FEMINISM AND MEDIEVAL STUDIES IN THE ACADEMY

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The following are responses to the comments of Judith Bennett and Elizabeth Robertson in the last issue of MFN

FEMINA ACADEMICA: MEDIEVAL STUDIES IN FEMINISM

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In the last issue of *MFN* (14 [Fall 1992]: 20-26) Judith Bennett and Elizabeth Robertson addressed the difficulties of being a feminist in a medieval world (that is, an academic world peopled both by medieval scholars and by individuals with medieval attitudes about women). I would like to confine myself to discussing the plight of medievalists in a feminist world. I feel particularly well-positioned to undertake this task, having spent most of my career teaching in schools with no other medievalists in any discipline. Bennett and Robertson describe a situation in which they have difficulties convincing their colleagues in Medieval Studies to take their feminist scholarship seriously. That has not been a problem for me because, until now, I had no colleagues to convince. Instead, I have found myself struggling to persuade my feminist colleagues of the significance of medieval scholarship. In spite of the enormous quantity of exciting research that feminist medieval scholars have produced in the last decade—research that has reshaped and reinvigorated Medieval Studies—many of my feminist colleagues hardly seem aware that any feminist scholarship exists for this period at all and, more importantly, almost none of it has found its way into the cultural narratives produced by feminist theory.[1] When students registered for my Senior Seminar in Women's and Gender Studies found out the course would examine the Medieval history of love, I was hard-pressed to win them to the view that such a topic was an appropriate "capstone" experience for their concentration in gender studies.

The reasons for this state of affairs are perhaps many and complex, but I can't help thinking that the Middle Ages is the "origin" Western civilization has chosen to repress. It has been far more satisfying for the purveyors of Western culture to cultivate an identity whose origins lie in classical Greece and Rome and their continuations in the Renaissance. Never mind that it was the work of medieval Arabic scholarship that first made that tradition accessible and transmitted it to the Renaissance. Several scholars—Alexandre Leupin, Caroline Bynum, and Howard Bloch among them—have argued that many of those institutions by which Western culture defines itself were, in fact, created in the Middle Ages: printing, the university, legal codes, our ideas about romantic love, our burial practices, and the political boundaries that constitute European nationalism, to name only a few examples. But the Middle Ages does not lend itself as readily to the narratives about progress and enlightenment that have been the major themes in Western historiography. Because feminist scholarship has, for the most part, simply reproduced conventional historical periodization, along with its teleological assumptions, it too has participated in the cultural repression of the Middle Ages.

If Western feminism, as many argue, has excluded and silenced women of non-Western races and cultures, it has also ironically excluded much of its own history before the eighteenth century. Feminist literary theory, for instance, has been created almost exclusively from a canon of works by women written primarily during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in England and America. For this reason, I wonder: if medieval studies has been reinvigorated by the last decade of feminist scholarship, what impact should that new medieval scholarship in its turn have on feminist theories of knowledge? By way of demonstrating the potential of medieval feminist scholarship to unsettle the products of feminist theorizing, let me suggest at least three fundamental tenets of feminist literary theory that need to be rethought in the light of feminist scholarship of the Middle Ages.

1. Feminist scholarship in literature has been largely concerned in the last decade with rediscovering lost and undervalued women writers, the project Elaine Showalter has dubbed gynocriticism. The goal of feminist analyses of women's writing should be teasing out "the manifestation of the subjectivity of the absent author—the 'voice' of another woman."[2] But medieval writers are not easily subsumed within twentieth-century notions of authorship. Widespread illiteracy in the Middle Ages among all classes of people, including educated men and women, and the modes of manuscript transmission through which writing was preserved, tend to obscure, modify, diffuse, and dilute this female "voice," denying us unmediated access to an authorizing "female" subjectivity. Unlike the printed book, each manuscript is a unique event, a new work which may bring the author and the compiler into a relationship of collaboration that modern scholarly editions tend to flatten out. Attention to these previously marginalized activities of writing and scribal transmission—to what Paul Zumthor has called the *mouvance* of the medieval text—may suggest more politically powerful feminist theories of reading and authorship that do not rely exclusively on positing the author as the transcendental signified of her text.[3]

