

MFN SESSIONS

We received abundant positive feedback concerning the 5 Kalamazoo sessions organized and sponsored by MFN this year. Many people asked that we print the texts of the six papers given in the session on Feminist Theory organized by Elizabeth Robertson (English Dept., Univ. of Colorado, Boulder). So here they are in order of their appearance at K-zoo!

I. Where Feminist Theory and the Medieval Text Intersect

E. Jane Burns, Romance Languages, Univ. of No. Carolina, Chapel Hill

In answering Beth's general question about the applicability of feminist theory to the analysis of medieval texts, I would like to begin with one of those texts and to explore how it raises some of the very issues that become the focus of French feminist theory some 800 years later. I begin with a quote from Chretien de Troyes's Erec et Enide, taken from Enide's encounter with the Comte de Limors. The count arrives on the scene at the moment Enide is about to kill herself with Erec's sword, believing wrongly that her companion knight who lies unconscious at her side has been killed in combat. After wresting the sword from Enide's hand the count "begins to inquire about the knight" we are told, asking Enide to explain whether she was his wife or his lover, "sa fame ou s'amie" (v. 4650).

In inquiring about the terms of this woman's role vis a vis her chivalric mate, the count of Limors is asking for a definition of femininity. His question in fact raises one of the most fundamental issues for feminist criticism. Because in calling for a definition of Enide's feminine status he sets up a clear either/or proposition, invoking the kind of binary logic that Helene Cixous and other French feminists following Derrida believe to be at the heart of phallogocentric discourse. In La Jeune Nee Cixous shows how logocentric ideology is structured on binary pairs that correspond to an underlying opposition of man/woman. She outlines the following: Activity/Passivity, Sun/Moon, Culture/Nature, Day/Night, Father/Mother, Head/Emotions, Intelligible/Sensitive, Logos/Pathos, showing how each of these seeming either/or propositions actually conceals a hierarchical relation that devalues the feminine term. Activity is validated over passivity, Culture over Nature, Head over Emotions and so forth. When Limors offers the options of wife or lover to Enide he posits a choice between two of these negatively valued terms, a false choice between terms that are not in fact opposites. Whether wife or lover, Enide will be defined in terms of Erec. Deriving her identity from the male chivalric model, she becomes not a wife or lover in her own right but his wife or his lover, "sa fame, s'amie."

The count of Limors then provides a perfect example of the phallogocentric subject who represses the sexual difference of the female. Unable to see woman as qualitatively different from himself, he can only imagine her as quantitatively different, as the object of man's conjugal rule or his sexual desire. We should remember here that Chretien's text makes explicit the count's bias, stating that in posing his question he is inquiring not so much about Enide as about Erec, the wounded knight. In asking

about her, the count is really asking about him. In this way Limors's question illustrates Irigaray's contention in Speculum de l'Autre Femme that within the phallogocentric symbolic order there is no place for symbolizing woman, woman as different from but socially equal to man. Within what Irigaray calls the "logic of the same" woman can only be seen as other- as the object on which the masculine subject constructs itself. Limors's question thus takes us all the way to Kristeva's controversial claim that woman cannot be defined because that definition will necessarily be a social not a natural construct ("Woman Can Never Be Defined," New French Feminisms, ed. Elaine Marks, 1974). Woman cannot adequately be represented in the literary text because she exists above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies. Kristeva distinguishes here between the biological woman (sex) and the social construct of the female (gender). It is in the social structures of Western society that the simple biological difference between man and woman becomes transformed into a hierarchy privileging the male term of the equation.

For the Middle Ages with its Aristotelian and Patristic heritage, however, woman was inferior to man in both domains. Naturally inferior because of her association with the corporeality of the body through Eve, she was also socially inferior through marriage. In many ways Enide exemplifies this concept of the doubly inferior wife, she whose body should rightfully come under her husband's control and whose speech should be governed by thoughts from his head. In this system, as in the Adam and Eve story, man is the first term, lying outside of gender and woman is inherently gendered as different from man. What these stories attempt to hide is how masculinity and femininity are not produced from a unity in which one essence precedes and overshadows the other, but from an originary play of difference, from a kind of asymmetry that refuses the logic of either/or.

