FEMINIST LEGACIES: FEMALE MEDIEVAL SCHOLARS AND THE ACADEMY

MEDIEVAL MARXISTS: A TRADITION

I use "tradition" rather loosely here, because I don't claim to have been directly influenced by any of the people I will mention, except for the first one; but I want to bring out some points of contact among these individuals and between them and myself as a Marxist medievalist, as suggested by Jane Chance for her Kalamazoo session (2000) in which a version of this paper was offered.

Karl Marx wrote about medieval economics, as he had to in order to document the development of mercantile capitalism during the High Middle Ages. These scattered items, collected by Eric Hobsbawm as *Precapitalist Economic Formations*, have been used by many cultural historians—Ernst Fischer, Arnold Hauser, Norbert Elias, Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel, Jacques LeGoff, Perry Anderson among others—and remain useful to materialist-minded medievalists. Marx well understood the radical intellectual and social innovations of the high medieval period (e.g., the Italian city-state) and admired high medieval culture. He paid tribute to Dante, concluding his preface to the first edition of *Capital* with a line from "the great Florentine" that might well have served as a life motto: "Segui il tuo corso e lascia dir le genti."[1]

The beautiful and erudite Eleanor Marx, Karl's oldest daughter, had close friendships with two important figures in nineteenth-century medievalism. One was the Marxist artist and printer William Morris, with whom she founded the Hammersmith Socialist League. Morris's prose dream-vision "A Dream of John Ball" and his *Kelmscott Chaucer* are probably his best-known ventures in medievalism, though his "Defense of Guinevere" also picks up the fashionable art-nouveau medievalism of the period, as well as its nascent feminism. Eleanor's other good friend was F.J. Furnivall, the famous editor of medieval texts, founder of scholarly societies including the Chaucer, Early English Text, Ballad, and Wyclif Societies, and organizer of what eventually became the Oxford English Dictionary. Furnivall was a militant activist for the rights and education of working men and women; he organized, he marched, he demonstrated, he led protests in the streets. Furnivall's socialism, unlike Morris's, was not of the Marxian revolutionary type, but rather the semi-utopian good-works Christian Socialism fashionable among English intellectuals at mid-century. Part of Furnivall's attraction to medieval literature lay in what he saw as its populist thrust; thus in 1858 he lectured on *Piers Plowman* "because of its sketch of working men in the fourteenth century," as he put it.

Eleanor doubtless took her dear papa to literary meetings, for he was a lover of romantic poetry and of Shakespeare's work. A private Shakespeare club grew out of Furnivall's larger Shakespeare society; it often met at the Marxes' house, and the two men must have met, there or elsewhere, for Marx described Furnivall as resembling "a pilgrim on the way to the Holy Land to seek St. Anthony's beard." Eleanor worked at the British Museum for the Philological, Chaucer, and Shakespeare Societies as well as for the new Dictionary. Among other items she transcribed the manuscript of the so-called Macro plays in 1881–2: the three fifteenth-century morality plays in the collection of the Rev. Cox Macro (*Wisdom, Mankind,* and *The Castle of Perseverance).*

I started reading the revolutionary classics as a graduate student in the Ph.D. program at Columbia from 1964–67. I had been active in minor academic ways and was fired in 1968 from my first job, at Queens College, CUNY, for that activity. I was then hired into the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge) remedial program at City College during the period of open admissions, then fired from that before I could start, along with the two people who had hired me—in short, blacklisted. So I had an enforced year off, which I used to become more political. I joined the New University Conference, a new-left organization in which I met the Progressive Labor Party, a left split from the Communist Party. PL provided an attractively militant pro-labor alternative to the rather flaky new leftists of NUC. But flakiness has never prevented anti-communism, and when NUC expelled PL in its own little witch hunt I went with PL as a sympathizer. I sold their paper, *Challenge,* in the garment district and cut my hair the better to do so: long hair whipped in the wind too much and provoked flirtation from garment workers to whom I wanted to sell the paper. One non-activist friend, Marshall Berman, was horrified: "You sacrificed your femininity to the party!" he gasped. I thought I had a better grasp on my femininity than that, so I was amused at his analysis. I should add that years later, when I sent for my FBI file under the Freedom of Information Act, I found all the most interesting parts blacked out: the parts that would have enabled me to identify the agency's informants at Queens, at Columbia, in NUC or perhaps even in PL.

