Medieval Feminist Movement

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Our Past

My task as a speaker in the "Founding Mothers" Session at Kalamazoo last spring was to provide a brief historical timeline of the first ten years of *The Medieval Feminist Newsletter* that Bonnie (Roberta L. Krueger), Beth (Elizabeth Robertson), and I founded in 1985, with Thelma (Thelma Fenster) joining us soon thereafter (1986). I include that timeline below so that readers can see at a glance how rapidly the landscape of feminist scholarly activity in Medieval Studies changed between 1985 and 1995. The *Newsletter* was of course not the source of the complex and widespread transformations that were taking place in many quarters during those years. Changing patterns in feminist research were fueled by the unflagging commitment and writing of a host of individual scholars. But *MFN* offered, I think, a particularly fruitful venue for feminist conversation and challenge, for the sharing of information, and for lively disagreement. My recent review of the early issues of the *Newsletter* revealed the key role played by certain features that appeared early on and persisted throughout: perhaps most importantly the publication of feminist bibliography (so crucial in the days before online bibliographic sources), the ever-expanding list of subscribers with notations of their publication and teaching interests designed to facilitate networking (which was also fostered by the annual business meeting and cash bar at Kalamazoo), the productively controversial Commentary Column edited by Thelma Fenster, and book reviews, which began with *MFN* #4 (1987). Other concerns were highlighted through special topics featured in individual issues of *MFN* between 1985 and 1995, including feminist/women-centered teaching, graduate student concerns, the processes of mentoring younger colleagues and supporting feminist research, and the commitment to collaboration in medieval feminist scholarship. The *Newsletter* was also often at the forefront in articulating the interface between medieval feminism and other emerging fields of study. As early as 1991, *MFN* addressed

"Postcolonial Pedagogies and Teaching Gender" (*MFN* # 12), in 1992, "Gay and Lesbian Concerns in Medieval Studies (*MFN* #13), and in 1993, "Multiculturalism in the Middle Ages" (*MFN* #16).

From informal conversations with former *MFN* contributors, I discovered, in addition, a consensus that the *Newsletter* had helped transform the sessions at Kalamazoo in two ways: by introducing new formats such as round table discussions and panels with four or five speakers instead of the requisite three, and by giving a prominent place to theory, not in the abstract, but in relation to practice. Thus were the practices of literary analysis and the writing of history or art history examined in relation to theoretical paradigms, raising the possibility of using feminist theory to bridge otherwise separate disciplines.

Our Future

Having focused my remarks at Kalamazoo on the past, I would like now to turn briefly to the future of medieval feminist studies, picking up on one topic of conversation that followed our papers in May 2006, namely: how can we continue to move medieval feminist work "forward" with the same force and vitality it once had? Don't we need to "return" to an earlier model of feminist political engagement in order to "revive," in a sense, a commitment to the practice of medieval feminist work, in particular to medieval feminist theory? I think we would do well to reframe the question because in fact we cannot "go back" (however attractive the nostalgia for sessions held in those large rooms with packed crowds) and because "going forward" is not sufficient either.

I would suggest instead that we jettison the paradigm of progress altogether and adopt another model for medieval feminist movement by combining aspects of the work of two feminist theorists not usually mentioned in the same breath: bell hooks and Luce Irigaray. Why not consider promoting "feminist movement" in Medieval Studies in bell hooks' sense of the term, following her call to reframe "The Feminist Movement" more broadly by incorporating a number of feminist movements or feminist futures: "to ensure that we are moving into feminist futures, we still need feminist theory that speaks to everyone, that lets everyone know that feminist movement can change their lives for the better. This theory [. . .] will always challenge, shake us up, provoke, shift our paradigms, change the

way we think, turn us around."[1] To effectively pursue hooks' concept of feminist movement requires that we reconceptualize the process of movement altogether, to see movement as non-linear. This is where Irigaray's view of women's movement generally as movement not forward but "outward" in many directions simultaneously can help. In "The 'Mechanics' of Fluids," Irigaray offers the category of "women" as a conceptual model for developing a theory of fluids, stating that "Women diffuse themselves according to modalities scarcely compatible with the framework of the ruling symbolics." We might adjust the quote to say instead that "medieval feminist practice" diffuses itself according to modalities scarcely compatible with the ruling symbolics. The rest of Irigaray's statement would then follow easily, as she explains the disruptive effects of women's diffusion and the responses it often elicits: it "doesn't happen without causing some turbulence, we might even say some whirlwinds, that ought to be reconfined within solid walls of principle, to keep them from spreading to infinity. Otherwise they might even go so far as to disturb that third agency designated as the real—a transgression and confusion of boundaries that it is important to restore to their proper place."[2] Could we imagine an analogous paradigm for the diffusion of medieval feminisms: a spreading out of feminist practices in many directions simultaneously as they create, disrupt, and challenge, always moving into new and different sites of inquiry?

