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Revealing and Reveling in Late Medieval Sermons from England: Siegfried Wenzel, Preaching in the Age of Chaucer: Selected Sermons in Translation

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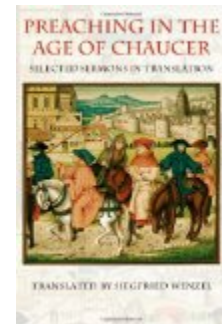
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Siegfried Wenzel. *Preaching in the Age of Chaucer: Selected Sermons in Translation*. Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008. xvii + 334 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8132-1529-7.

Reviewed by Chris L. Nighman
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Revealing and Reveling in Late Medieval Sermons from England

The study of medieval sermons has flourished in recent years. As the author of numerous excellent books and articles on sermons and other texts related to medieval preaching, Siegfried Wenzel has made an enormous contribution to this development. This latest offering confirms his standing not only as an eminent scholar in this field, but also as one of its most effective promoters and teachers, for the primary purpose of this book is to introduce the rich variety of medieval sermon literature to students who lack the linguistic and paleographical skills to access the original sources themselves. The book succeeds brilliantly in this objective, and it will no doubt inspire some budding young scholars to go on to obtain those skills so that they can further explore the vast, still largely unknown corpus of preaching materials that survive from the Middle Ages, while others will come to appreciate these texts for the rich sources that they are for myriad aspects of medieval thought. This book also offers much of interest to general readers, to sermon scholars working in other periods, and to medievalists in such related fields as English literature, social history, theology, pastoral studies, and rhetoric. Finally, Wenzel's colleagues in the field of medieval sermon studies will surely appreciate his approach in presenting their subject to a novice audience, not only in terms of the book's textual content but also in his infectious enthusiasm for the subject, which is especially evident in the general introduction and also appears in his prefaces to the various sections and to the individual texts.

The book contains English translations of twenty-three complete sermons (the back cover erroneously claims twenty-five) that were composed during Chaucer's lifetime or in the half-century following his death (c. 1350-1450), as well as translations of a biblical passage (as transmitted by Hugh of St. Cher) and the commentaries on particular phrases in it from the *Glossa ordinaria*. These two latter texts are presented at the beginning of part 1, "From Scripture to Sermon," which is intended to show how a scriptural lection (#1), in this case Luke 11:14-28 for the third Sunday of Lent, and the ordinary gloss on it (#2) could be used along with other materials, such as the biblical commentaries known as postils, to produce a model sermon (#3) that could itself be employed in combination with other resources to compose "real" sermons (#4 and #5) that were presumably delivered from the pulpit. Wenzel explains that he chose these three particular sermons as examples because "they show very different approaches" to treating the same lection, as indeed they do (p. xii).

The remainder of the book presents twenty representative examples of the genre grouped into three categories. Part 2 contains nine *sermones de tempore* that would have been delivered for various feasts in the Christian calendar, such as Advent and Good Friday, or on particular Sundays, as with the three sermons in part 1. Part 3 is comprised of five *sermones de sanctis* intended for particular saints' days, two of which are by the same preacher and, for the sake of comparative interest, dedi-

cated to the same saint: Catherine of Alexandria. Part 4 offers six occasional sermons, including a eulogy, a sermon for a provincial synod, and another for the enclosure of a nun.

In compiling this collection of representative types, Wenzel has provided examples of different late medieval approaches to pulpit oratory, including one homily, several thematic sermons, and various hybrids drawing on these two forms. In addition to model sermons and “real” ones that were probably delivered essentially as they have been preserved (i.e., in content though not always in the same language), there is also a *reportatio*, a brief paraphrased account (in this case by the preacher himself) of a delivered sermon. The selected sermons include some by famous and prolific preachers as well as others that are anonymous. Their intended audiences ranged from parishioners and other groups of laity to university masters and students, from secular clergy and prelates to friars, monks, and nuns, with styles spanning the spectrum from the formal academic to the “more free-flowing, relaxed” approach of sermons typically delivered *ad populum* (p. x). Not confining his sample strictly to the orthodox, Wenzel has also included one sermon by John Wyclif and another by an anonymous Wyclifite preacher. For a collection of fewer than two dozen sermons, this book covers the ground extraordinarily well.

