

# Lollard Literature and the Anonymous Group

**Lynda Lamb and Simone Celine Marshall**

## **Introduction**

In her seminal work, *The Premature Reformation*, Anne Hudson notes that the anonymity of Lollard writings is one of the crucial problems that face scholars of this literature. “Anonymity is inconvenient,” she says, and limits the authorial context that one may like to ascribe to a particular text.<sup>1</sup> Without a named author “one may be left with a multiplicity of short texts, each one of which may have interesting views to propound but which must remain isolated fragments of one, or a number of, insoluble jigsaw puzzles.”<sup>2</sup> Scholars are the more frustrated, Hudson suggests, because anonymity “seems to have been a deliberate choice.”<sup>3</sup> Even with a cursory knowledge of Lollard history, this is not surprising: “at its lowest level, anonymity afforded protection” from charges of heresy, but Hudson continues with a significant observation: “it seems clear,” she says, “that the suppression of a name was not always for such a simple reason.”<sup>4</sup> Hudson cites texts that present such thinly veiled attempts at obscuring the author’s name that surely they could not have offered any protection at all, and notes too that at times an author’s name may be withheld to signify his membership of the Lollards, “the company of *trewe men*,” an instance in which pseudonymity is used to signify such a membership. But this remains the extent to which Hudson engages with the issue.<sup>5</sup>

This article takes up and responds to Hudson’s research, to tease out exactly how and why literary anonymity becomes such a significant feature

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 10.

of Lollard literature. It is certain that one reason for the anonymity of the majority of Lollard literature is for protection against charges of heresy. However vague and limited the remaining evidence for Lollard activities is, there is no doubt that many people were tried as heretics and suffered significant punishments as a result. Therefore it makes sense that many writers and producers of texts deemed to be in contravention of the Church's authority would have chosen to remain anonymous. It is clear, however, that this does not adequately account for the anonymity of all Lollard texts, and it is equally clear that there are other demonstrably valid literary, theological, and social reasons for why many of these authors chose to remain anonymous.

This article responds to one particular question regarding the anonymity of Lollard texts: why are the texts anonymous? Here, we posit two reasons for the Lollard use of anonymity, in addition to the aforementioned protection against heresy: first, the Lollard predilection for the primacy of scripture encourages the demurrer of authorship in favour of the authority of the text. Concomitant with the primacy of scripture, the medieval notion of authorship comes into focus in a significant way with regard to the dissemination of Lollard literature. Second, the Lollards made ample use of the fact that anonymity and pseudonymity gave their movement a substantial amount of unity, strength, and political power through the dissemination of their texts.

### **A Note on Terminology**

As with much scholarship concerning the works of John Wyclif and the Lollard movement, we are faced with the need to establish a clear set of terms with which to advance our argument. 'Lollard' is itself a contested term, used by some scholars interchangeably with the term 'Wycliffite', while other scholars see a definable difference between the two terms.<sup>6</sup> We are choosing to use the term 'Lollard' specifically to refer to the loosely organised movement that grew up mostly in the fifteenth century, after John Wyclif's death. Thus, this takes into account the way that, during this time period, Wyclif's doctrine is transmitted in a variety of ways, some of which he may not have intended. We have taken this definition because it fits best with the

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Andrew Cole's *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

remaining evidence, and with the focus of this article, which in the end lies solely in the texts and their impact.

### **Medieval literary anonymity as a topic for research**

There is currently no full-scale assessment of the nature of anonymity in medieval literature. Traditionally the assumption is that medieval writers wrote anonymously because they lacked a sense of individuality and therefore could not identify themselves as authors. Modern theorists, including Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, have inadvertently reinforced this view by inferring that individualism is a recent creation. We know of course that this is not true (Colin Morris' 1972 work having elaborated this quite clearly, for instance), but it is a view that seems to continue to pervade scholarship.<sup>7</sup>

The second reason often presented by scholars to explain medieval literary anonymity is that medieval texts have 'lost' their authors over the course of time and through transmission. Although this scenario is indeed possible, it is unlikely to account for the high proportion of medieval texts that are anonymously authored. Moreover, it seems to us that this scenario overlooks the fact that many texts that have seemingly 'lost' their authors may actually be cases in which the author's name has been deliberately removed from the texts, at a later date.

While scholarship on medieval literature has engaged with the topic of authorship, it has been slow to single out anonymity as a topic in its own right. Scholarship tends to consider anonymity as a minor point to be noted in amongst the investigation of individual texts. Often, literary anonymity is seen as an invitation to speculate about who the author might have been, rather than to consider what a text's anonymity might mean in itself.

In recent decades, with the movement to recover medieval women's writing, medieval anonymity has been raised as a possible topic for consideration. Alexandra Barratt, for example, argues convincingly that women writers had greater reason than men to remain anonymous, thus encouraging scholars to reconsider anonymous texts.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972).

<sup>8</sup> Alexandra Barratt, *Women's Writing in Middle English* (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 16-21.

An important contribution to the discussion is Alastair Minnis' *Medieval Theory of Authorship*. In his study of scholastic prologues, Minnis argues influentially that naming an author was integral to textual understanding, indicating that anonymity was not a preferred status for an author. Minnis describes his study as "one area of the subject" of a medieval theory of authorship.<sup>9</sup> Medieval literary anonymity is, I would argue, one consciously utilised feature of authorship.

### **Scholarship about later anonymous literatures**

Anonymity in modern literatures has become a topic for investigation in its own right in the last decade. There are now monographs, anthologies, and special editions of journals that consider the topic and elevate it to a significant feature of literary studies.

John Mullan writes on anonymity in eighteenth and nineteenth century English literature, presenting a series of case histories to argue that anonymity was used not only for concealment, but also for inciting interest and scandal.<sup>10</sup> Robert J. Griffin's anthology traces the way anonymity and pseudonymity has been used in literature from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. Focused on "the rise of the professional author," each chapter examines instances of anonymity in different time periods.<sup>11</sup> Griffin has also edited a special edition in *New Literary History*, arguing for the acknowledgement of anonymity as a valid topic for literary analysis.<sup>12</sup> Marcy L. North, on the topic of anonymity in Renaissance literature, considers "how anonymity created meaning in specific cultural contexts or for particular types of literatures."<sup>13</sup> Finally, Janet Wright Starner and Barbara Howard Traister's collection of essays consider the range and consequences of anonymous Early Modern literature.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> John Mullan, *Anonymity: A Secret History of English Literature* (London: Faber, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Robert J. Griffin, 'Anonymity and Authorship', *New Literary History*, vol. 30, no. 4 (1999), pp. 877-895.

