Medieval Women and Their Objects
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Dedication to Carolyn P. Collette

Arlyn Diamond

The last king of Armenia, Christine de Pizan and European humanism, Anne of Bohemia and women’s political agency, writing and the public self, movies about invading aliens, Chaucer and Aristotle, Emily Davison and the battle over votes for women, the long life of Patient Griselda, medieval alchemy—a random and incomplete listing of subjects that have captured Carolyn Collette’s scholarly imagination and appear in her lucid and thoughtful body of work.

This volume honors not just Carolyn’s extensive scholarly corpus but also her own collaborative and communal scholarly life. Her openness to the ideas of others and her generosity in sharing her own efforts will be evident even in this brief overview of her major publications. Her collaborations with her colleagues Richard Johnson, Harold Garrett-Goodyear, and Vincent DiMarco; her team-teaching; her organization of panels and essay collections that enabled the work of younger scholars have all been sources of pleasure and profit.

When Carolyn and her late husband David bought a flat in the Northumbrian market town of Morpeth, they began their characteristically enthusiastic exploration of the area. Where most of us would have settled for a few good pubs, they found Emily Wilding Davison, the famous suffragette who died tragically at Epsom racecourse in 1913. Davison was an important figure in Morpeth, and her life has been the subject of numerous studies. Her writings, however, had been largely ignored. It took a literary scholar to notice this absence, and it took someone with Carolyn’s research skills and energy to produce the definitive collection of Davison’s work, In the Thick of the Fight (University of Michigan Press, 2013), placing it in the context of the movement to which she had devoted her life. In doing so, she restored Davison’s voice: witty, passionate, politically astute.
It may seem odd to begin a survey of the accomplishments of a distinguished medievalist with a book about a late Victorian political activist, but it illustrates Carolyn’s many gifts, including her wide range of interests and her ability to notice the obvious—which is only obvious once she has noticed it. The satisfaction she finds in archival research. Her ongoing attention to women’s voices and agency, a natural product of her own education and career at a women’s college. A commitment to semiotics. A deep affinity for the intersection of history and complex modes of representation. All of these can be seen in her recent volumes on medieval literature and history and are to be anticipated from her current research on nineteenth-century missionaries to Armenia from Mount Holyoke College.

Carolyn’s scholarship frequently reminds us that our readings of medieval works are inevitably too thin. We lack the dense web of juxtapositions, allusions, and intellectual systems that medieval readers brought to these works, and her scholarship, whatever the topic, scrupulously seeks to reconstruct that web—context in its richest sense. A useful and imaginative collection of readings for students, *The Later Middle Ages: A Sourcebook* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), coedited with her colleague Harold Garrett-Goodyear, reveals the wide interdisciplinary knowledge and critical understanding that underlie all Carolyn’s work. The success of this volume is due in part to collaboration between colleagues of long standing who have different disciplinary strengths, but due also to a common willingness to rethink the meaning of “sources” and the interpretive matrices in which they are read. Thus, for example, not the static category “Peasant” but the much more thought-provoking “Producing and Exchanging: Work in Manors and Towns”; not “The Rise of English” but “The English Languages.” Like her earlier collaboration with Vincent DiMarco on the “The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale” for *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales II* (D. S. Brewer, 2009), it is a valuable resource for others and testimony to her intellectual generosity.

Her first book on a medieval topic, *Species, Phantasms, and Images: Vision and Medieval Psychology in The Canterbury Tales* (University of Michigan Press, 2001), foregrounds the theories of perception and cognition that Chaucer relied on and thus reinvigorates a body of knowledge largely unknown to modern readers. Carefully tracing the development of a science and philosophy of vision from Aristotle through writers like Avicenna and the great encyclopedists, Carolyn demonstrates how *The Canterbury Tales* presents “a drama of perception . . . vision, imagination and understanding”
The unexpectedness of her approach and her willingness to engage with texts many readers have found unsympathetic, such as Melibee and “The Parson’s Tale,” form a consistent pattern in her work.

Performing Polity: Women and Agency in the Anglo-French Tradition 1380–1620 (Brepols, 2006) can also be read under the rubric of “reconstruction” of lost contexts. The product of her long thinking and writing about medieval and early modern concepts of the relationship between individuals and political authority, it addresses a broader range of writings than do her earlier works. The scrupulous readings, always one of her strengths, shape an argument about historical change, political ideology, and the construction of gender. “Real” women—Christine de Pizan, Anne of Bohemia, Catherine of Aragon—are situated within an international literary and intellectual culture that helps define their possible roles as members of society. Court cases, chronicles, plays, records of the cult of the Virgin, political and theoretical texts like Nicole Oresme’s translation of Aristotle are read against each other and against poetic texts to suggest the contexts in which women performed their roles as conscious social beings. The story of Griselda is woven throughout this study of women’s roles, her story a potent vehicle for exploring the knotty problem of the rights and limits of sovereignty and the nature of the public good.

Not surprisingly for a scholar interested both in the uses Chaucer made of a sophisticated international literary culture and in that culture’s depiction of women, Carolyn has found in his stories of famous women a rich field for exploration. The Legend of Good Women: Context and Reception (D. S. Brewer, 2006) is an important resource for students of Middle English and further evidence of Carolyn’s generative scholarship. As editor, she provided the inspiration for the volume and the energy and discipline to bring it to fruition. The essays themselves vary widely in approach but all share her interest in “imagining the collaborative and social dimensions of literary production in Chaucer’s world.” This anthology can also be seen as a kind of companion to Performing Polity, demonstrating through its multiple discourses that women’s lives, real or framed in seemingly stereotypical narratives, are compelling guides to the world that produced and consumed them.

Taking the Legend seriously as a topic for investigations informed by contemporary critical concerns, she shows in her most recent (and widely praised) book, Re-Thinking Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women (York Medieval Press, 2014), how this problematic and somewhat neglected work can be made vibrant again for modern readers. Her bold claim, that the Legend
is “a thematically and artistically sophisticated work whose veneer of transparency and narrow focus masks a vital inquiry into basic questions of value, moderation and sincerity in late medieval culture,” is justified by her success in giving life again to the intellectual and cultural milieu that produced it. In taking seriously the moral issues the legends and their protagonists force us to confront, she once more makes clear her personal investment in the complex intersection of fictions, ideas, and human experience.

In emphasizing Carolyn’s allegiance to the idea of an intellectual community, I do not want to neglect her role as teacher. Her first book, written with her colleague Richard Johnson, was a handbook on writing, with a telling title: Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Personal, Professional, and Public Writing (Longman, 1997). The claim in the introduction, that “presence implies commitment and invites conversation . . . matters of the deepest importance to anyone who writes,” could be seen as the ground on which her work is formed. “Anyone who writes”—it seems characteristic that her last class at Mount Holyoke was a writing class for campus employees. Even this overview, which leaves out so many articles and reviews and presentations, demonstrates her engagement with her subject matter; her dedication to intellectual honesty; and her desire to connect with her readers, fellow scholars, and students, traits that are deeply embedded in all that she has produced.

Many of the contributors to this volume could testify to something else central to Carolyn’s personal and academic life—the pleasure she takes in sharing her ideas and hospitality with friends. Arguments, recipes, jokes, resources exchanged and readings debated were often part of the genesis of her work, and they remain a source of her continuing joy in intellectual explorations.