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Kathleen Ashley and Robert L. A. Clark, Eds., *Medieval Conduct*. Medieval Cultures, no. 29. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. xx + 241 pp. Notes, list of contributors, and index. \$54.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8166-3575-7; \$19.95 (pb). ISBN 0-8166-3576-5.

Review by Cordelia Beattie, University of Edinburgh.

This coherent collection of essays tackles the question of conduct largely through analysis of "conduct" literature. Building on French scholarship, which widened the focus from 'courtesy' texts teaching courtly etiquette to all didactic literature including mirrors and *exempla* collections, the editors Kathleen Ashley and Robert Clark apply the adjective "conduct" to any written text that systematized a society's codes of behaviour (p. x). The only essay which perhaps uses the term differently is the final one in the collection, Ruth Nissé's "Grace Under Pressure: Conduct and Representation in the Norwich Heresy Trials." Nissé uses heresy trial records to analyse the Lollards' new concept of devotional conduct. However, in approach her essay fits in well, as many of the authors wrestle with how to get at lived practice from what is prescribed in their texts. The theorists that many of the contributors use in their quest for practice are Michel de Certeau and Pierre Bourdieu.

The focus of the volume is the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and texts from England, France, Germany, and Italy are all considered. This range is one of the strengths of the collection, as *exempla* and whole texts circulated across those countries' borders. The proliferation of didactic literature in this period, across Europe, is linked by many of the contributors to a changing social and religious context. As the editors note, in a "period of flux, conduct provided a guide for literate readers to negotiate new sets of social possibilities" (p. x). The importance of class is one of the themes that runs through the volume, as is gender; the editors credit women's history with intensifying interest in conduct books in recent years. While there are such common themes, each essay nevertheless represents a particular approach or a detailed study of a particular text that will be of specialist interest. I shall therefore briefly outline the main points of each essay, while drawing attention to common themes and approaches.

The first two essays, by Claire Sponsler and Mark Addison Amos, consider texts from fifteenth-century England, Lydgate's "Dietary" and Caxton's *Book of Courtesy*, respectively. These have traditionally been regarded as "courtesy" texts, inculcating the etiquette of the court. However, both Sponsler and Addison Amos situate them within a period of social mobility and argue that the needs of a new group, the bourgeoisie, can be read into the texts. Sponsler, in her "Eating Lessons: Lydgate's 'Dietary' and Consumer Conduct," builds on Norbert Elias's study of early modern civility to show that changing manners were used earlier as a way of signaling status and apportioning power. As Lydgate's "Dietary" foregrounds private eating, Sponsler argues that it can be read in several ways: as teaching the bourgeois reader how to eat so that he could advance socially; as disciplining the bourgeois diet and so keeping this new group in their place; and as fashioning the bourgeois consumer with an ethos of private moderation rather than aristocratic conspicuous consumption. The essay is theoretically eclectic, but the works of de Certeau and Bourdieu are used most in reaching a conclusion that allows the consumer some agency.

Addison Amos names the same two theorists in the title of his essay, “For Manners Make Man’: Bourdieu, De Certeau, and the Common Appropriation of Noble Manners in the *Book of Courtesy*.” He situates Caxton’s *Book of Courtesy*, printed in the late fifteenth century, in a social context where traditional aristocratic identity was being undermined by an urban elite. He sees it as “a point of entry both into the issues of identity confronting these colliding classes and into the usefulness of these theories of modern consumption in examining medieval society and texts” (p. 25). In particular, Addison Amos uses de Certeau’s two broad categories of practices of consumption: strategic and tactical. Caxton’s *Book*, ostensibly aimed at educating aristocratic youths, taught noble behaviour as a way of distinguishing this group from any other. For Addison Amos, noble readings of such a text are conservative and “strategic” in that they support the traditional hierarchy. A “tactical” reading, though, must originate from a disadvantaged position as it invades a text and imposes a fragmentary reading. He argues that, as in Sponsler’s essay, the bourgeois reader can find in an aristocratic text his own class identity. In reading Caxton’s *Book*, the urban elite must negotiate their own experiences and an aristocratic text that seeks to exclude them.

