

remote from our own in chronological and spatial terms places them at no greater disadvantage than men entering the field. As a discipline, medieval studies has become a more neutral playing field. Of course it is also true that women scholars have now opened new questions about medieval women's historical agency and the construction of gender. These are fruitful debates that draw in more investigators. And feminist medieval discourse represents one of the few radical discourses left in academia; it attracts inquiring minds for that reason.

To turn to the second question, because of this attraction future search committees will continue to find more women—well trained, first rate scholars, I might add—to choose from when they make an appointment in medieval studies. This leaves search committees with two choices: 1) appoint a woman and accept the possibility that she will construct her courses and her scholarship around her interests, which may include a feminist agenda of women or gender, or 2) find grounds for excluding women candidates. In these days of Affirmative Action the latter is a peril-filled path but, of course, that may change due to political action. Perhaps more importantly such exclusion would eliminate some of the finest products being turned from our graduate schools today, and few first rate institutions are prepared to take that path.

Is it possible that we are entering a seller's market? Now that would be a new twist.

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1. David Herlihy, "The American Medievalist: A Social and Professional Profile," *Speculum* 58,4 (1983): 881-889.
2. *Ibid.* pp. 882-885.
3. *Ibid.* p.889. That women might represent a first family income was not discussed.
4. The literature on this question is vast. For two example see Barbara J. Harris, *Beyond Her Sphere: Women and Profession in American History* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood, 1978) and *Interpreting Career*, ed. by Richard A. Young and Audrey Collin (Westport, Ct.: Praeger, 1992).

READING ABILITY: NEGOTIATING ACADEME ON CRUTCHES

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Question: Medievalism, feminism, and disability: where do the three intersect?

Answer: Where I'm standing.

It was clear to me that the three terms somehow conveniently intersected in me, a disabled feminist writing a thesis on the poetry of the *trobairitz* and aspiring to a career in academe (though not necessarily in that order). That was the best I could do when the topic of this piece was first proposed to me. Beyond it, I had only questions: why would I want to write it? Frankly, it reeked of -isms: Medievalism, Feminism, Ableism...to say nothing of the mental masochism involved in trying to combine the three of them in what was to be a "short" piece. Secondly, why would anyone want to read it? The topic struck me as too subjective—self-indulgent, even—and not theoretical enough to be of interest to anyone in the able academic community. Such cynicism is certainly due to years of trying to convince professors of the legitimacy of studying a topic—the representation of disability in literature—in which I have such a "personal" investment.

Of course, I shouldn't have to convince them. Such arguments are ridiculous, especially when one considers the return on the "personal" investment that women have made in doing research on women in the last thirty years. Even more astounding, however, are my own doubts about writing this piece, which demonstrate the extent to which my voice has been conditioned by a dominant discourse that continues to turn a blind eye to the *reality* of different bodies in both theory and practice.¹ These doubts are rooted in an my own inability to come to terms with the duality of my rapport with dominant discourse. Because I am physically different, it seems I hedge the boundary between compliance and dissent, challenged far more by the ongoing task of purging normative attitudes from my self-perception than I am by the fact of my physical difference. I did not choose to be born with a disability, but, unconscious though the link was, the fact that I am disabled has been the primary factor in the professional choices I have made.

In fact, my choice to study the literature of the Middle Ages is a fairly new one, and is based primarily on my experience with Old Provençal. The first day of class, we began with a *canso* attributed to Bernart de Ventadorn. The *domna* never speaks within the textual space of the *canso*, perhaps (we learned) because the ideology with which the *canso* is invested—the complicated system of courtly love—drowns her out, renders her an objectified incarnation of the ideal of courtly love, a narcissistic reflection of the troubadour's own worth: better song (=better lady) =better troubadour.

This idea of a reflection really hit home with me. I am often placed in a similar position by able people who, with the "kindest" of intentions, insist they know best how to handle my limitations. As a little girl, I was supposed to be normal, meaning that my physical therapists were "gonna make me walk." My futile attempts to learn were inspiring.² Refusals to try to do so at the behest of everyone who knew better provoked anger and disappointment, a bit of malaise: why doesn't she want to be like everyone else? Nobody cared to hear the answer, because my emotions were not at stake. Theirs were, and I was supposed to reflect them in order to legitimize their own sense of normalcy.

Although I've accepted that such messages are not my responsibility, I'm still learning not to hear them, because hearing them necessarily awakens a conflict in me between the very human subject that I am and the super-human object that dominant discourse would have me be. Herein lies my special kinship with the *trobairitz*, the twelfth-century women poets who as often as not chose the *canso*—the misogynistic, codified genre which so objectifies the *domna*—as their vehicle of expression. I couldn't help but marvel at such an affront, especially when, in contrast, half of the corpus attributed to the *trobairitz* consists of *tenso*s, which pose fewer overt problems to the female voice. I wondered, within the textual space of the *canso*, to what extent this female voice contradicts its subjecthood by adhering to the genre's misogynistic rigors? By what means and to what extent does it subvert them? Through careful grammatical analysis of four poems, I was able to demonstrate how the *trobairitz* graft the female voice of the *tenso* onto their *cansos*, and through a subtle game of pronoun shuffling, echoes, and repetition, alter the misogynistic and unidirectional paradigm of courtly love.

