

"MINE IS LONGER": GENDER DIFFERENCE AND FEMALE AUTHORITY IN THE ACADEMY

"Just because I am wearing a dress, don't assume I left my dick at home."—Anonymous, *S/M Aesthetic*

When I began teaching as a new tenure-track professor thirty years ago, authority was the one attribute I seemed to lack, and it continues to be elusive. In my own experience, I have had to fight initially (and most explicitly) against the gender stereotypes of mostly male students at a mostly male southern institution that discounts female authority because the classroom is defined as a patriarchal domain. Later and more subtly, I came to resist gender stereotypes within a field and profession that continue to be dominated by men.

As the first tenure-track woman professor teaching in the English Department at Rice in 1973, for years I was confused with the secretary (and still am, if I happen to be in the department office when a student comes in). I sat through countless Graduate Committee Admissions meetings in which my colleagues made comments about the attractiveness of one or another graduate student applicant (based on the photograph we then still requested), in lieu of, or preliminary to, any discussion of her writing sample, her other scholarly skills, or her recommendations. My department chair at the time I was hired at Rice was dating an undergraduate; the most popular and distinguished professors (always male) at that time tended to date and marry female students. In 1973, there were only 19 full-time and tenure track women faculty, with male faculty numbering around 320. That this atmosphere had an effect on the perception of female authority, in and out of the classroom, was undeniable: one diminutive woman professor in what was then the equivalent of Computer Science was literally hounded out of the university because male students in her large classes hated her high-pitched voice. They gave her the worst teaching evaluations imaginable and sent in to the student newspaper anonymous scurrilous diatribes about her.¹

The construction of gender difference has affected how I have been perceived by others and how I perceive myself, whatever inner core of self esteem fuels my ambitions. When I was a very pregnant undergraduate senior semifinalist for the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and walked into my interview at Northwestern University, I knew immediately when I saw the ring of male interviewers I wasn't going to advance to the next stage. My balloon belly signalled, "Hey! Don't waste your money on me! I'm going to have a baby, and mothers don't make it through Graduate School!" It was 1966, when women didn't much go on to Graduate School, even in English. I had had only one woman professor as an undergraduate senior honors English major, the modernist comparatist Margaret

Church, who warned me and my English-major fiancé during tea that I could not balance marriage with a career as a professor, that I had to choose, as she had, *either* scholarship and teaching, *or* children and a husband. Indeed, even in Graduate School I had no women professors, not a one.

At the time I don't think this bothered me: I assumed that whatever gifts I had, they would be assessed fairly. I was not a feminist, didn't become a feminist, didn't burn my bra, and got through Graduate School in four years because, good girl that I was, my professors told me I had to. Of course there were disturbing signs of gender difference along the way: my advisor, later my dissertation director, once scolded me, after I told him rather excitedly that a Dante professor had asked me to be his Research Assistant, that I needed to learn to be more magisterial. Magisterial=*magister*: how could I, a mother and then single parent, be magisterial, signify mastery, except by virtue of what I thought and what I wrote, but not the way I looked? (Later, much much later, I understood that this man's seeming irritation over my lack of masculine authority actually reflected his fear that he might lose me to his colleague in Italian Studies—I was a trophy! A prize!) At about the same time, staying over at a graduate party one night, I woke up to find my clothing being removed by some bald professor I hardly knew. To be magisterial *and* safe from assault: there's the rub.

Why don't I have a beard? Why don't I have a deep voice? Ever since I became a college professor I have mourned the absence, not of a penis, but of those masculine badges that signify authority—the icons of beard, stature, deep voice that can resonate at the back of a lecture hall, pipe, tweed jacket with elbow patches. Indeed, according to Indira Karamcheti, writing in "Caliban in the Classroom" about the "minority professor, or those ethically different," authority is "the most elusive issue." She might have added "or any professor different from others in the majority." By "authority" Karamcheti means "the establishment of authority, of objectivity, of impartiality—that is, of those attributes traditionally associated with the performance of teaching."² Her solution? "If the minority teacher has traditionally been allowed into the groves of academe as a native informant, on the basis of the authority of experience, then the impersonation of the personal allows him or her the experience of authority" (Karamcheti, 146). The minority teacher's strategy of impersonation involves using the personal, what Karamcheti calls "the generic substance of the minority self," in courses or contexts where the personal is an icon of authority, for example, Neocolonial literature or the literature of resistance. By using such a technique, says Karamcheti, "Caliban can speak with the master's voice, perhaps even be transformed into Prospero." The specific requirements depend on acquiring certain skills: "Denying the visual evidence of race or ethnicity, this role insists on the authenticity of guild membership—card-carrying status in the

union of academic professionals, usually demonstrated, at least at the current time, by the use of complex poststructuralist concepts, language, and theory to analyze postcolonial, minority subjects" (Karamcheti, 143–4).

