

Were there really any medieval feminists? Rethinking medieval culture in terms of late twentieth-century theories is taking place, but very slowly, and slowest of all in the study of visual objects. Despite the leadership and encouragement of the editors of the interdisciplinary *Medieval Feminist Newsletter*, and the many conference sessions run by the instigators of the organisation Medieval Feminist Art History Project, there is as much a need for a book on the subject today as there was ten years ago when I began to teach „Women and Medieval Art“.¹ During that time the field has changed rapidly towards an emancipating destabilization, to the point of even questioning the notion of „women“ as a category for analysis.² Thus, gender polarity no longer frames the study of „women“; art historians no longer study „art“ (as opposed to non-art) nor „history“ (as opposed to criticism), and we no longer have to decide between architecture and the „minor“, „decorative“ or pictorial arts; medievalists need not sever the sacred from the secular, latin from vernacular texts, or „literature“ from other writings (though they often do); „theorists“ are less concerned with choices between historically contingent and universal „causes“, merging „what was“ with „what has to be“, and culture with nature in so far as definitions of „nature“ must be historically contingent.³

Yet there are those who fear that historical perspectives will be annihilated, and to them „Medieval Feminist“ has an odd ring; I am often told, „But of course there were no feminists then [and it’s a good thing too].“ Semantically these critics are correct, we have too easily elided feminist-medievalist to sound like an anachronism. And I agree that the erasure of „history“, in so far as it renders alterity moot, is an erasure of difference that is ironic in light of our postmodern efforts to come to terms with differences of sex and gender, class, and ethnicity. Applied to culturally distant materials, much literary analysis that acknowledged different (gender-based) readings ignored the tension between historicity and contemporary criticism.⁴ Theorists who claim their paradigms are universal risk a charge of „presentism“. ⁵ Historical models can reinforce what the philosopher Jane Roland Martin recently referred to as „the extraordinarily important insight that phenomena that traditionally have been considered natural, and therefore fixed, are social constructs with histories.“⁶ For this reason she advocated the study of some object of inquiry over time, charting change, rather than a contextual approach. Yet I do not believe that the feminist project is best advanced by privileging „history“ (itself a modern invention) over other modern discourses, such as psychoanalysis or semiotics.

The Feminist intervention, like the „Marxist“ interpretations that have assisted in its definition, views history as a branch of ethical inquiry. It therefore involves a consideration both of the means by which women have been subjugated (including representations in art), and the ways they have occasionally negotia-

ted to find a voice (including artistic expression). Yet, though its base remains ethical, feminist history cannot merely be content to praise or condemn selected aspects of medieval culture. What is needed is to dislodge masculinist readings from the center, where they have been naturalized, and to read the past with an awareness of the hegemonies (then and now) implicit in sexual difference. Representations of women in medieval art comprise more than images of women. Topics for study include women's roles as makers, owners, patrons, and recipients of works, their function as subject or object in a viewing situation, even their absence through exclusion or silencing.⁷ Art objects need to be looked at for the ways in which they functioned ideologically, including how they contributed to the construction of gender itself; the power of images is such that they may either have maintained existing power structures, or in many cases, may have advanced the cause of patriarchy. Yet it would be pointless to prove over again that „The Middle Ages“ (one thousand years of European experience) was monolithically patriarchal.

Triangulation: Long and short levers

I advocate bringing various feminist strategies to focus on selected works of art, and at the same time establishing a medieval context for them; in other words, I have two quite different angles from which I approach the object of study, giving a kind of stereoscopic vision. I have come to think of this model as an asymmetric triangle, where the medieval representations form an apex, projected between two widely separated viewing positions – one of the postmodern feminist critic, the other of the „historian“ whom I hold by definition to be modern.⁸ The historical viewpoint privileges commentaries by the makers and audience of the object in its original temporal and spatial frames, and may encompass interpretations over time; this is the conventional route, the shorter of the two, yet it can no longer be viewed as the only one, connecting the ancient object directly with its modern viewer, the way it was held to be before the New Historicism. I still think of it as the short lever with which to pry open the object, but contextual study has a tendency to confirm the unity of culture at a given moment, rather than to reveal its fissures.⁹ An invisible plumb-line links the viewer with the object in my model. This purports to represent the direct view of the object, assuming it is unaltered by restorers (the editors of our field), yet unmediated viewing is scarcely possible. Even deconstructive readings that appear naive need a theory. The connection is invisible because it is illusionary.

