

*Feminist-Medievalist Editorial Practice and the Early English Text Society*  
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In two papers prepared for the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship sessions at Kalamazoo, for a roundtable discussion of “The Future of Medieval Feminist Studies” (1999), and for a session on “Feminist-Medievalists Revisit the Early English Text Society” (2000), I argued for more rigorous archival training for medievalist graduate students and for feminist editing of medieval texts, since what is at stake is how we understand and transmit the language, literature, and history of the period—what lens we fashion through which our students see the Middle Ages. Many of us have observed the marginalization of the study of early periods in our universities, and the trimming of our medieval course offerings, along with some colleagues finding editing or archival work “secretarial” and not grounded enough in critical theory.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the recent (Jan. 2005) spate of pleas on [medfem-1](#) for more paleography seminars and more graduate school experience with archival research was a welcome call to reevaluate what our legacy should be to our students and future colleagues.

From my perspective in medieval English, a major archival duty of scholars involves transmitting the “texts,” “works,” “writings,” “literature”—whatever nomenclature we favor for

the materials we study and teach<sup>2</sup>—from their manuscript witnesses to scholarly editions for ourselves and graduate students, as well as to student editions and translations for our classes. The two need not be separate categories, but generally editors of texts intended for the classroom make some attempt to “maintain the linguistic integrity of the original work but within the parameters of modern reading conventions” because of unfamiliar dialects and erratic scribal orthography in many early English texts.<sup>3</sup> Scholarly editions consider, for example, the manuscript tradition of the work and attend to textual variations, providing apparatus for understanding how decisions were made about best-text matters or emendations. There is no shortage of editing work yet to be accomplished, either re-editing outdated and biased editions, editing neglected materials for the first time, or providing alternative more student-friendly editions of materials which have acceptable but rarified scholarly editions. Scholars and students need to have access to responsible well-edited texts—and I do not mean heavy-handed, over-interpreted, over punctuated editions. Student-friendly editions have expanded glossaries and bibliographies, and wider-ranging interpretive and context-rich introductions than the spare editorial apparatus of the

volumes of, for example, the Early English Text Society, to which I will later return. And, of course, editing does not represent the only avenue of archival manuscript studies for students of medieval English literature. Investigating materials in archives for their historical information, and for what codicology and decoration can tell us remains a crucial form of scholarship. For example, knowing that the unique but sort of scruffy manuscript of the Gawain-poet (BL MS Cotton Nero A.x., Art.3 fols. 43-130) was decidedly not an elaborate presentation copy for a wealthy noble patron makes us consider the texts it contains, its audience, and the bookmaker in a different light from that of the grand Ellesmere Chaucer in the Huntington Library or a jewel-like book of hours such as *Les Tres Riche Heures* of Jean, Duke of Berry. Clearly, the medfem-1 discussion identified the dearth of formal coursework and seminars in manuscript study, paleography and codicology, diplomatics, and bibliography, as depriving potential scholars of the tools required for primary research and entry into the academic conversation in their fields.

Since many of the contributors to the discussion thread shared their own preparation (or lack thereof) in archival training, I mention my own, because its serendipity still awes me, and I would wish such an experience for others. Knowing somehow in graduate school the necessity of learning

about medieval manuscripts, I applied to a Summer Seminar in Old and Middle English Paleography held at Harvard in 1980 under the auspices of the Medieval Academy, and directed by Linda Ehrsam Voigts of the University of Missouri, Kansas City.<sup>4</sup> I bless her each day for the daunting range of her expertise, and the confidence she instilled in me that I was in the right niche. I still hope to make Linda Voigts proud of me; she set the bar high. My apprehension of the significance of manuscript studies, and of feeling like a “real” academic dates from that seminar. Laboring to learn vernacular paleography and archival protocol and using the riches of Houghton Library, seminar participants grew to respect one another’s talents and zeal, and unearthed some scholarly “finds” resulting in publications.

