

earlier agendas for feminist studies and for medieval studies? Might we risk becoming mainstream centrists, simply reproducing existing power hierarchies which will inevitably be resisted by other groups who perceive themselves to be marginalized?

In an early passage of *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues against the feminist mimicking of established power relationships:

Feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism. This effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms. That the tactic can operate in feminist and antifeminist contexts alike suggests that the colonizing gesture is not primarily or irreducibly masculinist. (13)

And while I don't think that Bennett and Robertson intended to imply that occupying "a more central place" (in Bennett's words) would necessarily also be a "colonizing gesture" over other groups, the danger of feminists assuming the "strategy of the oppressor" and becoming oppressors in their own right is real, albeit distant.

In contrast, it seems to me, maintaining a vocal and visible marginality offers us the opportunity to critique the center or the status quo; to engage in positive, subversive commentary—much as medieval manuscript marginalia does; and to speak what cannot be spoken by those in positions of institutional authority who have their positions to protect. A vocal and visible marginality offers feminists, medievalists, and medievalist-feminists the means of challenging from the outside existing institutional structures which may be outdated, of joining with other marginalized groups—such as African-Americanists, multiculturalists, literary theorists—to imagine and to create new ways of organizing and running institutions. This may be more desirable and more revolutionary in the long run than our occupying old positions at the center of old hierarchies.

Thus I hesitate to embrace uncritically a general move into positions of authority as desirable. Perhaps my inexperience with institutional resistance to change renders these remarks meaningless in practice. Perhaps a move toward the center of the academy by some medievalist-feminists should be one move among many. Still, the quest for authority and centrality needs to be examined with an eye to what *marginal power* may be lost and what opportunities for institutional change may be missed if we aspire to replicate, rather than to challenge, the power hierarchies within which we already work.

MEDIEVAL FEMINISTS IN THE ACADEMY: A RESPONSE FROM THE CENTER?

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The contributions to "Medieval Feminists in the Academy" by Judith M. Bennett and Elizabeth Robertson relate the question of who we are to that of our institutional prominence, now and in the future. Are we "feminist medievalists" or "medieval feminists"? Can we talk fruitfully from the margins or should we try to seize the center

(as Bennett advocates)? Implicit in these inter-related questions are issues of hierarchy that come into sharper focus when we remember that this year ushers in the formal ratification of our new Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship. At a time when we are in the process of institutionalization, it is absolutely vital that we debate our sense of ourselves, our relation to the Society, and to the Academy more generally, and profit from the tensions that this debate will inevitably generate. The formation of the Society marks an important moment in the evolving history of feminists and Medieval Studies: let us celebrate this fact while we consider how to consolidate and enhance our visibility and the value of our scholarship.

Unlike Judith M. Bennett, for whom “medieval” modifies “feminist” or “feminist” modifies “medieval,” and whose preference is slightly in favor of the latter, I have always used “medieval feminist” as a convenient abbreviation for “medievalist *and* feminist,” or vice versa. In fact, I’m just as often to be heard describing myself as an Anglo-Saxonist *and* a feminist, or vice versa, especially in circles where Anglo-Saxon studies do not have a high visibility. Nor is the question of my institutional identity—as a feminist, as a medievalist—one that I consider distinct from the rest of my life. Feminism goes well beyond the academic discourse of Medieval Studies. Even though I am fully aware of the dangers of using “we” either in the context of feminism or of Medieval Studies, it is important that we consider who we are. “We” are importantly different, and in many ways. “We” are scholars with different backgrounds, politics, histories, and professional affiliations, for example, although we could certainly benefit from hearing voices from other cultures more often than we do: Medieval Studies is strongly dominated by scholars of the Medieval period in Western Europe. Our feminisms differ as much as our scholarship, and we have much to learn from each other, both from our agreements and, equally importantly, from our disagreements. But at stake in the question of “medieval feminist” or “feminist medievalist” is an issue that goes well beyond grammatical accuracy or the familiar feminist debates about identity, and raises the more pressing problem of hierarchy. My resistance to describing myself either as a “medieval feminist” or a “feminist medievalist” deliberately challenges the privileging of either noun or modifier.

Yet there is one place from which “we” can speak, and it is as members of of the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, whose mission is “...to promote the interest and activity of scholars in feminist issues connected with the Middle Ages and Renaissance.” I find this formulation from the Society’s by-laws (*MFN* 14 [1992]: 42) an extremely helpful reminder of who we are. In this place, this context, we are feminists. What has brought us all together (and there are many of us) is our interest in, and support of, feminist issues. In this place, then, which we might call the “center” if we were to adopt Bennett’s and Robertson’s vocabulary, we affirm our connections with, and differences from, each other at the same time as affirming our connections with, and differences from, other groups of feminists, and other groups of medieval and renaissance scholars. In fact, this is one area of definition overlooked by both Bennett and Robertson. We need to develop our contacts with each other, and with scholars interested in feminist and gender issues in other fields. We should be identifying and talking to these groups, explaining our own interests, listening to theirs: while we may disagree fruitfully about whether we are students of feminism or of gender studies, this is a transdisciplinary,

multi-cultural project. In this respect, I have been delighted by the recent discussion of gay and lesbian issues in *MFN* (13 [1992]: 2-15; 14 [1992]: 12-19), as well as by the recent announcement of the new journal, *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* (*MFN* 14 [1992]: 34): these are precisely some of the kinds of connections we should continue to explore and promote. The practice of networking has served us well in the past; I suggest that it is still our most useful strategy, because it pragmatically builds alliances (both formal and informal) across groups and tempers the disturbing potential for insularity and hierarchical practices within any group or institution.

