

**Kathryn Kerby-Fulton.** *Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England.* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. Pp. lii + 562; ill., appendices. ISBN: 9780268033125.

This magnificent and dense study of revelatory writing challenges the standard narrative of radical spiritual thought in late medieval England: that is, that Wycliffism is the lone voice of insular radicalism and the crucial shaping influence on Ricardian and early Lancastrian literary writers. In its stead, Kerby-Fulton describes an England far more aware of and influenced by continental spiritualisms than we have recognized, and the site of radical reformist thought next to which Wycliffism often seems quite conservative. England, she argues, is neither as innocent, insular, nor unique (37) as we have thought. The project is necessarily, and at times bewilderingly, multi-layered; via a close look at revelatory writing, it makes the case that radical reformist ideas pre-date and circulate concurrently with Wycliffism; that these ideas were perceived by the English church as a significant threat, perhaps more so than Wycliffism; that continental and Latin spiritual traditions had more impact on English thought than we have recognized and helped promote radical thought in England; that Ricardian literary writers such as Chaucer, Langland, and the Pearl poet were less concerned about or interested in Wycliffism than they were with these other intellectual/spiritual reformist ideas.

Kerby-Fulton establishes this rich portrait of multivalent insular spirituality and its cultural impact through close consideration of revelatory theology, which she defines as “novel theological perspectives arrived at via claim to visionary or mystical experience” (14). As she delineates the multiple strains of radical thought in England, she examines, as her subtitle suggests, “censorship and tolerance of revelatory writing in late medieval England,” and the profile she unearths is complex indeed. As she establishes that England did engage in inquisition with targets other than Lollards (Joachim, Olivi, Rupescissa, William of St. Amour, Ockham, and their followers, among others), she traces the ways in which claims to divine inspiration could provide some measure of protection against censure and also the ways in which censure failed to be monolithic.

The story she creates is breathtaking in scope and insight, though one difficulty of such an original study is that Kerby-Fulton has to establish simultaneously that England’s culture was inquisitorial *and* that it provided certain means for writers and book owners to avoid persecution, particularly through the revelatory mode. The argument is exciting but not always quite cogent. Disparate receptions of Hildegard of Bingen and Joachim of Fiore, for example,

(touchstones of the first four chapters), amply illustrate England's complex intellectual climate but less clearly demonstrate a "safe space" for revelatory writing. Both of these writers claim divine inspiration and both form independent traditions in which they provided alternative salvation histories, claiming that "spiritual renewal will be experienced here on earth before the end of history" (46). In parallel with Hildegard's visibility in fourteenth-century England, Joachim, Kerby-Fulton argues, also had a large impact, despite the current "myth" that he had no influence. She points out that Joachim was under official condemnation throughout fourteenth-century Europe, including England and Ireland, and his condemnation in 1215 by the Fourth Lateran Council would have had a profound impact on England, which took the Council's teachings very seriously. She helps us see that, via Roger Bacon, English Franciscans took an increasing interest in Joachism in the mid-thirteenth century, his works coming from the continent largely to (and from) convent libraries in addition to those being composed in England. In the early fourteenth century (1329–30), then, we have the first evidence of actual persecutions of Joachite writers with the arrest at Cambridge of four Franciscan lecturers and, shortly after, of Franciscan Spirituals being burned. Throughout her study, Kerby-Fulton traces traditions of "suspect" and censored thought back to Joachim.

She establishes so convincingly that Joachite thought was present in England and deeply unsettling to the English church that it becomes very difficult to understand how Hildegard's writings and *Hildegardiana* could circulate quite freely in the fourteenth century when she came to be closely associated with Joachim and ideas of antimendicantism, antipapalism, and pro-disendowment propaganda (41). Kerby-Fulton does take up this question, gesturing to Hildegard's deft handling of imperial-papal politics, her "deliberately obscure prophetic style" (203), a lack of activism inspired by her works, and the overtly visionary mode in which she writes. Yet this answer is accorded a mere two paragraphs in an otherwise intensely detailed study and leaves one wondering how visionary is visionary enough to merit the relative liberty Hildegard enjoys.

Certainly, though, in considering Hildegard's reception, Kerby-Fulton makes visible the complexity of England's intellectual climate and the "health of intellectual freedom" (203) in the period. Hildegard's work was seen multivariably as "a beacon of hope," "an annoyance," "a safe outlet for suppressed radical frustrations," "a piece of political pragmatism," "a suspect non-biblical mode of 'faith'," "too potent," and "revelatory heresy" (203). Joachim too illustrates this point in that, even as the Avignon papacy is after "England's most popular native Joachite writer" (80), Henry of Costesy, Alan of Lynn is busy indexing Costesy's

Apocalypse commentary. Both the challenge and the value of this book is its refusal to obscure complexity for the sake of a simple narrative consistency. As the author points out, she began the project looking for evidence of intolerance and was often surprised at the amount of tolerance she discovered.

This intricate backdrop contextualizes the work's discussion of three other female visionaries, Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich, and Marguerite Porete. Looking at the intellectual and devotional milieus of York and East Anglia to trace elements of continental spirituality in English texts, she argues, for example, that Kempe received coaching in anticipation of the York clerics who questioned her fishing for traces of Free Spiritism. Further, she argues that Kempe was influenced in her thought and teaching by continental, urban models of devotion, certainly more so than Wycliffism and alongside, if not more so, than the hagiography often understood to be her model (249). So too with her examination of M. N.'s glosses to Porete's *Mirror*. Kerby-Fulton maintains that anxiety about Free Spiritism, rather than Wycliffism, inspired the glossator's careful commentary and emendations. But she also shows how sympathetic a Carthusian audience, an order that embraced mysticism and helped disseminate texts that celebrated religious contemplation, was to Porete's theology. This is the audience that probably disseminated Julian's *Shewings*, which Kerby-Fulton shows "at least in *reception* . . . sounds like Porete's *Mirror*" (298). This is also an audience sympathetic to the other two points Kerby-Fulton makes about Julian; "her brilliant negotiation of women's right to teach" and her use of a nearly "forensic" visionary descriptive technique to take her readers *beyond* the authority of official art" (298). Kempe, the M. N glossator of Porete's *Mirror*, and Julian have help in negotiating the potentially hostile reception of their works, but the anticipated hostility has less to do with the Church's anxieties about Wycliffism than with its concerns over continental radical thought.

If this work takes on rather more than it can describe with full coherence, it nonetheless profoundly shifts our understanding of England as insulated and complacently orthodox. Kerby-Fulton's careful examination of manuscript reception and dissemination, her thoughtful readings of relevant texts, and her recognition of pertinent but overlooked historical events create an exciting and groundbreaking story of England's engagement with radical reformist thought.

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