

Karen Green and Constant J. Mews, eds.
Virtue Ethics for Women 1250–1500.
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There has been a recent call for a resurgence of virtue ethics, not just within philosophy in general, but also within the anthropology of morality and the history of ideas, something of which the contributors to the volume *Virtue Ethics for Women 1250–1500* are aware. The collection is the fruit of a symposium on “Virtues and the Formation of the Feminine Moral Subject, 1250–1550”, which took place in conjunction with the 7th Biennial International ANZAMEMS (Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies) Conference held in December 2008 in Hobart, Australia. It aims at filling a particular gap: medieval women’s absence from the discussion of the history of virtue ethics. It thus examines medieval virtue ethics expressly from the perspective of gender.

Especially over the last few decades, Christine de Pizan has served as a source of inspiration for medievalists and various researchers to such an extent that one might wonder if there is anything left to say about her. Four of the twelve articles collected here address her writings. This is no coincidence: the editors, Green and Mews, have previously co-edited a volume dealing with the political thought of Christine de Pizan (*Healing the Body Politic: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*, Brepols 2005). Indeed, few medieval or Renaissance writers wrote more works on politics than Christine de Pizan, addressed to audiences at once popular and scholarly, male and female. As early as 1838, Raimond Thomassy demonstrated in his *Essai sur les écrits politiques de Christine de Pisan* that Christine de Pizan’s writings had a political and not simply literary dimension.

Virtue Ethics for Women 1250–1500 continues to touch upon Christine’s political ideas, but the main focus is on virtues in general addressed to women and written by women in the late middle ages and at the outset of the early modern era (or Renaissance, as the writers of the anthology seem to prefer). In addition to Christine de Pizan, the authors examined include Anne de France, Laura Cereta, Marguerite de Navarre and the Dames de la Roche.

Christine de Pizan’s *Livre des trois vertus* is scrutinized from different perspectives in the articles of Earl Jeffrey Richards, Karen Green, and Tracy Adams. István P. Bejcy concentrates on Christine’s *City of Ladies* [*Livre de la Cité des Dames*], contextualizing the discussion on virtues and gender within the contemporary scholastic debate. While a thorough analysis of Christine de Pizan’s ideas on virtues is welcome, exploration of women writers and scholars such as Margherita Cantelmo (by Carolyn James) and the mother-and-daughter pair Catherine and Madeleine de la Roche (by Catherine M. Müller) and texts such as *Speculum Dominarum* provide viewpoints on the less familiar writings around the theme.

Constant J. Mews’s and Rina Lahav’s articles on *Speculum Dominarum/Miroir des Dames* carefully demonstrate the intertextual nature and the web of connections woven in this genre. The treatise *Speculum Dominarum* was compiled for Queen Jeanne de Navarre (ca. 1271–

1305) by her Franciscan Confessor, Durand de Champagne, drawing heavily on Ps.-Vincent de Beauvois' *Speculum morale*, a compendium of ethics and moral theology, which in turn largely exploits the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas. Furthermore, one of the starting points (as well as one of the research results) of the volume and something the contributors attempt to show is that *Speculum Dominarum*, or rather its more popular French translation *Miroir des Dames*, circulated in the courtly milieu that nurtured Christine de Pizan and thus possibly influenced her conception of virtues. Janice Pinder focuses on the vernacular version(s) of the text, *Miroir des Dames*, but neither her article nor the others ruminate on the assumed gendered use of languages.

From the twelfth century onwards, the discussion of virtues flourished in vernacular literature. Similarly, virtues of different groups such as artisans, merchants, clergy, nobles, peasants and women had been increasingly discussed since the thirteenth century. It has been frequently maintained that there was a close, perhaps even causal relationship between women and the beginnings of vernacular literacy. This conception has often led to the assumption that vernacular writing was generally intended for a female audience. According to some recent views (e.g., Sara S. Poor's studies on gender and writing in the Middle ages), the relationship between vernacular and supposedly male-dominated, masculine-coded Latinate culture cannot be so simply determined, but the complexity of this relationship should be determined in each specific context.

The anthology also includes two art historians' papers on manuscript illuminations: While Cécile Quentel-Touche discusses images in which Queen Jeanne de Bourbon (1338–1378) is often represented as expressing the virtues of listening and learning, Anne-Marie Legaré introduces us to a late-fifteenth-century manuscript that illustrates the entry into Brussels of Joanna of Castile (1479–1555), later called Joanna the Mad. Connections to Christine de Pizan are interesting, but more or less speculative, which is inevitable when sources are lacking or they are fragmentary. The reader appreciates that some specimen images are provided but, if I am allowed to complain, their quality is customarily the same: grey and small in size, which does not do justice to the brilliantly colourful and detailed illustrations.

In general, the collection contains a lot of detail, which can be regarded as an advantage and is well worth careful attention. In this abundance, some lapses occur. There are few factual errors, though Christina of Sweden should have been dated to the seventeenth, not the sixteenth century (22) and Old French in Gerson's times (89) sounds odd instead of Middle French (though the latter notion derives from a reference, not the author).

I particularly appreciated and enjoyed István Bejczy's masterly chapter on Christine de Pizan in the scholastic framework and Karen Green's balanced piece on the comparison of *Miroir de dames* and *Livre des trois vertus*. Earl Jeffrey Richards's theses and arguments on Christine de Pizan's and Jean Gerson's intellectual and spiritual friendship are interesting and convincing. R. Natacha Amendola's chapter, which pairs textiles and text in Laura Cereta's writing, offers the most refreshing, thoughtful, and well-documented interpretation.

Examining and conceptualizing virtues, contextualizing these discussions as well as demonstrating their interrelatedness, constitute the best offering of the book. Gathered together, they provide an exhaustive perspective on the discourse concerning virtues and elite at that time

around French, Northern Italian and Burgundian courts. The elite nature of court circles and other upper class milieus to which these writings, their authors and audience principally belong, is, however, not discussed. Yet through the exposed virtue discussions it becomes evident that the texts under consideration belong widely to the shared literary tradition and even to the same textual community.

Neither is the choice of temporary focus on 1250–1500 sufficiently explained. The same goes for passages, developments, and changes between what is characterized as medieval and Renaissance. As a historian, I felt slightly uncomfortable that terms such as humanism or Renaissance were never defined and what I took was the expectation that readers should content themselves with a broad notion of assumed transitions and renewals between medieval and early modern Europe.

In sum, the collection rises above earlier discussions of the relative virtues of men and women in positioning the ethical ideas on how late-medieval women understood virtues and were represented by others as virtuous subjects.

Susanna Niiranen

University of Jyväskylä