EQUAL IN OTHERNESS: MEDIEVALIST-FEMINISM IN A SMALL SCHOOL SETTING

In the call for proposals for the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship’s Roundtable, “Feminism and the Academy”, the organizers start with the premise that medievalist feminists experience considerable antipathy from feminist colleagues who study later periods. On many campuses this antipathy can manifests itself as a chilly environment for medievalist in departments and programs of Women’s Studies which limits our ability to participate in the opportunities these programs present for interdisciplinary teaching and collaboration.

This premise, however, reflects a decidedly “large-school” perspective. After all, one must have a least some small quorum of feminists before hierarchies of discipline and/or chronology can emerge. In writing for this Roundtable, I want to turn this premise on its ear. Rather than a liability, the combining of two such diverse fields of study can be a decided asset in a small school environment, where the most successful faculty are those who can serve their students and colleagues in multiple roles.

Susquehanna University is an undergraduate institution in Central Pennsylvania, with a faculty of 100 serving 1700 students. We alternate between aspiring to be a more elite liberal arts college and embracing our small comprehensive status which combines traditional and professional degrees. Just over ten years ago, I was hired to teach both the Middle Ages and Women’s History by a group of guys—and they were all men—for whom both medieval and feminist studies were equally “other”. The 5-person history department was looking to kill as many birds as possible with a single tenure-track line. The traditionalist wanted someone who could do early Europe, the social historian wanted someone to do women, and the Academic Vice-President had decreed that the blatant gender imbalance on the faculty be corrected. As a woman who studied medieval nuns, I fit the bill. As a bonus, I came from California—the land of true “otherness” to natives of central Pennsylvania.

During my on-campus interview, I was introduced to the feminist on campus—an English professor who studies contemporary American Women’s poetry. We bonded instantly; she was desperate to see a sympathetic face. My year was a good one for feminists, with three others besides myself hired: an additional English professor, a cell biologist, and a professor in the management department. (This boom can be directly tied to the efforts of the aforementioned Academic Vice President, herself a feminist.) In any case, the five of us became fast friends, colleagues, and co-conspirators. Our fledgling “feminist agenda” included integrating women’s voices into survey courses (like my Western Civilization), teaching upper-division classes on women and feminist theory,
representing “women” on a variety of standing and ad hoc committees, and arguing for the value of feminist scholarship in tenure and review decisions. In addition, Susquehanna was one of the few institutions that managed to enter the 1990s without a Women’s Studies program. So, our gang of five interdisciplinary feminists created one, with the aid of several male allies—including a dean who footed the donut bill for our monthly meetings (fulfilling the consummate role of administrators: to provide food). The proof that I had won the confidence of my feminist colleagues was that fact that I was put in charge of creating and teaching the capstone for the new program—a course called “Women in the Twenty-First Century”. Imagine, the future entrusted to a scholar of the Middle Ages! I also became the “feminist ambassador to the other”—those often older, often male colleagues with whom I can talk the talk of tradition so important to their understanding of academe in general and our institution in particular. This role became key in getting the Women’s Studies program approved by both the Curriculum Committee and the faculty as a whole. (The argument went like this: if medieval history is a part of it, surely Women’s Studies has some academic merit!)

As the medievalist, I have often found myself in the “middle” of other interdisciplinary collaborations that are the hallmark of small schools like Susquehanna—bridging chronological, methodological, and disciplinary differences in Jewish Studies, Honors, Humanities, general education, and freshman seminars. I have team-taught not only with my counterpart in the English department but also with colleagues in Spanish, music, and biology. I have also found myself in the “middle” of some thorny discussions as well: on the meaning of the institution’s Lutheran heritage, on the appropriateness of our “Crusader” mascot. My ability to hold in tension both a grounding in the traditions of the distant past and a post-modern theoretical stance has been an asset in mediating conversations among colleagues from a variety of perspectives.

One might argue that the collegiality among Susquehanna feminists is more a product of desperation than of tolerance: we are understaffed and overworked and we need warm bodies willing to teach Women’s Studies courses so that our students are adequately served. And I will admit that the combination of medievalist and feminist still remains strange in the eyes of many of my colleagues, feminist or not. However, I would argue that the kind of collaboration that has taken place among the feminist at Susquehanna is not unique. My very unscientific polling of colleagues at a variety of schools suggests that cooperation among feminists might well be the norm. Few Women’s Studies programs have such robust offerings as to turn down a chance to cross-list a course on medieval women. Moreover, feminists of all stripes, regardless of infighting, are politically savvy enough to form alliances when it
comes to getting women elected to key campus committees, validating feminist scholarship for rank and tenure reviews, lobbying for gender equity in salaries, fundraising for campus daycare centers—the list goes on.

My impressions were further confirmed in April, 2000, when I attended a conference sponsored by the University of Washington, entitled, “Re-Envisioning the Ph.D.” (For more on this project see: http://depts.washington.edu/envision/.) This was a gathering of 150 people from a variety of sectors interested in higher education: colleges and universities, graduate schools, disciplinary and professional societies, industry, government, graduate students, to discuss needed reform in graduate education. Those representatives from colleges and universities were divided into two groups: “Research Intensive Universities” and “Higher Education, Not Research Intensive”—a designation emblazoned on blue and red ribbons respectively and attached to our name tags. At one point those of us in the “not” category—which included folks from community colleges, state land-grant schools, comprehensive institutions, liberal arts colleges, and everyone else not in the top tier of Ph.D.-granting institutions—were asked to meet together to talk about how graduate education could better meet our needs. In addition to the universal cry that graduate training pay more attention to teaching, second on our list was a wish for people to be more broadly trained and more able to engage in interdisciplinary collaboration. We also were apprised of a quite startling set of statistics. While graduate education is primarily structured around producing the kind of scholar needed at research intensive universities, these institutions actually employ under 10% of all employed Ph.D.s. Those of us in the “other” category, however, employ over 50%.

In one of the final session of this conference, David Damrosch, professor of English at Columbia University, envisioned a Ph.D. thesis process that would be much more interdisciplinary with parts even being collaborative. However, he sounded a cautionary note not to be too radical, lest students not compete well on the job market. My response to him was to not underestimate the attractiveness of interdisciplinary candidates to perspective academic employers. While it continues to be true that smaller places prefer to hire people with degrees that fall into traditional disciplinary categories, most are also looking for broad training and flexibility within the discipline and the ability to make connections across disciplines. Combining Medieval Studies with feminist studies is a great match. It takes the best of a very traditional field and combines it with the best of new scholarly approaches.

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