

“Le Bone Florence of Rome”: A Critical Edition and Facing Translation of a Middle English Romance Analogous to Chaucer’s “Man of Law’s Tale,” edited and translated with introduction and notes by Jonathan Stavsky. New Century Chaucer. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017. Pp. 304. ISBN 9781786830623; E-ISBN 9781786830647.

Jonathan Stavsky’s welcome new book presents an edition and translation of a neglected romance, *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, an important analogue to Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*. The edition is published as part of a series, the New Century Chaucer, which aims to provide “editions, with translations, of Chaucerian and related texts alongside focused studies which bring new theories and approaches into view.” The relationship with Chaucer’s text provides a crucial justification for the appearance of this new edition, but Stavsky is keen to emphasize that this lively and engaging romance deserves to be studied in its own right.

Le Bone Florence belongs to a large body of narratives of accused queens, and in its broad points the story may seem familiar even to those who have not read it. Florence, the daughter of a Roman Emperor (Otes) comes to the attention of Garcy, the aged Emperor of Constantinople, who demands she be sent to him (with startling directness, the emissaries make it clear he wishes to first bed her before he considers making her his wife). When Garcy declares war on Rome, two disinherited Hungarian princes, Mylys and Emere, come to fight for Otes; Emere falls in love with Florence, but the lovers are betrayed repeatedly by Mylys, who ultimately abducts Florence. A series of misadventures befall the heroine: she is subjected to attempted rape and to physical assault; not long after being rescued, she is forced to fend off further sexual assaults as well as a false accusation of murder. She rescues a thief from the gallows, only for him to sell her to a sea captain who attempts to rape her; God answers her prayers by sending a storm to wreck the ship. She arrives at a convent, where she becomes a nun and demonstrates a miraculous gift of healing; in the final movement, she is sought out by her tormentors, each of whom has been struck down with a terrible illness, as well as Emere who has been wounded in battle. The tormentors publicly confess their crimes and are cured (though executed nonetheless); Florence and Emere return to Rome to be married, produce an heir, and live happily ever after.

While the ending wraps up the threads in a way that seems simplistic, the tale contains much of value for students interested in medieval romance and gender studies. As a heroine, Florence arguably displays more character and agency

than her counterpart Custance, while she also experiences more supportive and positive relationships with other women: at one point, a female friend saves her from her male tormentors, and she finds refuge and respect with the abbess and her community of women (in the Florence tradition, unlike the Constance stories, the villains are all men). The tale also provides interesting insights into romance constructions of masculinity: positive examples of chivalric prowess and courtesy are juxtaposed with the cowardice and unchecked aggression of Florence's tormentors. In one vivid moment, Florence's father Otes encounters Garcy, the Emperor of Constantinople, on the battlefield. The poet creates a surprisingly affecting depiction of two elderly men testing their fading skills as warriors, but this moment is soon shattered by Garcy's coarse boast that he intends to do "schame and vlyenye" (689) to Florence. In a classroom setting, the tale could work well as a focal point for discussions about medieval representations of gendered violence. Florence survives physical and sexual assault as well as being sold into sexual slavery, and the narrative explores with some complexity not only her survival strategies (including, at one point, smashing out the teeth of her assailant), but also the motivations of the men who pursue and oppress her. While at times it seems that the narrative represents sexual assault as no more than misdirected sexual passion or a perversion of chivalric aggression, at times it provides an even darker and more complex view of violence and gender relations, for example in the shocking moment when Mylys finds himself impotent and unable to impose himself on Florence, only to explode in a torrent of physical violence.

Stavsky's fine edition is the first since that of Carol Falvo Heffernan in 1976, which is now quite hard to come by. It is accompanied by a facing-page translation, which is written in prose but set out as verse. Initially I found this idiosyncratic, but quickly adapted to it and found it not only unobtrusive but actually helpful when comparing original and translation. The translation is fluid and accurate, and while one might quibble about some choices, the annotations marshal solid evidence from the MED and previous editions for Stavsky's decisions. The text itself is based on the sole manuscript, Cambridge, University Library MS Ff.2.38; Stavsky's introduction provides a useful account of the contents of the manuscript, other versions of the Florence story, and useful parallels with other medieval romances. The endnotes are mostly well tailored to the needs of a student audience; but, while I was grateful that Stavsky chose to allow *Le Bone Florence* to stand on its own merits as much as possible, it might have been helpful (especially for the student audience) to provide more thoroughgoing comparison with Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, while scholars

might appreciate a more extensive analysis of the place of the text within the tradition of accused queen narratives (the important work of Nancy Black is only briefly mentioned). The appendices are not uniformly useful: there is a helpful list of names and places, but in place of a glossary we are directed to a brief list of “Middle English Words and Idioms Discussed in the Explanatory Notes,” which is not particularly helpful as presumably most readers will look directly to the notes in the first place. In the electronic version I was provided to review (which seems to have been a proof copy) there was no index, and I spotted a couple of small copyediting errors. I also noted that the list of names and places included an entry for “Gayne *adv.*, or *prep.*,” a word presumably meant to appear in the list of Middle English words. In spite of these minor issues, this is a very good edition and translation, which will hopefully ensure a wider readership for this engaging and under-valued text.

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