Allegory and Sexual Ethics in the High Middle Ages (review)

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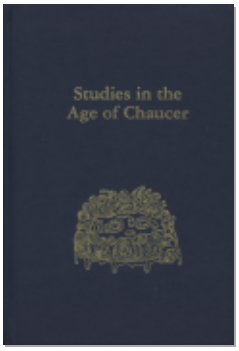

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why prominent female "local informants," such as Floripas in the Old French and Middle English *Fierabras* romance or Belacane in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, are excluded from the category of the righteous heathen, as they seem to provide witness to Christian truth from a pagan perspective no less than, for example, Mandeville's Sultan of Babylon. (Coincidentally, the romance of *Fierabras* is also related to a small error concerning the contents of an English manuscript said to contain both *Fierabras* and a vernacular romance of Alexander: "Un Volum del Romaunce . . . de Ferebras, de Alisaundre" (p. 78). This is much more likely to be a romance "of Fierabras of Alexandria," as many of the Old French versions are titled; if both romances were present, the entry would probably have read "de Ferebras e de Alisaundre.")

Representing Righteous Heathens is a valuable contribution to our understanding of non-Christian alterity as it was viewed in late medieval England, containing particularly fine close readings of *Piers Plowman*, *St. Erkenwald*, and *Alexander and Dindymus*. Grady has done much to illuminate the nature of the vernacular theology concerning salvation and redemption to be found in the diverse poetic production of late medieval England, as well as the nature of its "specifically insular audience" (p. 40). The book will certainly attract a wide readership and serve as a stimulus to further work in this rewarding field of study.

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Noah D. Guynn. *Allegory and Sexual Ethics in the High Middle Ages*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Pp. xii, 218. $65.00.

With this book, Noah Guynn makes a significant fresh contribution to literary scholarship and to the history of sexuality, deftly intertwining three distinctive balancing acts in interpretation. The first and most prominent is his attention to the contrasting forces at the heart of medieval allegory, the tension between "an overarching, formalized, and essentialist textual design and a more fluid, variable, or protean conception of textual meaning" (p. 3). Guynn provides a clear account of the importance of both tendencies, rather than the first alone, to ideological forces in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Guynn's conjoined consid-

eration of secular and sacred figurations of desirable and deviant bodies also sets this book apart, since he manages to clarify the interrelation without obscuring differences. Guynn's investment in identifying the rhetorical figuration of sexual desire as a tool for consolidating social and political power has a dual nature as well; his commitment to understanding allegory's role in past cultural formations is matched by his commitment to recognizing the political stakes of reading allegory and ethics discourse today. Guynn argues that medieval allegory's ability to expose the contingent nature of meaning cannot be celebrated as a tool for political liberation; instead, "medieval allegories call for violent responses to symbolic or representational problems, for imposing consensus and conformity through physical brutality because it cannot be achieved through other means" (p. 173).

Guynn designates allegory as both the representation of a "symbolist mentality" (p. 17) and "the master trope of imaginative literature" (p. 18). Defining strict generic boundaries for allegory is not one of Guynn's aims. Guynn considers medieval romance as well as dream visions; patterns of textual structure and character introduction, homophonic resonances of words, personification, and simple metaphors are all grist for analysis. His broader understanding of allegory lays bare a commonality in the techniques of secular and ecclesiastical writings. As he demonstrates that "an implicit social hierarchy . . . precedes and predetermines the text's fascination with the slipperiness of its own meaning" (p. 9), the book moves rhythmically between the sacred and secular concerns of the hierarchy's upper margins. An opening chapter marks out the study's theoretical grounds with reference to patristic and ecclesiastical writers, including Augustine, Aquinas, and Alan of Lille, before the book turns to the secular and aristocratic interests of the *Roman d'Eneas* in the second chapter, then offers a fuller exploration of Alan's *Anticlaudianus* and *De Planctu Naturae* in chapter 3, and makes a return to the realm of lay readers and the secular clergy in the fourth and final chapter on the *Roman de la rose*. Each chapter connects the slipperiness in rhetorical representations of sexualized bodies to the justification of violence against actual bodies, protecting the challenged ideology of aristocratic sovereignty, the theocratic authority of the Church, or the masculinized prerogatives of the clergy.

