spirituality" are, I believe, inadequate, as they rest on the old hierarchical dualities of physical/spiritual, literal/symbolic, male/female, and transcendence/immanence. As long as we continue to use the categories of this discourse, we remain outside the good game of the women's mystical language somewhat like the so-called great men who pursue Kempe out of town with their curses.

A recent book by Patricia Yaeger entitled, Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing, advocates just such a search in the works of all women writers for what she calls "play," what Kempe called good game. As Yaeger explains:

Play itself is a form of aesthetic activity in which, for the woman writer, reality loses its seriousness and what has been burdensome becomes--at least momentarily--weightless, transformable, transformative. As women play with old texts, the burden of the tradition is lightened and shifted; it has the potential for being remade.6

In order for feminist critics to describe this potential in the works of women mystics for remaking mystical language and experience, they must assist in the lightening of the burden by indulging in such play themselves. "The wise interpreter," says Julia Kristeva in "Psychoanalysis and the Polis," must "give way to delirium."7 The writing of both Kristeva and Cixous offer possible strategies of good game, of discovering the transformative potential of language in the writings of women mystics without diminishing their seriousness. Neither does such interpretive delirium rule out historical scholarship. I don't see why we cannot both explore the interrelationship and contexts for female mysticism and let Kempe have her good game. Borrowing from Huizinga's concept of the homo ludens, "men at play," I am suggesting that we might embark on a study of female mysticism of "gyno-ludens," the woman at play with language, whether she is claiming the eucharist as her speech or having good game with her words as she reimagines both mystical discourse and herself.

V. Feminism and Medieval Literature I: Theory: Explicit and Implicit.
Karen Robertson, English Dept., Vassar College

Beth Robertson speaks of the division between those interested in theory and those wary of it. I think it is important for feminists to engage in theory because if we do not, we risk reproducing the unexamined assumptions embedded in the traditional study of literature--I think for example of the heterosexual bias that has been a real problem in the study of Marlowe. Yet I appreciate and occasionally share the wariness of those suspicious of theory, for heavy theoretical analysis of literature at times seems to substitute for texts we know a secret language available only to a small group of initiates. I

6 Yaeger, 18.
think as feminists we have the responsibility to keep lines of communication open and not to imitate the prevailing masculinist models of intellectual life. I recognize the difficulty of doing that, because it is difficult to engage in discussion of questions of passionate interest to you, with people who haven’t done the same reading you’ve done. Yet I think it’s important not to allow the community of feminist critics to fragment, because if that happens, we lose our power as a movement for political change. We have become domesticated—just one more academic approach.

I take very seriously Jane Marcus’s proposal, in “Still Practice A/Wrested Alphabet: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic” in Shari Benstock’s Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship, what she calls the responsibilities of Progne.1 She uses an analysis of Virginia Woolf’s use of Ovid’s tale of Philomela and Progne, to define for us our responsibilities to interpret the tales of our silenced sisters. Yet we must also exercise restraint before the tales of others. Marcus suggests: “The white woman critic must be careful not to impose her own alphabet on the lesbian writer.”2 I would like to apply that suggestion to the problem of using feminist theory with historical texts. I think we have a responsibility as historical feminist scholars not to impose contemporary dogma flatly on texts of the past. What I would like to see is what I am calling a triangulation. That we take our contemporary preoccupations to past texts, but add a third lens, the potential, hypothetical past reader. I suggest we invent from all we can learn about the past, the range of responses possible in a past audience. (Do I risk Tillyardism? I don’t believe one mind came to the theatre.) Yet I do think that people with some shared experience, which is not our experience, came to participate in theatrical events. I believe we must try to imagine what the limits and interests of those people were, while we acknowledge our preoccupations in the present. Raymond Williams’ categorization of ideology may be helpful, and helpfully untidy. He suggests we look for dominant, residual, and emergent ideologies. I am particularly interested in what women in the past said, did, thought. I believe as scholars we have a responsibility to those women and I believe that we have to build a tradition that is ours.