The next four essays, while keeping class in play, add gender to the equation, either by considering texts that were aimed at women or by comparing conduct writings for men and women. Indeed, chapter six by Anna Dronzek discusses three of the texts mentioned by Addison Amos, including the *Book of Courtesy*, although she does not modernize the title. The essays by Roberta Krueger and Kathleen Ashley discuss related texts from fourteenth- and fifteenth-century France (both quote in French, though Ashley often does not supply translations). Ashley focuses on the *Miroir des Bonnes Femmes*, composed c.1300, while Krueger analyses *Le livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry* (whose *exempla* were largely drawn from the *Miroir des Bonnes Femmes*), *Le Ménagier de Paris*, and Christine de Pizan’s *Livre des Trois Vertus* (which Krueger suggests shows knowledge of the works by the Knight of la Tour Landry and the *Ménagier* of Paris; pp. 51-52).

Krueger’s essay, “Nouvelles choses’: Social Instability and the Problem of Fashion in the *Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry*, the *Ménagier du Paris*, and Christine de Pizan’s *Livre des Trois Vertus*,” continues the first two essays’ emphasis on consumption. Dress, like eating and manners, could be used to show social distinctions but was also seized upon by the socially mobile. Both Krueger and Ashley refer briefly to a historical context of social and economic change in late medieval France (pp. 54-55, 96-97). Krueger brings out—in a detailed discussion of what her three texts have to say about textiles—how, while “[w]ritten within different social venues, for diverse readers, and employing distinct narratorial strategies, these three books nonetheless intersect in important ways” (p. 51). She argues that, whilst all her texts might criticize fashion, by describing such new fashions in detail the works perhaps accentuated their desirability for readers.

Ashley’s essay, “The *Miroir des Bonnes Femmes*: Not for Women Only?,” also looks beyond authorial intentions in order to challenge the “party line” that sees didactic texts addressed to women as written by men to discipline women. She uses Bourdieu and de Certeau to argue that cultural practices produce meaning. Ashley focuses on one of three manuscripts containing the *Miroir*, an early fifteenth-century Burgundian manuscript, and traces its ownership up to the 1560s. By analyzing the “paratext” of this manuscript, the various commentaries and notations that surround the main text, Ashley demonstrates that it functioned at least partially as a *livre de raison*, a book to record significant family events such as marriages, and was also owned by fathers, sons, and daughters from two bourgeois elite families. She argues that the text was therefore embedded “within a dynamic of social advancement and family formation” (p. 95). Again present is the theme of conduct books as guides to upward mobility and also of a distinct bourgeois identity, here the female gendering of honour (which Ashley traces in the *Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry* and Christine de Pizan’s *Livre des Trois Vertus* as well).

The next two essays, by Ann Marie Rasmussen and Anna Dronzek, both compare conduct texts written for women with ones written for men, although their approaches are very different. Rasmussen, in

“Fathers to Think Back Through: The Middle High German Mother-Daughter and Father-Son Advice Poems known as *Die Winsbeckin* and *Der Winsbecke*,” spends much time outlining how German scholarship from 1845 to 1985 has affected interpretations of the poems. (She uses a different form of referencing to the other essays, having a bibliography at the end of the essay, presumably because so many of the works cited are in German.) The poem known as *Die Winsbeckin* had received far less critical attention and was usually seen as a text inferior to *Der Winsbecke*. The latter begins with a monologue from the father advising his son on how to live virtuously in the world, which the son then rejects, before the poem closes with the father’s praise for the spiritual retreat he and his son are undertaking. Much of the debate around this poem focused on whether the father’s narrative voice could be identified with a real knight, Winsbecke. Partly because of this concern, the first scholarly edition of the poem split it into two sections: *The Old Poem*, which consisted of the father’s monologue only and was deemed the original; and *The Continuations*, in which the son’s intervention and the father’s more spiritual advice were seen as the work of one or two later anonymous authors, possibly clerics.

