

H-France Review Vol. 11 (October 2011), No. 230

Cynthia J. Brown, *The Queen's Library: Image Making at the Court of Anne of Brittany, 1477-1514*. Philadelphia and Oxford: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. xi + 384 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$79.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8122-4282-9

Review by Elizabeth L'Estrange, Université de Liège.

Cynthia Brown's new study of the manuscripts and early printed books at Anne of Brittany's court follows hot on the heels of her edited collection, both of which place the patronage of and cultural activity associated with Anne, duchess of Brittany and twice Queen of France, in its wider context.<sup>[1]</sup> Brown's aim in *The Queen's Library* is to examine books as "virtual repositories of late medieval image-making in both verbal and visual terms" and as "cultural artefacts that embody signs of contemporary harmonies and tensions [...] that provide insight into how women's roles as political strategists and cultural figures were translated by and for those in their entourage and the world at large" (p. 7). Acknowledging the substantial amount of work that has already been carried out on women's libraries in the late medieval period, specifically on their devotional books, including Anne's own *Grandes Heures*, Brown's attention is focused on the "nondevotional books that figured centrally in the life of Anne of Brittany and her contemporaries" (p. 10). Through the books and manuscripts she considers, including descriptions of royal entries, catalogues of famous women, and Pierre Choque's account of Anne's funeral, Brown seeks in particular "to uncover the potential conflict that surfaced in male-authored, male-illustrated works for and about women" (p. 12). Her emphasis on "image-making" means that she often considers the texts alongside their woodcuts, illuminations and frontispieces as a way of exploring what she calls the "politics of the page" (p. 12). The book is illustrated with forty-eight black and white figures.

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter one, "Rituals of Entry: Women and Books in Performance" analyzes the way coronations and entry rituals were recorded in book form and how these "books in performance" [...] staged women of power (p. 20). This chapter includes discussion of the account of the queen's cousin Anne of Foix's marriage to Ladislaus of Hungary in September 1502. This account, commissioned by Anne from her Breton herald, Pierre Choque, "underscores Anne's personal interest in the commemoration of such royal events" (p. 27). Although the performances staged during Anne of Foix's journey to Hungary exalted women more than in Anne of Brittany's own 1492 Parisian Entry ceremony, Brown suggests that Choque's account also worked to eliminate any tension resulting from Anne of Foix's reluctance to her forthcoming marriage by carefully controlling and codifying the public performance of this ritual. Brown also discusses the Parisian Entries of Anne and her daughter Claude in 1504 and 1517 respectively. André de la Vigne's account of Anne's coronation and entry, presented to the queen in manuscript form (now Waddesdon Manor, MS 22) offers a "verbal reconstruction of events" which is "dramatically interpreted through decoration and page illustrations" (p. 42). She points out that the *tableaux vivants* organised by the city of Paris were far less personalised than those organised for her coronation as wife of Charles VIII, which may have reflected anxieties about Louis XII's divorce from Jeanne of France in order to marry Anne. The only theatre that appears to have had any personal allusions was the staging at the Painters' Gate, in which Anne was associated with five Biblical Annes, two of whom had difficulty conceiving. This suggests a concern with Anne's own failure to produce a surviving male heir in either of her marriages. Such civic stagings made Anne's maternal role clear, although as Brown also points out, the "abbreviated description of this entry theatre" in La Vigne's court-sanctioned account "underscores a distinction, if not tension, between the royal and municipal reconstructions of the queen" (p. 44). The similarities between Claude's own entry in 1517 and those of her mother underscored the way daughter replaced mother as queen, yet

the emphasis on visual allusions to fertility and childbearing in some of the theatres seems to have functioned to construct and confirm Claude's actual relegation to motherhood and thus her exclusion from political decision-making.

