
Marsha Urban. *Seventeenth-Century Mother's Advice Books*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 206p.

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There are two kinds of academic books: those that have a theme or argument and those that provide new scholarly information. *Seventeenth-Century Mother's Advice Books* is one of the latter. Marsha Urban offers the reader an introduction to the social and political context of the advice book, a quick course in establishing printer's and compositor's manuscript corrections and evidence for the authorship of an advice book, *Age Rectified*, that was thought to be anonymous.

To understand *Seventeenth-Century Mother's Advice Books*, it is best to begin with the events that gave rise to it. Urban's story is a parable for scholars. While working in the British Library as a research assistant on the *Hamlet Variorum* project, Urban spent her spare time poring through the library's holdings of 17th-century women's manuscripts. To her delight, Urban discovered what she believed to be an original manuscript text, *Age Rectified*, attributed to Anne Brockman, in the papers of the Drake-Brockman family. Like any graduate student, Urban was thrilled to think she had discovered an unknown manuscript and began work on it. Then she was devastated when she later found a published 1709 tract called *Age Rectified or, some cautionary hints for the rendring [sic] it less obnoxious to our selves and others. Recommended to serious matrons. By one of the same sex*. Still intrigued by some aspects of the manuscript, in particular, "marked signatures, page breaks, consistent spelling corrections and sentence-level editing in a hand other than Brockman's," Urban concluded that these were the work of a printer or compositor preparing the manuscript for correction, particularly in light of the fact that the practice of the period was to return the corrected original to the author. Urban realized that she had established the authorship of the hitherto anonymous tract and found the subject matter for her dissertation. In presenting her findings to the reader, Urban divides her material into three chapters: the first provides cultural background for the discussion of the genre and *Age Rectified*; the second provides biographical background for Brockman; and the third provides the handwritten manuscript in tandem with the published tract to illustrate the fact that the changes in the manuscript are echoed in the publication.

Urban argues that *Age Rectified* is important because of its subject: women and old age. According to Urban, in the 17th century, the majority of works on "female" topics such as cookery, midwifery, and needlework books were written by men. Of the few advice books written by 17th-century British women (Brockman cites five popular advice books), only Brockman's *Age Rectified* is devoted to advice to women

on how to handle their children so that the women will be better treated when the women are old. Generally, in the 17th century, old age in women was a matter for derision and humor and it was a commonplace that older women could experience unpleasant treatment at the hands of their children. (I am not entirely sure that Urban's view of the situation of the older woman has changed in the modern period, but that is, indeed, another question.)

Seventeenth-Century Mother's Advice Books is not an easy read. It would have benefited from some editing. Its repetitiousness marks it as a quick revision of a PhD thesis—there are some spelling errors—and a careful reading of transcribed works would have solved some anomalies. (For example on page 157, in Brockman's poem, a word transcribed as "san," that makes nonsense of the first line, is obviously "saw.") Nevertheless, *Seventeenth-Century Mother's Advice Books* is useful to the scholar and is part of the scholarly reexamination being done by critics, like Susan Staub, who have begun to explore non-traditional works such as advice books to open up narrative theory. While cultural studies has broadened the scope of works that are included in the study of narrative, it has tended to be late in realizing the need to include areas relegated to women's sphere. Urban's work is a contribution to this larger effort. ✱