CHAPTER 18

Reading the Wycliffite Bible in Reformation England

Mark Rankin

This essay scrutinizes the circulation and reading of the Wycliffite Bible translation in England primarily during the sixteenth century and Protestant Reformation. Scholarship on this subject has tended to focus upon Wyclif’s general reputation,1 or specifically upon the question of Lollardy and its influence upon the translator William Tyndale and his successors.2 The Wycliffite Bible was translated into English from the Latin Vulgate by followers of the fourteenth-century Oxford theologian John Wyclif, first in a more literal, Earlier Version (EV), and then in a more idiomatic Later Version (LV).3 By discussing the ownership, reading, and use of these Bibles across the Tudor era (1485–1603), this essay builds upon recent research into books associated with Lollards, from their initial composition through to their subsequent ownership.

and eventual migration into institutional collections. The present investigation approaches these Wycliffite Bible manuscripts in terms of their materiality as physical objects and asks how such evidence can shed light upon the ways in which early readers assimilated their intellectual contents. In so doing it contributes to a burgeoning body of scholarship in the history of reading and the history of the book during these years.

Early English printers refrained from printing Wycliffite Bibles, presumably because Archbishop Thomas Arundel had prohibited ownership of the text in his Constitutions (1409), and his strictures remained in effect. After the Henrician regime licensed the Matthew Bible (1537), an edition of the Wycliffite General Prologue appeared from the press of John Mayler in 1540, with funding from the evangelical publisher-bookseller John Gough. He updated this work with references to justification by faith alone. The Edwardian poet and bookseller Robert Crowley edited the Prologue from another manuscript a decade later and had it printed at the press of Richard Grafton.

However, evidence suggests that Wycliffite Bible manuscripts circulated and were read in England after William Caxton set up his printing enterprise at Westminster in 1476. In his Dialogue Concerning Heresies (1529), the lawyer and humanist scholar Thomas More notes that he has himself ‘sene & can shew

---


9 *STC* 25588.