reading of this poem, "The Patristic Humanism of John Skelton's *Phyllyp Sparowe*" (*From Cloister to Classroom: Monastic and Scholastic Approaches to Truth*, ed. E. Rozanne Elder, Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1986, 202–38), got into print at the same time Schibanoff's essay did. I could have benefited from her astute handling of *all* the parts of this poem for I, like other modern readers, mostly men, excised parts and did not have Schibanoff's synthetic insight. Like her, however, I treat the reading activity of this poem seriously, and I'd like to think that the more historical interests of my essay might have benefited Schibanoff by pointing out ways Skelton reread and rewrote for a sixteenth-century audience particular classical and patristic *artes legendi* drawn from Plutarch, Basil, Augustine, Jerome, and Paulinus. Schibanoff alludes in her first note to Skelton's adaptation of patristic sources "about women," but she apparently did not examine those sources and discover how they were often "about" reading, writing, and poetry, too. In other words, the patristic sources Skelton used can help answer the question of intentionality that, Schibanoff says, a consultant specialist for *PMLA* raised in response to her essay.

For example, just as Skelton amplified Catullus' *passer* poems to picture the fictive schoolgirl Jane's reading experience, he refashioned Jerome's letter to Eustochium in which the male cleric exhorts the young woman to chastity of body *and* of eloquence while advising her to read constantly, to fall asleep reading. To Eustochium Jerome confesses his own love of literature and the necessity for decorum in literacy by telling her his nightmare of being accused before the judgment seat of being a Ciceronian, not a Christian. Long before feminist deconstruction, both Jerome and Skelton analogized textuality and sexuality, indicating a kind of didacticism that has been too long marginalized by critics who prefer to limit this satire to the goliardic humor of the fictive Jane's adolescence. Schibanoff's feminist reading corrects some of that marginalization by letting the analogy of the "text-body" surface, but the lack of a certain historicism in Schibanoff's approach suppresses what could have been one of her major arguments in the interpretation of Skelton's "primer."

Inadvertently, that kind of suppression leads Schibanoff to conclude with the moralisms of a deconstructionist feminist criticism that now needs to critique itself, as Nina Auerbach and others have suggested, for missing the perceptual nuances of texts and contexts. Schibanoff says that Skelton credits Jane's reading autonomy in the afterword but then undermines it by having Jane reject part of herself as she echoes male authorial motives and condemns the celebration of her own awakening female sexuality. On the contrary, both Skelton's satiric purpose and his paternalism support the positive cultural standards of a sound literary education and a blessed sexual life for a fatherless young woman at a time when sewing classes (Jane's embroidery?) and claustration were more likely the norms controlling the expression of value in femininity. Skelton's lampoon of an English girl's literary foibles and adolescent naïveté masks his satire on male clerics, including himself, on church hierarchy, and on the Benedictine nuns of Carrow Abbey who should be tutoring Jane in a Christian hermeneutic and not merely in the fashionable rhetoric of Dame Sulpicia. The didacticism of a historically Christian *ars legendi* permeates Skelton's poem and establishes his use of the primer for women readers as a statement on interpretation conducted by *all* writers and readers.

The broader intentionality of Skelton's argument for the activity of reading derives from Basil's letter "on the usefulness of secular letters," popularly known as *Ad adolescentes* and embraced by Renaissance humanists and educators as the art of reading par excellence. Behind it lies Plutarch's view of reading. We "hear" a poem better, Plutarch says, if we work to exercise our own wit, "to invent something of our owne, as well as to comprehende that whiche we heare of others," to search into the discourse "even to Morall Philosophie, and the gentle framing of the mind unto the love of vertue" (*Philosophie*, Holland trans. [1603], 63, 17–18). It is this exercise of invention that Skelton and his persona Jane alternately perform by rereading and rewriting—educative tasks undertaken for the sake of the soul, according to Basil. Similarly, *Phyllyp Sparowe* is more about "the fall of a sparrow" than about the in-phallicities of male authorial motives, for Skelton poetically designs a morally ambivalent bird, the interpretation of which reveals the characters of the readers as much as its composition does that of the writer. Classically, the sparrow represents venereal love and, patristically, the soul; in Paulinus's exegesis of Psalm 101/102, Christ is the Sparrow who dies and resurrects. Jangling jays will always interpret the ambivalence of Skelton's literary and liturgical *consolatio* in the direction of titillation or condemnation; but readers practicing a Christian hermeneutic will find in Phyllyp the comedy of earthly and heavenly pleasures reconciled through providential care for the soul worth many sparrows (Matthew 10)—in this case the "sparowe's soul" of the literate schoolgirl who builds her nest in the house of God (Psalm 83/84). "Taking Jane's Cue" is too good an analysis to have been pushed, perhaps, into consideration of intentionality not within its scope and to have lost some of its author's reading autonomy.

