DIOGENES

Diogenes 225: 30–45
ISSN 0392-1921

Feminism, Gender studies, and Medieval Studies

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"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 feminity) under our view. Medieval studies will never be the same." Yet "although *women* are better assimilated into medieval studies in the 1990s, *feminist scholarship* is not." (Bennett 1993: 25–26).

It has been a revealing exercise for me to reflect on feminist scholarship on the European cultures of the middle ages, as it looks fifteen years on – from the Beijing Conference on Women, and from the "feminist" issue of the journal of the Medieval Academy of America, cited above.[1] Right after 1993 it might have seemed that the whole card house of feminism had collapsed. A special issue of *Differences,* entitled "The Essential Difference" appeared in 1994; Naomi Schor brought together many of the stellar feminists of the moment to ponder the risk of essentialism, that is, of taking for granted that there is a male and a female identity: Teresa de Lauretis, Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz, Diana Fuss, Robert Scholes, Leslie Wahl Rabine and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak all contributed. The charge of being essentialist, or of succumbing to a heterosexual imperative, made some declare that feminism was over. The most prominent male pundits who dominate cultural theory by constructing its historiography, tend to take the view that feminism has been superseded by postcolonial and queer theory. Such views are expressed in succinct and readable text books. Terry Eagleton's assessment is that feminism peaked in 1970s and 80s, and the postscript he added in 2008 gives it a place in history. His predominant assessment allows it to have been a force for social change, assisting women in their struggle for equality, which means that he overlooked the theoretical realignment of feminism. With a typically Marxist suspicion of identity politics, he is not concerned with deconstructing binaries or with queer theory, although he does recognize an alliance between feminism and postcolonialism at the level of praxis. Jonathan Culler takes a similar view in his introduction to literary theory (Culler, 1997: 117–128).

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DOI: 10.1177/0392192110369441

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192110369441 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Yet although he defines one branch of feminism as involving itself in championing the rights of women, he also recognizes another that is concerned with deconstructing the m/f opposition (Culler 1997: 117–128). Even so, he does not suggest parallel development for feminist and queer theory, let alone the symbiosis that I will argue has occurred in medieval studies. It is more encouraging that in 1993, Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson still placed "Feminist Theories" at the end of their chronological guide to literary theory, after postmodernist and postcolonialist theories, and they celebrated its extension into the issues of ethnic and lesbian identities.

Outside academe, the political aims of the dominant new-right movement in the Bush era (father and son) bombarded feminists with negative propaganda: We are complainers, men haters, and even "Femo-Nazis" according to the radio showman Rush Limbaugh; feminist became an "f" word, as Toril Moi has explained. Since recognition of hegemonic structures and communities of oppression are corner stones of feminist theorizing, it has built-in protection against mere name-calling! However, the anti-feminist polemic penetrated college and university campuses, through organizations that collect complaints of faculty "bias" and "unpatriotic" views in the name of academic freedom, such as the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (www.goacta.org), founded by Lynne Cheney in 1995, and Noindoctrination.org. Currently very few students taking women's studies courses in the United States will identify as "feminists." In spite of the backlash, studies informed by feminist theories continue to thrive, and the focus of feminist inquiry has broadened far beyond people whose culture designates them as "women."

My perspective is not global, and its scope may appear narrow and esoteric because the recent theorists I know best are Anglophone, and because European culture between 800 and 1500CE is not at the forefront of contemporary consciousness. It is rare that articles on medieval topics are included in the major journals concerned with feminist theory.[2] In response, woman medievalists have founded other journals which run on a shoestring, passing around between university departments or women's/gender studies programs.[3] Yet I claim not only that feminism as a way of interrogating this distant cultural production has invigorated the whole field of study for scholars who strive within it, but also that it has revealed a new premodern Europe, quite different from the "medieval world" that colonial ideologies had invented in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[4] It has assisted in the postcolonial agenda to a greater extent than is generally acknowledged. Furthermore, medieval culture is so distant from ours that its very alterity has pressured medievalists to adapt, rather than adopt, modern and postmodern theories of gender and their intersection with race and class. Feminist theory and its queer relative also invite a new framework for the interrogation of the textual and visual discourses concerning celibate religious, both monks and nuns, and celibate priests. These views of layered differences could encourage new ways of thinking in the main stream, if only contemporary theorists would read what we write!