With the help of my main PL contact, an astro-physicist, I began to read a lot of Marx, Lenin and other classics. I wanted to integrate this into my scholarship, and looked to Margaret Schlauch as a model. I don't recall why I chose her, but probably I had heard that in 1951, some 15 years earlier, Schlauch, a Communist, had left her job as an English professor at NYU and defected to Poland. Much later I learned that she had a number of reasons for going. Her sister was there, married to a Polish physicist who had just been expelled from Canada as a Soviet spy. In the U.S. of 1951, the cold-war anticommunist witch-hunt was gathering strength under President Truman; the Korean War was in progress;

Senator Joseph McCarthy was firmly in the saddle and the famous televised Army-McCarthy hearings of 1954 would soon transfix the nation, including me. Margaret's close friend Edwin Berry Burgum had just been fired from his position at NYU for refusing to sign the loyalty oath required of all public employees. Schlauch was about to be called before an NYU committee for interrogation; she too would have refused to sign and would have been fired, so her leaving was a pre-emptive gesture. It occurred to me recently that Schlauch thus re-enacted the scenario of her best-known book, *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens*, the doctoral thesis she submitted at Columbia in 1927. It is a study of the romance topos of the falsely accused noblewoman forced to flee her homeland. The difference, of course, is that the romance heroine returns; Margaret Schlauch did not.

In my search for a scholarly model, I read Schlauch's 1956 book, *English Medieval Literature and its Social Foundations*, and was disappointed. It juxtaposed social and literary data without tackling what I saw as the real challenge: to show the interpenetration of the two on the level of consciousness and style, even apart from explicit social content or message. For example, when Schlauch discussed the literary influence of urban growth and commerce in the High Middle Ages, she did so in terms of the exotic stories brought back to Europe from distant lands. Or again, she explained troubador poetry with a rather heavy-handed and unilluminating quotation about adultery from Engels's *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State.* I learned that this well-intentioned but schematic type of work was fairly typical of scholars sympathetic with Stalinist parties, and realized I had to go back to Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky to find out how to do what I wanted to do as a Marxist medievalist; that is, to work with subtlety as well as rigor.

A few years later—the early 70s, in Vancouver—I looked for a Marxist journal in which to publish, for at that time openly partisan work was not accepted in mainstream journals and certainly not taught in graduate schools. I found *Science & Society*, a Marxist journal in New York, edited by one Henry Mins. *S&S* took several of my long pieces, and eventually asked me to be an advisory editor. The journal, founded in 1936, has the longest continuous publication history of any Marxist journal in the world—now nearly 65 years. Among the responses I received from international readers was a congratulatory letter from Margaret Schlauch in Warsaw. In December 1974 she wrote, "I can only say that I wish [your article] had been available to me when I was writing my book (many years ago) on *English Medieval Literature and its Social Foundations.* I could have profited from your exposition in many ways" (personal letter, Dec. 11, 1974). In a second letter a couple of months later, Schlauch wrote that her book on Constance "stemmed partly from my commitment to women's rights and votes for women in the period before World War I. I was an adolescent then, but

I bicycled around in the suburb where I lived, getting signatures supporting an amendment to the Constitution of the U.S. that would give women the vote" (personal letter, Feb. 28, 1975). Furthermore, it turned out that Schlauch was a founding editor of *S&S*, and that the journal was an important outlet for her political writing. There, through the 30s and 40s, she published on topics both current and medieval, obviously understanding, like many before her and since, the contemporaneity of the medieval.

It is tempting to suggest that Schlauch's solution to the question of how to be a Marxist medievalist was to split the two functions, publishing relatively conventional medieval material in mainstream journals and hard political pieces in *S&S*. This would not be entirely fair, because she did, at several points, introduce a class or other political perspective into several of her books. Nonetheless, Schlauch's scholarship overall seemed to me to implement the typical CP strategy of the day: never reveal your whole agenda, keep a low profile, influence people gradually. This has not been my approach, for a number of reasons I haven't space to specify here.