The theoretical side of the triangle is the long lever, capable of exerting greater pressure precisely because it is the least direct. It draws upon concepts that had not been entertained at the time the work was created, and it owes its power to its predisposition not to look for unity within medieval culture.¹⁰ It is precisely when suspect unity emerges that it is the moment to invoke postmodern theories: It is the tension between postmodern theory and „history“ that produces a

new truth – as soon as they appear irreconcilable we can glimpse the underlying ideological structure that used to demand unified systems. As Emily Apter stated in 1991: „Though in certain respects this interweaving of critical theory with historically grounded nineteenth-century French studies became unavoidably anachronistic, I purposely wanted to blur traditional chronological parameters in an effort to bring the questions of contemporary psychoanalysis, literary interpretation, and feminism into fruitful confrontation with their formative past.“¹¹ Juliet Mitchell described the process as a *unité de rupture*: „the moment when the contradictions so reinforce one another as to coalesce into the conditions for a revolutionary change.“¹²

Case-studies

In the great collection of hagiographical narratives through which the interior of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame of Chartres has been illuminated since the first quarter of the thirteenth century, there is only one story of a virtuous wife who was permitted to live in domestic harmony with her husband and child: the Virgin Mary, Mother of God.¹³ Marina Warner, pioneering feminist, long ago deconstructed her cult, arguing that the extreme idealization of this oxymoronic virgin-mother deprived ordinary women of the hope of salvation, since it was impossible to follow her example. Not allowed to be an ordinary woman, she was idealized as a Virgin, so pure that her mother St. Anne also conceived without sexual intercourse; the Virgin Mary was enthroned as Genetrix, Queen of Heaven, and Intercessor, and also invoked as Star of the Sea in medieval anthems; as a symbol of Ecclesia she was the Bride of Christ.¹⁴ Yet her cult was carefully controlled by the clergy. In the Chartres window she is even educated by them, whereas in later images she is taught to read by her mother.¹⁵ Clerical control ensured that the Virgin Mary was not permitted to share the aura of deity, nor the roles of priesthood. Even when she is represented in heaven, enthroned next to her son, as in the north transept portal of Chartres, her body language is deferential.¹⁶ How is this tightly controlled spiritual consort to be reconciled with the so-called misogyny of countless medieval writers? Take, for instance, a roughly contemporary poem against getting hitched:

„Whose wife is good is blest“ its said,
But „good-wife“ tales are rarely read.
She'll either nag or fornicate –
His lordship she'll not tolerate.“¹⁷

There is in fact a psychoanalytic theory available that compellingly describes such extreme views of women, as embodied in the subject's mother. Object-relations theory, derived from Freud's notions of pre-Oedipal development by his feminist critics, supposes that the male child is either horrified at his mother's lack of a penis, or over-compensates for his negative feelings by idolizing her.¹⁸ The perspective is a useful one because it should make us withdraw the polemical

