

- 4(1985), 361-373. [Ed. note: See also Gravdal's *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (University of Pennsylvania, 1991).]
- 9 L. D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Houghton, 1987) xxii.
- 10 Lee Patterson, "No Man His Reson Herde: Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer's Miller, and the Structure of the *Canterbury Tales*," in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530* (Berkeley, 1990), 113-155.
- 11 Stephen Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford, 1986), 52.
- 12 The rapist's trial by women in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* is an especially revolutionary statement when we consider how difficult it was to indict a man on charges of rape during the fourteenth century, and that only a hundred years before, rape had not been considered a felony. For details see Barbara Hanawalt, *Crime and Conflict in English Communities 1300-1348* (Harvard, 1979), 104-110.

## FORUM: ON COLLABORATION IN FEMINIST MEDIEVAL SCHOLARSHIP



HISTORY, LITERATURE, AND MEDIEVAL WOMEN'S MEDICINE



IN READING the discussions between historians and literary scholars in past issues of the *MFN*, and in participating in an interdisciplinary feminist study group over the past several years, I have been both fascinated and frustrated by the dynamic interactions between medieval historians and literary scholars. I have been fascinated because I feel strongly that medical literature needs to be assessed critically as constructed texts reflecting many of the same constraints and possibilities for manipulation of genre, rhetoric, and language that characterize other kinds of texts; but as of yet, I have gotten little guidance from literary scholars on how to engage in such analysis, since most work has concentrated on belletristic or devotional texts, rather than technical prose (what the Germans neatly call *Fachliteratur* or *Fachprosa*).

The texts I work with beg for a historical analysis that pays attention to the texts as *texts*. I am currently completing an edition, translation, and historical commentary of the three Latin gynecological and cosmetic treatises attributed to or called "Trotula." (These have no direct relation to the authentic *Practica* of the woman healer Trota.) The first of these, the *Trotula major*, has in its preface a claim that the author wrote the treatise because women were too ashamed to bare their ills to a male physician. Although this is not a direct statement of intended audience, it does imply that the author intended that the text be used by women.

The normal historian's response is to say "Whoopee!" (or something to that effect): here we have a text meant for women and we can use it to see how women, reacting against male interference and taking control of their own bodies, conceived of and treated their medical conditions in the Middle Ages. The problem (and it is a sobering one) is that this same theme of women's use is rehearsed again and again in medieval gynecological texts, even when we know that men were the principal readers. This repetition of the theme of shame need not invalidate the sincere intentions of any specific author or translator, but it does force us to acknowledge that the preface to the *Trotula major* and others like it are perhaps as tradition-bound as the rest of the medical descriptions and remedies that make up the body of the text.

Even if we can admit that the authors really intended their texts to be used by women (and in some instances I think we can), we are still forced to assess how serious their expectations could have been. Was there any sizable audience of women who could read texts? This, of course, opens up the can of worms of women's literacy, a topic which has yet to gain the historical attention it merits. While nuns are ritually trotted out as archetypal female literates of the Middle Ages (at least in Latin), does this readership really make sense for texts on women's diseases (many of them consequent on childbirth, which should not be a concern to nuns) and cosmetics (which should equally be of little interest within the cloister walls)? How do we assess women's "quasi-literacy," the dependence on literate texts but the inability to read them oneself? Although these issues in some sense become more simplified when the texts are translated into the vernaculars, in other respects they become more historically complex, since *men's* access to the texts has also increased with the transition to the common tongue.

Literary scholars who are interested in women as readers will already see the relevance of gynecological texts to their interests. Others may be drawn to the texts to learn about medical images of women's bodies, or perhaps the social structures of medical practice. But nobody will be able to do anything with these texts until they are critically edited. Philology seems to have become a dirty word among literary folk, but there is a pressing need for scholars with (old-fashioned?) linguistic and philological skills to attend to the many texts of *Fachliteratur* that are still sitting unknown and unstudied in manuscript rooms all over Europe.

I would like to close with a caution for literary scholars, though it is surely one that we all must heed as we venture into interdisciplinary waters and therefore lose our comfortable command of our own discipline's critical standards, methodologies and bibliographies: that is, we need to understand how large are the gaps of our historical knowledge and, consequently, how cautious we must be in drawing connections, given that so little of the available material has been published or, sadly, been published in error-ridden form. For instance, of the 16 different vernacular translations of the Trotula treatises (and there may be more that I haven't seen yet), only two have been published (the Flemish and the Irish), both of them in distressingly flawed editions that cannot be relied upon.

The best hope for filling the many lacunae in published materials and in assuring the highest standards of quality in future studies is, in my opinion, precisely the kind of interdisciplinary cooperation and dissemination of ideas to which the *MFN* is dedicated. Even within history, there are too many subfields for any individual to stay on top of more than a few bibliographic areas. Formal collaboration may not always be feasible because of logistical constraints or tenure demands, but surely we will all benefit from interdisciplinary dialogue, even in such humble forms as the sharing of bibliography and information about works-in-progress.

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## COLLABORATIVE WRITING: HISTORY AND ART HISTORY

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PAMELA SHEINGORN and I recently co-edited a book entitled *Interpreting Cultural Symbols: St. Anne in Late Medieval Society* (Georgia, 1990) and, because we enjoyed working together so much, we have embarked on another collaborative project — a two-