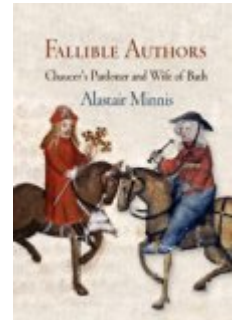


**Alastair Minnis.** *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath.* The Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. xvi + 510 pp. \$69.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4030-6.



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Any reader might wonder, is another study of Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath needed? Have their fallible authority and authorship not been canvassed adequately already? But it has to be said at once that Alastair Minnis brings a special authority of his own to this renewed discussion. Altogether, the book is a logical culmination of Minnis's numerous preceding publications. The impress of his learning is evident over a continuum of topics to do with authority, authorship, publication, disclosure, revelation, prophecy, teaching, and preaching. His treatment of the medieval controversies, along with their classical and patristic precursors, is deeply informative and will serve as a corrective to monolithic models of medieval Catholicism and to "sweeping and simplistic grand narratives" of the Middle Ages as a whole--as Minnis himself notes, clearly with an eye on Michel Foucault (p. 348). Anyone engaged in teaching and researching Chaucerian texts will profit from this book. The argument is necessarily intricate and densely documented: for the purposes

of this review, I will confine my remarks to a few salient topics.

The main body of the book divides into four chapters, preceded by a preface and introduction and followed by full notes, bibliography, and indices. The preface and introduction broach broad questions to do with "Authority and Fallibility in Medieval Textual Culture." Minnis leads off with some reflections on his own subject position, as an author of Northern Irish Protestant formation who has spent his career engaging with medieval Catholicism. Then he moves on to expound some leading ideas, among them Donatus's heretical tenet that "the effectiveness of the sacraments depends on the moral character, the state of grace, of the minister" and Wycliffe's related understanding of *dominium* as power (including priestly power) that depends on divine grace and is forfeit in the absence of such grace (p. xiv). Minnis opposes to these deviant teachings the doctrinally orthodox but morally deleterious tenet that a priest may be corrupt yet permissibly continue to minister if his congregation remains unaware of

his corruption. (Here Minnis's modern instances, taken from the world of politics, seem strangely tangential to the issues really at stake.)

Among the issues discussed in chapter 1, entitled "*De officio praedicatoris*: Of Preaching, Pardons, and Power," are the status of the preacher (moral or immoral), the powers of the priest and the right to consecrate the sacraments, the definition of the keys to heaven, and the theology of indulgences. While avoiding caricature of the system of penance and indulgences, indeed even verging on advocacy of indulgences as an altruistic sharing of the burden of sin, Minnis shows how the essential distinction between absolution from pain and absolution from guilt was apt to be conveniently elided by authorities within the church in the course of facilitating fundraising for the Crusades and other causes. Minnis fully brings out the ferocity of Wycliffe's attack on indulgences. His treatment of Chaucer's position, by contrast, is nuanced: we must not reduce Chaucer to the position of a Wycliffite fellow-traveler, yet at the same time, and after all necessary reservations have been made, it is difficult to regard Chaucer's satire as entirely safe or sealed off from dangerous dissemination.

In chapter 2, entitled "Moral Fallibility: Chaucer's Pardoner and the Office of Preacher," Minnis attempts to bridge the gap between theological texts on the one hand and Chaucerian texts on the other. Here the methodology and sequence of exposition struck me as questionable. Anyone discussing the Chaucerian texts must confront the difficulty that as a matter of principle the Pardoner of the General Prologue cannot be assumed to be exactly coextensive with the Pardoner of the link passages, the Pardoner of the Pardoner's Prologue, and the Pardoner of the Pardoner's Tale. Chaucer may have meant differently at different stages of his piecemeal composition. Only apparently in hindsight, near the end of this chapter, does Minnis acknowledge these limitations on modern holistic interpretation. Yet they affect key

questions under discussion, for instance, the Pardoner's claims to clerical status and the significance of the references to the gelding or mare. Having canvassed the widely diverse views regarding the Pardoner's gender, Minnis opts for one or other variety of eunuchry, updating the well-known arguments of Walter Clyde Curry. This, while open to the objections noted above, is convincingly defended as more in keeping with the limited textual evidence than any attempt to impute a definite sexual preference to this character. Minnis is eminently fair to all schools of thought, and it is only occasionally that his interpretations seem tendentious or forced, a notable instance being the proposition that the poisoner in the Pardoner's Tale "could perhaps be taken as a type of the false priest who figuratively poisons the wine" and could "stand in parallel to that other 'false empoysnere,' the Pardoner himself, who spits out venom at his congregation" (p. 139).

