

BOOK REVIEWS

## **Elizabeth Allen, *Uncertain Refuge: Sanctuary in the Literature of Medieval England***

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In this remarkably good book, Elizabeth Allen, a literary scholar who teaches at the University of California, Irvine, explores “sanctuary seeking in the literature of medieval England between the twelfth and the seventeenth centuries” (2). What is remarkably good about the book is the author’s mastery of both the pre-Conquest and the post-Conquest (common) law of sanctuary (and its canonistic alter ego) and her profound familiarity with the administration—or performance—of the practices mandated by the law. This knowledge permits her to read a variety of well-known literary texts in new ways and to identify and explain features of them that appear to be responding to the real world of medieval criminality, the thirst for justice (retribution, vengeance), and the almost incredible willingness of contemporary judicial authorities to be merciful to confessed felons, which the system encouraged. It also allows her to use these texts to probe perceptions of sanctuary and its violation in the complex construction of ideals of kingship in England. There are no simple binaries here. Sanctuary enabled power by vesting a peculiarly radical form of mercy in the medieval “state.” It also bound rulers to a particular form of sacred governance. Far from considering sanctuary as evidence of weakness in the judicial system, we should regard it, she suggests, as stimulating a centuries-long dialog about justice and compassion and, to some extent, about the proper spheres of churchmen and kings. This dialog was about the limits of compassion, too, because although success at sanctuary saved lives, it did so through a set of practices (abjuration and exile) meant to humiliate confessed felons and isolate them from the local communities whose norms they violated.

A felon wishing to escape judicial execution or mutilation needed to find shelter in a sacred space, where, in a prescribed interval, he or she openly acknowledged the crime to a coroner. It was only then that the criminal could abjure—forswear the kingdom, promising never to return except with the express

permission (pardon) of the king. There was always the danger that those seeking retribution would try to violate sanctuary or attack a felon before he or she had a chance to leave the country. Innumerable scenarios accompanied the drama of sanctuary, and medieval writers appear to be referring to them in works as different as Reginald of Durham's twelfth-century miracle collection, which includes the wondrous tale of Cuthbert's stag, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Robin Hood and the Monk*. Let me spend a few words on just two of these.

The discussion of the miracle of the stag is breathtaking. Hunters had been pursuing the stag. The animal managed to reach and to jump a barrier to a churchyard, kneel before the church and, through the intervention of Saint Cuthbert, preserved his life in what briefly became an almost Edenic locus of peace. The hunters, responding to this not so subtle critique of animal slaughter, decided to abandon the chase. Then, however, an onlooker incited a youth to breach sanctuary and try to kill the stag. The animal appeared to take flight, but in a dramatic reversal gored the youth as punishment for his father's incitement to violate Saint Cuthbert's sacred space. The text evokes many religious texts, but it also interweaves with a number of narrowly local as well as territorially broader contemporary concerns, which Professor Allen teases out deftly.

Her discussion of the fifteenth-century story, *Robin Hood and the Monk*, explores the failure of sanctuary to achieve its purposes, "a weakening of magnanimous lordship and a weakening of demands for mercy from the bottom up" (177). Although Professor Allen rightly avoids situating the tale in the "truism that the fifteenth century saw a dramatic increase in violence and disorder" (a view from which she politely distances herself), the plot line begs for an explanation of why Robin (indeterminate in status) would use the sacred space of the churchyard to slaughter his attackers before his imprisonment. Who violated whose sanctuary in this troubling scenario? All of this makes Robin's rescue and return to the forest look like a re-enactment of sanctuary seeking, but, as Professor Allen shows, the woodland asylum bears little resemblance to Eden, "the forest's function does not coalesce into sanctuary" (192). Oaths, vows, promises—all the bonds of human community—are fragile in this representation. Sanctuary emerges as an aspiration—to climb Jacob's ladder, to invoke a later metaphor (226). It will remain so until men (and women) recognize the absolute necessity of respecting sacred space.

Interspersed with the hagiographic and fictive texts that Professor Allen analyzes are explorations of narratives on the political fall of the early thirteenth-century Justiciar, Hubert de Burgh, and the so-called Hawley-Shakell affair, which involves a pollution of sacred space by violence. The discussion of two notable later texts, Thomas More's *Richard III* and John Ford's *Perkin Warbeck*, which reveal a growing unease with sanctuary, more or less closes the discussion, although there is what Professor Allen terms a "coda" that addresses the transition to aspects of the modern sanctuary and asylum movement. It is a chronological leap, but the story she tells, which touches upon some of her father's humanitarian work, is quite arresting and rewarding. A beautiful ending to a beautiful book.