Ramussen shows how a reading of the Mother-Daughter advice poem, transmitted as a textual dyad with the Father-Son poem in the three chief manuscript witnesses, can be used to challenge the association between the father of the poem with a knightly author and so the division of the poem into two. First, no one believes that the mother’s voice must be the product of a female author giving advice to a real daughter, leading to the question: “If *Die Winsbeckin*’s title came from a compiler, if its author was anonymous, and its female narrator a fiction, why could the same not be true of *Der Winsbecke*?” (p. 120). Secondly, in *Die Winsbeckin* the mother and daughter speak and respond to each other, resulting in a dialogue regarding courtly love, whereas the father’s monologue dominates *Der Winsbecke* (even with the son’s interruption included, since the son’s beliefs are then legitimated by the paternal voice). Ramussen argues that the co-transmission of the poems “suggests the manuscripts set these two genre-based horizons of conduct literature, monovocal advice literature and debate literature, in productive debate with one another” (p. 127). Just as Ashley argued that we should not view conduct literature for women only as evidence of patriarchal control over women, Ramussen suggests that thinking about conduct literature as a debate rather than “a monologue of received truths” (p. 127) might also be productive.

Dronzek’s essay, “Gendered Theories of Education in Fifteenth-Century Conduct Books,” aims for a broader approach by considering conduct texts which circulated in fifteenth-century England and looking for gendered differences. Her sample consists of ten texts for boys and three for girls. The social context which she briefly outlines is known from Sponsler’s and particularly Amos Addison’s essays (pp. 138-39; cp. pp. 23-30). Dronzek makes it clear, however, that she is concerned with authorial intentions rather than readers’ reception; making reference to de Certeau, much used by other contributors, she states that before we can look at “tactics,” we must know the “strategies.” Dronzek finds a number of gendered differences:

- i. The poems for girls are more aural, whereas those for boys have more visual clues, suggesting that “authors appear to have expected boys to read their texts, perhaps as they would study in a schoolroom, but anticipated that girls would listen to another person read the texts to them” (pp. 141-42).
- ii. The literature for girls uses a more experiential format: “[a]uthors invariably present lessons for girls through the device of a parent advising his or her daughters, a narrative device that is an exception in the boys’ literature” (p. 142).
- iii. Authors believed that girls needed knowledge tied to the physical so examples are frequently given, whereas boys could absorb information told to them in the abstract.
- iv. While references to physical chastisement appear in both, in the girls’ texts “[i]mages of violence serve indirectly to reinforce the explicit moral lessons of the text” (p. 146).
- v. Failure to act appropriately would affect honour or reputation but “authors constructed a woman’s reputation or honor as a function of her sexual behavior, whether or not her actual

transgression was sexual in nature. Men's honor, however, was a function of social standing and rank in the eyes of other men" (p. 147).

Dronzek ties all of these differences, with the exception of the first which stems from different schooling practices, to "the medieval view of the physical differences between men and women" (p. 142), that is, women are creatures of the corporeal world, whereas men are more rational.

While such a comparison of conduct material for males and females is long overdue, some of Dronzek's conclusions are overdrawn. For example, she only has three texts for girls: "The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter;" "The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage;" and *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* (an English translation of the French text by Geoffroy de la Tour Landry). One can see how this leads to her second point, that the literature for girls uses the device of a parent advising his or her children, but can as much be made of the fact that "How the Wise Man Taught His Son" is the only comparable example in the set of texts for boys? If authorial intention is being examined rather than readership, the inclusion of Geoffroy de la Tour Landry's advice to his daughters suggests that this "medieval view of the physical differences between men and women" is a pan-European one and thus would have to take into account texts such as Ramussen's *Der Winsbecke*. There are interesting similarities here, as Dronzek comments that "The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter" often appears in manuscripts with "How the Wise Man Taught His Son".

The use of *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* is further problematic since many of Dronzek's other points regarding the education of girls stem from this text which is very different in format from her other two texts. For example, regarding the third point (that girls needed knowledge tied to the physical), the only evidence given from the Good Wife poems is the physical figure of the mother, whereas all the *exempla* are from the Knight's text. The only convincing images of violence are also from the latter text; the argument that a comparison in "The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage" between women showing their legs and meat-sellers "conjures up the unpleasant image of dead animals and perhaps suggests that similar violence will occur to the daughter" (p. 147) is tenuous (or an example of the abstract thought process of which women were supposedly incapable).

