

## Their Writings

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This chapter will survey the many texts written, translated, or interpolated by lollard writers, nearly all of them anonymous. It makes no pretense to originality, but relies heavily on the work of others as well as my own previous work.<sup>1</sup> In the light of significant advances in our understanding of the social networks and locales in which religious books were produced and circulated in medieval England, it attempts to describe not just texts themselves, but the life histories of the kinds of books in which they appear.

In the forms in which they now remain to us, most lollard texts are as uninformative about their original date and circumstances of production as they are about their authorship.<sup>2</sup> Some are only extant in much later copies. Their study has been complicated by difficulties of identification and definition. What counts as a lollard text? Scholars have sought to isolate doctrinal claims, polemical points, vocabulary, or stylistic characteristics that are distinctively lollard. On the other hand, they have also sought to identify characteristics that rule out the possibility of lollard influence. These tasks are made more difficult by three tendencies in lollard textuality strongly prevalent in their

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- 1 In addition to studies cited in this chapter, I draw upon Ernest W. Talbert and S. Harrison Thomson, “Wyclif and His Followers,” in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050–1500*, vol. 2, (ed.) J. Burke Severs (Hamden, CT, 1970), 354–80, as updated by Anne Hudson, “Contributions to a History of Wycliffite Writings” and “Additions and Modifications to a Bibliography of English Wycliffite Writings” in *Books*, 1–12 and 249–52. This overview gives a fuller account of Latin writings and of verse than was possible in my “Wycliffite Prose” in *Middle English Prose: A Critical Guide to Major Authors and Genres*, (ed.) A.S.G. Edwards (Woodbridge, 2004), 195–214, itself an update of an eponymous article by Anne Hudson in *A Companion to Middle English Prose*, (ed.) A.S.G. Edwards (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984), 249–70. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and with David Watt, Mary Raschko, and others credited in the document, I have compiled an open access online resource to accompany this chapter, in which a list of the extant manuscripts of every item discussed may be found: [http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/eng\\_suppub/3/](http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/eng_suppub/3/). This resource will be regularly updated: corrections and additions are requested.
  - 2 In contrast with an earlier phase of scholarship when many writings in English were confidently attributed to John Wyclif or to John Purvey on the basis of similarity of dialect or expression, most now agree that the only solid reason for authorial attribution is identification of the author in the work itself. However, most writings are anonymous.

books, and indeed to a greater or lesser degree in every manuscript book written out laboriously by hand. These are tendencies toward repeated revision in successive copies; toward the more or less thorough interpolation and adaptation of existing writings; and toward the miscellaneous gathering within one book's covers of widely varying materials.

Far from helping us pick out which texts are lollard, these habits of manuscript book production often blur the line between lollard writings and the religious mainstream. A seemingly distinctive word or phrase present in one extant copy of a text might be removed in other copies. Interpolation or adaptation of a mainstream text may produce an ideological position that seems incoherent or at the very least inconsistent. What looks to us like a text with very obviously objectionable content may nonetheless appear without alteration in a manuscript owned by a religious house and otherwise consisting of prayers and devotional writings that seem entirely ordinary. These phenomena suggest that medieval readers were often as uncertain as we are about the boundaries between lollard and mainstream writings—though the readers who *were* sharply aware of them, and meticulous in their revisions and adaptations, can be very helpful to us in deciding where to draw them. Moreover, many medieval readers did not much care about these boundaries, and some at least saw little risk in incorporating materials of unknown provenance within their compilations. Ownership of books containing English writings or reports of clandestine group reading may sometimes (especially among lower-status laity) have been the grounds for an investigation for heresy. Far more rarely, the content of a specific English book may have been investigated under trial.<sup>3</sup> But more often lollard writing seems to have flown under the radar.

This complexity and even confusion need not invite despair, even for those new to this field of study. Rather, it should impel us to move as quickly as we can beyond introductory, thematic anthologies of shorter texts and excerpts—valuable as these are as a starting point—toward the study of the books from which these writings come.<sup>4</sup> This chapter shows the way: the survey provided here places the texts it examines within a roughly chronological account of three overlapping phases in the production and reception of lollard writings

3 See Chapter 7 of this volume.

4 Still widely used are the anthologies by Arnold and Matthew. Their ascriptions of works to Wyclif are now rejected, but their principle of selection was not unsound: they gathered polemical and pastoral materials found together in a small group of manuscripts then sought other items like them. More recent anthologies with better quality texts and more commentary include Hudson, (ed.), *Selections*; Helen Barr, (ed.), *The Piers Plowman Tradition* (London, 1993); Mary Dove, (ed.), *The Earliest Advocates of the English Bible: The Texts of the Medieval Debate* (Exeter, UK, 2011); *Wycliffite Spirituality*.