What is the equivalent strategy for a medievalist woman, given that authority in our discipline is constructed differently, perhaps because of the exceptional nature of Medieval Studies as a discipline among disciplines, requiring comprehensive knowledge of a broad span of cultures over a long period of time? To answer this question I can only draw on my own experience as a woman medievalist, given the lack of role models available in the early years of my career.

When I was a little girl and my family planned a party with lots of games and competitions, I wanted to win all of them. At eight years old I was small and skinny, a tomboy who liked to run, jump, and ride horses as well as play with dolls and make mudpies. My father cautioned me, however, that "I needed to let the boys win sometimes, because they wouldn't like me if I always beat them." That seemed the most ridiculous advice I had ever heard, and I made up my mind right then and there to win as much as possible regardless of the consequences. Indeed, after my mother had become very ill and died, and there remained of my family just my father and my younger brother, I became very much a tomboy. So much so that my grandmother, a very strict religious woman called in temporarily to manage the household and add feminine balance, insisted on my wearing a dress every day she was visiting us, as was only proper for a "lady." I much preferred wearing pants so that I could roll around on the ground or jump as high as possible without worrying about my underpants showing. The dress was a way of setting limits and controlling behavior—sitting with knees together, without jumping, causing noise, or knocking anything over, not getting it dirty, not wrinkling it. My way of accommodating my grandmother's nonnegotiable demand was to wear pants *under* the skirt, so I could sit or run or jump anyway I wanted.

Was I a little lady who just happened to be wearing pants, or was I a tomboy with a dress on top? If women move comfortably in a world where silence, anonymity, and the veil provide concealment of feminine otherness, literal or figurative, then for academic women, publishing work on women and gender must be surely equivalent to the Sabine women flaunting their genitalia to the Romans. Or is the dress the same as wearing a veil, just because, as a trace of difference, it marks the wearer as feminine? As Virginia Woolf so powerfully reminds us in *A Room of One's Own*: "It was the relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women even so late as the nineteenth century. Currer Bell, George Eliot, George Sand, all the victims of inner strife as their writings prove, sought ineffectively to veil themselves by using the name of a man. Thus they

did homage to the convention, which if not implanted by the other sex was liberally encouraged by them (the chief glory of a woman is not to be talked of, said Pericles, himself a much-talked-of man), that publicity in women is detestable. Anonymity runs in their blood. The desire to be veiled still possesses them."³

In line with my father's and grandmother's admonitions I have spent the rest of my life literally accommodating the demands gender places upon women while trying to win the games—negotiating a gender balance that is like walking a tight-rope. Unfortunately, however successful I have been at camouflaging myself as a Girl—protective coloration—(success defined as dating, marriage, motherhood and grandmotherhood), so that I could continue playing as a Tomboy, the world, and in particular the academy, or the Academy, has perhaps too literally read the “dressed up” / “made up” image I present to the world and disliked me for my successes (winning competitions, fellowships, publishing books, etc). Or perhaps disbelieved the successes, or any authority that might accompany it, because of the camouflage (the veil, the dress over the pants). That is, merely publishing more or achieving more than men have at a comparable rank—the “Mine is Longer” strategy—only exacerbates the problem of recognition of authority because gender difference is in this case translated into a trope and what is being impersonated is a male attribute of accomplishment. So—the greater a woman's scholarly success, the more severe her colleagues' reaction. They want to cover you with veils. Let me give you another example.