As I look again at the 1993 special issue of *Speculum*, a journal that was still freighted with the traditions of male-dominated academe, I can re-experience the thrill of that achievement: the guest editor, Nancy Partner, persuaded a very conservative body to let her create one of the first multi-disciplinary collections of articles on medieval women by feminist scholars. It was immediately revised as a book, and I have used

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many of the articles in teaching ever since. Yet, it is also a measure of the success of feminism in the 1990s that, whereas anti-feminist medievalists for the most part grumbled and giggled amongst themselves as secure majorities do, there was vociferous, even vituperative, criticism from feminists who protested that the guest editor of *Speculum* had promoted essentialism, by seeming to accept that women (and men) were distinct categories.[5] Indeed, gender theory as many of us used it in 1993 had naturalized a male/female polarity of sexual difference (a biological infrastructure), and a masculine/feminine gender polarity "normally" coincident with it in the social sphere – even though we held social construction, not sex, to be largely responsible for gender. Binary m/f opposition, later dubbed heteronormativity by Karma Lochrie, had been allowed to dominate gender distinctions, as had assumptions about sexual practices (the heterosexual imperative). It has to be said that most modern European languages perpetuate this thinking by their binary pronouns, but Latin is free of that problem and might have assisted medievalists to avoid the m/f opposition, as I observed in my online book in 2001. Even Adam of the *Genesis* account in the Latin Vulgate is a person (homo), not a man (vir), and of course in Hebrew he is a person by name.

In fact a concentrated critique of the binary gender system had begun in 1989–90, most famously by the brilliant literary critic Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble*, in which she drew on linguistic theory of performativity, and critiqued or tweaked a number of the usual suspects we think about in relation to theories of sexuality and gender, from Freud and the structuralists to Lacan and Foucault, in order to destabilize the connection between genital difference and gender, and to overturn the gender binary. A declaration concerning the gender of an individual is not a constative – no one "is" masculine or feminine without performatives such as dress and behaviors, which of themselves convince viewers of the subject's masculinity or femininity. Butler (1990: 2) also argued cogently that "the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation." Like much theoretical writing, Butler's book does not "apply" any theories to instances of cultural production outside the discourses that had defined a subject category of "women." In my understanding, feminist praxis is thwarted as long as activists have to use the terms (and concepts) invented within a system of oppression, much as now in the United States using the "n" word (nigger) would not advance racial equity (I exaggerate here, to get across the negative impact).

Some of this "trouble" had been avoided in 1975 by the anthropologist Gayle Rubin who wrote of "sex/gender arrangements" in preference to sex or gender difference; this aptly conveys the notion that infinite arrangements are possible, as indeed comparative anthropologists have to allow. An earlier anthropologist, Margaret Mead, was the first to acknowledge that very different "personalities" may be pegged to one biological sex, and she may have been freer to acknowledge such subtly variable differences because she was thinking before the notion of gender had entered structuralist discourses.[6]As soon as it did, gender was naturalized as a binary. Only since 1990 have the two foundational terms of feminism, "women" and "gender," been problematized, in a move that is sometimes regarded as post-feminist, and often labeled as queer theory. It is more accurate to say that feminism was redefined in concert with the rise of postcolonialism and queer theory; already in 1993, Judith

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Butler (1993: 239) suggested that some re-thinking was needed that would "muddle the lines between queer theory and feminism." In fact it proved entirely possible to challenge the heterosexual imperative within feminist frameworks, especially in relation to historically distant cultures. Already, Caroline Bynum had characteristically gained a purchase on the instability of bodily functions associated with men and women, well ahead of these other inquiries. Her book from 1982, *Jesus as Mother*, examined the medieval discourse of spirituality, for metaphors assigning lactating breasts to Jesus, and nurturing motherly qualities to abbots (who of course are called fathers in the church). The result was the kind of radical destabilization of the m/f binary called for later under the banner of queering the middle ages, yet Bynum resisted any temptation to posit that these writers had homosexual desires. To her, as to many who are immersed in the study of medieval Christian devotion, metaphors of the body somatize spiritual longing. In the twelfth century St Bernard had glossed that superbly sensual love poem, the biblical *Song of Songs* as eulogizing the love of Christ for his Church. I will return to these issues.

