

Fiona Somerset, *Feeling Like Saints: Lollard Writings after Wyclif*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2014. xvi + 315 pp. ISBN 978-0-8014-5281-9.

Unlike a few decades ago, lollard texts are no longer situated on the periphery of Middle English studies. Following the pioneering work by Anne Hudson and others in the 1970s and 1980s, there has been a burgeoning scholarship addressing the writings associated with this late medieval religious movement inspired by the Oxford theologian John Wyclif (d. 1384). The richness of the scholarly activity may be easily appreciated, for example, by examining the website of The Lollard Society at lollardsociety.org.

Such proliferation does not mean, however, that the field is now saturated and the topic area exhausted. Quite the opposite; the latest book by Fiona Somerset, one of the leading scholars on lollardy, argues that we need to rethink some basic assumptions concerning the nature of lollard writings, including even the question of how to define them in the first place. As Somerset observes, the identification of lollard texts has largely been based on the detection of specific points of doctrine in them – views that were officially condemned as heresies or errors and documented, for example, in the records of legal proceedings against Wyclif and his followers. Based on criteria formulated by their opponents, this approach has, Somerset argues, foregrounded certain overtly polemical lollard materials as objects of enquiry while downplaying the importance of a wide variety of other texts in understanding the characteristic emphases of lollard writing.

Feeling Like Saints charts this under-researched territory by discussing an impressive range of primarily instructional and devotional lollard texts from later fourteenth and early fifteenth century England, some of which have not even been viewed as lollard products in earlier research. Instead of drawing categorical and generally applicable doctrinal boundaries between lollard and ‘mainstream’ writing, Somerset pays considerable attention to subtler nuances of emphasis between them and often also reminds the reader about their similarities. The result is an engaging and thought-provoking study which shows how lollard writers employed literary strategies such as architectural allegory and interpretive biblical paraphrase to stir feelings in their readers conducive to communal responsibility and right action in their everyday lives. By performing these social duties, which included speaking the truth to anyone regardless of their rank and enduring persecution to death if necessary, one could hope to be included among the community of saints though never certain of one’s salvation.

In Somerset's reading, moral instruction in the proper form of Christian living rather than the formulation of points of doctrine thus emerges as central tenet of lollard writing.

The Introduction (pp. 1–22) offers a useful survey of different types (genres, styles) of lollard writing. As Somerset observes, the manuscript corpus of lollardy is huge: almost five hundred medieval codices, predominantly written in Middle English, including Bible translations, biblical scholarship, summaries, commentaries, reference works, sermons, religious instruction and devotional material, as well as polemical writings. The manuscripts and their texts come in many shapes and sizes, and they often bear witness to complex processes of book-production and composition. Indeed, with a few notable exceptions, “most writings associated with lollardy exhibit textual instability and apparently purposive intervention to a very high degree” (p. 10).

The Introduction also contains Somerset's explication of the criteria she devised for defining lollard writings. The core of these writings, not surprisingly, is formed by texts “we can link firmly with Wyclif's influence” (p. 6, with some examples). Outside the core group, Somerset “proceeded more cautiously but found many other writings that exhibit strong similarities with” it, especially in manuscript miscellanea that also contain well-known polemical works (p. 6). In addition to these two types of lollard writing proper, so to speak, she “consider[ed] any piece of writing that appears in a [pre-seventeenth-century] manuscript that also contains one or more lollard writings to be *affiliated* with lollardy” (p. 11, emphasis in the original). While manuscript context thus plays a key role in determining lollard affiliations, Somerset is careful to note that texts with lollard affiliations in a manuscript may well testify to “divided intentions” (p. 11), i.e. that more than one writer (scribe, annotator, corrector) may have contributed to their textual shape, for example by adding a text at the end of a quire or erasing a passage.

The codicologically-based definition means that manuscript miscellanies may also contain “mainstream works affiliated with lollardy” (p. 12). Somerset observes that they often “exhibit variance that cannot be attributed to copying errors or dialect translation or simplification” (p. 12). Depending on the extent and thoroughness of their lollard adaption, such (originally) mainstream texts may according to Somerset be termed either *lollard*, *lollard-interpolated* or *lollard-leaning/lollard-infected* writings. She also recognises the possibility of an ideologically opposite textual transformation whereby characteristic lollard

emphases may be removed from a text when it is included in a more mainstream manuscript (*expurgated lollard writings*).

Chapter 1, “The Lollard Pastoral Program: Reform from Below” (pp. 25–62), focuses on a cycle of 54 Middle English dominical sermons in Cambridge, Sidney Sussex College MS 74. Its writer used a large variety of sources, including Sunday sermons from the *English Wycliffite Sermons*, to compile what Somerset finds a “fully realized version of a distinctively lollard pastoral program” (p. 26). The way in which the writer combines polemical and pastoral modes (complaint and instruction) in his sermons is discussed in detail with illustrative and sometimes extensive citations from the manuscript. What some previous scholars have viewed as the sermon writer’s doctrinal inconsistency (especially in his treatment of oral confession) is convincingly interpreted by Somerset as his tolerance of different opinions. As Somerset cogently observes, “[a]ll variation within lollardy need not be attributed, as it sometimes is by scholars less kindly disposed toward the movement, to inconsistency, lukewarm belief, or failure of commitment” (p. 60).

