
Kathryn Kerby-Fulton. *Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2006. 562p.

CINDY CARLSON
METROPOLITAN STATE COLLEGE OF DENVER

Kathryn Kerby-Fulton takes on a huge project with *Books Under Suspicion*: a re-consideration of censorship of religious texts, particularly those concerning apocalyptic revelation; the punishment, or not, of their authors; the recantation, or not, of their authors; patterns of reading and using suspect religious texts; and how these controversies show up in the writings of Chaucer, Langland, and Langland's imitators. Once Kerby-Fulton lays out her ground, surprising connections appear among religious and secular texts, connections that indicate intense reading of texts, whether or not they are officially suspected of religious heterodoxy. Wyclif and his readers prove to write across a spectrum of religious ideas, and his readers apparently read beyond what might seem acceptable Lollard beliefs. English hunts for heresy encompass more than Wyclif and lollardy, for the issue is not strictly one of church politics but also of theologies of salvation. Both treatises that deal in visions that validate strictly predestinarian views, like those of Wyclif, and those that envision a nearly universal salvation, those of followers of Joachim of Fiore, risk suppression for heterodoxy if not heresy. As in European hunts for heterodoxy, English concerns for salvation theology go to the heart of the Church's role in salvation through its sacraments and teachings. Predestination renders that role ineffective by means of God's foreknowledge of who is to be saved and who is not; theologies that foreground divine mercy and the desire for salvation at the moment of death, and even beyond, offer salvation outside of the Church and its rituals. In this treatment of reading and writing, Chaucer's texts show signs of Wycliffite predestinarian theology while Langland's *Piers Plowman* struggles for a more inclusive vision of salvation and the saved.

Kerby-Fulton's treatment of the frequent failure of suspicion to eventuate in censorship or, in more extreme cases, prosecution, provides a helpful view of manuscript culture as vibrant in producing texts, even where those texts are produced carefully so as to escape official censure. Even official censure cannot equal effective censorship in a manuscript culture because manuscripts can be copied, altered, and circulated in single copies while effective censorship depends on centralized production and policing of texts. Her evidence of manuscript suppression or alteration is clear—manuscripts with pages torn out, writers imprisoned. Yet, manuscripts are copied and are read, as is clear from the existence of the manuscripts and themselves and readers' hands in comments and entirely new works written in response.

In this work of erudite scholarship, Kerby-Fulton's treatment of Chaucer reading *Piers Plowman*, as evidenced in *House of Fame's* interest in "revelatory writing" and citation or parody of Langlandian language, is illustrative of her methods and interests (341f). She finds that Fame's distressingly varying judgments demonstrate "sheer unpredictability" as she awards reputation without regard to merit (345). This sort of judgment is central to current Christian controversies concerning the judgments of God and whether or not his judgment is limited by gospel, by reason, by promises of mercy. In *House*, "Fame sweeps all before her with a *potentia absoluta* frightening in its ruthlessness" (345). Human judgment proves fairer and more predictable. Here, Chaucer presses toward what Kerby-Fulton considers a "*Langlandian* (sic)" position, but does not quite occupy that position. Instead, Chaucer and Langland, considering the breadth of their works, end up taking different positions on the matter, with Chaucer taking a more determinist view of divine judgment. Kerby-Fulton finds this point of view on display in the Clerk's Tale with Walter exhibiting the dark potential of absolute power: its arbitrary nature. Because Chaucer, in the Retraction, appears to save the Clerk's Tale, Kerby-Fulton sees Chaucer as taking a very "severe view of faith" or finding an advantage in appearing to do so (350).

However disconcerting it might be to find the Clerk's Tale serving as an illustrative example of how manuscripts of all sorts comment on, and thus further, contemporary religious controversy, Kerby-Fulton's monumental work serves modern scholars as a guide to the complexity of English manuscript culture as it relates to visionary writing and the censoring pressure it both invited and resisted. Clearly religious works and those we regard as literary share that same culture, particularly in those works categorized as "dream visions." Engaging with the demands of *Books under Suspicion* will take the reader into a world of medieval writing and reading that cannot be contained by our own sense of disciplinary boundaries. ✱