A second aspect of the new resistance to the notion of a binary sex-gender system came from historians of the biological sciences. In 1990 also, Thomas Laqueur struck a blow at biological sex difference, arguing that this distinction too is historically contingent. Fairly prevalent in the middle ages was the so-called one sex model whereby it is held that there is continuity between the fully male and the fully female; yet this begged the question whether none the less most people were pressed into performing as males or females. The writer of a text called the *Women's Secrets,* that became popular around 1300, advocated that an infant born hermaphrodite, and therefore unable to generate, should be treated as male, the more dignified term. (LeMay 1992: 117).[7] The modern equivalent from the 1960s is the psychiatrist who argued that infants with indeterminate m/f genitalia should be consistently treated as one or the other from birth.[8] In either historical frame, it seems that personhood depended on establishing a sexual/genital identity.

Since Laqueur's was an historical study, it had important things to say to scholars of medieval cultural production, even though Katherine Park and Robert Nye (1991) contested some of his generalizations. Medievalists could readily accept that "sex" in the sense of genital/sexual identity should be regarded as much a social construct as gender. This was a powerful insight, assisting feminist critiques of the discourses of the medical body and of medieval visual representations of the anatomical body on one hand, and multi-disciplinary research and theorizing on the other. In 2001, an historian of science, Monica Green, reassessed the medical writings of a woman, known as the *Trotula*, as a way of assessing what women knew about their bodies; it is worth noting that close critical study of that kind draws on all the skills and learning developed by traditional medievalists (languages, philology, paleography). Medical illustrations and anatomical drawings have also provided insight into attitudes to the sexed body, and their publication has expanded the canon of "art" history.[9] One miscellaneous manuscript in Oxford contains an enigmatic sequence of pictures relating to the sickness of one or more female patients, where she is seen to faint, and to undergo surgery or autopsy. Without accompanying text, they continue to provide a riddle for would-be interpreters. In the same manuscript are disembodied diagrams of male and female genitalia that seem to be ideograms for sexual difference. The

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woman's birth canal and ovaries indeed appear like introverted testicles and penis, just as Galen said, and writing penetrates her organs whereas it respects the male's firm contours. A new assessment by Karl Whittington (2008) complicates this picture of difference by adding another exegetical layer to it, resonating with Marianic and Christological themes.

An aspect of feminist inquiry that is sometimes held in question, is a propensity to dwell on sexuality and the body; the argument as I have heard it, is that if you feminists are tired of being treated as sex objects, why do you bring attention to such things? In terms of praxis, the flip answer I give is that bringing men's talk out of the locker-room neutralizes it. In print (*Visualizing Women*) I have taken issue with the first-wave feminist notion of a penetrating male gaze, suggesting that it derives from (some) women's experience, and that some women artists of our time have responded by blocking views of the sensual body (see also Thomasset 1993). In so far as medieval theologians condemned any visual engagement with genital nudity, they ensured that only bodies in pain, or dismembered as relics, were placed in view by painters, with results rather similar to some contemporary feminist works. In 1995, Caroline Bynum had given different theoretical and historical responses to the question she framed as "Why All the Fuss about the Body?" She historicized the female body in Western culture, correcting the often-repeated half-truths about the way it was viewed in medieval thought, and relating it to some contemporary concerns.

The bibliography of the medieval body is growing very fast, and the topic of "the body" as it is being addressed currently has had a major role in redefining medieval culture. Between 1993 and 2000, Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury, Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin, Dolores Frese and Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, Darryl Grantley and Nina Taunton, paired up to edit notable collections of papers. Their contributors and others have focused on nudity and clothing, suffering and violence, surgery and self-inflicted wounds, the relics of saints and the division of corpses, fasting and feasting, corporeality and somatization, the body politic . . . the list goes on. Medieval obscenity has also been explored, notably in a collection edited by Jan Ziolkowski (1998) and more recently by Nicola McDonald (2006). Apart from its fascination and topicality, this "body work" is notable for the way it cumulatively transforms "the middle ages" from the romantic notion of an epoch spiritually and morally dominated by Christian theologians. Scholars in all fields have sought out the under-belly of that era and changed our view of it forever.

