

## THE BLACK DEATH RICHARD II AND THE PEASANTS' REVOLT JOHN WYCLIFF & THE LOLLARDS

### Key Words and Related Topics

Temario de la Guía Docente: 1. The Origins and Evolution of English Institutions. 2. From *Magna Carta* to the Glorious Revolution: the origins of modern English Political Culture. 6. The Anglican Church, the Monarchy and Parliament: their historical origin, their evolution and their cultural roles today

- Church and State.
- England and the Papacy.
- The three estates of medieval social structure: those who pray, those who fight, and those who work.
- Republicanism and radical religious reformation.
- The translation of Scripture.
- John Wyclif as a forerunner of the Protestant Reformation.
- Wyclif regularizes Middle English prose (through his translations from the Bible and his own sermons) in the same way in which Chaucer established a new norm for Middle English poetry.

### Introduction

In this unit we shall learn about some significant developments in English culture during the late 14<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, some of which prefigure events, trends and ideas that would become prominent in subsequent periods.

We shall first learn about John Wyclif, a theologian, and a scholar who promoted the first translation of the Bible into English. Wyclif's ideas and his translation of the Bible in the language that the common people spoke are significant events, because they illustrate the close connections between translation and political ideas, and also the close relation between theology and political thought. Wyclif's ideas on the relation between the church and the monarchy, and his theology go hand in hand with significant political events, in particular with the Black Death and its social and economic consequences.

Towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century we can see that some trends that would take center stage during the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were gaining momentum. As we do so, we shall see that some of these ideas and trends already featured in previous periods, and in previous concepts and ideologies—such as those expressed through *Magna Carta*, Common Law, the nature of the relation between the monarch and the aristocracy, the monarch and the common people, and the sort of monarchical rule that was considered fit to rule England. Theology and politics go hand in hand, for instance, in the movement known as Lollardy.

As a result of the crisis of authority described in text number [8], King Richard II sought to reassert his authority before the common people, and also before his aristocracy. One of the strategies which he employed was to embark on a campaign of artistic output that sought to sacralize the authority of the king: hence the *Coronation Portrait* and the *Wilton Dypic* (shown below). These outward



The deposition of a monarch. Richard II is taken into custody by the Earl of Northumberland. From Jean Froissart's *Chronicles* (15th century manuscript)

manifestations of monarchical authority—sanctioned by divine providence—went hand in hand with Richard's belief that he was the source of the law—an absolutist claim that contrasts with other theories of limited monarchy, which hold that the monarch is always beneath the law. This is why, Richard II's deposition as a king (a rather unusual event) is viewed by some historians as a case in which the power of the aristocracy managed to frustrate royal attempts to gain absolute power.

**TASK.** Read the following texts on John Wyclif, and answer the following questions:

1. Why were his opinions controversial?
2. Which were his major achievements?
3. Who was Geoffrey Chaucer? Find information about him and provide a brief description of his role in English literary culture.
4. What do you think the text means by claiming that Wyclif “did for Middle English prose what Chaucer did for poetry”? Explain in detail. How can this be related to the claim of text number [5] that “Lollard theology was based on a belief in the supreme value of scripture”? How is this related to translation?

[1]

**Wyclif(fe), John** (c.1329–84). English philosopher, theologian, and proponent of reform. He was resident in Oxford for most of his life. His views were not wholly original, and were somewhat protected by the fact that they were normally expressed within the university. However, he engendered controversy by stressing the importance of civil powers within the Church, which scandalized the pope and leading clergy. He is chiefly remembered for his opposition to transubstantiation<sup>1</sup> and his support for vernacular scripture. Some of his ideas were preserved in Wycliffe's *Wicket*, but his major achievements were to provide a translation of the Bible in English, and to put forward views on the Church which were later promoted by the Lollards. He is recognized in the Church of England Lesser Festivals, 6 Oct.

"Wyclif(fe), John", in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. Ed. John Bowker. Oxford University Press, 2000. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Universidad de Granada. 25 December 2011 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t101.e8016>>

[2]

**Wycliffe, John**, also Wyclif, Wiclif, and others [c.1320–1384]. English reformer and Bible translator, born at Wycliffe in Yorkshire, and Master of Balliol College, Oxford (c.1356–c.1382). His role in the Lollard movement and the politics of the Reformation have tended to overshadow his significant contribution to the language. His translations (with collaborators) of the Vulgate BIBLE were the first complete Bible in English and existed in two forms, the Early Version (c.1380–2) and the Late Version (c.1382–8), the second being more idiomatic, less archaic, and freer from Latinisms and generally more highly regarded. Wycliffe was a friend of Geoffrey Chaucer, who may have used him as the model for the Poor Parson in *The Canterbury Tales*. He did for Middle English prose what Chaucer did for poetry, making English a competitor with French and Latin; his sermons were written when London usage was coming together with the East Midlands dialect, to form a standard language accessible to all, and he included scientific references, such as to chemistry and optics. His style influenced Reformation and later nonconformist writing, and John Milton was among his admirers. More than 300 of his discourses survive, with some 170 manuscript copies of his Bible, circulated from Lutterworth, where he was rector (1374–84). Its opening words are: ‘In the firste made God of nought heuene and erthe. The erthe forsothe was veyn withynne and void, and derknnessis weren upon the face

<sup>1</sup> **Transubstantiation** is the belief that, after consecration by the priest in mass (i.e. the Eucharist), the bread and the wine are turned, by divine intervention, into the actual flesh and blood of Christ. This belief became one of the most controversial doctrinal disputes between Catholics (who defended transubstantiation as a dogma of faith) and Protestants (who denied its status of dogma). Jonathan Swift made fun of these doctrinal disputes (which caused wars and deaths in Europe over the course of the 16th and 17th centuries) in his satirical *Gulliver's Travels* (on Swift and his satire on—*inter alia*—religious dispute, see unit 6).

of the see.' Wycliffe's own share in the translations bearing his name is uncertain, but was probably considerable.

