

Medievalism and Feminism

By Judith M. Bennett

“What is this journal *Speculum*?” the prospective graduate student asked me. “Is it some sort of radical feminist journal? I saw copies of it in Professor So-and-So’s office, and I can’t imagine that *he* would subscribe to a feminist publication. . . . So, what is *Speculum*?” To understand this question, I had to remember myself at twenty-two years of age, educated but not professionalized, more familiar with speculum as an instrument used in gynecological examinations than with *Speculum*, the premier journal for medievalists. Vaguely recalling my own puzzlement at first encountering a journal for medievalists called *Speculum*, I explained to the student the Latin derivation of the title, the importance of the journal in medieval studies, and the absolute absence of a connection between the title of the journal and anything gynecological. We chuckled a bit—in female solidarity—about the naïveté of *Speculum*’s founders (all male, we correctly assumed), who had chosen to title their journal with a name that resonated so strongly (and so misleadingly) for modern women.

But were the founders of *Speculum* really naïve, really unaware of the other meanings of their chosen title? In the months since that student and I so blithely assumed their ignorance of the gynecological speculum, I have begun to doubt it. The records of the formation of the journal in the 1920s tell us only that a few other titles were considered (e.g., *The Middle Ages* and *Mediaeval Studies*) and that E. K. Rand (who, as it turned out, became the first editor of the journal) especially advocated the choice of *Speculum* because it suggested to him “the multitudinous mirrors in which the people of the Middle Ages liked to gaze at themselves and other folk.”¹ This sounds quite innocent of any gynecological reflection. Nevertheless, it now seems possible to me that Rand and his associates knew the gynecological meaning of “speculum.”

In a rare moment for a medievalist, I have been able to conduct oral history on this point. My maternal grandfather, who in the 1920s was practicing obstetrics and gynecology in New Jersey, has assured me that the speculum was in regular use at the time, that his patients almost certainly knew the name of this instrument, and that “although most men at that time might have never seen a speculum, they probably knew of its gynecological use.”² What he remembers so clearly can be confirmed in written sources. At the time that *Speculum* received its title, the most common meaning of “speculum” was its medical meaning; the gynecological speculum was regularly used by physicians; and it

¹ E. K. Rand in *Speculum* 1 (1926), 4. Luke Wenger provided me with photocopies of documents describing the early history of the journal (as well as his own reconstruction of that history). I would like to thank him not only for these materials but also for information about the membership, officers, and annual meetings of the Medieval Academy.

² Telephone interview with Robert Abbe MacKenzie, M.D., 4 November 1991.

had even been a subject of considerable public discussion and debate.³ Perhaps Rand and his associates were peculiarly insulated from all this, but perhaps not. It seems quite possible that, rather than being ignorant of the term's gynecological usage, they were very aware of this modern meaning and happy (either consciously or unconsciously) to counter speculum-as-a-gynecological-instrument with a *Speculum* that asserted Latinity, antimodernity, and masculinity.

Whatever their intentions, the founders of *Speculum* gave their journal a title whose double entendre has grown much louder in the last few decades. Since the 1960s activists in the feminist health movement have focused even more public attention on the speculum—urging doctors to exercise more care in its use and urging women to use it on our own for self-examination.⁴ Indeed, the speculum became by the early 1970s a critical symbol of women's control of our own bodies; in 1973, for example, one feminist newsletter published a cartoon showing Wonder Woman swinging a speculum at an intimidated male physician and shouting, "With my *speculum*, I *am* strong! I *can* fight!" (at her feet lay already vanquished representatives of such groups as Planned Parenthood, the American Medical Association, the Pro-Life movement, and Zero Population Growth).⁵ More recently, Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* has become the center of intense debate among feminist theorists—about her depiction of woman as a mirrored "otherness" or "absence," about her seemingly essentialist link between women's bodies and women's voices, about the very (im)possibility of a truly free female speech.⁶ For feminists in the 1990s, then, the speculum is a powerful representation, speaking not only to women's knowledge of our own bodies but also to women's cultural and social positioning in a patriarchal world.⁷ As a result of this ongoing feminist speculation, the title

³ *A New English Dictionary*, 9/1 (Oxford, 1919), p. 560, gave as its first definition for "speculum" "A surgical instrument of various forms, used for dilating orifices of the body so as to facilitate examination or operations." It also reported that in English usage the medical meaning of "speculum" antedated its meaning as a mirror by about a half century. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1933) repeated this information without change. As this definition indicates, there are many medical uses of the term "speculum," but the gynecological speculum has been and remains the predominant use of the medical instrument. For public debates about the gynecological speculum, see especially Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge, Eng., 1980).

⁴ See, for example, Boston Women's Health Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (New York, 1971), esp. pp. 270–71. Interestingly, both sorts of speculum are used in a gynecological self-examination: a speculum to open the walls of the vagina and a mirror to reflect the images back to the subject.

⁵ See the illustration on p. 311. I would like to thank Etta Breit for bringing this cartoon to my attention. It was reproduced in Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness* (Old Westbury, N.Y., 1973).

⁶ Although published in French in 1974, this book was not widely read in the United States until its translation in 1985: Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian G. Gill (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985). In seeking to understand Irigaray and her influence on modern feminist theory, I have relied on four texts: Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History* (Cambridge, Eng., 1988); Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London, 1985); Margaret Whitford, "Rereading Irigaray," in *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan (London, 1989), pp. 106–26; Carolyn Burke, "Irigaray through the Looking Glass," *Feminist Studies* 7 (1981), 288–306.

⁷ I would like to emphasize that the speculum is not an unambivalently positive representation for feminists, for it has often been seen as an instrument of male control over women. For example,



Cartoon by C. Clement, front cover of *Sister* (July 1973), published by the Los Angeles Women's Center

Speculum can suggest—especially for the hundreds of medievalists today who are also feminists—both medievalism and feminism.

Of course, *Speculum* rarely carries this double meaning. For most medievalists *Speculum* is a modern echo of a popular medieval title, evoking reflection and perspective, not gynecology and certainly not feminism.⁸ *Speculum* resonates so narrowly for us because we have accepted a narrow perception of our field, a perception that usually treats the combination of feminist studies and medieval studies as curious or anomalous or even appalling. Medievalism and feminism: an odd and unwelcomed couple. I think this perception is wrong, for as I wish to argue in this essay, the separation of medievalism and feminism is both artificial and counterproductive. Feminist work in medieval studies is a thriving

in the late nineteenth century, Josephine Butler, campaigning against the use of the speculum in forced examinations of prostitutes by police physicians, condemned it as a form of “instrumental rape”; see Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*. For another example, its use in early-modern Germany has recently been associated with “the intrusion of early modern male practitioners into the birthing room”; see Lynne Tatlock, “Speculum Feminarum: Gendered Perspectives on Obstetrics and Gynecology in Early Modern Germany,” *Signs* 17 (1992), 725–60 (quotation from p. 757).

⁸ See especially Ritamary Bradley, “Backgrounds of the Title *Speculum* in Mediaeval Literature,” *Speculum* 29 (1954), 100–115.

enterprise with a distinguished past and a promising future. Although the medieval-studies community is often indifferent and sometimes hostile to this feminist scholarship, the blending of medievalism and feminism works to the mutual benefit of both feminist studies and medieval studies. In short, the founders of *Speculum* might have been either naive or unconcerned about the gynecological speculum of their own day, but they were prescient about the development of medieval studies. The title they chose in 1925 means even more today, speaking not only to what medieval studies has been but also to what medieval studies is becoming.

It is difficult to assess the rich, varied, and as yet, unwritten history of women in the development of medieval studies.⁹ On the one hand, women have always been active in medieval studies, and indeed, women today are more active in medieval scholarship than in most other branches of academia. As David Herlihy reported in his presidential address ten years ago, women constitute more than one-third of the members of the Medieval Academy. This is not parity, but it is much better than most other academic disciplines.¹⁰ On the other hand, although medieval studies has always accommodated women with more alacrity than other fields, the accommodation has been a restricted one. For example, women were part of the Medieval Academy from its beginning, but only a small part. Of the 33 fellows elected in 1926, only one was a woman (Nellie Neilson of Mount Holyoke). No women served on the original editorial board for *Speculum*, but one woman was included among 19 scholars on the advisory board (Cornelia Catlin Coulter of Vassar and then Mount Holyoke). The place of women in the Medieval Academy remained quite restricted for many decades: a few female fellows, a few female officers, and no female presidents until Ruth Dean in 1973–74.¹¹ Moreover, even this restricted place for women long relied on sex-segregated training and employment, especially at Bryn Mawr and Mount Holyoke, where generations of young women were inspired to take up careers in medieval studies.¹²

⁹ Although some of my comments in this section pertain also to medieval studies in Europe, I shall focus on North American relationships between medievalists, female scholars, and feminist scholarship.

