

Book Reviews

Pre-1800

ELIZABETH ALLEN. *Uncertain Refuge: Sanctuary in the Literature of Medieval England*. The Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. Pp. 311. \$59.95 (cloth).

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Sanctuary has typically been depicted as the source of a power struggle between church and state, with the church trying to challenge royal authority for ultimate control over the kingdom's subjects. What is new about Elizabeth Allen's study of sanctuary, *Uncertain Refuge: Sanctuary in the Literature of Medieval England*, is that she sees it instead as a boon to both church and state: each used the prestige of granting sanctuary to bolster their authority, and sometimes they even did so by working in tandem. In addition, she examines a third party often forgotten in the interplay between political powers—the community that made use of and protected sanctuary—demonstrating how time spent in sanctuary had a consecrating effect on the individual and their reputation. To reveal just how deeply entrenched the ideology of sanctuary was in medieval society, Allen employs sanctuary as a lens through which to analyze contemporary literature. Finally, her choice of such an unusual grouping of source materials means that even those who think they know everything there is to know about medieval sanctuary will discover that *Uncertain Refuge* still has much to teach about the role and function of sanctuary in medieval England.

Organized in roughly chronological order, spanning the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries, each of Allen's six chapters is devoted to a different work of literature. In chapter 1, Allen examines the *Libellus* of Reginald of Durham, ostensibly written in honor of Saint Cuthbert, upon whose shrine Durham Cathedral is founded. Allen traces the faint outlines of a political contention within the *Libellus* in which Reginald uses sanctuary to shore up the bishop's jurisdiction and authority as the “universal landlord of Durham” (48), by explaining how his position grew out of the personal protection afforded by Cuthbert. In doing so, Reginald also helps the reader to contemplate the meaning of *sanctuary*. While *sanctuary* may originate with the sanctity of certain holy men, by the twelfth century it had come to be spatially

defined. Sanctuary represents God's presence on earth, recognized by all his creations: even the dogs hunting the stag recognize it—they cease their hunt the moment the stag leaps within the bounds of Cuthbert's sanctuary, only to resume once it emerges.

Roger of Wendover's *Chronica Majora*, with additions by Matthew Paris, takes center stage in chapter 2 with the flight of Hubert de Burgh, the king's justiciar, who claimed sanctuary three times within a period of fourteen months. For King Henry III, coming of age meant exerting his newfound authority by lashing out at those who ruled on his behalf. The chronicle's description of the episode brings out the power of sanctuary. Henry's violation of sanctuary by sending in men to drag Hubert out drew attention to the king's "excessive ire" (82). He becomes a better king when he learns to respect sanctuary. At the same time, imbued with the holiness of the space, the justiciar blooms from villain to holy hero.

In chapter 3, Allen examines changing attitudes toward sanctuary as expressed in descriptions of secular breaches of holy space at Westminster sanctuary and articulated chiefly by Thomas of Walsingham, the Westminster chronicler, and (surprisingly) John Wyclif. The fourteenth century saw the first grumbings of discontent about sanctuary, although not from the places that one might expect. Fears that the church harbored traitors and seasoned criminals within its sanctuary were expressed chiefly by members of the clergy, while King Richard II was keen to prove himself to be a "sanctuary king," insisting that "the state is made up of souls whose spiritual care he must allow but not legislate" (133).

Chapters 4 and 5 are more traditional in terms of Allen's literary approaches. In chapter 4, she uses *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight's* metaphorical use of sanctuary to demonstrate how its permeable boundaries leave sanctuary vulnerable to violence seeping in from the outside. Then, in chapter 5, Allen discusses how *Robin Hood and the Monk* highlights the brutality of those in power and questions the notion of law as stable and just.

Jumping ahead to the seventeenth century, in chapter 6 Allen focuses on the era after the abolition of sanctuary through an examination of John Ford's play *The Chronicle History of Perkin Warbeck: A Strange Truth*. In the play, sanctuary appears both superstitious and superfluous: divine right and an absolutist king make sanctuary unnecessary. The king's protection can be found anywhere in his realm.

With her astute analysis and attention to unconventional sources, Allen makes a significant contribution to the study of sanctuary, a field more typically populated by dry legal records and their historians. Nonetheless, this study is the first to clarify just how integral sanctuary was to royal authority. Not only did medieval seekers see sanctuary as a form of royal hospitality, but the king's highly public management of sanctuary was critical to his reputation as being merciful and just. Most importantly, tensions over sanctuary did not pit secular against sacred: support of and opposition to sanctuary could be found on both sides.

In the coda to the book, Allen ties this study into her father's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement in Southwest Georgia in 1962, which she argues was very much a sanctuary movement. This perceptual connection had a clear influence on her approach and understanding of sanctuary. However, it also has the unfortunate (and unintentional) result of equating Black voters with criminals. While those fighting to suppress the vote surely did see Black voters as felons, the voters themselves were innocent of any crime. This difference is not trivial. Sanctuary in the medieval era stands as a testament to the extraordinary mercy accorded to those who some today might not believe worthy of compassion.

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