

HAGEDORN, SUZANNE. C. *Abandoned Women: Rewriting the Classics in Dante, Boccaccio and Chaucer*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004, 220 pp. ISBN 0-472-11349-6

The figure of the forsaken and plaintive woman has attracted readers' attention since classical times, particularly after Ovid created his well-known and innovative epistles, the *Heroides*.¹ Taking into account its inclusion in library catalogues and medieval school anthologies or *libri manuales*, we could affirm that there was an increasing interest in this type of epistolary genre in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Like most medieval literature, the *Heroides* was regarded as a didactic work in the Middle Ages. According to the commentators of the age, Ovid was trying to instruct in the art of love and to warn readers about the danger of foolish love. In an *accessus* of the twelfth century a commentator wrote: '...The final cause is the following: that having seen the advantage that proceeds from legitimate love and the misfortunes that usually follow from foolish love, we will flee these two and only devote ourselves to chaste love' (p. 29). Notwithstanding this, others interpreted the *Heroides* as an instructional handbook in the art of love-letter writing. The echo of this influence may, indeed, be heard in Heloise's letters.

From the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, the subgenre was used and adapted by the most representative medieval poets of the European vernacular literature, namely Dante, Boccaccio and Chaucer. These authors, especially known for their retelling of classical stories in their own language, used Ovid's *Heroides* as a common point of departure for some of their works.

¹ Since a compilation of this type did not exist before, Ovid is considered its creator. Although, Propertius, in the third poem of his Book IV, wrote an elegy in a letter form whose sender was a woman. Furthermore, its tone was much the same as the *Heroides*.

In the present study, Suzanne Hagedorn focuses on some medieval oeuvres where abandoned women are represented and analyses them, highlighting the Ovidian letters' influence. Having published widely, *Abandoned Women* is the first extended essay where Professor Hagedorn displays brilliantly every noticeable and intertextual connection among the aforementioned medieval authors and their classical predecessors, especially Ovid, Virgil and Statius. She is particularly keen on the way Ovid and his medieval adapters questioned the values of the male oriented epic world and its individual heroism, owing to the fact that these epic heroes, searching for glory and fame, abandoned and deceived their wives and lovers. Dante, Chaucer and Boccaccio disguised, occasionally, as classical and mythological women (what Elizabeth Harvey and Lynn Enterline call 'transvestite ventriloquism'²) and complained about their pain and suffering, asking the deceitful lovers for their return as well as readers' for their pity. Therefore, instead of focusing on the classical heroes' deeds and the aftermaths of their legendary journeys and constant comings and goings, the three great vernacular fathers emphasised the female domestic sphere, thus challenging those genres that commemorate male supremacy and traditional values.

One of the most interesting aspects Hagedorn addresses is the question of whether to emphasise wit or *pathos* as the main Ovidian aim. Offering a variety of modern critics' opinions, she defends Marina Brownlee's interpretation,³ originally based on Bakhtin's ideas about novelistic discourses, and states that 'Ovid's playing of various rhetorical styles and stylistic registers against one another destabilizes ideological systems and the conventions of the epic in a way that Bakhtin views as characteristic of the novel' (p. 25). Both Hagedorn and Brownlee accept these two apparently contradictory stylistic registers.

² Harvey, E. D. 1990: *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts*. Routledge, London.
Enterline, L. 2000: *The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

³ Brownlee, M. S. 1990: *The Severed Word: Ovid's Heroides and the Novela Sentimental*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

In searching for parallel works, Hagedorn presents a medieval anonymous poem called *Deidamia Achilli*. Deidamia, Achilles's wife, tells the Statius's *Achilleid*'s theme and story in an Ovidian style. This poem, written in first person and in an epistolary form, denounces Achilles for deserting his wife in a tone quite similar to that of the *Heroides*. Statius is a little-studied author nowadays. However, his *Achilleid*'s addition in the *Liber Catonianus*, a medieval compilation used in schools to teach grammar, makes us believe that he was a representative author between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. Statius's oeuvre is compared with Dante's *Commedia*, specifically *Inferno XXVI*. Both texts are examined step by step, focusing attention on every detail they have in common.

Dante seems to be influenced by Statius's sense of fraud, which appears to be a crucial theme in the *Achilleid* and is embodied in the figure of Ulysses in Dante's work. He is represented as someone who uses rhetoric to deceive people and whose ambition and individual heroism brought Achilles's family and the city of Troy to an end. Besides, Hagedorn concludes that Dante the pilgrim, who personified the *alter* Aeneas of Christianity, breaks out into tears turning the *Commedia* into a redeemed Christian version of the *Aeneid*.

Boccaccio's and Chaucer's descriptions of the figure of Theseus are analysed in this work, to show how both poets tend to avoid the mention of Ariadne and consequently, Theseus's betrayal. Indeed, Boccaccio in his *Teseida* does not refer explicitly to the famous abandoned woman or her brother, the Minotaur, due to his continual playing with time in the story. Nevertheless, he gives the reader some clues to make him or her notice that Theseus is not totally trustworthy. On occasions, Boccaccio finds some similarities between him and Dante's Ulysses, both for his relevance in the Theban conflict and for the desertion of his father, wife and son. Moreover, he shows no interest in women's wishes, as we see in his approval of Emilie's marriage, Ariadne's omission or Ipolyta and Helen of Troy's rape.