¹⁰ David Herlihy, "The American Medievalist: A Social and Professional Profile," *Speculum* 58 (1983), 885. For comparison, women constituted less than 25 percent of the membership of the American Historical Association in the early 1980s (I am grateful to Noralee Frankel for providing me with this information).

¹¹ In addition to Ruth Dean, the following women have served as presidents: Eleanor Searle (1985–86), Katherine Fischer Drew (1986–87), Marcia L. Colish (1991–92). I would like to emphasize the accuracy of this list, for two women (Helen Wieruszowski and Nellie Neilson) have recently been misidentified as past presidents of the Medieval Academy. For Wieruszowski, see Susan Mosher Stuard, *Women in Medieval History and Historiography* (Philadelphia, 1987), p. 88. For Neilson, see Jacqueline Goggin, "Challenging Sexual Discrimination in the Historical Profession: Women Historians and the American Historical Association, 1890–1940," *American Historical Review* 97 (1992), 796.

¹² This sex-segregated training and employment severely limited the professional opportunities of early female medievalists. As Neilson herself complained in 1939, "Women scholars do not have access as a rule to the research professorships that are the Mecca of men scholars"; quoted in Margaret Hastings and Elisabeth G. Kimball, "Two Distinguished Medievalists—Nellie Neilson and Bertha Putnam," *Journal of British Studies* 18 (1979), 146.

To be sure, these early female medievalists were respected by their male colleagues. Eileen Power was remembered in *Speculum* as a scholar of "great distinction"; Nellie Neilson, noted for her "thorough and penetrating" work, was the first woman elected president of the American Historical Association (in 1943); Bertha Putnam was remembered as one of the earliest "feminist pioneers," with a "fine character" and "tough mind"; Hope Emily Allen was memorialized as "quick and ardent in research, bold in interpretation, meticulous in verification."¹³ Nevertheless, these early female medievalists did not and have not found a place among the founders of medieval studies. In 1950 F. N. Robinson included in his presidential address an extended discussion of the scholars who helped form medieval studies in late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century America. He mentioned not a single female scholar. More recent histories by S. Harrison Thomson, William J. Courtenay, and Norman Cantor do much the same.¹⁴ In both its development and its own history, then, medieval studies has adopted a pluralistic model: men have tolerated women in the field, but women have been kept segregated from and subordinated to the mainstream. Perhaps "separate but equal" in conceptualization; certainly "separate and unequal" in actual practice.¹⁵

Today, of course, women are more numerous and more prominent in me-

¹³ See memoirs published in *Speculum* as follows: Power, 16 (1941), 381–82; Neilson, 25 (1950), 417–18; Putnam, 35 (1960), 522–23; Allen, 36 (1961), 535. For other memoirs of early female medievalists (all either fellows or corresponding fellows of the Medieval Academy), see Belle Da Costa Greene, 32 (1957), 642–44; Lis Jacobsen, 37 (1962), 489–90; Helen Jane Waddell, 41 (1966), 600–601; Dorothy Waley Singer, 42 (1967), 593; Helen Maud Cam, 43 (1968), 572–73. See also Hastings and Kimball, "Two Distinguished Medievalists"; Susan Mosher Stuard, "A New Dimension? North American Scholars Contribute Their Perspective," in her edited volume *Women in Medieval History and Historiography*, pp. 81–99; John C. Hirsh, *Hope Emily Allen: Medieval Scholarship and Feminism* (Norman, Okla., 1988); Goggin, "Challenging Sexual Discrimination"; Maxine Berg, "The First Women Economic Historians," *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 45 (1992), 308–29.

¹⁴ F. N. Robinson, "Anniversary Reflections," *Speculum* 25 (1950), 491–501, esp. pp. 493–95. S. Harrison Thomson, "The Growth of a Discipline: Medieval Studies in America," in *Perspectives in Medieval History*, ed. Katherine Fischer Drew and Floyd Seyward Lear (Chicago, 1963), pp. 1–18. William J. Courtenay, "The Virgin and the Dynamo: The Growth of Medieval Studies in America (1870–1930)," in *Medieval Studies in North America, Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Francis G. Gentry and Christopher Kleinhenz (Kalamazoo, 1982), pp. 5–22. Thomson briefly mentions two female scholars (Neilson and Edith Rickert) in an essay that details the work of dozens of male medievalists. Courtenay does note that honors bestowed upon Neilson and Coulter by the Medieval Academy recognized women's "importance and contribution to medieval studies" (p. 19), but beyond this token recognition, he says nothing about either the nature of women's importance or the extent of their contributions to the field. Norman F. Cantor, in his *Inventing the Middle Ages* (New York, 1991), includes only one woman (Eileen Power) in his discussion, and she is treated in a section on "the dissenters, the eccentrics, the nonconformists" (quotation from p. 376).

¹⁵ I am building here on Alice Rossi's three models for talking about equality: the pluralist model, which seeks to retain differences among groups while hoping (unrealistically, in Rossi's view) for equality; the assimilation model, which seeks to eliminate inequality by erasing the differences that distinguish subordinate groups from the superordinate mainstream; and the hybrid model, which seeks to change all groups (superordinate as well as subordinate) in the search for equality. See Alice S. Rossi, "Sex Equality: The Beginnings of Ideology," *The Humanist* 29/5 (Sept.–Oct. 1969), 3–16. These models will be familiar to many readers as those used by Natalie Davis to assess the effect of the Reformation on women in her "City Women and Religious Change," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), pp. 65–96.

dieval studies. In the Medieval Academy alone many women are now active as advisers for *Speculum*, councillors, fellows, even presidents.¹⁶ Yet although women are better assimilated into medieval studies in the 1990s, *feminist scholarship* is not. No direct equation links all women to all feminist scholars, but certainly feminist scholarship is a type of work particularly associated with women and particularly important to us. As a result, as women have grown more influential in medieval studies, we have promoted feminist scholarship on the Middle Ages. What exactly defines this scholarship as *feminist*? This question is not easy to answer. On the one hand, many would define all research on women as ipso facto feminist, whether explicitly informed by feminism or not. This broad definition is particularly pertinent to medieval studies since the antipathy of some medievalists towards the study of women has created a recursive link between “the study of medieval women” and “feminist medieval studies.” In other words, since any study of medieval women is condemned by many medievalists as feminist, most scholars who undertake such projects have probably developed some feminist consciousness.¹⁷ On the other hand, this ecumenical definition poses two problems: first, all studies of women are not informed by feminism (indeed, some scholars working on medieval women would almost certainly eschew the label “feminist”); and second, some feminist scholars focus not on women but instead on such topics as gender, masculinity, and sexuality.¹⁸ In this essay I have tried to balance these competing definitions by recognizing the possibility that all work on medieval women might be feminist but focusing particularly on explicitly feminist research.

This year might mark the centennial of feminist research on the Middle Ages: in 1893, Florence Buckstaff published an article exploring the legal rights of married women in medieval England. Buckstaff explicitly eschewed any discussion of the status of women in her own time, but she did offer some feminist criticisms of contemporary circumstances (she noted, for example, that even in the liberal state of California “the sexes are not equal”). In subsequent years, other medievalists (mostly women) began investigating the history of women in the Middle Ages: Elizabeth Dixon looking at craftswomen in Paris in 1895; Lina Eckenstein investigating female monasticism in 1896; Mary Bateson discussing women in English towns in 1904; Annie Abram writing about working women in London in 1916; Eileen Power examining English nunneries in 1922.¹⁹ In

¹⁶ For modern participation of women in the Medieval Academy, see this issue of *Speculum*, which reports that two of eight associate editors are women, two of five members of the editorial board are women, and five women are among the twelve councillors.

¹⁷ This broad definition of feminist scholarship is perhaps the most common. It is the definition used not only by the editors of the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* (as reported to me by E. Jane Burns) but also by Ellen DuBois and her coauthors of *Feminist Scholarship: Kindling in the Groves of Academe* (Urbana, Ill., 1987).

¹⁸ For discussions of the difference between women’s history and feminist history, see Adrienne Rich, “Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life,” in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985* (New York, 1986), pp. 136–55, and my “Feminism and History,” *Gender and History* 1 (1989), 251–72.