Textual games like these keep pulling me back into the corpus of the Middle Ages, although it has taken me a long time to grasp fully the notion that underlies them: that in dealing with these texts, we are not so much concerned with poets as with poetic voice.

The conditions of medieval textual production are such that no (single) body is responsible for a given text, and modern notions of text and author are undermined by the fact that a given text was written to be performed and transmitted orally.

The plurivocality of this process is quite liberating for me, especially in the way that it has conditioned scholarship. The fact that the work of text editors lays bare discrepancies in the text and acknowledges the existence of faulty transcription and differences in orthography casts difference itself in a new light, as possibly normative, even advantageous. In so doing, text editing can be seen to encourage active reception, forcing us to think through textual difference(s) and reminding us that responsible reception is as much a question of what is read as of what is not. If only bodies were read in the same, panoramic spirit!

To me, this is feminism's *coup de grace*: having identified the first textual variant for what had long been defined as the standard human body, feminism for me is the mother of the disabled movement. Over time, feminism demonstrated to me that my body, because it is different, often serves as the site for the projection of dominant discourse—a definitive text which would have me believe that my difference is inherently inferior to it. Feminism taught me that all this discussion of how I stand in relation to dominant discourse does little to change the fact of *how* I stand (on crutches). As such, I must think and speak from the margins, because to think and speak in the mainstream means listening to and ultimately borrowing a voice that is not my own. My physical difference necessarily conditions my status as speaking subject because I *must* either condition its reception or consent to its objectification.

I have seen the boundaries of prevailing discourse begin to shift ever so slightly in everyday life: the fact that a mother laden down with packages and a stroller usually allows me to open the door for her (she used to drop everything to do it for me) is proof that people are beginning to hear me, and to accept a definition of disability that is both situational and relative. Within the walls of academe, disabled studies is experiencing an explosion of interest in all disciplines, especially the arts.³ Its alliances with both feminism and multiculturalism have provided the theoretical groundwork for rapid and panoramic progress.

Such progress is daunting and tough to keep up with, but the role I've always envisioned for myself in academe hasn't changed much. I'm still committed to preparing myself to teach people to read: actively, critically, and alternatively, to acknowledge variants—first objectively, through what they read, then subjectively, through how they *choose* to live.

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1. In most cases, federally funded institutions do not recognize the disabled as a minority. As such, disabled applicants are not eligible to receive minority fellowships. Financial aid advisors confirm that money allocated to the disabled is very difficult to find, particularly at the graduate level.

2. Especially when altered by the media. In 1981, the local TV station was doing a series on exceptional kids. I was Friday's girl. One of the cameramen asked to see me take a few steps without my crutches. 1-2-3 fall. (Whoops!) Try again: 1-2-3 fall. (Whoops!) etc... Apparently the display wasn't inspiring enough, as when we tuned in on Friday, I shuffled all the way across the yard! All falls had been cut.

3. In December, the first roundtable on Disability in the Humanities was held at the MLA. Organizers have petitioned for a permanent session for next year. In May, a conference entitled "This Ability: An Interdisciplinary Conference on Disability and the Arts" was held in Ann Arbor, and organizers have begun an Internet bulletin board on Disability in the Humanities.

FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP IN OLD NORSE STUDIES

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The problem in Old Norse scholarship has not been the rediscovery of women but the interpretation of their varied representations. In the last two hundred and fifty years the options have ranged widely. In 1755 the Swiss author Paul-Henri Mallet, writing in French, treated the prehistory common to the nordic countries and illuminated by translations of Old Norse poetry. The idea of the nordic independent woman appeared for the first time in his work. Embracing Montesquieu's vision of the Germanic North as the fountain of political freedom among men, Mallet extended this privilege to women and added gender equality as another characteristic. Like other intellectuals of the eighteenth century, Mallet conflated the Germans and the Celts. Claiming descent from both peoples, French intellectuals espoused Mallet's ideas with enthusiasm and continued to entertain notions of liberty and equality for women in the North throughout the nineteenth century.

Mallet's vision was largely drawn from his intuitive reading of mythological and poetic sources. Joining the fray but focusing on the prose narratives, German scholars easily corroborated Mallet's conclusions about strong northern womanhood, because such heroines are found more readily in the Icelandic family sagas than in poetry. German scholars no longer extended these conclusions to the Celts, but they were eager to read the Norse sources as representing the entire Germanic family. They also accommodated the fundamental problem inherent in most Old Norse texts—that centuries separate events from inscription—by arguing that oral transmission kept information about the pagan age alive during many generations until it was inscribed beginning in the twelfth century. Set in pagan times, the family sagas were therefore believed to transmit a true picture of the pagan Germanic/nordic woman, an image to which Nazi ideology attached special significance.

During the generation following the end of the Second World War, Old Norse studies largely retreated to Iceland. Faith in oral tradition declined and historians lost interest in the narratives and in saga heroines. When literary critics occasionally dealt with these figures, they saw them not as flesh-and-blood women but as transmitters of single literary motifs, for example that of inciting, inserted in the texts according to the needs of the narrative and then dropped immediately after.

It is not surprising that the current woman's movement has generated a revival of interest in the strong nordic woman. The spectrum of possible interpretations now extends further than during the previous history. On the one hand, nordic feminists, best exemplified by the Icelandic Helga Kress, have argued for a female culture conveyed orally from time immemorial to the dawn of nordic history. Although severely damaged