"WYCLIFFE, John", in the *Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Ed. Tom McArthur. Oxford University Press, 1998. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Universidad de Granada. 25 December 2011 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t29.e1317>>

**TASK.** Read texts [3] to [6] and answer the following questions:

1. What is the Black Death?
2. Why were such laws as the "Ordinance of Labourers" (1349) and the "Statute of Labourers" (1351) issued? How are they related to the effects of the Black Death?
3. Which other long-lasting effects did the Black Death have upon English society?
4. Compare the impact of the Black Death on medieval social structure with the description of this structure that you can find in unit 1 (see the section on the Domesday Book).
5. Why does the text say that the Black Death may have brought about (or contributed to) the end of feudalism?
6. What was the purpose of the 1363 Sumptuary Law, and how is it related to the Black Death?
7. Who were the Lollards? Write a brief paragraph describing them.
8. What is the contract which, according to one of the texts, had been for centuries at the "the heart of feudalism"?
9. What does the same text mean by saying that "increasingly, salvation seemed a do-it-yourself project", and what role did Wyclif play in spreading this idea? What does text number [5] say about this?
10. What is "chantry" and how does it relate to indulgences and the Protestant Reformation?
11. What did Wyclif think about the relation between Church and State?
12. What did he think about the exercise of power by individuals who were not virtuous? Did his opinions prefigure some other important trends in this area?
13. According to text number [6], what did Wyclif think about the church as an institution?
14. According to the conclusions to text number [6], why did Wyclif think that the clergy should be expropriated?

[3]

### **Black Death: The lasting impact**

By Professor Tom James (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/>)

The long term effects of the Black Death were devastating and far reaching. Agriculture, religion, economics and even social class were affected. Contemporary accounts shed light on how medieval Britain was irreversibly changed.

#### **The onset of the plague**

Contemporaries were horrified by the onset of the plague in the wet summer of 1348: within weeks of midsummer people were dying in unprecedented large numbers. [...] A monk, writing in Wiltshire, reckoned that 'over England as a whole a fifth of men, women and children were carried to the grave'. The plague did not abate in the Winter but became even more virulent in the early months of 1349 and continued into 1350.

Chroniclers and administrators make numerous references to the extension of graveyards, for example in Bristol, and to the mass burial of bodies in pits. At Rochester (Kent) men and women cast their dead children into communal graves 'from which arose such a stench that it was barely possible to go past a churchyard'. Modern excavation of such pits in London, near The Tower on the site of former Royal Mint and in the cathedral close at Hereford, testify to these extreme measures. [...]

Today we have the benefit of hindsight. We know, as fourteenth-century people suspected, that the mortality caused by the bubonic plague of the Black Death was the worst demographic disaster in the history of the world. We also know that the mortality came to an end in the first

outbreak soon after 1350; contemporaries could not have known this would happen - so far as they were concerned everyone might well die. Some treated each day as if it were their last: moral and sexual codes were broken, while the marriage market was revitalised by those who had lost partners in the plague.

[...]



### Contemporary accounts

Evidence of the effects can be measured and responses traced not only in social and economic, political and religious terms, but also in changes in art and architecture. The effects of the Black Death in all these matters were disputed by contemporaries and are still hotly disputed today, which makes the topic so endlessly fascinating.

By way of example, Ralph Higden, a contemporary chronicler, argued that 'lords and great men escaped'. By contrast, Geoffrey le Baker, an Oxfordshire man, noted deaths among the nobility. And so there were: one of King Edward III's daughters, archbishops, bishops, abbots, abbesses, nobles and lords of manors died in the first outbreak. [...] However, there is no doubt that proportionately the hardest-hit part of society was the most numerous: the peasantry, labourers and artisans.

### Society turned upside down

Following the plague we find a clear sense of society turned upside down in England. The rulers of the kingdom reacted strongly. Some elements of legislation indicate a measure of panic. Within a year of the onset of plague, during 1349, an Ordinance of Labourers was issued and this became the Statute of Labourers in 1351. This law sought to prevent labourers from obtaining higher wages. Despite the shortage in the workforce caused by the plague, workers were ordered to take wages at the levels achieved pre-plague. Landlords gained in the short term from payments on the deaths of their tenants (heriots), but 'rents dwindled, land fell waste for want of tenants who used to cultivate it' (Higden) and '...many villages and hamlets were deserted...and never inhabited again'. Consequently, landed incomes fell. The bulging piles of manorial accounts which survive for the period of the Black Death testify to the active land-market and the additional administration caused by the onset of plague. But all too often the administration consists of noting defaults of rent because of plague (*defectus causa pestilencie*).



It has been argued that the Black Death brought about the end of feudalism. This was the system of service in return for a grant of land, burdening the peasant with many obligations to his lord. For example, payments were due on entering a land holding, upon marriage and death and on many other occasions. The Black Death did not start the process of the commutation (substitution) of a money payment for labour and other services. However, there is no doubt that the plague speeded up the process by reducing dramatically the numbers of peasants and artisans.

Government and landlords tried to keep the lid on rising wages and changing social aspirations. Lords and peasants alike were indicted for taking higher wages. In 1363 a Sumptuary Law was brought through parliament. This measure decreed not only the quality and colour of cloth that lay people at different levels of society (below the nobility) should use in their attire but also sought to limit the common diet to basics. Such legislation could only occur when the government had observed upwardly-mobile dress among the lower orders. Such legislation was virtually impossible to enforce, but indicates that among those who survived the plague there was additional wealth, from higher wages and from accumulated holdings of lands formerly held by plague victims.