¹⁹ Florence Griswold Buckstaff, “Married Women’s Property in Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman Law,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 4 (1893–94), 233–64, quotation

the 1990s feminist medievalists have greatly expanded on this early tradition. Whereas Buckstaff and other early scholars usually studied medieval women as a sideline to their work on more traditional subjects, many feminist medievalists today focus primarily on the study of women and gender. Whereas Buckstaff and her colleagues were few in number, more than 350 scholars today belong to the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship.²⁰ And whereas the study of medieval women was a relatively isolated pursuit for Buckstaff and others, feminist medieval studies today generates not only dozens of sessions at the annual international congress at Kalamazoo but also such long-term research projects as the Barnard study on "Women's Religious Life and Communities, 500–1500."²¹ Indeed, perhaps as many as one in every ten medievalists today in North America considers herself or himself to be a feminist.²²

In short, a fine tradition has given birth to a distinguished and flourishing field. Yet just as female medievalists were once appreciated but marginalized within the institutions of medieval studies, so today feminist scholarship on the Middle Ages flourishes but only within a largely indifferent and sometimes hostile community of medievalists. Antipathy of this sort is hard to prove (and I do not wish to dwell upon it), but let me support this accusation with two types of evidence: collegial and institutional.

Collegiality is, of course, vitally important to every medievalist. Like all academics we derive a great deal of our professional positioning from discussions in hallways and at conferences, from recommendations and referrals, from the help of mentors and friends. On this person-to-person level most feminist medievalists endure at least occasionally the insults and denigrations (joking or serious) of colleagues. If you doubt this, ask us. Or for just one example, listen

from p. 263; E. Dixon, "Craftswomen in the *Livre des Métiers*," *Economic Journal* 5 (1895), 209–28; Lina Eckenstein, *Women under Monasticism: Chapters on Saint-Lore and Convent Life between A.D. 500 and A.D. 1500* (Cambridge, Eng., 1896); Mary Bateson, ed., *Borough Customs*, Selden Society 18 and 21 (London, 1904 and 1906), 1:222–30, 2:c-cxv and 102–29; Annie Abram, "Women Traders in Medieval London," *Economic Journal* 26/2 (1916), 276–85; Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries* (Cambridge, Eng., 1922), and "The Position of Women," in C. G. Crump and E. F. Jacobs, eds., *The Legacy of the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1926), pp. 401–33. It is worth emphasizing that other female medievalists who did not publish on women, such as Bertha Putnam, were nevertheless deemed feminists by their contemporaries. See her memoir in *Speculum* as cited above, n. 13.

²⁰ Subscriptions to the publication of this society, the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter*, can be secured by writing to Regina Psaki, Department of Romance Languages, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403 (\$15 for a two-year subscription in the U.S., \$12 for students).

²¹ For example, the call for papers for the Twenty-Seventh International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo included some three dozen sessions of special interest to feminist scholars. For further information about the Barnard project, see Mary M. McLaughlin, "Looking for Medieval Women: An Interim Report on the Project 'Women's Religious Life and Communities, A.D. 500–1500,'" *Medieval Prosopography* 8 (1987), 61–91, and her "Creating and Recreating Communities of Women: The Case of Corpus Domini, Ferrara, 1406–1452," *Signs* 14 (1989), 293–320.

²² I have derived this estimate by comparing the membership of the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship (about 350 members in 1990) to enrollments in the Medieval Academy (3,748 members in 1990). I would like to thank E. Jane Burns and Luke Wenger for providing me with information about those two societies. Of course, membership in the two organizations does not always overlap, but I think that the numbers nevertheless suggest that a significant minority of medievalists are also self-identified feminists.

to the testimony of graduate students who reported in 1989 that their professors derisively told them that “[f]eminism has no place in medieval studies” and urged them to avoid classes offered by a colleague whom they described as a “crazy medieval feminist woman.”²³

On an institutional level this sort of marginalization and even disparagement of feminist medieval studies is easier to trace. First, consider scholarly journals. In the twenty years from 1971 to 1990 *Speculum* published less than one article per year on a topic even remotely connected to women. The publishing records of *Mediaeval Studies* and *Medium Aevum* are even less satisfactory, with about one such article every two years. In this regard, we are doing much worse than our colleagues in other disciplines. *PMLA (Publications of the Modern Language Association)* has averaged three to four articles per year on topics related to women and feminism; the *American Historical Review* has published about three every two years.²⁴ Second, consider how the specialties of medievalists are described. In the 1990–91 *Directory of History Departments*, nearly 50 medievalists are listed among the top faculties in North America. These listings describe many medievalists as interested in political or constitutional or economic or intellectual history, but only one suggests a specialty in the history of medieval women. In contrast, the *Directory* abounds with historians in other fields—particularly the United States, but also modern Europe and the Third World—identified by a specialty in women’s history.²⁵ Third, consider employment. Be-

²³ *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 8 (1989), 5. Since I am quoting here from a “Report from Chapel Hill” by Merrimon Crawford and Alison Smith, I would like to note two things. First, I do not believe that problems such as these are unique to my own campus (and indeed, I am proud that feminist medievalists at UNC-CH are at the forefront of those willing to articulate these problems). Second, I am not, in fact, the “crazy medieval feminist woman” whom these students were encouraged to avoid. In short, I cite this report as symptomatic of a general trend, not as a specific event in my own life.

²⁴ The best medieval journal I found for the publication of feminist scholarship is the *Journal of Medieval History*, a relatively new journal (begun in 1975) which has published about two such articles every year. Of course, every editor can only accept what has been submitted, and it is possible that *Speculum* and other medieval journals have suffered from the perception of feminist medievalists that our articles will not be treated fairly by these journals. Yet editors, of course, can alter these perceptions—by including feminist scholars among editors and advisers, by soliciting more articles by feminist scholars, and by publishing special issues of interest to feminists (as *Speculum* is doing in this instance). Every editor has had to use strategies such as these to encourage publication by feminist scholars. My survey suggests that editors of medieval journals have accomplished this incorporation much less effectively than editors of journals in other disciplines.

²⁵ I examined the faculty of twenty-one departments, including all universities that reported graduate-level training in medieval studies to George Hardin Brown and Phyllis Rugg Brown in their survey “Medieval Studies Programs in North America,” in *Medieval Studies in North America*, ed. Gentry and Kleinhenz, pp. 57–80. The following universities were considered in my survey: Boston College; Brown University; Catholic University; Cornell University; Columbia University; University of Connecticut; Duke University; University of California, Berkeley; University of California, Los Angeles; University of California, Santa Barbara; Harvard University; University of Michigan; Université de Montréal; Princeton University; University of Notre Dame; University of Pennsylvania; Stanford University; University of Toronto; Western Michigan University; University of Wisconsin, Madison; and Yale University. Monica Green, an assistant professor at Duke, identified her interests as “medieval, medicine, women.” See *Directory of History Departments and Organizations in the United States and Canada, 1990–91*, ed. John Barnett (Washington, D.C., 1990), p. 132. It is interesting to

tween 1989 and 1991, students completing their doctorates in medieval history have pursued almost three dozen employment opportunities. In advertisements for these positions, many preferences were stated (e.g., expertise in textual editing, historiography, English history), but only one position gave a special edge to candidates interested in the history of medieval women. At the same time, literally dozens upon dozens of advertisements were running for specialists in the history of women in the United States or modern Europe or the Third World.²⁶

For these institutional indices of the state of feminist research in medieval studies, I have relied particularly on information about medieval studies within my own discipline of history, but nothing suggests that medieval history is any worse in its treatment of feminist scholarship than medieval literature or medieval art history or any other branch of medieval studies. As medievalists, all of us share a curious state: our field has an exceptionally distinguished record of accommodating women, but it also is now (un)distinguished from other scholarly fields in its failure to incorporate the new feminist scholarship of the last few decades. How have we reached this impasse?

