



## MANAGING MEDIEVAL MISOGYNY

Last year, when this round table was proposed, I was confused by the question, "Are you still deciding to be a medievalist or a feminist?" I was reading the question as one of subject and method: medieval studies and feminist approaches. According to Elaine Showalter, feminist criticism explores two areas: the representation, images, and conceptions of women in literary works and the writing of women authors (Showalter 1377). I didn't see the conflict that the question seemed to presuppose. Although medieval literature is overwhelmingly populated with male characters and mostly created by male authors, studying the portrayal and construction of female characters and analyzing medieval women's writing are certainly valid pursuits for a medieval scholar. Between medieval studies and feminist methodology, there is no conflict.

Later in the year, however, I began not only to understand the question but feel the conflict between medieval studies and feminism. I was reading primary materials for one of my dissertation chapters, and I was becoming increasingly angry and frustrated at the persistent misogyny in these texts. I became sick and tired of reading about the faults of women, real, imagined, and mythological; I began to argue with and against the texts; I wanted to throw the books across the room. At this point, I realized that today's question, "Are you still deciding whether to be a medievalist or a feminist?" was not a matter of subject and method, as I had been reading it, but rather a question of politics and philosophy. How can we love, support, read, and teach texts that continuously and systematically deride women?

I admit that my frustration is politically grounded. Like many of my contemporaries, I was born after the battle for women's rights had begun and was consequently brought up to believe that women are people. Most medieval literature does not accept this simple feminist idea, and the few medieval texts that do accept that women are people do not accept that women are *equal* people or *good* people. Yet, as a medievalist, I have to read these texts. In fact, I have to read *many* of these texts, as I am currently studying the portrayal of women warriors. And scholarship has not often addressed the issue of misogyny in these or other medieval texts; in his study of medieval Spanish texts, Michael Solomon notes that many critics ignore or deny a text's overt or underlying misogyny and concentrate instead on its brilliance (Solomon 2).

And when I searched for scholarship on teaching misogynist texts, medieval or otherwise, I found about ten articles after searching several databases and asking for my colleagues' suggestions. Yet when I asked the medfem-l discussion list about dealing with misogynous texts as scholars and as teachers, several responders admitted "the increasing desire to pull my hair out," as Regina Psaki put it, and also that their students had considerable resistance to the misogynist

ideas of medieval texts as well. The question then becomes, “How do we, as scholars and as teachers, as readers, deal with the misogyny of medieval texts in face of our own personal, political feminism?”

Part of the debate, of course, is determining how misogyny actually affected the lives of real women. Opinions vary on the extent of everyday effects, and frankly, without time travel or a new hoard of autobiographical texts, we can only speculate. But we do have a few medieval textual instances of women’s reactions to misogynist works. The Wife of Bath first rips and then burns her husband’s “book of wikked wyves” (Chaucer III.685). Even though I’ve had the same impulse, we all know that such a strategy will not help us. Nowadays, print, microfilm, and digital rendering have preserved all these books in multiple forms and copies, making the texts themselves almost impossible to eradicate, and destroying the text does not destroy its ideas anyway. The narrator Christine in *The Book of the City of Ladies* initially deals with a misogynist text by internalizing its ideas. Certainly, as political feminists, we cannot advocate this strategy for ourselves and our students—and as three allegorical figures promptly show up to correct the narrator, we can assume that author Christine de Pizan did not approve of this strategy either. But by writing *The Book of the City of Ladies* itself, Christine de Pizan offers perhaps the most constructive strategy for dealing with such texts: she confronts misogyny head on and tries to refute it. But how well would this strategy work for us? As scholars, should we waste time refuting old and obscure texts that do not directly influence current misogyny? As readers, does arguing against these uncomfortable ideas make the constant reading of them any more comfortable?

And of course, none of these strategies work in the classroom. Our current undergraduate students do not remember the struggle for women’s rights; for them, women’s equality has always existed, at least as an idea, and many do not realize that women’s political, legal, social, and economic equality has not actually been achieved. Many of the responders on the medfem-1 list reported that their students found the misogynist portrayals of women in texts frustrating and maddening. Yet Judith M. Bennett notes that students in fact like to discuss these texts and the ideas behind them (30), and RáGena DeAragon, Regina Psaki, and J. Chimene Bateman reported the same in their e-mails to medfem-1. Yet all of these scholars admit that it is very easy for the students to get caught in emotional responses or trap themselves into dismissing medieval misogyny as a distant historical philosophy (Bateman; DeAragon).

At least some of the few articles I managed to track down on medieval misogyny had concrete suggestions for coping with misogynist texts and our students’ reaction to them in the classroom. In a forthcoming article, Susannah Chewing, citing specifically the schizophrenic portrayal of Criseyde, reconciles the “evil” of women characters by examining the social situations that leave them no choice but to act as they do (Chewing 2–3). Howard Bloch suggests grounding the texts in their historical context, pointing out the text’s internal inconsistencies, and drawing a line between the arguments and action (3–4). Judith Bennett endorses Bloch’s suggestion and proposes class discussions about whether the misogyny was an everyday reality or a “literary posture,” yet cautions that

“actual women suffered from misogynous ideas” (30 and 31). The medfem-l responders also offered concrete strategies. RáGena DeAragon uses reading journals; Regina Psaki assigns her students to list misogynist assumptions of texts and identify ones that are still current (that is, most of them). Almost all the responders advocate centering the discussions about misogyny in medieval texts in social history and ideas about gender.

These strategies may also help us to understand the misogynist texts that we study and to put them in their proper perspective—whatever that is. Can these strategies help us and our students to deal with our emotional conflicts? I don’t know. But in researching this presentation, I learned one thing for certain. We have not explored this problem nearly enough. As I said earlier, I was only able to find about ten articles on misogyny and education and scholarship after doing several searches on several databases and asking the help of colleagues. I found 148 articles on *race* and education by searching *one* database and doing one search. Obviously, we need to speak to each other about the misogyny in these texts; we need to write about it. We need to think about our students’ reactions to the misogyny in these texts and we need to develop more strategies for handling the students’ responses. At the very least, we—and, I suspect, our students—need to know that we are not alone in our frustration. We may not be able to prove how and how much the misogynist tradition actually affected medieval women, but we do know that it affects us.

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