erles, barons, knyȝtus and squiers, men of lawe and oþer men of value, and communers.”45

---

41. Ibid., lines 211–12.
42. Ibid., lines 3–8.
43. Ibid., lines 34–36.
Yet even as Tract I echoes the low view of the “rude” laity held by opponents of Bible translation, arguing in effect that vernacular Bibles should be limited to the privileged who can afford them, the tract also shows the continuing appeal of the “laity” as an unified category. On the one hand, the work has not resolved its attitude to vernacular literacy, playing its own games with verbs of knowing, “kunnen,” “knowe,” and “vnderstande”:

Summe þer ben þat kunnen rede but litil or noȝt vnderstonde, and for hem ben ordent bookis of her moder-tonge . . . in which bokis þei mowen rede to knowe God and his lawe, and to fulfille it in worde and dede, and so to slee synne in hemself and ech in oþer bi þer power and kunnynge, wherþorouȝ þei mowe desserue eendeles blisse.\(^\text{46}\)

Although privileged lay readers need vernacular Bibles in order to “knowe God and his lawe,” this knowledge allows only a lower-level response to the divine word involving the active-life exercise of “power and kunnynge” in fulfillment of divine law “in worde and dede,” but falling short of true, clerical “vnderstond[inge].” Vernacular literacy is still the same as Latin illiteracy.

On the other hand, Tract I’s arguments for biblical learning are difficult to restrict rhetorically to the privileged, constantly invoking the principle of universality of access, that seductive bridge between the categories lay and vernacular. However hard it tries to keep its two laities separate, it tends to undercut its own attempts at social nuance whenever it returns to its key claim, that the scriptures are divine law that must be announced to all in order to be promulgated:

3if þe kynge of Englond sente to cuntrees and citees his patente on Latyn or Frensche to do crie his lawis, his statutes and his wille to þe peple, and it were cried oonly on Latyn or Frensche and not on Englisch, it were no worschip to þe kynge ne warnynge to þe people, but a greet desseyt. Ryȝt so þe kynge of heuene wolde þat his lawe and his welle were cried and tauȝt openly to þe pepel, and but it were tauȝt hem openly on Englische, þat þei mowen knowne it, ellis it is aȝens þe worschip of God and gret hendrynge.\(^\text{47}\)

This powerful analogy is strained enough that it may not inevitably resolve into an argument for vernacular Bibles, which, even in epitome, cannot realis-


46. Tract I, lines 9–16.
47. Ibid., lines 117–24.
tically be “cried” in every village square, as the king’s laws are supposed to be; indeed, *The Lay Folks’ Catechism*, designed as a summary of divine law, would fit the analogy more closely than can the Wycliffite Bible. But the analogy suggests that Tract I cannot quite get behind the very nuance or, perhaps one should rather say, compromise—vernacular Bibles, restricted to the few—that it seems to want to broker.

Revisiting the problems raised by Tract I, Tract XII, “A dialoge as hit were of a wyse man and of a fole denyinge þe trweþe wiþ fablis,” returns to the issue of universality of access in a different way, by staging a new confrontation between lay types, now distinguished along spiritual, not social, lines. The “fole” who meets with the “wyse man” at the outset of the tract, opposing the severe scripturalism of the latter’s call to a life of penitence with a defense of gossip, swearing, tale-telling, and other back-slapping oral genres in sustaining a customary religion, might well be a lay *paterfamilias*, one of the class defined by Tract I as “men of value.” But he is also a representative of “þe peo-

For late a man come nowadays amonge þe people, be þei olde or þjonge, he
schal riȝt soone heere talis of pride, glotony and lecherie and of alle man-
erie synnes, and he þat can most merely schewe þese wordis to þe vnwese
peple is gretly comendid of hem for þis foli dede, and þei sweren armes,
bones, hert and sidis þat he is a good felawe, and þat eche companye is þe
betere þat he is amonge.

