

exclusion of women from institutional ecclesiastical history, has had a similarly useful effect in the world of theological education. In divinity schools as well as departments of religious studies, those who study women's religious history have to look outside the traditional canons. The habit of subsuming the history of Christianity under the rubric of "church history" no longer works, and logically must be abandoned. (Logic or no, this has not happened in very many places.)

I have left no space to speak in any detail about the professional fate of feminist medievalists, and generalization is not useful—too much depends on who and where. My closing question leads in a different direction: why is religion ignored, and religionists seldom hired, in departments of women's studies? The tendency to concentrate on literary/critical questions (usually modern, or at least post-Renaissance), or on the social sciences and American history, excludes feminist medievalists along with all other scholars of religion. And yet religion, in my (biased) opinion, lies near the heart of women's studies.

## MEDIEVAL FEMINISTS AND THE LONG TERM

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Feminists in medieval studies could not have expected it to be otherwise: to reform a corpus of scholarly work we would first have to confront those structures of thought that lay embedded so deep within our field of study that they were, like as not, in no need of expression.<sup>1</sup> Catherine MacKinnon set as her task to uncover the deep structures of the law that disadvantaged all women; our colleagues who are feminist anthropologists made it their express purpose to strip critical theory of anti-female bias. But medieval feminists confronted a distinct problem. For us, bias lay in the most enduring and perhaps the most productive of all our deep structures, that is, within what I will call the "long term." Few if any organizing ideas hold such consequence for us as the long term, for long-term considerations condition our approaches to texts, insuring our analysis against anachronism. That is, in Lucien Febvre's words, "a monograph which is no more than a portrait bust, without background or setting, is misleading. No religious thought—no thought of any kind—however pure and disinterested, is unaffected by the climate of a period. Or, if you prefer, by the hidden operation of the conditions of life that a particular period creates for all the conventions and all the manifestations that meet on its common ground—and on which it leaves the imprint of a style never seen before, and never to be seen again."<sup>2</sup> The passage of time becomes a filter, a means of assessing a period's unique style and then explaining it to our own age, with its unique style. But an approach that embraces this sense of the long term is both the chief asset and the chief challenge to our endeavors.

The idea of the long term pulls along with it some strong Victorian overtones. Somewhat over a century ago scholars discovered through archaeology and recovered texts the full compass of recorded history, and they developed an overwhelming enthusiasm for grand synthesis. Millennial thinking refocused at least some attention away from carefully crafted short term studies; in fact grand synthesis was applied at times in order to structure discrete studies into a vast tapestry of the past. The very

concern with the issue of women's status that characterized nineteenth-century investigations of medieval women's lives—which one feminist views today as an overgeneralized and itself an anachronistic inquiry<sup>3</sup>—reflects how deeply the idea of changing status as viewed over the passage of centuries figured in medievalists' thinking.

A century ago in *Patriarchal Theory* John F. McLennan spun out a chronology for primitive Europe according to which the rule of the fathers finally imposed moral order over the promiscuity occasioned by the matriarchy that preceded it.<sup>4</sup> According to McLennan, and Henry Maine, the last battles of that gigantic struggle were being played out in medieval times.<sup>5</sup> And a century of medieval scholarship presented powerful women as vestiges of that imagined former age. Evil queens and their circles constituted the rare, and disparaged, presence of women in general histories. Women holding any authority were treated as barriers to progress, while moral and theological writings by women were often attributed to male authors on the assumption that women could not by nature produce such work.

So, not surprisingly, women's low or subordinated status, generalized over centuries by modern scholars, was the very question requiring answers from feminists—and, as we know, answers seldom escape the terms of the question they set set out to answer. A lively feminist tradition countered the dominant hermeneutic with its tautologous thinking, but the feminists did not escape the Golden Age trap entirely. The Boston-born and -bred Paulina Wright Davis, writing in *The Una* during the Civil War, stated that, paradoxically, women's journey back to the Middle Ages was a journey of progress. Women had been physicians and notaries and held positions of authority then, whereas nineteenth-century women could only hope to teach the very young or do factory work.<sup>6</sup> Emily Putnam's *The Lady* (1910) documented powerful medieval women who found no equivalent in modern times.<sup>7</sup> The British historian Alice Clark saw a Golden Age for women in the medieval era that had changed for the worse by the seventeenth century, the period of her own research.<sup>8</sup> The very best of the scholarship that considered women, the work of Bertha Phillpotts on the early Germanic kindred, for example, raised the issue of status in order to establish that women's condition differed over time—in other words, that women were not ahistorical and unchanging but, over time, they varied in their social and historical roles.<sup>9</sup>

The very project of establishing women's historicity (that is, of proving that women were not the one, enduring constant in the historical continuum) meant casting the question of change over the long term. Paulina Wright Davis, Emily Putnam, and Alice Clark raised the possibility for modern women that they suffered under no inherent disability, thus raising women's sights toward recapturing roles in society lost long ago. This was an important task for feminist history and, as women's rights have been gained at a snail's pace, a challenge spread over at least three generations of feminist scholars of the Middle Ages.

Notwithstanding the high purpose of this scholarship, the feminist appropriation of the long term had inherent problems. In the very era when McLennan produced his popular *Patriarchal Theory*, Johann Jacob Bachofen expressed his own fascination with chronologies that spanned millenia during which vast transitions occurred. Bachofen merely reversed the negative value attached to early matriarchy, seeing it instead as a Golden Age with women's goodness predominant, which patriarchy later ruined.<sup>10</sup> Since

feminist medieval studies has often reflected Bachofen's scheme, we have some indication of the power of those immense Victorian programs on our discipline, a power that reaches down to our decade. Judith Bennett recently stated that "all of us collaborate in a master narrative that, in identifying our contemporary world with the change of the early modern era, perceives the Middle Ages as a sort of socio-cultural palindrome of modern life."<sup>1</sup> This inversion may lure us into the simplistic belief that women were both good and powerful then but enfeebled in modern times, an overgeneralization that distorts our investigations.