I’d like to give an example of work which mixes theory and history. It’s a collection of essays Body and Body Politic: Sexuality in Renaissance Drama which I co-edited with Carole Levin, who is a Renaissance historian. The collection is eclectic—and deliberately mixes a variety of feminist approaches—liberal, Marxist, psychoanalytical, deconstructionist—to examine the representation of women on the Renaissance stage. I see the collection as granting insight into a space, that can be seen as a feminine space. Certainly it is a space of semiotic potential and heterogeneity which eludes precise confinement.3 I see the attacks on the stage as indicative of its troubling power. Here’s William Prynne in Histriomastix. He attacks pleasure and links the stage with other effeminate activities:
Manifest to all men's judgements, that effeminate
mixt Dancing, Dicing, Stage-playes, lascivious
Pictures, wanton Fashions, Face-painting,
Health-drinking, Long haire, Love-locks, Periwigs,
Women's curling, poudring and cutting their hair,
Bonefires, New-Yeare's gifts May-games, amorous
pastoralls, lascivious effeminate Musicke... .
wicked unchristian pastimes.4

I think there's real potential in a space that provokes that kind
of outrage. I see the stage as a place of disruption—and I
think at times we can find in the drama moments that suggest a
lifting of the rigidities of what is considered 'natural' and
'essential' to male and female. I see the reminders that boys
are playing female characters—for example Cleopatra's objection
"And I shall see/Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness in the
posture of a whore" (5.2.218-220)—which takes my breath away for
its daring—as moments which challenge notions of biological
essentialism and acknowledge, albeit not in our terms, the
cultural construction of gender. We need to connect with such
moments in the past.

My last example picks up Beth's question about Cixous. I believe
that feminist study of Renaissance drama grants us access to
moments where the fixed binary oppositions of Western thought are
cracked open. Catherine Belasy in a marvelous essay in
Alternative Shakespeares analyzes moments when the boy actor,
playing a female character, disguised as a boy, disrupts the
binary oppositions of sexual difference. She considers the
moment when Rosalind disguised as Ganymede engages in traditional
invective against women. The extra-textual sex of the boy actor
calls into question just who has spoken—female character,
disguised boy, or comic boy actor misogynist. Belasy argues that
these moments 'momentarily unfixed the existing system of
difference, and in the gap thus produced we are able to glimpse a
possible meaning, an image of a mode of being, which is not a-
sexual, nor bisexual, but which disrupts the system of difference
on which sexual stereotyping depends.'5

I believe we as feminist scholars have a responsibility to
consider the past and see what it offers—we have the
possibility, perhaps, of finding moments which serve as powerful
elements in the construction of a tradition which is ours. But
we can also engage in a process which allows for the otherness of
other experience. Valerie Wayne, whose essay on Othello is in
our collection, suggests this approach:
Since we now have the power of discourse, one way to
use it is to examine diversity rather than assert
unity, to create disruptions in the male text that give
us a space for speech, and for political change.'6

NOTES
1Jane Marcus in Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship, ed.
2Marcus, 80.
VI. Feminism and My Work on Sixteenth Century Defenses of Women.
Pamela J. Benson, English Dept., Rhode Island College, Providence, RI

I would like to begin with a brief description of my work. I am writing a book tentatively titled The Dilemma of the Independent Woman in Renaissance Italian and English Literature. It is a study of Italian and English defenses of womankind written by male authors from Boccaccio through the Elizabethans and of literary works, also by males, in which an independent female character, a lady knight, for example, engineers her own return to the conventional role of wife and mother. The absence of female authors from these categories was unintentional on my part. That is, I decided to look at the genre of defense and discovered that it was not a genre in which women in Italy and England participated in the period I was studying. One Italian woman wrote a defense of women’s learning; one English woman defended her right and her capacity to translate a work on the "manly" topic of chivalry. No woman wrote a large scale rhetorical defense of her sex. Similarly the literary works by women of which I am aware before 1535 in Italy and 1603 in England are non-narrative and also do not deal with the dilemma of return to a passive role. Therefore they do not fit within the boundaries of my study. (Perhaps members of the audience or panel might be aware of works of which I am unaware, I would be grateful to have them called to my attention.)

Given all this, I am especially sensitive to feminist theorists who argue that we cannot know women by means of men; that is, these works are written by men and do not necessarily (or even probably) express women’s own views. Liberal as they are, they may be another patriarchal attempt to put woman in the place where man wants her.

This is the way that many feminist critics of the Renaissance read the tradition I am studying. Ann Jones, Margaret Hannay, Valerie Wayne, Suzanne Hull, all represent the education of women in Renaissance England as repressive rather than progressive as the former scholarly tradition took for granted. Their evidence is two fold: what educators told women and those in charge of the education of girls and what women did. Those in charge of the education of women directed them to devote themselves to the spiritual as "the particular province of women," and they excluded rhetoric from the program because rhetoric was of no practical use to women. The large majority of