

2008

Suzanne C. Hagedorn, *Abandoned Women: Rewriting the Classics in Dante, Boccaccio, & Chaucer*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004. Pp. ix, 220.

William Sayers

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/heliotropia>

Recommended Citation

Sayers, William (2008) "Suzanne C. Hagedorn, *Abandoned Women: Rewriting the Classics in Dante, Boccaccio, & Chaucer*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004. Pp. ix, 220.," *Heliotropia - An online journal of research to Boccaccio scholars*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/heliotropia/vol5/iss1/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Heliotropia - An online journal of research to Boccaccio scholars by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Heliotropia 5.1-2 (2008)

<http://www.heliotropia.org>

Suzanne C. Hagedorn, *Abandoned Women: Rewriting the Classics in Dante, Boccaccio, & Chaucer*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004. Pp. ix, 220.

This is an appealing book whose title may be more apt than the author had intended. The introduction situates abandoned women in medieval tradition, showing them to be less a literary motif, like the *mal mariée*, than a matter unto themselves, although here too almost exclusively literary. The touchstone is Augustine's youthful sympathy for the abandoned Dido of Virgil's *Aeneid*. But Augustine, too, forsakes Dido in his later spiritual journey. Reiterations of this will be multiple, intertextuality combining with what soon appears a cyclical, archetypal male act of betrayal. Ovid, not Virgil, will leave the more durable imprint on later authors, as a relatively limited number of heroines of antiquity progress from infatuation to despair in the works of Ovid, Statius, Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer.

After an informative "Introduction" that situates the book project in historical and theoretical terms, Hagedorn's first chapter focuses on the critical and, especially, moralizing commentary traditions associated in late antiquity with Ovid's *Heroides*, a determining text for subsequent elaborations. In the context of the dissertation from which this book is drawn, the discussion that follows of the eleventh-century Latin poem *Deidamia Achilli* would have been relatively fresh material on which the author could test and refine her critical approach. Here it slows the advance to more interesting authors and, like the full Latin text now given in the appendix, would have been better published separately.

The subject of Chapter Two is more of a construct than is the case in other chapters, as the author relates Achilles' abandonment of Deidamia at Ulysses' instigation in Statius' *Achilleid* to Ulysses' own neglect of Penelope. The summary judgment is that Ulysses' heroic rhetoric is essentially "empty and duplicitous" (19). Chapter Three situates Ariadne's abandonment in the background of both Boccaccio's *Teseida* and the *Knight's Tale* in Chaucer. The latter is seen to be the more innovative rewriter of Theseus' history, with its recurrence in two additional works, *The House of Fame* and *The Legend of Good Women*. Hagedorn places Chaucer last in the sequence of authors studied but also shows how he created for his female figures a complex "genealogy of abandonment" (19).

Discarded women move from background to foreground in Chapter Four and in two lesser works that came on the heels of Boccaccio's *Teseida*: the *Amoroso Visione* and *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*. Here, as elsewhere, Hagedorn provides a sensitive and informed reading of the original texts. Her exploration of the distinct but interrelated moralizing

<http://www.heliotropia.org/05/sayers.pdf>

and affective responses to the plight of the heroine(s) is particularly rewarding. Chapters Five and Six are devoted to Chaucer, seen from the perspective of this study as the rich and enlightened heir to a host of earlier writers. To illustrate the imbrications in these entwined works, Hagedorn writes: "Chaucer's Ovidian technique comes with a gender difference: although Criseyde's literary genealogy links her to Ovid's Briseis, the putative 'author' of *Heroides* 3, the abandoned Troilus most fully assimilates the behavior and epistolary style of Briseis and other forsaken Ovidian heroines, for his speeches and writings in the latter half of the poem are punctuated with allusions to Ovid's *Heroides*" (20). In the closing chapter many of the earlier treated heroines are pulled together in the ironic catalogue that is Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*. Our recognition of the ironic perspective is facilitated by the ever changing stylistic registers and modes of discourse. Chaucer's poetics here are revealed as more novelistic and dialogic than monologic (to use Bakhtinian terminology). The Dido of Chaucer is the descendant of those of Virgil and Ovid, and, at book's end, returns us to Augustine's youthful emotional engagement, now seen even more critically than in his *Confessions*.

The author skillfully elucidates how each successive medieval author takes an individualized stand on the traditional matter of forsaken heroines and is not simply ringing changes on a motif. None of the major authors is content to rewrite the stories in a new linguistic medium or new genre. Rather, plot lines are modified and authorial stances shift along a broad range between poles of sympathy and condemnation. Each writer not only distinguishes himself from his predecessors but also very consciously attempts to position himself on the field they create, in order to be foregrounded to the desired effect. Hagedorn concentrates more on authorial method than on the texts' possible freestanding — in the sense of a divorce from authorial intent — relationships to each other or on the multiple overlaid impressions that might have been made on a well-read British reader of the fifteenth century. At the same time, this concentration on writerly practice leaves larger authorial objectives insufficiently explored and the medieval authors less than accurately situated on the topic of male infidelity toward women in the larger context of the ideologies of their respective times. Some of this may be the consequence of Hagedorn's attempt at critical distance from Laurence Lipking's *Abandoned Women and Poetic Tradition* (1989).

While Hagedorn does not favor callous male lovers over the women they leave, she does seem to promote critical interest in the male author over the female subject. However interesting the twists and loops in the intertextual fabric, the summary impression is that grief over a lost love and a

<http://www.heliotropia.org/05/sayers.pdf>

Heliotropia 5.1-2 (2008)

<http://www.heliotropia.org>

life of loneliness is a unidimensional emotion that is hardly amenable to detailed treatment. Unlike the keen, which combines personal sentiment with the external matter of the deceased beloved or leader, the despair of these abandoned women is self-centered and, in this analysis or its absence, comes across as self-indulgent, both emotionally and intellectually impoverished. Trapped in sorrow, women seem incapable of psychological or moral growth. Having absented themselves from male desire, the victims appear to have only themselves to blame. Thus the heroines of antiquity, read in and through Chaucer, Boccaccio, Dante, Ovid, and Virgil, are repeatedly cast off: in their histories by their lovers, in their stories by their successive authors, and, finally, in their academic abstractions by their critic.

WILLIAM SAYERS

CORNELL UNIVERSITY

<http://www.heliotropia.org/05/sayers.pdf>