exclude some kinds of feminism is to risk your own subjection to the exclusionary principle by others, including anti-feminists; and to endanger the multiplicity and heterogeneity that feminism--written in the plural--offers. This is not, of course, to deny or minimize the presence of genuine conflict and struggle within feminist-inflected theory--for feminism is, if anything, a theory of struggle--or to endorse contradiction over conciliation. It does, however, ask that each feminist reading be considered in its own terms, against a background of its own logic and assumptions; and that we speak across our differences while mutually respecting difference itself. For it is in the very proliferation of multiplicity, heterogeneity and difference that our defense against our own tendency toward mastery or hegemony lies: in our division, perhaps, in our strength.

III. Feminism and Medieval Studies
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Feminism has helped us to understand that no approach to a text is free of theory or ideology. This insight is particularly relevant to scholars of the medieval period. More than students of other periods we have appealed to history as an escape from ideological contamination. But as a cultural construct, history cannot avoid being enmeshed in the moment of its makers and its making. May we then abandon history and claim the Wife of Bath as a fourteenth century feminist or the female mystic as the narcissistic woman? I think we should be more cautious. Feminists must resist remaking the Middle Ages in our image, for the masculine tendencies to appropriate and specularize have already yielded falsely monolithic versions of the past. At the same time, the Middle Ages needs to be revisioned by feminists. Patriarchal culture, still viewed by some as the Western tradition, cannot be allowed to account for all of culture. Women's texts and the feminine subtexts to be found in much medieval writing challenge the cultural hegemony of great men and great books.

How can feminists best approach the Middle Ages? Feminist theories offer a wide range of critical practices. One of the benefits of the explosive growth of theoretical feminist discourse in the eighties is that it enables us to speak with an intellectual self-consciousness that was not available to the pioneers in our disciplines. But one danger of theoretical debate is that it becomes a struggle for power. I think feminists need to resist replicating the "Oedipal" struggles for power that characterize patriarchy. When we promote a particular theory, we need to guard against the tendency to silence the opposition. That is what appears to be happening in the debate between "Anglo-American" and "Continental" practice. In response to the criticism of American "gynocritics" as essentialist or empiricist, we hear the charge that feminists who adopt the insights of Marx, Derrida, or Lacan build on foundations that are "irretrievably Misogynist" (Bawn 45).

Why must we search for some totalizing and single theory of feminism? For feminists studying the Middle Ages, I would propose instead a critical practice in which no method is irretrievable and none has the final say. It does not disturb me
to see feminists wielding tools developed by male scholars, whether we bring to bear the traditional methodologies of literary history, the skills of editors, the philologists, and the biographers, or the newer theories of deconstructionists, Marxists, and psychoanalysts, with their insights into the ways in which gender is constructed. Let us be thieves of language and theory, stealing to enrich our own studies. Let us be aware of the antifeminist applications of some of the tools we borrow, but not in awe of them.

A central project of feminist medievalists is the rewriting of literary history. Although gender will necessarily be a central focus, it should not be the only focus. For example, attempts to uncover a woman’s poetics and feminine lines of influence in medieval literature must take into account other determinants: economic, religious, or regional, for example. As we recognize the blind spots in androcentric visions, let us try to avoid similar failures of our own sight.

To illustrate my point, let me contrast two very different approaches to female mystics: First, the impressive scholarly edition of *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, and second the discussion by French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray. College and Walsh have done a great service to Women’s Studies and their meticulous editions of the longer and shorter versions of Julian’s work, with their comparative analysis of the texts, and their biographical research. At the same time, they issue us a challenge by attempting to dismiss gender as a critical consideration with comments like the following: “That Julian wore her learning so lightly, that she is so insistent (especially in her first edition) on her untutored simplicity, suggests, certainly, that she knew that it would be impolitic to set herself up as a bluestocking, but also that she herself had little use for bluestockings” (42). This peculiar choice of a derisive eighteenth century epithet to describe intellectual women is an attempt to silence contemporary feminists, preceding as it does, an attack on “the kind of speculation which forms so much of the scholarship of Hope Allen and her school” (42). The editors state their own ideological assumptions very clearly in the Introduction: “In any discussion of the nature and meaning of her revelations, there are no criteria except those of Catholic theology as it reflects over the centuries on the Christian faith as contained in Scripture and authentic ecclesiastical tradition” (69). The limitations of their approach are evident as are, of course, the strengths. Understanding Julian’s debts and contributions to Catholic theology is central to appreciating her work.