Chapter two, "Female Patronage and the Politics of Personification Allegory" explores how male authors and artists sought and praised female patrons through representation of women in allegorical works. Brown analyses works including Jean Marot's *Voyage de Gênes* as a way of exploring James Paxson's theory "that, as textual and fictional personifications came to imitate the forms of actual women, real women were increasingly treated like personified agents" (pp. 64-66). Brown first shows how, in the manuscript copy of La Vigne's *Ressource de la Chrestienté* dedicated to Charles VIII, the "queen's presence is reduced to visual and textual symbolism" (p. 69). Yet, Brown shows how the use of female allegorical figures in this book, especially the figure of *Magesté Royale* intended to personify Charles VIII himself, "transforms the socio-political tensions amongst French males at the end of the fifteenth century into an allegorical scenario dominated by women of power who resolve these very hostilities" (p. 73). Other books by male authors such as Claude de Seyssel's *Louenges du roy Loys XIIIe de ce nom* and Marot's *Voyage des Gênes* show how the king's military exploits and victories were celebrated in books offered solely to the queen herself.

In her discussion of the *Voyage des Gênes*, Brown reveals that the copy offered to the queen, illuminated by her favourite artist, Jean Bourdichon, "evoke[s] certain contradictions and ambiguities concerning the representation of late medieval women of power in French books written for and about them" (p. 88). Brown carefully explores this ambiguity through the crying, mourning, violated figure of *Gênes*, representing the city of Genoa which had been conquered by Louis XII. She shows how this depiction of *Gênes*, both in the text and in the images, functions as a way of commenting on, and controlling, women's traditional role as mourners. Furthermore, by implicitly associating *Gênes* (who is finally shown submitting to Reason) with Anne of Brittany, Brown suggests that this text is "the metaphoric narrative of Anne of Brittany's own political trajectory" (p. 100)—from resistant Breton duchess to subdued queen. Works such as Marot's *Voyage* thus reveal that Anne of Brittany "was an unintended target as much as an honoured recipient of the book that had been created in her name" (p. 107).

In chapter three, "Women Famous and Infamous: Court Controversies About Female Virtues," Brown turns to the "famous-women" topos which developed out of the popularity of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* and responses such as Christine de Pizan's *Cité des Dames*. Here, works by the same authors already encountered in previous chapters, such as Jean Lemaire des Belges and Jean Marot, are studied alongside those produced by other authors who sought the queen's patronage, such as Antoine Dufour and Antoine Vérard. A substantial part of this chapter is dedicated to Vérard's 1493 edition of an anonymous translation of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*, *De la Louenge des cleres et nobles dames*, in which the translator claims that Anne of Brittany inspired the translation. Focusing on the dedicatory prologues in particular, Brown shows how the translator constructed Anne as "an intellectual model" for "both ladies of the court and other females outside court circles" (p. 127). Yet, Brown also shows how the publisher was able to remove the original association of the text with Anne of Brittany in his editions for Charles VIII and Henry VII by manipulating the prologues and woodcuts. As with the manuscripts and books discussed in the previous chapters, Brown here again offers more a sense of the way male authors and book producers used the queen as a means to their own self-promotion than of Anne's own literary tastes and personal commissions. Even Anne's documented commission of Dufour's *Vie des femmes célèbres*, which appears to adopt a more protofeminist attitude than other *Defence of Women* texts, especially with its images of "military women," still offers "analogies between Anne and virtuous females of the past [that] were indirect at best" (p. 166). Brown's analysis thus draws out the ambiguity both of the relationship between the queen and her court poets and of the nature of the construction of the female sex by male writers.

The last two chapters, "Famous Women in Mourning: Trials and Tribulations" and "Women Mourned," offer a more subtle and original analysis of the construction and representation of noble women in books and ceremonies in the late medieval period. The books discussed in this chapter also allow for some additional discussion of Anne of Brittany's contemporaries—and rivals—including