At least part of the answer lies, I believe, in our own history, for our distinguished past has shaped our less distinguished present. The key can be found in the old model of pluralist marginalization of female medievalists. As we have seen, long before other fields opened to women, medieval studies welcomed female scholars but accommodated us marginally: women were in the field but kept separate from and unequal to men. This tradition has, it seems, shaped the ways in which medieval studies has more recently treated feminist scholarship. While other disciplines, without a strong tradition of female scholarship, have integrated both women *and* feminist scholarship into their ranks since the 1970s, medieval studies has lagged behind by extending to *feminist* medievalists only the marginalized acceptance that so long served for *female* medievalists. If my surmise is accurate, we have committed an understandable error, but an

note that several scholars who have published in women's history—Caroline Bynum, Sharon Farmer, and Ruth Karras—are not identified with this specialty in this edition of the *Directory*. My own identification ("European women") errs in the other direction, asserting my feminist scholarship but not my expertise in medieval studies. As with my survey of journals, these data on the specializations of medievalists are suggestive, not definitive. Attributions in the *Directory* are not carved in stone but instead derive from several sources—self-identification, to be sure, but also directives from departmental chairs or determinations of secretaries. I would argue, however, that all attributions in the *Directory* are determined in these idiosyncratic ways and that the overall comparison of medieval historians with other historians is particularly telling: in the *Directory*, medieval history stands out from other fields of history as particularly untouched by feminist scholarship.

²⁶ I extracted these data from the "Employment Information Bulletin" published in the A.H.A.'s newsletter, *Perspectives*, between May/June 1989 and May/June 1991 inclusive (vols. 27/5 through 29/5). In December 1989 Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, sought a medievalist in an advertisement that included the following exceptionally tentative statement of desired specialty: "While candidates from all fields of medieval history are strongly encouraged to apply, an interest or teaching competence in some area of women's history would, in specific circumstances, be considered an asset." I am happy to report that a historian of medieval women (Monica Sandor) was appointed to this position.

error nevertheless. For, rather than being a marginal aspect of medieval studies, feminist scholarship embodies some of the very best traditions of our field.

Best traditions? Who defines what is a “tradition” and what is “best” from it? Let us turn to *Speculum* itself as our arbitrator. In the sixty-seven years of its publishing history, *Speculum* has offered its readers a handful of special articles reflecting upon the nature, objectives, and challenges of medieval studies. In 1941, as war threatened much of the world, C. H. McIlwain spoke at the annual meeting of the Medieval Academy on the importance of “Mediaeval Institutions in the Modern World.” His comments were published in *Speculum* later that year. McIlwain, who was then nearing retirement after a distinguished career as a constitutional historian at Harvard, spoke movingly about the “cruelty and inhuman savagery” of events in Europe and tried to draw from them new insights about the “limitation of governmental authority by private right” in medieval Europe.²⁷

Under the shadow of McCarthyism a decade later, *Speculum* published two more essays on the state of medieval studies. In 1952 E. N. Johnson addressed a joint dinner session of the American Historical Association and the Medieval Academy on the subject “American Mediaevalists and Today.” Johnson, a professor at the University of Nebraska who was particularly noted for his textbooks on medieval Europe and Western civilization, spoke of his “heart-sickening despair” at attacks on academic freedom and his unhappy finding that *Speculum* in particular and medievalists in general were failing “to relate the mediaeval to the contemporary scene” (or as he sarcastically put it later, were largely “unstained by the sin of contemporaneity”).²⁸ In 1955 Barnaby C. Keeney, who would shortly thereafter be elected president of Brown University, spoke at another Medieval Academy dinner on the subject “A Dead Horse Flogged Again.” Keeney, who went on to chair the National Council of the Humanities in the late 1960s, castigated humanists in general and medievalists in particular for the aridity of our research and teaching: “Not content with boring our students, we likewise bore ourselves.”²⁹

Perhaps significantly, no similar reflections were published by *Speculum* during the turmoil of the 1960s or during the more complacent 1970s and 1980s. Then, after a thirty-five-year silence of criticism, Lee Patterson’s “On the Margin” in 1990 again challenged us to think hard about the intellectual structures and values of medieval scholarship. Patterson’s essay (the only essay in our group that did not originate in a dinner speech) pointedly questioned the interdisciplinary paradigm at the heart of medieval studies. In Patterson’s view, we have retreated into an isolated and marginalized enclave of medieval studies, a field now viewed by other scholars as “a site of pedantry and antiquarianism.”³⁰

Clearly, these essays fall within a single genre: exhortatory critiques of me-

²⁷ C. H. McIlwain, “Mediaeval Institutions in the Modern World,” *Speculum* 16 (1941), 275–83.

²⁸ E. N. Johnson, “American Mediaevalists and Today,” *Speculum* 28 (1953), 844–54.

²⁹ Barnaby C. Keeney, “A Dead Horse Flogged Again,” *Speculum* 30 (1955), 606–11.

³⁰ Lee Patterson, “On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies,” *Speculum* 65 (1990), 87–108.

dieval studies. Bewailing the state of our field, McIlwain, Johnson, Keeney, and Patterson have urged us to revise our practices in quite specific ways. What they say cannot be taken as representative of either actual practices or common values, and indeed, they seem to speak, at the same time, from both the margins and the center of medieval studies. On the one hand, their essays can be construed as the ignored mutterings of malcontents. Certainly, if all medievalists had agreed with McIlwain in 1941 and put his ideas into practice, Johnson, Keeney, and Patterson would not have had much to criticize later on. On the other hand, their essays seem to constitute a long and distinguished tradition of self-criticism within medieval studies. Since McIlwain, Johnson, Keeney, and Patterson are, after all, the only critics who have merited space in the pages of *Speculum*, the editors of our flagship journal must have determined that their ideas were particularly significant and laudable.³¹ On balance, although these essays might not represent the practices or ideals of most medievalists (past or present), they do represent a distinguished tradition within our field, a tradition expressed by eminent scholars and sanctioned by repeated publication in *Speculum*.

What, then, do these scholars have to say about feminist scholarship? In direct terms, very little. To my knowledge, none of the authors of these essays have been enthusiastic feminists, and since McIlwain, Johnson, and Keeney wrote before the 1960s, only Patterson was able to address directly the current work of feminist scholars. Yet, as I read all of these essays, they indirectly but substantively support feminist scholarship. Indeed, the qualities that McIlwain, Johnson, Keeney, and Patterson set out as the ideals of our profession are the very characteristics of feminist scholarship that offend so many medievalists today. Let me elaborate.

One of the most threatening aspects of feminist scholarship has been its assault on positivism, on the idea that any scholar can uncover the “truth” about the past. Revealing the male-centeredness of much so-called “objective” and “value-free” research, feminists have questioned the objectivity not only of past scholars but also of ourselves. We have argued that every scholar works within an inescapable framework of experience, attitudes, training, and politics, a framework that inevitably affects any final product. Given this inescapable context, “truth” is quite simply unattainable—a false god who has too often shielded prejudice and poor judgment. This rejection of the positivist ideal is not peculiar to feminism; it has a long and distinguished intellectual pedigree and a very wide-

³¹ I have excluded presidential addresses from my pool for two reasons. First, these addresses are, in a sense, “command publications.” Since the editor of *Speculum* has no choice but to publish them, the views expressed therein do not carry the same imprimatur of essays *chosen* for publication. Second, very few presidential addresses have reflected on the state of medieval studies (and none has provided the sort of sustained critique offered by McIlwain et al.). Nevertheless, insofar as past presidents have considered the subjects treated below in their addresses before the Medieval Academy, I have attempted to note their views in footnotes. Milton McC. Gatch’s recent ruminations of “The Medievalist and Cultural Literacy” (*Speculum* 66 [1991], 591-604) appeared after this essay was completed, and its focus on education per se makes it, in any case, a poor match with the broader issues considered by McIlwain, Johnson, Keeney, and Patterson. I would, however, like to call attention to Gatch’s attempt to defend women’s history (pp. 598-600).

spread contemporary presence in the postmodernist movement.³² Although perhaps more clearly apparent in works of interpretive history than in philological or antiquarian studies, the situatedness of the author is, feminists and many others argue, always present. We might aim for truth, but we must also recognize that we will inevitably fall short of our goal. Among feminist medievalists, both the questioning of previous orthodoxy and the asserting of the inevitable judgments entailed in scholarship have been relatively mild; it is perhaps most visible in studies suggesting that many of the “progressive” movements of the Middle Ages—the Carolingian renaissance and Gregorian reform are good examples—might have been much less progressive for women than for men.³³

What do our referees—the authors of *Speculum*'s select critiques of medieval scholarship—have to say about the ability of scholars to cast an “innocent eye” upon the past? McIlwain conceded the point entirely, noting that our understanding of the Middle Ages “will be affected by our temperament, our traditions, and our peculiar studies.”³⁴ Johnson agreed, stating quite clearly that “there is no final historical truth to be distilled from our documents.”³⁵ Keeney also had little hesitation on this point, arguing against the ideal of value-free scholarship in the humanities, bemoaning the “wistful imitation of the scientists by humanists,” and condemning scholarship in which “the past has sometimes been presented with a certainty which is in itself inaccurate by its very nature.”³⁶ Patterson similarly dismissed what he called the “outmoded positivism” of medieval studies, noting that “those who write history, make history.”³⁷ In short, in questioning the search for truth and asserting the situatedness of all scholars, feminists are not introducing a new heresy into the pure orthodoxy of medievalism; instead, feminists are simply putting into practice a principle that some medievalists have long accepted and other medievalists have long been urged to adopt.³⁸

³² Among historians, this matter has received much recent attention in the wake of Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988). See also a recent forum on this book published in the *American Historical Review* 96 (1991), 675–708. For literary scholars, the best recent discussions can be found in Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison, Wis., 1987), esp. chapters 2 and 3.