Opposing the verbal texture of the worldly lay culture it depicts to the “medic-
inable wordis of God,” found in vernacular religious instruction, Tract XII
again has a certain sympathy for the opponents of Bible translation in their
anxiety to protect divine mysteries from desecration, even as it seeks to show
the urgency of providing sound scriptural teaching in English.

Rather than making any explicit case for the Wycliffite Bible, then, Tract
XII sets out to delimit a wider field of religious instruction capable of oppos-
ing the rampant secularization of discourse, via the idle “tales” of the igno-
rant, that it sees as the dominant force in contemporary vernacular culture.

48. Tract XII, lines 17–18.
49. Ibid., lines 4–9.
To an extent, this process follows familiar pathways. When the Wise Man’s somber discourse is interrupted for the second time by the Fool requiring “a mery tale of Giy of Wariwyk, Beufiȝ of Hamton, eiper of Sire Lebewȝ, Robyn Hod, eiper of summe welyfarynge man of here condicions and maners,” we are meant to be put in mind of the earlier English and Anglo-Norman religious works that pour scorn on secular romances, even those with homiletic content. Speculum vitae states its intent “To carp of mast nedefull thynge,” not the “dedes of armes” and “amours” of “Beuis of Hamptoun” and “Sir Gye of Warwyke.” Greatham’s Miroir warns the reader (in the English version) against the “lesinges” found in “tristrem, oþer of Gii of Warwike, oþer of ani oþer,” which “n i ney drouȝt drawn out of holi writ.” “The wyse mon wol of wis-dome here / The fool him drawes to foly nere,” declares Cursor Mundi, listing a series of similar foolish works.

Besides defending the Wycliffite Bible itself, then, Tract XII keeps room open for an older and still serviceable tradition of verse biblical narration and instruction.

Similarly, when the Fool is improbably converted at the end of the work, the Wise Man’s advice on how he must emend his life stays within the domain of vernacular catechesis, with a few advanced variations. Like the Three Kings, who offered Christ gold, incense, myrrh, the Fool must offer the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, then return home by another way, again like the kings (Matt. 2:12), rightly using the five senses and seven gifts of the Spirit in forsaking the road of the sins for that of the commandments, the cardinal virtues, and the works of mercy, bodily and ghostly, so as to be rewarded “with the eighte blessinges of Criste rehearsed in the gospel.” The converted Fool can find these items in scripture, but might be best advised to pursue them in the many contemporary catechetic expositions designed to help him.

Certain of the Fool’s responses, however, seem designed to open a space for a less expected kind of vernacular writing: the mode of satirical narrative,

50. Ibid., lines 162–64; see Watson, “Lollardy: the Anglo-Norman Heresy?”
52. Tract XII, lines 383–433. This expanded catechetical list could have any number of sources or none, but most of these items are found in the English derivatives of the late thirteenth-century Somme le roi by Laurent d’Orléans, such as The Book of Vices and Virtues: A Fourteenth Century Translation of the “Somme le Roi” of Lorenz d’Orléans, ed. W. Nelson Francis, Early English Text Society, o.s., 217 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942) or Speculum vitae.
loosely descended from the *sermo ad status* tradition, whose best-known contemporary vernacular representatives are *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, to both of which Tract XII may indeed allude.\textsuperscript{53} The Wise Man’s account of how the “people” welcome “merely” told “talis of pride, glotony and lecherie” and commend the teller blasphemously by “armes, bones, hert and sidis” as a “good felawe” already seems evocative of Chaucer’s poem. *The Canterbury Tales* is greatly preoccupied with the asymmetrical relationship of tale-telling and moral truth, and the poem’s blasphemers, most especially the Miller, the Pardoner, and the Host himself, use similar language, in the Host’s case as a kind of personal signature.\textsuperscript{54} The poem also conducts its own, characteristically quizzical investigation of the moral as well as social value systems implied by the phrase “good felawe.”\textsuperscript{55} “Myrie” and its adverb, which Tract XII uses four times in connection to tale-telling, is a further *Canterbury Tales* keyword, found especially in the tales of the Miller, the Merchant, and the Nun’s Priest, often in association with sex or singing and used in several tale transitions to refer to tales and their tellers themselves.\textsuperscript{56} Initially used as a generic adjective for the company of pilgrims and their tale-telling game, and given some dignity by its association with the Knight as he begins his tale, its status soon deteriorates toward the ribald and never recovers.\textsuperscript{57} Even the

\textsuperscript{53}. For the *sermo ad status* and its influence on Chaucer and other literary writers, see Claire Waters, *Angels and Earthly Creatures: Preaching, Performance, and Gender in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), chap. 7, “*Sermones ad Status* and Old Wives’ Tales; or, The Audience Talks Back” (pp. 143–67).