In January, 1997, *Speculum* arrived on time, *mirabile dictu*, bearing two very important announcements, at least for me. One was a small ad I had placed two months before announcing a six-week NEH Summer Institute on “The Literary Traditions of Medieval Women” to be held at Rice University in Houston that summer, to invite applications from interested college teachers. I was particularly delighted to publicize the Institute in *Speculum*, the journal of the Medieval Academy of America, because of long widespread concern among medievalist feminists that they and their subject had been excluded from the organization, and because the very directorship was a triumph for feminist theory and gender analysis of medieval studies and therefore, given that it was the only medieval NEH Institute awarded that year, a triumph within the most conservative bastion of male and ivy league scholarly privilege that still existed in America at that time.⁴

But in this same issue of *Speculum* was a wholly unexpected dismantling of whatever authority I had accrued by having been awarded the Institute: a truly hostile review of my book, *Medieval Mythography: From Roman North Africa to the School of Chartres*, published in 1994. The first volume of my life's work on mythography, this 730 page book had taken me from 1975 to 1992 to write and

encompassed two years of research at European libraries funded by prestigious grants, an NEH and a Guggenheim, a year in Princeton at the Institute, and many summers.

In fact, this book was a major scholarly success for me, garnering numerous honors, positive reviews, and prestigious invitations to speak. Yet my academic success clearly provoked a backlash within the bastions of the Academy. This review was so horrific that in its wake I received mail from friends, colleagues, former students, now professors, as well as total strangers who sent me their apologies on the reviewer's behalf. One respondent remarked, "I'm not familiar with your work, but I was so offended by the tone of the review that I decided to write to you. I have never read such an unkind and unprofessional review and I can only imagine that at the root of the *ad feminam* comments lies [the male reviewer's] wounded ego." I felt as though, once again, I was stripped of my masculine disguise (the pants) and effectively re-veiled as the dress-wearing unauthoritarian woman I so clearly am (no beard, no pipe). No amount of professional success prepared me for that kind of assault.

Unfortunately, my experience was not unusual. Generally academic feminism has come in for increasing attack. Nancy K. Miller, in *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*, has described this backlash as "important enough for the MLA Commission on the Status of Women to take up as an issue. . . .—a kind of critical misogyny practiced by women as well as men—that has been cropping up (along with gay bashing) in a variety of institutional contexts and guises. What should we make of this published violence against feminist ideology in general and individual critics in particular (ad feminam)?"⁵

What can we conclude from this? Women medievalists, if my story is any indication, might best reclaim authority by means of an academic economic product equivalent to teaching Neocolonial or African-American literature, the literatures of resistance and powerlessness. An analogous "impersonation of the personal," like that of the minority teacher, might involve the study of medieval women, but by means of the narrativization of gender. Miller notes, "Feminist theory has always been built out from the personal: the witnessing 'I' of subjective experience. . . . In literary studies, the works of pioneering feminist literary scholars. . . were clearly fueled by a profound understanding of the consequences of taking the personal as a category of thought and gender as a category of analysis" (Miller, 14-15).

I became a feminist and changed the direction of my research when I was asked by the (male) chair of my department at Rice in 1974 to create a Women's Studies course for our all-male department. Even though my field was Middle English

Literature, in 1975 I put together a course, "Images of Women in Literature," that focused on twentieth-century women writers. The more I wrote and taught about women, medieval or modern, the more I identified with them and became more indignant at their marginalization and exclusion. And thus I, as a marginal woman at Rice University, came to identify with those marginalized literary women and, indeed, all marginalized women, whether those few in other departments whose efforts to speak in department meetings were met with silence or ignored, or those marginal women like secretaries and other staff members with whom I was so often confused by students.⁶ I came to see gender as an obstacle, a wall, that results in a silencing and isolation, as well as a means of controlling who and what women are as individuals. From the seventeenth century, when sexual repression began, according to Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, it "operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know."⁷ Clearly the way around this is to speak out and to make known.

The work I have done speaking out and making known has garnered two awards, both in 1998, of which I am very proud, one, a Rice University Impact Award, for the empowerment of women at Rice, awarded on the basis of student nominations by the Women's Center at Rice, and an Award from the Texas Faculty Association acknowledging my contribution to faculty advocacy and faculty rights in Texas. I have also achieved these "firsts" as a woman, firsts that may not even be generally recognized within the Academy or within Rice University itself: I was the first tenure-track woman to teach in the English Department at Rice back in 1973. The Women's Studies course I created, first in the English Department at Rice, was mentioned by *Newsweek* and *Time Magazine* in feature essays on the 70s Renaissance in women's fiction. I was the first woman faculty member to successfully negotiate a maternity leave at Rice, in 1982. As a result of the fund-raising genius of Bonnie Wheeler, I moved TEAMS out of the Medieval Academy in 1986 and incorporated it as a non-profit organization, becoming the founding President of the Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages, Inc. My efforts at establishing a Medieval Club at Rice in 1981 resulted in the creation of the Medieval Studies Workshop and Program at Rice in 1989, which allowed for a medieval studies undergraduate major and which hosted biennial conferences in Medieval Studies, along with a speakers program. Consequently, a major donor in 1992 offered money to help fund future named biennial conferences in Medieval Studies at Rice. Because I was director of the program for the first several years of its existence, from one of the initial symposia I developed and edited *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages* (1996). My initial editorial in the student newspaper in 1986 about gender