Indeed, my most serious reservation with the observations of both Bennett and Robertson lies in their hierarchical language of “margins” and “centers”. If used uncritically, such language automatically carries with it the promise of inclusion and exclusion—a promise that I’m sure was far from the minds of either scholar. Judith Bennett recommends that we “take our place at the center of Medieval Studies and hold it firmly” (21), but just where is this “center” of Medieval Studies and/or Renaissance Studies? Are we not in danger of at least co-creating that “center” simply by re-iterating our marginality, or by locating it and holding it firmly, will we not inevitably marginalize others? Feminism has taught me to distrust such politics—occupying the “center”, wherever that might be, will always empower the few while continuing to disempower the many. Given that most of us are affiliated in one way or another with institutions in different countries, whose power structures are shaped by different forces (at least at the local level), and given that our notions of the “center” of our many disciplines will inevitably differ as well, I have doubts about the viability of this tactic. The Society, I think, has the potential to offer an important counter-balance to these issues of centers and margins, precisely because it cuts across the boundaries between disciplines, institutions, and interests.

Viewing ourselves as marginalized from one center or another has helped us to understand our own powerlessness and to identify strategies with which to change it. Many of us are indeed marginalized, some of us (graduate students, for example) will doubtless feel understandably marginalized even in the pages of *MFN*. And I have no doubt that this language will continue to have its benefits, but we might use it more self-consciously. For one thing, the extent to which we can consider ourselves marginalized is changing—while job descriptions have yet to carry the term “medieval feminist” (or vice versa), scholars with such interests *are* now being hired, *and* promoted. Similarly, articles and books with a resounding focus on gender issues in our period *are* being published, even by some mainstream academic journals and presses. I don’t, however, want to be caught sounding too celebratory: it would be most useful to have a survey of the prominence *and/or* invisibility of our scholarship, our job successes and failures, our dissertations, and our publishing record, for example. But I do view such recent developments with a degree of cautious optimism.

I take the project of strengthening and promoting our interests and our scholarship just as seriously as do Judith M. Bennett and Elizabeth Robertson. Remembering, however, that some of us are already more central and others more marginal, I suggest that we challenge the process of creating *the* “center” and *the* “margins” with a series of loosely defined, shifting, and pragmatic alliances that acknowledge, and are more consonant with, our varied interests. That we have already achieved this in the pages of

MFN, as in our sessions at Kalamazoo, as indeed at many other venues, is a strong indication of the success of such strategies. Building alliances is never fuzzy feminist politics but the way forward. Indeed, I will go further and recommend that we consider carefully our aims and strategies as a Society since we, as a community, united by our feminisms as by our scholarly interests, are now taking our place in Medieval Studies: a place from which we can share and debate our ideas and goals, and examine our attitudes and commitments toward them, with others, both within and without our respective disciplines.

WOMEN AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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I have been asked to enter the discussion of the role of feminist medievalists in the academy from the perspective of religious and theological studies. It has been gratifying to reflect on the scope of our accomplishments—so much so that I have turned the question slightly away from professional issues and toward this pleasant task. My remarks are focused on the contributions of feminist interests and insights to the study and teaching of medieval Christianity in departments of religion and theological schools. I'll begin with a (very) brief narrative of selected developments, look at some significant changes produced by attention to the experience of women and by the use of gender as a category of analysis, and close with a note on professional concerns. My comments are restricted to my own field, the history of Christianity, but contributions of similar range and significance are being made, of course, by feminists in medieval Judaism and other areas.

Like our colleagues in other historical fields, feminist medievalists began by exhuming relevant “women worthies.” In some cases (Joan of Arc comes to mind, as does Heloise), these female giants were not lost so much as shrouded in layers of sexist as well as religious ideology; they have been revisited in the light of what we know now about sexual politics. In the notable and extraordinary example of Hildegard of Bingen, rediscovery was followed (happily) by translations of many of her works, and by responses that ranged all the way from the profound theological analysis of Barbara Newman (*Sister of Wisdom*, 1987) to the Hildegard T-shirt franchise.

In the 1970s, while feminists in religious studies were renewing their attention to medieval women, they were also re-reading male Christians, from Paul of Tarsus to Paul Tillich. Much of that work was undertaken by those who approached Christian history from a theological perspective—seminary and divinity school professors, whose women students were preparing for ministry in Christian churches. There was much to be done: unfortunately, there is never a shortage of hateful texts. With a sharp eye for exclusion and misogyny, and fueled by anger at what they perceived to be distortions of the Gospel by church leaders and theologians, feminists set about the deconstruction of the Fathers. (Some early examples of this genre were gathered in Rosemary Radford Ruether's influential anthology: *Religion and Sexism*, 1974.) Deconstruction was an essential step toward historical revision, but attention to women soon spread far beyond exposing the sins of their detractors. (Ruether's next anthology, edited with Eleanor McLaughlin in