Louise of Savoy and Margaret of Austria. In chapter four, by drawing on works such as Octovien de Saint-Gelais's translation of Ovid's *Heroides* and Lemaire de Belges's *Les Epîtres de l'amant vert*, Brown shows how the "imagery of sorrow associated with the French queen and her contemporaries defined and often confined women [...] [and] implicitly promoted long-held male-constructed images of women as vulnerable, powerless, and excessively emotional individuals" (p. 182). The text and images of Macé de Villebresme's translation of Fausto Andrelini's *Epistre...en laquelle Anne...exhorte de son retour le trespuissant et invincible roy de France Loys douziesme, son mary estant en Italie*, for instance, depict Anne as a woman in mourning that resonates with the images of Anne/Gênes in Marot's *Voyage des Gênes* discussed in chapter two. Although Anne's voice in Villebresme/Andrelini's text is that of a political advisor, this is still a "male-generated image of the French queen and her thoughts" which "projects the carefully controlled behaviour of a woman and wife of complete devotion to her husband" (pp. 210-211). As Brown acknowledges about many of the texts discussed here, "it is difficult to determine how direct a role [Anne] might have played in the construction of this representation" (p. 211).

Chapter five returns to the discussion of "books in performance" begun in chapter one, by focusing on the lamentations written around the queen's serious illness in 1512 and the ceremonies organised at her death in 1514, which were recorded and disseminated in illustrated books and manuscripts. Developing ideas in previous chapters on women as mourners, Brown again argues for the "ambiguous image of women" that issues from male-authored books about them, especially ones in which women are negatively associated with grief. In her discussion of Lemaire des Belges' 1512 *XXIV Coupletz*, Brown draws out apparent male fear of feminine grief and cultural malaise about the expression of masculine grief, suggesting how both were controlled and codified by an author like Lemaire des Belges. Even in death, Anne appears to remain the object of ambiguous male manipulation and control. For instance, although Jean Bouchet's *Epitaphe de madame Anne de Bretagne* gives the deceased queen a voice, this voice "emphasizes at greater length her two husbands rather than her own piety and economic prudence" (p. 267) and dramatically "emphasizes [her] [...] failure to produce a male heir" (p. 268). Anxieties about expressing grief and the depersonalisation of Anne's image are also evident in Pierre Choque's account of Anne's funeral, the *Commémoration de la mort madame Anne...* to which Brown devotes an important analysis. The popularity of this work, which was produced in multiple, personalised, copies offered to some thirty noblemen and women, "transpose[d] the public mourning of Anne of Brittany's death into a multilayered political and codicological drama with a personal touch" (p. 280). What also emerges in this discussion, as in those of other works by authors like Lemaire des Belges, is the male author's dependence on a figure like Anne of Brittany and in particular his concern for his own livelihood. In the case of the accounts of Anne's funeral, this even led to competition between writers. In concluding this chapter, Brown demonstrates how Choque for instance upstaged La Vigne by failing to identify La Vigne's poems in his copies of the *Commémoration* and by placing his own poem in the queen's grave, trumping La Vigne's own placement of a poem in the queen's coffin.

The strength of *The Queen's Library* is its bringing together, in a lively and interwoven discussion, a number of non-religious texts associated with Anne of Brittany, some of which are less well-known than others. The dominant themes of the book are male authors' ambiguity in their representations of women in the late Middle Ages and the way male authors used and constructed a figure like Anne of Brittany as a means of accessing the court and earning their living. Given that many of the works discussed here were made *for* or *about*, rather than directly commissioned *by*, Anne of Brittany, the reader has a real sense of the way in which court ideals were codified and performed and how Anne was transformed into an allegorical figure for manipulation. At times, therefore, the book seems less about Anne than about the men who solicited her support. Whereas Brown's analyses are close and excellent, a discussion of the way in which Anne made her *own* image, and exercised her own, albeit relatively little, power—and how this differed or not from the male-authored constructions offered to her—would have added another dimension to this already rich study.

## NOTES

[1] Cynthia J. Brown, *The Cultural and Political Legacy of Anne de Bretagne: Negotiating Convention in Books and Documents* (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2010).

Elizabeth L'Estrange  
Université de Liège  
[elizabeth.lestrange@ulg.ac.be](mailto:elizabeth.lestrange@ulg.ac.be)

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172