

FEMINISM AND THE ACADEMY: A PANEL DISCUSSION

Organized by Lynn Arner and Katherine French, at the 35th International Congress on Medieval Studies (Kalamazoo, MI) in May 2000.

STUDIED INDIFFERENCE: INSTITUTIONAL PROBLEMS FOR FEMINIST MEDIEVALISTS

This roundtable examines problems that feminist medievalists face at all stages of their academic careers. I will begin by considering some institutional disparities—at multiple sites—between feminists who work in medieval studies and feminists who work on later historical periods.

There is an institutional gap in the reception of scholarship produced, on the one hand, by feminists who study the Middle Ages and, on the other, by those who study later periods. Unlike feminist scholarship on contemporary American culture or on early modern English literature, for example, the writings of feminist medievalists are rarely read widely by academics who work on other epochs. (Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* is one of the only exceptions that comes to mind.) Yet feminist medievalists frequently read work outside their fields and in fact must be conversant, to some degree, with feminist scholarship on later periods to be considered legitimate Women's Studies scholars. Meanwhile, specialists of later eras need not be versed in any developments in feminist scholarship on the Middle Ages to be considered competent in Women's Studies. There is a common perception that scholarship by medievalists does not contribute to the larger body of feminist inquiry in academe. Unlike the research of feminist scholars of early modern English literature, for example, our work is frequently seen as being merely derivative of the work of feminist theorists and scholars who specialize in later eras. The knowledge of medievalists is often dismissed as having no relevance to feminist scholarship on later periods, as contributing little to feminist methodologies, and as being inconsequential to the larger field of Women's Studies. How do we help our work become more recognizable in the larger field of Women's Studies, and how do we overcome some of the intellectual isolation to which we are subject?

Similarly, there is a common belief that feminist medievalists are not well-equipped to work in Women's Studies departments in American academe. Full-time jobs in Women's Studies departments are obviously not plentiful; however, when announcements for full-time appointments in Women's Studies do appear, search committees typically do not look for medievalists. Indeed, medievalists are rarely considered appropriate candidates for full-time or joint appointments in Women's Studies departments. I have seen only *one* ad for a joint appointment in Women's Studies and medieval or Renaissance English literature (the search

committee hired a Renaissance scholar, by the way). When announcements for positions in Women's Studies indicate desired areas of specialization, they typically specify modern periods. Moreover, particularly at larger institutions, feminist medievalists who hold appointments in other departments (such as English, History, or Art History) are sometimes viewed as ill-prepared to teach courses in Women's Studies programs, in part because of the assumed historical alterity of the Middle Ages.

At one of the few interviews that I had for a Women's Studies position, an interviewer inquired if I planned to abandon Medieval Studies. At another interview I was asked how I, as a medievalist, could claim to be able to teach Women's Studies. Anna Dronzek will speak about her experiences applying for Women's Studies jobs, as a historian who specializes in medieval England.

How do we make ourselves seem more appropriate candidates for Women's Studies positions, whether at the junior level, or at the senior level for appointments to chair Women's Studies departments? How do we convince those who work on later historical periods that feminist medievalists are competent feminist scholars, theorists, and teachers? Fortunately, as Linda McMillin attests, at small colleges there are greater opportunities than at larger institutions for medievalists to teach Women's Studies courses.

Even in terms of curriculum, Medieval Studies is all too often seen as somehow incompatible with Women's Studies or as unable to attract Women's Studies majors. Chris Africa recently posted to the Medfem-I discussion list the following observation about Women's Studies programs:

I have just been struck by the realization that I know if not lots, at least some medieval/early modern historians and lit people . . . would have something of value to contribute to women's studies programs, but the historical perspective, if present at all, in organized, institutional certificate or degree-granting WS programs, seems to start with 1800. I'm not talking about courses that may be accepted for credit requirements; I am more interested in the incorporation, or lack thereof, [i]n core women's studies courses. (28 April 2000: quoted with permission)

The institutionalized bracketing-off of women's histories and cultural productions from periods prior to 1800 creates the illusion that women never struggled against gender inequities or contributed to the production of history before a certain moment in time. The absence of early periods from core requirements in Women's Studies inadvertently reinforces hegemonic ideologies in America that represent women's struggles against oppressions as a *new*

historical phenomenon. This absence also unwittingly supports teleological histories that claim that the rights of oppressed groups progressively increase as history unfolds. One consequence of these ideological messages is that students—including a new generation of scholars—are being trained to understand that Women's Studies is incongruous with Medieval Studies. As Ann Marie Rasmussen explains, American academia has an obsession with presentism, and one of the effects of such presentism is the widespread perception that Medieval Studies is largely irrelevant to contemporary Women's Studies and, in fact, that Medieval Studies has little place in any current education. Rasmussen locates such dismissals within the larger context of the crisis of the Humanities.

Just as medievalists are frequently under suspicion as Women's Studies scholars, they are under greater suspicion when it comes to their knowledge of cultural studies and/or post-structuralist theory. This suspicion is, in part, a product of the Renaissance / medieval divide. Many scholars of Renaissance English literature seem to need a dark, amorphous Middle Ages full of folks without agency or consciousness against which to construct not only an intellectual and cultural rebirth, but a subject with agency who is recruitable to various ideologies and into various identifications and who is capable of giving his/her consent. This problem has been recently exacerbated by the turn towards the term "early modern," so that the Renaissance is posited as being continuous with the modern, simultaneously constituting some radical break with people and events in the Middle Ages. One result of the periodization is that we are frequently instructed that, as medievalists, we cannot borrow methodologies from post-structuralist theory, take the parts that are useful to us, or modify these methodologies to discuss medieval texts. Another consequence is that we are often told that we cannot offer information about the Middle Ages that is relevant to contemporary political or intellectual concerns.