Compared with such dynamic change, studying women does not always present itself as feminist scholarship, as Judith Bennett observed in the quotation above and as she has recently elaborated in a book on feminism and the practice of history (2006). Many practitioners have resisted the theoretical shift away from the m/f binary, and in that sense have not kept up with the new feminisms. Studying historical women is a less radical branch of inquiry, but one that feeds much feminist work, and ironically has a greater investment in social change through education. Scholars involved in women's and or gender studies – by the 1990s, a full-fledged program on many college campuses in the US after a long struggle in most instances – have continued to reveal histories that had been silenced, and such programs often adhere to the goal of extending the process throughout the world. These newly discovered realms of female experience have also provided a narrative for multi-volume histo-

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ries of European women (Waithe 1989; Anderson and Zinsser 1988; Klapisch-Zuber 1992). Another resource are two invaluable collections of Christian primary sources (in translation), culled by Alcuin Blamires (1992, 1997), that lay out the very long textual traditions of blaming women on one hand, and defending women on the other. As women gained ground in many spheres of modern life, some of their sisters sang in praise of women: Joan Ferrante celebrated women who were involved in producing texts, and more radically Barbara Newman brought to light writings that metaphorically treat some saintly or allegorical figures as goddesses. Meanwhile, whereas some scholars have argued that medieval women (notably queens and abbesses) had great power, others spoke for the women – including some of the same – who were disempowered by the gender (and class) system. The exercise has been useful, because the case studies reveal a general downward trend in women's autonomy, from the twelfth century to modern times. In 2003 Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski revisited the theme of Woman and Power through a collection of essays informed by feminisms that are more subtle and less positivist than the publication of 1988. A deconstructive move would be to resist such polarities by destabilizing the notions of power and oppression as alternatives, and instating them as constantly shifting experiences that might be felt by a single individual (or group) at the same time. My own view is that the oppressor is also oppressed; it is the modern state (or the medieval kingdom and church) that benefits from a rigid m/f distinction as part of a hegemonic system, somewhat as Jean Baudrillard stated.[10] Masculinity studies have revealed the extent to which gender construction demanded sacrifices of men as well as women. Bluntly stated, it was no more fun to be a prince dying on crusade than a young queen dying in childbirth.

If the ultimate goal of women's studies was to produce new knowledge that would transform the mainstream, by enabling the next generation to write histories in which male and female subjects are mingled, it has largely come about for Europe.[11] Yet in recent decades, women still needed special attention in very real political terms; even as the label "women" was declared theoretically untenable, activist/theorists like Deborah Rhode (a lawyer) continued to reassert the need to acknowledge the existence of communities of oppression – and that female people still constitute one such community.[12] She argued cogently from theory, but her definition was urgently needed as an issue of praxis. The un-met goal of UNESCO, that oppression of women cease throughout the world by 2002, keeps the issue alive. When and where women are no longer a community of oppression, female subjects will no longer need to be distinguished from male subjects under the law. Jacqueline Murray has taken the case back to the middle ages, exposing the extent to which defining feminine gender was historically contingent. Murray and others also opened the way to consideration of other communities of oppression in medieval Europe, including gays and lesbians, and groups of heterosexual men.

It was also easy to come to this conclusion as a natural extension of viewing the mechanisms by which all signifying discourses had the capacity to perform ideological work, including by the construction of "women." and "men." My own work continued in part to concentrate on the ideological circle whereby pictures and texts both encouraged gender construction in the children of the ruling classes, and confirmed the distinction by representing males and females in masculine and feminine

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activities and dress (*Reframing Medieval Art*). Female religious and female saints were co-opted into a system that naturalized suffering and discouraged women from complaining (*Visualizing Women*). Yet it was a logical extension, as noted above, to look also at the construction of difference between groups of men, another project that I therefore claim as feminist. In *Reframing*, I uncovered a plurality of masculinities in a famous medieval visual narrative, the Bayeux Embroidery, with the help of Carol Clover's analysis (1993) of the varied sexual pejoratives used in old Norse as fighting words.

Several other scholars have examined representations of "those who fight," the group that had been romanticized as knights in medieval and modern images and imaginings; most notable recently is the art historical inquiry of Rachel Dressler, who has not only observed the assertive body-language of knights' effigies, but also the contrast with their wives' adjacent figures. By attention to textual representations of knights, Richard Zeikowitz and William Burgwinkle revealed homoeroticism as a major factor in bonding for adventure or war. Romance and epic have been mined for shifting definitions of masculinity, as by Sara Poor and Jana Schulman. *Männlichkeit* in German epic poetry has become a popular topic, though gender studies have only recently touched German medieval scholarship, as remarked by Charles Nelson (e.g. Baisch *et al.* 2003; Klein 2002: 433–463).