Students need to know what an array of manuscripts await editing and that documents lie ready for scholars to investigate about the Middle Ages and medieval women.<sup>5</sup> So, it is particularly lamentable, in my experience, that so few graduate students attain archival and paleographical /codicological expertise, even in the diluted form it might assume away from a major manuscript repository like Harvard. Of the participants in the medfem-1 discussion, a fortunate few mentioned acquiring an outstanding background from the M. Phil. at Cambridge, Toronto, or the University of London. Many admitted mastering the material

on their own, hit or miss, which while having its own rewards, does not necessarily make the best use of your always-too-brief time at an archive. Required courses in paleography for those working in the early periods are a must, keeping students from realizing too late that they are without the expertise to do the research they desire—or preventing them from ignorance of what sort of research might be attempted. When, thanks to Warren Hollister, I taught paleography /codicology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, it was distressing that not one graduate student in English (my field) took the course. Instead, a cadre of History and Art History graduate students participated, following the advice of sage mentors about the subject's necessity to their program. It really is our duty to provide these archival skills for our students, in our own *translatio studii* of feminist-medievalist editing sensibilities. We should clamor for national seminars and required university courses in bibliography and methodology and introductions to medieval scholarly practice, admittedly a difficult task as the economy worsens. But not to do so dilutes our whole discipline.

The shape of our field, however transformed and reinvigorated by the women's movement and the emphasis on theory and gender studies and political correctness, would not retain its core, its intellectual rigor, and its character without the continuing prominence of

good paleographic and editorial skills. As feminists we can do no kinder thing for our students than to arm them with the tools to be crackerjack traditional medievalists. Familiarity with archival research, paleography, bibliography and editorial theory, language facility, a solid historical grounding, a sophistication about critical theory, Plus feminist sensibility—these are the *desiderata* for future feminist-medievalists. For instance, we should set them the task of investigating how to apply feminist theory and sensibilities to the process of manuscript editing. Our students (and ourselves) should not be in the position of sniping at texts from the margins of established editions, but able to experience the manuscripts' peculiarities and problems and edit texts from a self-proclaimed center. Hence, feminist-medievalists need archival skills to produce grist for our mills: exciting, historicized, and well-edited scholarly or classroom editions and translations, or re-readings of neglected texts incorporated into our study. More and better editions enlarge our understanding of the writings in Old and Middle English and the construction of women as subject and object within them and within the larger culture of which the works are a part.<sup>6</sup> Scholars have not yet exhausted the recovery of women's writings, writings about women, and writings for female audiences. Nor have they yet exhausted re-visiting texts both

literary and historical, canonical and non-canonical, and even those extra-literary modes of the letter, the marginalia, the practical manuals that have much to say about gender roles, about their male authors, about the implications of the depictions of women.

What are feminist editorial principles? F. Regina Psaki asks us to re-examine the late 19th-century's project of canon-formation and assess its influence on the Middle Ages we know: "How does a 19th-century construct of 'woman' show up in the Middle Ages shaped for us by our predecessors?"<sup>7</sup> Both Psaki and David Matthews (in *The Making of Middle English*) remind us that our experience of medieval works is filtered through our material experience of their editions.<sup>8</sup> An over-determined editorial practice has dominated the dissemination of medieval texts—over-determined in the kind of clarification an editor seeks for readings, as well as over-punctuation and skimpy glossing. Psaki's perceptive remarks about *Le Roman de Silence* give feminist editors a lot to ponder as we seek to preserve and present early texts to new audiences. She argues that our predecessors' urge to clarify and disambiguate a text may result in simplifying complex texts that *aim* at ambiguity and equivocation; texts which explore a problem, not resolve it. In short, to make what is *literary* literal. Psaki, therefore, asks for more diplomatic editions, rather than

critical editions, less guidance, rather than more, through the morass of meaning in some manuscript witnesses/texts (notwithstanding that texts with multiple manuscript witnesses present problems of manuscript selection). Diplomatic editions could open out texts and make the experience of reading more authentically what medieval audiences might have experienced—an ambiguous non- or lightly-punctuated work, for example, rather than the irritatingly over-punctuated over-determined readings of the *Riverside Chaucer*.<sup>9</sup> The tidy pre-digested, pre-interpreted versions of earlier editors that we and our students take for granted, need, in feminist editorial practices, to be opened out, to invite multi-valent readings, to allow for grey areas.

