

John of Gaunt and John Wyclif

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Historians have always been somewhat puzzled at the alliance of two such men as John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster and third son of Edward III, and John Wyclif, controversialist and reformer. A generation or so ago, it was not merely puzzling but downright embarrassing that the “Morning Star of the Reformation” should have been linked with such an unprincipled politician as Gaunt. Nowadays, historians question sharply the validity of this title for Wyclif, although Miss McKisack warns us against a too precipitate revision.¹ John of Gaunt, on the other hand, has not received a full coat of whitewash; no doubt he would be pleased to learn that he is no longer considered an arch-villain, though he might indeed prefer even that to Anthony Steel’s description of him as “an amiable nonentity of no special attainments.”²

Background of the Times

One may wonder legitimately to what extent Wyclif (or even Gaunt) would be remembered today, had it not been for the circumstances of the time; it is indeed quite possible that these thrust both men into a prominence that more settled times might have precluded. For it was an unsettled period indeed, when these men came to the fore; an unsettled period that almost exactly paralleled their prominence in the national life. Miss McKisack writes of the decade from 1371: “General uneasiness, rising at times to panic, manifested itself in three open assaults on the executive.”³ And K. B. McFarlane speaks of Edward III’s last years as “one of the most confused periods in fourteenth-century history.”⁴ The decade opened in 1371 with something like a palace revolution whereby the predominantly clerical administration was replaced by laymen. However, too much should not be made of this incident. Many historians consider it an

¹ “...this unlikeable man of powerful intellect and narrow sympathies, had reached and stated almost all the conclusions subsequently held by the Protestant reformers. Wyclif’s influence in his own generation was limited; for he lacked the gift of winning men and the extravagance of his radical opinions served to unite all the forces of conservatism against him. None the less, the case for protestantism had been stated.. .” *The Fourteenth Century*, 311.

² *Richard II*, 21.

³ *The Fourteenth Century*, 384.

⁴ *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Non-conformity*, 37.

anti-clerical outburst; I prefer to consider it an outburst of dissatisfaction on the part of the war-hawks against the unsuccessful conduct of the war with France by the clerical heads of administration. And by way of digression I suggest the time has come to look more closely at that word “anticlericalism”; if “anti-clericalism” is merely opposition to and dislike for clerical actions, then I fear that many clerics are anti-clerical, then and now. If the word means opposition to the political actions of clerics who are acting as politicians (e.g. bishop William of Wykeham and bishop Thomas Brantingham, in 1371), then the word “anti-clericalism” is meaningless. But to get back to the point. This incident of 1371 went beyond an attack upon this or that minister; the commons petitioned the king to remove, now and for the future, clerics from the positions of chancellor, treasurer, clerk of the privy seal, barons of the exchequer, chamberlains of the exchequer, and all major officials of government, and that only laymen fill these places. This sweeping demand is, of course, the basis of the charge of anti-clericalism. It is impressive, at first glance; but I think it oversimplifies the situation. One must look to the motive; and in my opinion, the commons felt that churchmen were not capable, as a body, of carrying on a vigorous war policy. But I must not stray too far. Regardless of the motives involved, the incident reveals considerable unrest among the ruling groups.

A second major event indicating confusion and unrest is the unprecedented actions of the commons in the Good Parliament of 1376. They dropped their role of “grumble and consent,” and led a stiff attack upon the government of the day, even impeaching ministers of the crown. In 1381 came the Peasants’ Revolt, whose ultimate easy pacification should not conceal the serious threat it posed.

In these three incidents one can discern dissatisfaction among every class in England. In 1371, the ruling class who were the “outs” (“His Majesty’s Loyal Opposition”) successfully turned out the government, and thus, presumably, satisfied their dissatisfaction. In 1376, the knights of the shires for a short while had their victory over the government, which however lasted only the life of the Good Parliament. In 1381, the peasants overran the south-east and London in protest against the conditions they had to face. These widespread expressions of protest – three in one decade – were against the government; consequently, we must look to the government to see what might cause such protests.

It must be clearly borne in mind that a medieval king had to rule as well as reign. He was his own prime minister; he must lead; he must direct; he was the government, *assisted* by his natural *advisers*, the lords, and by the commons. Thoughtful men dreaded the accession of a child king, who could not do what a king had to do; regency councils spawned factions, almost to the point of civil war. The same could be said for kings who had entered upon their second childhood; but what usually saved this situation was that at hand to prop up a senile king was the mature heir to the throne, for all purposes, a king in fact though not in name.

And what do we find in our decade? England has had worse kings than Edward III and Richard II; but never has fortune so conspired against the

medieval English monarchy than in the decade under discussion. Edward took very little sustained interest in government, partly through laziness, partly through growing senility, deteriorating steadily until his death in 1377. Normally his heir, the Black Prince, should have taken over the burdens of governing; but this popular hero was already a mortally sick man, predeceasing his father in 1376. Whether or not he could have saved the situation is an open question; his activities had been confined to the battlefield, with results that were sensational without achieving very much. His place at the right hand of the aging king was taken by John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster.