In Chapter 2, “God’s Law: Loving, Learning, and Teaching” (pp. 63–98), Somerset turns her attention to lollard commentaries of biblical commandments; their often subtle distinctions from mainstream commentaries are usefully summarised on pp. 72–73. She first examines all extant (freestanding and catalogued) Middle English expositions of the gospel precepts, classified into three types (Commentaries A–C). Interestingly, only one of these texts (a C type commentary in San Marino, CA, Huntington Library MS HM 148) seems to have no lollard characteristics at all. Somerset compares it in detail with a closely related lollard version in Trinity College Dublin MS 155. The second main section of the chapter focuses on a long and ambitious commentary on the ten commandments in British Library MS Harley 2398 that Somerset views as “the apogee of lollard compendiousness in commentary on the commandments” (p.84). Disagreeing with some earlier critics who regarded the Harley commentary as leaning toward orthodoxy, owing especially to how images are discussed in it, Somerset sees the treatment of images in the text “as a crucial locus where the writer’s instructional aims are fully explained, rather than a dilution of or digression from his articulation of lollard views as these have previously been understood” (p. 97).

Chapter 3, “Lollard Prayer: Religious Practice and Everyday Life” (pp. 99–133) addresses the meanings lollard texts attach to prayers and praying. The chapter opens with an excellent overview of writings on prayer (in English, Latin and French) that circulated among English

readers in the later medieval period, with useful references to their modern editions. Somerset begins her exploration of the lollard material on prayer from the polemical *De precationibus sacris* and the tract *A Schort Reule of Lif* characterised by her as a “lollard form of living” (p. 112; see further Ch. 7). She notes how these writings tend to describe praying primarily in terms of rightful living and social responsibility rather than as an act of recitation. The primary sources explored in the chapter also feature three Pater Noster commentaries that were included in the nineteenth-century editions of Wycliffite texts by Thomas Arnold and F. D. Matthew. Somerset also compares two lollard-interpolated versions copies of Edmund of Abingdon’s *Speculum ecclesie* in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 416 and British Library MS Harley 2398. While these commentaries share many concerns with mainstream treatments of the prayer, Somerset finds that they are more distinctively lollard, “though by no means heterodox”, in “their intensive focus on feeling and intention” as well as “their insistence that prayer without ceasing should be accomplished in and through daily actions” (p. 125). Toward the end of the chapter, the discussion of prayer by the two fifteenth-century non-Lollard writers Reginald Pecock and Nicholas Love is contrasted with the lollard expositions.

In Chapter 4, “Lollard Tales” (pp. 137–165), Somerset illustrates how lollard writers use narrative forms to evoke and sustain emotion – “to show their readers how to feel like saints” (p. 137). The main writings scrutinised in the chapter include the *Dialogue between a Wise Man and a Fool*, the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleying* and the Latin “autohagiographic” *Letter of Richard Wyche*. Somerset focuses especially on what she describes as “the lollard confessional poetic”, the common practice of lollard writers of making use of (especially biblical) narratives to “provide exemplary and even participatory models for sainthood” (p. 145) for their readers to imitate and identify with. The final section of the chapter discusses how lollard writings, by encouraging prayers to saintly prophets and apostles, “offered [...] comfort and joy in the aspiration (if not the stable certainty) of dwelling with God in holy church” (p. 159). The discussion at this point also helps to clarify the epistemology of lollard thinking about predestination.

Chapter 5, “Lollard Parabiblia” (pp. 166–202), explores a genre that has been largely overlooked in earlier research on lollard biblical scholarship: the biblical summary. According to Somerset, a possible reason for this neglect may be the apparent ideological incompatibility between biblical translation (encouraged by lollards and implemented, for example, in the Wycliffite Bible) and biblical summary, i.e. “renderings of the bible in words

other than its own words” (p. 168). The famous *General Prologue* of the Wycliffite Bible is a case in point: although two thirds of this text in fact consist of biblical summary (of Old Testament books), that section has not been in the focus of previous research and, as Somerset notes, “has been rather unwelcome to most scholars” (p. 168). Focusing on this section of the *General Prologue*, she argues that its “biblical summary helps us understand how lollard writers thought summarizing the bible could contribute to better reading of the text” (p. 169). To show how biblical summary could function “as a hermeneutic tool” (p. 172) for lollard writers, Somerset first examines the *General Prologue* and then turns her attention to an extensive (and almost completely unresearched) Middle English biblical commentary in Oxford, Trinity College MS 93 from the turn of the fifteenth century. Her analysis of this text (pp. 179–202) is rich and nuanced, for example as regards the way in which clusters of lollard keywords are employed by the writer in his “attention to true speech and its consequences, persecution and vindication, and the forging of an imagined community of true believers” (pp. 180–181). There are also interesting observations of textual affinities between the Trinity summary and some glosses in the Wycliffite Bible that would be worth further exploration (see especially p. 185).

