



FEMINIST STUDIES: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN  
JOB MARKETS AND INTELLECTUAL EXCELLENCE?

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In my comments at Kalamazoo this past spring in response to the *Speculum* issue on Gender (April 1993), I focused on how feminist studies can help graduate students' coping with a difficult job market. In revising those comments for *Medieval Feminist Newsletter*, I have been influenced by a note in the Spring 1994 *Teachers for a*

*Democratic Culture* that opposes “intellectual excellence” to “job markets”-privileging, of course, the former (John K. Wilson, “Duke Bashing” 26). I was struck by this apparent binary, and I began to think about the ways that these two concepts interact. My thinking has wandered far from Wilson’s argument, but his implication that we can know “intellectual excellence” separately from its entanglement in grades, tenure reviews, and the job search disturbed me. Not that those systems are meritocracies; they are not. Yet our positions in relationship to them always affect the ways that we define “excellence.” Feminist studies, among its many other uses, helps bridge the gap some scholars perceive between academic excellence and the job market. Indeed, more than bridging this gap, feminist studies helps graduate students and their advisors *interrogate* the gap, asking, among other questions, does it exist at all?

I have always found intellectual excellence—which for me includes pursuing new ideas, thinking hard, and loving what I do—to be entwined with the search for and the carrying out of an academic job.<sup>1</sup> Yet I have also talked about the two as opposites, and I have heard this kind of opposition from my graduate student colleagues, usually in reference to potential dissertation topics. For example, must one write about Chaucer in order to be “marketable?” As those around me who chose nontraditional areas of study found that there were almost no ads in the MLA job listings in English for “Novel” or for “British *and* American Twentieth Century Literature,” or even “Women’s Literature and Feminist Theory,” I wondered if allowing graduate students to focus on those areas was the good idea it had seemed when I first received mailings from Madison. Don’t graduate programs have a responsibility at least to inform students about job prospects? But shouldn’t they also challenge students to take their fields in new directions and into new dimensions?

Like Wilson, I want graduate students to be able to study what excites them and to have every opportunity to pursue nontraditional studies. Then, I hope, those students will be able to change undergraduate curricula and make room for further innovative hires. But that scenario is hopeful, and entrenched job-search categories do stand in its way. I have a variety of ideas about how to change hiring practices and graduate programs, but for change to occur we need ideas from those who make decisions about junior hires, those who form undergraduate and graduate curricula, those who are teaching and learning in those curricula. Thus, I frame my comments about the pleasures and uses of feminist studies with a call to scholars from all positions in the field to speak out about the relationship between graduate study and the graduate student’s job search—and that study’s preparation for the teaching job that follows the successful search.

Desire both for intellectual pleasure and for success on the job market propelled me through graduate school. I found both, and feminist theory and gender/sexuality studies helped greatly. First, feminist theory and criticism is challenging and therefore fun for many graduate students. We can never overestimate the importance of pleasure in graduate study. At a time when many of us face the possibility we may have to leave the academy after graduation, graduate school must have pleasures. “Pleasure” includes the political value that many students find in feminist studies and the intellectual stimulation that this changing and difficult field provides. I was sitting with a group of my friends during a particularly bleak job-search period this past January, and one of them said she had realized that even though she may have to go on to a different career, she does not

regret any choices she has made. She loves her strongly feminist work and is glad she's been able to do it. Now, I don't regret that in the three years I spent working on *Piers Plowman* my feminist agenda was only implicit, but I do know that the chance to do feminist work has energized me and many of my colleagues, including many men. When I feel personally at odds with this profession that I am still learning, I often turn to a feminist essay—earlier I tried to take feminist classes—in order to find again in myself the commitment and joy I know I have felt in my studies.

The next reason that it is important for graduate students to study feminist theory and criticism is to help them get a job if they want to stay in the academy. Graduate students must be able to talk about teaching when they interview for jobs. More and more, we have to be ready to go out and create student interest in the Middle Ages. I had to talk in almost every interview about how I would develop that interest; my feminist studies were a big help. Many undergraduate students are interested in questions of gender politics and enjoy seeing how different times and places have constructed those politics otherwise.

