



## ROUNDTABLE: MIEVEALIST FEMINISTS IN THE ACADEMY



The following short papers were presented at the 27th International Congress on Medieval Studies, May, 1992. MFN invites reader responses so that the discussion may continue in the spring 1993 issue.

I'd like to begin by commenting on the title for our session: Medieval Feminists in the Academy. As constructed in this title, "Feminists" enjoys the place of prominence, the noun-spot, while "Medievalist" works as a humble modifier. I have *never* thought of myself in this way (as a "medievalist feminist") and have trouble doing it now, for I've always inverted the two and considered myself to be a "feminist medievalist." I think the difference between these two constructions might be very important. The title of our session says that we are feminists interested in Medieval Studies; the term with which I'm more comfortable says that we are medievalists motivated by feminist politics. I don't want to argue today that one label is better than the other. I simply want to note the difference, to proceed to use the term with which I'm most familiar ("feminist medievalist") and to wonder (hopefully) if the emergence of "medievalist feminist" reflects a generational shift towards more assertive feminist Medieval Studies; if so, it is a shift that I welcome, despite my fuddy-duddy discomfort with the term.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is this very shift that I'd like to encourage in my remarks today, for I want to argue that there is a critical need for feminist scholars to begin to take a more central place within Medieval Studies.

Like (I think) most of us, I have always seen feminist Medieval Studies as a fringe group within medieval scholarship, a quasi-heresy working on the edges of pure medievalism. I've found this marginal positioning to be annoying but also easy — I have been able to work as a medievalist within a very isolated but pleasant group of scholars who share (more or less) my ideas about feminist scholarship and the medieval world. Yet I have recently come to think that my acceptance of this marginality is entirely wrong and certainly counterproductive. My realization has come in two stages.

First, I have been surprised to discover that my marginal stance is ahistorical, for the sorts of ideals that motivate feminist medievalists are not new in Medieval Studies, but instead have been there from our nineteenth-century beginnings. This is a crucial point.

In taking “women” as our subject of inquiry, in questioning the “innocent eye” of scholarship, in writing for larger audiences, in advocating politically aware scholarship, in seeking to develop a critical engagement between the past and the present, we are not revolutionaries waging a new fight against a unitary and pure tradition of scholarship on the Middle Ages. We are, instead, part of a long line of medievalists who have advocated and practiced either feminist scholarship *per se* or scholarship motivated by similar concerns. Recent histories of Medieval Studies have suppressed these traditions (just as they have suppressed the essential and numerous contributions of female scholars to Medieval Studies), but these traditions *are* there and these progressive and feminist medievalists of past times *do* belong to us.<sup>2</sup> As feminist medievalists in the 1990s, we belong in the Medieval Academy as much as do those who espouse the scholarly principles of E.K. Rand or Paul Oskar Kristeller or Norman Cantor, for we have Eileen Power, Bertha Putnam, Hope Emily Allen, David Herlihy, and many others as part of our intellectual heritage. Our history teaches us, then, that we, as feminist medievalists, are as much true medievalists as those who seek in Medieval Studies an arcane sort of truth and an elite escape from the modern world. The field belongs to us as well, and we must not cede it to others.<sup>3</sup>

Second, I have come to realize that this sort of scholarship that we, as feminist medievalists, are pursuing is absolutely essential to the survival of Medieval Studies in the twenty-first century. Medieval Studies today is clearly in a state of deep crisis. Budgets are getting cut, positions are being lost, our scholarship is being ignored by most classicists and modernists, and even at Oxford, the study of Anglo-Saxon is suddenly being deemed unnecessary. If Medieval Studies is to survive this crisis and thrive in the next century, it must quite simply become more accessible, more relevant, and more interesting to more people.

This is exactly what feminist medievalists (among others) are doing. We are not afraid of multiculturalism; we are not aghast at the mixture of theory with Medieval Studies; we are not appalled at postmodern critiques; we are not jaded about the real possibilities of interdisciplinary studies; and we are not even lacking in lay audiences deeply interested in our subject (medieval women). With our new theories, new questions, and new approaches, feminist medievalists, working from the margins, have already substantially changed medieval studies for the better, and we will change it even more in the future. In the process, we are attracting new students, stimulating new archival work, and provoking new discussions: just what Medieval Studies needs.<sup>4</sup>

Informed, then, by these two realizations (one about our past and one about our future), I have come to see us—feminist medievalists—as an empowered group that must begin to *use* our power more assertively: we account for perhaps one in every ten medievalists now working in North America; we have a distinguished (albeit suppressed) place in the historical development of Medieval Studies; and, the future very much belongs to us—indeed, it relies upon us. Understanding these things, we must take our place at the center of Medieval Studies and hold it firmly.

