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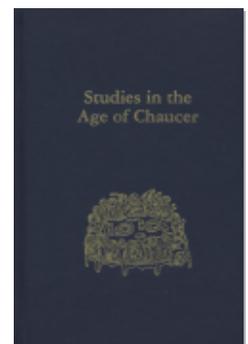
*Performing Polity: Women and Agency in the Anglo-French Tradition, 1385–1620* by Carolyn P. Collette (review)

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ness, masculinity, and Englishness—in other words, everything the city is not). This pair of essays inspires a number of questions both about this current volume and about our contemporary critical practices. Why is the idea of London currently (or recently) so central to Chaucer studies? Where does our interest in the city place us? And what, or where, might be next?

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CAROLYN P. COLLETTE. *Performing Polity: Women and Agency in the Anglo-French Tradition, 1385–1620*. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2006. Pp. 218. \$75.00.

Powerful and original in its insights, richly detailed and suggestive in its readings of individual texts, Carolyn Collette's *Performing Polity* will almost certainly become required reading for any Chaucerian interested in women's writing and history, late medieval political theory and its relation to literary culture, or Chaucer and French literature. It's impossible within the confines of a short review to do justice to the complex and various arguments of the eight chapters that make up the book, so I will focus my detailed discussion to the first three chapters as containing material most likely to be of immediate interest to Chaucerians.

Chapter 1 discusses how Christine de Pizan's *Livre des Trois Vertus* maps the routes to agency a culturally authorized social androgyny made possible for late medieval women. Even while the default template of action and being is male, and a woman must prove herself as an ideal woman, nonetheless, Collette argues, women, "particularly of the aristocracy and the merchant classes, regularly perform successfully as socially androgynous members of society who are fully able to step into male positions and roles, fully able to function as men" (p. 24). Thus, in order to act successfully as surrogate men, Christine advises women to use speech as an offensive and defensive weapon, to preserve the good reputation that will afford her power and leverage over others, to cultivate the foundational social and political virtue of late medieval French culture, *Prudence*. Exploring the social construction of gender as powerfully as she does thus allows Christine to articulate women's goals, prop-

erly defined, as social goals advancing the common good and to thus assert that “men and women demonstrate an equal capacity to engage in the same range of human activity” (p. 39).

Chapter 2 addresses the tradition of female conduct literature from which Christine’s more radical interventions develop, focusing in particular on Philippe de Mézières’ *Le Livre de la vertu du sacrement de mariage*. In contrast to Christine, and her emphasis on a female agency and access to power that could be constructed via a culturally sanctioned social androgyny, Philippe’s stories of married women center on the connections to be made among virtue, marriage, and the public good. Thus Philippe emphasizes the role of “*Prudence* as an important female virtue . . . in the private life of the individual woman rather than as part of the strategies that enable her public life” (p. 42), or emphasizes the Saint Cecilia story as an exemplum of marriage as much as of martyrdom. And his narrative endpoint, the story of Griselda, casts her as the most exalted exemplar of female virtue—greater even than any of the nine ancient worthy women—because she conquers herself and manifests an unwavering self-control. Philippe’s work, Colette argues, epitomizes a larger ideology of women as participants in shaping polity, one influential on both sides of the Channel, and thus one that “helps define the field of reference and the literary *sociolect* in which Chaucer’s stories of Prudence, Cecilia, and Griselda were written and received.”

Chapter 3 reads the late fourteenth-century play *L’Estoire de Griseldis* through the lens of contemporary French political theory, notably Nicole Oresme’s translation and commentary on Aristotle’s *Politiques* (completed at the request of Charles V). In a detailed and fascinating close analysis of the play, Collette notes that the play’s emphasis on dialogue and the scenes it selects for inclusion “re-presents the story of Gautier and Griselda within a wider social context than the terms of an individual, if exemplary, marriage found in most prose versions” (p. 62). This is accomplished through extended scenes of action and conversation between Gautier and his huntsmen and courtiers; through conversations between Griselda and a nurse that establish a context of nurture and maternal solicitude for Griselda’s virtue; through portrayals of the court as a chorus for an elite class with a particular interest in advancing the common good; and most important, through a pastoral motif established in the exchanges between two shepherds who abandon dreams of escaping their class like Griselda to choose duty and the care of sheep as their highest calling. Throughout, Collette traces the close correspon-

dences between these features of the play and elements of Oresme's political theory in order to demonstrate how "rather than being ends in themselves, the virtues Griselda manifests serve a greater purpose, the establishment of social harmony in a hierarchical yet integrated society" (p. 78).

Chapters 6 and 8 engage with the Early Modern afterlife of the Griselda story: first, with William Forrest's *History of Grisild the Second* (written during the last months of Mary Tudor's reign), which reads Catherine of Aragon's Griselda-like patient resistance to the tyranny of a Walter-like Henry VIII by womanly force of will; and second, with a series of Elizabethan and Stuart pamphlets and plays. The latter, especially, chart the shift in interest from a late medieval Griselda embodying the ideals of *Prudence* and constancy that Collette sees offering potential agency to medieval women to an Early Modern Griselda that emphasizes patient obedience to authority as the essential virtue of the good subject, a representation of woman now capable of responding to and helping to disseminate "an emerging Tudor-Stuart ideology of ready obedience in which previously separate spheres of household and state craft become conjoined in one model of absolute authority." A similar shift in the relationship of women and agency and the performance of polity is mapped in the discussion of the power of medieval representations of the Virgin Mary as intercessory queen, along with the agency gained through intercession by earthly queens such as Richard II's Anne of Bohemia, in chapters 4 and 5, giving way to the Protestant despoliation of the Virgin's power and celebration of her absolute obedience and abject humanity as simple womb receiving and giving birth to the Godhead (in Chapter 7's "'*Nowe leaft of*': The York Pageants of the Death, Assumption, and Coronation of the Virgin").

*Performing Polity* makes an important and substantial contribution to a growing body of work that brings together conduct literature, conjugality, the household, and political theory. Its picture of a vibrant and innovative social, literary, and political Anglo-French tradition developing in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries around women's agency and the common good should also go a long way to challenging some long-standing assumptions about where Chaucer's literary influences are derived.

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