<sup>12</sup> Robert J. Griffin, *Faces of Anonymity: Anonymous and Pseudonymous Publication from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Marcy L. North, *The Anonymous Renaissance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> *Anonymity in Early Modern England*, eds Janet Wright Starner and Barbara Howard Traister (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

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Anonymity, it seems, is coming into its own as a topic for literary research, perhaps reflecting a modern concern with privacy, concealment, and freedom of information. It is conspicuous, for instance, that many of the political and social circumstances in which anonymous Lollard literature appears are comparable with the twenty-first century cyber-hacking organisation known as the Anonymous group. These are issues that remain relevant and important to our societies.

However, the questions that have been raised of other literatures have yet to occur in the study of medieval literature: How does anonymity occur? Are there reasons for why an author may choose to be anonymous? While it is true that we may never know the answers to these questions for some medieval texts, previous research on anonymous medieval literature indicates that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that medieval literary anonymity is often a deliberate and conscious choice for an author.<sup>15</sup> There are, indeed, complex intellectual reasons for anonymity in medieval literature that are yet to be evaluated, and yet to be set alongside anonymous literatures of other periods.

### **The Anonymous Group**

Over the last few years, a contemporary social movement that engages deliberately with anonymity as a device – the Anonymous group – has offered a modern example that brings into focus some particularly important features of Lollard texts and the society they helped hold together, and demonstrates a similarly complex and multifaceted use of anonymity.

For outsiders, the anonymity of the Anonymous group and its various communities has a powerful psychological effect. In her work on Lollard literature, Anne Hudson has recognised that “there seems to be a very deeply rooted and persistent human objection to anonymity.”<sup>16</sup> The resulting compulsion to project a fixed identity on to anonymous individuals and literary artefacts suggests that this fear originates in anonymity’s resistance to definition and classification. ‘Why We Protest’ recognises this aspect of anonymity when describing the Anonymous group to new users:

Anonymous is simply a group of people who communicate using disposable identities, or not using any identity at all. “Anonymous” can

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<sup>15</sup> See Simone Celine Marshall, *The Anonymous Text* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011) and Simone Celine Marshall, *The Female Voice in The Assembly of Ladies* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 9.

refer to the millions of people who post on various websites without using their real identities, it can refer to any given subset of those people, or it can even refer to a single person.<sup>17</sup>

Anonymity essentially provides the Anonymous group with a unifying framework and impression of cooperation within a movement in which, to the outside world, individual members are not differentiated and “refuse to distinguish themselves.”<sup>18</sup> For the actions and publications of the ‘group’, then, anonymity provides an authority, which is disconnected from any one individual member and thus belongs to all members. For the Anonymous group, anonymity has the even more powerful effect of creating the (mostly illusory) impression of a massive, indefinable and immeasurable hive of cooperative activists, in which the idea of one is the idea of all, and activities perpetrated by the Anonymous group add to the reputation of this theoretical whole. Further, for the Anonymous group, individual anonymity and the collective it creates establishes a psychological entity that is impossible to pinpoint or, critically, undermine and diffuse or destroy. Because the unifying entity of this community is an idea rather than an identifiable individual, the Anonymous group has no vulnerable nucleus.

Close consideration of the impact of anonymity as used by the Anonymous group highlights the capacity for literary anonymity to generate equality, to actively privilege the content of disseminated ideas over the identity of the creator or transmitter of those ideas (both concepts that are central to Wyclif’s ideas of authority, the centrality of scripture and equal access to knowledge) and to create cohesion within an otherwise amorphous social movement.

### **The Authority of the Text**

One particularly compelling reason that Lollard authors might have chosen to remain anonymous lies in the fact that literary anonymity and relinquishing individual identity agrees remarkably well with two central tenets of the theological doctrine espoused by John Wyclif regarding dominion, authority and the centrality of scripture: the equality and shared access to knowledge implied by the idea of a ‘priesthood of all believers’, and (perhaps most

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<sup>17</sup> *Why We Protest*, at <https://whyweprotest.net/threads/please-read-anonymous-whyweprotest-and-wikileaks.66042/page-3>. Accessed 23 September 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Alex Bair, “‘We Are Legion’: An Anthropological Perspective on Anonymity”, *Proceedings of the 2008 Senior Symposium in Anthropology*, ed. Richard N. Holmer (Idaho State University, 2008).

importantly) the concept of the primacy of the text. Wyclif advocated that Christian authority lay in the text, not in the institution of the Church. His theological and philosophical argument that the Bible was “the purest expression of God’s mind”<sup>19</sup> and “formed the only valid source of doctrine,”<sup>20</sup> which implied that priests and other spiritual leaders (including the Pope) were not ordained by God to convey Christian knowledge; they were, rather, ordinary men able to educate layfolk in Christian values. This doctrine elevated the status of the text, and implied that Christian men and women could and should interpret scripture and manage their spirituality themselves, as they, too, were ordinary men. Although this concept as expressed in its most developed and mature form in Wyclif’s *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* (c. 1378) and *Trialogus* (1382-3) in fact limits those truly able to interpret scripture severely,<sup>21</sup> the Lollard movement that grew out of Wyclif’s ideas actioned the demand that “illum librum debet omnis cristianus adiscere,” (“All Christians ought to learn those books”),<sup>22</sup> which elevated the Wycliffite Bible translations from the realm of academic argument and into real-world contexts.