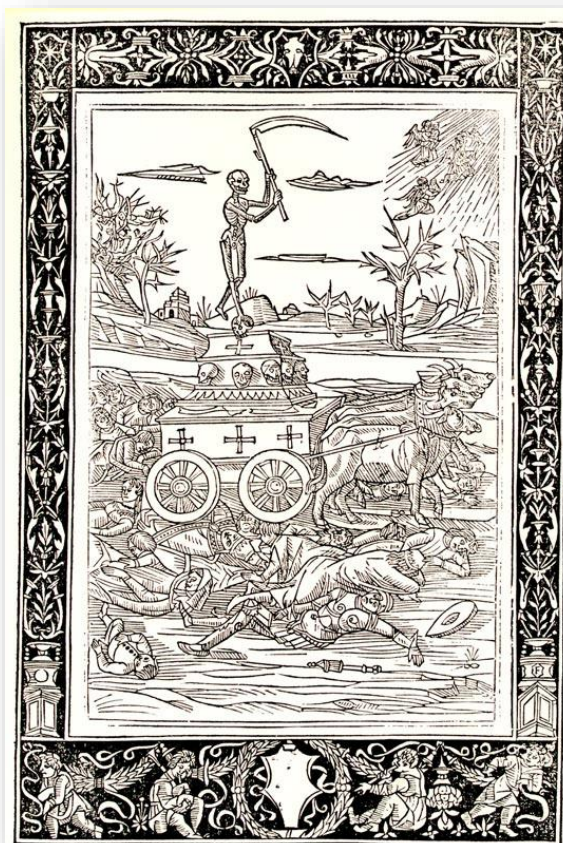
In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* of 1387 the well-known Prologue describes the dress of each pilgrim. Arguably, it demonstrates that apart from the knight, the poor parson and the ploughman, who personify each of the three traditional divisions of medieval society, every pilgrim is dressed more grandly than the Sumptuary Law would allow. The *Canterbury Tales* came six years after the Great Revolt of 1381 in which rebellion flared throughout much of England, the Kent and Essex men invaded London, chopped off Archbishop Sudbury's head and terrified the fourteen-year-old Richard II into agreeing concessions on the Poll Tax and other matters. The Poll Tax was an unsuccessful attempt by the government to combat the effects of plague by changing the basis of taxation from a charge on communities (many much less populous following successive plagues), with a tax on individuals who had survived. Chaucer, the court poet, was very aware of the anxieties of the elite in the new post-plague society. His *Canterbury pilgrims*, as the courtiers encountered them, were arranged 'by rank and degree' and sent back down the road to Canterbury in perfect order, led by the knight: precisely the opposite to the unruly mob which had marched up from Canterbury in 1381.

### Never the same again

If lay society was never the same again after the Black Death, nor was the English Church. Contemporaries were quick to note that the Black Death killed proportionately at least as many clergy as laity.

[...]

In summary, the vast majority of the population at the time of the Black Death was rural peasants who suffered the highest mortality and in so doing, became much more expensive and choosy about where they worked, and how they related to lords. Weakened communities provided the opportunity in the century and a half after the plague for landlords to clear lands and enclose them for sheep, so that Sir Thomas More, writing soon after 1500, saw the countryside as overrun and consumed by sheep. People certainly expected and obtained higher wages even in the church, whose authority was challenged by many, including Chaucer in his mocking *Canterbury*



Tales. Recruitment to the parish clergy fell and monastic houses never recovered. In a sense the Black Death was the prehistory both of enclosure and of the Reformation. Perhaps Cardinal Gasquet was right when he noted long ago that the plague led to the emergence for the first time of a middle class (who chatter and challenge authority) funded by accumulating the wealth of those who had died. Thus the old medieval tripartite division of society into those who fought (the nobility and knights), those who prayed (the churchmen) and those who laboured (the peasants) was never the same again.

[4]

### The relation between the Black Death, Wyclif and the Lollards

“King Death was, then, an unlikely liberator, shaking up the old social hierarchy in the countryside and rearranging the relationship between the powerful and the powerless. The onslaught of his scythe cut straight to what, for centuries, had been the heart of feudalism: the contract between submission and protection that had said ‘do what you’re told, stay where you are, and you will be protected from those who may wish you harm’. But in the middle of the fourteenth century, with those who were supposed to make good the promise—the lord’s reeve and his bench on the manorial court, the county knights and their fellow jurors, and even the lord himself, his family and esquires and servants—following each other to the boneyards, this promise must have rung hollow.



This was not yet a world of individualists, cut loose from the inter-connected obligations of feudal society, but it was a world in which, suddenly, self-help seemed not just desirable but urgent. And this was as true for the structures of belief as it was for the structures of social power. Despite all the prayers and processions and penances, it seemed that God’s wrath was not yet assuaged by gestures of tearful contrition, for the plague came back in 1361 (and after that in twenty- to twenty-five-year cycles), taking not a half but certainly a quarter of an already shrunken population. From the beginning, a disproportionate number of its victims had been priests, whose obligations to minister to the sick and

dying had put them in the front line of the epidemic. The decision in 1349 that the last rites could be received from the laity when there were no priests around to do the job, although strictly temporary, must already have made inroads into the clergy’s absolute monopoly on the sacraments, and it may well have encouraged those who were understandably fearful of being struck down to prepare themselves as best they could against the day when they might be struck down in their prime. Increasingly, salvation seemed a do-it-yourself project. For some of the boldest, this sense of having been left bereft by the institutional Church led them dangerously (or excitingly) close to heresy. The Oxford scholar John Wyclif taught that the priesthood was not indispensable for salvation and that, in the words of scripture, each Christian might find the true way. His gospel ‘mumblers’ or Lollards were initially saved from formal charges of heresy only because Wyclif himself had powerful protectors, especially Edward III’s third son, John of Gaunt, whose enthusiasm for Lollardy was passed on to a small but influential group of knights.

For less audacious souls, however, it was possible to pursue the personal road to salvation in ways that were sanctioned, rather than proscribed, by the Church. For the humble this might be a pilgrimage to the shrine of a saint like Beckett, whose intercession might be implored for the sins of the pilgrim. But those who had the means could take out an insurance policy against being struck down by King Death without having had adequate time to prepare themselves to be properly commended to God’s mercy. This was chantry<sup>2</sup>. It was based on the idea, widespread for the first time after the Black Death, that, pending final judgment, souls did time in the stony

<sup>2</sup> In this respect, *chantry* prefigures indulgences: these were official pardons granted by the Pope to those who paid a certain amount of money. Protestant Reformers decried indulgences because they thought that divine forgiveness could not be bought and sold just as any other common, material good. Indignation against indulgences was one of the main incentives that led Martin Luther to protest against Church corruption. (See appendix one below)

limbo of Purgatory where they atoned for their transgressions. The chantry was a sum of money, which was given in advance of one's death, either to establish a special chapel or simply to designate clergy to chant masses for the soul. So much money would pay for so many monk-hours of chanting, and the time spent in Purgatory would shorten accordingly."

