

feminist concerns as only a liability on the job market is to forget (or, at least, I think, to underestimate) the decades of work done by medieval feminist scholars in various academic departments and on various search committees. We would be better served, I think, by taking our hope and our inspiration from their efforts. And to give up our feminist studies until we have “mastered” all the skills we need (when, after all, will that day arrive?) means our relation to the past comes at a cost to our critical acuity, exchanging the politics of our modernity for what comes to stand for a scholarly heroism. And of course, as feminist Medieval Studies has shown us, heroism itself has long been a gendered category.

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ON FEMINISM AND MEDIEVALISM:  
MUSINGS FROM A PRONE POSITION

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I don't have much opportunity for reflection in the ordinary way of things. Usually I'm too busy fulfilling other obligations to concentrate on this—arguably most important—one. So I suppose I'm grateful, in a way, for my recent enforced leisure. I've been slowly recuperating from a neck injury I suffered last summer, unable to read or use the computer for more than a few hours a day. In fact, most of my time for the last ten months has been spent lying flat on my back, staring at the ceiling, and thinking. And one of the things I've been thinking about is a set of problems that used to trouble me deeply when I was in graduate school, but which I've been too preoccupied to consider since I finished my Ph.D. and began teaching.

How can we, as feminists, justify our medievalism? Why, exactly, are we so preoccupied with medieval mystics, romances, and manuscript illumination? Does our poking around in the minutiae of medieval life and culture do anything to alleviate oppression and improve the situation of women in the modern world? Could it actually be making the situation worse, by draining energy from other activities? And finally, even if we can justify devoting our time and energy and love to the study of the Middle Ages, how should we—as feminists—be going about it?

I.

There are many sound intellectual reasons for studying the Middle Ages, but personally, I don't believe that anyone devotes her life to such a peculiar career as that of medievalist solely out of rational concerns. So let me speculate, in a ridiculously superficial manner, about the emotional underpinnings of medievalism—at least as it exists in North America in the late twentieth century. I seem to detect in myself and many of my colleagues, as well as in the more eager undergraduates in my classes (the medievalists of the future), a kind of complex nostalgia for the Middle Ages—a romantic attachment to certain aspects of medieval life combined with a fascinated horror of other aspects of that life. What lies behind this nostalgia, I suspect, is the perception (probably

absorbed in childhood) of the medieval as the exotic antithesis of the modern. The world of the Middle Ages serves as a foil for our complex and conflicted feelings about the world in which we live today. The professional medievalist (for very good reasons) generally conceals these perceptions and feelings behind a screen of sophisticated verbiage, but this does not make them any less influential in her life and work.

In pointing out that many of us came to medieval studies out of an irrational love of the Middle Ages, I am not suggesting that we should sternly cast that love aside. Nostalgia for medieval society is by no means incompatible with feminism. In fact, it can sometimes be liberating. For example, I attribute my own awakening to the fact that the structures and values of modern life are not natural and inevitable to my early ventures into medieval history. Immersion in medieval studies can also offer feminists a temporary retreat from the exhausting struggles of everyday life, enabling us to emerge refreshed and eager for renewed engagement. The danger, of course, is that the temporary retreat may also become a permanent refuge. This is what happens when medieval studies become an end in themselves, an escape from the modern, rather than a means of approaching the modern from a different perspective. It seems to me that while feminists can be medievalists, we cannot justify a career based on escapism.

## II.

What kind of medievalists should we be? How should our feminist politics shape what we do professionally? There have been several interesting discussions recently in these pages and on medfem-1 about teaching so let me concentrate here on research. Since feminism is a political movement (or a set of political movements), it seems axiomatic that feminist research should have some kind of political impact—although that term can and should be defined very broadly. Even those of us who study the alien and archaic world of the Middle Ages should be doing so as part of an effort to change our own times—whatever form that effort may take.

But can it really be said that our research—as currently conducted—is having much progressive/subversive/revolutionary effect? Most of what I write and most of what other feminist medievalists write is intended for an incredibly small audience of people who are our interest in women and gender, and who also happen to know something about Hildegard of Bingen, the *Roman de Silence* or the Gospel Book of Matilda of Tuscany. Our books and articles would be unintelligible, and frankly boring, to almost anyone else. That's the way the academic game is played, of course. It is only by writing for the tiny audience of our "peers" that we can display our talents as scholarly virtuosos, get jobs, garner grants, acquire tenure, fame and fortune in the world of late-twentieth-century academe. That's the way the game is played—and in many ways it's a very enjoyable game. It's fun writing for people who understand your references and appreciate your jokes. But it's also a dangerous game, because once you start playing it's all too easy to forget who made up the first rules and why.

We may tell ourselves that our research is advancing the frontiers of knowledge (if we are old-fashioned Enlightenment rationalists) or that it is disrupting the master narratives of Western culture (if we are post-modernists). We may tell ourselves that the world will be a better place as a result, but who are we kidding? No matter how transgressive/progressive/revolutionary our research is, it will have no political impact unless it circulates outside the charmed circle of our "peers." So long as we present our

ideas and display our knowledge primarily to other medieval feminists, all we're really doing is playing a game whose rules have been set by the universities and the professional organizations, in order to regulate the distribution of academic wealth and power, while maintaining the equilibrium of an oppressive system.

If we play the game well and have a little luck, we get to keep our jobs (or get jobs in the first place). And that is important, of course. Having an academic job gives us the status and resources to act politically in other ways: by teaching in a feminist manner, by organizing and protesting, by performing the unexpected and unacceptable in our daily lives. Best of all, it may allow us to create other kinds of work (novels? popular history? computer work? screenplays?) for a wider audience, using our specialized knowledge. This kind of work does not currently confer much status in the academy, but I believe it provides us with our greatest opportunity to further the feminist transformation of modern society and culture. Should this be where we go from here?

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## RETHINKING MEDIEVAL FRENCH GRADUATE STUDIES/ SYLLABUSES IN LIGHT OF GENDER ISSUES

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Over the past five years, new theoretical and historical perspectives on the status of gender (tied both to my own scholarly interests and to those of my graduate students) have changed in important ways how medieval French literature is taught at the University of Pennsylvania. When Jane Burns first invited me to contribute to this issue of *MFN*, I decided that I wanted to respond in a “personal” manner, i.e. that I wanted to explain in quite specific terms how my and my students’ awareness of gender issues within the context of medieval French literature has resulted in newly conceived graduate seminars. I therefore beg the indulgence of *MFN*’s readers for the specificity of what follows.

The four base texts I use for my introductory seminar are now configured in such a way as to allow gender to emerge as one of the focal points of the seminar. During the fall semester, these were *La Chanson de Roland*, Chrétien de Troyes’s *Chevalier de la Charrette*, *Aucassin et Nicolette*, and Christine de Pizan’s *Cent Ballades d’amant et de dame*. The seminar, of course, has several foci: each text is read as a “coherent” literary entity (with discussion of how the notion of literary coherence has changed over time); each text is read in its particular socio-historical context; each text is read in terms of the different “anthropology” that gives rise to it and that it embodies. In addition, the four (or more) texts are sequentially configured in a number of (hopefully) suggestive ways. With regard to gender, this can involve starting with the opposing but complementary depictions of women in “tangential” but essential roles in the *Roland* (Bramimonde and Aude), before moving to the central status of Guenièvre in the *Charrette*, first as simple object of desire, then as complex desiring subject. The *gender reversals* of Godefroy de