

Nancy B. Black. *Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens*. University Press of Florida, 2003. pp. xviii, 261 + illustrations.

More than seventy-five years have passed since Margaret Schlauch first charted the medieval European theme of the “calumniated queen” in her 1927 book *Chaucer’s Constance and Accused Queens*. While much ink has been spilled upon the most well-known of these stories, Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*, Nancy B. Black’s *Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens* is the first book since Schlauch’s to attempt a comprehensive study of the production and influence of this story type. Distancing herself from Schlauch’s early-twentieth-century anthropological approach, Black strives to read her mainly English and French texts in their original manuscript form rather than modern, printed editions, attending to literary questions of authorship, patronage, and reader reception, as well as analyzing illuminations, glosses and rubrics. Black acknowledges a debt to V.A. Kolve’s *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* for providing a model of the kind of “integrated analysis of art and text” (6) that her study seeks to accomplish. However, Black also seeks to establish these texts as “agents of cultural change” (6) and to account for the popularity of this story form from the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries.

“Accused queen” narratives take two distinct forms according to folklorists. The first, “Crescentia,” Black applies to accounts of the Empress of Rome

that Gautier de Coinci added to his *Miracles de Nostre Dame*, and to versions of the Empress of Rome in Jehan Maillart’s *Roman de Comte d’Anjou*, Thomas Hoccleve’s “Tale of Jereslaus’s Wife,” sections of Christine de Pizan’s *Book of the City of Ladies*, and the *Gesta Romanorum*. The second narrative type, the “Maiden without Hands,” is applied to the wanderings of Constance or Constance-like figures in Philippe de Remi’s *Le Manekine*, Trevet’s *Cronicles*, Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*, and Jehan Wauquelin’s *La Belle Helene de Constantinople*. Both the Constance and Empress of Rome forms are found in a collection of fourteenth-century plays, the *Miracles de Nostre Dame par personnages*. Each type possesses a four-part structure, with the heroine falling twice from her status, but regaining it in the end. The plots also follow similar patterns of slander, reinstatement, and slander, reinstatement. In both, the woman gains a happy ending to her life as a reward for her struggles and demonstrated virtues, usually protecting her chastity.

Black has selected manuscripts that she notes are “seldom-studied vernacular codices” (6) but which have been chosen because they “can be placed within a specific, localized historical setting” (4). The chapters thus provide dense and detailed descriptions of historical

context and of the manuscripts and their glosses. To readers unfamiliar with these texts, however, these admirably meticulous lists of evidence to some extent obscure the analytical perspective so clearly presented in the introduction and conclusion.

In the chapter treating the most well-known version of this story, "Constance and her English Sisters," Black, building upon the work of Christine Rose and others, sets analyses of Gower's story and the *Man of Law's Tale* alongside Trevet's version in his Anglo-Norman *Cronicles*. She argues that each work adapts the Constance story according to its generic requirements. Although she explicitly rejects source study as a method that privileges the Chaucerian text, Black praises Chaucer for more successfully joining the Constance story to major medieval philosophical ideas than any other author in her study.

Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens joins the already well-underway Women and Gender Studies project of providing, as Black writes, "an image of women that lies between the two extreme views [...] glorification into immaterial abstraction (the virgin) and vilification as the personifier of lust (the whore)" (8). As an ambitious, interdisciplinary study, Black's book should appeal to medievalists who study literature and history as well as art.

Editor's Note: See UP Florida ad for this monograph on p. 75.

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