(Simon Schama, *A History of Britain*, vol. 1. London: BBC Books, 2003, pp. 205-6)

[5]

### The emergence of Lollardy

"Without John Wyclif (c. 1330-84) there might perhaps have been Lollards in late medieval England: religious zealots who even if they criticized pilgrimages and the cult of saints no one would have particularly minded; but there might not have been Lollardy. It was the teaching of Wyclif that created a recognizable and recognizably dangerous movement. Wyclif was an Oxford scholar whose early years—he was successively fellow of Merton, Master of Balliol, and Warden of Canterbury Hall—gave no inkling of his later notoriety. Sometime after 1371 his services were employed by the Black Prince and John of Gaunt and it was then that his new career in the public eye began. As a spokesman for government causes his controversial opinions at first were welcomed; it was only his rejection of transubstantiation as a philosophically untenable doctrine together with the suspicion—whether or not unfounded—that he was in some ways implicated in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 that forced his retirement from the public arena to his rectory at Lutterworth. There, however, he continued to write with unabated enthusiasm in defence of ever more radical positions.

Wyclif's original brief in c. 1371 had been to develop arguments to enable Edward III's government to direct clerical wealth from papal coffers to its own, so as to assist in the prosecution of the war against France. Wycliff would finally come to believe that church endowments should be pared down to the barest minimum. His reasoning here was set within the framework of a revised theory of the relationship between Church and State by which the pope represented the humanity of Christ, the king his divinity. It thus followed that it was the duty of the king to reform the Church and not vice versa. Not content with this reversal of traditional roles, Wyclif went further, claiming in his teaching on lordship or 'dominion' that power was nullified unless exercised by the virtuous<sup>3</sup>; the true pope, in consequence, was not necessarily the man with the title, but simply whoever happened to be the most righteous man on earth. This was teaching which aroused suspicions of Donatism, a heresy long condemned by the Church, by which the validity of the sacraments depended on the moral standing of the celebrant. Wyclif himself denied the implication—it being from God rather than from any 'cursed man' that sacraments were received—but it is clear that his followers took his arguments a step further, claiming both that priests 'in deadly sin' had no sacramental powers and, conversely, that all truly good Christians, men and women, were in fact priests. According to Hawisian Mone, examined in the Norwich heresy trials of 1428-31, 'every man and every woman beyng in good lyf oute of synne is as good prest and hath as much poar of God in al thynges as any prest ordred [ordained] be he pope or bisshop'.

[...]

Had Wyclif and the Lollards had their way, an English Church more radical than anything born of the Henrician Reformation would have been established. Just how strong, in the face of persecution, was the tradition of dissent that stretched from Wyclif to sixteenth-century Protestants is still a matter of some controversy, though there can be no doubt that the tradition was maintained. What is also clear, as heresy trials show, is the extent to which religious debate in late medieval England was not confined to any particular milieu; such matters touched men and women of all social classes and backgrounds.

[...]

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<sup>3</sup> In this Wyclif coincided in part with other Reformers, such as George Buchanan, who thought that subjects had the right to rebel (in some cases) when the monarch was not virtuous, or was not following Natural law (in their thinking, the kind of universal law instituted by God), or when the king became a tyrant. This argument was used by radical reformers, for instance, to justify the deposition and eventual execution of king Charles I in the 17th century.

Lollard theology was based on a belief in the supreme value of scripture—*sola scriptura*<sup>4</sup>—and on the right of all Christians to be able to read and understand it. Huge efforts went into the provision of vernacular copies of the Gospels—occasionally of the whole Bible—to be disseminated among local groups up and down the country, alongside sermons and tracts. It was awareness of the crucial role played by the reading, memorizing, and discussion of such texts which led Thomas Arundel, archbishop of Canterbury, to pass stringent laws controlling the production of vernacular literature, in his *Constitutions* of 1409.

[...]

The story of the fifteenth-century Church cannot, however, be read simply as a tale of forward-looking heretics battling against a reactionary hierarchy. The story that has to be told is more complex and interesting than that.”

(Henrietta Leyser, “Piety, Religion and the Church”, in Nigel Saul, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval England*. Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 196-199)



A manuscript copy of Wyclif's Bible

[6]

### Church and State. John Wyclif: political thought, theology and translation

During the fourteenth century, the kingdom of England, her government and people alienated from the Avignon papacy by its diplomatic and financial support for the French, was achieving something like *de facto* autonomy in church affairs. After the 1350, senior church appointments were largely in the hands of the Crown and appeals from English courts were generally disallowed. **The last major medieval theorist of church-state relations, John Wyclif (d. 1384), was an eminent Oxford scholastic theologian.** In the early 1370s he was employed by the English Crown, under John of Gaunt's influence, to argue the case for royal taxation of the clergy, and for practical limitations upon the papacy's power over the English church and its

<sup>4</sup> *Sola scriptura* here means that Scripture alone (i.e. the Bible) was sufficient to save a soul: you did not need the Church hierarchy (i.e. the priests, bishops, cardinals, etc.) to save you. Only God's grace, and his divine providence, was enough. And the best way to reach God was through close reading and assimilation of the Bible, not through the mediation of priests and bishops. In their defence of the principle of *sola scriptura*, the Lollards also prefigured the Protestant Reformation. Precisely because the word of God, as laid out in the Bible, was the only true source of salvation, reformers put a lot of emphasis on translating the bible into languages that the common people could understand. In contrast with this view, the Church hierarchy wished to control access to the Bible by keeping it in Latin, a language that only learned elites could read and understand.