To be sure, feminism has never had a "proper place" and medieval feminism or feminist medieval scholarship should not seek one now. But it should, I think, continue through slow, concerted movement to make places for as many versions of itself as possible within and around any number of scholarly discourses, however "incompatible" those junctures might seem initially. In fact, we are very well positioned to facilitate such feminist movement because of the substantial research strategies that medieval feminist scholars have developed over the past twenty years or more. To appreciate the breadth and depth of feminist work in my own field of medieval French literary studies we have only to remember what was not yet available to us as feminist scholars in 1980. Looking back, even the rubrics used by Bonnie Krueger and me to organize the bibliography accompanying our special issue of *Romance Notes* (25.3, 1985) devoted to "Courtly Ideology and Woman's Place in Medieval French

Literature" attest to the limited analytical perspectives available to medieval feminist scholars at that time. Even as we attempted to showcase the considerable pioneering work that had already been done at that point, we structured the bibliography around "Women in Medieval History," "Woman as Character, Image and Sign," and "Women Writers, Feminine Textual Voices, and Female Audience." If the classifications we selected twenty years ago now seem quite dated, it is because of all the new theoretical frameworks, research strategies, and feminist approaches to medieval French literature that have been put forward since then. Indeed, feminist work in medieval French studies has created an impressive array of scholarly tools now available for everyone to use.

To account for all aspects of this scholarship and give due credit to individual authors is well beyond the scope of this brief commentary. But if I had to characterize in broad strokes what we have inherited from the varied practices of medieval French feminist scholarship over the past twenty to thirty years, I would say the following. Medieval feminist practice, in addition to bringing new authors to the fore through landmark editions of the women troubadours and trouvères, Christine de Pizan and religious women, has forever changed the way we read and teach women authors long included in the "canon," giving us a host of new categories previously unavailable or only marginally visible: the categories of older women, single women, lesbian women, women healers, and women performers, to cite but a few. We now have new ways to configure more established categories of analysis, such as women readers, and women patrons. We have new conceptual models for understanding literary depictions of mothers, wives, fairies, amazons, queens, and the highly vexed and under-read category of the Saracen princess, along with the equally problematic if over-read image of the courtly lady. We also have new frameworks for understanding rape and incest apart from the mystification of love.

Medieval feminist scholars have encouraged us to look productively at masculinity and men as a category of analysis, at gender and cross-gendered and queer identities, all of these giving us nuanced accounts of the problems of gender in studying historical women such as Joan of Arc, medieval women saints, or fictive female characters in old French epic and romance. As questions of

social class, ethnicity, and race have been shown to be central to, not alien from, medieval literary analysis, they have also emerged as necessarily imbricated within, not distinct from, questions of gender. The postcolonial Middle Ages is a gendered Middle Ages and feminist analysis can show why. The categories of self, agency, and identity have been nuanced and honed productively with the help of psychoanalytic and other theoretical frameworks to help us understand that subjects can be partial and fragmented, but no less significant. Studies of material culture have given us new ways to think about the relational dynamic between gendered individuals and the material objects that might constitute and define their social worlds.

We now have a number of effective strategies for reading female characters as they are figured in male-authored texts, enabling us to analyze constructions of female voice and body without essentializing either one. We have come, for example, to understand the importance of dynamic relations between a dominant social or narrative structure and forms or expressions of resistance to that overriding structure, alternatives that are found in resistant reading, modes of debate and response, and the force of counter narratives.

Medieval feminist scholars have also taught us to ask a range of new questions: Not only "Who is speaking?" but perhaps more importantly, that age-old feminist question, "From whose perspective?" We can now look beyond the description of a female character's actions or speech to see what effect each of them might have. "What is the text in question showing us about women and gender and social relations as opposed to what it might be telling us outright about those same issues?" We now understand that either/or categories often imply hierarchies that cannot be undone by simply reversing the poles of a given dyad. We have learned to look instead for narrative and cultural formations that rely on the seemingly paradoxical construction of both/and, since women so often occupy a given cultural or rhetorical position and its opposite at the same time.

Of course, many of these innovations also exemplify work undertaken by feminist scholars studying other national literatures; they are not, by any means, the exclusive province of Old French studies. And the list is all the more incomplete because it does not even begin to mention the related and equally important work in other disciplines of medieval studies such as history, art history,

archaeology, philosophy, or religious studies, to name but a few.

