



THE NEXT GENERATION: BRINGING MEDIEVAL FEMINISM INTO THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Answering the question, “What does it mean to be a medieval feminist today?” can be challenging, especially because of the difficulty for many of us to separate the two ideas, of being a medievalist and being a feminist, in our scholarship. In many respects the two ideas have not been separate ones in my own training as a scholar: as I examine certain texts of the medieval period, I often gravitate (through inclination and experience) to an examination of women’s spheres and influences. Since I was confused about how the question might be divided, I attempted to assess informally other people’s attitudes and thinking about the subject by querying other graduate students in my department. I was met with more than one simple blank stare, and one person even said jokingly, “There were no women in the Middle Ages.” Now, perhaps one should take this last statement in the humorous spirit in which it was intended, but the man’s teasing made me think rather hard about my self-image as a scholar and my perception of the future of medieval feminism in general.

My position today as a graduate student returning to finish the PhD is, in part, due to the work of the women before me. In a dynamic and inspirational fashion, early medieval feminists blazed new trails in the discipline, and academia as well, so these younger generations could follow more easily; in some ways, it can be said that I cut my early graduate critical teeth on the groundbreaking efforts of women like Jane Chance and Caroline Walker Bynum whose ideas served as the foundation or starting point for my own. Such women also carved a place for women in traditional medievalism, and while it can be said that my situation as a returning doctoral student and mother of two children is not yet very common in the field, it is not all that unusual either. As a result of their efforts, it seems on the surface that women like myself can take for granted our place in academia and can rely on a strong feminist critical tradition when we approach our various subjects.

On the other hand, I still have to wonder about the young man’s statement. As my very wise mother claims, “Many a truth is said in jest,” and when I apply that folk wisdom to this situation, uncomfortable truths emerge. The man’s statement points to a problematic conflict in the discipline, that of an anxiety that some men have about feminism in general. This tension plays itself out on several levels and (like the fact that they’ll never really know what labor is like) perhaps these men question whether they can ever truly understand what feminism is all about. The mystery of our procreative abilities may extend to this very female discipline—we have certainly and rather vocally claimed it for ourselves, made a room of our own for ourselves. On the other hand, Audre Lorde once stated that “The master’s tools will never dismantle

the master's house," and I wonder whether we have, then, gone off and built our own house, or if our space is really nothing more than a room built off the back of the master's house.

Ten years ago, Allen Frantzen grappled with a similar question in his article, "When Women Aren't Enough," in a 1993 issue of *Speculum*, as the "token man" in the volume chosen to speak for all men (445). Frantzen was understandably uneasy about his responsibility as such; the choice of this person in particular as the "token man" is problematic in and of itself, and perhaps speaks volumes about our own uneasiness about the encroachment of men into "our" territory. Frantzen concedes medieval feminism's triumph in bringing women's concerns into the curriculum (447), but notes that more recent "gender studies" has created new anxieties for feminists that the inclusion of men in the discussion (such as in masculinities studies and queer theory) leaves women vulnerable to subjugation (445). It seems that the battle between the sexes rages on, but on a new ground: women have been historically oppressed by men; therefore, male involvement in gender studies threatens to marginalize women even more than before, because of the possibility that men will dominate us in "our own" space. This conflict gives rise to a potentially self-perpetuating dilemma for medieval feminists, because if women insist on the exclusivity of the discipline, we run the risk of being dismissed to the fringes of academia, something "other" that will not be taken quite seriously.

Of course, conditions for inclusion have improved a bit in the ten years since Frantzen wrote his article. We consistently hear several men's voices on the medfem-l discussion list, and there was even one male graduate student who participated in the SMFS mentoring program this year, but I'm not sure that this is enough. Unfortunately, whatever "equity," in Frantzen's opinion, feminist studies may have achieved in academia (447), the fact remains that conditions for women in the professorial sphere continue to lag, especially for women of color. The polarization that exists in medievalism is not limited to sex alone; there is an appalling lack of diversity across the board, as noted by researchers Gloria T. Nye and Spencer J. Maxcy: "Higher education continues to be portrayed as an ivory tower where, except for tokens, women and minorities are stuck closer to the moat than the pinnacle" (2). While there have been undeniable improvements in opportunities for women and minority faculty, a recent study by Adalberto Aguirre, Jr. confirms their view: "The number of women and minority faculty in higher education has been increasing...Despite the increased numbers, however, women and minorities remain underrepresented in higher education relative to their numbers in the U.S. population" (3). More disturbing, however, is the fact that "despite appreciable gains in the number of Ph.D. degrees earned by women and minorities, their proportionate representation in the U.S. faculty population has remained unchanged" (3) and even the quality of their work is questioned: "Women and minority faculty are also perceived in the academic workplace as less competent than White male faculty. As a result, White male faculty often discredit feminist and minority research" (4). It would seem, therefore, that a great deal more needs to be done if medieval feminists are to achieve the kind of respect and equality that they deserve.