*wealth. Wyclif's theological compendium, begun in the same years, dealt in its early sections extensively with the question of divine and civil authority (dominium). Wyclif also began a translation of the Bible into English and promoted 'poor preachers' to carry his evangelical ideas to ordinary people. As the heterodoxy of his views on theological as well as political questions became clear, he fell from royal favour; but, despite his suspected if unintended influence on the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, he was allowed to continue living and writing, voluminously, as a parish priest.*

*Wyclif held that the only human group that had spiritual significance was the true church, consisting exclusively of those predestined to salvation, 'the community of the just'. It alone had a legitimate claim to spiritual authority. But, since no-one except God knew who these persons were, this group is unrecognisable, and therefore non-institutional. **What is commonly called 'the church'**—the clergy, bishops and papacy, and the identifiable community of baptised Catholics—**is but an institution of human contrivance with no divine sanction.** Yet another reason why in its present form such a church cannot be authoritative is that it has, as any study of history clearly shows, changed radically over time and today stands in desperate need of reform. Wyclif reinterpreted sacred history: the church's best period was before Constantine. Since then the clergy had grown in status, power and wealth, especially since the eleventh century when (Wyclif correctly observed) power became increasingly concentrated in the papacy: this was corruption. Yet, **according to Wyclif's understanding of Scripture, salvation is in fact available to all true believers quite independently of the clergy and its ministrations, through faith, the reading of Scripture and personal sanctity. There is, therefore, no need for any group or institution calling itself the church to exercise coercive jurisdiction.***

*Wyclif too made a connection between authority and property. This was crucial because one of his chief aims, for both political and religious reasons, was to discredit clerical titles to wealth and land-ownership, except as a voluntary recompense for their services granted by lay people and subject to re-possession if abused. This supported the Crown's case in negotiating with the papacy, but Wyclif's arguments went much further than the English authorities required: they justified wholesale expropriation of church properties on the grounds of abuse and corruption. For, in the first place, **all dominium—property-ownership and jurisdiction—is given by God on condition of one's being in a state of grace:** this is because, Wyclif rather tortuously argued, **nature bestowed goods on human beings in common, private property was introduced by God only as a remedy for the sin of Adam,** and now Christ has redeemed human beings from sin by his grace. But we have absolutely no means of knowing who is in a state of grace.*

*In the second place, Wyclif said that the church militant here on earth, being composed of humans, still requires some visible organisation. And, in the absence of any identifiable spiritual community or authority, this is nothing other than the kingdoms and other states which make up ordinary human society throughout Christendom. There is no special divinely ordained religious organisation among Christians, and therefore for practical purposes the public religious affairs of Christians are to be managed by those who are in any case, by clear biblical precept, their legitimate rulers in other matters: the civil authorities.*

[...]

*The upshot was that, given our ignorance about who is in a state of grace and therefore about who has an absolutely valid title to property and jurisdiction, dominion in all its forms is under the disposition of the king. Clergy hold their possessions by the will of the ruler; this achieved one immediate purpose of his political works by showing that the clergy should indeed be taxed by the state. But far beyond this, since the clergy had obviously abused their possessions, they should be generally expropriated. Furthermore, since the realm is the church and the king is God's only visible representative on earth, it is the king's duty to carry out that reform of the church which is so pressingly needed. Wyclif looked forward to a reformatio as a spiritual renewal for both clergy and laity, for which dispossession of the clergy was a prerequisite.*

(Antony Black, *Political Thought in Europe. 1250 – 1450.* Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 79-82)

**TASK.** Read text [7]. Extra credit: do some research on the following questions, and write a short essay on the topic (500-700 words).

1. Read the prologue to Wycliff's translation of the Bible in the 1390s, and explain what the text means, and what it says about different ways of translating a text.
2. Why do you think that Bishop Arundel banned unauthorized translations of the Bible and restricted the preaching and discussion of Christian texts in 1409?
3. How does the translation of the Bible prefigure the Protestant Reformation? Find about the concept of 'justification by faith alone', and how Luther's translation of *Romans* 3.28 became so important for the Protestant Reformation.

The translation of the Bible had a significant subversive potential, among other reasons because it took the power to interpret its teachings, and the main doctrines of Christianity, from the elite of Church leaders who had so far monopolized it. These were the theologians, bishops, archbishops, and cardinals who were also used by monarchs and aristocrats to legitimize their power as stemming from God's will. Since God's message was enshrined in Scripture, the Bible was used to legitimize political power. Any attempt to open up the text, and make it available to a larger group of people was deemed as dangerous, since the Bible could now be interpreted to defend different political structures and eliminate the established power.

[7]

“Throughout the early history of the Englishing of the Bible, doctrinal and political anxieties had pressed in on matters of linguistic detail. During the 1380s and 1390s, probably in Oxford, followers of Wycliffe engaged in intense translatory work on the Bible, establishing the source text, translating more or less word for word, and then revising their first efforts into a more comprehensible and elegant English. The Prologue to the fully revised translation of the 1390s reflects on this process, and sums it up in what was to become an influential justification of ‘opening’:

*The beste translating is, out of Latyn into English, to translate aftir the sentence, and not oneli after the wordis, so that the sentence be as opin either openere in English as in Latyn, and go not fer from the lettre; and if the lettre mai not be suid in the translating, let the sentence evere be hool and open, for the wordis owen to serve to the entent and sentence*

[The best translation is out of Latin into English, to translate after the sense, and not only after the words, so that the sense can be as open, or even more open in English than in Latin, and not to go far from the letter; and if the letter may not be followed in the translation, let the sense be always whole and open, for words should always serve the purpose and the sense]

[...]