Nowadays one is inclined to react sharply against the envenomed pages of Thomas of Walsingham; and rightly so. And it should not be forgotten that in his own day John of Gaunt had his loyal supporters. Neither hero nor villain, John was conservative and conventional in everything. As befitted a royal son and the wealthiest landowner in England he was proud and somewhat arrogant; but the noble class would readily understand and accept this in one so favoured by fortune. To his friends, especially clerical friends, he was lavish in his generosity; to his enemies he was implacably bitter. And, more than most of his contemporaries, he was loyal; loyal to his father, to his elder brother, and to his nephew, Richard II; loyal to his followers, the reputedly dishonest Latimer and the heretical Wyclif; and above all, loyal to the concept of society and government that he knew. As regards this last point, his loyalty, while admirable in itself, was out of place in an age of transition. Possibly his mind was no better than mediocre in grasping situations; but this could be an oversimplification. McFarlane writes: "... he had his victories in diplomacy. He preferred an advantageous peace to the chances of war and it would have been better for his father's empire had the English barons shared his insight."⁵ He may well have seen the unprecedented direction the Good Parliament was taking; and it was not at all to the liking of his conventional mind. And the anger he showed towards his opponents could simply be that of a proud man balked. Still, he could never be called great; at best, better than average; but the times called for more than that.

In 1377 the nine-year-old Richard succeeded his grandfather, as king of England. There was no disputed succession; but the accession of a minor was not likely to remedy the situation, for a child could not give the required leadership. Nor could his uncle of Lancaster, partly because of his own limitations, partly because of the refusal of the magnates to accept him as sole regent. There remained only a council of regency, representing all factions, to muddle through until the king reached his majority; that no disasters occurred is due, at least in part, to Gaunt's loyalty to the young king.

Thus England moved through ten years without a strong head to the government, accepted by all. This was disturbing, especially in an age of transition; and it is a moot point how much the confusion contributed to the

⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

transition, and vice versa. Regarding Wyclif's background it is not necessary to go to much length – for the purpose of this paper. And indeed it is not possible to go to much length: “We know very little about the external events of Wycliffe’s career at any stage; we merely catch a series of glimpses, sometimes with the added uncertainty that the John Wycliffe we are pursuing may turn out to be another man of the same name.”⁶ At heart, he remained an Oxford don, and a rather bad-tempered one at that; more at home in the controversies of the schools and driven into the public forum, whence came his later fame, by the force of circumstances. Few will deny his powerful intellect, at least as a controversialist, though not all will admit that his was a great and original mind. As to his impact upon his own times, historians tend to minimize it, e.g. J. Dahmus, “The Prosecution of John Wyclif.” Our task is not to assess this, but simply to examine in detail the alliance between Gaunt and Wyclif.

The Problem of the Records

According to Dahmus, while the older explanations have been exploded, the more recent ones scarcely explain, leaving the matter “even more a mystery today than some years ago.”⁷ This mystery has deepened because historians today are not so inclined to read so much into the records and are more anxious to let the records speak for themselves. Unfortunately these are not fully satisfactory; there are some surprisingly wide gaps regarding two such prominent men. As a result, there is much conjecture and argumentation in offering an explanation that seems to square better with the known facts; and each historian will have his own opinion on this. With this warning I will proceed to offer what I consider a plausible explanation. I have no new facts to offer; I am simply reevaluating (or maybe, re-warming) available information, and offering a somewhat different interpretation on one point at least. This will involve going over again many incidents of the 1370’s already well known, but usually in different connections. By trying to see them in the referential frame of the Gaunt-Wyclif alliance, we may, I hope, be able to see better something about that alliance.

While admitting the fact of the alliance, historians are by no means agreed as to its starting-point, its nature or the reasons for its existence. In an attempt to throw some light on these points, I shall examine the various incidents in which the two men appear together.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷ J. H. Dahmus, “John Wyclif and the English Government,” in *Speculum*, XXXV (1960) “One last matter merits our attention, and that is the relationship between the duke and Wyclif. Why did Gaunt protect Wyclif? This is even more a mystery today than some years ago, since scholars have abandoned the earlier view that Lancaster approved Wyclif’s theories on dominion and hoped to use him to drive churchmen out of the government and to take over the church’s wealth.” 68.

The House of Herod

Some have accepted a remark in a controversial tract written by friar John Cuningham (or Kenningham), as a reference to Wyclif's entry into the service of the king (according to Shirley, editor of *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*) or of Gaunt (according to Workman). The pertinent words read as follows, "nec Herodis domus dux mihi est": to this Shirley adds a footnote, "Herodis] Herodii, MS,"⁸ the importance of which will be pointed out later. By these words Cuningham is supposed to have accused Wyclif of belonging to the house of Herod (which is interpreted the house of Lancaster). If this be true, then we have evidence that the alliance dates from at least 1373, for this is the earliest date Loserth will allow for Cuningham's tract. But it is not true, in spite of Workman's acceptance of this "uncourtly sneer" and ArmitageSmith's "uncourtly reference" to John of Gaunt. To equate Lancaster with Herod is obviously a deep insult; and it is most unlikely that Cuningham would have insulted so generous a benefactor of his own Carmelite order. Also, Cuningham later held the very personal and intimate post of confessor to the duke. Furthermore, such an ill-mannered remark would have been out of place in a controversy which was carried on with courtesy and respect on both sides. Wyclif never fails to give the friar his title of doctor and speaks of his "valde sagaci modestia." To Cuningham Wyclif was "reverendus magister Johannes Wycliff," "profundus clericus." Any further doubt in this matter would be resolved by glancing through the first paragraph of the friar's "Secunda Determinatio ... contra Wycliff." It was a controversy between two Oxford schoolmen, maintained on an academic level.

