

effect political change. Whereas deconstruction avoids taking a "yes or no" position in a conscious attempt to avoid being coopted by the system of phallogocentric logic that it critiques, the woman's movement must articulate clear "yes or no" positions. While it is necessary for feminists to take these positions, we can acknowledge that none of them is fully true or correct. We can perhaps best see them as working positions, necessary but incomplete. The questions at their base are often binary and neither answer is satisfactory.

But here the deconstructive paradigm applies as Rabine suggests. For as deconstructionists know all too well, every challenge to logocentrism is incomplete, because it exists, can only exist, in the language of logocentrism. And this is the feminist dilemma or challenge too. How to act within a metaphysical logic of patriarchy in order to dismantle it. The trick according to Kristeva is to avoid identifying with the patriarchal power structure that we think we are demystifying and fighting. Or as Jane Gallop has cautioned: we must try to resist the desire to encompass difference, to "get it all together," to erase women in an attempt to define, represent or theorize woman ("Annie Leclerc Writing a Letter with Vermeer," in The Poetics of Gender, ed. Nancy K. Miller, 1987).

Probably the most difficult aspect of the task before us is that it requires moving from the well-known terrain of binary logic to the less-comfortable realm of the unknown. Or as Kristeva has said, we're moving from a patriarchal society to "who knows what?" Medieval feminists, especially readers of the adventure story, should feel right at home with this journey into the unknown, into the imprevisible of what is still to come. Except that in this instance the subject of the adventure will not be the knight, but the feminist critic launching out on her own aventure.

II. Desire in Language: Theory, Feminism, and Medieval Texts Geraldine Heng, English Dept., Cornell Univ.

Let me begin by telling two stories which will help to focus my particular interest in our session today.

In December of '86, I gave a paper at the MLA in New York, in a special session on feminism and medieval literature. One of my strategies at the time involved reading a feminine presence in masculine-centred romance by wilfully scrutinizing everything the text did not say, while ignoring everything the text did in fact highlight, and locating my reading in what the marxist Pierre Macherey calls "the unconscious of the work", and what post-Lacanian refer to simply as "the textual unconscious." After the session, a very nice woman came up to me, and in the course of conversation asked a question that was obviously much on her mind, and which thereafter shadowed my own for many months. "When you read," she asked quietly, "how can you know you are really reading the unconscious of a text?" I answered at length, but was unable to satisfy either of us. Sixteen months later, I can still see her in my mind walking away, disappointed at not having come to any certainty as to where the dividing line was between the conscious and the unconscious text, and between the

text and its reader. Her desire for certainty, and clear knowledge-- for a rule that might be applied and followed through in all instances-- haunted me, perhaps because it spoke, uncannily, for me as well; and it became increasingly vital to negotiate the pitfalls of the question.

The second example arises from the occasion of our session itself. When Beth first wrote with an invitation to sit on this panel, she voiced her concern-- an honest and important concern-- that the session should "bring medieval scholars together...rather than set them against one another." In a recent letter, she mentioned once more how disturbed she felt at the "division among feminist scholars", and repeated her desire that we try to "reconcile our different points of view...in order to put together an outline of feminist theory that would be most useful to the appreciation of medieval and renaissance works." "At the very least," she said hopefully, "I would like us to be able to articulate how a feminist approach to such early works differs from feminist approaches to later works." Expressed like this, I recognised a similar drift in some of my own hopes, and positions with which I at least partly identified, in however tentative or contingent a fashion. Three things would therefore seem to be desired by us, organised somewhat like this: one, an end to our division and contentiousness as feminists; two, a body of feminist theory specifically applicable to early literatures; and three, a differentiation between how we read earlier and later forms of literature.

My subject today, as you might guess from these examples, is desire-- in particular, what is at stake when we voice or do not voice our desire. As feminists we are familiar with the ways in which traditional critical reception masters a text and produces a tradition which excludes or marginalizes us-- through the pretence, say, that texts permit only a narrow range of possible readings, which are then by definition the only legitimate ways in which they may be read. By eliding over its own desire, a non-feminist reading is able to masquerade as politically neutral-- that is to say, unmotivated by any hierarchy of values, implicit ideological commitments, or assumptions about power. To outwit this particular attempt at mastery-- this manipulation of the text which hides what is at stake in the act of manipulation-- feminists often make explicit the politics of their own reading, even as they proceed to identify the politics of the texts and critics they read. A common feminist position is that all readings are political, whether they claim to be so or not, whether or not they are conscious of the politics they demonstrate.

Invoked in this premise that I have coded as feminist is thus already a certain admission: namely, that both the text and the reader participate in the determination of meaning. That is to say, texts do not coerce and force only particular readings upon a reader; neither are they endlessly re-readable. Readers in turn cannot pretend to a transcendent position of objectivity in confronting a text, but must accept responsibility for the choices they make in the course of reading. There are resistances and sedimentations within a reader; each meets the desire of the other in a process that can only be described as endlessly dialogical-- or, in the vocabulary of psychoanalysis, transferential.

In this drama of reading, then, no certainty is possible for where is the line to be firmly drawn between what is in a text, and what is in the reader? Each is mutually implicated in the other; and the extent and character of that mutual implication shifts from moment to moment within every reading compact. Nor, as one comes to realize, is mastery finally possible: for there is that within a text, and within a reader, which is blind to itself. Along with what a text intends to say, comes that which it did not intend, and of which it is not even aware; similarly, the discourse of every reader is equally traversed by its own blindnesses.

The attraction of poststructuralist and psychoanalytic forms of feminist theory for me lies in part in this frank admission of the utter impossibility of mastery and certainty, an admission which turns back the impetus of our desire for both. Such kinds of feminism do not seek to replace, wholesale, male mastery with female mastery of the text and the critical tradition, but to question the boundaries by which inclusions and exclusions are stabilized, and the disseminations of power necessarily entrenched with each and every laying-down of a boundary. The willingness of such feminist readings to admit that they can themselves ever only be partial and provisional in nature, in the end re-doubles, for me, their political force.

But it is always easier to detect and explore the desire of the other, in all its political ramifications, than to examine the implications of our own. What is meant, for instance, by our desire to evolve a homogenous body of feminist theory directed to addressing medieval or renaissance texts? And what is at stake when we attempt to draw a line between groups of texts, designating one kind as different, in essence, from another, and ask for separate considerations in reading each kind? Might we not suspect, firstly, in our wish to develop a body of theory for application to medieval literature, a desire that the theory should master the literature? That is to say, we would group ourselves alongside the position of a superior, theoretical knowledge- manipulating that knowledge to explain, clarify, illuminate, inform and re-arrange subordinate textual knowledges. Conversely, in our demand that theory be appropriate to medieval literature may be sensed a current in the opposite direction: the desire to submit theory to the authority and jurisdiction of the medieval text, which would then determine and direct its usages. Thus subject to inspection and correction by medieval literature, an appropriate form of theory would easily become appropriable, and finally, be appropriated by the very literature with which it is supposed to enter into discourse, its potential for speaking in a different voice smothered and subsumed at the outset. Finally, in our request for a clear separation between feminist approaches to earlier texts, and feminist approaches to later ones, may similarly be discerned the politics of an interested desire-- our desire to privilege and protect our own specialism by constructing a barrier to keep us in, and keep others out, and thus secure the fleeting illusion of a fictive mastery over literary property.

It stands to reason then-- not, perhaps, the reason of common sense, but the reason of an un-common sense-- that we cannot afford to rule out any kind of feminist readings, on any texts, of any period, as inappropriate or illegitimate. To

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

Wendy Clein, The University of Connecticut, Hartford

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 revised 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" (Baym 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