Chapter 3, entitled "*De impedimento sexus*: Women's Bodies and the Prohibition of Priestly Power," takes up a series of issues to do with the prohibition of priestly power to women, so as to "provide a full reading context for the Wycliffite (or supposedly Wycliffite) views concerning female preaching and teaching which were circulating in Chaucer's day" (p. 200). The discussion shows how the prohibitions against women preaching publicly lent themselves to attack by dissenters. These prohibitions obtained despite the fact that women were simultaneously being enjoined to teach within the home and to reform wayward husbands; despite the fact that women's revelations and prophecies were acknowledged to have played a formative part in Christianity; despite the fact that it was admitted that women might be good and priests might be evil; and despite the fact that ultimately, in the human soul, no distinction could be made between female and male. Minnis documents the scope and vigor of controversy on such fraught matters, within both orthodoxy and Lollardy, in great detail. Complementarily, he points to the danger of confusion

between genuine Wycliffite tenets (where these can be identified) and the heresies falsely attributed to Wycliffe and his associates by agents provocateurs and prosecutors in the ecclesiastical courts.

In chapter 4, entitled "Gender as Fallibility: Chaucer's Wife of Bath and the Impediment of Sex," discussion focuses on authority, female sexuality, attitudes to old women, and the sovereignty of the soul. Minnis emphasizes the Wife's serial marriages, while downplaying the business pursuits that have made her an attractive target for social-historically based research. Perhaps here he overcorrects: as in chapter 2, he acknowledges only belatedly that the textual evidence might point to different compositional stages representing different conceptions of the character, as would arguably befit what in all likelihood was a much-aided performance piece that possessed a reputation, not to say notoriety, in its own right. However, Minnis usefully and informatively distinguishes the Wife's opinions on marriage and sexuality from the tenets of Wycliffe and his associates, demonstrating that these dissenters displayed little interest in a theology of marriage and if anything could be regarded as proto-puritanical on sexual matters. What to make of the Wife in toto evidently, and understandably, remains a dilemma for Minnis. Her discourse could be read as the self-disclosure of an impenitent sinner and thus as playing into misogynist hands, parallel to that of *la Vieille* in the *Romance of the Rose* and of course the Pardoner in his Prologue. But equally, as Minnis argues, the advocacy of true nobility (in claimed affiliation with Dante) within the Tale could be seen constructively as opening up and claiming legitimate new subject matter for female discourse.

Not quite all of this book earns its keep. Many cross-references are made without necessity. The transitions from chapter to chapter and section to section are labored, as if the architectonics of the book as a whole were becoming strained by the

sheer quantity of theological exposition to be imparted. There is much repetition. Among one or two minor quirks is that of referring to schoolmen as if they were present-day figures (thus, on page 132, "Professor Peter Stokes O. Carm."). The apparent recurrent mocking of Chaucer's use of the form "Dant" for "Dante" (e.g., p. 324) seems ungracious--and moreover beside the point when Chaucerian attestations of the name show that in most instances the final "e" must be pronounced to produce correct scansion.

As to ancillary values, this is a handsomely produced book. The proofreading and attention to mechanicals are excellent, with only a few occasional slips, of which the following are representative examples rather than an exhaustive list: "he" for "be" (p. 44, line 13), "from both punishment and punishment" for "from both guilt and punishment" (p. 76, line 8 from bottom), "exhihit" for "exhibit" (p. 102, line 19), "they are" for "there are" (p. 243, line 13), "crescite et multiplicami" for "crescite et multiplicamini" (p. 287, lines 5-6 from bottom, and repeated elsewhere), and "poll position" for "pole position" (p. 325, line 18 from bottom). A citation is carelessly incorporated in "He must 'taketh his olde wyf, and gooth to bedde'" (p. 315). No such accidentals, however, can detract from the great achievement of this work in its endeavor to keep criticism informed, honest, and nuanced. Minnis sees Chaucer as ultimately finding "a means of containing and neutralizing highly sensitive issues in the very process of giving them voice" (p. 249); complementarily, reversing the emphasis, he registers the poet's risk-taking, which, at a dangerous time in English history, affords a measure of interpretive free play to the audience, both medieval and present-day.

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