And this is precisely what Enide says in her response to the Count of Limors's question. When he asks whether she is Erec's fame or amie she says: "both" ("L'un et l'autre" v. 4651), meaning neither one nor the other exclusively, or neither one at all. This woman's voice in Old French literature is saying in essence that the binary pair male/female, and all its complementary oppositional pairs that posit one term as a totality and the other as its supplement, do not hold. We hear in Enide's response a clear echo of the French feminist contention that one cannot define woman's position as unitary or unified. That woman, by nature, includes a range of terms held normally to be mutually exclusive by patriarchal discourse. Enide's ambiguous reply signals one of the most basic problems of feminism and one of its greatest strengths: its inherent and necessary diversity. There is not now and will never be a unitary feminism with which women can identify. But it is precisely through its lack of unity that feminism can most deeply challenge our social structure and academic writing.

The problem is how to launch the challenge. And here I will echo some useful insights offered by Leslie Rabine in a recent article in issue of Feminist Studies ("A Feminist Politics of Non-Identity," Spring 1988). If deconstruction practices an endless intellectual dismantling of oppressive structures, it is of little practical use to a woman's movement which desires to

effect political change. Whereas deconstruction avoids taking a "yes or no" position in a conscious attempt to avoid being coopted by the system of phallogocentric logic that it critiques, the woman's movement must articulate clear "yes or no" positions. While it is necessary for feminists to take these positions, we can acknowledge that none of them is fully true or correct. We can perhaps best see them as working positions, necessary but incomplete. The questions at their base are often binary and neither answer is satisfactory.

But here the deconstructive paradigm applies as Rabine suggests. For as deconstructionists know all too well, every challenge to logocentrism is incomplete, because it exists, can only exist, in the language of logocentrism. And this is the feminist dilemma or challenge too. How to act within a metaphysical logic of patriarchy in order to dismantle it. The trick according to Kristeva is to avoid identifying with the patriarchal power structure that we think we are demystifying and fighting. Or as Jane Gallop has cautioned: we must try to resist the desire to encompass difference, to "get it all together," to erase women in an attempt to define, represent or theorize woman ("Annie Leclerc Writing a Letter with Vermeer," in The Poetics of Gender, ed. Nancy K. Miller, 1987).

Probably the most difficult aspect of the task before us is that it requires moving from the well-known terrain of binary logic to the less-comfortable realm of the unknown. Or as Kristeva has said, we're moving from a patriarchal society to "who knows what?" Medieval feminists, especially readers of the adventure story, should feel right at home with this journey into the unknown, into the imprevisible of what is still to come. Except that in this instance the subject of the adventure will not be the knight, but the feminist critic launching out on her own aventure.

II. Desire in Language: Theory, Feminism, and Medieval Texts Geraldine Heng, English Dept., Cornell Univ.

Let me begin by telling two stories which will help to focus my particular interest in our session today.

In December of '86, I gave a paper at the MLA in New York, in a special session on feminism and medieval literature. One of my strategies at the time involved reading a feminine presence in masculine-centred romance by wilfully scrutinizing everything the text did not say, while ignoring everything the text did in fact highlight, and locating my reading in what the marxist Pierre Macherey calls "the unconscious of the work", and what post-Lacanianians refer to simply as "the textual unconscious." After the session, a very nice woman came up to me, and in the course of conversation asked a question that was obviously much on her mind, and which thereafter shadowed my own for many months. "When you read," she asked quietly, "how can you know you are really reading the unconscious of a text?" I answered at length, but was unable to satisfy either of us. Sixteen months later, I can still see her in my mind walking away, disappointed at not having come to any certainty as to where the dividing line was between the conscious and the unconscious text, and between the