

3See Toril Moi's discussion of Julia Kristeva's chora in Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory, p. 162. See also Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia UP, 1974), 25.

4Cited in Jonas Barish, The Antitheatrical Prejudice (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1981), 85.

5"Disrupting sexual difference: meaning and gender in the comedies" in Alternative Shakespeares, ed. John Drakakis (London: Methuen, 1985), 190.

6Valerie Wayne, "Historical Differences and Othello," in Body and Body Politic: Sexuality in Renaissance Drama, ed. Carole Levin and Karen Robertson.

VI. Feminism and My Work on Sixteenth Century Defenses of Women.
Pamela J. Benson, English Dept., Rhode Island College,
Providence, RI

I would like to begin with a brief description of my work. I am writing a book tentatively titled The Dilemma of the Independent Woman in Renaissance Italian and English Literature. It is a study of Italian and English defenses of womankind written by male authors from Boccaccio through the Elizabethans and of literary works, also by males, in which an independent female character, a lady knight, for example, engineers her own return to the conventional role of wife and mother. The absence of female authors from these categories was unintentional on my part. That is, I decided to look at the genre of defense and discovered that it was not a genre in which women in Italy and England participated in the period I was studying. One Italian woman wrote a defense of women's learning; one English woman defended her right and her capacity to translate a work on the "manly" topic of chivalry. No woman wrote a large scale rhetorical defense of her sex. Similarly the literary works by women of which I am aware before 1535 in Italy and 1603 in England are non-narrative and also do not deal with the dilemma of return to a passive role. Therefore they do not fit within the boundaries of my study. (Perhaps members of the audience or panel might be aware of works of which I am unaware, I would be grateful to have them called to my attention.)

Given all this, I am especially sensitive to feminist theorists who argue that we cannot know women by means of men; that is, these works are written by men and do not necessarily (or even probably) express women's own views. Liberal as they are, they may be another patriarchal attempt to put women in the place where man wants her.

This is the way that many feminist critics of the Renaissance read the tradition I am studying. Ann Jones, Margaret Hannay, Valerie Wayne, Suzanne Hull, all represent the education of women in Renaissance England as repressive rather than progressive as the former scholarly tradition took for granted. Their evidence is two fold: what educators told women and those in charge of the education of girls and what women did. Those in charge of the education of women directed them to devote themselves to the spiritual as "the particular province of women," and they excluded rhetoric from the program because rhetoric was of no practical use to women. The large majority of

works extant by sixteenth century English women are either prayers or translations of works on religious topics. Looking at this evidence, feminist critics choose to emphasize the male directive role and to perceive the female role as passive.

This distresses me. Why should "feminist" critics devalue women's work? Why is spiritual writing now conceived of as a secondary, inferior activity when in the sixteenth century religious questions were the most hotly debated and books on religious topics were popular? Why is translation now not considered an estimable activity when in the sixteenth century most of the major male authors as well as the minor ones engaged in translating?

The answer, it seems to me is modern, political, perhaps Marxist: most feminist critics assume that the only power is public and political and that, as long as women are excluded from that power, they have no power at all. This devotion to political power results in the study of women who held conventional power--queens, and women who, because of class and money and family, held power in the cultural world: patrons such as Mary Sidney. This seems to me a direction that feminist criticism shares with New Historicism, a theory that validates the authority of the very power structure it criticizes by its insistent focus on it. It leads scholars to search for women who chafe at restrictions, who resemble what we in the twentieth century recognize as "liberated" women.

I would argue, instead, that English women's power lay in spiritual autonomy. Perhaps in recommending spirituality to women, male writers were acknowledging an already existing situation. Women worked away at translating, at learning, and did not address either a female audience to encourage them to follow their example or a male audience who needed to be persuaded of women's capacity. The need to defend women and to redefine their role seems to have been a male need. Men are bothered because women have no political role and try to find excuses why they do not. Women do not express concern about not having a political role. This female silence has led me to wonder whether women did not find their new activities to be extensions of their old and therefore comfortable and not in need of defense or of restructuring whereas men, in addition to expressing anxiety about infringement on their authority, were exploring possible limitations on their own social roles by means of women. Male interest in female cross dressing and return to female roles reveals a male interest in the dilemma in which the women were placed. Were men being forced into roles that they perceived as feminine? At court, for example, where passivity and advisory roles were the norm and obedience was more obvious? If my suggestion is true then reexamination of texts from a feminist point of view that assumes that it cannot be taken for granted that women wish to be men yields greater understanding of male anxieties and explains to me something I had never before understood: why this topic was so popular among men in the period. I previously saw it as a result of anxiety about women, that is, once women began to be accomplished men felt their authority to be threatened and defended certain aspects of women while discouraging public activity for them. But anxiety about their own femininity may have led men to show so much interest in the topic.

This leads me to Carolyn Bynum's Holy Feast and Holy Fast which confirms my sense that women were not passive victims of male domination in their choice of spiritual genres but that rather they found the genre congenial because it expressed a particularly female kind of power: their voices combined with past voices in the act of translation of psalms and meditative works, their voices speaking for many in the writing of prayers. Perhaps sixteenth century women would not necessarily have preferred to work in other genres.

Notes

1 Dain Trafton, "Politics and the Praise of Women" in Castiglione: The Ideal and the Real in Renaissance Culture (New Haven and London: Yale, 1983) argues that the stories of great women teach about men by implication, that is a young courtier with his eyes open could learn real politics from the example of the women. "Here is a tale to be pondered by courtiers who would instruct princes. The Magnifico does not call attention to the fact that his very first extended example of a virtuous woman introduces a new and more realistic tone into the discussion" (35).

OBTAINING SUPPORT FOR FEMINIST RESEARCH: A SURVEY

What follows is a report on the informal survey on "Obtaining Support for Feminist Research" distributed to MFN subscribers with the November Newsletter. We received 26 responses which are summarized below. Thanks to all of you who contributed!

Publication

1. Where have you succeeded in publishing research on women? Eight respondents indicated collections of essays as a viable outlet for research on women and listed the following publishers in particular:

Basil Blackwell, Women of the Medieval World, ed. Julius Kirchner and Suzanne Wemple, 1985

Univ. of Georgia Press, A forthcoming sourcebook on medieval Women's history (tentative)

The remaining responses varied widely citing the following publishers for:

Books

Harper and Row

Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies

Articles

Speculum

PMLA

Chaucer Review (2 responses for this one)

Viator

The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion

The Journal of Homosexuality

Feminist Studies

Allegorica