Taken together, feminist work across all these disciplines has profoundly changed our strategies of reading and analysis while fostering the production of knowledge in medieval studies in unexpected directions and across previously uncharted terrain. But those old feminist questions are not outmoded. Indeed, we need to continue to ask them, broadening their applications as we allow them to "flow" productively between disciplines and across theoretical approaches within each discipline. As feminist questions continue to spread outward into new scholarly modes of analysis, breaking boundaries and confusing categories, as Irigaray describes women's movement generally, they will merge at times with other theoretical approaches and new questions will arise, perhaps heretofore unimaginable questions. It is by keeping that visionary aspect of feminist inquiry open that we will be able to facilitate, in the most substantial and lasting way, medieval feminist movement.

As the "Founding Mothers" of *MFN,* we would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have contributed creatively and generously over the years to the rich and continuing project of feminist medieval studies in all its forms and venues. We have all benefited greatly from that work.[3]

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END NOTES

1. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: South End, 2000), p. xiv.
2. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985), p. 106.
3. For more detailed references on medieval feminist scholarship, the reader might wish to consult, as a beginning, bibliographies in the following works: R. L. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Medieval French Verse Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993); Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995); Helen Solterer, *The Master and Minerva: Disputing Women in Medieval French Culture* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995); E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Medieval French Literature* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1993).

Timeline *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 1985-1995:

Key Moments in *MFN*'s History

May 1986 (*MFN* #1)
This first issue is composed almost solely of the names and fields of interest of subscribers, a feature that continues in all subsequent issues to 1995.

May 1987
First *MFN* Kalamazoo sessions, first Cash Bar, and first Business Meeting.

November 1986 (*MFN* #2)
Thelma Fenster joins as editor of the "Commentary Column." Issue features "recent bibliography on women in the Middle Ages and on potentially useful work in Women's Studies or feminist theory."

First bibliography
Many entries, thanks to contributors. Bibliography contributed by subscribers continues in most, but not all, subsequent issues.

June 1987 (*MFN* #3)
First Commentary Column, devoted to identifying sources and resources for studying women in the Middle Ages. It asks: "How can we 'uncover' more, both through text editing and looking at male-authored texts?"

November 1987 (*MFN* #4)
First Book Review (by Elaine Tuttle Hansen). Book reviews become a regular feature by *MFN* #10.

Spring 1992 (*MFN* #13)
Formation of the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship. Jacqueline Murray and Karma Lochrie call for nominations to the SMFS Advisory Board.

Fall 1992 (*MFN* #14)
Election results for first SMFS officers announced: Jacqueline Murray, President; Karma Lochrie, Vice-President; Regina Psaki, Treasurer

Summer 1993
MFN back issues (nos. 6-14; Fall 1988-Fall 1992), plus complete bibliography to date, becomes available as one packet.

Highlights of *MFN* Special Topics

MFN #3
Featured a survey of the membership (then a roaring 146 people) on "Teaching Women in the Middle Ages." Results based on 41 responses. The stated goal is "to share work."

Again in Fall 1990, another issue on teaching.

MFN #5
A survey focused on "Obtaining Support for Feminist Research." Summary of 26 responses received.

MFN #6
Commentary: Responses to R. Howard Bloch's essay on "Medieval Misogyny" (*Representations* 20 [1987]: 1-21). Respondents include: Elizabeth Clark, Wendy Clein, Elaine Hansen, Peggy Knapp, Marshall Leicester, Linda Lomperis, Carol Neel, and Helen Solterer.

Article: "Men in Medieval Feminism," by David Wallace.

MFN #7
Commentary: Bloch's response to *MFN* #6.

Article: "Approaches to Medieval Spanish History and Literature," by Louise Mirrer.

MFN #8
Commentary: "Feminism and the University of North Carolina and Cornell University Medieval Studies Programs: A Report from Graduate Students."

FALL 1994 (*MFN* #18)
Another issue on Graduate Student concerns, which includes seven contributors, both faculty and graduate students, and a "List of Problems" that subscribers would like to see discussed. The most commonly cited one was, "how do we apply feminist theory of modern literature or of film to medieval works without being anachronistic or without distorting the past?"

MFN #9
Teaching from a Feminist Perspective.

MFN #10
Commentary: "Collaborative Work in Literature and History, A Historian's Perspective," by Sharon Farmer.