As with the study of women, "masculinity studies" advanced rapidly through a number of collections of articles: The contributors to Jacqueline Murray's edited volume, *Conflicted Identities*, examined men in religious and secular contexts, including aspects of affectivity, sexuality, denial of fear, governance and patriarchy. The next year Jeffrey Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler brought out a volume on "becoming male in the Middle Ages," that also demonstrated the social pressures on male subjects in various contexts to be masculine. Feminists had already recognized that many "men," as much as women, constituted communities of oppression, especially those differentiated by ethnicity, religion, class, "unmanliness" and enemy status (Jews and Moslems, heretics and witches, peasants and losers). In such studies, the tenets and frameworks of feminism expand to encompass the constructions of difference that intersect in varying ways with gender; accusing some men of being effeminate is one way. Writing for yet another collection, Louise Mirror presented examples of Christian attitudes to Moslem and Jewish men in northern Spain, as expressed in literature. Like women, these groups were treated as "Other" in the sense that had been popularized by Edward Said. Recent insistence on this phenomenon, valid though it is, seemed to me to have neglected three different questions. One was broached in 2002 in the March 1 issue of *Diogenes* that centered on questions of "The View Held by the Other, the View Taken of the Other" and opened the door for the "Other" to look back. The second is to enquire about the subject position and self image of the Christian European who is doing the "Othering." In a recent study I traced the invention of the "whiteman" as depicted in European art, to the era of the crusades, when Christian faces were painted chalk-white for the first time. This innovation followed a long tradition that demonized black and brown skin, but from the thirteenth century on, Jews and infidels were also represented as dark skinned, including the flagellants of Christ and the torturers of pure, often virginal, saints. My third question is why feminists so firmly turned the tables on Luce Irigaray's com-

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plaint (1977) that women's sex is "not one" like men's, by recognizing a plurality of masculinities, but not of femininities.

Other cultural historians have accepted the challenge to a two-sex system by focusing on the instability and contextual specificity of the m/f distinction in language and narrative, emphasizing trans-gender terms, and representations of trans-sexuals, trans-vestites and castrated men. The contributions are many, but an overview of medieval attitudes to sexuality, edited by Vern Bullough and James Brundage in 1996, provided a foundation, with a book on female cross-dressing the same year by Valerie Hotchkiss.[13] Recently, Mathew Kuefler revisited some of the issues that had been raised by John Boswell concerning same-sex desire and acts. Are these studies informed by feminism? I claim that they are, since one of the aims of feminist praxis is to seek out groups that have been stereotyped or silenced in ways that are similar to the treatment of women in medieval or in contemporary societies. Ironically, medieval lesbianism has been harder to document than its male equivalent, in part because it is silenced in the texts, even though the good behavior manuals for girls fulminated against it. And in modern parlance, homosexuality is often understood as an all male domain. Yet, as with feminism, the first wave of "queerism" was concerned with probing the exclusions and invisibility of gay men and lesbians.

Modifying the m/f binary by introducing the notion of a "third sex" has been a contested issue in the last decade. The term was first used to refer to homosexuals by an early psychiatrist, who considered them abnormal and in need of treatment. The collection of historical essays that were published by Gilbert Herdt (1993) under that rubric gathers a number of historical texts that treat the man who is penetrated by another as less than masculine, even in social groups that were comfortable with same-sex union, as in ancient Greece. One pattern that has become clear for the middle ages is that men and women were not labeled as homosexuals as they often are now (even by self definition). Instead, same-sex coupling was regarded as a choice of the moment, in Christian terms a sinful act but not a permanent sinful state. Yet the act was demonized from the eleventh century on, by a label deriving from the unspecified biblical "sin that stunk to heaven" for which God destroyed Sodom, thereby inventing "sodomy," as Mark Jordan demonstrated. Of course Christianity did not stop homosexual relationships, it merely drove them into silence. Some eminent medievalists however, have advocated extreme caution in interpreting outpourings of apparent physical longing on the part of religious writers in a literal way, claiming that these texts somatize spiritual longing, as noted above.

