

# COMMENTARY



THE following essay by Sharon Farmer is the second installment of a dialogue between historians and literary critics launched in the hope of mapping out common ground between feminists working in both disciplines. Responses to these essays, suggestions for other strategies of collaborative work, or other thoughts on the history/literature intersection are welcome and encouraged. The Spring issue of *MFN* will feature a "Commentary" essay on feminism and new historicism by Gayle Margherita. If you would like to join the discussion, please send your remarks to E. Jane Burns, Department of Romance Languages, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, 27599-3170.

## COLLABORATIVE WORK IN LITERATURE AND HISTORY: AN HISTORIAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON WHAT WE NEED



LINDA Lomperis' stimulating and intelligent essay in the last *MFN* proposes an agenda for medieval feminist historians and literary scholars to which I give my enthusiastic assent. The prospect of working in a truly interdisciplinary and cooperative manner in order to enhance our understanding of medieval women's self-consciousness as women (as feminists even), of female literacy and political agency, and of sexuality — both as practice and as cultural construction — strikes me as extremely exciting, and urgently necessary. It is time, in fact, for medieval feminist scholars to begin collaborating to gain institutional support for such projects.

I agree with virtually everything in Lomperis' statement, with the exception of her characterization of what is going on in the discipline of history. The hot debates in recent issues of the *American Historical Review* over the "new" history and the "old"; Peter Novick's widely discussed book on the "objectivity question" in history; and the discussions (many of them, again, in the *American Historical Review*) of history's "linguistic turn" suggest that there is a crisis afoot in the historical discipline, precisely because "empiricism and objectivity" do not hold the central positions that they were once thought to hold.<sup>1</sup> Both women's history in particular, and social history in general, have helped to stimulate the new debates and to disturb the defenders of objective history and metanarrative. The "new" history (whether defined as Marxist, in the classical sense, as feminist, or as "new cultural") is sometimes perceived as a threat to objectivity because those historians who have chosen to study class and gender structures, the voices of the powerless, and the role of language in the construction of class, gender, and power are self-consciously aware that doing history is anything but apolitical.

Medieval historians may be less self-conscious than their modernist colleagues about the political and theoretical implications of their enterprise. In this sense, I would agree with Linda Lomperis' observations, and if I do not think that all of her observations about my discipline are accurate, I would attribute the problem to the inherent difficulty

of venturing into the interdisciplinary realm. I certainly feel at sea when I venture into medieval feminist literary scholarship. And the richness of what I find there makes me feel extremely guilty that I do not read that scholarship more often.

Let me attempt my own description of what I think historians and literary scholars are contributing to feminism. I will then discuss some weaknesses in each of the two disciplines and what I think each discipline needs to learn from the other. In conclusion, I will offer some suggestions for further dialogue.

I would argue that the chief contribution of feminist historians involves the “denaturalization” of relations between the sexes and of definitions of gender.<sup>2</sup> Feminist historians have taught us that women’s place in society and society’s definition of “woman” have changed over time, and they have thus suggested that the way things are is not the way they have to be: just as the present is different from the past, the future can be different from the present. Medieval historians who have described and attempted to explain women’s changing status and changing definitions of gender (Suzanne Wemple, Jo Ann McNamara, Susan Mosher Stuard, Caroline Bynum, and Martha Howell, for instance) have tended to draw not only on the “theory” that gender is culturally constructed but also on the idea, first put forward by anthropologists, that the status of women in a given society is closely related to the relationship between the public and private spheres.<sup>3</sup>

Historians look for change over time, literary scholars usually focus on single texts. In some recent articles, medieval literary texts are “read” as reactions to or mystifications of specific historical circumstances that shaped women’s lives.<sup>4</sup>

However, most medieval literary scholarship has a more attenuated relationship with historical context. As far as I can tell, the central project for most feminist medieval literary critics involves either the “demystification” or the “deconstruction” of two sets of texts: those that constitute the “canon” or “great tradition” and those that constitute the body of accepted modern criticism. One key prerequisite for this kind of reading is an understanding of the complexity and ambiguity of texts. Feminist literary readings of medieval texts often disclose the multiple ways that women can be read and interpreted in the texts. And the corollary of that project is the understanding that while the literary canon may have worked in the past to perpetuate a misogynist tradition (especially when interpreted by misogynist critics), the misogyny of that canon frequently contains the seeds of its own subversion.