discrepancies in faculty pay inspired a handful of women faculty, including myself as initial chair, to create a Rice Commission on Women. With the help of 150 Rice women faculty, staff, and students, this commission produced the first self-study report on women at Rice, in 1987. Because the big teaching prizes at Rice have always gone to (male) teachers of big classes, often in science and engineering, in 1995 I established the annual Julia Mile Chance Prize for Excellence in Teaching to honor women as teachers. The prize is named after my mother and paid out of my salary; the selection is made on the basis of nominations and teaching reports submitted to the Commission on Women.

We return in a sense to the strategy of mimicry and accommodation I deployed successfully as a seven-year old, the wearing of pants under a dress, but understood more figuratively. Like Foucault I am sustained by a belief that the empowerment of women lies in our very discourse about sex and repression, what he calls “*this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures, to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights*” (p. 7). If we look to the future as if in longing for this Garden of Eden so familiar to medievalists, then we as scholars perform an act that also replays those of the past. The beguine women of the thirteenth century were similarly examined, chastized, and prohibited from speaking, preaching, priesting: our past and our future come full circle. If these women become our subject, of us speaking in the subject position of the “little women” at the altar within the Church, or might I say, the Academy, we might rightly appropriate their style, by which I mean, their patience, daring, resistance, and faith, and by this means—let *them* empower *us*.*

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1 This section of the *Rice Thresher* of those days was known as the “Backpage” and originated in the lascivious scrawls and defamations inscribed on the backs of toilet doors.

2 “Caliban in the Classroom,” in *Pegagogy: The Question of Impersonation*, ed. Jane Gallop (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1995), 138-9.

3 (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1929; rpt. 157), 52.

4 One hopes that the recent changes instituted in the organization of the association and the politics of *Speculum* will enhance academic equity at all levels.

5 In *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), x.

6 For this reason, when the women faculty of the Steering Committee for the Commission on Women (which I headed) were considering whether or not to include staff women, or high-ranking staff women, in the composition of the first elected commission, I argued *for*, despite the separateness of our concerns and possible class issues, because discrimination against one woman is discrimination against all women. On the other hand, discrimination *by* a woman *against* a woman is not legitimized by the fact that she is female, an analogous mistake administrators often make when they select a woman for an administrative position and assume that her sex will justify any subsequent gender inequity in hirings or tenure and promotion decisions.

7 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 4. Later in the same passage, Foucault notes: "On the subject of sex, silence became the rule.... It would be driven out, denied, and reduced to silence. Not only did it not exist, it had no right to exist and would be made to disappear upon its least manifestation—whether in acts or words."

TACKING AND VEERING THROUGH THREE CAREERS

In the forty-one years since I graduated from college, I have had three careers: in medieval art history, in international relations, and in gender studies. These were not sequential phases, but strands that wove together, with sometimes one, sometimes another in view. Switching between them gave me room to maneuver in cultures that were not always accepting of women. I have to begin the story at the beginning.

At my all-women's college in Cambridge in the late fifties our conversation often turned to the nagging issue; could women have a career and marry? Many of us would have returned from a date to meet the midnight curfew (a few climbed in later, a few slept out, but the sexual revolution had not really reached us yet). We had few role-models for combining marriage with a career—mothers who did not work, supervisors who were almost all single. One idol fell: Elizabeth Zeeman, my supervisor for Chaucer who had lectured while pregnant in my second year and taught us in her home with the baby, was suddenly divorced and remarried, and the dons of Newnham seemed to shun her like a fallen woman. Her reincarnation of course was the Elizabeth Salter so beloved of medievalists at York and then Storrs Connecticut.

At the age of 21 when I graduated, I regarded marriage as legal prostitution. Like many of my "class of '59" I wanted to go into government service—we were the followers of Gandhi, the UNESCO generation. I set my sights on Africa (despite my disappointment with anthropology which I had read in my first year; I was irked by the British school's insistence on an "anthropological present" or status quo rather than a willingness to embrace change in societies), and attended a