

REPORTS



GENDER AND MEDIEVAL STUDIES MEETING: SPACE AND THE BODY

(University of London, England, January 3d, 1991)



THE THIRD meeting of the British Gender and Medieval Studies group was held at the Romance Institute, University of London, on January 3, 1991 and was attended by over 40 medievalists, an encouraging third of whom were graduate students. Five papers were fitted into a rather tight schedule, which left less time for discussion than many participants would have liked, but the meeting was stimulating and informative. The meeting, whose theme was "Space and the Body," began with Miri Rubin (History, Pembroke College, Oxford) surveying current approaches to the body, including the work of anthropologists, social historians (and especially those looking at the history of social control), feminists and their critique of Freud, and post-structuralists. She pointed out the limitations of the anthropological approach, which treats the reading of cultural/ritualized symbols as unproblematic and fails to take account of the experience of the victim (the cat, the woman?) in ritual. She discussed the contribution of feminists (in particular Caroline Bynum) to the debate, stressing the danger of using only one type of source and of trying to identify one (instead of a variety) of female reactions and experiences relating to the body.

Roberta Gilchrist (archaeology, University of East Anglia), "Gender, space and material culture — archaeological perspectives on medieval monasticism" adopted a comparative approach to medieval male and female monastic settlement, exploring gender in relation to landscape situations, approaches to estate management, roles in economic production and consumption and the negotiation of monastic space through meanings placed on the forms, functions, and iconography of nunnery architecture. She concluded that most nunneries are closer in their characteristics to gentry houses than to monasteries for men. These findings may suggest that for medieval religious women, gender identity was more closely influenced by the social estate from which the founders and inmates of nunneries were drawn than by the monastic order and community. For further information see Roberta Gilchrist, "The spatial archaeology of gender domains: a case study of medieval English nunneries," *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 7,1 (1988) 21-8; id. "Medieval English nunneries: a research design" in *The Archaeology of Rural Monasteries* (ed. R. Gilchrist and H. Mytum), *British Archaeological Report* 203 (1989), 250-60; id. "Blessed art thou among women: the archaeology of female pity" in *Woman is a Worthy Wight* (ed. P.J.P. Goldberg), forthcoming 1991, published by Alan Sutton.

Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (English, University of Liverpool), "Body and Space: Problems in Virginité Literature," argued that the spaces materially provided and symbolically proposed for women religious and pious laywomen in Anglo-Norman England were enclosures that veiled and contained the body. In the exemplary biographies offered to the same audience, the female body is represented as exposed, stripped naked, flogged and dismembered. Her paper examined the bodies and spaces of *Ancrene Wisse* and its associated group of female virgin martyr Saints' Lives, the Katherine Group, together with the relevant Anglo-Norman texts, and considered ways of

reading the enclosure/exposure contradiction, its significance, and in what kind of historical context one should locate these texts' preoccupations. The paper continued work begun in "Saints Lives and the Female Reader," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* (forthcoming, 1991) and "The Virgin's Tale" in *The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect* (ed. Lesley Johnson and Ruth Evans), forthcoming from Routledge, London, and is part of work on a book provisionally entitled *Authorizing Virgins: the Literature of Female Celibacy in Medieval England, c. 1150-1350*.

Marion Wynne-Davies (English, University of Lancaster), "An object of desire: the problems of locating female identity in *Pearl*", discussed the ways we relate literature and history and how to explore the female experience in 14th- and 15th-century England. Drawing on Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, she argued that *Pearl* not only anticipates an oppositional voice outside the text, but incorporates within it a hidden polemic. Her paper grew out of work linking materialism and symbolism with the female subject in medieval English literature, the subject of a book she is writing.

Catherine Batt (English, QMW, London), "On the margins? Space for women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," considered the presentation of women and the antifeminist *topos* in *Sir Gawain* in the context of concerns voiced in the poem with regard to the epistemological importance of its spatial coordinates, and its structure as a piece of alliterative poetry. She argued that examination of the dialogues between Gawain and the Lady draws our attention to the consequences of ambiguity evident in both the written and the spoken word. A fuller version of this paper will appear in the *Reading Yearbook of English Studies*, a special 1992 issue on medieval narrative, under the title, "Gawain's antifeminist rant, the pentangle, and narrative space."

The next meeting of the Gender and Medieval Studies Group will be held at the University of Cardiff, Wales on January 7 and 8, 1992. Topics will include "what is a text?" and possibly witchcraft. If you would like to offer a paper or contribute to a workshop, please contact Dr. Sioned Davies, Dept. of Welsh, University of Wales, P.O. Box 910, Cardiff CF1 3XW.

It is with deep sadness that we announce the death of Kate Westoby, Department of French, Cardiff. Kate was a very active and enthusiastic member of our group who participated in the workshop in teaching at the Warwick conference and would have been an organizer of the Cardiff meeting. She will be greatly missed.

Karen Pratt, Goldsmiths' College, London (organizer of the London meeting).

NOTES AND ANNOUNCEMENTS



FUTURE ISSUES OF MFN:



MFN 12 (FALL 1991) will feature feminism and art history. Gay and lesbian issues in medieval studies will be the topic for *MFN* 13 (Spring 1992). Anyone interested in contributing should contact E. Jane Burns, Department of Romance Languages, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3170.

Please send bibliography and announcements for the Fall issue by October 15, 1991. Send book reviews and copies of books to be reviewed to Beth Robertson, Department of English, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309.