As the recent gay movement gained momentum, it claimed third sex as a positive term, much as African Americans had proudly claimed themselves to be black (though not niggers, as noted above). Praxis demanded a transvaluation of the old pejoratives, producing a rift with the past. One anthropologist proposed a third and fourth gender among some Native Americans, designating one for women who performed masculinity and another for men who performed femininity (Roscoe 1998). On the other hand, some medievalists labeled the hermaphrodite as a third sex (Nederman & True 1996). And in chapter 2 of *Reframing Medieval Art* I have used the term to characterize the inadequacy of the Anglo-Saxon fighting men as portrayed by their Norman conquerors: In the Bayeux Embroidery it is insinuated that they are both foppish and hyper-virile, yet effeminate in their lack of discipline.

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Despite its affinities with feminist theory, fully fledged queer theory has sometimes appeared oppositional. There has been some jostling over which one holds the cutting edge, and some exponents have seemed determined to destabilize and even subvert feminism in order to assert a new truth. Yet adherence to heteronormativity is not part of current feminist practice, and lesbians are claimed as subjects in women's and gender studies. Queer theory is not only about the study of gay people, but about continuing the process of placing the foundations of all our branches of learning in question. Like feminism, queer theory has revealed fissures in the older ways of understanding and interrogating medieval culture. *Queering the Middle Ages* is an important collection edited by Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger, with contributions by some of the foremost scholars of the middle ages, among them Marilynn Desmond, Pamela Sheingorn, Michael Camille, Peggy McCracken and Kathleen Biddick. They revisit topics such as the body, sexuality, masculinity, the gaze, desire and the construction of history. A notable feature that separates their writing from some feminist prose is a witty, quixotic quality, a kind of écriture homosexuelle.

One subject that has been in the purview of everyone's middle ages is the monk or nun. Reviled in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for their laxness and ignorance, they were idealized in the nineteenth century for their discipline of sexuality, and they have often been studied in modern times for their spirituality. To feminists interested in gender, they present a conundrum. We seem to lack a term for the men and women who lived in same-sex communities as monks and nuns, and were claimed to be virginal/chaste (whatever their actual sexual lives might be). How is a feminist to think of these special communities of medieval religious? My own view is that a social function of monasticism was to designate some offspring, before puberty, as non-breeders (they were typically presented to a monastic house as oblates between the age of seven and puberty); this simplified inheritance for generations to come; monastic vows of chastity (a form of birth control), and of poverty, also increased the material wealth of those who propagated. Whether you agree with this materialist view, or prefer the rhetoric of voluntary abstinence, spirituality and an exchange economy of prayer and benefit, the monastic system placed sexual identity in question. The subject immersed in devotion is the hardest to place in any model of gender difference. The question is pondered by Sarah Bromberg in the first issue of *Different Visions*, in relation to the viewing community for an illuminated manuscript that some have assumed to be female. Jo Ann McNamara has explored the ways that enclosure caused men and women to be revalued, women more and men less; her essay in *Conflicted Identities* (Murray 1999) is aptly entitled "An Unresolved Syllogism: The Search for a Christian Gender System." In the feminist number of *Speculum*, Nancy Partner had probed the issue of the sex/gender of a cross-dressed man who was exonerated from blame for living among nuns because he was sexually dysfunctional; she wittily questions if this might be a case of "No Sex, No Gender?" Monasticism, with its declared program to separate the sexes and to suppress sexuality, turned out to be a safehaven for homo-philia and homo-socialism for some, and for others a site where all s/g identity could be disavowed. Yet monasticism was based on an increasingly rigid separation of monks and nuns, as if sexual identity had first to be affirmed, and then denied. If people are removed from the sexual economy of marriage and procreation, is this another kind of "no sex, no gender?"

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Yet the enforced differences between their life-styles, notably in that female religious could not say mass, may best be thought of as a gender gap. If we still have to number genders, to which one do they belong? To try to provide a number is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the gender system. Not to do so forces us to accept all manner of gender ambiguity.

The world outside the cloister was different. Another story told of a girl-baby who was destined to be an heir. She was named Silence by her parents and raised as a boy. Her masquerade worked perfectly until by some unhappy accident she was seen unclothed; the fiction of her male identity immediately collapsed, despite her masculine performance (Kruger 1993 has a chapter on the *Roman de Silence*). For the members of the ruling class who were not enclosed, the heterosexual imperative was as strong then as in modern times.