At the opposite ideological pole is Irigaray’s work “La Mysterique.” At the heart of mystical experience, Irigaray finds an exploration of the feminine, the space of the other. Though dazzlingly insightful, her analysis is at the same time breathtakingly ahistorical. Medievalists will be disturbed by the license (albeit poetic) that Irigaray takes with concepts which have a certain historic specificity. God, problematized in the text by its enclosure in quotation marks, shifts from signifying the "most female" Christ, his "virgin flesh" erotically "alit" with wounds, to representing the mystic herself, become divine in her Jouissance (199-200). Though this psychoanalytic reading uncovers some aspects of the medieval
mystics' God, it inevitably restricts the extensive symbolic register found in mystical treatises. Moreover, "La Mysterique" conflates all mystics, severing their experiences from time and space. Mysticism is for Irigaray a psychosexual liberation, an ateleological experience of jouissance. In a book that critiques the conception of the subject in Freud, Plato, and Descartes, this essay on mysticism offers an alternative reading of subjectivity. But Irigaray's mystic has been freed from any connection with the material. As I read her account, I cannot resist contextualizing it and thereby complicating it immeasurably. I think, for instance, of the political leverage that the mystics could exert as a result of their access to the divine. I think of how the church recognized, however warily, their alternative power, and how it attempted to protect its hegemony by silencing or controlling their voices.

College and Walsh are medievalists--Irigaray, perhaps, a feminist. (I am not sure she describes herself as such.) The feminist medievalist would combine traditional scholarly techniques with a contemporary appreciation of gender as a psychosocial construction. She would have the skills to critique editorial decisions, to uncover the erasures of a feminine point of view and of female authorship. Then she would try to listen to the voices speaking from medieval texts, to hear their differences rather than a single expression of difference. Her practice might look rather like Carolyn Bynum's in Holy Feast, Holy Fast. Bynum listens to the metaphors of women's writing and writing about women. She notices differences and analyzes them in a broad historical context. But a feminist's conclusions would probably be different. Bynum summarizes her study by describing the self-mutilating behaviors of the fasting and feasting women as: "not rebelling or torturing their flesh out of guilt so much as using its full sensual and affective range to soar ever closer to God" (295). She continues: "Men and women chose different symbols--men renouncing wealth and power, women renouncing food" (295). A feminist medievalist would make more of the problem that medieval women had increasingly less wealth and power to renounce, and that suffering was for many the only access to power. She would also question whether women chose their symbols or whether they internalized those which men linked with femininity. In my own conception of feminist scholarship, such political questions are central. While much work on women is valuable to feminism in that it undermines the apparent cultural hegemony of patriarchy, a scholar becomes a feminist when she acknowledges both the political implications of her work and the sexual politics informing texts.

Works Cited


Somewhere near the beginning of Margery Kempe’s controversial pilgrimage to mystical perfection, she tells of a particularly unpleasant skirmish with church authorities at Canterbury. According to her account in The Book of Margery Kempe, a group of monks, priests, and secular men who were greatly provoked by her habit of weeping in public places, began to upbraid and curse her: "I would you were closed in a house of stone so that no man should speak with you," says one outraged monk. While Kempe’s husband sneaks away out of embarrassment, she stands her ground by begging leave to tell a tale. Her story is about a man who had sinned so greatly against God that as penance he was enjoined to pay people each day to chide and heap scorn upon him. After spending quite a sum on such abuse, Kempe tells us, he found himself one day among "many great men," just as I do now, she remarks to her audience. These great men proceeded to attack and revile him generously without any promissory payment—just as you do me, Kempe adds once again to her Canterbury crowd. Instead of retaliating as the great men expect him to do, the abused man merely laughs and, in Kempe’s words "[had] good game at their words." When the perplexed great men ask him "why are you laughing, you wretch, when you are being greatly despised?" he thanks them for saving him a good deal of silver that day. Kempe then turns to her own detractors and thanks them for their verbal assaults which only further her own cause of penance. Whether she laughs as she tells this tale or not, she doesn’t say, but the fact that she is chased out of town by some angry great men, calling for her to be burned at the stake, suggests that Kempe has succeeded at her own good game.

The reason I am calling your attention to this story of good game from The Book of Margery Kempe is that I think it can serve as a kind of parable for Kempe’s strategy of resistance against patriarchal harassment. As an illiterate woman aware of her own exclusion from clerical discourse which threatens to silence her, she uses good game, a kind of aesthetics of play, to undermine their efforts, and at the same time, to claim her own right to speak. Just as the man in her story has good game at the words of great men, Kempe practices her game with her own

1 Sanford B. Meech and Hope Emily Allen, eds., The Book of Margery Kempe, Early English Text Society 212 (1940), 27.