As it developed within the Lollard movement, Wyclif’s philosophy of the primacy of scripture over mediated interpretation implied that, if ordination or mediation through Church services was not necessary for understanding scripture, any ‘true Christian’ was able to interpret scripture and manage their spirituality themselves. Closely related to the concept of spiritual autonomy and a product of his theological argument of predestination and the ‘true Church’, Wyclif’s argument for the “priesthood of the predestined” developed within his Lollard legacy to open up membership among those who taught the faith and administered sacraments to include “any holy man or woman.”<sup>23</sup> Because Wyclif’s doctrine of predestination stressed that no one could ever know for certain if he or she was predestined for salvation,<sup>24</sup> this doctrine effectively implied not only that the visible Church and ecclesiastical hierarchy were false and pointless, but also that no Christian could reasonably be elevated above another since “all

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Rex, *Lollards* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 280.

<sup>21</sup> John Wyclif, *De veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ed. R. Buddensieg (London: Trübner, 1905-07), p. 109; John Wyclif, *Trialogus*, ed. G. Lechler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1869), III.31.

<sup>22</sup> Wyclif, *De Veritate*, p. 109.

<sup>23</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 325.

<sup>24</sup> Rex, *The Lollards*, p. 42.

the predestined are kings and priests.”<sup>25</sup> One can imagine these views were unpopular with the Church; after all, as Stephen Lahey has pointed out,

It follows that, if the Church is the congregation of the elect, whose identity remains unknown in this life, the need for clerical authority is likely to be decreased, if not eliminated altogether.<sup>26</sup>

As early as 1388, Lollards in Leicester “considered that ‘quilibet bonus homo, licet literaturam nesciat, est sacerdos’” (“Any good man, although ignorant of writing, is a priest,” our translation).<sup>27</sup> In her court statement, Hawisia Mone confessed her belief that “euery man and euery woman beyng in good lyf oute of synne is as good prest and hath [as] mucche poar of God in al thyng as ony prest ordred, be he pope or bishop.”<sup>28</sup> In itself, the concept of the ‘preisthood of all believers’ in its Lollard development encouraged equality and commonality, and worked to invalidate personal distinction.

Individual identity and reputation may thus have had little place in the literature of Wyclif’s subsequent followers and Lollards. By dislocating their works from their individual identities, Lollard authors both enacted and signalled adherence to these doctrinal tenets. As Christopher Poole, the originator of the anonymous online messageboard 4chan/b/ (the birthplace of the Anonymous group) recently argued, a fixed identity, whether real or pseudonymous, encourages an audience to associate that identity with the ideas it produces or publishes and creates reputation. Anonymity removes the influence of reputation on the reception of ideas, which encourages community members to participate in creative idea generation and to judge and promote ideas based solely on the value of their content.<sup>29</sup> Anonymity thus “frees people to take the risks that lead to innovation”<sup>30</sup> and helps to ensure that only ideas that are perceived as valuable by the community

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<sup>25</sup> S. E. Lahey, ‘Wyclif and Lollardy’, in *The Medieval Theologians*, ed. G. R. Evans (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 338.

<sup>26</sup> Lahey, ‘Wyclif and Lollardy’, p. 338.

<sup>27</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 325.

<sup>28</sup> *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, ed. Anne Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 35.

<sup>29</sup> David M. Ewalt, ‘4chan’s Christopher Poole: Why Anonymity Rules’, *Forbes* (3 March 2011), at <http://www.forbes.com/sites/davidewalt/2011/03/13/4chans-christopher-poole-why-anonymity-rules/> (paragraphs 3-5 of 5). Accessed 17 September 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Douglas MacMillan, and Barrett Sheridan, ‘Social Networking: Fighting to Remain Anonymous’, *Bloomberg Businessweek* (March 17 2011), at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-03-17/social-networking-fighting-to-remain-anonymous> (paragraph 8 of 9). Accessed 23 September 2019.

survive and spread. Within the Lollard literary corpus, the natural consequence of anonymity preventing an author's reputation and ego from influencing the reception of the text may also have encouraged creative ingenuity and ensured, as it does for 4chan.org/b/ and the Anonymous group, that only ideas that were valued and promoted by the community survived and were actively disseminated. Henry Knighton may have recognised this process in action when he labelled producers of new, ingenious Lollard 'conclusions' as "members of that sect," and assumed that "whatsoever opinions any member of that sect expressed, the rest of the sect approved and preached as truth, and disseminated them more widely."<sup>31</sup> This feature of anonymity is powerful as a means of focusing an audience's attention on to the content of the text they are engaging with, rather than on its author.

### **Anonymity for Unity**

Such dislocation between identity and reputation and product also redefines the rewards associated with the generation of ideas. Because an idea cannot be credited to an individual reputation, the idea becomes the intellectual property of the community *en masse*, and the reputation-building rewards associated with that idea are also shared by the collective group persona. 4chan.org/b/ and the Anonymous group both capitalise on this function of anonymity to foster a sense of cohesive community and collective authority, and in both cases seem to use anonymity in this way intentionally. Anonymity is actively encouraged by the design of the 4chan.org/b/ imageboard, which, although it allows users to enter a name if they wish, offers no function to register an exclusive name. Bernstein et al. have noted that over 90% of posts on 4chan.org/b/ are assigned the default name for a poster who does not include a name in the posting form: Anonymous.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps more tellingly, a small percentage of posters opt to enter *anonymous*, deliberately, as their 'name', suggesting that anonymity is not always a default, but is a conscious choice made as part of the community's culture. This deliberate adoption of anonymity as a defining characteristic is supported by the negativity with which the community responds to those who

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<sup>31</sup> *Knighton's Chronicle 1337-1396*, ed. Geoffrey Howard Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 287.

<sup>32</sup> Michael S. Bernstein, Andrés Monroy-Hernández, Drew Harry, Paul André, Katrina Panovich, and Greg Vargas, '4chan and /b/: An Analysis of Anonymity and Ephemerality in a Large Online Community', *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media* (2011), p. 50.

do choose to differentiate themselves by entering a name (labelled “namefagging”).<sup>33</sup> 4chan.org/b/ posts also provide evidence that users actively foster a community spirit by demonstrating negativity towards requests that appear “self-serving” rather than community-serving. Such removal of individual identity amalgamates 4chan.org/b/ users into a collective identity and a community without a status or reputation-based structure. Anonymity thus not only allows greater creativity and privileges “content over creator,”<sup>34</sup> but is also unifying and equalising. As the Lollard movement developed, such a sense of unity would become very important to its survival.

