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Noah D. Guynn, *Allegory and Sexual Ethics in the High Middle Ages*. Basingstoke, U.K., and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. xii + 218 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$65.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4039-7147-0; \$65.00 U.S. (e-book). ISBN 0-230-60366-1.

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Noah Guynn's *Allegory and Sexual Ethics* is a new step in the very exciting field of the history of sexuality of the Middle Ages. A number of influential studies have appeared over the last decade in the fields of history and literature.^[1] What literary studies of medieval sexuality have had in common—this being a very positive and productive development in the field—is the imbrication of literature and history whereby literary texts, through careful philological deconstruction, are capable of supplying the material for both fascinating readings and convincing historical arguments and analyses. Following the lead of Burgwinkle and Gaunt, Guynn successfully attempts just such an analysis. Since Guynn's major theoretical frameworks are Foucault and deconstruction, he does not aim to link literary texts and historical events directly or causally (a method that has been shown—and that he knows—to be complicated and questionable). Instead, Guynn chooses to argue that “medieval systems of ethics and sexual ethics should be understood as ideological apparatuses that share many common features with what historians have discovered about medieval forms of social and political coercion” (p. 46). Following the Foucauldian line of inquiry, he concentrates on a particular, dominant feature of medieval discourse: allegory.

Guynn's point of departure is the very problematic nature of allegory that he underlines and exposes in all of its complexity and perversity in each of the chapters. A rhetorical figure, allegory is problematic because it is never what it shows itself to be, never what it says it is, but it always stands for and personifies something else, producing an unstable meaning. While allegory is supposed to figure a truth, an essence, it always points to the fact that that truth can be attained only through figuration. Moreover, its semantic instability opens the same sign to orthodox and heterodox interpretations. But because “allegory appears to throw its own representational and moral order into crisis... it does so principally so that it may eventually impose order through alternate, typically violent means and empower the ruling classes as agents of discipline” (p. 33). In other words, the body and sexual desire are marshaled in order to accomplish ideological goals: a “continuity can be found in the relationship between allegorical figuration and incorporated, institutional power” (p. 2).

Thus an ethics built on allegories, such as is the case from the twelfth century onward, is always already an ideological tool that claims to be the truth, but it achieves its “truthfulness” only through a violent imposition of the moral, ethical order that is nothing else but an ideology. Allegory is thus not an innocent figure of rhetoric but a clever tool that “exploits the instability of discursive meaning in order to generate anxieties about the *actual* instability of regimes of power and of the cultural and ideological fictions that support them” (p. 4). The instability of allegory itself is exploited in order to produce and internalize variation, plurality, and heterodoxy as otherness: “If a deviant, intolerable form of otherness is internalized within figurations of intellectual and moral truth or social and political power, that otherness in turn motivates moral vigilance and a drive to extirpate threats to established form of sovereignty” (p. 4). Hence, greater oversight, control, and punitive measures can be exercised legitimately. This discursive analysis of allegory provides an interpretation of why particular forms of exclusion—in Guynn's book, of women and sodomites—were employed in the Middle Ages; if regimes

of power are not inherently stable, then allegory is a privileged mode for inventing an internal enemy to combat: "The enemy within does not impede or disrupt ideology but is instead a ruse of power: a tactic for installing both the law and its frailty within each body and for transforming all bodies into ideological battlefields" (p. 50), to be disciplined and guided by the Christian faith and the church.

Allegory and Sexual Ethics in the High Middle Ages, despite its title, deals almost exclusively with the French Middle Ages. The introduction posits the author's theoretical claims in a clear and lucid language. Chapter one is dedicated to providing an intellectual and historical background to the rise of allegory in the twelfth century, the construction of an ideological medieval ethics, and the formation of the persecuting society, its *raison d'être*, its needs and structures. Guynn starts with Augustine's thought on evil, "not simply as otherness but as otherness internal to sameness" (p. 43), and his authorization of extreme violence to remedy it through killing and "just war" that are the cause of good death inflicted by love. In this chapter, he expands the basic argument between rhetoric, ethics, and ideology presented in the introduction. Chapter two deals with allegory and sexual ethics in the twelfth-century anonymous *Roman d'Eneas*, chapter three with Alan of Lille's *De Planctu Naturae*, and chapter four with Jean de Meun's thirteenth-century *Roman de la rose*.

