

NEXT ISSUE

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For the next issue of MFN, subscribers agreed that they would like to have another issue devoted to teaching. Therefore, we would like to ask you to write to us about a specific work you have taught or feminist approaches you have used in the classroom. You needn't describe a whole course. Rather, we would appreciate it if you would provide specific information on specific books you have taught from a feminist perspective. For example, you might explain which passages you chose to discuss and why, what issues came to the surface for discussion, what outside sources you brought to bear, etc. All contributions must reach Elizabeth Robertson at the University of Colorado, Department of English, Box 226, Boulder, Colorado 80309 by FEBRUARY 15th. Thank you for your contributions.

COMMENTARY

Feminism and Medieval Studies: A Report from Chapel Hill
Submitted by Merrimon Crawford and Alison Smith

The classroom was completely silent. Today was a special day because an eminent professor of Aristotelian political theory was coming to speak to an undergraduate philosophy class as part of a forum on the American political system. In the audience sat a young woman who was later to become something as yet totally unknown: a feminist medievalist. As a freshman, she was a bit overwhelmed by theory, but enjoyed listening to her philosophy professor. She was impressed with his knowledge. And now she would have the opportunity to listen to one of the top scholars in the field!

But as the visitor began to speak of the Aristotelian polity, something went wrong. The young woman heard this respected scholar saying, "As far as women are concerned, we must consider that Aristotle was right: men should rule over women just as the superior mind rules over the inferior body." She looked around, thinking that this must be some kind of joke. No one was reacting to that statement, not even her professor who was seated in the front row with a look of reverent deference on his face. The young woman's ears burned as the great man droned on, "to date there have been no females who have significantly contributed to the making of politics. There are no historical examples of women who had political power in their own right." At the reception following the talk (for which she had been asked to help serve the punch) her professor explained frankly that no female scholars had been invited to participate in the forum because there were no prominent women in the field.

So she went to graduate school and entered a program of Medieval Studies hoping thereby to circumvent the anti-feminism of Aristotle and his academic followers. Only to discover that the institutional configuration of her graduate program closely paralleled the Aristotelian model.

On the first day of the semester the classroom was completely silent. New students eagerly awaited the arrival of the eminent professor. His specialty

was not Aristotle but Medieval Studies. He believed in Truth, Beauty, Authority, Erudition and had found it all in Philology. We might recast some of the graduate-school experiences of that budding feminist in the form of a medieval romance narrative.

Knights returning from battle had told of the famous exploits of Sir Philologloat before his arrival at court. He entered the classroom. He lectured endlessly while students obediently took notes. No one dared to question him. In the course of the semester he defined the poetic genres, explained sound changes, and gave a superficial outline of medieval history. Not once did students discuss the texts assigned for the class. They never opened their books. Authoritatively, the professor dismissed the women troubadours: "They just didn't exist." He knew because he had been out conquering philological dragons while others had remained in the castle listening to the minstrels. Nevertheless, a young woman challenged him one day, asking how this class would prepare students to read and interpret literature. A covey of students--Sir Latinate, Sir Origins, Sir Humanismus, and Sir Sourcstudy--stood alongside Sir Philologloat as he proclaimed, "My dear, how can you ask such a silly question? You don't even read Latin! If you had read the Church Fathers, you would realize the state of your ignorance." Sir Philologloat and the other students laughed knowingly.

That evening at a cocktail party one overheard Sir Philologloat lecturing to Dame Theory, "My dear, Interdisciplinary Studies simply have no right to exist." A male student, lance in hand, jumped to Sir Philologloat's aid and castigated the inappropriateness of the Dame's prior assertion. Two members seemed absent from this gathering. We were told that the Crazy Lady Feminist, like the Wife of Bath, was away on a pilgrimage. Sir Latinate breathed a sigh of relief and continued his figural interpretation of her story. He cleverly allegorized away the social critique in her tale. No one seemed to notice the presence of the unassuming and open-minded Sir Questing. He was holed up in the kitchen doing the dishes and singing an unheard tale. Sir Philologloat had successfully isolated the inquisitive Sir Questing from Lady Feminist, Dame Theory and the students because if they met, they might agree. Then there would be potential for dialogue and questions, for thinking. And that might dissipate the power structure he had so carefully built up.