And feminist studies is useful to those learning how to teach medieval literature not just because it is interesting. It offers a useful frame to think about the connections between students' concerns and the Middle Ages. Feminist criticism of medieval texts demonstrates different methods of relating the past to the present. As a graduate student, I struggled most with how to make a relationship between Langland's century and my own. For me, the excitement of medieval studies lies in the chance to rethink assumptions that my culture takes for granted—but that raises questions about what role history should play in my scholarship. Should the present enlighten the past or the past the present in my studies? I want to find ways to use contemporary feminist theory in my work, and perhaps to change that theory. How much can feminist theory aid my study of medieval literature? How much can my study of medieval literature change the way I and others engage with feminist theory?

I have always had an intuitive sense about my approach to the past, a similar approach to that which David Halperin says guides his studies of ancient Greece. In "Two Views of Greek Love," Halperin rejects the notion that the past is alien to us and he rejects the sometimes opposing idea that we are the inheritors of the past. I sometimes want to tell my students that they should care about the Middle Ages because it shapes the way we are today, but I think that answer is too easy, and I don't think that's really the assumption that underlies my work. Halperin replaces the poles of past as alien or past as bedrock with the idea that "we use our 'truths' about the Greeks to explain ourselves to ourselves," therefore "the Greeks occupy an unexplicit margin framing our own self-understanding" (70). With this quotation I have to struggle again to cross a historical divide—medieval literature doesn't play quite the same role in American academic culture as classical studies has. But in the study of English literature, the border between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance has become the border of "our culture." Looking in new ways at the Middle Ages helps us to re-draw that border and to reimagine the very concept "our culture."

Now, that's what I believe, but what does it mean in practice? How much do I need to know about the *moderni* if I am to redefine my relation to *Piers Plowman* and to the past? How much do I need to know about Irigaray or Biddu Martin? The space between

feminist theory and medieval texts is a key place to ask these questions about history, and it is the site of those questions I asked in graduate school which still remain unresolved. I have watched many students struggle to apply feminist literary theory—created in the twentieth century, often about nineteenth-century texts—to medieval texts. And this is the place where, as a student, I received the least guidance. I think it is right that my questions are unresolved. I think they are the kind of questions I should ask again and again throughout my career. But I also think that those who teach graduate students need to urge students to ask these questions and at least some publications need to analyze varying models of constructing relationships between past and present texts. To some extent, the New Philology issue of *Speculum* and a number of other works by medievalists have dealt with questions of past and present, medieval texts and contemporary theory, but I needed more models of how study of the past can change “our culture” and more explicitly feminist examples.

So, I look to gender and sexuality studies to explore the past and to change the present. One thing that seems to need changing is the relationship between graduate study and the job market. I urge readers to talk to each other and to write to *MFN* with their ideas about how “intellectual excellence” and “job markets” do currently relate to each other; about what kinds of changes need to be made regarding this relationship, if any; and about what role gender, sexuality, and other cross- or anti-disciplinary studies should play in such changes.

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1. In thinking about “intellectual excellence,” I have found that intellectual pleasure is part of my definition of “excellence.” Yet not all aspects of scholarship and teaching, “excellent” or not, are pleasurable. I also need to note that the “job market” is not the same as the job; the dichotomy I am analyzing is not identical to the traditional “research vs. teaching” dichotomy. I also question this latter opposition.

#### WORK CITED

Halperin, David M. One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love. New York: Routledge, 1990.

#### AN ENTREPRENEURIAL APPROACH TO THE JOB MARKET\*

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##### *Job-Seeking 101:*

It’s never too early to begin thinking about life after graduate school. From your very first semester, begin to view yourself as a developing professional, an engaged colleague, an informed participant in academic discourse. This involves some self-reflection and experimentation. What kind of scholar do you want to be? Do you enjoy having a voice in departmental affairs? Do you have a talent for initiating scholarly, social, or political events? Are you at ease giving papers at conferences? Are you willing to invest the time