I know that this is, to put it mildly, easier said than done. In my own university, one of my colleagues has been ridiculed to graduate students as a “crazy medieval feminist”; I am not considered to be part of the field of medieval history in my department (because I work on women); and the interdisciplinary graduate program in Medieval Studies has

been controlled by men for whom feminism in their own lives is anathema, much less feminism in Medieval Studies. In such a context, it is more than easy to feel marginal and to retreat to a safe spot on the sidelines. But if we stay on the sidelines, we effectively abandon undergraduates and graduate students to a practice of Medieval Studies that is inimical to our own, and we effectively condemn Medieval Studies to a slow and agonizing death in the new academy of the twenty-first century. We need to talk about strategies and plans and options, but we also need to act. As feminist medievalists and/or medieval feminists, we must take strength from our history, we must recognize our legitimacy and our centrality to Medieval Studies, and we must claim our rightful place at the very center of scholarship on the Middle Ages.

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<sup>1</sup>I realized after the Kalamazoo session that the choice of "Medievalist Feminists in the Academy" for the title probably reflected *MFN*'s sponsorship of the roundtable. Yet in the title of *MFN* (and in the name of our Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship), both "medieval" and "feminist" are adjectives, thereby weakening the significance of the order — it really doesn't matter which comes first. When transferred to the session title, however, this sequence created "feminists" as a noun modified by "medievalist," and this construction did (and still does) strike me as unusual.

<sup>2</sup>I am thinking particularly of the following histories of Medieval Studies: F.N. Robinson, "Anniversary Reflections," *Speculum* 25 (1950), pp. 491-501; S. Harrison Thomas, "The Growth of the Discipline: Medieval Studies in America," *Perspectives in Medieval History*, ed. Katherine Fisher Drew and Floyd Seyward Lear (Chicago, 1963), pp. 1-18; William J. Courtenay, "The Virgin and the Dynamo: The Growth of Medieval Studies in America (1870-1930)," *Medieval Studies in North America, Past, Present, and Future*, eds. Francis G. Gentry and Christopher Kleinherz (Kalamazoo, 1982), pp. 5-22; Norman Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages* (New York: 1991).

<sup>3</sup>My thoughts on this first point derive from an essay on "Medievalism and Feminism" that I have prepared for a special issue of *Speculum* scheduled for 1993.

<sup>4</sup>My thoughts on this second point derive from an essay on "Our Colleagues, Ourselves," prepared for the 1992 conference at Notre Dame on "The Past and Future of Medieval Studies." The proceedings of this conference are currently being edited by John Van Engen for publication by the University of Notre Dame Press.



## FEMINISM AND MEDIEVAL STUDIES AND THE ACADEMY



As a feminist medievalist, I often feel doubly marginalized; indeed, I imagine that I

am sometimes perceived to be some sort of antiquarian hysteric. This twofold marginalization particularly disturbed me when, as graduate director of the University of Colorado's English department — a department increasingly devoted to cultural materialism — I decided to revise the graduate curriculum. While I was successful in getting the department vote for new requirements in beginning and advanced theory as well as in multiculturalism, I was unable to secure a requirement in gender studies or to retain our previous requirement in medieval literature.<sup>1</sup>

I believe that feminism and medieval studies, both separately and together, are marginalized elsewhere in the academy. In Europe, courses in medieval studies have been seriously cut back, and here in the United States, medieval studies courses are not invulnerable to the same fate. Stanford University, for example, recently dropped its Old English requirement. Furthermore, until quite recently Medieval Studies had to struggle to maintain its place at the Modern Language Association. I know of many proposals for special sessions in the medieval field that have been rejected, while special sessions in other fields have proliferated. While feminism has been well-represented at the MLA in other periods, medieval feminist literary panels have only begun to appear, and even those have been scheduled in such a way as to enhance their marginalization. The special session, "Rape in Chaucer," that occurred at the 1990 MLA was scheduled on Saturday night after childcare needed for two of the speakers was no longer available and when most conference-goers were out to dinner. This year's MLA session on feminism and medieval studies was scheduled directly opposite the large standard Middle English session. In addition, while feminist sessions, most often sponsored by the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter*, are common here at Kalamazoo, such sessions are far less common at other major medieval conferences, at the Medieval Academy, for example, or at the New Chaucer Society Meetings. Finally, few departments eagerly embrace the idea of hiring a new medievalist; and, I know of only one department that ever advertised for a medieval feminist.<sup>2</sup>

