

the end of the twentieth-century. Not the clitoris as a failed penis, therefore, but the penis as a “hyper-inflated clitoris.” Or, the deflated Victorian penis/phallus in relation to the female body as the new purveyor of meaning and value. Several writers name this relationship of envy and appropriation with acuity. Chris Tysh, borrowing a phrase from Ntozake Shange’s *for coloured girls*, remarks that “somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff.” The male hysteric, for Tysh, is the new philosopher, “Innkeeper of Logos,” who “adds on to himself that by which he is diminished.” This male hysteric is “up there on the stage of the 21st century Symposium on Philosophy for the Future,” performing a pantomime of the feminine in a last scramble for power.

Avery Gordon makes the very important connection between male hysteria and violence against those who pose a challenge to the sovereignty of white masculinity. For men, “increasing challenges to that sovereignty, to that intersection of knowledge and power and the resulting ambiguity of cultural meanings,” is terrifying. This terror gets translated into terrorization of those who threaten the enclosure of the white male’s perspective on the world.

Not all of the contributors (who, incidentally, are British and American as well as Canadian, and male as well as female) deal specifically with the male hysteric. Several writers, in a highly self-conscious fashion, explore the construction of female identity: the mechanisms of confession and surveillance in the practice of

cosmetic surgery, the attraction of the Harlequin romance for feminist readers, the endless regression of mirrored identities in the genealogy of the bleached blonde. These essays in particular are extremely original pieces of feminist criticism. The self-consciousness of the writers informs their arguments with the contradictory realities of feminist experience.

While the quality of the contributions is uneven, and the copy-editing often careless, this collection of essays tracing the next stage of gender politics is a worthwhile, though arduous, read. Feminists interested in questions of popular culture and theory (or how George Bush can be a seductive hysteric or how women can learn to ejaculate with practice) will find much to ponder here.

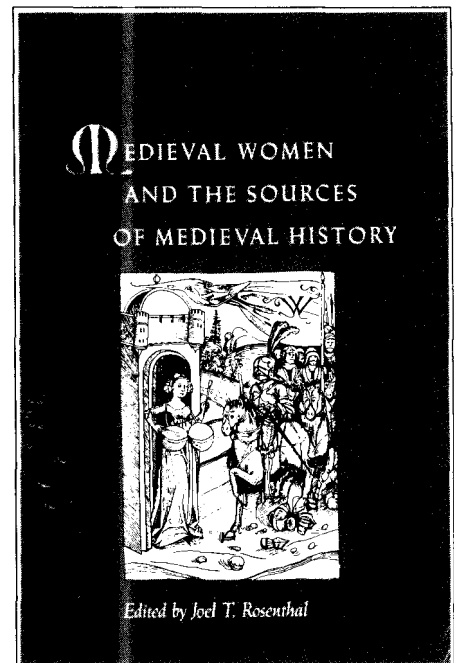
MEDIEVAL WOMEN AND THE SOURCES OF MEDIEVAL HISTORY

Joel T. Rosenthal, ed. Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1990.

By Laura Cameron

There are winners and losers in history, and although sometimes we might like to believe that objectivity is easily attained, more often it is an elusive thing. Intended for students and teachers of history, *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History* endeavors, with a good deal of success, to probe into the whereabouts of women during the medieval period. Surely they existed, but as many of the authors demonstrate, the losers in the history game do not often figure prominently on the scoreboards.

I read the various articles of the anthology with a mixed reaction. There is a certain cause for anger here, as I am made aware by one historian after another of the scribes who ignored, dismissed and were oblivious to, even the *presence* of women in medieval life. Although there is information to be gleaned from the sources, much of what we could learn about women’s lives, about gender interaction, and (although the winners might scoff at this last) even about men’s lives, has been irretrievably lost. However, I was excited to discover that there are scholars who are committing themselves to the task of “uncovering” medieval women.



The fourteen papers in this collection are written in a variety of styles and cover diverse subjects. They range from Janet Senderowitz Loengard’s re-examination of English legal history, in an effort to extract new insight from an old and well-established topic, to Helen Lemay’s hypothesis on how women’s medicine might have influenced the male medical establishment of the day.

We can begin to learn more about medieval women and society by scouring established sources, and opening up our traditionally trained minds to previously uninvestigated sources. Janet Tibbetts Schulenburg demonstrates this beautifully in her work with hagiographic sources, an area of historical research traditionally considered unreliable and insignificant. Some of the papers approach material through the compare-and-contrast paradigm. Jo Ann McNamara’s account of the fate of two religious women, touched by the hardening views of contemporaries, who shunned what they saw as excessive pluralism taking root in spiritual Christian thought, is riveting. Others, like John Freed, use case studies to examine the data, first from a male perspective and then again in the context of both sexes. They are excellent at illustrating the richness and depth possible when both perspectives are examined — which raises an interesting point.

I half-hoped, half-feared that Rosenthal’s collection would raise the fire of militancy in my soul. My half-hope was born out of anger. My half-fear was

grounded in that elusive virtue — objectivity. Anger can perhaps lead to a creativity of thought, stretching the boundaries of the established; it can also produce inaccurate, skewed data. Simply reversing the winners and losers in history does not help in broadening our understanding and sensitivity; we must work to change the attitudes that led to this inequality in the first place. On this score, Rosenthal's collection is superb.