In his *Knight's Tale*, Chaucer rewrites Boccaccio's *Teseida* and Theseus is depicted as an old and wise man remembering his youthful imprudence. Still, he has done what Ariadne had predicted in Ovid's letter: memorialized the Cretan deed in his flag, forgetting about her aid and their love story, a fact that is highly suspicious. The knight maintains the male power structures of chivalry, just as Virgil had done in his epic masterpiece. Furthermore, to reinforce these structures, female voices are kept silence. In this sense, both Boccaccio and Chaucer apparently warn readers against the narrative persona's description of *buon Teseo*. They seem to say that it is not gold all that glitters.

Some of Boccaccio's minor works are also studied, particularly *Amorosa Visione* and *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*. They show how the Italian poet, in contrast to medieval moralists, does not try to impose any ethical burden on his readers' minds; he understands that there is a thin line between vice and virtue in human experience. For that reason, he scrutinizes classical tales of abandoned women and the way readers respond and identify with the *pathos* of these heroines.

In an attempt to imitate Dante's pilgrimage, Boccaccio begins his *Amorosa Visione* with a dream encounter between the narrator and a female guide. Against the guide's will, they enter into a portal where they find various walls depicting the Triumph of Wisdom, Glory, Wealth and Love. The wall depicting the Triumph of Glory was full of historical and literary figures and Laodamia, Deianira, Dido, Hypsipyle and Medea are among them. In the Triumph of Love, Ovid's influence is still more evident: we recognize the dramatic romances between Jason, Hypsipyle and Medea; Theseus, Ariadne and Phaedra; Deidamia, Briseis and Achilles; Phyllis and Demophon, Oenone and Paris, Laodamia and Protesilaus, Penelope and Ulysses as well as Dido and Aeneas. Their images are so vivid that they seem to be truly talking. However, it is the narrator himself who gives them voice and emotions. He becomes fascinated with all the pictures because he can feel the heroines' suffering. However, the guide criticises his interest in what she calls 'earthly

goods'. Hagedorn finds two meanings in their contrary reactions: the guide symbolizes those readers who consider literature must have a didactic purpose, and the narrator symbolizes those who creatively empathize with literature. On the other hand, his concern in *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta* is, precisely, that the female narrator participates actively in the heroines' pain. By imitation, she tries to be an abandoned woman herself with all it involves.

Chapter 5, Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde: Re-gendering Abandonment, concerns Chaucer's challenge of conventional gender roles of the abandoner and the abandoned, presenting Troilus not as the male traitor, but as the 'abandoned woman'. Both Chaucer's poem and its main source, Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, are influenced by the *Heroides*' description of abandoned women in different ways: Criseyde betrayed Troilus for Diomedes, just like Paris was disloyal to Oenone for Helen of Troy; parallelisms and allusions to the letter of Ariadne, Penelope's or Phyllis's can be found as well. Nevertheless, the most interesting group of allusions refers to the epistle of Briseis. Interesting enough is the fact that Chaucer's Criseyde directly relates to Homer's Briseis, as Boccaccio's Criseida derives from the character Briseida in Benoit de Saint-Maure's *Roman de Troie*; and Benoit created Briseida's story and adapted her name from Homer's Briseis. Moreover, both women have been used as objects and exchanged by men.

To conclude with her study, Hagedorn analyses one of Chaucer's minor poems, *The Legend of Good Women*, emphasising some ideas she had presented previously and relating them to this legendary catalogue. She applies Bakhtin's novelistic discourses to clarify the so controversial tonal shifts of the legend, as she did in her examination of the *Heroides*; and she questions the god of love's request, criticising his moralistic, conservative and simplistic tendency, as she did in relation to Boccaccio's *Amorosa Visione*'s guide. Both characters eliminate the intricacies of human conduct in a desperate attempt to follow a didactic schema. Far from it, Chaucer's narrator 'breaks off rather than ends'; he advises us to read another book and no moral is expected:

readers can draw their own conclusions. The persona of the poem, like the false men of his stories, deceives the god of love through his intentional manipulation of the events and of the heroines' traditional representations. He opposes the forced task of writing conventional stories of abandoned women as redemption for the revolutionary gender variation in his previous work, *Troilus and Criseyde*. In Hagedorn's words: 'Chaucer's mixture of wit and pathos in the Legend ends up being parodic, but rather than mocking women's suffering, he satirizes the stylized, monologic portraits of abandoned women in the literary tradition, which make them into exempla rather than fully developed human characters.' (p. 191)

Thanks to this original and well-structured book, we can see the European literary interconnection in medieval times through the voice of someone who loves literature and understands the influence that classical topics had on the authors at that time. We realize that the *Heroides* became the *locus classicus* for those medieval writers who wanted to portray abandoned women. For that reason, this accessible reading is particularly suitable for those interested in literature, the Middle Ages, the classical period and women's image in literary works.

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