What causes these two fields to be marginalized? Let's consider them separately for a moment. As Toril Moi puts it, feminism is now "strictly speaking an impossible position" for "its aim is to abolish itself along with its opponent. In a non-sexist, non-patriarchal society, feminism will no longer exist."<sup>3</sup> Non-feminist literary theorists are legitimately uncomfortable with the theoretical traps feminism so easily falls into — the "essentialism" trap, for example, the "victimization" trap, or the "equality" trap. Critics of feminism see it as one-dimensional in its commitment to understanding gender oppression. Furthermore, the field itself is split between psychoanalysis and history as if neither could inform the other. The necessary move from feminism to gender studies has had the unfortunate effect of dividing the feminist community and undermining political urgency. As Toril Moi complains, the problem of post-modernist feminism is that it refuses to take sides.<sup>4</sup> As we break down the category of "woman," we must reconsider how to construct a politics of women, perhaps through alliance politics. And the concurrent developments in historicism and multiple feminisms have led to an uncomfortable split between politics and gender. Like the one between history and psychoanalysis, this split reproduces that traditional division between the public and the private spheres that, as Linda Nicholson has pointed out, has so plagued the development of feminist theory in the academy.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, we must question not only the category of gender, but of politics as well.

The reasons for Medieval Studies' marginalization, as Lee Patterson has discussed, reside in part in its development as a field.<sup>6</sup> Contributing to its marginalization is the fact that it has at times been naïvely positivistic, is still patriarchal in its structure, and is slow to change. Within the discipline, scholars are often pitted against their critics. Theorists in other fields, failing to see the multiplicity of theoretical difficulties specific to the field of Medieval Studies, conclude that, rather than legitimately challenging theoretical constructs in order to shape Medieval Studies to the specific needs of the field, medievalists are simply too naïve to engage with theory at all. Medieval Studies is seen as an area that no serious theorist would enter. Feminist medievalists are only beginning to make their mark in English literary studies, but as in other fields, critics of medieval English literature have too often viewed politics and gender as two separate spheres of inquiry.

Other than marginalization, what do these two fields, medieval studies and feminism, have in common? Perhaps part of the difficult relationship these two have with the academy resides in their complex relationship to difference. Given the recent rage for acknowledging and studying difference, one would not think that feminism, a field that confronts students automatically with gender difference, and medieval studies, a field that confronts students immediately with differences of languages, orthography, sociology, and history, would both be at the forefront of recent historically based theoretical developments in literary studies. Indeed, as both Judith Newton and Lee Patterson have pointed out, both fields have a long-standing involvement with history.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps, however, it is just this long-standing involvement with history that creates difficulties for both fields, since both feminism and Medieval Studies have at different periods been prey to universalizing tendencies. The concern of feminism and Medieval Studies with difference makes me wonder, however, if that shared interest is in fact at the basis of their uncomfortable relationship with the academy. One might expect multiculturalism to embrace medieval studies. While our department allowed the possibility that a course in multiculturalism might be one in Medieval Studies, I doubt that such a course will be taught; the English department at Irvine initially resisted the possibility. Why? Perhaps English departments aren't really interested in difference at all. Jean Howard in her critique of new historicism identified in many critics the habit of "seeking an image of the seeing self" in their criticism rather than an image of the other.<sup>8</sup> Thanks to deconstruction, we are all now aware of the impossibility of seeing the past without the involvement of the present; but it is nonetheless important not to let our presentism take precedence over our quest for an understanding of the past. Feminists are as much at risk of mirroring as medievalists. The courses I have offered in gender and Chaucer and in female mysticism and the like have managed to engage the attention of our more theoretically-inclined students, yet I fear that their interest is based on their misuse of feminism as a tool to transform medieval works into mirrors of themselves. Perhaps we need to acknowledge and explore the phenomenon of mirroring in criticism more fully.

It is important for both medievalists and feminists to recognize their commitment to the otherness of the past and their implication in it. Just as it is crucial for medievalists to acknowledge how their present concerns shape their attempts to produce an objective understanding of the past, it is crucial for feminists not to use the past as a mirror but as a strategic tool for understanding the present in relationship to a different past. <sup>5</sup>See Linda

Furthermore, feminists must learn to distinguish between the universal and the essential; yet, in their commitment to local and concrete history, they must at the same time, as Judith Bennett has recently argued, continue to query the source of repeated instances of gender oppression over time.<sup>9</sup>

I propose that medievalists can bring Medieval Studies closer to the center of the academy by offering courses that are theoretically informed. At the same time, I think it is extremely important that medievalists try to reverse the progressive isolation of the field by communicating with colleagues in other periods. One way to do so might be to team-teach across periods. For example, Margaret Ferguson and I have considered team-teaching our department's required graduate course in Critical Analysis of Medieval and Renaissance texts. By doing so, we could perhaps interrogate the historicist project itself.