In the case of the Wycliffite Bible, it was not any linguistic detail that led to official condemnation, but rather the further ‘opening’ caused by the circulation of the translated texts. As David Lawton has put it, ‘the question is not what? (An English Bible) but who? (who owns it?)’. With his *Constitutions* of 1409, Archbishop Arundel not only banned unauthorized translation but restricted the preaching and discussion of Christian texts: thereafter, the ‘symple men’ whom the Wycliffites had in view could be found guilty of heresy for possessing a Bible translation, even though Henry VI himself owned one. Nevertheless, echoes of the Wycliffites’ unease about the first stage of ‘opening’ the ‘letter’ are discernible in many subsequent Bibles, where little added words like ‘while’ were marked in parentheses, as by Coverdale, or italics, as in both the Geneva Bible of 1560 and the Authorized Version. And the sensitivities hereabouts were well grounded for the nub of Luther’s attack on the Roman Catholic Church was enclosed in just such a tiny explanatory adjustment: the insertion of ‘allein’, ‘alone’, before the word ‘Glauben’, ‘faith’, in *Romans* 3.28, translated in the Authorized Version as ‘a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law’. Luther protested that he had merely opened ‘the sense of the text’ (‘die meinung des text’) into the sort of German that is in ‘daily use’ (‘teglischen brauch’)

(Matthew Reynolds 2011, *The Poetry of Translation. From Chaucer and Petrarch to Homer and Logue*, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 78-79)



Richard II. Coronation Portrait.

## RICHARD II AND THE PEASANTS' REVOLT

**TASK.** Read texts [8] and [9] and answer the following questions:

1. Which were some of the most significant events during Richard's reign?
2. Where was Richard born? Which languages did he speak? What does it tell us about the Middle Ages in England? What does it indicate about the changing linguistic situation and the creation of a sense of national identity?
3. What do the texts say about the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, and how is this revolt related to the Black Death?
4. To what extent does text number [8] reproduce the same ideas about the effects of the Black Death (see previous texts), and how are these related to the crisis of authority, and the state of discontent in Europe and in England?
5. What triggered the Peasants' Revolt?
6. Who were the leaders of the rebellion? Were they peasants? What does this tell us about the changes that the Black Death had brought about in feudal society?
7. In 1399 something very unusual happened: King Richard II was overthrown? Why did this happen, according to text number [8]? How does this fit in with the sort of tradition that Magna Carta had already established, and with what, a few decades later, Sir John Fortescue said about the nature of the English monarchy?
8. Which other English monarch was also overthrown (and executed)? When and how did this happen?

[8]

## **The Reign of Richard II, 1377 to 1399**

By Ian Bremner (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/>)

To what extent did Richard II's reign lay the foundation for the bloody Wars of the Roses and what was the social impact of the Black Death? Ian Bremner investigates.

### **Introduction**

The reign of Richard II illustrates the changing nature of the crown and society after the Black Death wiped out almost half the population from 1348. Richard's downfall has also been called the first round in what the Victorians named the 'Wars of the Roses,' the bloody, noble civil wars that devastated England from around 1450 to 1487. But the legacy of his rule laid the foundation for that conflict and together with the impact of the plague achieved a social transformation that changed Britain forever.

Richard's rule can be viewed as a critical moment in Britain's history. It provides the first opportunity to assess the impact of the Black Death on all levels of the nations; as society realigns itself, the young king struggles to restore the prestige and authority of the crown. Key issues of the day colour Richard's reign: the ongoing war with France, the power of the nobles, religious change, extending royal authority into the regions and the continuing conflict in Ireland and with Scotland.

There is significant cultural and linguistic advance, new social groups such as the 'gentry' are emerging and by 1500, leave us with a pubescent modern nation state, firmly in possession of defensible borders and one 'common' language. The Peasants' Revolt, the first major 'headline' result of the series of plagues that swept across Europe, was a judgement on those who were governing the country in Richard's name. However, the king's reaction to the revolt was perhaps the highpoint of his personal activity. But it is the rapid fall of Richard II, from his position as a secure, wealthy and respected monarch that sheds the most light on the reality of medieval power.

### **Richard II, boy and man**

[...]

The son of England's greatest warrior lord, the Black Prince, and a renowned European beauty, Joan of Kent, Richard was born in Bordeaux, 1367. His christening was attended by three kings. Educated in a European style for the first four years of his life, Richard would bring a new sense of class and civility to the English throne. He probably spoke French first and foremost but also learnt English, the language that was rapidly becoming the main tongue of the English nobility.

Richard is the first king that we know for sure what he looked like, in part because of his own conscious attempts to raise the personal place of the monarch, through the active use of imagery and artistic representation, the most notable example being the Wilton Diptych, a portable altarpiece and Richard's own portrait...

The greatest cultural legacy of the period is the work of Chaucer, a contemporary of Richard and personally known to him but, perhaps surprisingly, not someone who benefited from the king's generous financial patronage. Chaucer's work and use of the English language are legacies of Richard's reign despite the king, not because of his actions; however 'cultured' his court became Richard neglected some of the major trends of his age.

[...]

On the death of the now senile Edward III in 1377, the ten year-old Richard II inherited a throne that ruled with parliament and in front of which he had to swear to uphold the laws of the people. For a prince who sought to raise the monarchy above human restraints it was an inauspicious start. Parliament selected a regency council that excluded the king's uncle and leading lord, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. With interests split between Gaunt, parliament and the council, government became disorganised.



[...]

### **The Peasants' Revolt, 1381**

This rebellion, "the most significant in English History," occurred for a combination of reasons, virtually all of which were prompted by the Black Death. The plague that struck Britain from 1348 killed almost half the population. Those agricultural workers who survived now found their wages rising (by 200-300 per cent) as demand for their services by competing landlords increased. However, the landlords were reluctant to pay the higher wages or allow workers to move to rival estates. Hit by this, three poll taxes and legislation which stated that wages could not rise above pre-plague levels, the ambitious and assertive Yeomen, (but not the poorest), of Essex and Kent rebelled. The 'Poll Tax' of 1380 became particularly hated, as it took no account of individual wealth or earnings and demanded the same sum from all, rich or poor.