While the last sentence describes the general tenor of the dispute, it might be suggested that Cuningham, for the moment, forgot himself and made the unfortunate remark. In that case, it is odd that the rather irascible Wyclif made no reference to it in his reply; however, it is most likely that he saw no reference whatever to the "house of Herod." Shirley was responsible for this meaning by emending "Herodii" of the MS to read "Herodis," quite without justification. The reference is to Ps. 103:17 (old version) which reads

... illic passeret nidificabunt.
Herodii domus dux est eorum."
(". . . there the sparrows shall make their nests
The highest of them is the house of the heron")

In his first Determinatio against Cuningham, Wyclif had figuratively referred to three nests in which he and other birds of Christ had rested and fed upon the truths of Holy Scripture. The most exalted of these was the metaphysical one. In his reply Cuningham sums up Wyclif's position, and adds a comment which is a modest disclaimer of ever reaching the heights to which his opponent soars:

⁸ W. W. Shirley (ed.), *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, 14.

“Verumtamen ... magister meus nificat in excelsis, quem sequi cupio sed apprehendere nequeo, quia nec Herodis (*sic!*) domus dux mihi est in curiosis et subtilibus adinventionibus ...”⁹ Neither the text nor the context can justify Shirley’s emendation in the slightest; it has needlessly complicated a matter *sufficiently* complicated. Consequently, from the phrase “nec Herodis domus dux mihi est” nothing can be drawn as to Wyclif’s entry into politics nor as to his alliance with Gaunt.

Peculiaris Regis Clericus

The second hint as to his political activity is to be found in his own words wherein he describes himself as “peculiaris regis clericus,” in his “Determinatio quedam magistri Johannis Wycliff de dominio,” which scholars date from the mid-1370’s. But what exactly does the phrase mean? Wyclif himself does not elaborate beyond the phrase. Historians have indeed offered their explanations; but they have not produced any solid evidence to substantiate them. If these words had been written after the middle of 1374, then Wyclif could have been referring to his appearance at Bruges as a royal commissioner to treat with the papal envoys. But even then there is nothing to indicate that he had become what we might call a permanent civil servant. On the other hand, if the phrase had been written before Wyclif had knowledge of his appointment, then we have no idea what precisely the phrase means. However, Dahmus states that he entered the service of the crown just prior to receiving his doctorate (which he dates 1372 or 1373), presumably basing his statement upon Wyclif’s receiving from the crown the living of Lutterworth in the spring of 1374.¹⁰ One would like stronger evidence than this.

Mission to Bruges, 1374

There is however one date of which we can be certain. On 26 July 1374, Master John Wyclif, professor of theology, was appointed a member of the commission to treat at Bruges with papal envoys over one of those constantly-recurring disputes of church and state. This is the earliest clear evidence of Wyclif’s public entry into politics. Obviously a man is not appointed to such a position unless he is known and esteemed by those who appoint him; and it is very probable therefore that by 1374 Wyclif’s reputation had spread from Oxford to Westminster. How well he was known, how influential with his fellow-commissioners are questions that cannot be settled. According to Workman, some writers have exaggerated the role Wyclif played at Bruges;¹¹ even his

⁹ *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, 14.

¹⁰ Dahmus, *The Prosecution of John Wyclif*, 3.

¹¹ H. B. Workman, *John Wyclif*, I, 254

appointment, they have said, was “a victory for the national party.”¹² In fact nothing very much was accomplished when the two groups met; and there is no record of anyone’s part in the proceedings. The argument as to his importance from C.P.R. 1370-1374 in being ranked second after the bishop can be countered from a chronicle which after mentioning the other commissioners by name adds “cum uno magistro in theologia”¹³ who is certainly Wyclif.

Can we find anything in this incident bearing upon Wyclif’s alliance with the duke of Lancaster? Obviously the formal appointment to the commission was made in the name of the king; but Edward III was already sunk in a senile lethargy, and more interested in the charms of Alice Perrers than in the theories of the Oxford doctor. The Black Prince, as heir to the throne the logical man to direct affairs in the king’s incompetence, was a dying man, wasting away from a disease contracted four years before. And it is my opinion that the duke of Lancaster was the dominant voice in English politics from 1371– a disputed opinion; but historians, generally, admit that by 1374 he was the real force in the government. Now it is hardly likely that he would appoint an unknown to such an important commission. And so I conclude that by the spring of 1374 John Wyclif was a *persona grata* to the duke. But can anything more be said? I have not been able to find any connection between the two men. Wyclif was not a member of the duke’s retinue, nor the recipient of any gifts or favours from the duke. I feel that all Gaunt saw in Wyclif was an able polemicist, who could hold his own in an argument. Gaunt was probably willing to have Wyclif put forth a strong case, so that the duke could later step forward with a compromise. This in fact happened; and on the second commission that met in 1375 Wyclif had no place. Dahmus puts his finger on a weak point in my reconstruction, and offers his own: “If the duke was instrumental in having Wyclif appointed to the Bruges commission, this cannot be confirmed, and the fact remains that Wyclif was left off the second commission in 1375 which was largely under the duke’s direction. In the absence of any positive evidence, one may suggest that Gaunt first learned what sort of man Wyclif was after he took over the negotiations with the papal envoys at Bruges in 1375. In acquainting himself with the ground the earlier commission had been over, he must have learned of Wyclif’s part in the proceedings, that is, if his part had been of any consequence.”¹⁴ But there are difficulties in this explanation; and I feel that my own is more plausible.

