

fantasy world. It seems to me that the challenge for educators concerned with gender is to complicate productively the world view inherited from Tolkien without completely destroying students' familiarity with and love for their idealized (and ideologized) view of the Middle Ages. One way to achieve this complication is to show that men have gender in *Beowulf* and other texts beloved by Tolkien, that this gender requires them to perform certain roles, and that these requirements often lead, to misuse one of Tolkien's more famous quotes about *Beowulf*, to "sufficient tragedy" (24).

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Tolkien A28 B, fol. 160r.

## FEMINISM WITHIN AND WITHOUT THE ACADEMY

Even though the trajectory of feminism in medieval studies follows that of feminism more generally in the humanities, the apparently unique problems of being a feminist in this field are emerging with greater clarity. In these brief remarks, we offer—and the "we" throughout this essay refers specifically to the three authors—our personal views of these problems, which in our opinion are both consonant and dissonant with the wider experience of feminism in the academies at the end of this century. Let us be quite clear where the three of us stand as feminist medievalists: we celebrate and affirm the achievements of feminism in medieval studies but we believe that criticism is an essential and necessary component of committed feminist inquiry.

Our thinking about our own feminist commitment and its relation to institutionalized academic practice reached a watershed two years ago following the publication of the *Speculum* volume on gender by the Medieval Academy of America, and our experience of the Kalamazoo session where it was discussed.<sup>1</sup> What concerns us here is not the individual essays but what the volume as a whole **represents** and **practices**, issues which were taken up but not widely debated by the session. Briefly and bluntly: we thought that the volume located its project within a utopic humanist vision, one which reinstated Western Eurocentric heterosexuality at its core, and which left out most of recent feminist inquiry into representation, ideology, and social construction. Through its

practice of delineation the volume renders the differences within feminist studies invisible, thereby both homogenizing and appropriating it at the same time. Our response to the session was visceral; we experienced it as a failure on many levels—of exchange, of community, of public critique, of feminist debate.

Now, two years later, both specific details and strong emotions are at more of a distance. We have co-authored a longer essay, offering a more specific analysis of both volume and session, but these events also usefully prompted us to ask more general questions about feminism within and without the Medieval Academy, and the academy overall. We are concerned in particular with how our identification as medieval feminist scholars is modified, troubled, and put into question by our experience of the institutionalization of feminism in our field. The problematic tension between individual work and communal goals for feminism can lead to a collective failure of will in our inability to critique our work in good faith without provoking irrational hostility or more rational fears of dismantling the sisterhood. This failure has profound consequences. It points to an inability to articulate our commitment to and goals for feminist work within the medieval community. It leaves largely unexplored and undebated the relation of medieval feminists to the discipline in general as well as to other emergent approaches of significant concern to feminism, such as identity politics, the history of sexuality, queer theory, and the politics of race. We argue that if feminist scholarship is to make a difference in medieval studies then medieval feminists must find more ways of speaking up and speaking out about these concerns. In so doing, medieval feminists must also find ways of reaching out to the wider community of feminist scholars in the humanities for further critique, discussion, and solidarity. How to negotiate difference at individual, disciplinary, and communal levels is one urgent problem facing feminists within and without medieval studies.

It is not easy to explore the failures of current feminist practice and theory - the downside of its evident successes. We have found ourselves depressed and disillusioned about the very area of our work that has nourished and sustained us for most of our careers. One source of our anxiety is the same as that which has rendered our feminist colleagues silent: namely, the fear of revealing our differences in public, with the attendant anxieties of being perceived as indulging in a cat-fight, a reductivism that permits the dismissal of feminism. Without minimizing these well-founded anxieties, we argue here that the greater danger is one of sterilizing (sic) feminist debate. Feminism is not, and never has been, just a matter of individual scholarship: it is a politics, a practice, and an orientation in the world that goes well beyond the academy. The tension between academic and nonacademic feminisms is perhaps the most important difference for all academic feminists to understand and negotiate. This tension will not go away, nor should it, but it might be put to better use in

understanding current experience and in formulating future strategies. Feminist commitment necessarily involves risks to notions of personal and communal identity: we view the need for public good faith debate as one such necessary risk.

The Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship and the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* provide vital support for all feminist medieval activities and concerns. As an area of debate, however, we wish to explore the enormous challenge this organization faces and its tenuous relation to other institutional forms such as the Medieval Academy. The huge attendance at various conference sessions promoted by the Society is a sign of its attraction for many medievalists, and its recognition in the profession, but it is not always a sign of contestation or critique. Issues of institutional and intellectual concern are still played out at the individual level. Collaboration, for example, is still seen as a hindrance to promotion, “theoretical” approaches are currently suffering a broad and vicious backlash, and many of us are still trying to persuade our nonfeminist colleagues that feminist scholarship is not spurious. Indeed, we wonder how to cultivate institutional support for an area itself regularly viewed as of only marginal relevance in the humanities. “Traditional” feminist avenues of support in general—networking, alliances of “sisterhood,” and women’s centers, for example—are themselves skeletal in many institutions, compromised as much by their lack of funding and their marginality within the academies as they are by the sheer practical difficulties of achieving genuine change and of articulating a distinct voice in the competitive and conflicted arena of identity politics.

