

COMMENTARY

The following is the first part of what we hope will develop into a broader dialogue between literary critics and historians, outlining how the feminist project in its many guises might build crucial bridges between the disciplines of history and literature. The fall issue of MFN will feature a "Commentary" essay by historian Sharon Farmer. Other comments and responses, other voices in this dialogue, are welcome and actively encouraged. Please send your thoughts to E. Jane Burns, Department of Romance Languages, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C. 27599-3170.

Collaborative Work in Literature and History:
What Literary Scholars Want from Historians

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In thinking about what it is that medievalists in literature may want from medievalists in history, I am struck first all by certain dilemmas that touch on the very possibility of bringing the two disciplines--literature and history--together. "Literature," though still an institutionally significant term, is very much a contested one; as a discipline, literature is in the process of redefining itself, of submitting to critical scrutiny all of its fundamental concepts, structures, and practices. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith points out, one would be hard-pressed these days to define what "literature" is, to state, for example, what makes one text, or even one genre of writing, more "Literary" than another.¹ Certainly one important consequence of this process of disciplinary self-investigation (itself the product of recent developments in literary and feminist theory) is the tendency nowadays among many literary scholars to look outward: now more than ever, the project of "doing literature" engages one in interdisciplinary work. Especially in the context of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, "Literature" per se seems to be increasingly subsumed by a more broad-based, and in some incarnations, a more politically-committed inquiry which terms such as "cultural studies" or "new historicism" are meant to designate.

Now looking at the academic discipline of history from the perspective of this admittedly sketchy description of literary studies in 1990, I do not discern such an extensive redefinition process. Whereas the discipline of literature is increasingly asking itself questions about the very ground (or lack thereof) on which it stands, historical scholarship, for the most part, seems still to be involved with concepts such as empiricism and objectivity that provide the very time-honored ground of the discipline. Perhaps, then, because of this situation of imbalance whereby one discipline more than the other sees itself as being in a state of flux, the field of history--especially the field of medieval history--seems to me to be less involved than medieval literary studies in the act of gazing outward.

Perhaps the first thing I as a medievalist in literature would want from my medievalist colleagues in history is a sense that we are both involved in a shared enterprise: I would like to see both historians and literary people contribute to breaking down the binarism of the "literature vs. history" split that has not only kept our various projects separate, but has also occasionally

contributed to an unwarranted sense of the superiority--moral, intellectual, or both--of one discipline over the other. Let us begin, then, by recognizing that neither "literature" nor "history" provides a master narrative of explanation, a Casaubon-like "key to all mythologies." We must, it seems to me, throw over the tendency to hierarchize the two disciplines, and instead begin to engage in genuinely collaborative work, a project that will demand first of all open acknowledgment of some of our central points of commonality. Though in different ways, and perhaps for different reasons, medievalists in literature and history both want access to that open, yet-to-be-charted space known as "the Middle Ages," especially to the various kinds of "material conditions" in and through which one might conceptualize the interactions of society (i.e., social institutions, political structures, communities, organizations, collectivities, and coalitions of all sorts) and culture (i.e., the milieu in which signs and symbols circulate; also, a site of contestation in which agents positioned variously in society struggle for control over signs and symbols). More importantly, as feminist readers of texts from the past, medievalists in both literature and history share a common concern not only for who and what medieval women were, but also for making the category of gender, as Joan Scott so persuasively suggests, into "a significant category of historical analysis."²

Even in the wake of these commonalities, however, collaborative alliances between literary scholars and historians will no doubt not be easily accomplished. Each group will have to give up what may amount to nothing more than long-standing prejudices about the other's discipline; each will have to rethink its methodological assumptions and begin to work in new, and therefore, initially uncomfortable ways. Both sides, in other words, will have to change. But this process of transformation, difficult as it may very well be, should not be unrelievedly dismal. The real benefit of collaborative work, it seems to me, is not only the possibility it provides for the open recognition of differences, but also the way in which it makes those very differences into a source of strength rather than divisiveness. For as medievalists in literature and history, we each bring to our work different strategies of reading, and even different standards for doing "historical" research. Together--in and through these differences--each side can help the other both to ask different questions and to ask questions differently. Medievalists in history, for example, can help literary scholars deal more effectively not only with empirical evidence (and here I mean the "a-word," "archives"), but also, more generally speaking, with the problems that arise in doing empirical research. For their part, literary scholars can help historians understand the virtues, if not the pleasures, of reading a particular literary text over and over again (as, say, Chaucerians such as myself are apt to do) and also how to recognize and indeed name the theoretical pressures of empirically-based insights (without this task amounting to an extended stay in what for historians must often appear as the "cloister" of literary theory.)

