

- 10) Renaissance Feminist Forum: Problems in Practice and Theory
Karen Robertson, English Dept., Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, N.Y. 12601
- 11) Renaissance Feminist Forum: Readings of one Female Renaissance Author's Texts (still to be chosen)
Pamela Benson, English Dept., Rhode Island College, Providence, RI

ITEMS OF INTEREST:

There will be an all-day symposium on Gender and Medieval Studies at King's College, Cambridge, Saturday, December 17, 1988. For information contact Sarah Kay (Girton College) or Simon Gaunt.

New Viking Perspectives Conference will be held in Glasgow in early September 1988. One or two sessions will be devoted to gender relations. For information contact Ross Samson and Pamela Graves, Archaeology Department, The University, Glasgow, G128QQ, GB.

Archaeological Review from Cambridge will dedicate its next issue to "Women in Archaeology," addressing the issues of gender biases in the interpretation of the archaeological record, the portrayal of women in the past and how a "feminist archaeology" might be defined. Issue scheduled to appear May 1988.

Gallerie is a new women's publication devoted to women's art and women artists. The first issue, the 1988 Annual, to appear in June 1988, is a book-length publication featuring the work of over 40 women artists in various media. Three magazine-scale issues will follow next year. For further information including editorial guidelines for authors, write to: Gallerie Publications, Box 2901 Panorama Dr, North Vancouver, B.C. Canada V7G 2A4.

Valerie Shubik, St. Anthony's College, Oxford, England, OX2 6JF seeks letters of support for a new journal on "Women in Literature." Solidly academic, this international journal would give a voice to modern feminists addressing Canadian and Australian writers as well as American and British authors.

COMMENTARY

Two Commentaries ago (MFN No. 3, June 1987) we asked how medievalists might undertake the kind of "archaeological" work which has allowed scholars working in later periods to find more of the writing done by women. That search has resulted in a reconsideration of non-traditional forms, among them, letters. Professor Joan Ferrante, Columbia University, is looking into one possible approach to the study of medieval women's letters.

Conversation with Joan Ferrante

Prof. Ferrante was among the earliest scholars of medieval literature to turn their attention to the study of women. Her book, Woman as Image in Medieval Literature, From the Twelfth Century to Dante (New York: reprint paper, Labyrinth, 1985) was one of the first studies written from the perspective of modern feminism. Whereas Woman as Image charted the depiction of (the) female characters in literature written by men, Prof. Ferrante is

now directing her attention to writing by women. In a recent conversation she outlined her new project, in which she hopes to study in part "the nature of women's correspondence."

In the Middle Ages letter-writing was an acknowledged literary form. The ars dictaminis, or art of letter-writing, was a rhetorical system arising from administrative needs which eventually fostered a more subtle awareness of written language. Though women as well as men engaged in letter-writing, letters by women, particularly in the early Middle Ages, are exceedingly difficult to locate. In a given correspondence between a man and a woman, frequently it is only the man's letters that have survived, though some from queens or abbesses can be found among the letters of their male correspondents. Heloise's exchange with Abelard was preserved as a collection, but only one other letter of hers survives (shouldn't we add here that the status of her signature in the correspondence with Abelard is in debate?). Hildegard of Bingen is an exception, for about three hundred letters that she wrote to secular and religious figures are extant; they are primarily in response to questions and problems posed to her, rather than in the style of "Dear Abbess."

Faced, therefore, with a sizable gap in the record of women's writing, Prof. Ferrante is also looking at the letters written by men to women to find out what subjects they corresponded about and in what form, and wherever possible to glean something about the woman and her letters. Even where they are extant, of course, we cannot be certain that the woman's letters were not written by male secretaries (as many men's letters were), but something can nonetheless be learned about the voice and attitude by which women allowed themselves to be represented. And there are certainly cases where the woman clearly seems to be the author.

In the first phase of the project, Prof. Ferrante is examining Latin letters in collections such as the Patrologia Latina, the MGH (Monumenta Germaniae Historica) and Historiens des Gaules et de la France with a view toward (establishing?) a preliminary classification. Initial stages of research show that a wide range of subjects is discussed in the letters between men and women: political, religious, and personal.

In this connection, readers may want to look back at Prof. Ferrante's essay, "The Education of Women in the Middle Ages in Theory, Fact, and Fantasy," in Beyond Their Sex, Learned Women of the European Past, ed. Patricia H. Labalme (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 9-42.

Contributions to future Commentary columns are solicited and should be sent to Thelma Fenster, Medieval Studies Center, K107, Fordham University, Bronx, New York 10458.