For example, three years ago I presented a paper on Nebuchadnezzar's dream from the *Confessio Amantis* in relation to the English Rising of 1381, using a methodology in dialogue with British Cultural Studies. Several Renaissance scholars in the group said that I could not make many of the claims that I was offering about the Middle Ages. One woman, for example, insisted that people in the Middle Ages did not have any agency. (And she was not referring to nuanced understandings of how subjectivity in late medieval England might have differed from subjectivity in Renaissance England.) I encountered a similar response from a journal which does not typically publish scholarship on the Middle Ages, but which regularly features articles inflected by British Cultural Studies. Academics who work on later historical periods often say that one simply cannot use paradigms from cultural studies and/or post-structuralist theory to discuss the Middle Ages.

Admittedly, the ways in which Medieval Studies is conventionally structured may contribute to the problem of medievalists being considered at best mediocre practitioners of post-structuralist theory or cultural studies, for the educational demands on medievalists in graduate programs are often more daunting than the demands on those who specialize in later periods. A graduate student in medieval English literature conventionally must learn several primary languages (Latin/medieval Latin, Middle English, and Old English) and often additional languages (such as Old French) as basic requirements for competence. There are also other areas in which Middle English scholars are frequently trained, such as paleography, codicology, and the history of the English language. Once a graduate student learns these languages and at least some of these areas, there is not much time left for taking courses in post-structuralist theory or cultural studies. One way around this dilemma which I and, no doubt, which others have attempted was to take courses well beyond the required number, to be considered competent as medievalists and as theorists. Admittedly, however, this is not a very practical solution. A historian of medieval Englishwomen, Anna Dronzek examines the ways in which the absence of feminist theory in her graduate education reinscribed larger institutional divides between feminists who study medieval history and feminists who study later periods and/or other disciplines.

Moreover, young scholars who employ various types of feminist, Marxist, queer, or post-colonial theory or who use cultural studies methodologies are being hindered in some specific areas of medieval literary studies, where a large number of senior scholars are not comfortable with post-structuralist theory, even though numerous scholars of later literary periods have embraced various forms of post-structuralist theory and have made theory an acceptable part of the intellectual terrain. How can we as a Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship increase our support for young feminist scholars who work in specific areas of Medieval Studies which are dominated by senior scholars who are not receptive to feminist and/or to theorized work? The mentoring program is a great project. My own wish is that the *Medieval Feminist Forum* would expand into a journal that publishes article-length pieces, perhaps aligning with another feminist body (possibly a caucus of Renaissance scholars) to form such a journal. Dawn Bratsch-Prince offers insights into how feminist medievalists, especially medieval Hispanists, can intensify their support for young feminist scholars and how feminist medievalists at all levels of the profession can strategically work to support each other and build powerful coalitions.

Solutions for the institutional divides I have discussed will not be easy to achieve. By decreasing the isolation surrounding Medieval Studies, we could lessen the intensity of some of the problems that I have outlined. However, this

strategy might be difficult to enact, for the cloistering of Medieval Studies, as I have indicated throughout this piece, is overdetermined.

I hope that audience members will find insights from our roundtable helpful in their daily battles against problems that plague feminist medievalists in academe.

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THE INVISIBILITY OF FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP IN MEDIEVAL IBERIAN STUDIES¹

During fall semester 1999, I made what I deemed a bold attempt to infuse my *Survey of Medieval and Golden Age Spanish Literature*, a class required of all undergraduate majors in Spanish, with fresh material. In addition to the traditional authors studied, we were going to read the literary works of four Hispanic women from this period: Leonor López de Córdoba (b. 1363) composer of the first “autobiography” written in Castilian;² St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), poet, prose-writer, mystic and, subsequently, doctor of the Catholic Church;³ María de Zayas y Sotomayor (1590–1650) novelist and dramatist who depicted the cruel reality of women’s life choices;⁴ and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–1695), Mexican poet, dramatist, essayist, autobiographer, and early feminist, who was persecuted for her intellectual pursuits.⁵ Because the works of these women—with the exception of one poem by St. Teresa—did not appear in our anthology, ⁶ I included in my course reader a selection of their writings and some supplementary materials.

On the last day of the semester, one of the brightest students in the class (who was also an honors student and native speaker of Spanish) approached me as I gathered up my books. “When was *Don Juan* written?” he asked me. I explained that the first literary work about the figure of Don Juan was Tirso de Molina’s seventeenth-century drama *El burlador de Sevilla*. A more popular version of the legend, *Don Juan Tenorio*, was composed in the 19th century by José de Zorilla. As if not hearing my answer, he continued to pursue his line of inquiry. “Why didn’t we read *Don Juan* in class?” he asked. “It is an important literary work.” “Well,” I responded, “this is a survey class, so we can read only a small number of representative texts. We read *Fuenteovejuna* by Lope de Vega, the ‘father’ of the modern Spanish theater, and a nicely glossed edition is in our textbook.”

The student and I walked out of the classroom and down the hallway. Two other students from the class tagged along listening. The young man now moved to make the point he had wanted to make all along. “While I was home during the