How does this feminist projection of the long term continue to affect thinking? This is an important question that we should ask today. Does it keep us from analyzing the subtleties of change, that is, the ebb and flow of change that is bound to characterize women's experience modulated by class, by rural and urban distinctions, and by the irregular pace of changes over the length and breadth of Europe? Most importantly, does it inhibit us in the investigation of the complex interplay of gender with other historical factors? I suppose the greatest damage to our work from Bachofen's grand synthesis occurs when we fall into essentialist arguments, that is, into assuming that there is a unique women's character, or outlook, or that anything produced by women is inherently good unless suborned by men. Opposite claims to moral superiority propounded by McLennan and Bachofen alert us to the fact that within any long-term projection—generally speaking, a major asset in our investigations—lies a tendency to claim the higher moral ground, hearkening back to a titanic struggle for dominance or to a Golden Age. While we need the long term to serve us in the practice of our discipline, we need to be aware that it brings with it a propensity to argue in the conditional: women "should be" accorded this right or that status based on some earlier imagined condition. Our history will be the better for avoiding that inclination.

The long term, when properly used, highlights what is unique in an era, and makes us look at change in a way that distinguishes our mental tools and conditions of life from those of the medieval women we seek to understand. All of us can profit from this use of the long term, whether historians, literary critics, students of theology, philosophy, language, or science.

<sup>1</sup> This brief essay calls on my address, "The Two Decade Transformation: Medieval Women and the Course of History," presented at Binghamton University, October 17, 1992, at the CEMERS conference, "The Roles of Women in the Middle Ages." It also owes a debt to the essays by Barbara Hanawalt, Diane Owen Hughes and Martha Howell, as well as to my own essay, in *Women in Medieval History*, ed. Susan Mosher Stuard (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*, tr. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, review of *Histoire des femmes en occident*, eds. Georges Duby, Michèle Perrot, Vol. 2, *Le Moyen Age*, ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (Paris: Plon, 1991), in *American Historical Review* 97: 4 (1992): 1193.

<sup>4</sup> John F. McLennan, *Primitive Marriage* (Edinburgh, 1867; repr. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970), and *Patriarchal Theory*, published under the editorship of his son, Donald McLennan (London: Macmillan, 1885).

<sup>5</sup> A less violent statement of the idea: Henry Maine, *Ancient Law*, 1st ed., (London: John Murray, 1861) may still be found cited by authors today.

- <sup>6</sup> Paulina Wright Davis, "Remarks at the Convention," *The Una* (September 1865): 136-37.
- <sup>7</sup> Emily Putnam, *The Lady: A Study of Certain Significant Phases of Her History* (New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1910).
- <sup>8</sup> Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1919; repr. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).
- <sup>9</sup> Bertha Phillpotts, *Kindred and Clan in the Middle Ages and After: A Study in the Sociology of the Teutonic Races* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1913).
- <sup>10</sup> Johann Jacob Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht: eine Untersuchung über die Gynaiokratie der Alter Welt*. 2nd ed. (Basel: B. Schwabe, 1897).
- <sup>11</sup> Judith Bennett, "On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies," in *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities, and Writing*, ed. David Aers (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992): 147-75.

## ON LESBIAN AND GAY/QUEER MEDIEVAL STUDIES

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A graduate student sitting next to me at an MLA panel on "Lesbian and Gay/Feminist Approaches to Middle English Texts" turned to me happily and said: "Thank God, at last it's the year of the queer for medieval studies!" As I thought about his comment, I realized that he was right. Conference papers, scholarly articles, heated e-mail discussions, classroom syllabi, a newly formed scholarly society, books in progress, have been heavily informed by Lesbian and Gay/Queer approaches to texts and culture. *MFN*'s participation in this exciting new cultural project not only marks the relationship and profound indebtedness of such approaches to a vibrant feminist scholarship but also indicates some of the directions in which Lesbian and Gay/Queer Medieval Studies is heading. While I agree wholeheartedly with the content of most of the *MFN* essays, I also think there are other issues, not raised sufficiently or explicitly enough in the comments, which must be considered carefully as we begin to shape this field. The remarks that follow should not be considered a critique but rather an addendum to and expansion of those points first enumerated in *MFN*'s Spring 1992 issue.<sup>1</sup>

One of the primary goals of medieval Lesbian and Gay/Queer Studies should not simply be to re(dis)cover the presence/absence of the male or female sodomite or homosexual—two terms frequently, and problematically, used interchangeably—in medieval culture; nor should it only be to analyze poetry inscribed within the realm of homoerotic desire. Rather, we should also turn our attention to investigating and theorizing the socio-political functions/roles/uses of sodomy as *constructed* by the *dominant* heterosexist and patriarchal medieval order, for such an investigation allows us an insight into medieval heterosexuality as well. In these texts, while same-sex sexual activity is theoretically prohibited, the representation of sodomy and the sodomite, a subaltern frequently constructed through the dominant order, serves an important ideological role: to regulate normative medieval sexual activity and (gendered) social practice. Since sodomy, especially male-male anal sex, exceeded the boundaries of proper sex and gender categories, its vilified representation and subsequent violent containment policed/constructed those very boundaries and attempted to make impossible their transgression, both imagined and real.