The language and content of much of the Lollard literary corpus suggests that a sense of community was central to the Lollard perception of identity. Throughout the corpus, authors frequently employ collective pronouns such as ‘oure,’ ‘we’ or ‘us’ and phrases evocative of the wider community (most notably formulaic phrases such as ‘þe comoun pepel,’ ‘þe comountee of cristyn peple’ or ‘þe compaignie of trewe men’) to build a sense of solidarity and community for their audience.<sup>35</sup> Jill C. Havens has explored the variety of ways in which Lollard authors constructed and maintained their ‘imagined community’ through the vernacular literature they disseminated, focusing particularly on the implications of this effort for the growth of English nationalism. Her work has demonstrated the intensity and active promotion of community sentiment found within the literature but, although she touches on the anonymity of the texts as a complicating factor, this is not the focus of her argument. In fact, anonymity as a basic psychological concept has very deep historical roots as a promoter of community cohesion and consciousness; at its simplest level, anonymity involves relinquishing individual identity, a central tenet of assimilation into, for example, monastic orders. Today, the Anonymous group actively uses the psychological force

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<sup>33</sup> Borja Fernandez, ‘Namefagging- or why it is so hard to stay anonymous’, *Anaj, Em S’taht* (13 January 2008), at <http://anaj.wordpress.com/2008/01/31/namefagging-or-why-it-is-so-hard-to-stay-anonymus>. Accessed 17 September 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Christopher Poole, ‘The Case for Anonymity Online’, *TED2010*, (February 2010), at [http://www.ted.com/talks/christopher\\_m00t\\_poole\\_the\\_case\\_for\\_anonymity\\_online.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/christopher_m00t_poole_the_case_for_anonymity_online.html). Accessed 17 September 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Jill C. Havens, “‘As Englishe in Comoun Lantage to Oure Puple’”: The Lollards and Their Imagined ‘English’ Community’, in *Imagining a Medieval English Nation*, ed. Kathy Lavezzo (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), pp. 108-9.

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of anonymity to establish and maintain cohesion among its membership, emphasising the idea that

individuals have opinions, frequently conflicting, on all sorts of unrelated things, but part of becoming Anonymous is leaving them behind with the rest of your ego.<sup>36</sup>

For the Lollards, literary anonymity contributed significantly to the “‘felaship’ between Lollard communities,” which was critical to the movement’s internal functioning and survival.<sup>37</sup>

Given the distribution of the Lollard population, it makes sense that “‘felaship” between its far-flung members and cells would be important for its cohesion. Richard Davies has pointed out “the irregular composition of the group” as a particular methodological problem facing scholars,<sup>38</sup> and from within the movement, William Thorpe referred to “sondir and diuerse frendis of sondri placis and cuntrees.”<sup>39</sup> Opponents such as Knighton emphasised the size and extensive spread of the Lollard population, commenting that they “filled the land, and peopled it as though they were begotten in a single day”.<sup>40</sup> Modern scholarship has produced conflicting conclusions about the composition of Lollard society but, in general, supports the eclecticism suggested in the court records and accounts of opponents such as Knighton. L. R. Poos, for example, has commented that “in England as a whole, Lollards whose occupations are given in the records were drawn disproportionately from craftsmen and artisans, as well as the lower ranks of the secular clergy.”<sup>41</sup> More recently, Maureen Jurkowski has widened her study of “Lollardy and Social Status in East Anglia” beyond the evidence found in court records to reveal that “there were clearly Lollards who were poor, or at least of low status,”<sup>42</sup> but, at the other end of the scale, in some

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<sup>36</sup> Anonymous, ‘New Members Faq’, *Why We Protest* (17 December 2005), at <https://whyweprotest.net/threads/please-read-anonymous-whyweprotest-and-wikileaks.66042/page-3> (paragraph 30 of 30). Accessed 23 September 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Havens, ‘As Englishe in Comoun Langage to Oure Puple’, p. 118.

<sup>38</sup> Richard G. Davies, ‘Lollardy and Locality’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 6, no.1 (1991), pp. 191-212, 192.

<sup>39</sup> *Two Wycliffite Texts*, ed. Anne Hudson, EETS 301 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 41-42.

<sup>40</sup> *Knighton’s Chronicle*, p. 299.

<sup>41</sup> L. R. Poos, ‘A Rural Society after the Black Death: Essex 1350-1525’, *Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past Time*, vol. 18 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 269.

areas Lollard adherents “actually formed the elite and were so in control of the manor court as to constitute a ruling faction.”<sup>43</sup> Knighton’s report suggests that Lollardy attracted “both men and women everywhere to join it”<sup>44</sup> and also indicates adherence or support, although to more limited extents, from higher and lower social strata – from smiths and servants to “some knights ... and some dukes and earls.”<sup>45</sup> That these conclusions can be applied to areas all over England is supported by evidence from proceedings against Lollard groups, as well as evidence of families and individuals in Bristol and the West Country, the Mid-Thames Valley and the South, the Midlands, eastern England, London, Kent and the South-East, northern England, and even to a lesser extent in Scotland.<sup>46</sup>

Lollardy, then, seems to have attracted a very diverse range of people, spread out in cells all over the country, many in isolation from others. Although, as Richard Davies has argued, Lollardy may have been closely associated with individual family groups and communities in “local self-sufficiency,”<sup>47</sup> their literature and the court proceedings against them strongly suggest that these far-flung groups were connected by a strong social network and sense of community, even though the movement was amorphous in terms of formal, traditional unifying forces. The psychological impact of the anonymity in their literature promoted and maintained this social network, which, as the authorities recognised, played a significant role in perpetuating and holding together the diffuse and eclectic “widespread communities” of Lollardy.<sup>48</sup>

Court records and the contents of some Lollard sermons and tracts suggest that Lollardy’s theological and political position, and the resulting threat and reality of persecution, made the social network connecting its disparate members vitally important. Records of proceedings against Lollard suspects demonstrate a tendency within the population to flee persecution if threatened – to move on from a hostile locality to one of relative safety,

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<sup>42</sup> Maureen Jurkowski, ‘Lollardy and Social Status in East Anglia’, *Speculum*, vol. 82, no.1 (2007), p. 151.

<sup>43</sup> Jurkowski, ‘Lollardy and Social Status in East Anglia’, p. 121.

