

COMMENTARY



THE FOLLOWING essay concludes a four-part informal dialogue between feminists working in medieval history and literature. If there are issues you would like to see discussed or debated in future “commentary” columns, please let us know. (Linda Lomperis has suggested a discussion of the relation between feminism and political analysis in general, inspired by the recent issue of differences 3 (1991) on “Politics, Power and Culture: Postmodernity and Feminist Political Theory.” Anyone interested?)

INTERRUPTION, RECONSTELLATION, AND LIMITATION: POSTCOLONIAL PEDAGOGIES IN TEACHING GENDER AND MEDIEVAL HISTORY



(Adapted for MFN from a presentation in a pedagogy workshop convened by Mary Beth Rose and Peggy McCracken at the Newberry Library Conference on Women and Gender in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, May 3-4, 1991.)

I would like to open this discussion of teaching gender and medieval history by problematizing the “present” in which I teach about a contested past. As a scholar and teacher I find myself inhabiting a postcolonial present, a present which interrupts the past produced by a dominant, institutionalized history, and questions its construction by and collusion with the production of colonialism and neo-colonialism over the past three centuries. Postcolonial critics have exhorted academic feminists to seek critical understanding of their own involvement in the discourses and social practices that perpetuate colonialism. Such agonistic scrutiny has brought feminism to fruitful crisis: “the moment at which you feel that your presuppositions of an enterprise are disproved by the enterprise itself.”¹ Crafting ways of writing and teaching to mark the postcolonial present can evoke powerful emotions about differences within our classrooms, our departments and our institutions. It could mean the end of deeply habituated ways in which we recognize gender and further complicate our disciplinary studies of women and gender. It means dealing with subjects and objects in new ways. New ways can be uncomfortable.

Medievalists have been slow to respond to a postcolonial critique at professional meetings. Last December the program for the Barnard conference on the Future of History in Medieval and Renaissance Studies raised my expectations that it would deal with the epistemological and institutional challenges posed by a postcolonial world. Instead, as a cure for an unnamed anxiety, the conference presented us with a medley of methodologies appropriated without careful concern for their disciplinary context. The conference enacted a kind of disciplinary hysteria rather than engaged institutional criticism.

Recent publications on the future of medieval history and feminism have also puzzled me. In a much discussed Speculum essay, Lee Patterson claims that feminism

along with Marxism ignited the present authentic historicist strain of postmodern thinking.² Feminism as defined by Patterson seemed so exclusive to me, however, as to be virtually unrecognizable. It is a feminism praised for avoiding “presentism” (which Patterson lists as structuralism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis) and a feminism unaware of postcolonial feminism. My own reading of such a feminism questions whether it can be anything other than a “pastism,” a radical containment of feminist critique and its reconstellation of historical differences.

In a recent article “Feminism and History,” my deeply respected colleague Judith Bennett also puzzled me by her reading of bell hooks, an African-American feminist.³ Bennett dismisses hooks’ work as emphasizing race rather than gender and thus unwittingly perpetuates a destructive opposition of gender and race. African-American feminists such as hooks and Hortense Spillers urge feminists to retheorize gender to account for the historical power-charged gendering of African women captive in American slavery, a process, they argue, which lies outside the symbolic of gender constructed in the academy in the 1970s and the 1980s: “It is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than in gaining the insurgent ground of the female social subject.”⁴ Postcolonialist feminism helps us to construct heterogeneous genders as they have been historically produced through racism, class structures, and heterosexism.

Perhaps a fear exists that marking a postcolonial present may be anachronistic to the study of the Middle Ages, indeed that it may do violence to its appreciation. I would like to share three stories to persuade you that we isolate ourselves from these movements in feminism and politics at our own risk.

A colleague in medieval history told me recently that her dean had asked how her medieval courses helped the college’s commitment to build a critical multicultural curriculum in the humanities. My colleague reported to me how she felt that the question threatened her personally and threatened the history she works so hard to produce and teach. Is it possible to work through such emotions and scholarly concerns and learn from them? Can medievalists respond to a changing academy? I think we can, if we start to use the tools a postcolonial feminist pedagogy can afford us.

My second story: I recently talked to a talented graduate student who is contemplating leaving her program in medieval literature to study in a later period because she considers it crucial to her research and future teaching to address race as well as gender. If we do not address postcolonial feminism in our medieval research and pedagogy, we risk losing talented and engaged graduate students.

My third story: We may be losing our faculty (and here I cite myself as part of the problem, although I do not think that my problem is limited to medieval history; rather, I see my academic crisis as part of a larger crisis in institutional history). I have to acknowledge here my own despair at the resistance of institutional history to examine its practices and my equal despair at the oppression of working with those practices. We would benefit from thinking about our attachment to the object, the past, as we engage in our archival research, teaching, and publication and from addressing the anthropological critique of the historic, institutionalized division of labor between anthropology and history in crafting an object, called the past, which served as a resource in producing colonizing and colonized subjectivities over the last three centuries.⁵

I have outlined in the broadest strokes the frame of my pedagogical problems which

are also my research problems. I would now like to share some examples of pedagogical practices I have devised in an effort to respond to and transform such problems.

