

succeeded in creating a cloistered environment for their wards” (p. 113). D’Andrea argues that this account, which is based on a set of regulations drafted in 1574, “finally institutionalized what must long have been an informal process” (p. 112) and can thus characterize practices during the period 1400 to 1530. His reading of the regulations assumes not only that the source can be taken at face value, but also that these conditions did not change during the period under examination. However, recent work on institutionalized women has demonstrated that the sixteenth century witnessed significant shifts in conceptions of what was considered to be “appropriate” housing for nubile girls, brought about by religious transformations associated with the period of Catholic reform. These changes were also manifested in the architecture of wards for female foundlings, which became markedly more cloistered in the second half of the sixteenth century. Although the loss of documentation cannot be helped, the book would have benefited from greater transparency concerning source materials and, in some instances, more critical treatment of surviving records.

D’Andrea’s book makes a significant contribution to the

field of confraternity studies. He raises numerous thought-provoking questions and suggests many new avenues of inquiry into the manifold intersections between charitable institutions, subject cities, state formation, and local religion.

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**Elizabeth Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truth in Later Middle English Literature.* (The New Middle Ages.) Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Pp. viii + 225.**

**W**e typically see the moral exemplum (found in Latin and vernacular sermons, confessional manuals, and devotional works) as naive, simple, and transparent. Elizabeth Allen shows how these short narratives, seemingly simple in form, are anything but simplistic. They produce their moral generalizations, Allen argues, by opening themselves up to the threat of an alternate reception. Reading “exemplarity” beyond the literary form of the exemplum per se and into the genres of

romance, hagiography, and complaint (among others), Allen understands it as a far-reaching mode of medieval literature, yet one never far from its didactic aims and moral benefits. But exemplarity runs afoul of the concretizing material and formal means by which it is transmitted as literature. Allen, therefore, seeks to describe a much more complex relation between examples and fictional forms: the narratives in examples as well as the exemplarity of all narrative.

In an introductory first chapter, she lays out the large aims of the book as well as the origins of exempla and their increased use following Dominican and Franciscan reform and the rise of confession in medieval England. She also traces a theoretical history of exemplarity from the classical tradition to modern reception theory in order to frame the workings of reading and medieval memory as somatic experience. The simplicity of exempla comes from a presumed dis-ambiguity, what Allen calls an “aspiration toward exact alignment among authorial purpose, narrative form, and audience response” (p. 2). But in effect, such alignment is a literalist fantasy, and exemplarity remains far from perfect or transparent in this respect. Eschewing the devotional

texts upon which one might expect her to concentrate, Allen reads the major poets of the late Middle English tradition—some (Gower, Lydgate) more explicitly interested in morals than others (Chaucer, Henryson)—to show the pervasive mode of exemplary reading strategies that characterize late medieval writing. Where previous studies invest themselves in the authority purchased by the example, Allen sees the subversive potential exemplarity works carefully to foreclose.

Chapter 2 focuses on *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, a text much like a number of lay conduct books for the aristocracy and rising bourgeoisie. Translated and printed by William Caxton in 1484 for a projected mixed-gender audience of nobility and gentry, this text, Allen suggests, would be better understood as an exploration of “the possibility that producing desire and curiosity in his audience will teach them to embrace virtue” (p. 31). The spectacles of vice, violence, and seduction work against the framework of authoritative interpretation to produce the excitements of narrative. Chapter 3 takes up Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, examining the legend of Virginia that he inherited from Livy. This chapter and the next concentrate

on Virginia as a “touchstone” for problems of exemplarity in late medieval English writing. Both Gower and Chaucer use “unreliable narrators and complex framing devices to reveal the violence inherent in Virginius’ ideal fatherhood” (p. 54). In the classical and medieval texts under scrutiny, Allen compares directly quoted to indirect discourse to evaluate the different versions’ moral status, aligning rhetoric with moral action. Livy’s text differentiates rhetorically between truth and slander. The truth or authority of Virginius and Icilius is set against the fabula of Appius. By contrast, Gower’s version makes Livy’s history into a fiction in *Confessio Amantis*. Virginia’s story appears as the penultimate tale in Book 7, Gower’s mirror for princes, which “stages an exploration of useful fictions for perpetuating a workable analogy between individual and public forms of desire” (p. 62). The “pitee” with which Gower prefers Virginia be understood is a quintessentially Christian response. Instead of opposing rhetorical truth and *fabula*, Gower rewrites her story as fiction, which the medieval poet embraces. For readers of *Medieval Feminist Forum* particularly, Allen situates Livy’s use of Virginia as the necessary feminine sacrifice to republicanism as too facile a means of understanding the way

his version of the story works politically. The “pitee” with which Gower’s medieval reading reframes the tale might offer, implicitly, a more feminine and feminist mode of interpretation.

Chapter 4 takes on Chaucer and Lydgate, and here Allen turns to the Virginia story in the *Canterbury Tales*, the Physician’s Tale, and Lydgate’s dual retellings in the *Fall of Princes*. Where Chaucer goes even further than Gower to “estrangle” his account from Livy’s history, Lydgate corrects Chaucer’s wayward account with his own. Chaucer’s version of the Virginia story, told as the Physician’s Tale, calls attention to the act of narration and emphasizes pity in a very different sense than Gower’s version. Telling the story of Virginia twice in the *Fall of Princes*, Lydgate rescues the tale from the uncertainties of exemplary narration to which Chaucer’s Physician had subjected it, particularly by mediating Virginius’s problematic combination of love and violence. Lydgate bolsters authorial intent by affirming the virtue of the father and resists Chaucer’s unreliable narration in the *Tales* “by portraying it as an avoidance of moral commitment” (p. 84).

Chapter 5 works further with the *Canterbury Tales* by scrutinizing

the Pardoner's Tale and its continuation in the apocryphal *Interlude* and *Tale of Beryn*. Working on the premise that exemplary stories provoke emotional responses that can inspire virtue, Allen looks to such continuations as responses in fictive form. Allen reads these texts as a reception history of the Pardoner and his challenge to the Canterbury pilgrims. The *Interlude* shows how one reader was provoked "to revise him into a morally tolerable figure" (p. 115).

In a final and sixth chapter, Allen reads Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, in some comparison to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, to explore the moral consequences of poetic delight. Allen traces various ways that examples of feminine behavior are read internally—within *Troilus and Criseyde*—as well as the way Criseyde increasingly becomes one of inconstant womanhood. But Henryson resists the way Chaucer's text "points out the dependency of such judgment upon the contingencies of time, place, and point of view" (p. 139). Showing how Chaucer's text is an "exemplary failure," Allen explains the odd appearance of the formal descriptions of Troilus, Criseyde, and Diomedes in Book 5. Readers of Henryson, especially those who have lately written about the

complexity of his attempt to finish Chaucer's poem more conclusively, will find the last chapter the most problematic one. Where we have little problem seeing Lydgate as reductive in relation to Chaucer, many will not find Henryson so. But even Lydgate and his scholars might find cause to complain here. Lydgate has been the focus of much recent critical attention since 2000, which does not appear in the bibliography.

Allen's book shows that exemplarity situates itself at the heart of what we take to be non-exemplary literature. Where other books on exempla focus on obvious texts like the Parson's Tale, they do so only to berate us for failing to understand and enjoy the moral discipline they have better exercised in reading this form historically. Allen's book comes with no such condemnation, implicit or otherwise. Instead she lets us see afresh what we thought we already knew about art, morals, and reading—and the intricate way in which they work together—in Chaucer and Chaucerian texts.

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