

## Book review

---

### **PERFORMING POLITY: WOMEN AND AGENCY IN THE ANGLO-FRENCH TRADITION, 1385-1620.**

**Carolyn P. Collette**

**Turnhout: Brepols, 2006. 218 pp.**

**ISBN 978-2-503-51800-8.**

---

Carolyn Collette's latest book is the fifteenth publication in Brepols' *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts* series, whose overarching aim is to explore the history of women's contributions to western culture. This broad remit has seen the publication in recent years of works that both focus on individual women and their writings, and that explore the wider issue of women's place in a particular society during a particular era. Collette's study neatly embraces each of these categories and examines changing ideals of gender within the context of changing ideologies of governance and polity between 1385 and 1620. Its subject matter continues the author's research interests in women, language and power in the medieval and early modern periods; indeed, the book grew out of a number of essays on various aspects of women and polity within this timeframe that she has published over the last decade.

To the uninitiated, therefore, the scope of Collette's book might appear somewhat ambitious, with its chapters focusing on apparently disparate topics. However, the author's clever use of recurrent themes and strands of enquiry ensures that each chapter fits neatly into her overall discussion. Her analysis of women's roles in both French and English texts (including women-centred stories, prayer books, sermons and tracts) from the period serves to support the book's central contention, that medieval models of partnership and co-operation within both the private and public spheres were replaced over time by models of obedience, reflecting a concurrent shift in ideologies of women's place within these spheres.

While the scope of the work is ambitious and the discussion pitched at a fairly knowledgeable audience, Collette interprets her material with a deftness that engages readers in, and familiarises them with, a shared Anglo-French body of courtly and literary sources. Having established that the ultimate aim of the study is to "compare medieval and early modern ideologies of women's roles in the interwoven worlds of private and public action" (p. 1), the first three chapters examine such ideologies as evidenced in fourteenth-century French texts written either by a woman – in this case, one of the most famous female writers of the middle ages, Christine de Pizan – or by men, specifically Charles V's adviser Philippe de Mézières and the scientific thinker Nicole Oresme. Despite the differing backgrounds of their writers each text has in common the assumption that "women acted openly in the public sphere" (p. 5), a belief shown to have been reflected by contemporary English writers including Chaucer, with whose *Canterbury Tales* Collette, as a Chaucerian specialist, is on particularly familiar ground. Each writer highlighted "connections among virtue, marriage and the public good" (p. 41) and em-

phasised prudence as a particular female virtue necessary to ensure the smooth running of the household.

The continued importance of this virtue is a recurrent theme throughout the book, and was but one female virtue emphasised through the idealised figure of Griselda who, as Collette shows, remained a central protagonist of so-called virtue tales well into the seventeenth century. The Griselda story was essentially about marriage and individual obedience, but also how this had could – and should- be extended to the public, political sphere. Her patience and obedience were seen as exemplary and were “tied to social good as much as to marital harmony” (p. 61).

All in all, the first part of Collette’s study argues effectively that ideological gender roles expressed in late medieval Anglo-French texts did indeed provide women with both voice and agency in both the private household and the wider polity. The book then moves on chronologically to show how the acceptance of these ideological gender roles diminished in the early modern period through changes in the models of polity of both Church and state. Collette continues to draw on the writings of Chaucer, de Pizan and de Mézières, as well as the performance of the famous York cycle of mystery plays, in her discussion in Chapters Four and Seven of the place of the Virgin Mary – that most venerated woman of the period – in contemporary ideologies of women’s agency and polity. Mary is shown to have had a significant impact on the idealised female model, as her life celebrated women’s nurturing abilities and her position sanctioned women’s roles as mediators.

The importance of public intercession and women’s agency is perhaps most obviously exemplified in the role of the queen and this is explored further through two contrasting examples of English queenship from both the medieval and early modern periods, Richard II’s wife Anne of Bohemia and Henry VIII’s wife Catherine of Aragon. In discussing each example Collette shows how a queen’s position was negotiated within a culture “that both accepted and depended on the exchanges of intercession to achieve justice” (p. 121). She admirably re-evaluates the fourteenth-century queen Anne’s traditional role as a “solitary figure of little real power” (p. 99) and in so doing she adds to the wider debate engaged in by scholars including Pauline Stafford and John Carmi Parsons about the nature of power and agency exercised through medieval queenship. In Chapter Six, Collette draws explicit comparisons with Catherine of Aragon and the enduringly popular figure of Griselda, showing how the changing nature of polity concurred with changes in idealised women’s roles in both the private and public spheres. In addressing the important question of why this change came about, the author stresses the importance of acknowledging the “vital link” (p. 1) between women’s status and the political construction of individual relationship to authority. Thus the subject matter of her book provides a far wider scope than if it had focused merely on a change in expectations of gender roles over time, which itself sets Collette’s work apart from earlier interpretations of women’s place in medieval and early modern societies, whether in the public or the private realm.

The melding of the state and the domestic spheres is shown in the book’s final chapter to have continued into the seventeenth century with the rhetoric employed, albeit as a justification for monarchical absolutism, by England’s James I in his *Basilicon Doron*. This and other contemporary writings continue to echo the Griselda story, and “propound[s] an ideology of power and of obedience for all members of society ... bound to one another” (p. 182). By the early seventeenth century, however, the goalposts, crucially, have moved; Griselda morphs from her husband’s “surrogate and partner in rule” to a wife absolutely denied such a role (p. 183), thereby mirroring the shift in idealised presuppositions regarding the nature of both private and political subordination and compliance.

Overall, Collette's book has been exhaustively researched and her detailed analysis is sound. There is very little to fault in her study, although it should be noted that the author of an important recent study on Tudor monarchy is Susan Brigden, not Bridgon as the book consistently states. The question remains of how far the reality of most women's lives aligned with changing ideology during the period under discussion, with Collette concluding this to lie "somewhere between the paradigms of either the medieval or the early modern age" (p. 193). Her research leads her to suggest that early modern women may have been "less restricted" (p. 194) than contemporary ideology might lead us to believe and, in drawing such a conclusion, her study makes a significant contribution to the ongoing scholarly reassessment of women's lives and experiences during the medieval and early modern periods. She concludes by noting that "[d]etermining the scope of and sanction for women's agency in any one period has an effect on how we understand gender and polity in other periods" (p. 196). For this reason, even those readers with no knowledge of or, indeed, specific interest in the medieval or early modern periods will find value in Collette's important and engaging study.

*KAREN JILLINGS*

*School of History, Philosophy and Politics, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.*