My chief pedagogical method is one of interruption. I interrupt the study of the past with the present and I interrupt theoretical readings in contemporary feminism with readings of historical sources. To help explain Teresa de Lauretis' theory of "technologies of gender," which helps students to understand the multiple and heterogeneous formations and assumptions of gender in different power-charged contexts, we look at Madonna's video Express Yourself and analyze the array of gendered identities she and other characters in the video assume. The students in the class (men and women) choose the gender identity that they most identify with and then we discuss the heterogeneity of their choices. Students also catalogue gender identities that they felt were absent from the video, a maternal identity being an example. Some students choose to locate themselves in those absent gender identities for the purpose of the exercise. The video raises issues about the interplay of race and class, and we discuss the political fact that students can "play" with these choices in the classroom, whereas the video foregrounds surveillance. We then use this contemporary political and theoretical exercise to read the multiple and shifting identities constructed around gender, ethnic and social positions in Gregory of Tours History of the Frankish People. We are able to use the recognition of the fluidity of positions encountered in the Madonna video to prepare us for an analysis of how characters in the stories told by Gregory of Tours used power and resources to negotiate identities in the diaspora of northwest Europe in the sixth century. The text itself is structured by such strategies.

The interruptions of past and present through exercises in reading help the students to see that gender identities are not fixed by biology either in history or in the present. They themselves become implicated in the classroom process of constructing identities imbricated along the axes of gender, race, and class.

I also interrupt archival sources with literary sources. Students can learn how the gendered life of peasants gets constructed in manorial records at the same time as they read accounts of literary constructions of peasants in sources such as Froissart's Chronicles. I also interrupt history with contemporary political problems raised by my students. For instance, when we come to the section on rape, prostitution, and violence and the sexual economy of medieval towns, my students ask how it is possible that women have colluded against other women, an aspect of the medieval sexual economy which troubles them deeply. We can turn that question back upon ourselves and view a film such as A Dry White Season by Euzan Palcy, a black woman filmmaker, which shows how women collude against each other and in favor of racism. The film also shows how it is possible to mark whiteness, that great unmarked category.

My students also interrupt me (inspired by the bonus of extra credit) by organizing their own film festival in which they screen films which count as history for them and hold discussion periods after the screening. The students thus create their own historical intertext on their own terms, terms which are not always mine, and I relish their interruption. But why interruption?

Interruption shows how any reading, any genre, even the temporal divide of past and present is limited, partial, and recursive. In a classroom of 60-120 students I am trying to evoke in a limited way the complex methodology of interrupted reading practiced in postcolonial feminism.⁶ These readings read disjunctively and mutually to produce the

specific historical limitations of each. They point the way to the work we have to do to interrogate further our theory and practice.

Let me conclude by looking at the edge of my teaching and research. In a recent article "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching," Shoshana Felman wrote that teaching needs to take a position at the edge of itself.⁷ For me this is not some "cutting edge" much beloved by our funding agencies, but a series of multiple and heterogeneous thresholds constructed by the subject positions my students present. The stubborn resistance of some students teaches me more about the postcolonial present. Some of the amazing deconstructions of the technologies of history, race, class, and gender imagined by many of my students also show me collaborative ways of crossing thresholds. I say this not in some liberal euphoria, but in humility before a learning process which shows me other possible futures of postcolonial reproduction crafted in the classroom and extending beyond that space in unpredictable ways. My work so far with this pedagogy has encouraged me about the generative, transformative practices of interruption.



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You may write to me for syllabi for the following courses in which I practice this pedagogy: Western Civilization I; upper-level undergraduate course on Gender and Power in Pre-Industrial Europe; graduate seminar Genders, Bodies, Borders: Postmodern/Medieval.

NOTES



- 1 Readers will find the following four articles useful in exploring the theoretical and political interruptions of postcolonialism, feminism and history: Teresa de Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness," Feminist Studies, 16 (1, 1990), 115-150; Nicholas B. Dirks, "History as a Sign of the Modern," Public Culture, 2 (Spring, 1990), 25-32; Chandra Talpade Mohanday, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism (Bloomington, 1991), pp. 51-80; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, The Post-Colonial Critic: Interview, Strategies, Dialogues, edited by Sarah Harasym (Routledge, 1990). The quotations come from Spivak, p. 139; Robert Young, White Mythologies: Writing History and the West (London, 1990).
- 2 Lee Patterson, "On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies," Speculum 65 (1, 1990), 87-108.
- 3 Judith Bennett, "Feminism and History," Gender and History 1 (3, 1989), 251-272.

- 4 Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Diacritics 17 (2, 1987), 80; bell hooks, Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism (Boston, 1981); hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics (Boston, 1990).
- 5 See Dirks, note 1; Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History (New York, 1988); Johannes Fabian, Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object (New York, 1983); Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality Feminism (Bloomington, 1989).
- 6 Examples of interrupted readings include: Gayatri Chakravory Spivak, "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World," in In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (Routledge, 1987), pp. 241-268; Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohany, "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do With It?" in Feminist Studies/Critical Studies, ed. by Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington, 1986), pp. 191-212; Donna Haraway, "Reading Buchi Emecheta: Contests for Women's Experience in Women's Studies," in Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature, (Routledge, 1991), pp. 106-126.
- 7 Shoshana Felman, "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching," American Imago, 48 (1, 1991), 13-73.

THE MEDIEVAL FEMINIST ART HISTORY PROJECT



(Based on a talk delivered at the Twenty-sixth International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 1991, in a session sponsored by MFN and organized by Paula Gerson and Pamela Sheingorn.)

Art is one of the most important sources we have for understanding the roles of women in medieval culture. Yet in discussion at sessions sponsored by the Medieval Feminist Newsletter a year ago, and with some justice, questions arose as to whether there was any medieval feminist art history and if so, where was it? Paula Gerson and I organized this session as an answer to those questions.



The "first wave" of feminist art history might be said to have begun with Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" But it is symptomatic of the relationship between feminism and medieval art history that Nochlin focused on the modern period and that the earliest century covered in Eleanor Tuft's 1974 survey, Our Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists, is the sixteenth. From the very beginning, feminist art history has concentrated on the modern and contemporary scenes.

There was a flurry of feminist activity in medieval art history in the 1970s, which consisted largely of the important work of recovery: identifying and documenting female