MFN #11
Forum on Collaboration in Medieval Feminist Scholarship. Participants included: Kathleen Ashley, Thelma Fenster, Monica Green, Ruth Mazo Karras, and Wendy Pfeffer.

MFN #12
Commentary: "Postcolonial Pedagogies and Teaching Gender," by Kathleen Biddick.

MFN #13
Commentary: "The *MFN* Gay and Lesbian Issue," by E. Ann Matter.

Forum on Gay and Lesbian Concerns in Medieval Studies. Participants include: Mary Anne Campbell, Carolyn Dinshaw, Simon Gaunt, Sylvia Huot, and Susan Schibanoff.

Publications Task Force
Task force established to monitor mainstream journals, checking for the proportion of women authors represented, inclusion of articles written from a feminist perspective, and participation of women on editorial boards. Designed to act as a watchdog. The Task Force Leaders were Kathleen Biddick and Marilynn Desmond.

MFN #14
Feature: "Women in/and Philosophy," by Joan Gibson.
Roundtable: "Medievalist Feminists in the Academy," featuring Judith Bennett and Elizabeth Robertson. Based on a session from Kalamazoo 1992.

MFN #16 (Fall 1993)
Commentary: Multiculturalism in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

MFN #20 (Fall 1995)
Directory of Members

A Sampling of Sessions sponsored by *MFN* at Kalamazoo

The first *MFN*-sponsored sessions took place in 1986 on "Women and Gender," and featured a range of topics, including:

- Misogynist Literature: The Texts and the Genres of the Tradition (Elizabeth Psakis Armstrong)
- Sex, Money, and the Portrayal of Women in Chaucerian Comedy (Leigh A. Arrathoon)
- Joan of Arc: Heroine, Saint, Mystic (Beverly Boyd)
- Images of Women in Medieval Art (Magdalena E. Carrasco)
- Feminist Mythology (Jane Chance)
- Gender and Class in Italy, 987-1987 (Stanley Chojnacki)
- Medieval and Renaissance Women's Writings: Views on Virginity, Chastity, and Marriage (Anne R. Larsen)

Already by 1987, *MFN* announced theoretical inquiry sessions:

- Theory: Explicit or Implicit (Elizabeth Robertson)
- Feminist Approaches to Anglo-Saxon and Middle English Literature (Karma Lochrie)
- Feminist Approaches to Continental Literature (E. Jane Burns)

For Kalamazoo 1989, along with "Women Patrons in the Middle Ages," *MFN* sponsored:

- Feminist Approaches to Dante (Anne Howland Schotter)
- Feminist Theory and Medieval and Renaissance Texts (E. Jane Burns)
- Women, History, and Literature: The Methods of Approach (Jacqueline Murray)
- Feminism and the Text: Translating and Editing the Medieval Text (Bonnie Duncan)
- Feminist Approaches to Chaucer (Elizabeth Robertson & Karma Lochrie)
- "Renaissance Feminist Forum": Problems in Practice and Theory (Karen Robertson)

Continuing the mix of theory and practice, in 1990, in addition to sessions on "Motherhood" and "Silence and Women," *MFN* sponsored:

- Literature, History, Feminism: A Dialogue (Linda Lomperis)
- Constructing Women in the Past—Then and Now—Problems of Historiography, Theory, and Discipline (Carolyn B. Anderson)

In 1991, *MFN* sponsored:

- The Feminist Medieval Art History Project (Pamela Sheingorn and Paula Gerson)
- Testing the Limits: The Compatibility of Psychoanalytic and Feminist Approaches to Medieval Religious Texts and Iconography (Nancy Coiner and Ulrike Wiethaus)
- "Mainstream" History Through the Prism of Gender: Feminist Perspective on Traditional Historiographic Problems (Ruth Mazo Karras)

And then in 1992, *MFN* sponsored, in addition to sessions on "Rape in the Middle Ages" and "Race in the Middle Ages":

- A Roundtable discussion on Medieval Feminisms in the Academy (Nancy Jones)
- Gender Trouble, Postmodern and Medieval: A Panel Discussion (Kathleen Biddick)
- The *Speculum* Issue on Gender: Responses (Kathleen Biddick)

MFN sessions for 1995 featured a Roundtable discussion on "Feminists in Dialogue" (Anne Clark Bartlett), including presentations on:

- Medieval Religious Women
- Gendering Men
- Changing the Subject
- The Ambivalences of a Queer Feminist
- Feminisms and Other Discontents
- Dialogue and Power in Feminist Criticism

And a session entitled "'Medieval'/'Renaissance': Feminists Rethink Canonicity and Periodization" (Jennifer Summit).