I wonder if, in part, the problem is analogous to John Berger's frustration, in his book *Ways of Seeing*, with art critics who deliberately mystify art in their discussions to lend authority to their arguments and thereby exclude vast numbers of people who feel, upon reading these discussions, that they could never access the vast and inscrutable world of Art with a capital "A." It is possible that scholars in general have traditionally, deliberately or not, complicated the past and this has prevented many potentially capable individuals from attempting to access the subject. Medieval feminists have an exceptional opportunity to humanize, and thus demystify, the medieval past both for ourselves and our students, and thereby include new perspectives to our work. Edward Taylor mentions an intriguing result of demystifying scholarly pursuits for students in his discussion of the role of imagination in encouraging diversity in academia:

Imagining yourself as successful in the academic domain is a key component of scholastic aspirations. I use the term imagination not to mean something make-believe or unreal but to describe the mental picture one has of oneself as accomplished and capable. This psychological image brings into being a goal that is conceivable, viable, and then, likely. (Paragraph 9)

In other words, when students are able to identify with the subject, they are more likely to pursue that goal and even succeed in it.

On the other hand, the understanding of a subject is not necessarily the same as identifying with a career goal and subsequently achieving that goal, which is where our critical roles as mentors come into play, not only of students but of each other as well, in demystifying the difficult passage from degree to hire to tenure. I'm sure that most, if not all, of us recall at least one professor who was instrumental to our development as scholars; unfortunately, effective mentors of junior faculty are often few and far between (if there are any at all), and success for women and minority faculty in academia is increasingly understood to be partially dependent on strong mentorship, by both females and males, even through the tenure process and beyond. Mentoring, different from the more passive and less effective activity of role-modeling, is defined by E.M. Byrne as "an active process of positive sponsorship by older 'patrons' or teachers... towards younger or less experienced entrants" (qtd. in Nye and Maxcy 8) and whose purpose is "not to benefit the professor, but to contribute to the community" of the discipline as a whole (11). On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine that the mentoring process would not be beneficial to both parties involved because of the mutual exchange of ideas and scholarship, even as it creates exceptional opportunities for new understanding and professional growth.

Affirmative action measures have done little to minimize the hurdles that women face in academia, and in fact may exacerbate the problems that polarize faculty along gender-racial lines: Aguirre's study has found that the "use of affirmative action in academia to increase the representation of women and minority faculty, for example, has often resulted in workers' perception

that they are tokens or outcomes of reverse discrimination practiced on White men” (3). The “sink or swim” approach to developing new faculty too frequently has dire consequences for women and minority hires (Nye and Maxcy 3); instead, recent educational studies demonstrate that success for women and minorities in academia is closely linked with mentoring and indicate that guidance from established faculty, either formally or informally, strongly promotes confidence and professional achievement. More important, perhaps, is the fact that the responsibility of mentoring should not be shrugged off onto other women and minorities, who often struggle with too many demands of teaching and service to diversity programs to achieve their own professional goals (Nye and Maxcy 5,8; Aguirre 3-4), but should be engaged by all members of academia:

For women and minorities to enter and succeed in higher education careers which are seen as non-traditional for them, they need one-on-one advice, encouragement and support. To be effective, this empowering support which we call mentoring must come not from the extraordinarily few women or minority role models who are seen as exceptions, but from those who are in power and have credibility as being normal for that career—the majority men. Byrne has not accepted widely held but unproven claims regarding the need for role models...Her research challenged widely held assumptions and found that both same and other-sex mentoring, not same-sex role modelling, can advance women in non-traditional careers. (Nye and Maxcy, 8)

For the success of women and minority faculty, and of these groups in academia in general, it is essential to develop an inclusive mentorship program that does not rely heavily on the unproven efficacy of role-modeling but rather the demystification of the professional process through the support of those members in the discipline for whom scholarship is seen as a “traditional” pursuit. If one is encouraged by a mentor, guided in matters of research, publication, and advancement, the validation encourages the imagination of oneself as “accomplished and capable” (in Taylor’s words) and the achievement of individual goals, and enhances the growth of the academic community as a whole.

I think it is safe to agree with Frantzen that medieval feminism has “arrived” to some extent on the academic scene, but in order to continue our success in the demarginalization of women’s studies and even women in general, it is imperative that we make a conscious, concerted effort to open up “our” space and demystify our discipline to attract and encourage a greater variety of scholars. According to recent studies, being a good role model is simply not enough; we should actively encourage students to explore academia as a career alternative and to enjoy other faculty members to do the same—especially male faculty. This inclusion will benefit women and minority faculty by increasing support on both personal and professional levels, but also profit the discipline as a whole by facilitating awareness and furthering scholarship through the vital exchange of ideas. As a result of the inclusion of many dif-

ferent backgrounds and perspectives, medieval feminism will persist in being the vibrant, cutting-edge sector of academia that it has been in the past and promote exceptional scholarship, both of and by women.

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