But then, besides scholarship, there is political activism. One of my colleagues on the *S&S* editorial board is the indefatigable Annette Rubinstein, now 90 years old, who left the CP in protest against the party's self-liquidation into the Democratic Party. Schlauch was Annette's faculty advisor at NYU in 1925; later they became close friends and political coworkers. In a short memoir she graciously sent me, Annette tells this story, set in 1949, about Margaret Schlauch's practical medievalism:

> Vito Marcantonio, the veteran radical congressman, had decided to run in the mayoralty election, and I was campaign manager. We planned an early morning sound truck appearance at the lower west wide docks which were almost entirely worked by Italian-Americans. Since the 'shape-up' for the day's job took place at 5 AM, our meeting began at 4....Marc and I rode down on top of the truck, and as we approached the designated corner we saw Margaret chatting with a group of longshoremen. She had climbed the ladder and was with us before we could greet her. "Maggie" took over, said a few words of English then smoothly slid into Italian. When she ended her introduction of Marc with a quotation from Dante there was a roar of approval.

Annette continues with a poignant sketch of how Margaret Schlauch left America. She had invited Margaret to speak on "Homer and the Iliad" at a left-wing adult evening school, the Jefferson School, on a Saturday evening.

> Wednesday I received a note from her: "My dear Annette, I've never done this to a chairman before, and I'm desperately sorry to do it to

> you, but when you see the papers tomorrow you'll understand why I have to stand you up and why I couldn't let you know earlier." Headlines the next day told me that Professor Schlauch . . . had surreptitiously left the country the night before.

How was Schlauch received in Poland? She became chair of her department at Poland's top university in Warsaw, and had a lovely apartment of the type reserved for the privileged few, with a view of the river. Her letters say virtually nothing about politics or Polish social life generally; they were certainly subjected to the scrutiny of censors. So it is again to Annette Rubinstein's memoir that I am grateful for an account of Schlauch's "painful experiences during the first years" of her residence in exile:

> Her colleagues . . . thought her appointment had been made entirely on political grounds, perhaps even through Soviet pressure, and many felt that she was usurping a position which should have gone to an anti-fascist Polish professor. . . . Her first years were very lonely ones; while formal relations were always correct it was a very long time before she was invited for an informal meal at a colleague's home or included in any small social gatherings.

So I found that *S&S* had had a major medievalist as one of its editors during the 30s and 40s. I didn't know that Henry Mins, the editor I corresponded with, would provide another medieval connection. Mins had several brothers and sisters, all of them CP members or sympathizers. One of his sisters, Helen Ann Mins, was married to Rossell Hope Robbins, the well-known editor of medieval lyrics. Helen's bridesmaid had been Margaret Schlauch, and they were married by Carleton Browne, another famous editor of medieval songs. Henry Mins told his brother-in-law Ross about the Marxist medievalist in Vancouver, and I was invited to Robbins's retirement bash, "Chaucer at Albany II," in 1982. A few interesting things happened at the banquet. One is that Ross had asked for a medieval Latin grace before the meal, and everyone was asked to stand during this grace. Evidently he did not realize how many well-known American Chaucerians—including myself—were Jewish, and therefore did not stand. Another sign of changing times was Helen Ann's after-dinner address directed to the many women present, urging them to do as she had done in service of some great scholar and reminding us that (in John Milton's words) "They also serve who stand and wait." So it was a welcome surprise to me when I recently learned from a nephew of Helen's that she was the radical of the pair—though I don't doubt for a moment that Ross saw his editorship of popular medieval songs much as F. J. Furnivall saw his: as an aid to historical, radical and populist consciousness.