The Good Parliament of 1376

Wyclif’s admirers would have him inspiring the Good Parliament of 1376 which was obviously a GOOD THING; however, this must be set down as

¹² *Ibid.*, I, 240.

¹³ *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden*, VIII, 380.

¹⁴ *Prosecution of John Wyclif*, 7, 8.

wishful thinking. But at least Lechler realized the problem his suggestion presented. Either Wyclif supported the ill-concealed attack upon Gaunt or he was of a minority which supported the duke; or possibly he was neutral (in which case he can hardly be considered as an inspiration). Now, of such a minority we know nothing. If he supported the majority, it is strange, even incredible, that the duke would have continued or begun the alliance (according to some). Lechler's solution is very forced: Wyclif sympathized with and did not oppose the majority; but neither did he oppose Gaunt. One is somewhat surprised that Dahmus does not mention Wyclif in connection with the Good Parliament, in view of his dating Wyclif's entrance into the royal service back to 1372 or 1373. Since Gaunt was in effect the crown, how could Wyclif have kept silence? Or what sort of alliance could it have been? In fact, there seems no evidence whatever to support the contention that Wyclif ever sat in the Good Parliament or that he inspired it. It is not likely that he would be greatly interested in the doings of the Good Parliament; he was, above everything, a theologian, with little taste for political and constitutional problems. He was keen on reform of the church and would encourage the secular power to bring this about; but that was about as much use as he had for the secular power. Accordingly, we conclude that in the Good Parliament there is nothing to indicate the nature or even the existence of an alliance between Gaunt and Wyclif.

Summons to appear before King's Council, 22 September 1376

On 22 September 1376, Wyclif was summoned under the privy seal to appear before the king's council. Dr. Workman suggested that this was really an invitation to enlist with Gaunt's party.¹⁵ One wonders if Workman is a little forgetful, for he accepts the identity of the "house of Herod" with Lancaster, which would date the alliance a few years earlier. McFarlane considers it "the first occasion in his career when he (Wyclif) can be connected quite definitely with the service of John of Gaunt."¹⁶ But these statements go beyond the facts, as they are known. While one can readily concede that Gaunt dominated the council, all that is known is that Wyclif was summoned before it. We do not know the purpose of the summons; we do not know what took place at this meeting; in fact, we are not even sure that Wyclif obeyed the summons, though we may reasonably presume that he did. But to consider a summons before the council as an indication of an invitation to an alliance with the summoning power without positive evidence to that effect is a rather unusual interpretation. Consequently, the available evidence does not allow us to conclude anything as to the alliance.

¹⁵ *John Wyclif*, I, 279.

¹⁶ *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Non-conformity*, 70.

Arraignment at St. Paul's, 19 February 1377

A major incident in the search for the alliance is Wyclif's arraignment at St. Paul's 19 February 1377, the bare outline of which cannot conceal many puzzling features. Simon Sudbury, archbishop of Canterbury, most likely prodded by bishop Courtenay of London, had summoned Wyclif to appear before a bench of bishops to answer for his teachings. On the day appointed, Wyclif appeared, flanked by Gaunt and Percy, the new earl marshal, and by four friars of the mendicant orders. Before the trial could begin, Percy had quarrelled with Courtenay; then Gaunt joined in the dispute with angry words thrown at the bishop. Thereupon the London mob, which crowded the chapel where the trial was being held, entered into the fray, threatening the duke and the earl marshal. Meanwhile, Wyclif stood on the sidelines, virtually unnoticed, until the duke finally whisked him away. The trial had ended before it really began.

That Gaunt, openly and publicly, even defiantly, supported Wyclif clearly indicates that there was some connection between the two men – call it an alliance, for lack of a better word. And this is about all that is very clear. It might appear odd that Sudbury, “a friend of the duke,”¹⁷ would summon to trial Wyclif, who was being supported by Gaunt. But as Sudbury usually was slow to action, it seems more than likely that the pressure to bring Wyclif to account came from bishop Courtenay of London, backed by the bishops generally. I believe that one must credit Courtenay with pastoral zeal; a very intelligent man, he recognized the heretical drift of Wyclif's teachings and was determined to bring him to account. I also believe there was more to it than that. The exchange of taunts between the duke and the bishop would suggest that some hostility antedated this occurrence. Also, the bishops as a group were indignant at the treatment handed out to their colleague, William of Wykeham, bishop of Winchester, as an aftermath of the Good Parliament. He had been fined heavily and forbidden to appear within 20 miles of the court. During Convocation, which met at the time of the January 1377 Parliament, Courtenay vigorously undertook his defence; and the bishops refused to proceed with their business until Wykeham was allowed to join them. This of course was defiance of John of Gaunt. Also, it should be recalled that Wyclif's trial was arranged to take place in Courtenay's diocese of London and in such a public place as St. Paul's. One might naturally expect the trial to take place either in Oxford, his main residence, or in Lincoln, his proper diocese. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the place and the publicity were deliberately chosen. And if this be so, we must ask ourselves, “for what purpose?” If Wyclif were the only, or even the main, target of the bishops, such preparations would seem pointless. If Gaunt were Courtenay's real target, then they were well planned. It is a fact that Gaunt was most unpopular with the Londoners. It is interesting to read how the author of the *Anonimale Chronicle*

