

WORK IN PROGRESS NETWORK

This project is aimed at creating links between medieval feminist graduate students and faculty members working in similar fields since such links are often difficult to establish from the resources of a single campus. The primary emphasis will be on matching graduate students, particularly those at work on articles or dissertations, with those SMFS members willing to receive, and offer responses to, students' work in progress. To this end, I am compiling a list of potential readers, along with their fields of interest, which can then be circulated to SMFS graduate students through Medfemgrad (or by mail for graduate students not on the internet). Graduate students will be encouraged to make initial contact with potential readers, in order to agree on an informal contract in advance: this would specify first, how much material the reader might be willing to receive, and second, when the graduate student could reasonably expect a response. This is one avenue through which SMFS members can offer powerful support to graduate students and their work. Potential readers are invited to contact me, by sending either their names, addresses, and fields of interest for inclusion on the list, or any further queries about the project. Graduate students who would like to receive a list of readers by post should send me their addresses. Since this project is in the exploratory stage, comments, suggestions and questions would be most welcome from all SMFS members.

WHAT'S NEXT?

We have tried to schedule a meeting for SMFS graduate students and interested others at Kalamazoo on Thursday, May 4 at 5:30 in Fetzer (check your programs for confirmation of time and place). The agenda should include a report from the Work in Progress Network, but will also offer graduate students a chance to generate and share ideas about future projects, to become acquainted with one another at an early stage in the conference, and to become involved with what should be an exciting and empowering organization.

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“HOW DO YOU DO?” OR “HOW TO BE A FEMINIST MEDIEVALIST
ON THE JOB MARKET TODAY”



A lot of what takes place and what is at stake “on the market” these days can be summed up by the question of my title, “How do you do?” For that is really what faculties are supposed to want to know of the candidates they are considering: not just what sort of

intellectual field candidates claim to know, but also how they handle it, teach it—do it. However, in an economic climate causing many departments to trim costs by hiring candidates who specialize in more than one field, there is a sense that the questioners are nevertheless skeptical, that they place an increased emphasis on the how—i.e. how can you claim to be truly competent in this field and that one? When the two fields are Medieval Studies (in my case, Medieval German Studies) and Feminism, one senses not merely an undercurrent of skepticism, but even of incredulity—indeed, it is almost as if the question becomes rhetorical, for it seems to be automatically assumed that competence in one of these fields precludes competence in the other. To put it bluntly, philology and gender analysis just don't mix.

The assumption that these two fields are somehow mutually exclusive is not altogether surprising: medievalists as a group are generally considered to be conservative, both critically and politically, while feminists are by definition advocates of change. However, Judith Bennett has shown in her now well-known essay "Medievalism and Feminism"¹ that the perception of medievalism and feminism as an "odd and unwelcomed couple" is wrong, as well as both artificial and counterproductive.² In my comments here, I would like to expand on Bennett's arguments from my perspective as a graduate student and job candidate.

Bennett's assertions that feminist studies both have had and can continue to have a long and productive association with Medieval Studies are reflected in my own experience.³ That is to say, feminist concerns and issues have been an integral part of my medieval studies from the outset. My first medieval graduate course was a survey of Middle High German language and literature. Above all, I was fascinated by the idea that the texts we read in the textbooks were only approximations of an original, indeed, that with medieval literature the matter of an original written by an identifiable author was highly contested. In my first paper I wanted to focus on this textual situation and I chose to analyze the three major manuscript versions of a particular scene from the *Nibelungenlied*. The paper raised questions of dialect variation, manuscript transmission and textual reconstruction—all basic objects of philological study (i.e. traditional). But the scene I chose to examine was the final bedroom scene between Gunther and Brunhild in which Gunther, with the help of the magically invisible Siegfried, finally vanquishes his powerful bride. The main question I had was whether this struggle should be considered a rape. The existence of at least three slightly differing versions of the scene made the question much more intriguing: variations in the narrative, dialect and manuscript context pointed to the possibility of more readings as well as more complex readings. I was thus also able to speculate more generally on the representation and political significance of rape in these texts and contexts. What was really at stake in this scene, it seemed to me, was the control of female sexuality, a control that was a prerequisite for Gunther's continued and effective rule.

Throughout my graduate career, the study of medieval texts continued to be coupled with questions and issues pertinent to feminism. During a seminar in Berlin on the *Nibelungenlied*, I set out to write a paper on one of the standard research questions, that of Hagen's villainy or heroism. However, I quickly lost interest and turned to the equally traditional topic of the Norse and Germanic legendary sources. Rather than recount the various theories of origin and influence, however, I chose to widen the scope of the

earlier paper on Brunhild's rape, investigating what these "sources" added to the depiction of Brunhild as the locus of a struggle for political power that hinged upon the control of female sexuality.