³³ See, for example, Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society* (Philadelphia, 1981), and Brenda Bolton, “Mulieres Sanctae,” in *Women in Medieval Society*, ed. Susan Mosher Stuard (Philadelphia, 1976), pp. 141–58. The classic study of this genre is from the Renaissance; see Joan Kelly, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” (1977), reprinted in *Women, History and Theory* (Chicago, 1984), pp. 19–50.

³⁴ McIlwain, p. 276.

³⁵ Johnson, p. 846.

³⁶ Keeney, p. 611.

³⁷ Patterson, pp. 103 and 106–7.

³⁸ I have found one possibly dissenting voice among past presidents of the Medieval Academy. In his presidential address in 1977, Paul Oskar Kristeller urged medievalists to be prepared to make sacrifices for the “search for truth” (“Medieval and Renaissance Studies: Reflections of a Scholar,” *Speculum* 52 [1977], 1–4). About a decade later, however, another president of the Medieval Academy, Eleanor Searle, noted that scholars can only approximate the truth and that “any individual scholar’s sense of configuration and of significance will depend strongly on his/her own world view” (“Possible History,” *Speculum* 61 [1986], 779–86). It is perhaps worth noting that even E. K. Rand,

Many medievalists also nurture a haughty aversion to politically inspired scholarship on the Middle Ages. Feminism is a very wide-ranging political movement, but certainly all feminist scholars bring to our work a basic political aspiration: the hope that women and men might do a better job in the future of sharing human resources and responsibilities. This is, I think, a very common aspiration. Few of my students will call themselves feminists, but almost all of them expect that female graduates will have the same opportunities as male graduates to live healthy, safe, prosperous, and satisfying lives. Most parents hope the same for our daughters as for our sons.³⁹ In any case, what medievalists most fear from politically inspired scholarship is, I think, that it will dictate a rigid interpretive scheme, what McIlwain has called a “pattern ready-made.”⁴⁰ This has certainly *not* happened. Some feminist medievalists argue that the Middle Ages were a high point for women, a time when women enjoyed more opportunities and higher status than would be the case in the modern era; others argue that little changed in women’s status from the medieval to the modern era.⁴¹ Some feminist scholars depict medieval women as active agents who, despite some obstacles, asserted considerable control over their lives and destinies; others tend to see medieval women as victims whose lives were ever circumscribed by patriarchal constraints.⁴² Some feminists blame the church for promoting misogynistic ideas about women; others praise the church for offering to nuns some measure of education, respect, and autonomy.⁴³ And some feminist scholars call Christine de Pisan a feminist; others argue that this term is anachronistic.⁴⁴ These examples

in his introductory preface to the first issue of *Speculum*, acknowledged that medieval scholarship was shaped by “shades of belief or point of view” (“Editor’s Preface,” *Speculum* 1 [1926], 4). I would like to emphasize that the rejection of positivism does not necessitate any extreme sort of relativism. At the same time that feminist scholars and others argue that there are many “possible histories” (to use Searle’s phrase), they also recognize that there are other “impossible histories.”

³⁹ I think that the difference between many feminists and nonfeminists might be less a difference of aspiration and more a difference of assessment. Feminists tend to assess the current position of women—e.g., the possibility that our daughters will have the same chances as our sons—very pessimistically. Nonfeminists tend to assess the current relation between the sexes much more positively. For example, Geoffrey Elton, a scholar who seems to be building his latter-day career by attacking feminist scholarship, has even gone so far as to claim that “Most people are prejudiced in favor of women” (see the interview published in the *National Humanities Center Newsletter* 10/3–4 [1989], 3). I would like to direct those inclined to agree with Elton to the recent United Nations report on *The World’s Women, 1970–1990: Trends and Statistics* (New York, 1991).

⁴⁰ McIlwain, p. 277.

⁴¹ For example, see discussions of this historiographical debate in terms of women’s work in my “History That Stands Still: Women’s Work in the European Past,” *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988), 269–83, and “Medieval Women, Modern Womem: Across the Great Divide,” in *Culture and History, 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. David Aers (London, 1992), pp. 147–75.

⁴² Compare, for example, the different interpretations of women religious found in Jane Schulenburg, “Heroics of Virginity: Brides of Christ and Sacrificial Mutilation,” in *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse, N.Y., 1986), pp. 29–72, and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 1987).

⁴³ The different interpretations of Schulenburg and Bynum again illustrate this point.

⁴⁴ Joan Kelly, “Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des Femmes*,” *Signs* 8 (1982), 4–28. Susan Schibanoff, “Comment on Kelly’s ‘Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des Femmes*,’” *Signs* 9

could be almost endlessly multiplied, but the point is a simple one: feminism has prompted scholars to look at the Middle Ages in new ways, but it has not dictated either what we have found or how we have described our findings.⁴⁵

Feminist politics have also not undermined the fundamental disinterestedness of medieval research. As a feminist medievalist, I respect the possibilities and limitations of my sources; I approach the dead and different people of the Middle Ages with what Ruth Roach Pierson has recently called an essential “epistemic humility”; and I would never manipulate my research findings to suit present-minded concerns.⁴⁶ Yet I am more than an antiquarian, more than a reporter of facts newly uncovered; I am also a historian, an interpreter of the facts as I find them. In its interpretive aspects, my work necessarily reflects my feminist politics, just as the interpretations of *all* historians reflect their political views. Tacitus taught that the first duty of historians was to help people remember “virtuous actions” and abhor “evil words and deeds.”⁴⁷ To accomplish this, historians must exercise judgment (what *is* virtuous? what *is* evil?), and judgments differ with, among other things, the political beliefs of judges. Perhaps Adrienne Rich has best stated the inevitability of political and moral judgments in the writing of history:

Feminist history . . . is, indeed, as the department chairmen and the deans of liberal arts suspect, political. So, of course, is the history of white men, as told by themselves, political, having to do with the retention of power.⁴⁸

(1983), 320–26. Beatrice Gottlieb, “The Problem of Feminism in the Fifteenth Century,” in *Women of the Medieval World*, ed. Julius Kirshner and Suzanne F. Wemple (Oxford, 1985), pp. 337–64. Sheila Delany, “‘Mothers to Think Back Through’: Who Are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pizan,” in *Medieval Texts & Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Ithaca, N.Y., 1987), pp. 177–200.

⁴⁵ For an introduction to some of the many varieties of feminist theory, see Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder, Colo., 1989).

⁴⁶ Ruth Roach Pierson, “Experience, Difference, Dominance and Voice in the Writing of Canadian Women’s History,” in *Writing Women’s History*, ed. Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson, and Jane Rendall (Bloomington, Ind., 1991), pp. 79–106.

⁴⁷ Tacitus, *Annals* 3.65.