Considering the Middle English canon and manuscript editing from a feminist perspective might mean revisiting the grand project of the Early English Text Society (EETS). Conceived by Frederick Furnivall when he formed the society in 1864 as a "nationalistic" undertaking, he envisioned the publication of the literary and linguistic heritage of the English nation "a matter of moral duty and benefit to the nation."<sup>10</sup> Many older texts in that huge series need re-editing, need new readings, especially non-canonical texts and those of minor writers, to see what might be emended or if there are women's issues left unremarked by the editors.<sup>11</sup> The venerable EETS, the gold

standard of editions in Middle English, might be reassessed by feminists to judge how we have been taught, what editorial practices we tacitly accept, and what sorts of editions of early English texts we have been fed. The EETS need not be the only venue for feminists undertaking editions of Middle English texts, but because of its importance for scholarly editions in the field, with its huge backlist of editions, it is a force with which to be reckoned. Students of this field ought to be intimate with many of its distinguished and wonderful volumes (I always aspired to own a complete set!). Newer is not necessarily better, but redoing editions in the light of other practiced eyes on the manuscripts and in the light of further research is responsible scholarship. Normal EETS procedure asks editors for streamlined introduction information about the author, the manuscript and language specifics, and some context—plus a bibliography. No doubt the rationale that “studies” of the text are most prudently produced at a later date or by others, once the edition is launched, keeps these introductions conservative. Some EETS editions are the only editions of certain texts, although TEAMS and other presses do chip away at this monopoly.

The prospectus for the early subscribers to the Early English Text Society announced its inception “To bring the mass of unprinted Early English literature within the reach of students and provide

sound texts from which the *New English Dictionary* could quote.”<sup>12</sup> Revisiting EETS means looking at the Society’s history and examining its aims, both avowed and unspoken, and—not to denigrate the colossal achievement of Furnivall and others of bringing before the “public” (as they conceived of it, male) the corpus of Middle English works—to see whether the Society’s foundational moments might not be congruent with our present concerns for gender and investigation of the women’s voice and presence in a text. While the EETS had entrenched political *raison d’être*, none of these had much to do with women, Victorian or medieval. Few of the early subscribers to the Society were women, despite middle-class men of modest education signing on. And, the first group of editors did not include women among them, although Eleanor Marx, a friend of Furnivall, did research and transcription of early English texts in the British Museum.<sup>13</sup> Yet, interestingly, among the first texts the Society printed were Arthurian romances as well as prose and poetic conduct works, such as *Holy Maidenhood* (os 18),<sup>14</sup> *Early English Meals And Manners* (os 32), *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry* (os 33), etc.—materials read by, and probably created for the education of, medieval women.

David Matthews’ “material history” of the study of Middle English demonstrates that the EETS tried to democratize the study of

antiquarian texts, moving from the model of limited editions of the aristocratic Roxburghe Club to broaden the audience for these texts to appeal to men of modest means and some education—the middle-class, not the university or aristocratic circles. Matthews and others demonstrate that the EETS, conceived in a climate of liberal reform which included the rethinking of education, and in a context of imperialist expansion, was envisioned by Furnivall as having Early English texts democratizing and reinventing or reclaiming the national heritage.<sup>15</sup> It was a moral duty of men to study native literature, as “the true ground and foundation of patriotism.”<sup>16</sup> The cultural capital of old literature was not its antiquity, but its Englishness.<sup>17</sup> The literary value was not dealt with in the editorial materials in each volume; the literary value was the text. Its mere production in readable form for the public added value to English culture. Early English literature became, through the corpus of the EETS, less alien, and more foundational to modern literature, continuous with it. The tie to English nationalism, via Furnivall’s hopes for the series and his strong editorial hand, had ramifications for the texts edited, their presentation, and their teaching, which we need to explore in their pertinence to women. Furnivall’s notion of uncovering the texts, getting them into the hands of the reading public still appeals to me as the way we as feminists

should provide access to texts for our undergraduates, scorning elitism.

