

Book Reviews

Pre-1800

LUCY M. ALLEN-GOSS. *Female Desire in Chaucer's "Legend of Good Women" and Middle English Romance*. Gender in the Middle Ages. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2020. Pp. 236. \$99.00 (cloth).

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What do women want? The question intrigued Chaucer, who placed it at the heart of the Wife of Bath's Tale; arguably, the problem of women's desires also imbues much of his other writing. In *Female Desire in Chaucer's "Legend of Good Women" and Middle English Romance*, Lucy Allen-Goss approaches Chaucer's desiring women from a unique angle, reading the *Legend of Good Women* with an eye toward how the poem does and does not express or represent what and how its female characters want, and how the characters in the texts do or do not announce their needs or longings. As Allen-Goss moves across this textual trajectory, she draws comparisons between Chaucer's attitudes and literary techniques and those found in Middle English romances where female desires are given—or, more typically, are not given—voice. Throughout, Allen-Goss shows how incomprehensible or unspeakable female desire typically and systematically receives articulation vis-à-vis masculine desire. Consequently, her arguments will interest Chaucerians, medievalists, and other scholars of literature and literary theory with special interests in sexuality and gender studies.

Allen-Goss begins with two chapters that pair and compare two tales, Chaucer's tale of Philomela and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. The stories share central elements, including rape, torture, mutilation, and the muting of female desires. Allen-Goss interprets Chaucer's narrator's refusal to tell Philomela's whole story as a duplication of her body's violation and silencing in the Ovidian and traditional source material. She asserts that Chaucer's Philomela is forced to adopt male-gendered tools and linguistic strategies to share her experience, and in this she resembles other female medieval figures whose desires are therefore presented as deviant. In her analysis of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, specifically the rape and murder of the Duchess of Brittany, Arthur's kinswoman, Allen-Goss suggests that the violated woman's desires receive no direct verbalization; rather, she and her rape reemerge in a sense through Chaucer's replication of plot and language elements. Allen-Goss calls these elements parodic and concludes that the female desires in the *Morte Arthure* appear as absences, omissions, and lacunae.

The third and fourth chapters likewise juxtapose Chaucerian and romance texts, this time the tales of Dido and the legends of Hipsiphyle and Medea with the *Sowdone of Babylon*.

Allen-Goss pursues the idea that attempts to represent female desires oppression deform poetic language. She brings in the *relicta* trope: Chaucer's abandoned women try both to say and have what they want, but they fail, and their imperfect expressions give rise to misunderstandings. She alleges that Chaucer's narrator emphasizes the women's lack of Latin and of phalluses, their weaknesses. The early fifteenth-century *Sowdone of Babylon* presents a different yet comparable case, of the *belle sarrasin*. This romance's heroine is similar to those of Chaucer in her absence of masculine power. Yet Allen-Goss sees a difference: the author of the romance, unlike Chaucer, makes positive room for female desire that does not conform to patriarchal standards, in the process calling into question the logic of colonization.

The final two chapters have less obvious connection to one another than do the previous four. Allen-Goss's exploration of Chaucer's Thisbe and Ariadne continues her discussion of phallic power and its lack. In his telling of Thisbe's story, she sees Chaucer as questioning female desire as an impulse, but in his telling of Ariadne's, she contends, he again exposes women as unable to make meaning or effectively use masculine language. Allen-Goss deems Chaucer's project in the *Legend of Good Women* of considering what and how women want ultimately hopeless. She connects the late fifteenth-century romance *Undo Your Door* to the other poems she examines by locating it in a tradition of subversive Chaucerian writing, for the romance's princess heroine has legible desires, and some of them find satisfaction in the plot. Allen-Goss's conclusions about the romance seem more optimistic than those about Chaucer as she finds that *Undo Your Door* frees female desires from an oppressive masculinist orientation.

In each instance of textual interpretation described above, Allen-Goss gives much useful and accurate historical and linguistic information to contextualize the literary passages she works with. She also lets questions in, and not always to answer them, which allows her to generate possibilities for future work that might build on what she has assembled here. At the same time, Allen-Goss constantly deploys numerous different critical theories of language and gender. Indeed, the density and variety of her approach make it difficult to summarize clearly and succinctly in a brief review. For instance, Allen-Goss discusses the *Morte Arthure* as post-traumatic and *Undo Your Door* in terms of its portrayals of technology, à la Donna Haraway (195). She displays a firm command of this theoretical terminology, but her writing will almost instantly lose readers who know the literary works and historical context but have not mastered the theory. Her critical approach should inspire readers to learn more, though. Indeed, Allen-Goss demonstrates and stimulates both writerly and readerly bravery: she eschews the term *queer* for the most part because, as she explains, it accords all too well with sexist and homophobic medieval attitudes (viii). Meanwhile, she uses the words “hermeneutic” and “mansplain” in the same sentence at one point (191). The resulting style almost forces the reader to notice and reevaluate the sexual power dynamics that structure scholarly language. Ultimately, Allen-Goss has intentionally chosen a vocabulary that supports her deconstructionist and feminist/queer strategies of reading between the lines to open up old texts to new interpretations.

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“Charity begins at home” was already a tired piece of wisdom by the time Thomas Browne invoked the phrase with some exasperation in *Religio Medici* (1643). Despite its simple