⁴⁸ Rich, “Resisting Amnesia” (above, n. 18), p. 149. Rich agreed with Tacitus about the importance of recording the bad as well as the good, saying “And if we are serious about empowerment for women and about changing the very definitions of power, we need to know both the worst and the best.” I would like to emphasize that what distinguishes Marxist, progressive, and feminist scholars from other seemingly apolitical medievalists is merely that we are more explicit about our politics. If we agree with Eleanor Searle (as quoted in n. 38) that “any individual scholar’s sense of configuration and of significance will depend strongly on his/her own world view,” we must accept that *all of us* bring viewpoints with political import to our work. As Allan Pred recently put it, “Through their selection of categories and emphases even the most vehement opponents of theory-informed historical inquiry cannot avoid building their scholarship upon an implicit theory of how the world works in a given setting” (*Place, Practice and Structure: Social and Spatial Transformation in Southern Sweden: 1750–1850* [Totowa, N.J., 1986], p. 2; my thanks to Kären Wigen for bringing this book to my attention). The inevitability of the presence of both theory and politics in historical work has been underlined recently in a controversy about the English Civil War that pits John Adamson (a scholar trained by Geoffrey Elton, perhaps the most vocal advocate of the possibility of finding “truth” in the archives) against Mark Kishlansky. As Lawrence Stone has recently summarized the debate, what it “makes very clear is that Sir Geoffrey’s belief in pure and open minds, unsullied by ambition or ideology, going into the archives and emerging with the ‘truth’, bears no relation to

The politics of feminism, in short, have brought to medieval studies a present-day concern that has inspired new research and diverse interpretations; it has promoted neither doctrinaire nor biased scholarship. Of course, many medievalists would also object even to the relevance of feminist scholarship, to the "sin of contemporaneity."⁴⁹ Yet *Speculum's* commentators on the state of medieval studies would not concur. In 1941 McIlwain sought as the main purpose of his speech to establish some sort of link between the present and the past. Speaking rather tentatively and garnering support from both Aristotle and Maitland, McIlwain suggested "the possibility that events, even of today, may or should affect our interpretation of an epoch as far behind us as the Middle Ages."⁵⁰ He applied this principle to constitutional history; feminist medievalists today are doing just the same in our studies of women and men in the Middle Ages. During the McCarthy era, Johnson and Keeney spoke even more directly to the importance of present-day concerns in medieval studies. Johnson stated as a premise of his argument (a premise that, I assume, he expected most of his readers to accept readily) that "history is the interpretation of the past which a given generation needs to help meet contemporary crises."⁵¹ Keeney asserted the importance of medieval studies by arguing that "there is perhaps no other age that can be of more direct application to the problems of the present."⁵² And Patterson, our only commentator to write explicitly about feminist medievalists, praised "the sense of connectedness [between the past and the present] that lends urgency to their work."⁵³ Hence, in drawing inspiration from a critical engagement between present concerns and the past remains, feminist medievalists are working within an intellectual tradition of medieval studies that is both long and distinguished.

Because feminist scholars have sought part of our inspiration from a mass movement quite separate from the academy, our work is also sometimes dismissed as trendy and popular. Yet surely, feminist scholarship on the Middle Ages, reaching perhaps its one-hundredth anniversary this year, is scarcely trendy. As for the accusation of popularizing, listen especially to our arbitrators from the 1950s. Johnson suggested in 1953 that "some of us at least abandon for the moment our programs of esoteric research, and devote ourselves to a re-writing of mediaeval history that will help solve the major problems of today."⁵⁴ And he advised quite straightforwardly that "we shall have to write for a wide, popular, even newstand audience, and with all the adaptations however difficult or uncomfortable, such an audience will require."⁵⁵ Keeney in 1955 was even more explicit about the failings of scholars in the humanities to communicate with the general public in a meaningful way:

reality." For Stone's remarks, see the *Times Literary Supplement* (31 January 1992), p. 3 (see also subsequent issues of the *TLS* for responses to Stone's comments).

⁴⁹ Johnson, p. 844. Johnson, of course, was being sarcastic.

⁵⁰ McIlwain, p. 278.

⁵¹ Johnson, p. 846.

⁵² Keeney, p. 609.

⁵³ Patterson, p. 107.

⁵⁴ Johnson, p. 847.

⁵⁵ Johnson, p. 854.

I shall bewail their preoccupation with the obscure and curse their avoidance of things that are important and therefore interesting. I shall point with scorn to their contempt for intelligibility, for communication to lay audiences, and for their lack of interest in synthesis, and pity them for their general desiccation. I shall deplore their scholarly avoidance of judgments of value and ethics. (P. 606)

Insofar as feminist medievalists have responded to a wider audience, we have been doing just what Johnson and Keeney advised to an earlier generation; we have been making the Middle Ages more pertinent and more accessible to more people.⁵⁶

As a feminist scholar myself, it is hard for me to reconstruct fully what might offend some medievalists about feminist scholarship. Yet I hope that I have presented the major objections fairly, and I hope that I have shown that much that *prima facie* troubles many medievalists about feminist scholarship is, in fact, innocuous, beneficial, and even downright desirable. I do not mean to suggest that the authors of *Speculum's* few essays on the state of medieval studies were feminists themselves, and I do not mean to suggest that these men have spoken for all medievalists, past or present. If nothing else, the repetition of themes from the 1940s and 1950s in Patterson's essay of 1990 indicates that however much medievalists might be stimulated and provoked by these critiques, many of us have changed very little. Many medievalists still aspire to the "noble dream" of objective research; many still believe it most proper to eschew all engagement between present-day concerns and our scholarly work; many still write solely for our fellow scholars. Yet these are not the only traditions of medieval studies, not even the most eminent traditions of medieval studies. For decades, distinguished scholars have embraced other ideals, ideals that seek to engage actively with the ways in which the present impinges on our views of the past. I have traced this tradition in the critiques of McIlwain and his fellows, but it has existed in practice as well as theory—in the work, for example, of such distinguished medievalists as Eileen Power, Marc Bloch, and Rodney Hilton.⁵⁷ When we remember the arguments of McIlwain et al. and the work of

⁵⁶ In their presidential addresses, both Kristeller and Searle have spoken against this point. Kristeller argued that "the acquisition and increase of knowledge is intrinsically valuable, and it is the heart of our enterprise" (p. 3). Because Kristeller's presidential address seems to have disagreed with our commentators on two crucial issues (truth and relevance), it might be worth noting that he also urged medievalists to welcome new scholarship (among which, I hope, he would include feminist scholarship). He advised that established medievalists "should not be dogmatic about their fields and theories, but tolerant of other subjects and approaches" (p. 3). In her presidential address, Searle spoke quite explicitly against the notion that medievalists should seek wider audiences: "For myself I feel no responsibility to please the living or to entertain or to improve them. . . . I do not intend to be speaking to my contemporaries, save to my colleagues" (pp. 779 and 786).

⁵⁷ As Patterson has noted in his article, medieval literary studies also boasts a long tradition of scholars whose political commitments have enhanced their scholarship. Patterson's examples are of politically motivated "old philologists" (p. 107). Of course, the politics of some medievalists now strike us as repugnant, particularly those who supported the Nazi regime. I would argue, however, that such scholars were not wrong to engage the past and the present—they were simply (and terribly) wrong in their politics. With these exceptions aside, the politics of many past medievalists might seem, from a distance, much more tame and acceptable than the politics of feminist medievalists in the 1990s. Yet the difference is one of perspective rather than kind. I hope that someday the

Power et al., we remember a long and proud history of medievalists who have sought engagement between the past and the present. Feminist medievalists are part of this tradition.

Building upon this tradition, feminist medievalists have already substantially changed medieval studies and will change it even more in the future. Where will feminist scholarship lead medieval studies in the twenty-first century? Certainly, feminist scholarship on the Middle Ages will continue to transform medieval studies itself, helping to create a fuller and more nuanced understanding of medieval life and culture. Yet it is also my hope that we will help to direct medieval studies back to the present, back to critical engagement not only with contemporary issues and audiences but also with our nonmedievalist colleagues. Feminist medievalists have already breached the walls of the “medieval enclave” to reach out to other scholars; let us hope that those walls will entirely crumble away in coming years. In any case, feminist medievalism has two fields of play at the present and for the future: medieval studies (where feminist medievalists are enriching our empirical and interpretive possibilities) and scholarship at large (where feminist medievalists are reawakening a general interest in the Middle Ages).

Within medieval studies itself, there can be no question that research undertaken by feminist scholars has added in substantial ways to our corpus of information about the Middle Ages. Consider, for just one example, the history of medieval monasticism in England. In the 1940s and 1950s David Knowles almost entirely ignored nuns in his three-volume study of English monasticism, claiming in his defense that he could not study women because there was simply no information extant on female monasticism:

In truth, intimate or detailed records of the nunneries are almost entirely wanting over the whole period between *c.* 1200 and the Dissolution. . . . The religious historian of medieval England cannot help remarking, in every century after the eleventh, upon the absence from the scene of any saintly or commanding figure of a woman.⁵⁸

Knowles was wrong, and he should have known he was wrong. More than twenty years before he offered his excuse, Eileen Power had already proven it quite fallacious, using extensive documentation to produce her *Medieval English Nunneries*. And in more recent years, scholars such as Janet Burton, Sharon Elkins,

advocacy of equal opportunity for women will seem as ordinary and admirable as today seem to be the views of those who opposed Nazism or objected to McCarthyism or supported civil rights. Feminist scholars practice an inclusive politics addressed to the common interests of both women and men.

