

consistently feminist, this does not in itself signify that I am not a scholar, rather it means that I am a feminist medievalist scholar, with all the productive contradictions that such a label implies.

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1. First appearing in *Speculum* 68 (1993): 309-331. The entire issue has been published as a book, *Studying Medieval Women*, ed. Nancy F. Partner (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy, 1993). Bennett's essay appears on pages 7-29.
2. *Ibid.*, 9.
3. *Ibid.*, 10-16.
4. It seems that the effects of the ongoing canon-revision debates have been decidedly lopsided. Graduate students are faced with ever more numerous canons, disciplines and lists (and I think this is a positive thing), but they are still expected to "master" these much more formidable (i.e. voluminous) lists in entrenched institutional ways.

THE MEDIEVALIST AND FEMINIST THEORY: PREJUDICES AND PROBLEMS



"She's supposed to be our medievalist, but all she wants to teach is theory." That comment, overheard at the MLA convention, summarizes many of the problems, real and imagined, facing the medievalist who has a serious interest in critical theory, feminist or other.

Most of the following thoughts are applicable to those who deal with theory of whatever orientation, not only with feminist theory. It is true, however, that feminists face special problems: many in our profession who are reasonably sympathetic to theory in general will still react with suspicion to feminist studies. I can find no explanation for that other than old-fashioned misogyny, but whatever the reason, the fact remains that the "medievalist/feminist/theorist" potentially has two obstacles, not one, to overcome. There are dual antipathies: toward theory (odd as it may seem in the modern profession) and toward specifically feminist theory.

Let me offer another anecdote. Several years ago, when I was interviewed at a major university, I was asked in all seriousness why it is that the revolution in theory and criticism that has transformed all other areas has left medievalists untouched. I tried to disabuse the interviewer of the notion, pointing out not only that many important theorists began as medievalists but also that every major influence, from structuralism to deconstruction to feminism to others, has profoundly marked medieval studies. He listened courteously, but I had the impression that he remained unconvinced.

The point of recounting the anecdote is to suggest that anyone entering the medieval field with an additional specialization in critical theory will encounter a variety of

received ideas about the nature of our enterprise. The assumption, apparently, is that while others are witnessing exciting explosions of critical theory, medievalists are content to contemplate philology and to rehearse yet again the historical-biographical descriptions of literary texts.

Moreover, a corollary of that assumption is shared by some medievalists and non-medievalists alike: that is the notion that we are not only different but ought to be content to be different. It is not uncommon to suppose that those who “do” theory—if it absolutely must be done at all—are or ought to be modernists. Theory and medieval literature, on the other hand, are too often considered incompatible, though for reasons that frankly escape me.

But in addition to the received ideas about this problem, there is also a real difficulty facing the student who considers combining medieval studies with critical theory (or any other additional specialization, for that matter): it is hard enough just to become a good medievalist; and far harder to combine medieval studies with any other specialization. Specifically, the medievalist must acquire a good deal of knowledge and a good many skills not necessary for most post-medieval disciplines. We must do not only many different things but also more things.

As I think of the medievalist’s “core skills,” that is, those I consider essential, I realize that my list will sound thoroughly traditional. Yet I suspect that most medievalists, of whatever critical persuasion, will agree with the majority of my suggestions, since there are some skills that are, by definition, an indispensable part of medieval studies.

- It is self-evident that the medievalist-in-training must attain a high degree of competence in reading one medieval language and at very least the ability to negotiate a couple of others. Moreover, in addition to modern languages (especially German, for students in my field), there is also the question—dare I mention it?—of Latin. As we all know, few students bring a command of Latin to their studies, and too few make a concerted and extended effort to remedy the situation.

- Furthermore, I hope that no medievalist in literary study would deny the importance of reasonable training in philological matters (History of the Language; Romance or Germanic philology, and the like).

- I would add textual criticism. It may not be essential for the medievalist to have practical editing experience, although that is useful, but it is absolutely indispensable that she or he understand the process of making a critical edition and the literary implications of that process.

- Some will take exception to other items I might add (e.g., paleography, codicology), but we will surely agree that medievalists have much to learn and much to do in addition to mastering a sizable and steadily expanding corpus of literary texts.

It just is not easy to become a medievalist, and if it is done properly, it can easily consume the energy of a full-time student for several years—and even that is only a beginning. Here then, to my mind, is the one problem, as opposed to the assumptions and the prejudices about medievalists who “do” critical theory. Can anyone expect to master several medieval and modern languages and all the rest—and still develop competence in another very complex and difficult field (critical theory) at the same time?

Curmudgeon that I am, I think it true that most young medievalists are less well

trained in the “philological arts”—though better in criticism—than they were a generation or two ago. But students of theory (and especially feminist theory) may encounter peculiar explanations for this state of affairs: any deficiencies they have (in Latin, philology, or whatever) may be attributed specifically to their interests in theory, whereas other students with similar deficiencies are likely to be criticized, but without reference to other, presumably “competing,” interests.

The only approach, if one wishes to counter these attitudes, is to develop traditional skills to a point that is beyond reproach. Even this is not a full solution, however, since the fundamental suspicion some academics hold in regard to feminist theory will not be shaken even by admirable competence in the medievalist’s craft. (The likely reaction: “She’s well trained and bright; too bad she doesn’t concentrate on what she’s trained to do.”) But we all know that feminism won’t be embraced by everyone in any case, and ultimately, we simply have to accept the fallout.

Job candidates may well face a situation in which an interviewer will assume that they cannot be serious (or “real”) medievalists because of their feminist or other theoretical orientation. But on the other hand—and so as not to end on an entirely negative note—I suggest that, on occasion, the candidate’s theoretical training and orientation may instead be a decided asset. Not too long ago, a major university advertised for someone competent in History of the French Language and critical theory. I am persuaded in fact that the number of departments that might either seek or accept that combination is growing and will continue to grow.

But it won’t happen overnight.

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A NOTE ON BECOMING A FEMINIST PHILOLOGIST



Sarah Westphal teaches medieval and contemporary literature in the Department of English at McGill University. Janine Rogers is a Ph. D. student in the Department.

Sarah writes:

Janine Rogers and I have just designed an ad hoc “methods” course for research on medieval literary manuscripts. It includes sections on such traditional subjects as paleography, textual criticism, and physical composition of the manuscript book. By “traditional” I mean “long accepted by the academy.” Yet these subjects are not widely taught in graduate literature programs. In the minds of the participants, the course is also feminist. The feminism is not in the reading assignments, but in the extra effort needed