<sup>44</sup> *Knighton’s Chronicle*, p. 305.

<sup>45</sup> *Knighton’s Chronicle*, p. 295.

<sup>46</sup> John A. F. Thomson, *The Later Lollards 1414-1520* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 165.

<sup>47</sup> Davies, ‘Lollardy and Locality’, p. 211.

<sup>48</sup> Havens, ‘As Englyshe in Comoun Langage to Oure Puple’, p. 119.

frequently to be harboured by a fellow Lollard sympathiser. Surviving sermons and tracts suggest that evading investigation, whether by fleeing from it, abjuring one's beliefs in a hearing or both, was not only accepted but was encouraged by Lollard doctrine. Indeed, as Rex points out, "in several cases this mobility was essential to survival."<sup>49</sup> Hudson has highlighted the frequency with which "one community took in the fugitives of persecution elsewhere,"<sup>50</sup> and posits that "evasion was the instructed reaction for the Lollard facing investigation".<sup>51</sup> This instruction is clearly expressed in the anonymous sermon "Whi pore prestis han none benefice," which explains that "the true man should flee":<sup>52</sup>

bi þis þei may most sikirly saue hem self & helpe here breperen; for now  
þei ben free to flee fro o cite to a noþer whanne þei ben pursued of  
anticristic clerkis, as biddiþ crist in þe gospel.<sup>53</sup>

Hawisia Mone's testimony demonstrates how Lollard households and communities played an active part in this by receiving fugitives; she confessed that Lollards on the run had been "herberwed" in her house, where she "conceled, confortod, supported, may[n]tened and fauored" them.<sup>54</sup> Such evidence suggests that Lollardy required and expected a functional, unified network of adherents and supporters to survive as a movement, and most importantly, it supported this structure internally through its literature and preaching.

The same anonymous sermon (mentioned above) also shows that such mobility was encouraged as a means of sustaining the Lollard population; movement was not only motivated by self-preservation, but by a spiritual compulsion to move on to a new place where a devout Lollard could do good:

Also nowe þei may best wiþ-oute chalyngynge of men goo & dwelle among  
þe peple where þei schullen most profite, & in couenable tyme come & goo  
aftir the styrng of þe holy gost & not be bounden by synful mennus  
iurdiccion fro þe betre doynge.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Rex, *The Lollards*, p. 110.

<sup>50</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 157.

<sup>51</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 157.

<sup>52</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 158.

<sup>53</sup> *The English Works of Wyclif hitherto unprinted*, ed. F. D. Matthew, EETS o.s. 74 (London: Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1902), p. 252.

<sup>54</sup> *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, ed. Anne Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 34.

<sup>55</sup> *English Works of Wyclif*, p. 252.

The testimony of William Thorpe impresses the importance of travelling for the growth and maintenance of the Lollard population. As his fourth motivation for composing his ‘testimony’, Thorpe states:

þat alle þei þat wolen of good herte wiþouten feynyng oblischen hemself wilfulli and gladli aftir her kunnyng and her powere to suen Crist pacientli, trauelyng bisili, priuili and apeertli in werk and in word to wiþdrawen whom þei mowen fro vicis, plantyng in hem vertues if þei mowen, comfortyng and ferþeryng alle hem þat stonden in grace.<sup>56</sup>

Thorpe clarifies his own activities in this regard in his report of the first accusation of the archbishop, that he “*hast þis twenti wyntir and more trauelid aboute bisili in þe norþ lond and oþir diuerse contrees of Ynglond.*”<sup>57</sup> According to Thorpe, then, Lollards also had a duty to ‘travel’ doing the spiritual work (‘travail’) of spreading their beliefs. As a result, and particularly as persecution became more energetic, large portions of the Lollard population must have been nomadic, particularly those most active in spreading Lollard doctrine who, as well as obeying a duty to travel and preach in different localities, were often those in most danger. Under such conditions, a sense of community without any reference to physical location or individual identity was necessary to maintain the network of safe-havens that ensured the survival of the community as a whole.

Within this network, the private homes of Lollard adherents seem to have been of particular importance. Suspects frequently admit to fleeing to the house of a particular fellow Lollard, or to taking in fellow Lollards who were evading persecution, and conditions of abjuration often include being forbidden to harbour Lollards. As mentioned already, Hawisia Mone of Loddon, Norfolk, confessed that she had been:

right hoonly and priue with many heretikes, knowyng [þaym] for heretikes. And þaym Y haue receyved and herberwed in our hous, and þaym Y haue ceceled, conforted, supported, may[n]tened and faoured with al my poar,<sup>58</sup>

and was made to promise that in future she would:

neuer trowe to þaym, ner wittingly Y shal felaship with þaym ne be hoonly wiþ þam, ne gyve þaym consell, sokour, faour ne confort.<sup>59</sup>

Private homes provided not only potential safety for members on the run, but also meeting places for Lollard cells and centres of worship for individuals

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<sup>56</sup> *English Wycliffite Writings*, p. 27.

<sup>57</sup> *English Wycliffite Writings*, p. 27.

<sup>58</sup> *English Wycliffite Writings*, p. 34.

<sup>59</sup> *English Wycliffite Writings*, p. 36.

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and families. Hawisia's confession continues to state that, in collaboration with the many heretics harboured within her home, she had also:

ofte tymes kept, holde, and continued scoles of heresie yn priue chambres  
and priue places of oures, yn þe whyche scoles Y haue herd, conceyved,  
lerned and reported þe errors and heresies which be writen and contened  
in þese indenturis.<sup>60</sup>

The focus on the Mone home and private spaces, supported by the testimonies of her husband and their servant, suggests that the family provided a centre for Lollardy in the village.

