



Kyngervi



Opening Our Cage: Women, Power, and Agency in the
Medieval World, 500-1500; 16-20 May 2020

Raenelda Rivera

Kyngervi 2 (2020) 99–102.

Copyright © 2020 Kyngervi

Published in the United Kingdom

www.kyngervi.org



Opening Our Cage: Women, Power, and Agency in the Medieval World, 500-1500; 16-20 May 2020

Raenelda Rivera¹

Following worldwide travel restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the organizers of the *Opening Our Cage: Women, Power, and Agency in the Medieval World, 500-1500* conference, Dawn Seymour Klos and Samantha Sandy, opted to move the conference from a traditional university setting onto a digital forum. In doing so, their aim was to open the conference up to a wider audience by utilizing multiple online platforms, leaving all presentations available for open access to the general public, ‘beyond the elitism of scholastics,’ in perpetuity.² Each presenter was given the option to submit a paper to be downloaded for reading from the conference website or submit a video of themselves presenting their research to be uploaded to YouTube.³ Two papers were submitted to the website for download, while eleven presentations were uploaded to YouTube for open consumption on 16 May 2020. Questions were posed by email, on YouTube, or forwarded to the presenters to be answered, but there was also an option for attendees to ask questions via Twitter or to login to the two-day question and answer sessions via Zoom on 19-20 May 2020. Although there was no attempt to digitally re-create traditional conference sessions, the presentations and papers can naturally be grouped together under broad themes:

¹ MA graduate, University of Iceland; rjr9@hi.is.

² Samantha Sandy, direct quote during Zoom meeting, day one.

³ <http://openingourcage.webstarts.com>;

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqAZcFFmKNygMA3qjbTyDig>

agency-making in non-traditional gender occupations, persecution and resistance, and religion and power.

Anwita Roy, Melek Karataş, Mathilde Pointière Forrest, and Armando Torres-Fauaz all offered presentations which could be collected under the umbrella of agency-making in non-traditional gender occupations. Anwita Roy's 'Katherine of Sutton: First English woman playwright & a rupture in the Medieval misogyny' examined the abbess of Barking Abbey and her theatrical endeavours. Katherine of Sutton, the first-credited female English playwright, wrote and staged plays with fully female casts, flagrantly opposing the gendered theatrical conventions of the time. In doing so, Roy asserts that she was able to maintain her independent power. This presentation poses questions about the nature of Katherine's plays and their roles in further claiming feminine agency. 'Jeanne de Montbaston and the Bookmaking Women of Medieval Paris' was presented by Melek Karataş. This paper explained that bookmaking, although traditionally understood to be a masculine occupation, had a large network of women who laboured in all aspects of the profession. After detailing the various roles performed in the creation of medieval books, Karataş questioned the reasons that females remain unknown and uncredited, suggesting that there must have been a much larger number than are credited. The paper 'Wielding tools for agency: Christin de Pizan's pen and Joan of Arc's sword,' written by Mathilde Pointière Forrest, explains that feminine agency can often be the result of trauma or crisis. Using Christin and Joan as studies, Forrest explains how Cristin's occupation was the direct result of her own trauma and Joan's was due to crisis. She explains that both women could be considered to have been changemakers in their chosen professions and agents of inspiration to other women of their times. Armando Torres-Fauaz presented 'Key reforms and governance during the reign of Alix de Vergy, duchess of Burgundy (1218-1231),' which examined the improvements in ducal governance made by the duchess of Burgundy after her husband's death. Although the duchess's reign has been discussed by historians in the past, Torres-Fauaz makes the case that Alix de Vergy was not a

passive governess of the duchy, but a radical, insightful businesswoman who made changes which benefitted not only the title, but also her people.

The theme of persecution and resistance occurs in the presentations of Nicole Demarchi, Vania Buso, Audrey Covert, Caitlin Moon, and Rachel Davis. ‘A History of Resistance: Lombard Women and Frankish Men,’ presented by Nicole Demarchi, detailed the manner in which influential women and their families were criticized by the Church and their governments. She used the daughters of the Lombard king, Desiderius, as a case study to illustrate how women could use their power to oppose their oppressors and maintain their agency. Vania Buso’s ‘Bodies for Display: Women, Adultery, and the Law in Merovingian Gaul and early Lombard Italy’ presentation examined the manner in which sixth century Lombard women had their agency revoked and ignored when accusations of sexual misconduct were lobbied against them, including a comparison of the gendered penal system. She then explained the extreme actions that women would have to take to reclaim their power and agency. Audrey Covert’s presentation, ‘They’re Burning All the Witches, Even If You Aren’t One: Accusations of Witchcraft and the Danger of Female Influence,’ examined the political nature of accusation of witchcraft in the case of Jacquetta of Luxembourg and how this affected not only her, but also her family. Presenting a part of her doctoral dissertation, Caitlin Moon discussed the prescribed treatment of the female other in relation to Chaucer’s Wife of Bath in ‘The Wife of Bath’s Loathly Conduct.’ She drew interesting parallels between the Wife of Bath and the Loathly Lady, explaining why the socially dictated gender roles of the time could and, in some cases, should be broken. Rachel Davis’s presentation, ‘“Lock her up!”: The Imprisonment and Political Career of Isabella, Duchess of Albany and Countess of Lennox,’ examined briefly how the legal system was mistreated when accusations were cast upon women. Davis then turned her attention to the way a female could reassert her agency and regain her power after imprisonment, using the duchess as a case study.

Finally, falling into the theme of religion and power were presentations from both Catrin Haberfield and me. Catrin Haberfield’s presentation, ‘Speaking

or Spoken Through? Examining the Agency of Medieval Visionary Women,' looks at four case studies to illustrate how visions of light allowed women to reclaim agency and work autonomously in patriarchal societies by connecting them to divine light, thus making their personal power not only acceptable, but sacred. My own presentation, 'The Plant-bearing Figure: Accessing Liminality via Feminine Gender Role Adoption,' discussed the necessity of ritually adopting and performing feminine gender roles in order to traverse liminal states and obtain otherwise inaccessible knowledge.

While attendance in the question and answer sessions was small, its informal nature allowed for an inviting, comfortable exchange of ideas. The first day's Zoom discussion centred around gendered agency as it pertained to female suicide after rape, including response of the family left behind and wider community reactions to the family of the deceased, then the discussion turned to the Wife of Bath and how the bawdy nature of her story reflected the role of the female at various points in her life. Finally, the day's question session ended with a discussion of liminality and why *Yggdrasil* can be connected to the liminal and the feminine aspect of supernatural information gathering. On the second day, discussions covered traditionally masculine endeavours and how the medieval female might make a place for herself in such occupations, then turned to the role and reception of gender studies and scholars researching topics related to gender in the modern academic environment. Closing the conference, organizers Klos and Sandy expressed their desire to attempt to make this conference an annual occurrence and their hopes that they could find a way to meld this experience with a more traditional setting next year.