Chapter two significantly expands the present analyses of the *Roman d'Eneas* by proposing to answer a fundamental question that has not been sufficiently probed until now: "If the word *sodomy* refers to an intolerable violation of natural, human, and divine laws, what could it possibly have to do with courtly love...? Similarly, if the feudal court is the center of social regulation and secular justice, how could sodomy, which is socially marginal and eventually also indictable, in any way be implicated in courtliness?" (p. 51). Guynn argues that sodomy is "central" and not a "peripheral or incidental concern" in this romance (p. 54). Although the *Eneas* is not an allegorical but a highly genealogical romance, it uses the allegory of love and the ethics of "courtly love" as a sexual ideology in order to coerce the ruler into obeying the law he embodies: namely, the patriarchal agnatic law. But if an ideology must be used, it is precisely because the ruler may not obey and may misuse his body in a way that would threaten the very law and order he should embody and protect. Because they are fictions, "fictions of patriarchal power are subject to the vicissitudes of interpretation and unpredictability of desire" (p. 81). At the same time, as Guynn demonstrates wonderfully, discourse itself spawns ever more seductive rhetorical figures in disavowing sodomy; far from being sterile, sodomy creates a profusion of speeches that can only be temporarily disciplined but never fully silenced.

Chapter three ponders a problem of ethics based on allegory that gets embroiled in its own discourse: a sexual ethics of allegory participates in deviations it seeks to repudiate. Thus, Alan of Lille's language and ethics are compromised over and over again by his choice of metaphors: "It seems the poet can scarcely speak of those unspeakable acts without implicating himself and his speech in monstrosities" (p. 109). The nature of the allegory of Nature is such that "one can scarcely speak about ethics without lapsing into deviant, wicked pleasures" (p. 111). This chapter pushes Guynn's analysis of sexual ethics further and is at its most convincing when it demonstrates the poet's awareness of the fallibility of the allegory of Nature, for which he always finds new excuses. The poet's acknowledgment of the traps of allegory is the strongest argument in favor of Guynn's thesis of an effort to internalize evil in order to discipline and punish the internal, deviant enemy. But "the semantic ambiguities and sexual improprieties that pervade the *De Planctu Naturae* are not simply a return of repressed desires or evidence of an unacknowledged continuum between the homoerotic and the homosocial. They are instead a ruse of power. By internalizing evil within the good and blurring the distinction between natural and unnatural..., Alan's poem points to a moral imperative: the endless labor of rooting out evil [...] and excluding it through a formal rite or discourse, Genius's anathema" (p. 133). But since anathema, in its use of allegory, shares in the deviance it wishes to extirpate, its ideological power is fed on this endless cycle of contamination and repudiation.

Chapter four is an original reading of the *Roman de la rose*, as well as a convincing counter-argument to

the critical opinion of the poem as an unfettered liberation of procreative desire and a critique of celibacy. In Guynn's analysis "it is by no means clear that [Jean de Meun's poem] consistently resists or subverts the masculinism and misogyny of thirteenth-century clerical culture" (p. 140). This chapter is also the most prescriptive (with good reason) for medieval studies: "Scholars of the *Rose*—and of medieval misogyny generally—would do well, then, to concentrate their efforts not just on exposing internal incoherencies within misogynistic speech, but also on discovering the ways those internally disrupted discourses have been used to perpetuate antifeminism, to inscribe a masculinist ideology onto silenced female bodies, and to demand that women pay the price for literary celebrations of male sexual aggression" (p. 170). Demonstrating one last time the full efficacy of allegory, Guynn of course implies that if scholars do not follow his advice, they themselves will continue being trapped by the ruse of the regimes of power, thereby perpetuating in their readings the antifeminism, masculinist ideology, and male sexual aggression of the allegory of the rose. It is indeed a call to a future "ethically necessary politics," the ground for which can be laid only if "we" turn to the past and "challenge the oppressive, violent legacy of premodern ethics and sexual ethics" (p. 174)—as the conclusion wraps up the book's argument.

Allegory and Sexual Ethics thus exposes in a compelling and lucid manner the rhetorical—rather than (un)natural—reasons for exclusion. It is a formidable demonstration of medieval ethics as a contingency of rhetoric. This is an original, theoretically rigorous, thoroughly researched, and clearly written book that is a significant step in proving that the contributions of French literary studies to the history of sexuality cannot be ignored.

NOTE

[1] William Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law in Medieval Literature: France and England, 1050-1230* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage, eds., *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996); Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Mark D. Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and, most recently, James A. Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

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