As Hawisia's suggestion of the "scoles of heresie" hosted in her home supports, in the absence of itinerant preachers who, as part of their function, inevitably moved on, Lollardy was perpetuated within individual households and communities. Key to this practice and, therefore, the maintenance of the movement as a whole, were Lollard books and literary works. Hudson draws particular attention to the importance of reading for the maintenance of 'cells', pointing out that "books could remain where preachers had to move on."<sup>61</sup> In combination with the theological emphasis on scripture and the text, this practical consideration meant that "to the Lollards, access to the written word was crucial."<sup>62</sup> As Hudson points out, "the written word could stay when the persecuted preacher could not; a book is more easily hidden than a man; the text is constant if not permanent, where the spoken work is fleeting."<sup>63</sup> Indeed, another anonymous sermon, dealing with mendicancy and the holding of property, describes a version of this practice in action:

Now siris þe dai is al ydo, and I mai tarie 3ou no lenger, and I haue no tyme  
to make now a recapitulation of my sermon. Neþeles I purpose to leue it  
writun among 3ou, and whoso likiþ mai ouerse it.<sup>64</sup>

Not surprisingly, then, books are a key feature in court proceedings, and members fleeing persecution seem often to have travelled with their books (considering the weight and conspicuousness of this, a dangerous undertaking that highlights the value placed on literature). As Margaret Aston has argued, "groups of fervent readers, listeners and learners attending scriptural meetings, are characteristic of the Lollards."<sup>65</sup> Books

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<sup>60</sup> *English Wycliffite Writings*, p. 160.

<sup>61</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 186.

<sup>62</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 186.

<sup>63</sup> Hudson, 'Laicus Litteratis: The Paradox of Literacy', in *Heresy and Literacy*, eds Peter Biller and Anne Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 231.

<sup>64</sup> *English Wycliffite Writings*, p. 96.

therefore provided a continuous, tangible connection to Lollard beliefs for individual cells of the movement and, in content, style and design, literature and books combined a number of effective community-connecting features.

Throughout much of the Lollard corpus, literary anonymity is deepened and upheld by another long-recognised promoter of community and collective consciousness – uniformity. For scholars of the movement, Lollard texts are difficult to locate not only because they are anonymous, but also because they often lack the distinctive aesthetic and dialect features we would otherwise draw upon to identify their date and the circumstances of their production. M. L. Samuels drew particular attention to the “standard literary language” exhibited in “the majority of Wycliffite manuscripts”, stating that “once they adopted it, they copied it faithfully, probably fanatically so.”<sup>66</sup> Indeed, as early as 1382, Knighton had noted that Lollards seemed as though they “had been trained and taught in one school, and indeed instructed and raised up by a single master.”<sup>67</sup> Alexander Bergs made the connection between this literary standardisation and the Lollard social network, which has particular implications for the use of anonymity, in his recent brief examination of Lollard language:

the fact that ... the Wycliffite writings were composed by several authors and copy-edited by several scribes must be reckoned with. After all, one would expect a larger degree of variation in a group of speakers than in a single author. It can be argued that the Wycliffite group developed a distinctive, perhaps even normative, language use ... This distinctive style appears to have been made possible by the dense network structure of the group, and possibly by some kind of cultural focusing.<sup>68</sup>

Close examination of the community-building strategies at work in the texts, including their anonymity, suggests that this linguistic and textual uniformity was both enabled by and supportive of the Lollard social network and community.

Samuels goes on to observe that this ‘literary standard’ “survived in written form unchanged until the later fifteenth century,” by which time “no spoken form of English corresponding to it can have existed”.<sup>69</sup> Such

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<sup>65</sup> Margaret Aston, ‘Lollardy and Literacy’, *History*, vol. 62, no. 206 (1977), p. 353.

<sup>66</sup> M. L. Samuels, ‘Some Applications of Middle English Dialectology’, *English studies*, vol. 44, no.1 (1963), pp. 84-85.

<sup>67</sup> *Knighton’s Chronicle*, p. 303.

<sup>68</sup> Alexander T. Bergs, ‘Social Networks in Pre-1500 Britain: Problems, Prospects, Examples’, *European Journal of English Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2000), p. 249.

uniformity of language must have strengthened Lollard authors' sense of belonging to the group, and could support anonymity and its psychological impact in three main ways: by eliminating distinctive authorial features, thus removing the text even further from its author's identity and reputation, by dissociating the text from the locality in which it was produced, and by seemingly removing the text from time-period context.

Lollard audiences' access to the literature of their movement was therefore less influenced by the locality of the audience or their loyalty to a particular author; texts were transferable to any locality or audience, and must therefore have been ideal as 'travelling' texts. Further, Lollard literary material was not only often undated, but also did not date; it retained its linguistic character despite the continuing natural development of oral dialects, contributing to the "timelessness" that Hudson recognises as "an important fact about Lollard views and Lollard society."<sup>70</sup> Such timelessness and autonomy from contexts outside of the content of the literature forces focus onto the message of the text itself, and opens the literature up to as widespread and various an audience as possible.

For the initiated Lollard audience, however, the standardised language employed in the texts may have offered a further layer of the community-connecting psychology behind the texts' anonymity. Specific references to a unique brand of language in the texts suggest that this Lollard literary language may itself have acted as a symbol or pseudonym for the community and its beliefs – indeed, the language and style employed by Lollard authors may have remained stagnant and resisted development because that language was intended to be symbolic. The reference to "oure langage" in the *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards*, for example, appears to layer the meaning of 'our language' to mean more than the common spoken language, English. After employing collective pronouns 'we' and 'our' repeatedly throughout the text to refer to the Lollard movement and its beliefs, the *Twelve Conclusions* end with:

And þou þese materis ben here schortly knit, þei ben in another book longli  
declarid, and manie othere mo al in oure langage, þe qwyche we wolde  
were communid to alle trew cristene men.<sup>71</sup>

In the context of the collective pronouns and their function throughout the balance of this text, "oure langage" here can be understood not only as

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<sup>69</sup> Samuels, 'Some Applications of Middle English Dialectology', p. 85.

<sup>70</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 11.

<sup>71</sup> *English Wycliffite Writings*, p. 29.

‘English’, which is generally named as ‘English’ in texts arguing, for example, for the translation of biblical text and publishing of literature in the vernacular, but can also be understood as ‘the language of the Lollards.’ The remainder of this short passage develops this idea further, capitalising on the disposition and syntax of the previous clauses to conflate language with “materis” – “oure langage” thus becomes synonymous with ‘our beliefs’. Such expression is both inclusive (of all Lollards, thus reinforcing the solidarity of the movement) and exclusive, as it capitalises on the layered meanings behind such phrases as “trew cristene men.”<sup>72</sup> As Hudson and others have suggested, such phrases may have belonged to an exclusive vocabulary that “could help one Lollard to discern another, or to spot a Lollard text,”<sup>73</sup> further suggesting that “langage” could symbolise, as well as communicate, Lollard views.