Those of you who knew Ross will remember how proudly he displayed the large medal he had been awarded by the French Legion of Honor; he always wore it over a black turtleneck sweater. It was given for writing, not fighting. As an army officer, Ross wrote propaganda for American troops in Europe, particularly on the subject of how they should interact with French culture. Helen Ann's politics were more pointedly left. During the Spanish Civil War she worked in Paris for the Spanish Republican government in exile. Back home, she organized New York City public school teachers into the predecessor to the American Federation of Teachers, at a time when it was illegal for public servants to unionize. Even much later, when I was at Queens from 1967–69 and the AFT existed, the City U. system was not yet organized. We (untenured faculty) had no voice or vote at department meetings; we had no means of appealing a tenure or termination decision, no maternity leave, no right to see our files, and so on. My involvement with a group of other new hires attempting to change all this led to my being fired in 1969 despite my publications and educational pedigree. This coincided with a major student uprising; my rehiring became a student demand; there followed an exhilarating and much-publicized several weeks of sit-ins and occupations on the Queens College campus—which is, as they say, a whole nother story.

In Canada, in the 70s, I sought out the organization closest to PL—the Canadian Party of Labor. I sold their paper in a suburb called New Westminster, in front of the Army-Navy surplus store, where people often told us to "go back where we came from" and on a couple of occasions tried to set fire to our armful of papers with their cigarette lighter. On the other hand, "socialist" was not a dirty word to many Canadians as it usually was in the U.S.—though by "socialist," they usually meant social-democratic. My reading continued, and the more I read of revolutionary history, the more I and CPL realized that I was not about to join any Stalinist organization, so we parted ways and eventually I joined the Spartacist League, a bolshevik Trotskyist organization, and sold their paper, *Workers Vanguard*, to students, longshoremen and the general public. During my first five years at SFU I was active on campus and in town, leading Marxist reading groups first for CPL, then for the SL, and organizing and participating in various demonstrations: on Chile, on campus cutbacks, etc. It is perhaps not surprising that I was denied tenure and fired, despite even more publications, including two books. One offense was precisely having published in *S&S*. With the help of many a student petition and sit-in, my job was eventually saved by the same university president, Dr. Kenneth Strand, whose policies I had so often denounced in campus demonstrations.

I was in the SL for about 5 years, and neither resigned nor was expelled—an unusual ending. Instead, the party left town because of priorities elsewhere, and

I chose not to follow, since I had a job and two children. When they left—about 1982—I had no money, no friends, no social life, and not a single dress. Demonstrations, marches, and meetings do not require a dress; people were either comrades, contacts or opponents; and as for salary, party dues took a large chunk of it every month. I had also not published much during those five years. Still, I always appreciated one of the party leaders, a former physicist, for offering me what he saw as a very generous leave of six months to write a book on Chaucer. I didn't take the leave or write the book.

To wrap up: this sketch shows, I hope, that medievalism need not be an ivory-tower pursuit—that by some of its practitioners it has not only been compatible with militant social activism but has sometimes even been co-opted to that end. I can't say that I have brought my medievalism into my activism, except insofar as revolutionary commitment resembles *caritas*, but perhaps it suffices to have done it the other way round.

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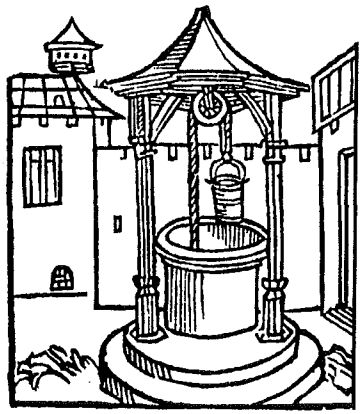
I am grateful to Alan Lupack of the Robbins Library at Rochester for sending me copies of Margaret Schlauch's letters to the Robbinses. Ross Robbins once asked me to edit this correspondence, but I was unable to at the time. I also appreciate the cooperation of Greg Finger, who supplied information about his aunt Helen Ann Mins Robbins's political life, and of Professor Jacek Fisiak of Adam Mickiewicz University in Posan, Poland, Schlauch's student and colleague. My research assistant Margot Kaminski has been an invaluable help in this as in other projects.

1 This appears to be an emended quote, for the first half of the line appears as "Vien dietro a me . . ." (Purg. 5.13) in John Sinclair's edition/translation (New York: Oxford, 1939).

2 And a writer of romantic poetry: cf. the City Lights edition, *Love-poems of Karl Marx* (1977), by Lawrence Ferlinghetti.