Furnivall’s endeavor failed, however, to engender a grass-roots clamor for antique texts; instead it institutionalized the study of Middle English in universities among an educated elite. Nevertheless the inception of the series had profound consequences for the course of studies in Middle English and the formation of the canonical texts in that discipline. Furnivall did, it seems, break “the hegemony of the aristocrats and their values over Middle English,”<sup>18</sup> but imposed upon the corpus of Middle English texts an omnivorous desire to have the entire English heritage in print for nationalistic and moral aims. His unintended creation of a subject of university study took these texts away from its first public (as womanless as it was, women might have at least seen these texts in the home of the men who subscribed), and conveyed it to the all-male bastion of the university by the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where it remained resistant to readings by and about women until quite recently.

The EETS editions are, for all their strengths, not student or classroom editions. The cost of each volume precludes ordering them for a class, which is sad, as there are several of them which I would delightedly order if they were less expensive, such as Caxton’s *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* (EETS ns. 2) edited by M.Y. Offord, or O.D. Macrae-

Gibson's edition of *Of Arthour and Of Merlin I and II* (EETS os. 268 and 279). I actually like the dated old editions to teach from, not only because many are admirable, but also because students perceive how far we have come, how much more there is to say about the ancient texts, and what the introduction does not allude to that we now care about. Perhaps, then, we should resort for our teaching editions to a press such as TEAMS, The Teaching of the Middle Ages Consortium, affiliated with The Medieval Institute and Western Michigan University, and now under the general editorship of Russell Peck, which takes as its mandate affordable scholarly editions of Middle English texts with students in mind. Such editions as Staley's *Book of Margery Kempe* (1996), Larry Benson's *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Mort Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure* (1994), provide authoritative Middle English texts, well-glossed on the page, helpful notes, and informative introductions which outline the critical questions about the manuscript(s) and work itself. Spelling has been somewhat modernized/regularized, punctuation introduced, not necessarily a good thing, but usually workable. What I am getting at here is that our students need decent access to the early English corpus before they are able to decide just why they want to use archives in augmenting their research on such texts.

Finally, although not strictly archival work, consider that translations of many medieval Latin works are long overdue. The recent English translations of the works of Hildegard of Bingen come to mind as a laudable endeavor in that area for *MFF*'s audience. Important works for the context of medieval literature such as Petrus Comestor's *Historia Scholastica* or Vincent of Beauvais *Speculum Historiale* have no modern English translations, despite their being ordinary texts in medieval classrooms, works which therefore lie in the margins of some of the literary texts we study. We can no longer expect our typical undergraduate (or even graduate student) to have enough facility in Latin to tackle either Vincent or Petrus. While graduate students in medieval fields of study should have Latin, the inclusiveness of what I would call a "feminist democratic" perspective on the texts argues for getting the materials to the undergraduate students, at first at least, in a vehicle they can comprehend.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, we should explore our primary resources, the manuscripts, to scrutinize the gender politics and editorial practices of previous editions of English texts, bringing with us sensibilities perhaps foreign to their earlier editors, interest in a feminist perspective. There is still ground to cover simply reifying the position, the existence of women in medieval works and looking for their presence, their construction by male authors, and hearing

their voices where we haven't looked/listened before or well, and exploring the relationship of women to the aesthetic life of literature. When newly editing or reediting Middle English texts, then, scholars should consider women and gender in those editions. They should also recognize that overediting closes down meaning. Less heavy-handed editorial control over the way the words appear on the page and more interpretive leeway may end up surprising the texts and their new readers with what now might be found there. Good editions and a host of other scholarly projects begin in the archives.<sup>20</sup> Let us transmit to our students the tools to use those treasures.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I actually heard this at a benighted institution, not, thankfully, my own university. My graduate students note that by keeping some study of Old English, for example, only as a graduate course, and not part of every English major's required curriculum, students have less and less contact with the early periods, and therefore do not know what is out there, and we are more and more marginalized.