The final point about women's honour being more bound up with the sexual has some weight in that the texts for boys do not discuss sexual transgressions. It is here, though, that we might usefully think back to the essay by Ashley, which examined the *Miroir des Bonnes Femmes*, the source for many of the *exempla* in the *Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry* (discussed by Krueger), from which *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* was translated. Ashley argues that the concept of female honour in the *Miroir* was more "broadly construed as virtue, good works, and proper behavior" (p. 97), and she also cites examples from the *Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry* and Christine de Pizan's *Livre des Trois Vertus*. Dronzek's essay, therefore, both benefits and suffers from following the previous five. Her stated intention to focus on authorial meaning is rendered problematic by its inclusion of a text which has been shown by two previous essays to have a complicated "authorship," even if we leave to one side Ramussen's caution about divorcing texts from their manuscript context. However, it is to the volume's credit that it brings together scholarship on, for example, French, German, and English texts, thereby allowing the reader to see conduct literature in its broader context and thus to question some of Dronzek's interesting findings.

The final three essays in the volume treat 'conduct' more generally, with Rondeau arguing that any historical text concerned with behaviour could be considered "conduct literature" (p. 186). However, these essays are all interested in devotional behaviour. That by Robert Clark, "Constructing the Female Subject in Late Medieval Devotion," analyses French devotional manuals written for lay women by their spiritual directors. He argues that, while similar devotional programmes were composed for men, "gender expectations can result in radically different interpretations of similar actions committed by women and men" (p. 162), and so we must take gender into account. In order to go beyond the texts'

representation of the subjects, he uses different theorists, including de Certeau and his strategies/tactics. Clark argues that the devotional guides often set up a tension between the active and the contemplative that has to be negotiated, thus impinging on the reader's everyday life: "[t]hrough these negotiations—actions carried out on a day-to-day basis, opportunities seized on the run—the subject of the text is in a very real sense fashioning her own conduct" (p. 178). Again we have the emphasis on self-fashioning that was discussed in the essays by Sponsler and Addison Amos.

The theme of self-fashioning can also be seen in Nissé's essay, discussed at the start of this review, with its emphasis on how the Norwich Lollards translated their rejection of the power of images into a new concept of devotional conduct. To do so, she compares their practices with orthodox lay conduct as set out by religious and craft guilds. Jennifer Rondeau, in "Conducting Gender: Theories and Practices in Italian Confraternity Literature," also looks at statutes. The clash she finds here is not between aristocratic and bourgeois values, a common theme in this collection, but between religious and commercial ones. Rondeau uses these texts, which object to the commercial activities through which members of the confraternities had achieved social prominence, both to show deep-seated social anxieties, and to suggest that these regulations were not meant to be followed. Again, we have the distancing of "conduct" literature from the prescriptive only.

The overlapping themes and arguments discussed in this volume signal the overall coherence of the work. Some of the contributors seem more aware of what is being argued elsewhere in the collection than others, and there are some minor stylistic differences regarding quoting original languages. However, that the scholarship on conduct texts from a range of countries is situated side by side is of great benefit for the reader, particularly when the author draws from manuscript material, such as in the essays of Ashley, Ramussen, and Clark. The volume should be of interest not just to those who work on "conduct books," but to anyone trying to negotiate the gap—which confronts both historians and literary scholars—between text and practice.

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- Claire Sponsler, Eating Lessons: Lydgate's 'Dietary' and Consumer Conduct.
- Mark Addison Amos, 'For Manners Make Man': Bourdieu, De Certeau, and the Common Appropriation of Noble Manners in the *Book of Courtesy*.
- Roberta Krueger, 'Nouvelles choses': Social Instability and the Problem of Fashion in the *Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry*, the *Ménagier du Paris*, and Christine de Pizan's *Livre des Trois Vertus*.
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