In delineating the relationship of ideology and allegory, Guynn avoids the twin temptations of treating either the rhetorical strategies or their range of objectives reductively. As noted, Guynn insists upon allegory's

polyvocality and interpretative ambiguity as he identifies these same qualities as a tool of polemic, rather than its antidote; he unmasks the enjoyable play of the self-deconstructing text as a calculated means of arousing the desire for stability and more aggressive policing of power. As Guynn acknowledges, it is not surprising that the *Roman d'Eneas*, *De Planctu Naturae*, and *Roman de la rose*, three seminal texts with powerful readerships, should rhetorically enforce privilege. Yet his nuanced analysis of the means by which these texts accomplished this feat is certain to provoke new thought as it challenges the assumption that medieval rulers, ecclesiastics, and clerics delighted in the rhetorical play of allegory due to some unspecified affinity with contemporary scholarly aesthetics.

The chapters of textual analysis all relate to the Augustinian-informed theoretical approach of the first chapter but are for the most part self-contained, perhaps a reflection of the fact that these portions of the project developed through the production of relevant articles. The crisp construction is admirable, although at times I found myself wishing for slightly messier textual interstices. More intrusion of the *Eneas* discussion into later chapters, for example, might have created space for reflecting on the concreteness in figuration found in the romance, in which even the god "Amors" takes the physical form of a human-constructed statue, in contrast to the analysis of more lively and abstract personifications from the *De Planctu* and the *Rose*. But each individual textual argument is of sufficient interest in itself, with the most important connections between chapters clearly rendered, resulting in a book equally useful as a whole or as separate chapters.

One claim of special interest found in chapter 2 follows a demonstration that females in *Eneas* name sodomy explicitly but explain its meaning not in denotative or anatomical discourse but rather in inventively rhetorical terms. Guynn claims that "not unlike an allegory, *sodomy* is both an abstract representation of moral failure . . . and a signifier pointing toward an ineffable meaning so outrageous it can only be spoken of 'otherwise,' through circumlocution" (p. 85, his emphasis). The observed parallel in operation marks a nice contrast with the equally rhetorical strategies of Alan of Lille discussed in chapter 3; sodomy is never directly named, nor is its cure, as the representation of bodies burrows more deeply into the play of interpretation. Language analysis is at its most fascinating in this chapter; Guynn's characterization of the gendered relationship between Nature and Genius is especially stimulating.

Chapter 4 reopens the debate on the sexual politics of the *Rose* by claiming that the unstable attribution of misogynistic and homophobic voices within allegory serves to privilege these voices, providing an interesting ideological reading of the signature practice on which so much ink has already been spilled. Discussion of Christine de Pisan's response to the *Rose* forms the conclusion of this chapter. Guynn champions Christine's allegorical staging of the recovery of female political power and voice, and condemnation of physical abuse in the *Cité des dames* as a "clear-sighted" response to the *Rose*, presenting such work as preferable to the "rhetorical misstep" of suggesting the *Rose* be burned (p. 168)—but it might be more just not to discount entirely Christine's potential participation in the disturbing ideological violence Guynn discovers in male authors' figurations. Consideration of Sheila Delany's recent work on the political goals underlying Osbern Bokenham's advocacy for women might have been useful here.

Delany's earlier *Medieval Literary Politics* and the scholarship of Gordon Teskey and Larry Scanlon are important critical touchstones for this book, and Guynn productively integrates a range of post-Foucauldian scholarship on medieval sexuality, recognizing the work of Glenn Burger, William Burgwinkle, and Simon Gaunt, among others. The index lists critical perspectives under the modern authors' names but also itemizes them under the names of relevant medieval authors and texts, a reader-friendly feature. Guynn's sensitivity to the many signifying aspects of language extends from the argument proper into his apparatus for quotations: he modifies existing translations of non-English texts to take into account subsequent scholarship, such as Danuta Shanzer's work on Alan of Lille's Latin. Like the index and translations, the secondary bibliography is another useful tool. One single detail teases the reader impressed by the *tour de force* of attention to apparatus: an illumination from the *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* appears on the book jacket, although discussion of this fourteenth-century allegory does not appear in the book. But I recognize my disappointed desire for Guynn's analysis of yet another text as just another indication of his book's high scholarly value.

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