

BOOK REVIEWS



Conduct Becoming: Good Wives and Husbands in the Later Middle Ages, by Glenn D. Burger. The Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. Pp. 262. ISBN 9780812249606.

Glenn D. Burger's *Conduct Becoming: Good Wives and Husbands in the Later Middle Ages* is an examination of a variety of different texts, written or compiled between 1200 and 1400, that all fall under the umbrella category of conduct literature intended for laywomen. Over the course of the first three chapters, he traces the development of secular female conduct literature from *Journées Chrétiennes*, devotional guides for laywomen; guides intended for noble women that mix devotional and practical advice, such as the *Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry*; to texts representing a more bourgeois background, most notably *Le Menagier de Paris*. In the final body chapter, he focuses on the story of Griselda as it existed across numerous diverse texts in the late 1300s. Through these texts, he explores the changing social view of married women following the confirmation of marriage as a sacrament in the early 1200s.

Taken together, Burger argues, late medieval married women were increasingly seen as a category on par with nuns or widows rather than as their moral or social inferiors. Married women—even those occupied with running a household—could engage in a program of devotions and improvement through the use of these very texts. At the same time, women as wives were not measured only by their religious devotions or sexual purity, as nuns were, by their position as objects of affection, as women in courtly literature were, or through their ability to produce children to carry on the line, as noble women had been. They were valued through their work in their marriages and their households. This extended not just to noble women but increasingly to bourgeois women as well.

For both noble and bourgeois women, Burger emphasizes the growing role of marital affection, which he defines as both an emotional bond and a sense of duty, carefully cultivated, binding individuals in an uneven but mutually

beneficial relationship. Just as women needed to work to improve themselves and their households, they needed to work to build this marital affection and, through that, strong marriages, families, and households. Marital affection was important in the discourse on marriage as the marital family was increasingly viewed as the cornerstone of society. In the early modern period, the concept became even more pervasive as the well-ordered state was understood as analogous to a well-ordered household, founded on the work and devotion of unequal yet equally integral parties.

In order to make these arguments, Burger weaves together medieval conduct texts with works of gender and cultural theory and an extensive bibliography of secondary scholarship on the texts. While his reliance on quoted material from these secondary texts seems heavy at times, pulling the scholarship together and drawing it into a single argument relevant to historians and literary scholars, those focused on gender and culture and on religion and devotional practices, is a real achievement. His argument shapes readers' understandings of the texts, of medieval women, and of the broader medieval understanding of the role of women in society.

The real contribution of this study is in bringing together and putting into conversation so many different and diverse conduct texts and the scholarship on those texts. These texts span place, social stratum, genre, and languages; Griselda narratives, alone, appeared in Tuscan, Latin, French, and English. Many of these texts, such as the *Menagier*, have been relatively little studied, especially in light of the copious and detailed scholarship on lay women in the later Middle Ages. And in the excellent scholarship that does exist, the texts have been examined largely in isolation from one another, in the context of the manuscript or time they appear in, rather than reaching across time and place, as Burger does.

This skillful combining of sources is perhaps most clear and appreciated in his fourth chapter, that focusing on the tale of Griselda. Modern readers who encounter this tale of a wife's silent endurance cannot help but be deeply unsettled by the apparent message of ceaseless devotion in the face of abuse so severe that even the medieval narrators of the framing texts remark on it. Nor can they miss the tension between the messages of the text and of the frames surrounding it. Further, this text was adapted by some of the most famous and well-studied authors of the Middle Ages, including Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Chaucer, among others. Nonetheless, it has received scant scholarly attention relative to its popularity—Burger's detailed and multilingual bibliography

includes only a dozen references dealing with the Griselda tale in any version—and the scholarship that exists tends to focus on one or another of the texts.

By contrast, Burger pursues the question of why the Griselda tale is so popular while also tracing the changes in the text and its meaning. Extensively examining four versions, and mentioning several others that draw on one of those four, he traces the tale's journey from an awkward fabliau in Boccaccio to Petrarch's Latin version, which fits Griselda into a mold used for ancient female models of virtue while also presenting her unswerving devotion to her husband in the face of suffering as a model of what his (male, Latinate) readers should aspire to in their relationship with God. From there, he traces the retranslation into the vernacular, this time in French, and the shift to a more feminine audience, with Philippe de Mézière's *Le Miroir des dames mariées*, which pairs the Griselda story with that of the Virgin Mary, suggesting that Griselda is a similarly unachievable ideal. He ends with Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales*, which is the most outrightly critical of Walter and his treatment of Griselda. While each of these tales is interesting in and of itself, brought to light by Burger's juxtapositions of these texts the arc of these various versions is fascinating.

This book makes numerous important contributions to studies of the evolution of marriage, the position of women in society, and women as readers in late medieval society. It also provides something much more unique by bringing these texts together and building towards a greater scholarship on conduct literature.

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