



# Medieval Feminist Forum

A Journal of Gender and Sexuality

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Gender, Science, and the Natural World:  
Essays on Medieval Literature  
from the 2020 Gender and  
Medieval Studies Conference



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**MEDIEVAL FEMINIST FORUM**  
**A Journal of Gender and Sexuality**

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## REVIEWS

*Female Desire in Chaucer's "Legend of Good Women" and Medieval English Romance*, by Lucy M. Allen-Goss. Gender in the Middle Ages 15. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020. Pp. ix + 225. ISBN: 9781843845706.

In "Not Born a Woman," Monique Wittig argues that lesbianism, as a refusal of self-definition in relation to masculinity, is a radically transformative political, economic, and intellectual project. Lucy M. Allen-Goss implicitly takes up Wittig's charge by attending to "the spectrum of female desires that do not answer to structuring masculine desire" in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and Middle English romance (3). Through densely associative and often surprising close readings, Allen-Goss locates a "lesbian-like erotic" that fills in some of the silences surrounding medieval lesbians, who, citing Jacqueline Murray, have too often been "twice marginal and twice invisible,"<sup>1</sup> first in medieval texts and then in scholarship about them (8). The female desires that Allen-Goss traces are not limited to same-sex desire but encompass capacious reconfigurations of binaries that define femininity as subordinate to masculinity.

Although the *Legend of Good Women* seems an unlikely candidate to anchor such an investigation, Allen-Goss argues that it is Chaucer's "most radically disruptive poem" because it challenges hermeneutic models, best known from Jerome, Alan of Lille, and the *Romance of the Rose*, that figure writing as a male violence on a penetrable female body

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1 Jacqueline Murray, "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible: Lesbians in the Middle Ages," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland, 1996), 191–222.

(7). *Female Desire* presents six chapters, organized in groups of two, which follow readings of the *Legend of Good Women* with interpretations of English vernacular romances. Whereas Chaucer sketches an alternative hermeneutic centering female desire typically to point toward its failure, romance narratives “reconfigure poetic practice” more fundamentally (30).

The first pair of chapters considers how Chaucer’s *Legend of Philomela* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure* strive to represent rape survival without reproducing misogynist tropes about female desire. Allen-Goss argues that Chaucer’s *Legend*, which stitches together different sources and leaves temporal gaps, artfully links the text with Philomela’s mutilated body as an evocation of self-authoring female voice. In chapter 2, Allen-Goss argues the alliterative *Morte*’s representation of the rape of the duchess at Mont St. Michel takes a self-consciously related approach. The *Morte*’s fractured, discontinuous narrative structure captures traumatic memories of rape through genital punning, disruptive masculine emotion, and charged violence among men. In both the *Legend of Philomela* and the *Morte Arthure*, glimpses of female desire—in the form of refusal—are fleeting. Chaucer’s *Legend* ultimately associates Philomela’s self-expression with a phallic prosthetic that compensates for feminine lack, and the *Morte Arthure* makes rape trauma visible, but only when it is “enacted on male (not female) bodies” (81).

The second set of chapters focuses on the relationship between gendered embodiment and desire in Chaucer’s narratives of Dido, Hipsiphyle and Medea, and in the fifteenth-century *Sowdone of Babylon*. Chapter 3 argues that Chaucer’s portrayal of Aeneas’s male femininity makes Dido visible as a “lesbian-like lover, a model for Hipsiphyle’s and Medea’s masculine yearning for a feminized Jason” (95). As in Allen-Goss’s reading of the *Morte Arthure*, homoerotic relationships between men offer an expressive language for “deviant” feminine desires; Medea’s desire, for instance, finds a model in Hercules’s devotion to Jason. Yet, as with the *Legend of Philomela*, Allen-Goss argues that Chaucer ultimately portrays Medea’s and Hipsiphyle’s appropriations of masculinity as inferior. Chapter 4, the book’s most ambitious, explores how a desire for relics, coded as sexually aberrant, collapses oppositions between animate and inanimate matter and between excess and containment in the *Sowdone of Babylon* to present Floripas as a gender non-conforming heroine. The *Sowdone*’s Floripas does not merely invert heteropatriarchal categories but rather points toward a

female masculinity that stands outside them, with significant implications for contemporary materialist feminisms.

The final paired chapters, readings of Chaucer's *Ariadne* and *Thisbe* and *Undo Your Door*, foreground the relationship between female desire and literary authority. Chapter 5 argues that Chaucer's *Legend of Thisbe* critically responds to Jerome's famous paradigm of the text as a veiled woman that must be stripped and penetrated. *Thisbe's* bloody veil is not a marker of the rhetorical ornament that must be cast off but instead of Pyramus's misguided reading, and *Thisbe* herself transgressively authors a poetic "compleynt" out of her lover's blood. Allen-Goss persuasively reads the latter as a "generative image of feminine linguistic production" (154). Pointing to the ways that the *Legend of Ariadne* self-consciously undoes this subversive potential, Allen-Goss again finds a more robust counter-tradition in romance. In *Undo Your Door*, imagery associated with female desire, particularly same-sex eroticism and masturbation, "upends and dissects the paradigm of masculine authority and female passivity in both textual and sexual operations" (166).

With creative close readings in dialogue with contemporary queer theory (especially Sara Ahmed and Elizabeth Freeman), this study offers a thought-provoking analysis of how medieval English literature challenges heteropatriarchal paradigms. *Female Desire* will arouse important conversations in queer and feminist medieval studies. For me, Allen-Goss's focus on Chaucer as inaugurating an alternative tradition subsequently taken up in vernacular romance risks upholding the same hermeneutic tradition from which *Female Desire* seeks relief. Allen-Goss emphasizes Chaucer's efforts to tamp down the *Legend's* radical potential, but it is nonetheless unsettling to encounter Chaucer as a primary innovator for representing "female desire." And, to return to Wittig, I kept thinking about Allen-Goss's central term, "female desire," because the concept of woman affirms a gender binary in which man dominates. The desires that Allen-Goss's readings uncover are in fact capacious (like Wittig's lesbian) in ways that challenge male and female as oppositional categories. In this sense, *Female Desire* reflects both the urgent need to dismantle heteropatriarchal interpretive paradigms and the difficulties of doing so, and my questions here register what I have learned from Allen-Goss's compelling study. *Female Desire* is a book I'll continue to think with, and I hope that the field will, too.

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