¹⁷ Dahmus, *Prosecution...*, 18; “eo quod ipse esse partium ducis videbatur” *Chronicon Anglie*, 11.

seems to consider the fray as primarily between Gaunt and the Londoners: “mesme celle temps de parlement comensast une graunte debate parentre le duk de Loncastre et les citisayans de Loundres par cause qe une meastre de divynite meastre Johan Wycliff nome, avoit preche en Londres et aliours come homme arage diverses poyntes encontre le clergie.”¹⁸ The Londoners’ animosity boiled over at the events in St. Paul’s and at the rumours that Gaunt and Percy were plotting to take away the liberties of the City. It was only the prompt action of Courtenay that saved the Savoy, Gaunt’s magnificent palace from destruction and that finally calmed the Londoners. In the light of this background, does the support given to Wyclif by Lancaster indicate that the two were closely allied? Or did the duke see in the carefully planned staging of the trial primarily an attack upon himself? Wyclif had to appear, since he had been summoned; Gaunt accepted the challenge and went along with Wyclif, for the two were popularly linked together. The events of the fall of 1376 are often considered a reaction against the Good Parliament whereby Gaunt regained his power. May not this action of Courtenay be considered, to some extent, as a counter-reaction? At most this incident reveals that there was some connection between the two men; but it reveals nothing as to the closeness or the nature of that connection.

The Lambeth Trial, late March 1378

Next we must look at Wyclif’s trial at Lambeth before a bench of bishops, towards the end of March 1378. On 22 May 1377 pope Gregory issued five bulls, three to Sudbury and Courtenay, one to the king, and one to the chancellor and university of Oxford; their burden was an order to bring Wyclif to account for the pernicious errors he was reputed to be teaching. For one reason or another, it was not until late December that the bulls were received in England. Sudbury ordered the university to see to it that Wyclif ‘appear personally before us or others delegated by us or our commissioners in this matter, in the church of St. Paul at London, to give answer, hear, and to do further concerning these conclusions and propositions, whatever should be done by apostolic authority in that respect and what right reason may dictate.’¹⁹ Sometime before 27 March 1378, Wyclif appeared before the bishops gathered at Lambeth.

This raises the first of these little mysteries with which this incident abounds. Why Lambeth, when the archbishop had specified St. Paul’s? Why did the bishops want to avoid publicity by holding the trial in the privacy of Lambeth instead of the public St. Paul’s, when they deliberately courted it just one year before? The obvious explanation is that they did not want a repetition of the disorder of 19 February 1377. This may well be correct; but there is no evidence to support it. Just as the trial got under way, sir Lewis Clifford, an emissary of

¹⁸ *Anonimale Chronicon*, 103.

¹⁹ In Dahmus, *Prosecution...*, 65.

king Richard's mother, ordered the bishops to refrain from passing formal sentence on Wyclif. Now the question is: whom did Clifford represent? Formally, it was the princess Joan; but it is scarcely credible that she was acting on her own initiative. Dahmus feels that he may have been representing Gaunt. The duke may have learned a lesson from the riot of the previous year to avoid a show of force in London and been satisfied to apply a more discreet, though open, pressure to protect his client. This may be correct; but again there is no proof. It has been further suggested that the government (i.e. the continual council) had ordered Clifford to intervene; but this is conjecture without solid evidence.

The reasons alleged for the interference are various and largely conjectural. Whoever sent Clifford is supposed to have sympathized with Wyclif's doctrines, mainly on the grounds that Clifford was a crypto-Lollard. But even Clifford's defection from orthodoxy "must have occurred, if at all, after 1396," so affirms Professor Waugh, and "among those who knew him best he had up to this time no reputation for heresy."²⁰ The continual council of nine members contained three bishops, including Courtenay; and no one has questioned the orthodoxy of the remainder. Some features of Wyclif's teachings would have appealed to Gaunt, as we shall see later; but not the ones for which he was being called to account. Dahmus offers a more attractive explanation of motive: a desire for tranquility of public order. Ultimately, the bishops had questioned and heard Wyclif's defence and had forbidden him to speak further on controversial matters. And about the same time, the council forbade John de Aley, a Benedictine, to attack Wyclif. "Actually it may be no oversimplification to assert that both Wyclif and Aley received the same order – to keep silent – from the same group, the continual council, at the same time – probably 1378 – and for the same reason, national tranquillity."²¹ By quieting both parties, the responsible people of the realm may well have been trying to prevent the situation from getting out of hand. Today we may be surprised at the latitude allowed Wyclif by the bishops; but freedom of debate was not the least attractive quality of the medieval schoolmen.

But what does all this reveal about the alliance between Gaunt and Wyclif? At best, nothing much; at worst, simply nothing. Gaunt's participation in this incident has not been proved at all; it is mostly a matter of conjecture.

Wyclif's Defence of Gaunt regarding the Violation of Sanctuary

An interesting sequel of the violation of sanctuary at Westminster, 11 August 1378, is Wyclif's defence of John of Gaunt. It is sufficient to recall that two prisoners, Hawlay and Shakyl, had escaped from the Tower and taken refuge

²⁰ Dahmus, in *Speculum*, XXXV, 55.