During the same year, I participated in a seminar on paleography and manuscript study. In the second semester of this year-long course, each participant had to choose a manuscript from the voluminous collection at the Berlin Staatsbibliothek and write a detailed analysis of it, establishing its date, locating its dialect and script historically and cataloguing and analyzing its contents. The manuscript I chose, was a 15th-century devotional book containing a series of religious writings, parables, exempla and commentaries, which I became convinced had been the property of a woman and which interested me for its hints and suggestions about medieval women's piety and religious practices. Again, a standard philological project had led me to a feminist one.

Indeed, in retrospect, I find that all of the papers I have written in Medieval Studies testify to the possibility and productivity of such an alliance. That is to say, in my experience medievalism and feminism have always mixed.

Unfortunately, the assumption that "doing" feminism will necessarily detract from "doing" a thorough medieval study persists. Underlying this assumption are a number of seemingly conflicting and contradictory perceptions. First, feminism is viewed as one of many critical tools a scholar may or may not take up and apply to texts. As such it is deemed both dispensable and less legitimate than other tools. Second, feminism is understood not just as a tool but as an entire and separate discipline and there is a perception that despite economic needs for candidates with capabilities in two disciplines, six to eight years of graduate school can only *adequately* train someone in *one*—especially when one of the disciplines is the tradition-laden field of Medieval Studies. And third, feminism is perceived by many as neither a critical tool nor a recognized discipline. Rather it is seen as a political agenda that will lend the same "slant" to and thus always undermine the "objectivity" of a medievalist's work.

The challenge, then, is to realize that feminism can be all of these things—a critical tool that a medievalist can use in the interpretation of a text, a discipline from which a medievalist can borrow and to which she can contribute, and a politics, but one that is not necessarily dispensable, nor automatically detrimental to scholarship—that it is not only something that the feminist medievalist does, but part of who she is. The challenge is to re-evaluate the "how" of our initial question "How do you do?" If hiring committees really require candidates to demonstrate "adequate" coverage in more than one field of study, they should be wary of the tendency to raise expectations when a candidate claims to do so. But more importantly, the "adequacy" of graduate training should not be measured merely in terms of the coverage of this list or that canon, but rather *how* we work with this list, that canon, a discipline, a theoretical question, a politics. In graduate school we should be learning *how* to develop and write a literary, or critical, or historical study and *how* to teach. In other words, we learn how to be scholars, whether feminist medievalists or otherwise.

I would add somewhat cynically that as job candidates on a market trying to sell ourselves, we are not merely products to be purchased, but also processes. That is, we are not yet finished products, we have more to learn, and it is also for this reason just as important to consider how we work. If my process (my work) as a medievalist has been

consistently feminist, this does not in itself signify that I am not a scholar, rather it means that I am a feminist medievalist scholar, with all the productive contradictions that such a label implies.

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1. First appearing in *Speculum* 68 (1993): 309-331. The entire issue has been published as a book, *Studying Medieval Women*, ed. Nancy F. Partner (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy, 1993). Bennett's essay appears on pages 7-29.
2. *Ibid.*, 9.
3. *Ibid.*, 10-16.
4. It seems that the effects of the ongoing canon-revision debates have been decidedly lopsided. Graduate students are faced with ever more numerous canons, disciplines and lists (and I think this is a positive thing), but they are still expected to "master" these much more formidable (i.e. voluminous) lists in entrenched institutional ways.

THE MEDIEVALIST AND FEMINIST THEORY: PREJUDICES AND PROBLEMS



"She's supposed to be our medievalist, but all she wants to teach is theory." That comment, overheard at the MLA convention, summarizes many of the problems, real and imagined, facing the medievalist who has a serious interest in critical theory, feminist or other.

Most of the following thoughts are applicable to those who deal with theory of whatever orientation, not only with feminist theory. It is true, however, that feminists face special problems: many in our profession who are reasonably sympathetic to theory in general will still react with suspicion to feminist studies. I can find no explanation for that other than old-fashioned misogyny, but whatever the reason, the fact remains that the "medievalist/feminist/theorist" potentially has two obstacles, not one, to overcome. There are dual antipathies: toward theory (odd as it may seem in the modern profession) and toward specifically feminist theory.

Let me offer another anecdote. Several years ago, when I was interviewed at a major university, I was asked in all seriousness why it is that the revolution in theory and criticism that has transformed all other areas has left medievalists untouched. I tried to disabuse the interviewer of the notion, pointing out not only that many important theorists began as medievalists but also that every major influence, from structuralism to deconstruction to feminism to others, has profoundly marked medieval studies. He listened courteously, but I had the impression that he remained unconvinced.

The point of recounting the anecdote is to suggest that anyone entering the medieval field with an additional specialization in critical theory will encounter a variety of