

PRESUMED RELEVANT : FEMINISM TAKEN FOR GRANTED IN A MEDIEVALIST'S ORALS



When I began my Ph.D. qualifying examination on a humid day last spring, I doubted everything from my powers of recall to my ability to keep from passing out during the two-hour session. I could rest assured, however, about one aspect of my exam: I was surrounded by professors who regarded medieval studies and feminist analysis as productive collaborators rather than as strange and incompatible bedfellows. The three medievalists on the examining committee had pursued this interaction in their own work: the fourth professor, a specialist in modernism who oversaw my readings of feminist theory, had encouraged my efforts to become a feminist medievalist. In many ways, then, the account to follow constitutes a “progress report” in the most literal sense: in at least some English departments, numerous feminists populate the ranks of medievalists.

It would be premature, however, to infer the triumph of feminism from the circumstances of my exam. Both in and out of academia, reactionary thinkers and neoconservative barriers of the anti-“PC” standard might misrepresent a feminist orals as a celebration of ideological homogeneity, anachronistic statements, sentimental identification with female characters (“I am Griselda!”), and/or the vilification of male writers. To counteract these persistent stereotypes, I offer my orals experience as a demonstration of how exploring medieval texts from a feminist perspective can be a broadening and recuperative practice, not a dismissive and constricting one.

A useful illustration occurred during that section of the exam dealing with the medieval sermon exemplum. I brought up a tale from the *Alphabetum Narratorum* in which a nun forgets to pray over a piece of lettuce before eating it. As luck would have it, an invisible demon had been sitting on one of the leaves; he takes possession of the nun’s body until a monk forces him to leave.

As feminists, my examiners and I were inclined to explore the gender dynamics at work in this narrative: we regarded the nun’s disempowerment as something other than a neutral plot device. The committee expected me to do more, however, than simply lament the nun’s positioning as a site of contention between demonic and holy power. I ended up talking about this exemplum as a representative product of the Fourth Lateran Council, which seems to have greatly affected women’s private lives when it emphasized the need for all Christians to internalize church directives and to participate in outward rituals. These considerations led me to discuss the depictions of women in other religiously oriented works, like *Handlyng Synne*, *Jacob’s Well* and even the *Parson’s Tale*.

Far from confining the conversation, the committee’s common interest in the nun’s situation encouraged me to plunge with gusto into ecclesiastical history, generic conventions, and relatively prosaic texts (I, for one, welcome any critical strategy that animates the *Parson’s Tale*!). With only a half hour to discuss the exemplum, I’m grateful that I didn’t have to spend time arguing against indifference toward the nun, or sending my own critical angle on some convoluted detour in order to make it more male-identified.

In allowing me to bypass such exigencies, the committee was not, of course, asking me to blaze a solitary trail: I had plenty to do just tracking the inroads made by decades

of medieval scholarship by feminists. One questioner, for example, asked me to work through Carolyn Dinshaw's exploration of the ways E. Talbot Donaldson and D.W. Robertson exemplify "reading like a man" in their respective analyses of *Troilus and Criseyde*. Answering the question was made both easier and more complex by my knowledge of the examiner's feminism. I knew we wouldn't become embroiled in an argument over the presence of sexism in patristic and humanist criticism. But because the examiner regarded feminist concerns as something more than reductive conclusions, he posited Dinshaw's argument as a feminist reading rather than the feminist reading. The question construed Dinshaw's work not as dogma to be accepted uncritically, but as an influential voice with whom I should enter into dialogue.

"Dialogue," no doubt, entails disagreement as well as concord; indeed, there was plenty of debate about critics and texts during the exam. The committee granted me nothing more (and nothing less) than the opportunity to work through gender inequality's manifestations within medieval texts and medievalist scholarship. The "feminist approach" practiced by my examiners was just that—a means of access not just into medieval literature, but into academic conversation in general.

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PAST WATCHFUL DRAGONS?: THOUGHTS ON THE MED-FEM JOB MARKET

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In the Fall issue of the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter*, Norris Lacy described, with a certain sympathy, what he termed the "real difficulty" for those combining training in Medieval Studies with any secondary specialization like feminist theory. He wrote, "It is hard enough just to become a good medievalist, and far harder to combine medieval studies with any other specialization" (10). His words chilled me as I prepared for my first try at the Medieval Studies job market. As a doctoral candidate in English literature with a certificate of emphasis from our program in Women's Studies, and a methodological sub-specialization in Cultural Studies, I worried that the strange combination of my credentials might appear before a search committee as a compromise to my "excellence." Yet, as I scanned the MLA Job List, I was heartened by a number of positions advertised in "medieval cultural studies" or that indicated a preference for medievalists with specialization in gender and sexuality or critical theory.

And now on the heels of a successful job search, I can happily report that my credentials proved to be an asset rather than a liability "on the market." A good number of institutions pursued my candidacy not despite but because of my particular combination of interests. In a number of interviews and campus visits, I found not suspicion so much as interest in and curiosity about my work; scholars working in a variety of periods engaged me in conversation about my methodological concerns and the ways I worked to combine the historical particularities of my period with insights from critical theory. The job search confirmed my sense that Medieval Studies and feminist