Studying medieval culture has the power to challenge the theories of gender that were rooted entirely in modern philosophy and society. A number of aspects of the middle ages have emerged that destabilize even postmodern notions of sex/gender arrangements. Identities are more diverse than now – it might be said that only those who were thrust into married life and parenthood were fully constructed as masculine and feminine. Lords and ladies were more distinct from each other, in performatives such as dress and activities, than were lower class men and women, who often shared each other's work. And in various positions within the same culture there were the castrati, the virgins, the chaste, the prostitutes, the monks, the nuns, the priests clad in lace and silk, the half-naked cripples, and the lepers, whose gender identities cannot be numbered, and who denaturalize the labels of heterosexual/homosexual. What is e-sexual? What is androgynous?

A favorite pictorial motif of the high middle ages is the grotesque or chimera, appearing on the margins of portals and illuminated pages. A common type has a human head and shoulders and the hind quarters of an animal emerging from its garments. Hair length and head-covering may render the human part male or female, though many are given the features of beautiful boys who might be confused with girls. And it is as if the bestial lower parts allude metaphorically to genitals, yet thereby displace human sexual difference, or denigrate it as "beastly." What are they? They force the viewer to change the subject, to consider another favorite binary of the medieval philosophers (and of Aristotle), the natural and the un-natural. They have queered genital normativity far more dramatically and completely than do the human faces that evade being labeled. And like Rorschach's tests, they invite human fantasies that are not over-determined. Whereas some medievalists have "disciplined" themselves to find explanations in texts or other images (iconography), Michael Camille's *Image on the Edge* has shown what emancipation from those limits can do for the present-day reader. These weird creatures are open to feminist as much as to queer theories.

Many medievalists have worried about the perceived incompatibility of "history" and theories rooted in modern epistemologies. As an historian, Judith Bennett has pondered these issues in relation to that discourse, as well as feminism in all is guises; her book, *History Matters*, was published two years ago, a fitting sequel to the uncertain relation between feminist scholarship and the study of women she had described in 1993. In my own work I have frequently welcomed a tension between

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the kinds of contingent (contextual) truth arrived at by historical research, and the universal truth claim that might be argued from theory; I call this dual approach, from two directions, triangulation since both avenues are directed to the medieval object of study – in my case, most often a work of art. The contributors to the first issue of *Different Visions* all take variants of that approach, many using feminist or queer theory. In a paper that she wrote at that time, concerning "Subjection and Reception" in a woman's book, Pamela Sheingorn (2009) enlists a rich array of theories concerning the performative and subject formation, and interweaves them with – rather than applying them to – a specific book owner and her prayer-book. Almost every paragraph is triangulated, the particulars of the historical moment always invoked with or against modern frameworks. She places Judith Butler in dialogic relation to medieval theologians, without collapsing alterity.

I hope I have astonished readers from other fields and cultures than mine just how much good feminist writing and thinking has come from a new interrogation of the European "middle ages." Ironically, there are unexpected ways in which the study of sex/gender arrangements has benefited from the traditions of scholarship that had long been accepted by medievalists. For instance, the notion of multidisciplinary medieval studies goes back to at least the 1960s in universities, and had been embraced by the Medieval Academy of America from its foundation in the 1920s. Much as issues of *Speculum* might include contributions on Latin or vernacular texts, on philology or paleography, coronation rituals or liturgy, music or art, feminists could draw together scholars trained in different disciplines in new publishing ventures. Suddenly the presses eagerly accepted these thematic collections, many from conference papers (they did not before the 1980s). Such joint enterprises subverted the autonomy and "mastery" that are traditionally demanded of humanists in academe, and collude with the feminist goal of replacing authority with collectivity. With the unifying force of feminist theory, "interdisciplinary" and "multi-disciplinary" were commuted to new avenues of study that are non-disciplinary, encompassing consideration of all aspects of cultural production, and placing in question terms such as "art" and "literature," factual "history" and distinctions between "philosophy" and "theology" that had prevailed in the designation of university departments, yet did not exist in the middle ages. This trend met with more resistance among modernists than among medievalists, although eventually Eagleton (2008: 207) could write that "all manner of signifying practices [are] now our subject of study. . . . 'Theory' indicates that our classical ways of carving up knowledge are now, for hard historical reasons, in deep trouble. . . . for good historical reasons, the humanities could no longer carry on in their customary shape."