⁵⁸ David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England, 2: The End of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Eng., 1955), p. viii. Let me add two caveats. First, Knowles did concede that it might be possible “after a long course of research” to reconstruct the economic and social histories of nunneries, but not their spiritual circumstances. We must note, however, not only the effort Knowles expended on the economic and social histories of *male* religious houses but also the spiritual information about female religious that the authors cited below have uncovered. Second, Eileen Power would probably have agreed with Knowles about the absence of saintly women in late-medieval England. Still, it is very telling that Knowles never listed Power’s *Medieval English Nunneries* in any of the extensive bibliographies that accompanied his three-volume study.

Marilyn Oliva, and Sally Thompson have also found in the archives what Knowles dismissed as unfindable—extensive evidence about the institutions, lives, and religious experiences of medieval English nuns.⁵⁹

What happened in this specific instance has been duplicated in dozens of different areas of medieval studies; information about women that scholars once proclaimed simply irretrievable has been sought out, recovered, and reported by feminist scholars. In the discipline of history, this process has produced what is often now called “herstory,” a collection of new information about women that has validated the claim that women are legitimate subjects of historical inquiry. In literary and artistic studies this process has expanded the canon, by editing, anthologizing, translating, and bringing to critical notice the creative works of medieval women.⁶⁰ And throughout medieval studies this process has revitalized research, as feminist medievalists have developed new methods of archival investigation, extracted new sorts of information from old sources, and searched out new documents and texts.

Of course, feminist medievalists are doing much more than simply adding to the amount of material that constitutes the empirical corpus of medieval studies; we are also challenging old interpretations and providing new ways of seeing familiar things. In history, for example, some feminist historians are questioning the very periodization of the Middle Ages (suggesting that the so-called high Middle Ages were not, in fact, a high point for women at all), and others (most notably, Caroline Bynum) are reinterpreting well-known texts about and by medieval mystics in startlingly new ways.⁶¹ In literary studies, for example, Kathryn Gravdal is rereading encounters between knights and shepherdesses in French pastoral poetry (emphasizing rape where other critics have emphasized playful sex), and Helen Solterer and Sarah Westphal-Wihl are looking anew at tales about ladies’ tournaments (found in both the French and German tradi-

⁵⁹ Janet Burton, *The Yorkshire Nunneries in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, Borthwick Paper no. 56 (York, 1979); Sharon K. Elkins, *Holy Women of Twelfth-Century England* (Chapel Hill, 1988); Marilyn Oliva, “The Convent and the Community in the Diocese of Norwich from 1350 to 1540,” Ph.D. dissertation, Fordham University, 1991; and Sally Thompson, *Women Religious: The Founding of English Nunneries after the Norman Conquest* (Oxford, 1991).

⁶⁰ Although there is some risk of winnowing an extensive effort into just a few texts, I would like to call readers’ attention particularly to the following studies of medieval women writers: Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Eng., 1984), and Katharina M. Wilson, ed., *Medieval Women Writers* (Athens, Ga., 1984). One of the most interesting recent developments in the study of medieval literature is the attempt to claim female authorship for some anonymous texts; see Janet Nelson, “Gender and Genre in Women Historians of the Early Middle Ages,” in *L’historiographie médiévale en Europe*, ed. Jean-Philippe Genet (Paris, 1991), pp. 149–63. For the study of women in medieval art, see Lila Yawn-Bonghi, “Medieval Women Artists and Modern Historians,” *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 12 (1991), 10–19.

⁶¹ An early reassessment of the periodization of the Middle Ages can be found in Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple, “The Power of Women through the Family in Medieval Europe, 500–1100,” *Feminist Studies* 1 (1973), 126–41. For more recent statements, see Susan Stuard, “The Dominion of Gender: Women’s Fortunes in the High Middle Ages,” in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Stuard, 2nd ed. (New York, 1987), pp. 153–74; and David Herlihy, *Opera Muliebria: Women and Work in Medieval Europe* (New York, 1990). For Bynum’s work on female mysticism, see especially her *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

tions), showing how these tales betray a delicate gender balancing of conformity and nonconformity, restriction and possibility.⁶²

In some respects this feminist reinterpretation of medieval studies is quite properly reactive, seeking to revise or reinterpret traditional questions and texts. Yet in other respects this process is also creating new interpretive agendas, independent of the traditional problems and discussions of medieval studies. Hence, Bynum has not just reread well-known mystical texts in new ways; she has also created a new series of questions—about female and feminine religiosity—that demand scholarly examination. Many of these new subjects derive not from the traditional research programs of medievalism, but instead from the research programs of feminism. E. Jane Burns in her new study *Bodytalk* has tackled the critical feminist problem of women's speech by using medieval literature; Susan Mosher Stuard has taken new feminist ideas about gender into medieval scholarship, arguing that the twelfth and thirteenth centuries brought a new notion of difference between men and women to Europeans; in my own work on alewives, I have tried to give feminist concerns about misogyny a historical base, by tracing how misogynistic ideas might have had very real effects on women's work.⁶³ In dealing with issues such as these, feminist medievalists are still working within medieval studies, to be sure, but we are working to create an entirely new set of scholarly questions, methods, and discussions. We are also enriching medieval studies with theories, insights, and questions drawn from feminist studies.

Feminists, then, are revising the field of medieval studies from three directions: adding new information, answering old questions in new ways, and creating entirely new research agendas. We have helped to introduce the "linguistic turn" to medieval studies, and we are taking *all* of the Middle Ages (men as well as women, masculinity as well as femininity) under our view.⁶⁴ Medieval studies will never be the same. At the same time that all of these revisions of medieval studies have been going on, feminist medievalists have also enjoyed some modest success on our second field of play—in our attempts to awaken an interest among feminist scholars generally in the Middle Ages. As every medievalist knows, this playing field has not been level and never will be; in a modern world, scholarship on the Middle Ages will always be somewhat pe-

⁶² Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia, 1991), and "Chrétien de Troyes, Gratian, and the Medieval Romance of Sexual Violence," *Signs* 17 (1992), 558–85. Sarah Westphal-Wihl, "The Ladies' Tournament: Marriage, Sex and Honor in Thirteenth-Century Germany," *Signs* 14 (1989), 371–98. Helen Solterer, "Figures of Female Militancy in Medieval France," *Signs* 16 (1991), 522–49.

⁶³ E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia, 1993); Susan Stuard, "The Dominion of Gender"; Judith M. Bennett, "Misogyny, Popular Culture, and Women's Work," *History Workshop Journal* 31 (1991), 166–88.

⁶⁴ For examples of the linguistic turn, see Nancy F. Partner, "Making Up Lost Time: Writing on the Writing of History," *Speculum* 61 (1986), 90–117, and Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 65 (1990), 59–86. Both of these articles also illustrate my second point about the breadth of feminist scholarship on the Middle Ages, for they are *by* feminist medievalists but not *about* medieval women. Another example is the conference held at Fordham University in March 1990 on "Gender and Society II: Men in the Middle Ages."

ripheral. Yet for feminist medievalists the challenge presented by the marginality of medieval studies is even more acute. Women's studies faculties are especially dominated by scholars working on contemporary concerns, and although historical perspectives have a distinguished place in women's studies, it is a place that has focused mostly on the modern era and especially on the United States. Given both the political impetus of feminist scholarship and its American locus, this modern tilt is scarcely surprising, but it does pose a challenge for feminist medievalists. We have had to find a larger scholarly audience for our work among feminist scholars mostly interested in investigating the present (or the quite recent past) and mostly inclined to consider research on the Middle Ages to be a frivolous and irrelevant indulgence.

Despite these obstacles, feminist medievalists have made strong preliminary steps towards creating a wider audience for medieval research. Four years before *Speculum* became, with this issue, the first major medieval journal to publish a special issue on women, *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* devoted an entire issue to medieval women.⁶⁵ And long before the Medieval Academy was offering any (or many) papers on women at its annual meetings, the Berkshire Conferences on the History of Women were regularly scheduling numerous papers on medieval women.⁶⁶ The battle is not entirely won, to be sure. After publishing three articles on medieval women in its first three volumes in the early 1970s, *Feminist Studies* has yet to publish another. And some of the the newest feminist journals have yet to publish any articles at all on medieval women.⁶⁷ Still, although feminist medievalists have a way to go, we are at least on the right track. More than most medievalists, we have broken out of the medieval enclave and found new audiences for our work.

I hope that feminist medievalists (as well as all medievalists in general) will learn from these early successes and build upon them. Some successes have been based on networking and personality; the right feminist medievalists have been at the right places at the right times.⁶⁸ But the most crucial factor seems

⁶⁵ This was an issue on "Working Together in the Middle Ages: Perspectives on Women's Communities," *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14 (1989).