The historian’s “denaturalizing” project and the literary scholar’s “deconstructive” project have complementary goals and many feminists have come to recognize the value and necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of women and gender. Nevertheless, we almost always confront problems when we attempt to employ each other’s disciplines and insights. In a nutshell, each tends to flatten the other’s material. Thus, as feminist historians reading literary texts, we often want to read them for what they tell us about social reality, ignoring the fact that a text does not “mean” simply one thing, and that “woman” in a text is as much a “textural sign” as a reflection of an historical entity.<sup>5</sup> A second, and related, problem with historians is that we often have a limited understanding of the power of language. We espouse an interest in the historical construction of gender, but frequently come to the conclusion that gender definitions changed because social circumstances and arrangements changed — i.e., that in the end,

gender definitions are simply a reflection of material realities.

A problem with many feminist literary scholars is the reverse — they tend to ignore issues of change, thereby flattening history and essentializing gender, patriarchy, misogyny, the medieval church, etc.

Feminists in both fields certainly have something to learn from each other. Historians need to develop a greater sensitivity to the power and multi-dimensionality of language and texts. Literary scholars need to develop a greater understanding of the complex and changing natures of patriarchal and family structures, of relations between the sexes, and of definitions of gender.

But where can our historicizing and deconstructing projects actually meet? Linda Lomperis has made several useful suggestions concerning broad social and cultural questions we might ask together. I will focus instead on questions we might ask about literary texts in order to place them in a more dynamic, i.e. historical, context. First, we might attempt to ask how texts were actually read by medieval audiences. This would move us from the deconstructionists' understanding that Chaucer's texts, for instance, can and do have many possible meanings, to an historical understanding that his text, and its discussions of women, meant specific things to specific historical audiences. Such a project might involve looking at manuscript variations, illustrations, commentaries and glosses, reworkings of the text, or translations into early modern English.

Approaching the problem from the other direction, we could place Chaucer not only in the context of broad social developments in the later fourteenth century, but also in the context of specific discussions and debates in fourteenth-century England. This would require a broad reading of other texts — both literary and non-literary. There are, of course, good reasons why medievalists have been less prone to jump into this line of analysis than have Renaissance scholars: our texts are less accessible and we are dealing with several languages. Such work might therefore best be done through collaborative projects, involving, perhaps, a Chaucer scholar, an historian of medicine, and an historian of religion.

These kinds of projects — and I would hope to see them not only in the field of Middle English, but also in French, Italian and German scholarship — would greatly enhance our understanding of the construction of gender in the Middle Ages. Indeed, I am convinced that we cannot develop a sophisticated understanding of gender constructions in the Middle Ages until feminist medieval historians and feminist critics of medieval literature begin both to work together and to appreciate the complexities and insights of each other's disciplines.

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## NOTES

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1 See, for instance, "AHR Forum: The Old History and the New," *American Historical Review* 94 (June 1989); articles by John Toews, David Harlan and Joyce Appleby on the linguistic turn in history, *American Historical Review* 92 (Oct., 1987), 94 (June and Dec., 1989); Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (1988); Lynne Hunt, ed. *The New Cultural History* 1989.

2 On gender, see Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 28-50; on the needs to historicize patriarchy, see Judith Bennett, "Feminism and History," *Gender and History* 1, #3 (Autumn, 1989). I have indirectly borrowed the term "denaturalize" from Alice Jardine, as cited by Betsy Draine, "Refusing the Wisdom of Solomon: Some Recent Feminist Literary Theory," *Signs* 15, 1 (Autumn, 1989), 144-176.