Starting in Brentwood, Essex (May 1381) the mob rose against the tax collectors, joined with their colleagues in Kent and thousands of people sacked the City of London. The government lacked any significant military capability and so decided to follow a policy of conciliation with the King meeting the mob and their leader, Wat Tyler, first at Mile End and then Smithfield. The king heard and accepted Tyler's demands and then watched as his bodyguards slew the rebel leader, with or without provocation. Seeing him dead, Richard rode alone into the middle of the rebel host crying: "You shall have no captain but me. Just follow me to the fields without, and then you can have what you want." With that, the rebel hoard left central London and dispersed. Its leaders were subsequently tried and many hanged. Richard had personally seen off the greatest popular threat to the medieval English monarchy; it was an achievement that would not be matched for the remainder of his reign.

[...]

Richard's reign is also notable for the significant impact of John Wyclif and his Lollard followers, who formed the first recognised critics of the established church since the fifth century. Born in Yorkshire in the 1330s, Wyclif was a theologian at Balliol College, Oxford and a 'realist' who believed that one's knowledge derived from within rather than through the senses. He rejected the human church, preferring one which comprised the body of the elect with all authority derived from the scriptures. He denied transubstantiation and believed in the spiritual Eucharist rather than the physical one. Wyclif wanted the church reformed, with its landed wealth and tax exemptions removed.

The Lollards who followed Wyclif, often called "mumblers" (probably reflecting their scriptural based worship) represented a general, but very limited, minority theological reform movement. The most important Lollards were a group of knights who formed part of the king's court. [...]

After the Peasants' Revolt, when the association with any kind of opposition brought condemnation, the influence of Lollardy waned. [...]



The death of Wat Tyler, the leader of the Peasants' Revolt.

[9]

### Richard II and the Crisis of Authority

By Professor Nigel Saul (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/>)

In England in the late 14th century, authority was under challenge. Richard II, however, was not in tune with this change in attitudes, and paid a high price for his lack of understanding. Professor Nigel Saul explains where the king went wrong.

#### Society in flux

In England, as elsewhere in Europe in the late 14th century, authority was under challenge. The ordinary people of the land were growing restive. In June 1381, in southern England, peasant anger at their low status in society spilled over into violent rebellion, and for a few days London lay at the mercy of the mob.

Surprisingly, this discontent did not spring from poverty or hardship. As the foreign-born writer Jean Froissart observed, it was the product of affluence. No longer were the peasants of England prepared to endure the burdens they once had. In the late 1370s, when Richard II became king, living standards were rising, and rising rapidly. In 1348 the Black Death had struck England, reducing the population by between a third and a half. Labour, once plentiful, became in short supply. Wages shot up.

The wage-control laws imposed in 1351 had little effect on this, and skilled labourers drew twice or three times what they once had. At the same time, land in the fields could now be obtained cheaply. Those who had once had no land gained some for the first time, while others who already had some obtained more. Everyone moved a step or two up the economic ladder.

The effect of rapidly improving living standards was to raise people's expectations. They looked to a higher status in life. No longer were they prepared to endure the burdens they once had. In particular, **they rejected villeinage** - the condition of hereditary unfreedom - which bore down

on them in a variety of ways. Typically, villeins were required to work on their lord's lands at harvest time and to carry his produce to the market.

[...]

Upper class insensitivity showed itself, too, in the government's response to the collapse in its tax revenues. Until the second half of the century, the main form of public taxation had been the levy on moveable property. In the wake of the Black Death, receipts from this had fallen sharply for the obvious reason that the taxpaying population had likewise fallen.

The government could see nonetheless that people were still very well off. As a result, they conceived the idea of the poll tax - a per capita levy on everyone over the age of 15. In 1379 this tax had been 'graduated' - that is to say, it was calculated according to the taxpayer's means. But the next levy, that of 1380-1, was not. It was levied at a flat rate - and a very high one, of a shilling (5p) per head.

Such failure to take account of difference of means was deeply resented. It seemed to sum up ruling-class insensitivity, and its indifference to popular aspirations, and in June, in southern England the people of the region rose in rebellion. They attacked the tax collectors, clamouring for freedom, and the government was taken completely by surprise. Never before had such a massive popular rising been seen.

The peasant leaders acted with confidence and tactical skill - they too knew how to organise and command men. They were no longer the poor and the downtrodden of society, and they knew it was time they asserted themselves. They were drawn from the élites of their villages. They were jurors, reeves and lessees, and in demanding freedom and economic opportunity, they were simply claiming what they regarded as their own.

His kingly outlook showed itself in a number of ways. He insisted on grander forms of address ('your majesty' instead of 'my lord'). He commissioned exalted pictorial images of himself - most notably, the so called 'coronation portrait' in Westminster Abbey. And he built up a great retinue.

[...]

There was nothing particularly unusual about what was happening in England. So why, in 1399, was Richard overthrown? The main reason is that from 1397 his policies became increasingly arbitrary. He rejected wise counsel. Instead of guaranteeing order, he seemed to threaten it.

The final crisis was provoked by his treatment of the house of Lancaster. In 1398 Richard banished his cousin Henry Bolingbroke, John of Gaunt's son, of whom he was jealous. In the following year, on Gaunt's death, he seized the latter's estates, extending Bolingbroke's exile to life. To the nobility, these were actions that threatened the entire landed élite, for if Henry Bolingbroke was not safe, then who was?

In the summer of 1399, Richard went on an expedition to Ireland, and in his absence, Bolingbroke returned to reclaim his inheritance. As he watched popular and political support for Richard ebb away, he decided to make a bid for the crown himself. By the end of September in the same year, Henry Bolingbroke had become Henry IV of England.

The change of king in 1399, though sometimes termed a 'revolution', was in reality, more a *coup d'état*.

