

Feminized Counsel and the Literature of Advice in England, 1380-1500, by Misty Schieberle. Disputatio 26. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishing, 2014. Pp. x + 224. ISBN: 9782503550121 (cloth).

COUNSEL, BOTH GOOD AND BAD, was topical in late fourteenth-century England with a series of political crises in which those in power were considered to be inadequately guided and governing poorly. The efficacy and implementation of monarchical authority was queried. *Feminized Counsel's* four central chapters explore these concerns in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women* and *The Tale of Melibee*, and Christine de Pizan's *Epistre Othea* and its Middle English translations. These texts are examined in relation to Latin and French sources, historical models, and literary topoi. Schieberle builds on previous studies of counsel to trace how authority is established for fictional female advisors and the interplay between these women counselors and the authors who give them voice.

Advising one's superiors, and/or the politically powerful, could be fraught with difficulty and required great tact and diplomacy. Queenly intercession and counsel from a female, which were perceived as non-threatening and therefore acceptable, presented such counselling opportunities. Indeed, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century authors drew upon many tropes and devices to deferentially proffer guidance. *Richard the Redeless*,¹ a text composed at the end of the fourteenth century, achieves similar outcomes to Chaucer's and Gower's female advisors, though employing a different stratagem, that of indirect counseling, in order to modestly proffer advice. Under the guise of advising the deposed Richard II, the poet offers guidance to Henry IV. Schieberle argues that the use of female intercessors likewise affords a means of critiquing and guiding eminent figures while appearing reverential. In addition, by aligning themselves with female advisors the authors were able to offer guidance, even on contentious topics.

For Schieberle Chaucer's *Prologue to The Legend of Good Women* analyzes gendered hierarchies and explores whether feminized behavior is indeed threatening or helpful for those poets/authors who wish to examine social and political matters (63). *Feminized Counsel* sees Alceste as liberating Chaucer, providing him with the freedom to critique undesirable actions and behaviors (77). It is irrational desires rather than gender that render an individual menacing (88). *Feminized Counsel* argues that Gower depicts the relationship between counselor and lord as one of balance, a harmonious marriage. In *The Tale of Florent* and the *Tale of Three Questions* Gower conceives of political discourses as feminine

and authoritative (24). Female characters become the media for dealing with difficult issues (26). Indeed, this device of aligning women with truth and counsel is evident in much late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century English vernacular literature. *Feminized Counsel* widens its net by examining the strategies of female writers and their translators and in the deployment of this tactic. It finds that there are parallels between Christine de Pizan's depiction of Othea in *L'Epistre Othea*, its later translations and adaptations by Stephen Scrope and the composer of the *Lytill Bibell of Knyghthod*, and the female intercessors of Gower and Chaucer.

Central to Chaucer's project in *The Legend of Good Women* is the debate as to whether authority or experience is of most value. Schieberle concludes that the logic of *The Legend of Good Women* aligns authority and experience, envisaging them as interwoven (91). This concern with authority is also to the fore in *The Tale of Melibee*, with its focus on "authoritative advice" (93) and the contextualization and analysis of proverbial wisdom. It is through the character of Prudence, Melibee's supportive, accommodating helpmate, that such redoubtable counsel is made possible.

Exempla feature prominently in these texts, ranging from Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, through Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women* and *The Tale of Melibee* to Christine's letter. The latter text has more than one hundred exempla each presented in tripartite form with a "poetic *texte*, prose *glose*, and prose *allegorie*" (143). The interpretative framework presents both a historical reading with concomitant chivalric, social, political and philosophical points of interest and a Christian, ethical appraisal.

Although the focus of the book is on the figure of the female counselor in late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century vernacular literature in England, its thorough account of the diverse sources and models used to conceptualize this figure and the manner in which authors aligned themselves with her will be of interest to those engaged with social, political, and cultural history, gender studies, and the ethics of counsel and truth more widely. The analysis of works by both male and female authors, together with later adaptors, insightfully provides an informative correlative to the notion of authority as masculine. Furthermore, the engagement of others with a text, for instance the fifteenth-century translators of Christine, illustrate the evolving counseling strategies dictated by changing audiences, remits, and societal values. The survey highlights how advice literature continued to be read and counsel to be reconceptualized. Through encouraging us to look at fictional females delivering advice in context, *Feminized*

Counsel endeavors to promote awareness of the liberating role of the feminine subject position in political situations and to foster a better understanding of the interconnectedness of counsel and truth, experience and authority.

Bonnie Millar

NIHR Nottingham Biomedical Research Centre, University of Nottingham

1. *Richard the Redeless and Mum and the Sothsegger*, ed. James M. Dean (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, TEAMS, 2000).