If one sometimes senses an artificiality — that women have been parachuted into the story by sheer willpower — perhaps this is less the fault of the author than it is a testament to the historical exclusion of women. The authors consistently advance worthwhile data in an immensely readable format, and each article ends with an extensive bibliography.

The anthology does not stray outside the centres of Christian thought, to those who lived outside the European cultural axis. But Rosenthal selectively juxtaposes different subjects, scholars, research and writing styles that interact with each other. As a total work it is challenging and exciting, not only for what it says about the medieval woman, but also for what it says about the possibilities open to students in historical research. If we can develop the ability to mesh the old with the new — to accept the discoveries of the past, but learn to re-examine the data for fresh insight — we can better hope to reach true objectivity.

LANGUAGE IN HER EYE: Writing and Gender

Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard and Eleanor Wachtel, eds. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990.

By Laura McLauchlan

"I was determined," writes Libby Scheier, "that the anthology would contain the very real diversity of views current among good Canadian women writers on the subject of writing and gender." In their shared preface the three editors begin with the questions with which they approached the participants: "questions on the impact of feminism on writing and publishing within Canada, and on the impact of feminist theory on readers and writers." Then, too, they asked "could a

writer authentically take on a voice other than that of her own race, class, gender and sexual orientation?"

Of the forty-four writers who are represented in this book almost all — in alphabetical order from Atwood to Weinzweig — are novelists, poets and playwrights we once rather glibly lumped together as "creative writers." Since feminist critics and academics have spoken out on many of these issues, the editors reasoned it was time to summon others to write.

Numerous essays in *Language In Her Eye* either focus or touch on issues of race. Women of colour such as Marlene Nourbese Philip and Dionne Brand challenge white women to move away from stale self-justification. Claire Harris's "Ole Talk: A Sketch" uses the "authorial I" in a fictionalized conversation between friends, noting that "one in three young people (in Canada) are of various Asian and African ancestry. And there are, of course, the Aboriginal peoples.... If we're going to share this land safely, we better get to know each other." Two essays by Native Canadians, Lee Maracle and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, ask non-Natives to cease telling stories which appropriate Indian legend. Anne Cameron's sensitive response is presented in the aptly titled, "The Operative Principle Is Trust."

In the book's second essay, "The Sound Barrier: Translating Ourselves in Language and Experience," Himani Bannerji recalls her mother's "flour and dough covered hands" gripping her wrists and the admonition to "read — read — good books. Those you have in English." For her mother — as for many of our mothers — these "good" books meant the canon of white-mostly-dead males. Bannerji's essay explains why she must break with the seamless narrative circle of English as the language of "duty" if she is to textualize her own Asian-Canadian vision.

A number of essays are written by women whose first language is not English. But all of the entries are written in English. Not included are women writing in French and other languages, an omission made, we are told, because "neither space nor time would allow us to translate and represent them adequately in this volume."

The book would have been all the more timely had it cut not only "across both personal and professional territory" — as its editors note it does — but also across linguistic lines. Perhaps this lacuna —

this gap — will inspire the editors to produce a second volume.

The book succeeds in presenting eloquent spokeswomen with conflicting views. Numerous other writers present inner conflict. Some essays seem to use it as a way of avoiding confrontation. Judith Thompson's clever essay, "One Twelfth," outlines the weakness of "an unfeminist feminist" — a character she aligns closely with herself. Women, writes Margaret Atwood, "are (still) heavily socialized to please.... The fear that dares not speak its name, for some women these days, is the fear of other women. But you aren't supposed to talk about that...."

One of the many strengths of this volume of essays is that it does "talk about that." The good feminist "grinch" is at one point presented as a kind of postmodern equivalent to Woolf's angel in the house. As playwright Margaret Hollingsworth notes, "these days I write, I have a grinch, a gremlin, a gnome on my shoulder — a little voice that pipes up in my ear every time I put pen to paper — *should you? is it correct? how will this be evaluated?*" Hollingsworth constructs her essay around a conflict between her own feminist conscience, the "gremlin," and her work as a writer.

In her contribution to *Language In Her Eye*, Janet Turner Hospital speaks out without fear: "I am absolutely not impressed with many high profile 'career feminists' (both writers and academics)... who seem intent on making the right formulaic feminist statements to the press or in lectures, but are consistently unsupportive of, and frequently downright nasty to, other women."

The book is dedicated to Bronwen Wallace (1945-1989) who died before writing the essay she had planned to contribute. Wallace was a writer who faced hard facts. She would not have attempted to shrug off any of the problems with which the essays in this volume deal. The writers in this volume carry on where Wallace left off.

Language In Her Eye challenges Canadian women to consider writing and gender from the "real diversity" of perspective which Scheier and her fellow editors sought. Then, too, it gives us the assurance to celebrate what Jane Rule calls "gender disturbance," the kind of "disturbance" which prompts Aritha Van Herk to write (wryly footnoting another woman) "I want to make trouble."