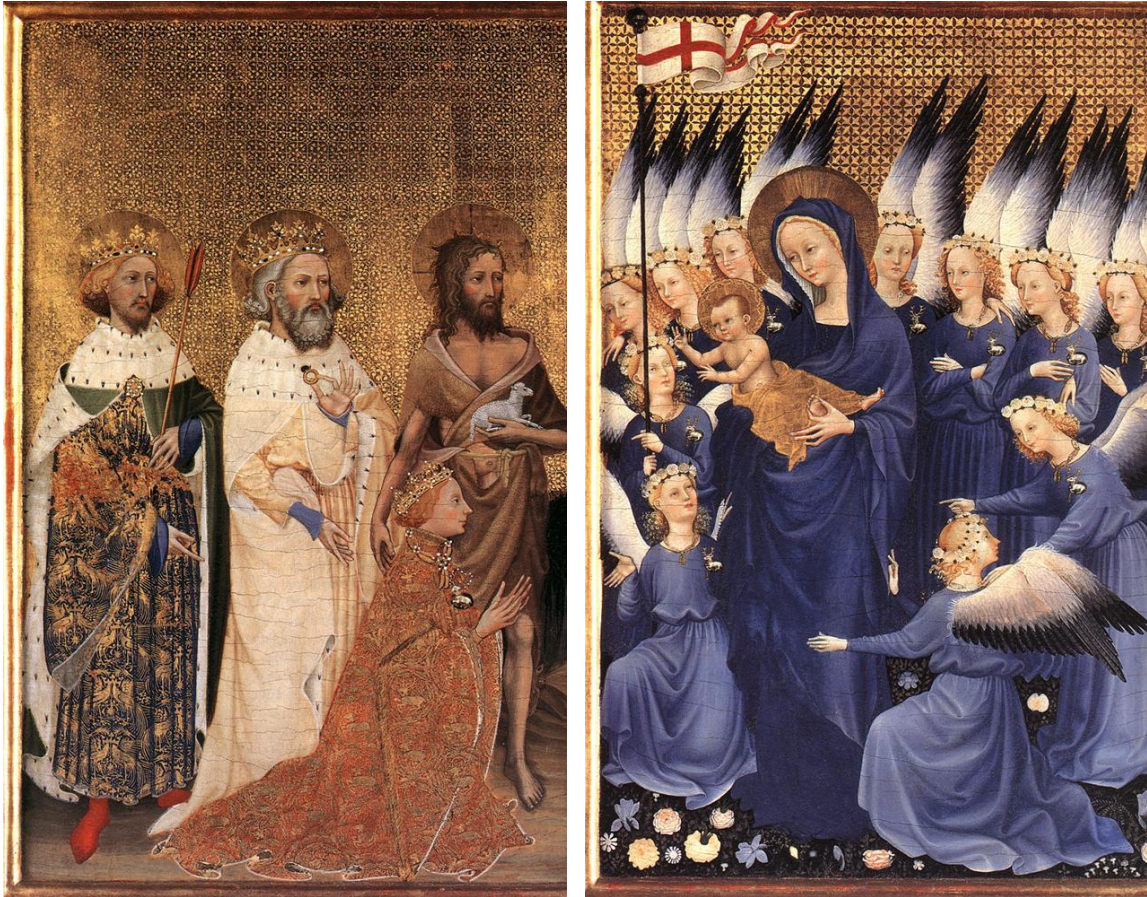
[...]

Richard, towards the end, had pictured himself as the source of all law, and according to the deposition articles of 1399, he had said that the laws of England were 'in his mouth or in his breast'. This, however, was a Roman law adage. In the English tradition, things were seen differently. In 1215, the Magna Carta had placed English kingship firmly under the law, and a generation later, the legist Bracton had said that 'the king is under God and under the law'.

Richard's deposition ensured that this principle stood firm. Kings could not simply dispossess their subjects as Richard had done. It was all very well exalting kingship; but it still had to be



under the law. It is largely because of the acceptance of that principle that we live in a limited monarchy today.



Richard II in the Wilton Diptych (ca. 1395-99). The saint robed in white on the left is King Edward the Confessor (who preceded William the Conqueror as King of England, immediately before the Norman Invasion). Compare this representation of an English monarch, with another English king, Charles I (see unit 5), below. Here Charles I appears portrayed in the *Eikon Basilike*, published on 9 February 1649, only ten days after the king had been executed as a result of the Civil War





## APPENDIX 1

**Politics and Literature: Shakespeare's *Henry V* and English national identity.**

**TASK. Extra credit.** Read the introduction to the text, and the excerpt from Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Find a Spanish translation if you find it difficult to understand. Then write a short essay with comments and explanations about the content of the excerpt and its relevance within the current unit.

King Henry V was heir to Henry IV. Henry IV, known as Henry Bolingbroke before he became king, was the aristocrat who deposed Richard II. In the narrative of English national identity, Henry V appears as a great, heroic king, who won many battles against the enemies of England, the French. Probably the most famous of those battles (and one of the most famous battles in the history of England), was the Battle of Agincourt, where a small English army defeated the French, whose forces were much larger. William Shakespeare wrote a play on this king, where he appears as a heroic, generous and God-fearing monarch. Henry V, however, cannot forget that he is the king because his father, Henry Bolingbroke, deposed the legitimate ruler, Henry II. Here we find him the night before the battle of Agincourt. Henry's prayer before the battle reveals the guilt and the anxiety he feels about his own legitimacy to the crown. His father stripped the former king Richard II of the crown (which makes Henry V the son of a usurper). This reveals that, in spite of the fact that the play is a piece of political propaganda for the English monarchy, certain sections of it, such as this one, expose the relative and unstable nature of King Henry V himself.

## KING HENRY V

O God of battles! steel my soldiers' hearts;  
 Possess them not with fear; take from them now  
 The sense of reckoning, if the opposed numbers  
 Pluck their hearts from them. Not to-day, O Lord,  
 O, not to-day, think not upon the fault  
 My father made in compassing the crown!  
 I Richard's body have interred anew;  
 And on it have bestow'd more contrite tears  
 Than from it issued forced drops of blood:  
 Five hundred poor I have in yearly pay,  
 Who twice a-day their wither'd hands hold up  
 Toward heaven, to pardon blood; and I have built  
 Two chantries, where the sad and solemn priests  
 Sing still for Richard's soul. More will I do;  
 Though all that I can do is nothing worth,  
 Since that my penitence comes after all,  
 Imploring pardon.

(IV.1.286-302)