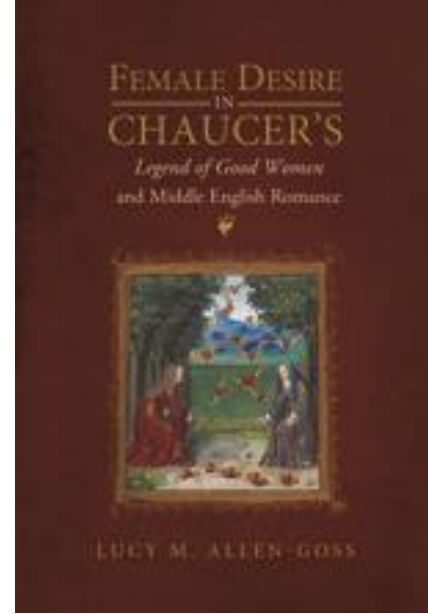





KİTAP TANITIMI | BOOK REVIEW

**FEMALE DESIRE IN CHAUCER'S LEGEND OF
GOOD WOMEN AND MIDDLE ENGLISH
ROMANCE**

Lucy M. Allen-Goss, D. S. Brewer,
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Lucy Allen-Goss is an Irish Research Council postdoctoral research fellow in the Department of History at Trinity College in Dublin. In her book, *Female Desire in Chaucer's Legend of Good Women and Middle English Romance* (Allen-Goss, 2020), Allen-Goss discusses the representation of masculinity and femininity in the Middle Ages, exploring the possibility of queer theory (Shildrick, 2009) which rejects the notion that queerness only exists in the minority, on the periphery, and at the present. Queer theory also challenges the limitation imposed on the queer subject by asserting ownership over seemingly fixed and immutable notions like time and space, as well as culturally significant frameworks such as language and history. Allen-Goss discusses the applicability of this argument of queer theory to medieval literary texts, especially to nonconforming medieval characters. She uses metaphor of "prosthesis" (p.20) as a marker of lack, an indication of definitive feminine inability to make meaning in constructing female identity. The book has six chapters which can be categorized into three sections: in the first section, female characters suffer at the hands of men, the second section is concerned with the projection of female desire into men causing male femininity, and the last two chapters target saving the language from male authority.

She analyzes Chaucer's Legend of Good Women: Legend of Philomela, Legend of Hipsiphyle and Medea, Legend of Thisbe, Legend of Ariadne and early 15th century Middle English Romances

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Sowdone of Babylon, Morte D'Arthure, The Squire of Low Degree with an alternative interpretation in terms of gender relations, female desires to investigate even Chaucer might be the one of the first feminists. Allen-Goss challenges traditional hermeneutics like Jerome, and Alan of Lille in which woman's body is seen as a blank canvas to get shaped by a male agency by replacing with an alternative one focusing on female desire and existence. In the introduction of the book, the creation of Eve, originating from Adam's rib, is presented to expound the perceived deviation of women in traditional hermeneutics. The dilemma of incompleteness, prostheses, and being lack of male body parts bring out female desire shaping from the time of Eve. In other words, a woman cannot give form to raw materials that her body contains. Allen-Goss describes "prosthesis" (p.3) as a marker of lack, an indication of definitive feminine inability to make meaning. The problem leads way to the patriarchal hermeneutics of Middle English Romances. At this point, Allen-Goss raises a reaction to traditional readings and she adds that it is possible to hear women's voices and desires in Chaucerian legends and other medieval romances.

In the first two chapters, the Legend of Philomela from Chaucer's *Legend* and the rape of the duchess from *Morte D'Arthure* are discussed in terms of rape survival cases. In these chapters, both Philomela and the duchess of Mont St. Michel are raped with a muted destiny; the revenge is taken out of Philomela's legend; however, the duchess' end is more tragic: What has been emphasized is not the violent rape of a woman, instead the size, and the shape of rapist's phallic appearance. Both condemning women eternal silence, and ignoring a penetrated female body, the two stories lead way to hear women' voice at the end. Although Chaucer cut the end of Philomela's story, he gave voice to Philomela in some couplets as she was weaving the rape scene into a fabric to show the resistance against male terror. Allen-Goss concludes that after the rape scene, killing the rapist and emphasizing the punishment of rapists is glorified as being "anti-rape" instead of "anti-war" by Chaucer.