From the perspective, then, of this sort of collaborative work, let us ask ourselves not what it is that medievalists in literature might want from medievalists in history, but rather, how might medievalists in literature pool their resources with medievalists in history so as to develop new methodologies as well as new sets of problems to investigate. As a way of beginning, I would propose the following areas in which historians and literary scholars might be able to work together;

- 1) Questions concerning the possibility of "feminism" or of "feminist consciousness" in the Middle Ages. Historians and literary scholars alike might address this issue by establishing a dialogue between the insights of

modern feminist theory and those of historical scholarship. And in this regard, much crucial work remains to be done, it seems to me, in bridging the gap between the work historians are doing on medieval communities of women (as demonstrated, for example, in *Signs* Winter, 1989) and the various sorts of feminist readings of medieval texts which literary scholars do. We might, for example, work together on questions such as these: To what extent were communities of women in the Middle Ages influential in shaping the work of medieval writers of literature (both male and female writers)? How might medieval literary texts help us assess whether or not medieval women living and/or working in communal arrangements had an *esprit de corps*, or even what we might wish to designate nowadays as a "feminist consciousness"?

2) Questions surrounding female literacy in the Middle Ages, and also concerning medieval women as readers and writers. I would like to know more not only about the socio-cultural conditions (especially educational) that produced such women of letters as the *trobairitz*, Christine de Pizan, and Margery Kempe, but also about the extent to which medieval women functioned as significant readers of and audiences for medieval texts. Knowing, for example, whether or not women represented a significant part of the audience for, say, Chaucer's or Dante's writings would certainly inflect our interpretation of these texts, and would also help us to assess their possible political significances. How can we work jointly to come up with new angles on these old questions?

3) Sexuality, sexual practices, and the notion of sexual "deviancy" in the Middle Ages. Here I envision collaborative projects whereby the historians' penchant for considering the various ways in which notions of sexuality are constructed in a number of different discourses (e.g., medical, theological, scientific, and political) would be combined with the literary scholar's tendency to focus on questions of sexuality in one particular text or in one particular grouping of texts (e.g., *fabliaux*, romances). In this context, we might ask: To what extent can literature be understood as opening up and/or transforming notions of sexuality current within more institutionally-based, prescriptive discourses? What does sex and sexuality look like if we juxtapose the writings of medieval men with those of medieval women? To what degree did notions of sexuality expressed within female-authored texts achieve cultural power, or even political significance?

4) Questions surrounding medieval women's socio-political agency. Medievalists in literature and in history have tended to address this issue, within a binary frame, some emphasizing medieval women's lack of authority (i.e., their lack of political, publically-legitimated power) and others featuring the limited and/or possible ways in which medieval women could gain some sort of politically-significant agency. Perhaps collaborative work on this topic could move us away from methodologies that promote binary thinking and focus our efforts more explicitly and more extensively on the multiple and conflicting ways in which women are constructed in discourse, acknowledging what Teresa de Lauretis has called "the historical existence of irreducible contradictions for women in discourse."³

To my mind, these sorts of collaborative foci will produce not only a new sense of what that entity "the Middle Ages" is all about, but also a genuinely new type of historicism, a "feminist historicism," one that is dedicated to the feminist project of "reading in detail,"⁴ thereby remaining sensitive to the contradictions, gaps, and multiple possibilities that exist within the text of history. Ultimately, feminist historicism such as this would make historical scholarship itself much less stable and coherent, much more open to paradoxes and inconsistencies than it might otherwise have been. In any case, it seems

to me that it is our own feminist commitments to collective action that will urge us--historians and literary folk alike--to leave the relative comfort and security of our disciplinary moorings, learn other ways of reading and re-searching, and thereby, live a little bit more dangerously than we previously have--though hopefully, more openly and honestly as well.⁵

NOTES

¹Introduction to "Presidential Forum: Breaking Up/Out/Down--The Boundaries of Literary Study," Profession 89 (published by the Modern Language Association of America), p. 2.

²I am referring to Scott's excellent analysis "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" in her Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 28-50.

³Alice Doesn't, Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1984), p. 7.

⁴I am alluding here to one of the central points Naomi Schor makes in her Reading in Detail, Aesthetics and the Feminine (New York: Methuen, 1987).

⁵In the spirit of collaboration, I wish to thank Professor E. Jane Burns for her invitation to write this piece, for her extraordinary (and completely unwarranted patience) in waiting for its completion, and for her many insights--some of which herein expressed--about the "literature/history/feminism" question.

TEACHING FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE:

In the last MFN we asked for readers to contribute ideas about how to teach specific texts and problems from a feminist perspective. Responses ranged from brief notes to full-scale essays. We thank our contributors and share their comments, as we received them, in alphabetical order.

The Pleasure and Value of Teaching Women Authors in a Course on Sixteenth Century English Literature

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One of the greatest pleasures of reading the works by many women writers of the Renaissance is also one of the greatest difficulties: for the most part these texts are unannotated and have received critical attention from only a very few scholars. One cannot approach them with any preconceptions about the author's methods or personality but must rely on one's own critical sense and sensitivity to help one get to know and understand the author. Because of that, characteristic, I find texts by Renaissance women to be excellent vehicles for teaching students the skills of literary criticism and scholarship. Reading them enables late twentieth-century students to experience something of the sense of discovery that was available to readers of texts by male and female authors in previous centuries.

Take, as an extreme example, the works of Lady Anne Southwell. As far as I know, her poetry exists only in a single manuscript that is at the Folger library. This manuscript is not in her hand, but it contains her autograph and