<sup>2</sup> Seth Lerer discusses reasons for why we call our literary artifacts what we do in "Medieval English Literature and the Idea of the Anthology," *PMLA* 118.5 (2003): 1251-67. He notes that "to understand English medieval literary culture—to historicize its notions of the author, its conceptions of the reader, and its idioms of genre, form, and social purpose—is to understand primarily its self-conscious

articulation of its modes of making and its media of transmissions," (p. 1253). Lerer's argument depends upon scholars' familiarity with archival work to explore manuscript contexts (anthologies) of literary texts.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from the mission statement of TEAMS (The Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages) Middle English Text Series, Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University. Back cover material on most editions. This series intends its texts for classroom use.

<sup>4</sup> There was also a seminar in Latin paleography running concurrently at Harvard, run by Paul Meyvaert, I believe.

<sup>5</sup> A. S. G. Edwards' *Middle English Prose: A Critical Guide to Major Authors and the Genres* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1984) for example, mentions some kinds of manuscript inquiry in Middle English texts which even after 20 years still remain to be investigated.

<sup>6</sup> From the evidence of many works recently published, I daresay this re-editing is starting to happen. For example, the works of Christine de Pizan are being translated in a Persea Books series; Sheila Delany has provided a fine student edition/translation of the neglected Osborn Bokenham's *Legend of Holy Women* (Notre Dame UP, 1992); Alexandra Barratt has edited an anthology of *Women's Writing in Middle English* (Longman, 1992); Lynn Staley has edited and translated *The Book of Margery Kempe* for Norton Critical Editions (2001) and a Middle English edition for TEAMS (1996); Peregriana Press's series on medieval women produces some fine work.

<sup>7</sup> Regina Psaki, "Introduction," Special Issue on *Le Roman de Silence*. *Arthuriana* 7.2(1997): 3-6. See p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> David Matthews, *The Making*

of *Middle English* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Howell Chickering "Unpunctuating Chaucer," *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 25.2(1990): 96-109, describes the dulling and obfuscating effect of over-punctuation on meaning.

<sup>10</sup> Matthews, *Making of ME*, p.147.

<sup>11</sup> Stephanie Trigg of SMFS has recently (1990) edited *Winnere and Wastoure*, and other volumes newly edited or in production are listed on the EETS home page <[www.eets.org.uk](http://www.eets.org.uk)>. The entire available backlist of the EETS can be found at the Boydell and Brewer website <<http://www.boydell.co.uk/EETS.HTM>>. A study well beyond the scope of this article—but really fascinating—might investigate that backlist, those early editions, and any of their later reincarnations, for ways in which the topic of women has been treated.

<sup>12</sup>This statement appears on the inside cover of every EETS publication; however, my direct source is the society's self-introduction, found in the pamphlet *EETS List of Publications, 1864-1978* (EETS: Sept. 1978), p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> See Sheila Delany, "Medieval Marxists: A Tradition," *MFF* 30(2001): 9-10.

<sup>14</sup> Since then, reedited by Bella Millett, *Hali Meidhad* no. 284 (1982).

<sup>15</sup> Matthews, *Making of ME*, p. 154.

<sup>16</sup> Furnivall qtd in Matthews, *Making of ME*, p. 148.

<sup>17</sup> Matthews, *Making of ME*, p. 150.

<sup>18</sup> Matthews, *Making of ME*, p. 159.

<sup>19</sup> Early English women were by and large left out of education and being *litterati* because they did not have Latin. I'd like this not to be the case with my students, even though I hope they want to learn Latin. My Old English students admit that had they not read *Beowulf* in translation in an

undergraduate class, they might never have thought to study Old English.

<sup>20</sup> Sian Echard's "House Arrest: Modern Archives, Medieval Manuscripts," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30.2(Spring 2000): 185-210, provides an interesting and valuable overview of the history and practice of archives, and catalogs some of the constraints placed upon scholars' access to medieval books in modern repositories, using her own experience with Gower manuscripts to frame her study.

Editor's Note: Most TEAMS texts are available full text on-line, archived at <<http://www.teamsmedieval.org/texts/>>