

RESPONSES TO MFN 18: LETTERS TO THE EDITORS

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Dear *MFN*:

I would like to respond to Anne Clark Bartlett's article, "An Entrepreneurial Approach to the Job Market," in the Fall 1994 issue of *MFN*.

Professor Bartlett's essay is filled with useful and constructive suggestions for job seekers. I have often wished that I had such effective mentoring when I was on the market myself. Nevertheless, I must strongly object to "a somewhat controversial suggestion" Professor Bartlett makes, namely that job candidates seek access to their dossiers by roundabout means without informing their referees.

A candidate who wishes to obtain this information has at least two legitimate ways to proceed. If the job seeker does not sign the optional waiver form, she can ask her referees outright for copies of their letters, which she then has a legal right to see. Or if she does sign the waiver, she can ask her mentor (or any other faculty member) to review her file in the placement office and look for any danger signals. Most universities, to my knowledge, would make no objection to such a review.

On the other hand, a candidate who signs the waiver but then gains indirect access to the file has a great deal to lose in return for a relatively small gain. Most important, she sacrifices her integrity, and if this dishonest procedure is discovered, she may gain a reputation for unethical behavior that will be hard to shake. If I learned that one of my own students had done this *after signing a waiver*, I would immediately pull my letter from the file and refuse to offer any further support to that student's career.

Job seekers should be aware that their mentors, especially at large institutions, may often have to recommend several candidates for the same position in the same year. Under such circumstances, letters need to be carefully worded in order to highlight each student's distinctive assets, but not everyone can be praised in equally superlative terms. Open access to referees' letters would inevitably heighten competitiveness among job seekers, who already have more than their share of realistic anxieties, while at the same time weakening the credibility of their referees and diminishing the trust that characterizes a good mentor-student relationship. At this level as in many others areas of the profession—tenure reviews, readers' reports on manuscripts, fellowship applications, and the like—there are very good reasons for maintaining the traditional confidentiality of the review process.

Sincerely,

Barbara Newman, Northwestern University

To the *MFN*:

A quick note to correct a comment made in Ruth Evans' review of Britton Harwood and Gillian Overing's collection. Evans writes that in the early 1980s I "declared that class and feminist analyses were incompatible." In fact, my 1975 essay "Sexual Economics"—reprinted in Evans' new anthology—does in fact bring together class and gender analyses, as does much of my work before and since 1975. What I wrote about was the ultimate incompatibility of socialist and feminist strategies for fundamental social change—taking "socialist" as equivalent to "revolutionary," and feminist as

defined by the more than century-long international history of the feminist movement.
I haven't changed my mind.

Sincerely,
Sheila Delany

Works referred to

Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (eds). *Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994. Reviewed by Ruth Evans in *MFN* 18 (Fall, 1994), 28-31.

Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (eds). *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: the Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

Sheila Delany. *Writing Woman: Women Writers and Women in Literature, Medieval to Modern*. New York: Schocken, 1983. Chapter 1.

Letter to *MFN*

Men's Place in Women's Studies?

The fall 1994 issue of *MFN* carries a note from Elaine Tuttle Hansen announcing that all four of the sessions proposed by the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship had been accepted for the 1995 Kalamazoo program. Clearly, good news. And yet, news with a possibly disquieting aspect. The four panels involved 18 participants; of these only one (Glenn Burger, on the roundtable, "Feminists in Dialogue") was a man.¹

The heavily skewed gender composition of the 1995 *MFN* panels lead me to raise the question of what role men have played, are now playing and will (continue to?) play in the future of medieval women's studies. I raise these questions, and offer my observations, as a social historian and presumably as a friend of women's studies. If my primary concern centers on my own discipline, I would like to extend my suggestions, along with the data presented below, in a wider arc so that my comments extend beyond history to other fields within women's studies and medieval studies and to the current and growing range of scholarly orientations regarding gender, sexuality, and feminism.

I presented a short paper on these questions at a SUNY Binghamton conference in 1993. For that I did a quick analysis of some WMU (Kalamazoo Conference) programs since 1980. I looked at the composition of panels that clearly touched some aspect of women's (or feminist) studies and at the individual papers on women's studies or feminist topics that were included in non-specific or general sessions. My findings revealed that since 1980 (the first conference for which I tallied the data) men have played a very reasonable role in the "foregrounding" of medieval women's studies. My tally also indicated that the supposed prominence or even domination of women's studies—as is often alleged by those unsympathetic to the field and concerned to boost a contrary political agenda—is hardly supported by simple counting.

Table I shows the number of panels that focused on women's studies in 1980, 1986,