

*Report from the UK: Symposium on Gender and Medieval Studies
King's College, Cambridge*

During a one-day meeting held on December 17, 1988 medievalists working in British universities and interested in feminism and/or women's studies exchanged ideas and shared their experience of researching and teaching medieval history and culture from a feminist perspective. The symposium, designed to provide a forum for discussion rather than for presentation of research papers, consisted in three ninety-minute workshop sessions, each led by a literary scholar and a historian. The leaders presented problems and issues with a view to inviting participation from the floor. This format proved highly successful. Sessions were: "Feminist theory and medieval studies" (led by Roberta Krueger and Lyndal Roper); "Sources for the study of women in the Middle Ages" (Linda Paterson and Jinty Nelson); and, "The teaching of medieval culture and history from a feminist perspective" (Karen Pratt and Sarah Beckwith).

Roberta Krueger and Lyndal Roper talked about the difficulties of making a thoroughgoing application of feminist theory to medieval historical or literary material. The tendency of historians is too readily to assimilate gender to other explanatory categories, such as class; literary scholars are constrained by the apparent complicity of medieval women in medieval masculine ideology, just as modern women academics are implicated in masculine institutions. Discussion then focussed on two topics that stimulated participation from both historians and literary scholars, namely, patriarchy and female subjectivity. The term patriarchy was deemed problematic by historians since it is subject to the dynamics of history. The problem of the location of the female subject underlined the importance of continuing to work with feminist theory.

In the second session Linda Paterson and Jinty Nelson drew attention to important sources, both textual and archeological, that have not yet been sufficiently exploited for women's studies. The problem, it was argued, was not so much a shortage of sources, but rather the limited way in which they have been used. There was a lively, if rather piecemeal, discussion of medical and liturgical texts, and of the way feminist historians challenge the traditional distinction between the public and the private. Fruitful topics for further discussion would center on women and value, women and land transactions, and women and iconography.

Sarah Beckwith began the session on teaching by stressing the need to break down the institutional barriers between academic disciplines such as literature and history if women are to be valorized as objects of study. Karen Pratt then spoke about the problems of setting up feminist courses in British universities. Experiences and advice were shared with respect to two major obstacles: first, unjustifiable bias against women's studies, and second,

institutional constraints on making time for new courses (only at the expense of more traditional ones, such as the historical study of language).

During the business meeting women from all disciplines expressed their feeling of marginalization, both institutionally as women and intellectually as feminists working on the Middle Ages. As a result, it was deemed desirable to schedule a further symposium having the same format so that continuing exchange and discussion with colleagues might occur. The next symposium is therefore to take place in September 1989 at the University of Warwick and will be organized by Linda Paterson. Efforts will be made to encourage art historians and archeologists to attend that meeting.

Participants in the business meeting also decided to establish a register of research being conducted in Britain on medieval women and on medieval history and culture from a feminist perspective. That would be done by circulating a questionnaire among medievalists interested in the subject but unable to attend the symposium. The questionnaire had already been completed by the forty-three conference attendees, the majority of whom were women. With the exception of one art historian, all were from the disciplines of history and literature. Nevertheless, their research interests were wide-ranging, as all periods of medieval history and a large number of medieval literary languages were represented. (Although most held teaching posts in institutions of higher education, a fair number were graduate students, reflecting the interest in feminism amongst younger scholars.)

Finally, the group expressed its desire to be in contact with the *American Medieval Feminist Newsletter* and to explore the possibility of starting a British section of *MFN*.

--Elizabeth Archibald, King's College, Cambridge;
Simon Gaunt, St. Catharine's College, Cambridge;
Sarah Kay, Girton College, Cambridge

Notes and Announcements

"The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan." The University of Virginia will host a symposium on the political writings of Christine de Pizan, October 20, 1989. Visiting speakers will include Charity Cannon Willard, Emerita, Ladycliff College; E. Jeffrey Richards, UNC-Chapel Hill; Christine Reno, Vassar College; Linda Leppig, Tulane University. For further information, contact Margaret Brabant or Michael Brint at (804) 924-3192, Woodrow Wilson Department of Government and Foreign Affairs, Univ. of Virginia, 232 Cabell Hall, Charlottesville 22901.

Second Annual Conference on Feminism and Art History. Barnard College, fall 1989. For information contact Natalie Kampen, Director, Women's Studies, Barnard College, New York, New York 10027.