²¹ Dahmus, *Prosecution...*, 71-2.

in Westminster Abbey church. Sir Alan Buxhill, keeper of the Tower, pursued the prisoners into the church; words gave way to blows until Hawley and one of the monks were slain in the choir. The archbishop of Canterbury issued a general excommunication against all involved in the outrage. Bishop Courtenay was more specific, naming Buxhill, and explicitly exempting the king, the king's mother, and the duke of Lancaster. Regarding the last person, some have, I feel, attempted to drag in a red herring of sorts; by naming Gaunt, Courtenay is supposed to have underlined the rumour that the duke was responsible for the outrage. But the decision to burst into the confines of the abbey does not appear like government policy to defy church authorities; in fact, that would have been the silliest thing for any government to do, since it knew that it would soon have to appeal to the clergy for a subsidy. The violation can hardly have been anything other than a sudden decision made on the spur of the moment by soldiers balked of their captives by a legal technicality. Had Gaunt on his return from St. Malo kept quiet, the affair might have blown over; but again he tangled with his foe, Courtenay, voicing loud threats. The government – and Gaunt must be considered a very substantial part of it – was forced to call a parliament, which met at Gloucester (20 October to 16 November, 1378) to ease its financial difficulties. Now the clerics, still angry over the violation of sanctuary, had somehow to be mollified if they were to contribute their subsidy. And since the government could not deny the fact of Hawley's murder – and the still more embarrassing murder of the innocent sacristan – it had to base its case on principle, viz. the abuse of sanctuary, conveniently disregarding the late sacristan. It would seem that a debate on principles has a more calming and soporific effect on the English mind than a debate on fact. And Wyclif was one of several learned men appointed by the government to argue its case. In a brief submitted to parliament Wyclif discussed the whole question of sanctuary and purported to set forth the duke's policy in this matter. Gaunt, he claimed, had no desire to take away any legitimate privilege of sanctuary; but that must not be abused to harbour criminals. At first glance this defence seems peculiar, in that Wyclif does not challenge the rumour nor claim Gaunt's innocence of any role in the affair. However the rumour may not have taken hold anywhere, save with the "ribald knaves," as Gaunt described the London mob; accordingly it would not be necessary to clear Gaunt of charges which no responsible person ever seriously considered. The fact that Gaunt was explicitly exempted, along with the king and the princess, from the excommunication laid upon the violators of Westminster need not be explained by the bishop's fear of offending a royal person; rather the explanation may very well be that the bishop did not think him involved. Wyclif's brief was not so much a defence of Gaunt as a further elaboration of his views on church and state.

Wyclif's condemnation at Oxford, early 1381

Around the end of 1380 and the beginning of 1381, William Berton,

chancellor of Oxford, set up a committee of twelve doctors to examine Wyclif's teaching on the Eucharist. Two basic points were condemned and were forbidden to be taught or promulgated at the university. The affair seems to have been a purely domestic matter; but Wyclif refused to leave it at that. He threatened to appeal, not to the pope who normally would be the ultimate arbiter in such matters, but to the king. Somehow or other, Gaunt heard of the dispute and came down to Oxford. "In effect, the duke must have forbidden Wyclif to do two things: first, to promulgate his theories at Oxford; second, to discuss them outside the school."²² But he also shielded Wyclif from any reprisals; and the whole matter dropped there. Gaunt's motive could only have been a sense of loyalty to one who had been, in some sense, an ally, for it is inconceivable that he could have approved Wyclif's views on the Eucharist. This is the last time there is anything to indicate that the two men came together. After this, Wyclif retired out of the public eye to Lutterworth where he died in 1384; Gaunt was preoccupied with Scottish affairs and with dreams of a kingdom in Spain. Wyclif has had his admirers, but there have not been many with a good word for Gaunt; consequently let me quote a sentence from Professor Dahmus. "And while Gaunt never gave any indication of approving the doctrinal innovations of Wyclif, it is a tribute to the loyalty of this maligned duke that he continued to shield Wyclif from the hierarchy even after this former agent of the crown had become a source of embarrassment if not injury to him."²³

A consideration of the evidence leads to the conclusion that the alliance between the two men was a very tenuous thing at best. And yet some sort of association, connection or alliance is inescapable. From contemporary sources we have two pieces of evidence: one from the monk of St. Albans and the other from Wyclif himself. In a passage that follows the events of the parliament of January 1377 and precedes Wyclif's trial in St. Paul's, Thomas of Walsingham wrote: "aggregaverat (dux) ideo sibi quendam pseudo-theologum ..."²⁴ who is unmistakably Wyclif. Of course, Thomas was bitterly hostile to Gaunt in the *Chronicon Anglie*; and we might be inclined to discount this remark if Wyclif himself had not referred to the duke as "domini mei, ducis mei."²⁵ Of course this is a slight piece of evidence; "mei" may be nothing more than courtesy. and yet, a study of the period leaves the definite impression that some association did exist between the duke and the reformer.

Our task is to find some hypothesis for such an unlikely alliance. This is not to be found in matters religious. Gaunt was completely orthodox, as untroubled in his faith as a child. Netter somewhat later called him "sacrae ecclesiae filius fidelis," and there is no reason to question this in essentials. Armitage-Smith's

²² *Ibid.*, 134.

²³ *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁴ *Chronicon Anglie*, 115.