\textsuperscript{55}. For “bettre felawe” and “good felawe,” see I.395 (General Prologue: the Shipman); I.648, 650, 653 (General Prologue: about the Summoner); III.617–18 (the Wife of Bath); III.1385 (the Friar’s Tale: about the Summoner).

\textsuperscript{56}. “Myrie” and variants appear more than sixty times in *The Canterbury Tales*. For the word in connection to tale-telling, see I.782 (the Host to the company: “But ye be myrie, I wol yeve yow myn heed!”), IV.10 (the Host to the Clerk: “Telle us som myrie tale, by youre fey!”), VI.316–17 (the Host turning to the Pardoner: “Or but I heere anon a myrie tale, / Myn herte is lost for pitee of this mayde”), VII.1924 (the Host to the Monk: “My lord, the monk, quod he, by myrie of cheere”), VII.3449 (the Host to the Nun’s Priest: “This was a murie tale of Chauntecleer”), VIII.597–98 (the Host to the Canon’s Yeoman: “Can he oght telle a myrie tale or tweye, / With which he glade may his compaignye?”). The word’s association with story or song was ancient.

\textsuperscript{57}. At the end of the General Prologue, the Knight “bigan with right a myrie cheere / His tale anon, and seyde as ye may heere,” dignifying the word (1.857–58). The rot sets in with
Parson’s final invocation of the word in the phrase “myrie tale in prose” may not quite redeem it, given the reproof that his tale metes out to the linguistic turpitude of the rest of the poem: “ne swereth nat so synfully in dismemberinge of Crist by soule, herte, bones, and body.” Tract XII actually approves of *The Canterbury Tales*, if read earnestly, from the viewpoint of the Parson.

Several moments in the Fool’s speeches, moreover, suggest the more precise possibility that Tract XII is appealing directly to Chaucer and perhaps Langland to fill out its satirical account of a nominally Christian lay society, conformed so fully to the practice of everyday life as to be afflicted with the deadly sloth that the B-Text of *Piers Plowman* associates with the “rymes of Robyn Hood and Randolf Erle of Chestre” from which Sloth cannot tear himself to meet the simplest demands of his faith. Mary Dove identifies a possible allusion to the portrait of the Summoner in the General Prologue: “þouȝ a man speke wordis of harlotrye . . . vsynge leccherie and oþer gret synnes, herfore he schal not be punysched but bi þe purge,” which she suggests evokes the Summoner’s soft treatment of the lecherous “good felawe” mentioned in the General Prologue, who escapes with a fine from the archdeacon’s court, “For in his purs he sholde ypunysshed be.” A second allusion, to a famous couplet of the Pardoner’s Prologue (“I rekke nevere, whan that they been beryed / Though that hir soules goon a-blakeberyed!”)—found in a passage which could also conceivably reference an equally famous line of *Piers Plowman* (“Do wel and haue wel, and God shal haue þi soule”—she views as definite.

Dove seems to me likely to be right. It is, of course, always possible that Chaucer and the author of Tract XII were drawing on a common set of proverbial

---

59. *Piers Plowman* B 5.396.
60. Tract XII, lines 88–89; compare *Canterbury Tales* I.653–56.
61. *Canterbury Tales* VI.405–46; *Piers Plowman* A 8.98.
stock phrases, but if so, they are not attested elsewhere, and the resemblance here, to say the least, is striking.\textsuperscript{63}

As the Wise Man’s earnest responses to them show, the Fool’s use of these phrases to support a complacently optimistic salvation theology is not quite in tune with their functions for Chaucer and Langland. This is also true of the reference to Canterbury pilgrimage in his longest speech, one again redolent of the world of Chaucer’s lowlifes and Langland’s second vision.