2. One consequence of this rethinking of authorship might be a new perspective on the question of whether or not there is something like what Woolf called a "woman's sentence" that distinguishes women's writing from that produced by men. Once we are no longer required to ask of a "woman's" text what deep and authentic part of her self she is expressing, we are free to ask other, perhaps more interesting questions of these texts, questions that enable us to interrogate the very bases of genre theory: what are the modes of existence of this discourse? where has it been used? how can it circulate? who can appropriate it?[4] If, for instance, the lyric poetry produced by the troubadours of Southern France is a genre created by men to negotiate not only the social relations men have with women, but also those they have with other men, how could aristocratic women—who are generally silenced by this genre—appropriate it to produce a poetry expressive of their social position? How would their different positioning within the system of signs created by the courtly lyric affect the formal elements of the lyric?

3. The search for the authentic "voice" of the woman writer has foreclosed such questions primarily by creating a romanticized image of the woman writer as madwoman in the attic, the silenced artist marked by madness, suicide, and death. One thinks of the frail Emily Brontë producing *Wuthering Heights* and dying, or of the psychiatric histories and suicides of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton, to name only a few. While it is entirely possible to read such an autobiographical narrative into the lives of visionary women like Margery Kempe or the trobairitz

Castelloza, seeing them, as critics have done, as hysterical or masochistic,[5] such a reading, I would argue, projects a post-Romantic and romanticizing pathology onto medieval women, ignoring the real sources of empowerment that enabled medieval women to participate actively both in shaping and in resisting their own cultures. The process of reclaiming a legacy for feminist literary criticism requires that we do not simply add women to existing cultural narratives—feminist or otherwise—and stir. It requires militant confrontation with those narratives. Women's writing does not constitute a monolithic and homogeneous tradition or a tidy teleological narrative any more than men's writing does; any feminist literary theory must account for—and recount—the local and historical conditions that shaped women's lives and art in the Middle Ages just as surely as they did those of women in our own century.

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[1] Although, curiously, one finds in the margins of works by French theorists like Kristeva, Irigaray, Lacan, and Foucault several intriguing references to medieval texts and cultures, these remain undeveloped and almost unremarked within the body of work that constitutes feminist theory. The one exception to this absence of the medieval in feminist studies is the 1989 special issue of *Signs* devoted to research on medieval women's lives, edited by Judith Bennett and Elizabeth Clark.

[2] Patrocinio Schweickart, "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading," in *Gender and Reading*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986): 47.

[3] Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiéval* (Paris: Seuil, 1972): 70-75. Space limitations prevent a full demonstration of the potential of such an approach; see my analysis of *The Book of Margery Kempe* in *Feminist Theory, Women's Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1992): 98-107.

[4] These are the questions Foucault asks at the end of his essay "What Is an Author?" in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Poststructuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979): 160.

[5] Luce Irigaray's reading of mysticism in "La Mystérique" is a good example of such ahistoricizing reading, not because of its use of psychoanalysis as a tool for understanding the mystical experience, but because it ignores the historical conditions that made mystical discourse by women possible; see *Speculum of the Other Woman*, tr. Gillian Gill (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985).

ARE THERE BENEFITS TO MARGINALITY?

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In their comments on "Medievalist Feminists in the Academy" both Judith Bennett and Elizabeth Robertson assume that a move toward the center of literary studies and of departments—for feminists, for medievalists, and for medievalist-feminists—is desirable. And while such institutional moves would represent only the beginning of a claim to institutional authority by these marginalized groups, such desires should also prompt questions about what we may have to give up—along with marginal status—when we seek, and then assume, a more central position in the academy. Are there some advantages to our current marginality that we should not easily forego? Is it possible that in such new roles we may risk losing the ability to represent as strongly as possible our