²⁵ *De Ecclesia*, XII, 266.

remarks well sum it up: “John of Gaunt in no point differed from the average religious thought and practice of his day. From the days of Archbishop Stratford onwards there had always been a party jealous of the influence of an episcopal ministerial class. In 1376 events forced on Lancaster the leadership of that party. He had no quarrel with the secular clergy as such, apart from their share in political opposition. The parish priest found him an indulgent landlord; the monastic orders a munificent patron; to the friars he was something more, for their leaders looked to him for support, and their armies fought his battles. From them he chose friends and councillors, and to every rank and division of the mendicant army he showed unstinted favour.”²⁶ Wyclif on the other hand had definitely heretical tendencies; he attacked the organization and administration of the church; and over the Eucharist he became certainly heretical.

We must go to politics for an explanation of the alliance. And I am here concerned not to give a survey of Wyclif’s theories but to touch upon those features which would be likely to appeal to Gaunt. Before proceeding further it is necessary to insert a caution. What *actually* did appeal to Gaunt is a matter of surmise; we have no direct evidence that Gaunt ever made his own any doctrine of Wyclif. It is well to set forth this caution, as some historians have stated their opinions as facts, when they are only surmises and without offering proof.²⁷ Possibly they have been too ready to accept Thomas of Walsingham: “dux tamen et dominus Henricus Percy ejus (Wyclif) sententias collaudabant, et scientiam et probitatem coelotenus extollere satagebant.” And the gist of these teachings, as they impressed Walsingham, was that Wyclif held “publice in scholis et alibi conclusiones erroneas et haereticas, ac statui universalis Ecclesim contrarias, et absurdas; et praecipue contra monachos et alios religiosos possessionatos venenose sonantes.”²⁸ This last phrase indicates the chief cause of Thomas’ indignation; it further reveals his prejudice and his scale of values. While my own conclusions are based on surmise, I feel that they are more plausible.

Let us begin by exclusion. In the first place, we can put aside Wyclif’s strictly philosophical and theological works; metaphysical arguments, according to Armitage-Smith, would have sounded in Gaunt’s ears, “like the ravings of a madman.” Nor would the duke have been attracted – at least logically – by Wyclif’s fundamental doctrine of dominion. One must bear in mind two things: first, his vast territorial holdings and his hopes for a kingdom in Spain; and secondly, his adulterous liaison with Katherine Swynford. According to Wyclif dominion is founded on grace; and the unjust sinful man simply does not have dominion, even though many goods and lands are in his hands. “Concedendum

²⁶ S. Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt*, 180.

²⁷ Workman, *op. cit.*, I, 275: “the one link between the two was hostility to the power and wealth of the Hierarchy.” A Steel, *op. cit.*, 22: “the foundations of the alliance between the very worldly Gaunt and his friends and the unworldly Wyclif undoubtedly lay in the latter’s theories of civil and divine dominion.”

²⁸ *Historia Anglicane*, I, 324.

est simpliciter quod injustus non habet dominium, liceat habeat bona naturalia modo improprio ... Patenter innuitur quod omnis justus simpliciter dominatur juste omnibus quibus praeest, injustus autem injuste occupat aliena.”²⁹ Furthermore, every act of the unjust man, every exercise of his presumed dominion is a further sin, and further enkindles God’s anger against the unfortunate man. Surely Gaunt did not seek an alliance with Wyclif on the basis of this teaching; this cannot be one of the opinions Gaunt lauded to the skies! It is sometimes maintained that Wyclif intended this doctrine to be applied only against the delinquent church; and he did urge lay lords to take away the property of delinquent churchmen. If this is so, then Wyclif is not completely honest; he is advocating only a partial application of his theories. In fact, however (*De Civili Dominio* II, IV, 33-4), he does admit that spiritual lords can take away the goods of unjust temporal lords. His theory of dominion applied to the laity as well as to the clergy. He was under no illusion as to the popularity of his views: “Scio enim quod ista sententia deridebitur a politicis et mundanis, cum exiit dominos a remuneracionibus graciosis.”³⁰

By the process of elimination we arrive at politics as the basis of the alliance. There are three points of Wyclif’s doctrine that might be thought to appeal to Gaunt: 1. the withdrawal of clerics from secular offices; 2. the disendowment and seizure of church property; 3. the dignity and supremacy of a king. Of these I consider the third as most likely to have appealed to Gaunt; however, I must state that this view has not been advanced by historians to my knowledge.

Certainly Gaunt continued to use bishops in secular offices. Two examples must suffice. Ralf Erghum continued on as chancellor for the duke, after the latter had obtained for him the see of Salisbury in 1375. Adam Houghton, bishop of St. David’s, was appointed chancellor of the realm on the eve of Gaunt’s “packed” parliament. If in 1377 the duke encouraged or allowed Wyclif to preach the disendowment of the church wealth, it was only as a threat to the bishops who had crossed him, by insisting on William of Wykeham’s presence at convocation in February 1377. There is no indication of his having been converted to Wyclif’s views on church property; he was as generous as ever to his clerical friends. Those who accuse him of coveting church property do not bring forward any proof. Even if he did encourage Wyclif to preach disendowment, this is still not proof; it can readily be explained as a threat to his episcopal opponents – a threat that cannot have been genuinely anti-clerical in view of his continuing gifts to clerics.

