

**Uncertain Refuge**

Sanctuary in the Literature of Medieval England

Elizabeth Allen

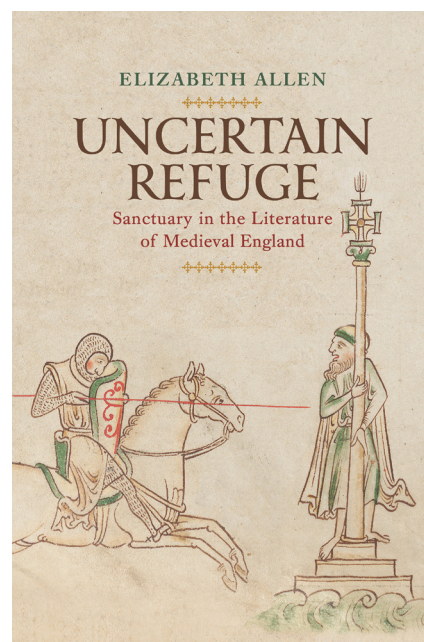
"Elizabeth Allen's *Uncertain Refuge* is an important, indeed necessary, intervention in the scholarly conversation about medieval concepts of sanctuary and the power they continue to hold today. By considering its cultural meaning and power, Allen brings a substantially different perspective to sanctuary in medieval England than others, greatly deepening our understanding of its significance."—Shannon McSheffrey, Concordia University

To seek sanctuary from persecution by entering a sacred space is an act of desperation, but also a symbolic endeavor: fugitives invoke divine presence to reach a precarious safe haven that imbues their lives with religious, social, or political significance. In medieval England, sanctuary was upheld under both canon and common law, and up to five hundred people sought sanctuary every year. What they found, however, was not so much a static refuge as a temporary respite from further action—confession and exile—or from further violence—jurisdictional conflict, harrying or starvation, a breaching of the sanctuary.

While sanctuary has usually been analyzed as part of legal history, in *Uncertain Refuge* Elizabeth Allen explores the symbolic consequences of sanctuary seeking in English literary works—miracle collections, chronicles, romances, and drama. She ponders the miracle of a stag's escape from the hunt into a churchyard as well as the account of a fallen political favorite who gains a sort of charisma as he takes sanctuary three times in succession; the figure of Sir Gawain, seeking refuge in a stark land far from the court and Robin Hood, hiding in his local forest refuge among his Merry Men. Her consideration of medieval sanctuary extends to its resonances in a seventeenth-century play about the early Tudor usurper Perkin Warbeck and even into modern America, with the case of a breach of sanctuary in southwest Georgia in 1963, when sheriffs took over a voter registration meeting in a local church.

*Uncertain Refuge* illuminates a fantasy of protection and its impermanence that animated late medieval literary culture, and one that remains poignantly alive, if no longer written into law, in today's troubled political world.

**Elizabeth Allen** is Professor of English at the University of California, Irvine.



The Middle Ages Series  
October 2021 | 376 pages | 6 x 9

ISBN 9780812253443  
Hardcover | \$59.95

ISBN 9780812298079  
Ebook | \$59.95

**Order online for a 20% discount!**

**Ordering from North America, South America, or the Caribbean?** Visit <http://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/16262.html> and enter promo code **FA21PP** during checkout to receive a 20% discount.

**Ordering from outside the Americas?** Visit <https://www.combinedacademic.co.uk> and enter promo code **FA21PP** during checkout to receive a 20% discount.

**Interested in an ebook?** Visit <https://www.combinedacademic.co.uk> and enter promo code **EB00KPP20** during checkout to receive a 20% discount.