In Chapter 6, “Moral Fantasie: Normative Allegory in Lollard Writings” (pp. 205–238), Somerset examines the multiple meanings lollard writers associate with “gostli vndurstanding” in scriptural exegesis. Contrary to the commonly held notion about lollards as indefatigable proponents of the literal sense, she argues that there is much more common ground between lollard and mainstream biblical hermeneutics than is usually acknowledged, and that the use of non-literal (spiritual, allegorical, figural, mystical, metaphorical etc.) interpretation is in fact central to lollardy: “lollard writings display a sophisticated engagement with the terms and possibilities of what they most often call ‘gostli speche’ or ‘gostli vndurstanding,’ one that gives credit to the capacities of human wit as well as the contents of holy writings” (p. 214). In Somerset’s reading, *gostli* is identified as a cultural keyword in later medieval English vernacular theology. Probing its meaning also involves an insightful discussion on how, according to lollard writers, one can draw a distinction between moral and immoral “fantasie” (imagination). Among the primary texts investigated in this chapter we find versions of the prologue to Robert of Gretham’s *Miroir*, including its lollard adaptation in Cambridge University Library MS Ii.6.26; the *General Prologue* to the Wycliffite Bible; two treatments of the inward wits in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley

938; and a unique text on Ephesians 2:19 in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 23 Somerset labels the *City of Saints*.

Chapter 7, “Lollard Forms of Living” (pp. 239–272) continues the exploration of “gostli speche” by focusing on what Somerset calls “lollardy’s most self-consciously literary writings” (p. 239) – texts that build creatively on the tradition of using “spiritualizing metaphors”, especially ones associated with complex architectural allegory, to guide readers in their daily living. The discussion focuses on texts of different genres which yet share some notable similarities in their emphasis on reaching religious perfection through “gostli” enclosures (the allegorical cloister of the soul) instead of life in religious orders and their material cloisters. Somerset first analyses the overtly polemical *Dialogue between Jon and Richard*, which she edited for EETS in 2009 in *Four Wycliffite Dialogues*, and then turns her attention to *Book to a Mother* – a text that is usually assumed to date from the 1370s (and thus predate lollardy). In her careful scrutiny of the case, she finds “no grounds for dating *Book to a Mother* before 1380”, but “plentiful grounds for dating the *Book* to the 1380s or later and for associating it with contemporary lollard writings” (p. 261). She also brings up (pp. 255–256) the interesting possibility that “some direct line of influence” may have existed between the writers of the *Dialogue between Jon and Richard*, *Book to a Mother* and the likewise lollard *Dialogue between Reson and Gabbyng* (also included in Somerset’s EETS edition).

In the Conclusion (pp. 273–283), Somerset summarises her argument by analysing the *Fyve Wyttes*, a unique text in British Library MS Harley 2398, which, like the *Book to a Mother*, has previously been regarded as a non-lollard product. She finds not only that this text seems to be an excerpt from a longer work, but also that it is “a good example of how lollard writings encourage their readers’ active engagement in the discovery of truth by teaching them to doubt and question” (pp. 273–274). A noteworthy aspect of this text is its use of the term “lollard”, which Somerset examines in detail and finds to denote “not a fixed identity stably attached to a fixed group”, but “an allegiance to truth, a structure of feeling” (p. 281). This usage is also compatible with her own understanding of the term. For Somerset, lollards are primarily defined not through socially-based group membership, but through their roles as “writers and readers engaged in a textual culture that collaboratively produced writings about reformed forms of life and that attempted to make them a way of life” (p. 16). Her systematic use of the lowercase spelling “lollard” follows from this definition and is intended to avoid

the possible implication of the capitalised Lollards as “a distinctive, cohesive social group” (p. 16).

Somerset’s book appeals not only to specialists of lollard studies but is also intended to serve the interests of a wider academic readership interested in later medieval English religious writing and vernacular theology. Readers not trained in Middle English are helpfully served by intralinear glosses in the longer, indented citations from the primary texts. The impressive Bibliography (pp. 285–305) is usefully divided into subsections for manuscripts, printed editions and secondary sources. The Appendices of the book are available in digital form only. Appendix A (http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/eng_suppub/1) provides detailed content descriptions of four of the manuscripts discussed in the book: Cambridge, Sidney Sussex College MS 74; Cambridge University Library MS Nn.4.12; London, British Library MS Harley 2398; Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 938. Appendix B (http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/eng_suppub/) contains a sermon-by-sermon description of the pastoral programme of Sidney Sussex MS 74.

As regards the strength of the book’s approach and its wider scholarly implications, one can, by way of conclusion, wholeheartedly agree with Somerset about

the importance of reading lollard writings across the full range of genres and rhetorical modes, and with attention to what they share with mainstream religion as well as how they differ, if we want to comprehend this religious movement’s widespread diffusion in English religious culture and fathom the appeal of a spirituality so severe upon, yet invitingly inclusive of, its participants (p. 272).