With their arguments supported by authoritative quotations and proverbs, and enlivened with materials from the *Legenda aurea* and exempla collections, these sermons serve as rich primary source documents that reveal much about the intellectual and religious culture of their period, reflecting mentalities that are at times strangely different from our own, though at others curiously familiar. Wenzel’s prefaces and discursive footnotes serve very well in helping readers make sense of these texts by placing the sermons within their liturgical and institutional contexts, commenting on the preachers’ backgrounds (if known) and individual tastes and styles, pointing to particular features as distinctive or commonplace, and noting other points of interest. In all of this, Wenzel deserves nothing but our admiration and gratitude for his astute selection and effective presentation of these texts.

The book’s success as an anthology and edition is matched by the excellence of Wenzel’s translations, which have resulted in very readable sermon texts, easily accessible to modern readers, even in the case of the academic lecture/sermons. Only one sermon, John Mirk’s for the feast of John the Baptist, survives as a purely ver-

nacular text, and Wenzel has “modernized” its original Middle English. The rest have come down to us in Latin, though a few, such as an anonymous one for Good Friday, are macaronic sermons containing occasional vernacular passages, often in verse, which Wenzel treats by providing the original Middle English and, where needed for comprehension, modern English enclosed by square brackets.

The great majority of these sermons were translated from full transcriptions made by Wenzel from manuscripts at the Bodleian Library, Worcester Cathedral Library, and elsewhere; only four are from printed editions. Clearly, this anthology is the product of a prodigious amount of scholarly effort; it would have been much quicker and easier to produce a collection of translations from existing editions, but that approach would not have produced the representative sample that Wenzel wanted to provide to his readers. His efforts in this regard are not only admirable from a scholarly point of view, but also in terms of pedagogy, for he is emphasizing to his readers the fact that the great majority of sermon materials are still only available in manuscript and that much editorial work remains to be done in making these texts more accessible for scholarly study, a point he makes explicitly in the introduction. By pointing out the research opportunities in this field, Wenzel is issuing an implicit invitation to students who might go on to work on these texts. This is also implied when Wenzel notes variant readings between different manuscript copies and when he deals with difficult passages by noting the nature of the problem and offering a tentative reading which makes the most sense given the context; rather than simply using a formal scholarly apparatus that would satisfy his colleagues, he takes the time to explain his editorial rationale for the benefit of student readers.

The book concludes with two indices, a bibliography of frequently cited primary sources, and a short list of suggested further readings. The suggested readings usefully cites four previous collections of Latin sermons in translation from late medieval England, preceded by a very brief bibliographical essay on general works in the field of medieval preaching; considering that the book is aimed primarily at students, I would have liked to see the bibliographical essay, which cites only four essential texts, expanded to include a few more major publications and to make mention of *Medieval Sermon Studies*, the journal of the International Medieval Sermon Studies Society. However, Wenzel does cite many other key studies in the notes provided throughout this book. Most promi-

nently mentioned is one of Wenzel's own books, *Latin Sermon Collections from Later Medieval England: Orthodox Preaching in the Age of Wyclif* (2005), which has been widely praised, and justifiably so.[1] For twenty-one of the sermons in *Preaching in the Age of Chaucer*, Wenzel cites a number of pages from his *Latin Sermon Collections* for relevant literature. Indeed, it appears that *Preaching in the Age of Chaucer* almost serves as a sort of extended appendix to *Latin Sermon Collections*, offering complete sermon texts in translation that exemplify the contents of particular manuscripts or illustrate certain issues discussed in his earlier book. Nevertheless, *Preaching in the Age of Chaucer* certainly stands on its own as an excellent textbook for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, and as a highly effective introduction to the subject for nonspecialist academics and interested general readers. Still, if I were to assign *Preaching in the Age of Chaucer* as a required textbook for a course, which, in fact, I intend to do for a future graduate seminar, I would make sure that my university library had a copy of *Latin Sermon Collections* (which is only available in hardback

and costs over two hundred U.S. dollars) that I would be able to place on reserve for my students to use in writing document study papers based on the texts in *Preaching in the Age of Chaucer*.

This superb anthology is a welcome contribution to medieval sermon studies that will be of great utility to scholars and students for many years to come. I expect that its greatest legacy will be the interest in these materials that this book will engender in students, some of whom will be inspired by Wenzel's impressive scholarship to go on and make their own contributions as future scholars of medieval sermon literature.

Note

[1]. On its reception see, for example, Patrick Horner, review of *Latin Sermon Collections from Later Medieval England*, by Siegfried Wenzel, *The Catholic Historical Review* 91, no. 4 (October 2005): 805-807; and James Clark, review of *Latin Sermon Collections from Later Medieval England*, by Siegfried Wenzel, *The English Historical Review* 122 (April 2007): 475-477.

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