It remains now to see what Wyclif held about the royal dignity and supremacy that might appeal to Gaunt. According to Wyclif, the king is the father and leader of his people; and all, clergy and laity, must obey him in

²⁹ *De Civili Dominio*, I, VI, 46; I, XI, 65.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, III, VI, 254.

matters temporal and in any conflict of the temporal and the spiritual. His power is from God; and to God alone is he accountable. This divine origin of kingly power could not fail to appeal to John of Gaunt. In September 1371 he had married Constance, elder surviving daughter of king Pedro of Castile and Leon who had died in 1369 without a male heir. Through his wife the duke claimed this Spanish throne – a claim disputed by Constance's bastard uncle, Henry of Trastamare, and by a considerable group in the Spanish kingdom. Left to choose between a man who was one of their own and a woman with a foreign husband, the Spanish nobles might very well have chosen the former. It must have been comforting, then, for Gaunt to hear that hereditary succession was preferable to election and that the king holds his power from God and not from man. This would greatly strengthen his wife's and his own claim to the Spanish throne.

The king's principal duty was to see that justice was done to all: the good rewarded and the bad punished; and the punishment of all, clergy and laity, was in the royal hands. To make wise and just laws (but few), the king must have about him wise men, since he does not have infused wisdom, as had Solomon. But these men are only counsellors; and the king is free to accept or reject their advice. Nowhere does Wyclif say or hint that the subjects of a king have a right to a determining voice in the government of the realm; kingship is personal and paternal. With memories of his difficult times with parliaments, Gaunt must have found these doctrines balm to his ruffled feelings. Furthermore, since human law should be the reflection of divine law, it is necessary for the guidance of the laity to have doctors of divine law, i.e. theologians, about the king.³¹

Such exaltation and independence of the royal power must have been gratifying to Gaunt who had pretensions to the throne of Castile and Leon, but not to the throne of England, in spite of the calumnious rumour that circulated on the death of Edward III.

Now there is a difficulty confronting this explanation, which must be faced but which I fear cannot be resolved satisfactorily. The notions on kingship are from Wyclif's "De Officio Regis" which appeared most probably in 1379, much too late a date to begin an alliance. However I do not think it unreasonable to assume that Wyclif had had these ideas for some time previous to 1379 and that he had made them known to his protector. But I cannot prove this point. If this assumption is not accepted, then the alliance of the two men is more of a mystery than ever. Certainly the bases of the alliance, as usually given (viz. dominion, removal of clerics from secular office, disendowment of the clergy), are flatly contradicted by the duke's practice.

The alliance, such as it was, was of very gradual development, and never became close or intimate. Nor is this surprising when we examine the background and the aims of the two men. That Wyclif should see in Gaunt an instrument for the reform of the church is a severe tax on our credulity; but what

³¹ *De Officio Regis*, 47, 48.

other explanation can one offer? The duke, one feels, was prepared to use Wyclif as a threat to his clerical opponents; a political tactic one can readily understand. But it would be creating a false picture to let the matter stand there. Political expediency played a great (possibly a major) role in bringing the two men together. But more deeply, there was an agreement on principle; the paramountcy of the king was a central feature of the state for both men. This view may have been out-moded, before the march of the lords and commons to a fuller share in government; but it is still something more than expediency. Gaunt may have been a reactionary in opposing the development of the constitution but he may also have seen the consequences more clearly than did his contemporaries, consequences that cut at the heart of his views on kingship. Anthony Steel gives John credit for seeing the futility of the French war, when his contemporaries were for pushing it. May it not be that Gaunt had some vision in this other field? Quite possibly he did not see clearly the direction the lords and commons were taking; but he did see that their road broke off sharply from the one he knew and had resolved to stay with. It was his duty then to keep the country on the familiar road. The means he used to do so might be arguable but he employed them to save a principle.

John Wyclif logically had to support Gaunt. From his theories on kingship, we see that that was the only course open to him apart from complete abstention from politics. He may have had to swallow with difficulty many undesirable things about Gaunt; but for the sake of a principle, the theory of personal monarchy (possibly as a necessary condition to reform of the church), he was willing to ignore, though not approve, the weaknesses of his ally. In the end, however, the forces against both were too strong. These, with the centrifugal forces within the alliance, made the latter ineffective. Instead of being a source of strength, the alliance weakened both. Gaunt won no friends; his enemies were confirmed, and the ardor of his friends cooled somewhat. Wyclif linked himself with a powerful man, but one with powerful enemies. To Gaunt's credit it must be said that when ecclesiastical authorities attempted to put Wyclif on trial, four times in five years,³² he did not abandon his ally.

Politics make strange bed-fellows; and this is well borne out in the alliance of Gaunt and Wyclif. By their natures, background, mental outlook and aims, these two differed too widely ever to form a genuine alliance. The picture of Wyclif as an ingenuous idealist hoping to see in Gaunt an instrument of reform, while the "unprincipled politician and thoroughgoing opportunist" played with him, is a caricature; it makes Gaunt appear as a villain and Wyclif as a simpleton. The fact is that while circumstances threw them together, each saw that the other's use to him was quite limited; and accordingly the alliance was a rather indistinct, nebulous affair. This would explain why we cannot discover when they formed the alliance, why it was ineffective, and why it died unnoticed.

³² St. Paul's, Feb. 1377; Lambeth, May 1378; Oxford, 1380-1381; Black friars. London. 1382.