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Reply:

I have read with interest Mary Jane Doherty's recent article on Skelton in *From Cloister to Classroom: Monastic and Scholastic Approaches to Truth.* Although her study reaches the traditional conclusions of patristic exegetical criticism—that *Phyllyp Sparowe* presents a

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900173742 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Christian allegory of the soul, promotes *caritas* and condemns *cupiditas*, and so on—it does make innovative use of what the early church fathers thought about reading, and it helps widen our still narrow range of approaches to Skelton's poem. Doherty's letter, however, contains some particulars that do not strike me as similarly useful: for instance, her misappropriation of one feminist critic (Nina Auerbach) to scold another (me), her mischaracterization of my approach as "deconstructionist feminist," her assertion that good readers will "always" interpret Skelton's sparrow in her way and that bad readers will not, and her suggestion that I got in over my head at the end of my article, which Doherty excuses because perhaps *PMLA* "pushed" me there. Not true. I dived in all on my own, and I shall forever remain grateful to the consultant specialist because he showed me the way to the water.

But these are peccadilloes, and I would be tempted to end my reply here on a note of "no (further) comment," except that Doherty's letter raises—unintentionally no doubt—questions about my field that do trouble me and that are worth airing in this forum: why is there still so little published feminist criticism of pre-1500 literature? What are we medievalists doing—or not doing—that makes some of our best and brightest graduate (and undergraduate) students take their feminist literary interests elsewhere?

Doherty's letter suggests part of the answer to these questions. When she charges that my article lacks a "certain historicism," she echoes the common misunderstanding that feminist criticism (of early literature, in particular) is a-, un-, or even antihistorical. And to be a-, un-, or antihistorical in my field is still not to belong, is to be heretical, marginal, other. Briefly (within my thousand-word limit here) I shall try first to set straight the record on the historicity of feminist approaches and second to suggest which myths we use when we continue to misunderstand this record.

Ironically, my Skelton article is quite historical. (So, too, in its dedication to such projects as resurrecting "lost" texts and interpreting them in their contexts, is most Anglo-American feminist literary criticism.) The *Phyllyp Sparowe* piece employs the standard historical technique of source and analogue comparisons; it considers the physical appearance of early editions of Skelton's poem, the actual way laypersons read the primer, Skelton's relationships with real writers and readers, and so on. Evidently, however, my article appears anachronistic because I *also* rely on—and acknowledge—my own experience as a reader, scholar, and woman to approach this text. Neither my combination of authority and experience nor my candor is original; most modern academic Anglo-American feminist critics read a text similarly.

Important to note here, though, is that readers in the Middle Ages also employed this approach. Christine de Pisan, for instance, in the debate over the *Romance of the Rose* and her *Book of the City of Women* and *Epistle to the God of Love*, uses both her considerable erudition and what she candidly claims to be her own experience—as a reader, woman, wife, mother, and widow—to interpret (and eventually rewrite) the important texts of her day from Aristotle to Jean de Meun. (Christine is not unique; space alone prohibits ample illustration of this way of reading in the Middle Ages.) Whether or not we all wish to adopt Christine's approach to a text is not at issue here. At issue instead is our obligation to grant that the methodology of modern feminist criticism has at least as much precedent and authenticity as does, for instance, Doherty's version of patristic criticism.

Two myths in particular fuel the misapprehension that feminist criticism lacks historicity: the first is that some critical approaches are neutral and apolitical, hence universal and laudable, whereas others are biased and ideological, thus narrow and suspect; the second, that feminist approaches, because they are political and ideological, must be modern and anachronistic. Among others, Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* debunks the first myth when he reminds us that we always find the *other* critic's approach biased and political, never our own. Doherty's way of reading is as ideological as is mine, except that hers, of course, promotes the church fathers and mine, I hope, promotes our mothers.

We can only believe the second myth—that no feminist politics existed in the literary criticism of the Middle Ages—if we ignore clear evidence to the contrary. We must overlook, for instance, the fact that both Christine and Chaucer's fictional Wife of Bath argue that if women had written more stories in the Middle Ages, we would find more positive images of women in medieval literature. In short, to be a political feminist reader *is* to be historical.

Despite the case I try to make here, historicity per se no longer seems to me the single important goal of work on early literature. I argue elsewhere (*Signs* 9 [1983]: 320–26) for a sort of deliberate "misreading" of the text, akin to Nancy K. Miller's concept of "underreading/overreading" (*The Poetics of Gender*, 1986), and I now begin to think that *even* we "historical" medievalists might gain much from attention to modern French feminist theory. That, however, does not diminish my respect for and appreciation of historical criticism; it obviously does not preclude my use of historical techniques; and, most importantly, it does not change the fact that both feminist methodology and politics do have precedent in the Middle Ages. In taking Jane's cue again here, my agenda has been to try to prompt my medievalist colleagues into rethinking feminist criticism and perhaps into opening doors that I fear our students think we bar against them.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900173742 Published online by Cambridge University Press