I would like to close by suggesting a course that might serve as an example, addressing some of the concerns I've discussed above, one that I believe could meet that need for an historically informed difference while at the same time maintaining the urgency of present feminist concerns — one that could, in other words, bring together the discourses of gender and politics while avoiding the pitfalls of presentism: that is a course on Rape in Chaucer. Such a course might include a combination of Chaucerian works in which rape is an issue (*Troilus and Criseyde* and the "Wife of Bath's Tale," for example); theoretical texts on the representation of rape in a variety of periods, such as Stephanie Jed's book on the rape of Lucrece, or some of the essays from Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver's excellent collection, *Rape and Representation*; and contemporary discussions on rape, such as Susan Brownmiller's book.<sup>10</sup> In addition, one might consider works that discuss legal texts of the period such as Kathryn Gravdal's *Ravishing Maidens*, James A Brundage's work on law in medieval Europe, and Barbara Hanawalt's work on English law.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the class might consider the documents surrounding Chaucer's alleged "raptus" of Cecily Champaigne.<sup>12</sup> A course like that might simultaneously train our students in the difference of medieval texts while it contributes to the growing complication of the theoretical/historicist project as a whole.

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<sup>9</sup>A persuasive argument against the medieval requirement was made by one of my younger Victorianist colleagues who claimed that Victorian literature is just as "difficult" as medieval literature. While this point may have some truth in it, that colleague was unable to see that whatever relative degrees of difficulty in the field in fact, in theory students perceive the medieval field to be both more difficult and less desirable than Victorian or than any other field other than medieval, and are therefore less likely to sign up for medieval courses than Victorian ones. Indeed, most students prefer to avoid the medieval arena altogether if given the choice; but when they are required to take a course in it, they are surprised by the richness of the field.

<sup>10</sup>The University of Colorado at Denver.

<sup>11</sup>Toril Moi, "Feminism, Postmodernism and Style: Recent Feminist Criticism in the United States." *Cultural Critique* 9 (Spring, 1988), 5.

<sup>12</sup>Toril Moi, "Feminism, Postmodernism and Style," 19.

<sup>13</sup>See Linda Nicholson's extended discussion of this split in her *Gender and History: The Limits of Social Theory in the Age of the Family* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986). For a discussion of alliance politics, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 1990).

<sup>6</sup>Lee Patterson, "On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies," *Speculum* 65, 1 (1990), 87-108. Clearly, part of the contemporary marginalization of Medieval Studies has to do with its association with religion.

<sup>7</sup>See Lee Patterson; also, Judith Newton, "History as Usual? Feminism and the 'New Historicism,'" *Cultural Critique* 9 (Spring 1988), 87 - 121, and the introduction to Judith Newton's book of essays, edited with Deborah Rosenfelt, *Feminist Criticism and Social Change* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

<sup>8</sup>Jean Howard, "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies," *English Literary Renaissance* 16, 1 (1986), 16. This essay is discussed at length from a feminist perspective by Marguerite Waller in "The Empire's New Clothes," in *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism*, eds Sheila Fisher and Janet Halley (Knoxville: U. of Tennessee, 1989), 160 - 183.

<sup>9</sup>Judith Bennett, "Medieval Women, Modern Women: Across the Great Divide," *Culture and History: 1350 - 1600*, David Aers (New York: Harvester, 1992), 147 - 176.

<sup>10</sup>Stephanie Jed, *Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1989); Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver, *Rape and Representation* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991); Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975).

<sup>11</sup>Kathryn Gravdal, *Flavishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Barbara Hanawalt, *Crime and Conflict in English Communities: 1300 - 1348* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979); James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987). See also John Marshall Carter, *Rape in Medieval England: An Historical and Sociological Study* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1985).

<sup>12</sup>For the most recent work on this case see Christopher Cannon, "'Raptus' in the Champaigne Release and Other Documents Relating to the Life of Geoffrey Chaucer," a paper delivered at the 1992 New Chaucer Society Meeting in Seattle and forthcoming in *Speculum*.