If language is used in the text to symbolise the solidarity of the Lollard community and the beliefs it held, the “literary standard” Samuels recognised could have instilled a particularly strong sense of belonging and sympathy with other members in its readership. Even in Latin Lollard texts we find evidence to suggest that finding common ground and sympathising with the audience was particularly important to Lollard authors. One example in particular is especially revealing in terms of the function of anonymity in Lollard texts. As Hudson explains, the anonymous author of *Opus Arduum*, a Latin Lollard commentary on the apocalypse,

tells the reader that he wrote the commentary between Christmas 1389 and Easter 1390 whilst imprisoned by a bishop on suspicion of Lollardy, and that he had been so confined for three years; his quotation of patristic and canonistic authorities reveals his university education, even if his use of Latin for his extensive work had not already made that obvious.<sup>74</sup>

As Hudson notes, a contemporary reader could easily identify the author based on this information if they chose to investigate further: “the text reveals sufficient of his own history to negate the effect of withholding his name, if this were done simply for self preservation.”<sup>75</sup> Rather, this author seems to be using the psychology of anonymity to connect with his audience as one of them, describing his persecution in sympathy with theirs or that with which they were daily threatened. Indeed, as Hudson recognised, “Knighton

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<sup>72</sup> *English Wycliffite Writings*, p. 29.

<sup>73</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 10.

<sup>74</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 10.

<sup>75</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 10.

noticed, and the author of the *Opus Arduum* exemplifies, the suppression of the individual into the community of *trewe men*.”<sup>76</sup> By withholding his individual identity, the *Opus Arduum* author turns the suffering and persecution of an individual Lollard into that of any Lollard.

William Thorpe, in his *Testimony*, constructs a similar connection with his audience, and refers to the role of shared suffering to encourage solidarity, perseverance and spiritual strength. In his first two motivations for composing and publishing what is now recognised as a fictional account, the author refers explicitly to the Lollard community of “diuerse freendis” who had encouraged him to publish an account of proceedings should he ever be examined. Encouraged “bi her good mouynge” and “cheritable desir,” he recognised

sum profit þat my3t come of þis writing. For truþe haþ þis condicioun: whereeuere it is enpugned, þer comeþ þerof odour of good smell, and þe more violentli þat enemyes enforsen hem to oppressen and to wiþstoonde þe truþe of Goddis word, þe ferþir the swete smell þerof strecchip.<sup>77</sup>

Thorpe appears to utilise the well recognised tendency within Lollard writing to use words with layered meanings for Lollard readers, or “shared phraseology”<sup>78</sup> intended for the “purpose of economy and allusion”<sup>79</sup> – “truþe,” for example, frequently referred to in formulaic tags for Lollard adherents such as “trewe men,” could refer both to the Lollard message and to the community itself. In this brief explanation, Thorpe reinforces the importance of adversity and the sharing of adversity to the purity, survival and growth (“ferþir ... strecchip”) of the Lollard movement. As the *Opus Arduum* suggests, anonymity could have a powerful influence on the ability of the audience to relate such adversity to themselves and their community.

The uniformity that works alongside anonymity in the language of the texts has also been recognised in the layout and aesthetic qualities of Lollard manuscripts. In his study of the *mise-en-page* of Wycliffite Bible manuscripts, Matti Peikola posits that

the lack of text-internal evidence about individual scribes, decorators and other book artisans may also quite plausibly tie in with the general uniformity of execution which has long been associated with the language and *mise-en-page* of WB manuscripts.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 10.

<sup>77</sup> *Two Wycliffite Texts*, p. 25.

<sup>78</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 141.

<sup>79</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 143.

Despite identifying notable individuality in the ruling practices of book artisans producing Lollard Bibles, suggesting contributions from many individuals and localities, Peikola recognises significant “standardisation of *mise-en-page*” and “uniform or standardised elements” in the core sample of 127 manuscripts examined.<sup>81</sup> After examining nearly two hundred Lollard manuscripts for his “Edition of Tracts in Favour of Scriptural Translation and Some Texts Connected with Lollard Vernacular Biblical Scholarship,” Simon Hunt comments that “It is difficult to convey in words the impression created by such a high degree of unity of layout and decorative features between the manuscripts.”<sup>82</sup> Drawing on Hunt’s findings, Havens, too recognises the “uniformity and imposed ‘standardisation’ that these manuscripts of both the Wycliffite Bible and the sermon cycle exhibit.”<sup>83</sup> Such uniformity could, like standardisation of language and lack of authorial identifiers, contribute to the breadth of readership such texts could appeal to and deepen the psychological anonymity of the texts and their contents. These features may have further strengthened the sense of community and faith within the Lollard population, symbolising the “comounitee of trewe men” and “truþe” of the Lollard message.

The Anonymous Group provides an especially compelling demonstration of the symbolism and unification produced by aesthetic uniformity, and its potential relationship with anonymity. Drawing on ideas from the graphic novel by Alan Moore and David Lloyd, and film *V for Vendetta*, directed by James McTeigue, in which a symbol of revolution – the Guy Fawkes mask – is used to symbolise the unification of many individual minds into one consciousness, the Anonymous group similarly combines the power of anonymity and uniformity in the aesthetic identity of their protests.

In a recent blog post, Gabriella Coleman, a well known researcher in the field of politics and digital media with a particular interest in the Anonymous group, drew attention to the power of the Anonymous group’s

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<sup>80</sup> Matti Peikola, ‘Aspects of *Mise-En-Page* in the Manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible’, in *Medieval Texts in Context*, ed. Graham D. Caie and Denis Renevey (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 30.

<sup>81</sup> Peikola, ‘Aspects of *Mise-En-Page* in the Manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible’, p. 51.

<sup>82</sup> Simon Hunt, ‘An Edition of Tracts in Favour of Scriptural Translation and of Some Texts Connected with Lollard Vernacular Biblical Scholarship’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford, 1994), pp. 45-46.