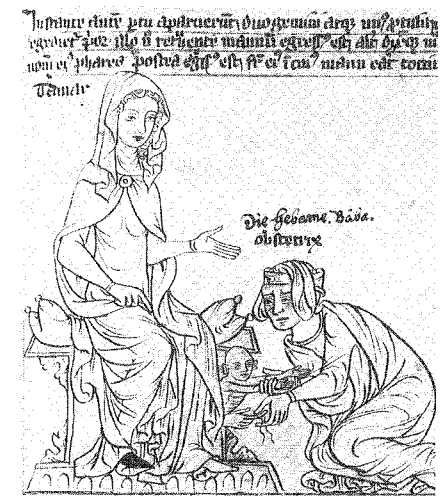
term misogyny in favor of the more sympathetic word gynephobia; we have to understand, however, that idealization, in denying women's corporeal reality, is as gynephobic as denigration. Mary was not only deprived of normal sexual reproduction, but her bodily Assumption to heaven through the agency of angels (thus always passive, not active like Christ's Ascension), left no physical remains of her actual body as relics.¹⁹ Items of her clothing were venerated as relics instead.²⁰ Fresh tears from her weeping icons have also been accepted as cult objects, but bodily excretions of milk and menstrual blood, though venerated in popular cults, tended to be suppressed.²¹ The „real“ woman was displaced by fetishes that indicate a lack of corporality and boundaries. At Chartres the precious relic that was miraculously preserved from the fire of 1194 was the tunic worn by the Virgin at the nativity, or rather at the „birth of the Lamb“ as Guillaume le Breton phrased it in the early thirteenth century, his allegory displacing the real birth of a baby boy.²² Guillaume goes on to say of the Lamb that „He sanctified as a very pure throne the Virgin who gladly / Is being honored as Mother,“ providing another displacement whereby she is „really“ a seat of wisdom. Indeed, in the difficult metaphor of the throne, Mary is not wisdom itself, but a seat for the son who embodied wisdom. I posit symbolic meanings that might not have been accessible to the twelfth-century makers of these statues, or their audience, because our culture has been slow in bringing them to words: the „Madonna as Sedes Sapientiae“ is the Lost Mother of Freud's pre-Oedipal myth, the Grand \emptyset of Lacan's Other under erasure, the woman always displaced, and the Great Mother whose cults had been suppressed in a struggle for masculinity.²³

Mary's twelfth-century representations bring out these tensions between what she is allowed to be in contemporary theology and the slippages that accrue in the visual form; the symmetry of her broad shoulders and widely placed knees may make her a throne (or a state of mind) personified, but they also dehumanize her motherhood. Only a woman's reading that was innocent of theology might have seen in her seated posture, open legs, and healthy child, evidence of a serene birthing, since medieval women gave birth on a stool where they were aided by gravity (and by midwives).²⁴ By the fourteenth century, more relaxed, natural-looking representational codes reinforce the similarity between a statuette of the Virgin and Child and a depiction of Tamar giving birth to her twins; both mothers are seated on a cushioned bench, fully clothed and with accentuated drapery folds between the legs (figs. 1 and 2).²⁵ Yet cult images of the seated Virgin were not exclusively, nor even predominantly, for help in child bearing. Increasingly the miracles of Our Lady were co-opted to answer the needs of men; her aid to the priest Theophilus in breaking his pact with the devil was among the most popular legends of the Virgin in the thirteenth century.²⁶

In an important essay on „Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender“, first published in 1980, Michèle Barrett attempted to advance the theoretical understanding of ideology, while deploring a tendency to de-materialize its workings by focusing on discursive practices.²⁷ Her analysis was particularly helpful in that it reaffirmed the ideological role of cultural productions, and separated



1 Madonna and Child, ivory, France (Lorraine?), second quarter of the 14th century, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 64.1588 (photo: Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



2 Tamar giving birth, Pictorial Bible of Canon Velislaus, c. 1350, Prague, Czech National Library, MS XXIII C 124, detail of fol. 41 (photo: Prague, Czech National Library)

the „processes by which the work of reproducing gender ideology is done“ into four very useful categories which I will illustrate from the Chartrain examples:

Stereotypes, as in the repetition of seated or standing Virgin and Child images in the thirteenth-century glass and sculpture; these drown each other out and have no culminating focus.

Compensation, as in the panel with the Virgin being taught to read in school by clerics, when in fact real women were denied access to the cathedral schools, and even excluded from representations of the productive work of artisans.

Collusion (women's consent to their inferiority). A kneeling female donor prays next to an image of the horrible tortures of St. Margaret, even though the saint's body becomes a sado-erotic spectacle when her breasts are torn off²⁸; St. Margaret was particularly associated with safe childbirth because she was vomited unharmed from a dragon, but this could only mean that the baby might be safely delivered from a monstrous mother.