In addition medieval feminists—still haunted by a sense of belatedness to feminist thought in general—have yet to develop positive connections with scholars working in other areas, whose own feminism seems so remote from medieval scholarship. If feminist medievalists feel marginal in relation to feminism itself then this marginalization is in fact double by virtue of the discipline’s own marginality. Responsibility lies not only with the failure of medievalists, however, since post-medieval feminism rarely bothers to extend its arms to the medieval. Few women’s centers, for example, include medievalists among their faculty, and rare indeed are the journals, essay collections, conferences, or even panel-sessions that feature medievalists among the wider group of feminists. Of all the highly imaginative and important work being written in feminist medieval studies, little of it manages to find an audience outside of medieval studies. This is especially unfortunate given recent critical emphasis on performative gender theory and on historicized constructions of the female body, areas equally fascinating, problematic, and productive for feminists both medieval and modern. We see medievalists coming to grips with issues essential to all feminists in the many exciting studies of the body and body

politics in medieval scholarship. Feminist engagement requires far more mutual use and interaction, and we—feminists of all disciplines and periods—need to remedy this.

The university is not separate from other expressions of cultural and social life. The idealized vision of its ivory towers is, and always has been, a fantasy (one fondly cultivated by conservative voices both within and without the institution). In consequence, the problems faced by feminists and other radical groups within the academy map all too well onto the picture of gender politics outside those “walls,” and *vice versa*. We would like to think that we would also not deny our responsibilities in this wider domain, where an unconsidered feminism is a present and future problem. Farfetched though it may appear to relate the issues generated by the *Speculum* volume and conference session to these more general ones of feminist thought and praxis, we do not think it any accident that the parameters of the debate are similar both within and without medieval studies. In fact, medievalists, feminist medievalists especially, have been situating their studies in terms of a conversation between past and present for some time now, often as a means of countering the presentism of many post-medieval disciplines. The particular alterity of this period urges profound reassessments of constructions of the past. The moment that is the moment of the *Speculum* issue has indeed delivered a healthy reality check to medieval feminist illusions, yet disillusionment has its positive sides, suggesting a more mature and therefore necessarily disenchanting future for feminism.

One risk that the *Speculum* volume on gender negotiates is that of a cynical appropriation of feminism by already institutionalized, more conservative formations within the discipline. Of course, feminists have always battled such cynicism, but this cynicism becomes more dangerous when it is incorporated into our own feminist enterprises. Without reflective debate, incorporation proceeds under the guise of silence, a response, perhaps, to the fear of appearing to haggle amongst ourselves. The problem is not that feminists themselves have become cynical, rather, that they have failed to critique that cynicism and incorporation for what they are. Medieval feminists are in danger of retreating into talking to each other only, using a policy of self-maintenance, and simply pressing on in the face of an apparent indifference. Disenchantment about some of our successes, however, can be used productively to counter the forms of nostalgia performed by the *Speculum* volume and to produce critique. If disenchantment introduces an element of healthy though sobering realism into our work, so be it: it at least provides us with a new place from which to speak.

If feminist medievalists are to expand their horizons, then this must be done on a variety of fronts without fear of diluting feminism. We wish to stress the need for a conversation (not just an audience) with contemporary feminism and

feminism of other historical periods. Those who study the history of medieval women have much to contribute to contemporary feminist debate about women and the Church, women and welfare, among other social issues.<sup>2</sup> There must also be a renewal of feminist critique, and a reckoning with queer theory. One possible beginning point for such a renewal would be a conference in which feminists of different periods and theories were invited to read each others work and discuss it, not in order to project some solidarity but in order to forge a larger intellectual forum for feminism than it currently has and to deepen an historical understanding of those feminist issues that are vital to all.

One positive effect might be the recreation of a sense of community that has characterized feminist endeavor and debate. Further, such a dialogue might initiate the process by which academic feminism, including medieval feminism can find a more public voice. The vitality of feminism in the future, we think, depends upon its excursion from the university even as it strengthens its academic vigor.

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<sup>1</sup> *Speculum* 68 (April 1993). The Roundtable Discussion on the *Speculum* volume, sponsored by the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, was held at the 29th International Congress on Medieval Studies, at Kalamazoo, Michigan, in May 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Our thanks to Judith Ferster for drawing our attention to these points of connection. We also thank here the North Carolina Research Group on Medieval and Early Modern Women for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