<sup>83</sup> Havens, ‘As Englishe in Comoun Langage to Oure Puple’, p. 114.

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aesthetics in relation to their anonymity, commenting that “It would be far weaker as a phenomenon without the masks, without their fantastic art work, without those videos.”<sup>84</sup> The Anonymous group media frequently exhibits adherence to a shared aesthetic, whether that aesthetic is expressed through protest videos such as *Message to Scientology*<sup>85</sup> and *Operation: Leakspin: a message from Anonymous*,<sup>86</sup> uniform wearing of masks at protest events or using stock images and styles in publicity material. This aesthetic, like the group’s anonymous culture, helps to give the movement shape and solidarity, both in the public eye and within the movement itself. Indeed, Coleman goes on to posit that:

Its aesthetics also helps ensure some coherence. While not everything produced by Anonymous follows its dominant aesthetics, much of it does. So while anyone can claim to be Anonymous, you will likely be more credible if you follow and play with established patterns.<sup>87</sup>

Lollard society also extended their anonymity and uniformity into their real world aesthetic, and may have used that aesthetic to signal adherence to their community. Knighton in particular noted the Lollard tendency towards uniformity in appearance, claiming that:

At the first coming of that wicked sect, the sham leaders for the most part wore clothes of plain russet, as though to show the simplicity of their hearts to the world, and so cunningly draw to themselves the minds of those who beheld them, and labour the more successfully to teach and spread their foolish beliefs.<sup>88</sup>

Hudson draws attention to similar comments by Walsingham and Dymmok, and to Archbishop Arundel’s mention of Lollard dress in Thorpe’s testimony, to conclude that “Whatever the precise shade, opponents were agreed upon the dissimulation of Lollard garb.”<sup>89</sup> Such evidence demonstrates the capacity of uniformity, anonymity and appearance to become representative

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<sup>84</sup> Gabriella Coleman, ‘The Aesthetic Face(s) of Anonymous,’ *Savage Minds* (15 December 2010), at <https://savageminds.org/2010/12/15/aesthetic-face-of-anonymous/>.

<sup>85</sup> Anonymous, ‘Message to Scientology’ (21 January 2008), at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCbKv9yiLiQ>. Accessed 17 September 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Anonymous, ‘Operation:Leakspin: a message from Anonymous’ (12 December 2010) at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLcUVNee\\_UI&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLcUVNee_UI&feature=related). Accessed 17 September 2019.

<sup>87</sup> Coleman, ‘The Aesthetic Face(s) of Anonymous,’ <http://savageminds.org/2010/12/15/aesthetic-face-of-anonymou/>. Accessed 17 September 2019.

<sup>88</sup> *Knighton’s Chronicle*, pp. 299-301.

<sup>89</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, pp. 145-46.

of a community or message, and highlights the fact that such forms of anonymity and uniformity cannot be intended primarily for protection – in fact, they frequently operate as a clear signal of belonging to the group. In this way, they may be more intended to promote cohesion, solidarity, and even exclusivity.

Like the Anonymous group, Lollardy was able to establish and maintain the psychological and practical social network it required to survive as a movement because of the access it had to the communication technologies of its time, and its ability to manipulate those technologies. Although some scholars have attempted to minimise the role of literature in the internal functioning, spread and survival of Lollardy,<sup>90</sup> the importance of the text to the Lollard community and the longevity of the movement as a whole seems convincingly clear. As Rita Copeland suggests in her investigation of William Thorpe, the Lollard community “organizes itself through textuality, with reading communities and textual transmission among all social levels of its adherents, whether those members are literate or not.”<sup>91</sup> Books and pamphlet production were particularly important to the movement. Such written material functioned as the main source of Lollard doctrine and learning in the absence of itinerant preachers, and was “used in many ways: to proselytize, to teach, and to reaffirm the faith of the Lollards.”<sup>92</sup> Books also provided an educational and symbolic focal point for Lollard cells and local communities, and bound together widespread communities not only with their communication of the shared beliefs of the Lollards, but also with their language and exploitation of the psychological potential of anonymity. As such, it is not only unsurprising but also critical to the life of the movement that court records show a large number of scribes, parchment makers and book producers among the Lollard population. These ‘artisans’ must have provided essential services and contacts to help keep Lollard texts in circulation, and offered access to the technology the movement relied upon to stay alive. It seems evident that such artisans supported and upheld the anonymity, and actively participated in the visual uniformity, of the Lollard literary corpus.

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<sup>90</sup> See, in particular, Richard Davies, ‘Lollardy and Locality’.

<sup>91</sup> Rita Copeland, ‘William Thorpe and His Lollard Community: Intellectual Labour and the Representation of Dissent’, in *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth Century England*, eds Barbara Hanawalt and David Wallace (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 210.

<sup>92</sup> Havens, ‘As Englishe in Comoun Lantage to Oure Puple’, p. 112.

## **Conclusion**

Identifying Lollard texts remains a problematic exercise, as does clearly ascertaining the nature of the movement at large. While we have been cautious not to overstate what little is known from historical evidence of the Lollards, at the very least we are able to examine the texts and records that do survive and draw some conclusions.

The small selection of Lollard texts considered in this article is indicative of the ways in which Lollard authors used anonymity for purposes that are often more sophisticated than for protection against persecution alone. Perhaps the most dominant feature to have emerged here is the way in which anonymity can create a stronger sense of community and cohesion than might otherwise be possible. One might expect the opposite to be the case, but the lack of an authorial figure and the emphasis on uniformity of textual production and language demonstrate how Lollard literature came to define the movement so emphatically.

Despite the limited surviving documentation, there seem to be some grounds for suggesting that literary anonymity is a phenomenon that was, at least on occasions, selected deliberately by Lollard writers as part of the features that identified them as a group. There is no doubting that protection from persecution must have been a strong and significant reason for the writers wishing to remain anonymous, but it is entirely possible that this is not the only reason. Just as we see today in the actions of the Anonymous Group, anonymity is an important part of securing the freedom to speak without fear of retribution. But it seems clear that, perhaps initially as a by-product and then later with more awareness and deliberation, anonymity becomes a commodity that writers use to strengthen their affiliation with a group.