

Castelloza, seeing them, as critics have done, as hysterical or masochistic,<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Patrocino Schweickart, "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading," in *Gender and Reading*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocino Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986): 47.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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

earlier agendas for feminist studies and for medieval studies? Might we risk becoming mainstream centrists, simply reproducing existing power hierarchies which will inevitably be resisted by other groups who perceive themselves to be marginalized?

In an early passage of *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues against the feminist mimicking of established power relationships:

Feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism. This effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms. That the tactic can operate in feminist and antifeminist contexts alike suggests that the colonizing gesture is not primarily or irreducibly masculinist. (13)

And while I don't think that Bennett and Robertson intended to imply that occupying "a more central place" (in Bennett's words) would necessarily also be a "colonizing gesture" over other groups, the danger of feminists assuming the "strategy of the oppressor" and becoming oppressors in their own right is real, albeit distant.

In contrast, it seems to me, maintaining a vocal and visible marginality offers us the opportunity to critique the center or the status quo; to engage in positive, subversive commentary—much as medieval manuscript marginalia does; and to speak what cannot be spoken by those in positions of institutional authority who have their positions to protect. A vocal and visible marginality offers feminists, medievalists, and medievalist-feminists the means of challenging from the outside existing institutional structures which may be outdated, of joining with other marginalized groups—such as African-Americanists, multiculturalists, literary theorists—to imagine and to create new ways of organizing and running institutions. This may be more desirable and more revolutionary in the long run than our occupying old positions at the center of old hierarchies.

Thus I hesitate to embrace uncritically a general move into positions of authority as desirable. Perhaps my inexperience with institutional resistance to change renders these remarks meaningless in practice. Perhaps a move toward the center of the academy by some medievalist-feminists should be one move among many. Still, the quest for authority and centrality needs to be examined with an eye to what *marginal power* may be lost and what opportunities for institutional change may be missed if we aspire to replicate, rather than to challenge, the power hierarchies within which we already work.

## MEDIEVAL FEMINISTS IN THE ACADEMY: A RESPONSE FROM THE CENTER?

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The contributions to "Medieval Feminists in the Academy" by Judith M. Bennett and Elizabeth Robertson relate the question of who we are to that of our institutional prominence, now and in the future. Are we "feminist medievalists" or "medieval feminists"? Can we talk fruitfully from the margins or should we try to seize the center