\textsuperscript{3}e, \textsuperscript{3}e, thou seist. I hadde as leif nouȝt as suche talis. Late us lyue as oure faders deden, and þan ne good inowȝ, for þei weren wel iloved of cheters, wrestlers, bokeler-pleieris, of daunceris and singeris, and they were wel-welled to haue hem to the ale. \textsuperscript{3}e, and ofte tymes on þe Sundays for good felowschip þei wolden dyne and drynke be note and go to chirch after, and so late us do nowadays and we schullen have the blissynge of seynt Thomas of Caunturberes. \textsuperscript{3}he, man, and Þif thou haue wel idrunke att home þi stomak schal waxe warme, þouȝ it be coole weeder, and þe soote sau-oure of good ale schal stiȝe into þi brayne and brynge þe mery asleepe. \textsuperscript{3}he, and Þoug the prest preche þanne never so faste, it schal no more greue þi wittis þan þe soune of a myre harpe.\textsuperscript{64}

In as much as they yet again support the Fool’s theology of cheap grace, the “cheters, wrestlers, bokeler-pleieris . . . daunceris and singeris” are different from the Pardoner’s “tombesteres / . . . yonge frutesteres, / Syngeres with harpes, baudes, wafereres,” who contribute to the tale’s portrait of a riotous “felaweshipe” whose members’ murderous actions shut them out from any possibility of redemption.\textsuperscript{65} Yet spiritual complacence is as much a theme for Chaucer or Langland as it is in Tract XII, and it is not hard to read both poets as the tract would have us read them, as conducting satirical analyses of the predicament of the laity, abandoned by the pastoral teaching of a compromised church in whose secularization it has eagerly participated.

Satire thus appears to be another vernacular genre that Tract XII seeks to protect, for the work it does in alerting and converting readers through its forceful, shaming, entertaining accounts of social sin. If we take the work as alluding directly to Chaucer and Langland, as I incline to do, the effect is

\textsuperscript{63}. See Bartlett Jere Whiting, with the collaboration of Helen Wescott Whiting, \textit{Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases from English Writings Mainly before 1500} (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), where Chaucer provides the only example of “To go Blackberrying” (B334); under “Do well and have well” (D278), Whiting lists several, mostly fifteenth-century examples, but only Langland has the precise phrasing of Tract XII.

\textsuperscript{64}. Tract XII, lines 187–96.

\textsuperscript{65}. \textit{Canterbury Tales} VI.479.
not only to place the Wycliffite Bible as one among several useful vernacular genres: part of a larger picture, not the singular object it is in many controversial writings on Bible translation. It is also to see Tract XII as attempting a specifically literary canonization of the Wycliffite Bible as a vernacular moral masterwork whose only peers are the greatest religious satires of the period. Building on Tract I’s attempts to reach compromise across ideological lines, Tract XII hopes to create a community of the earnest who can agree on the principle of vernacular instruction, even if they may not find wholly persuasive the claims made for vernacular biblicism itself.

When it takes the form of folly, lay ignorance might indeed be enough to give readers of Tract XII pause before throwing the divine pearls of biblical wisdom out into the world. But the need for instruction remains compelling, and oral delivery mechanisms such as *The Lay Folks’ Catechism* are inadequate to the situation. During the fifteenth century, the Wycliffite Bible did indeed circulate, usually not in its full form, as a prestige item among a wide array of vernacular religious writings, prose and verse, of all levels of complexity, generally immune to censorship except when found among communities lower down the social ladder and already suspect on other grounds. The *Twelve Tracts* points energetically to the work’s mixed future beyond the polarities of the translation debate. In so doing, it also points to the mixed future of the topos of lay ignorance, increasingly likely now to be challenged by images of lay competence, but still a widely available rhetorical resource into and through the sixteenth-century Reformation.