⁶⁶ At most recent Berkshire Conferences (with the exception of the 1990 conference), each time slot has offered at least one session (with multiple papers) on medieval women. At most Medieval Academy meetings, medievalists have been able to hear either no papers on women (as in 1970, 1971, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1980, 1985, and 1986) or only a handful. The only exceptions have been the 1989 and 1992 meetings, at which about a dozen papers on women were presented. One of the organizers of the 1989 meeting has reported to me that there were many complaints from members of the Academy about the "excessive" attention given to medieval women at this meeting. The first session devoted entirely to women at a Medieval Academy meeting was tellingly titled "Troublemakers: Women in Medieval Society" (1981 meeting).

⁶⁷ When I surveyed *Gender and History*, *Journal of Women's History*, *NWSA Journal*, and *Differences* in December 1991, I found no articles on medieval women. To my knowledge, only one article on a medieval topic has appeared since my survey: Susan Mosher Stuard, "The Chase after Theory: Considering Medieval Women," *Gender and History* 4 (1992), 135–46.

⁶⁸ For example, Jo Ann McNamara played a critical role in promoting sessions on medieval women at early Berkshire Conferences, and the presence of three premodern specialists among the associate editors of *Signs* in the late 1980s (Elizabeth Clark, Sarah Westphal-Wihl, and me) was the main impetus behind the special issue on medieval women.

to be the willingness of feminist medievalists to read outside of medieval studies. Hence, Gravdal focused primarily on medieval texts and medievalist interpretations for her study *Ravishing Maidens*, but she also read Susan Brownmiller, Catharine MacKinnon, Sylvana Tomaselli, and Susan Estrich, not to mention Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Derrida. By reading widely in this fashion, feminist medievalists gain two advantages. First, we are able to do a better job of making our work accessible, relevant, and interesting to other scholars. Of course, it is not always possible or even desirable to write for an audience of modernists; sometimes our findings are highly technical, and sometimes our discussions are directed solely at other medievalists. But wide-ranging reading ensures that we know, whenever we want to bridge the medieval-modern gap, how simply to build the bridge—what language to use, what issues to pinpoint, what contexts within which to place our work. Second, reading of this sort also provides us with theories, materials, and practices that directly enrich our work. Judith Walkowitz has things to say about nineteenth-century prostitution that are pertinent to our understanding of medieval prostitution; Alice Kessler-Harris has ideas about modern wage rates that can enhance our understandings of wage differentials in medieval Europe; Luce Irigaray has theorized about female speech in ways that enrich our readings of medieval literature. In short, as feminist medievalists read feminist scholarship outside of medieval studies, we are able not only to communicate more effectively with nonmedievalists but also to develop new ways of interpreting medieval sources.⁶⁹

Most of us would like to have wider audiences, reason enough for feminist medievalists to cast our voices a bit farther afield. Yet there is a more compelling reason: feminist scholarship quite simply needs medieval scholarship. Feminist medievalists contribute two critical perspectives to the larger community of feminist scholars: chronological and theoretical. Feminist medievalists, working on the premodern side of the most profound divide in Western history, provide a critical counterweight to the present-mindedness of much feminist scholarship. As the editors of the *Signs* special issue on medieval women put it in 1989, “A fully multicultural feminism that lacks a history before 1750 is as impoverished as a feminism that attends to historical differences but lacks a multicultural appreciation.”⁷⁰ This chronological perspective on Western women and Western feminism—a perspective that *only* feminist medievalists can provide—is already altering feminist scholarship and theory. For example, medievalists are playing

⁶⁹ Of course, medievalists need to build bridges with classicists as well as with modernists. Indeed, we have much to learn from classicists who, in the last few years, have produced work in the history of sexuality that has generated intense and wide-ranging interest. These classicists, whose problems of documentary survival and interpretation certainly rival our own, have enriched their study of ancient sexualities by building, often brilliantly, on inspirations found in psychology, postmodernism, feminism, and cultural anthropology. See Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1989); David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (London, 1990); John Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (London, 1990); and Halperin, Winkler, and Froma Zeitlin, eds., *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton, N.J., 1990).

⁷⁰ *Signs* 14 (1989), 260.

a critical role in debates about the low working status of women *in our own times*. By documenting remarkable similarities between the working lives of medieval women and modern women, we have been able to raise a critical perspective, a perspective suggesting that neither capitalism nor industrialism can be held responsible for the low status of working women in the 1990s.⁷¹ The medieval West is not, to be sure, the *only* chronological perspective important in feminist scholarship, but it is currently a *critical* perspective (for the past of the West is exceptionally influential and exceptionally well documented). In developing chronological perspectives within feminist scholarship, therefore, feminist medievalists play an essential role within feminist studies.

The study of the Middle Ages also offers unusual possibilities for the further development of feminist theory. To date, feminist medievalists have mostly been *consumers* of feminist theory; informed by the ideas of others, we have used them to see the Middle Ages in new and different ways. I hope that in the future we will also be *producers* of feminist theory, taking from our medieval scholarship insights that can inform the research of our nonmedievalist colleagues.⁷² We might be particularly effective in further elaborating feminist theories of “difference.” In the social sciences these theories have mostly explored the very modern intersections of race, class, and gender. What better context to develop fuller theories about such differences than in a medieval society that did not replicate such modern categories as race and class but was nevertheless rife with divisions between Christian and Jew and Muslim, between peasants and townspeople and warriors, between women and men? In cultural studies, feminist theories of difference have often emphasized the instability of texts and their readers. What better context in which to explore further the theoretical implications of textual instability than by reading medieval texts that so often embody—in their anonymous authorship and audiences, in their shifting content, and in their uncertain transmission—instability?⁷³ The medieval West, in its likeness and unlikeness to the modern West, provides many singular possibilities for feminist study, possibilities that should allow feminist medievalists to contribute substantially to the further development of feminist thought.

Feminist medievalists, then, are changing medieval studies in two fundamental ways: we are enriching medieval scholarship *per se*, and we are expanding the audience for that newly enriched scholarship. In the process we have also revitalized medieval studies in general—attracting new students, stimulating new archival work, provoking new discussions. Medieval studies will never become feminist studies, and *Speculum* will probably never develop into a journal of feminist medieval scholarship, but medieval studies, as a whole, owes a large

⁷¹ Bennett, “History That Stands Still” (above, n. 41).

⁷² In “The Chase after Theory” Susan Mosher Stuard presents a more optimistic view of the theoretical work done by feminist medievalists. In her view, feminist medievalists have long generated theory through practice, because they have “invented or tried new approaches out of need” (p. 135).

⁷³ In this regard, see particularly E. Jane Burns, Sarah Kay, Roberta L. Krueger, and Helen Solterer, “Feminism and the Discipline of Old French Studies: Une Belle Disjuncture,” in *The Discipline of the Discipline*, ed. R. Howard Bloch and Stephen G. Nichols, Jr. (forthcoming from Johns Hopkins University Press).

debt to female medievalists and feminist scholarship. That debt can best be repaid not in reparations but in appreciation and emulation. We have been part of medieval studies from its nineteenth-century beginnings; we work within some of the best traditions of medieval scholarship as it has been practiced in the twentieth century; and we are pointing the way towards a medieval studies that will survive and flourish in the twenty-first century. What Nellie Neilson told the American Historical Association in her presidential address in 1943 still speaks for us today: "The roots of the present lie deep in the past, a truism we cannot today despise if we seek a solution of our own difficult problems."⁷⁴

⁷⁴ *American Historical Review* 49 (1944), 200.

I would like to thank many people who have read and commented on drafts of this essay. My colleagues in the North Carolina Research Group on Medieval and Early Modern Women offered trenchant criticism of an early draft. Stanley Chojnacki, Jan Ewald, Monica Green, Barbara Harris, Nancy Hewitt, Ruth Mazo Karras, Mavis Mate, Janet Nelson, Lee Patterson, Helen Solterer, and Susan Stuard provided me with valuable written critiques. Cynthia Herrup, Maryanne Kowaleski, Nancy Partner, and Lyndal Roper generously took the time to read and comment upon multiple drafts. I would also like to state emphatically that I cannot and do not speak for all feminist medievalists. We are a very diverse group with very diverse ideas about the present and future of feminist scholarship in medieval studies. Although I have sought ideas, suggestions, and criticisms from some of my feminist colleagues, this essay necessarily reflects *only* my thoughts and my opinions.