I have said enough to establish that in the past fifteen years, medievalists have carried the banners of expanding feminism, gender theory and queer theory as well as have contemporary theorists, and they have contributed to the mainstream. But have any new theories come from scholars of medieval culture? In 1993 Judith Bennett could make this claim for the concepts Nancy Partner and Gabriel Spiegel had introduced into the textualization of "history." Jacqueline Murray now stands out as one who has contributed to the theoretical debate over defining women, as well as to medieval studies. These and many more have continued to resist the notion

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192110369441 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that feminism is over, because there is still work to be done that not only excites the mind but may do good in our time.

Some questions project into the future. Can the study of Old Europe still inspire a wide range of audiences, as it did in colonial times? How will medievalists relate to broader programs and theoretical moves, especially those concerned with the contemporary world and the sciences? The gravest question for all who aspire to theorize social difference is whether some fundamentally new ideas will re-energize our inquiry. The recent preoccupation with historiography, not only in the text books mentioned above, but also in encyclopedias and dictionaries and reprinted texts, either suggests that theory is over (as some hope), or that this process allows time to reassess its significance, before another radical turn (for instance: Groden and Kreiswirth 1994; Kowaleski-Wallace 1997; Warhol and Price Herndl 1997). Pending that, the revisionist project of feminist inquiry continues to be revised and revitalized, necessarily bringing new theories along with it.

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Notes

1. I endeavor here to describe the varied strands of feminist scholarship, but it is not my wish to create a master narrative for such a rich and complex area. However, I mention in the text some studies that appear to me in some way pivotal for my topic, and list them in the bibliography.
2. An electronic search of *Signs*: Journal of Women in Culture and Society (founded in 1975), showed only 48 articles concerning medieval subjects (it has to be said, however, that *Signs* has excelled in its global perspective). Differences and m/f would probably reveal a comparable ratio. Frauen Kunst Wissenschaft (1987–) has dedicated at least one issue to medieval topics (24, December 1997),
3. The Medieval Feminist Forum (founded as the Medieval Feminist Newsletter in 1986) and the associated bibliography: Feminae: Medieval Women and Gender Index: http://www.haverford.edu/library/reference/mschaus/mfi/mfi.html. The new online journal that encourages theoretical perspectives, *Different Visions*, was founded on the initiative of Rachel Dressler.
4. See Cohen (2000). Such changes have also been remarked on by Paul Freedman and Gabrielle M. Spiegel (1998).
5. As an example of the first, the renowned chartistes Richard and Mary Rouse wrote me a 9-page letter in angry response to my article on a Parisian manuscript. The critique from the other side came largely at a special session of the International Congress of Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the following May, during which one speaker developed the metaphor of Nancy Partner as vampire. A session at the Medieval Academy meeting the same year was less severely critical though not without *ad hominem* attacks.
6. For a discussion of Mead's concepts in light of more recent theories, see Banner (2003).
7. By 1988 two French scholars, Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset (1985), had analyzed the Latin text of *The Secrets* in light of discourse theory, exposing the extent to which it was a case of a man (probably a Dominican from the circle of Thomas Aquinas) "talking" to men. A few years later, Helen LeMay published the English translation of the text that became an invaluable source for teaching.
8. Stoller (1968: 29–30): "in those infants in whom ambiguous-appearing genitalia at birth make sex assignment uncertain, the proper sex must be diagnosed as soon as possible. Only by careful and rapid diagnosis can future emotional problems be avoided."
9. A useful collection of images is Murray Jones (1998).
10. I take liberty here with his statement that m/f polarity is "pegged to the grandiose cultural models

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192110369441 Published online by Cambridge University Press

whose function it is to separate the sexes in order to establish the absolute privilege of one over the other" (Baudrillard 1970).

11. Excellent examples are Sekules (2001) and van Houts (1999).
12. As I write, President Obama has just signed the Lily Letbetter law, overturning a Supreme Court decision that had denied the right to redress for years of unequal compensation to a woman, and granting all US women the right to equal pay for equal work.
13. By 2000 the Modern Language Association online bibliography contained about three hundred items concerning sexuality in pre-1800 texts, according to Smith (2000: 318).

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