

Swarthmore College

Works

Religion Faculty Works

Religion

3-1-1997

Review of "English Preaching In The Late Middle-Ages" By H.L. Spencer

Ellen M. Ross

Swarthmore College, eross1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ellen M. Ross. (1997). "Review of "English Preaching In The Late Middle-Ages" By H.L. Spencer". *Church History*. Volume 66, Issue 1. 107-108. DOI: 10.2307/3169652
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion/42>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages. By H. LEITH SPENCER. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993. xvi + 542 pp.

This fascinating book by H. Leith Spencer invites readers into the world of preaching in late medieval England. This study of sermon literature is characterized by thoughtful analysis of the context, styles, and forms of medieval preaching. Spencer's book advances the work of G. R. Owst on medieval English preaching and will be an influential resource for ongoing explorations of medieval sermon literature.

This book, which focuses on vernacular sermons, investigates the organization of sermon collections as well as the content, form, general context, use, and dissemination of medieval preaching texts. It addresses the complicated questions of who read late medieval vernacular sermons, the connection between the written word and the preached word, and the often close association between Latin and vernacular sermon compilations.

Among the important contributions of this study is its argument that there were many medieval preachers who wanted to make vernacular materials available for the "educated laity"; the emphasis on the vernacular was not a hallmark of the Lollards alone. Spencer does suggest, however, that the presence of the Lollards played a definitive role in shaping medieval preaching, both because many non-Lollard sermons were attempts to dispel Lollard teachings and because Lollards were superb preachers and shaped the direction of medieval preaching. Building on the work of Anne Hudson and Margaret Aston, this book dispels many scholarly stereotypes about the Lollards and displays their preaching as the influential presence it was in medieval England. Spencer argues that the question of education was at the heart of the conflict between the Lollards and those who opposed them. The impact of the Lollards cannot be assessed solely by measuring the longevity of the movement, but should also include an evaluation of the responses Lollards sparked, which had a continuing impact on mainstream religious practices and education.

Spencer's book is commendable for its attention to particular authors—including "conservatives, reformers, and radicals"—who are important resources for the study of medieval sermon literature and late medieval English religious life and reform from around 1370 to 1500. As well as investigating individual manuscripts and influential collections like the *Speculum Sacerdotale* and John Mirk's *Festial*, Spencer examines attitudes of such bishops as Reginald Pecock and Richard Flemyng, and such authors as the Longleat friar, all of whom, like the Lollards (and indeed, in some cases inspired by them), sought to educate the laity. He explores the work of ecclesiasts, such as John Carpenter, who directed their educative measures not toward the laity but toward parish clerics in an "effort by some individuals to promote preaching by secular priests in the parishes" (p. 268); and he discusses the actions of others, including Thomas Arundel, archbishop of Canterbury, who actively sought to limit the laity's access to vernacular materials by means of restrictive Constitutions which "had a marked repressive effect upon the circulation of sermon collections

written in English” (p. 182). Though not a study of individual preachers, Spencer’s book is an important introduction to sources of information about medieval sermons. Among them is the *Book of Margery Kempe*. It is good to see Kempe’s *Book* incorporated into a scholarly study as the significant resource it is for reflection on late medieval English religious life and practice.

At times the chapters in Spencer’s book begin *in media res* and the prose reflects an obscurity arising from the author’s assumption that readers are as familiar with the texts as the author is. But in general this book is characterized by careful description and the extensive and judicious use of quotations which convey the flavor of medieval sermons. This is an impressive book, recommended for library collections, and a delight for scholars and general readers interested in the history of medieval England, sermon literature, and religious reform movements.

Swarthmore College
Swarthmore, Pennsylvania

ELLEN M. ROSS

Patronage in Renaissance Italy From 1400 to the Early Sixteenth Century. By MARY HOLLINGSWORTH. Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. xii + 372 pp. \$19.95.

This book is designed for the student, general reader, and teacher interested in the interaction between political power, social status, and the patronage of art during the fifteenth century in Italy. It is a fine, balanced survey that, as stated, is carefully restricted in time and geography but brings together a scattering of information in a useful and comparative form. It is not for the specialist; it does not break new historical ground. Still, bringing together the results of recent historical scholarship by art historians and social historians and laying out what seems to be a general consensus among scholars about this very pivotal period in European and art history is a very valuable accomplishment.

The author begins with Florence, gives a concise historical setting, and then traces the major sources of patronage during the century, their strategies and general motivations. Beginning with the *opere*, committees responsible for major projects, she covers the guilds, the Medici, and the Florentine merchant aristocracy. She argues that at the beginning of the century attention was focused on the patron as the source of the subject and even the design of the project; it demonstrated the patron’s wealth and power, not the merits of the artist. The patron hired the artist as a contract employee and determined the style and especially the valuable materials displayed by the project. The subjects were initially overwhelmingly religious and patriotic, because of the traditional reluctance to display personal wealth and vanity. By the end of the century, however, following the example of the Medici, the desire to display personal and family wealth and prestige was little restrained, and the artist emerged as a strong creative presence. Stylistically, Hollingsworth reports a movement away