But what does all this mean for the future of medieval studies? What do we as feminist medievalists, formed by long-standing traditions of erudition and authority now want? To saddle up Sir Philologloat and ride him off into the sunset as the female protagonist does with Aristotle in the Lai d'Aristote? Far from it. Potential feminist scholars cannot afford to be illiterate, to ignore questions of origins and sources, to eschew manuscript study or to banish philology.

How could we hope to hear the woman's voice in medieval texts if we cannot understand the languages they speak? How could we challenge ideas or even begin to ask questions of literary texts if another has glossed those texts for us? But the problem is one of time and focus. The proponents of erudition tend to divert our most substantive and theoretical questions by telling us to learn languages as an end in themselves. When we have finished learning the requisite languages, we have also finished our degrees. So we arrive with a Ph.D. in hand and all we can say is that we are finally literate. Now we can ask our questions, but the system has quite cleverly marginalized our ideas. It has succeeded in closing down dialogue and the true exchange of ideas. We are the only ones talking.

Could we imagine an alternate scenario that would encourage medievalists to be theorists too, to understand and make use of a wide range of critical methods? While training medievalists to become feminist literary critics could we also begin forming feminist text editors, feminist translators and even feminist philologists? If we do not yet know exactly what all these terms might mean, could we at least begin considering some options for change?

What about developing an option whereby students could undertake intensive study of medieval languages during the summer months? Once having made the decision to pursue medieval studies, graduate students could spend a summer learning the necessary languages. This would leave more time, during the academic year, for taking courses in literature, theory, and interdisciplinary topics in medieval studies. It might also free-up feminist scholars now burdened with teaching medieval languages to focus on literature and incorporate theory more fully in the classroom. If such a language program were to exist, it should be supported by scholarship funds.

Sorely needed is a course on Problems and Methods in medieval literature that would offer varying theoretical approaches to the medieval literary text. A variety of professors could present their viewpoints on problems unique to medieval studies. A course like this could open dialogue between students and professors and perhaps even between professors of opposing ideological camps. Too often medievalists deny the relevance of literary theory, making their own approach appear natural and objective.

A methods course would open possibilities for potential feminists. We had no intention of becoming feminists when we entered medieval studies. In fact, we avoided taking classes with that "crazy medieval feminist woman" until a course in twentieth century literary theory made us question the ideas of our medieval professors who laughed every time the issue of women was brought up in class. "Feminism has no place in medieval studies," they kept telling us. We believed them. We did not even think of questioning them. Our access to feminism was cut off until the very end of our studies. A team-taught course in Problems and Methods could have exposed us to feminist studies as a viable option within medieval studies. At the very least, we might have discovered a lot earlier that this crazy woman wasn't so crazy after all. In the last year of our doctorate program, we have discovered the kind of intellectual challenge and dialogue missing from our previous studies. We are now working with that crazy woman and another non-feminist but very open-minded professor, each from a different department. Not until now did we dare suspect that a dialogue could exist between these two professors. The combination of their diverse approaches has added a new depth to our studies. From the way the Aristotles and Sir Philologloats tell it, one could never have imagined a feminist and non-feminist cooperating, actually talking and exchanging ideas. And yet it does happen.

REPORT FROM CORNELL MEDIEVAL STUDIES PROGRAM
Submitted by Disa Gambera and Wendy Peek

First, a brief overview. Cornell University offers both MA and PhD degrees in Medieval Studies. Most of the 20-odd students in the program have their major concentration in literary studies. The majority of the graduate students are funded by teaching in the Freshman Seminar Program, a Cornell-wide program which uses composition and close textual analysis to train students in