In the second section, we see the feminine male and masculine female characters. The third chapter discusses the Legend of Hipsiphyle, Medea, and Dido. The chapter starts with explaining "relicta" (p.83) which is feminizing power at the distant shores. Jason, Paris, Hercules, Achilles, and many Trojan men are met with this relicta. These effeminate heroes have always created anxiety and fear in the course of history. In Legend of Hipsiphyle and Medea, the faithless Jason has always been misread due to the linguistic lack of Latin. Allen-Goss claims that Jason is a queering device; his duplicitous sexual performance is evidence of his male femininity which has not been the main point of the academy for a long time. Male femininity can be read as the female desire projected on the male body. On the other hand, when it compared Chaucer's version of the story of Aeneas and Dido to Ovid's, Chaucer's Aeneas is more visible with his male femininity. Chaucerian Aeneas' appearance is more like her mother Venus, and his lament is more like women's sexual shame. Thus, Chaucer opens Dido in a way that is more active and self-sufficient. Like Aeneas and Dido, Jason's relationship with his friend Hercules is constructed on same-sex sexual intimacy. In Medea's relationship with Jason, Chaucer cuts Medea's end of killing her child and even her maternal abilities which is similar to Philomela's story. Medea, in a way, tries to replace Hercules' position to attack Jason to succeed which Hipsiphyle failed before. The dynamic of their love is built upon the female masculinity of Medea and the male femininity of Jason. Furthermore, Allen-Goss emphasizes the castration of language that is cutting the maternal power

of the female in this story. Chapter four continues with the narrative of Floripas from *Sowdone of Babylon* and her female gender nonconformity. This chapter examines how the pleasures of the forbidden coexist in the discourses of "deviant" desires and heterodox religion. Floripa's "stony femininity" does not respond to male manipulation and it does not drive toward the male agency. Contrasting other romanticized, sensual female characters, Floripas has a strong character and refuses male agency. Stony femininity is associated with the living relics of Christianity; both are covered with silk and preserved generally in a tower or closed places. It is tantalizing that desire for a relic, and the desire for a woman is tightly connected in pre-existing religious writings and this close relationship can be explained through religious writings that treat both relics and women's sexuality as objects of suspicion.

In the last two chapters, Allen-Goss interrogates the association of Latin with masculinity which was used in *Legend of Thisbe*, *Legend of Ariadne*, and Middle English Romance *Undo Your Door* and seeks the possibility of taking the linguistic authority of female characters. Chaucer's word choice in his narratives is carefully designed with his use of innuendos which later makes him center of hermeneutic debates. Chapter five also investigates the representation of female desires in medieval literature through the analysis of Ariadne, Thisbe. Ariadne is transformed into a constellation after a violent rape and Thisbe inseminates a wound with tears. These narratives explore themes of trauma, mutilation, and deviant desires in relation to female bodies and emotions. The story of Thisbe starts with the beautiful princess Semiramis' telling who is famous for her incestuous and nonconforming practices, which signal the deviant desires. In the following lines, Allen-Goss claims that the story of bloody veiled Thisbe should be read as a criticism of the famous paradigm of Jerome; a veiled woman must be stripped and her naked body should be penetrated. *Legend of Ariadne* is associated with the myth of the Minotaur which is the symbol of deviant intercourse. Similar to Thisbe's story, Ariadne and her sister Phaedra, communicate in wall gaps without seeing Theseus. After some time marrying, Ariadne desperately pulls off her own 'veil' to raise it as a message destined to be ignored by her betraying lover Theseus. In this perspective, she is challenging the paradigm of Jerome's captive woman.

Chapter six explores the Middle English Romance *Undo Your Door*. The parodic storytelling reveals the misunderstanding of the princess as she finds the steward's body disguised with squire's clothing which causes her ever-lasting mourning and embalming his body. Her treatment of the decorated corpse is similar to the treatment of a relic. At first, the architectural symbols are given examples to be likened to Virgin Mary and Christ. However, the reading of the princess' gazing through the window is read by Allen-Goss as a woman who is both in charge of her sexuality and meeting desires without any male authority which is far from religious reading. According to most scholars, the story is a parody of a marriage that is performed for reproduction.

Allen-Goss concludes that this book seeks the possibility of female hermeneutics in which language works in charge of speaking a woman's desire rather than being monstrous, deviant, evil, and muted. Even as Chaucer's *Legend* constructs female desires as irrevocably perverse in their expression, it also necessarily constructs a space in which these desires are expressed. In addition, the term "female desire" is intentionally left undefined and ambiguous to comprise all of the women's need for her agency. Her argument about prostheses is prominent and it is a good

metaphor which emphasizes the problematic mindset in both medieval thought and traditional hermeneutics which symbolizes the lack of a female body. This shows how medieval texts are always interpreted in the light of these hermeneutics which women's agency and their desires are left out of consideration. However, Allen-Goss demonstrates to us, by delving into Chaucer's texts, that it is possible to establish the viability of an alternative, more innovative interpretation in contrast to these classical approaches.

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