Recuperation, as when a female character's apparent independence is „eventually denied by the action of the narrative“. At all times, and even when she is preaching Christ risen to the apostles, Mary Magdalen is marginalized in „her“ window; in the top, churchmen take control, as they preach and bury her, and finally her tiny unsexed soul is passed from angel to Lord, a sign between men.²⁹

In a „final“ analysis Mary is not represented at Chartres. The images „of her“ are metaphors, corresponding to those used in mariolatry.³⁰ The immense new building in her honor literally causes her images to recede from the viewer, and they multiply as if by nuclear fission; she is everywhere and nowhere, the lost mother of the Christian search for her (dis)guises as Church or Heavenly Jerusalem.³¹ In modern times, a similar process has been documented in the design and reception of Arata Isozaki's building for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.³² The architect had made a template from the curves of Marilyn Monroe's body as displayed in Tom Kelley's 1949 pin-up photograph, which he used in several designs including a set of plywood chairs. He characterized the blocky forms of the gallery as phallic. The visitors attending the opening in 1986 inserted themselves (unwittingly in most instances) into an eviscerated female body, the empty shell of the quintessential sex icon Marilyn Monroe, in order to participate in a celebration of the orgasmic male art that was main-streamed by the curators and critics at the time. So too, the laity who flocked to Notre Dame of Chartres (or of Paris, Laon, Lausanne, Noyon, Siena, Amiens, Reims, where again she is multiplied), entered a building which invoked her by means of icons, but in which the all-male business of the cathedral church was conducted: the *opus dei* of the Latin liturgy presided over by bishop and canons whether in the privileged inner space of their choir or in processions. Opening up this discussion to such over-reaching „unconscious“ impulses on the part of the medieval builders and their modern interpreters reveals much about the closed discourse of (predominantly male) architectural historians, who refuse to look at images: Their insatiable quest for the perfect Gothic building on one hand – with unified (= penetrable) space, apparent weightlessness, and elegant profiles – and, on the other hand, an equally strong drive to name the masters who generated these forms is a re-telling of the creation myth by which man gave „birth“ to woman. Isozaki's avowed fetishism – his substitution of a profile for the female body – can help us observe the same impulse silently at work in the practices of an architectural historian who filled a caravan with templates taken from Gothic profiles in order to find the traces in them of individual male masons. This model may go some way toward explaining why monumental works that were likely the creations of men (cathedral architecture and sculpture) have been preferred in the canon to manuscript illuminations (which some thought „feminine“) and needlework (which was sometimes practiced by women).

Feminist analysis inevitably renders gender polarities visible, but the polarity breaks down when pressured by postmodern theory which encompasses the study of masculinities.³³ One might say that „women“ in the middle ages were constructed in order to define masculinity. It is almost impossible to meet any „real“ women – female representations with subjectivity, agency, and a voice of their own – so much are they the fabrication of male thinkers. It is in this, rather than in their essence, that they are female: Gender identity is performatively constituted.³⁴ „Women“ in the middle ages were as much an „epistemic community“ formed by their common history of oppression as they are today.³⁵

- 1 My book in preparation, with the working title *Essays on a Cock-Horse: Reading Medieval Art as a Woman*, is a series of case studies of works spanning the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. This essay is part of the introduction. The course, however, has been interdisciplinary since it is team-taught with my colleague in German literature and critical theory, Charles Nelson, see: M. H. Caviness / Charles G. Nelson: *Women in Medieval Art and Literature*. In: *Medieval Feminist Newsletter*, Vol. 15, 1993, pp. 17-20.
- 2 Two very positive contributions to post-structuralism are Michèle Barrett / Anne Phillips: *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992, and Jane Flax: *Thinking Fragments*. San Francisco: University of California Press, 1990. For more anxious reactions: Linda Alcoff: *Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory*. In: *Signs*, Vol. 13, 1988, pp. 405-436; Teresa de Lauretis: *The Essence of the Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain*. In: *Differences*, Vol. 1, 1989, No. 2, pp. 3-37, who considered the vehemence of the charge of essentialism in light of the politics of (re)defining or not defining women; she provides a useful discussion of Alcoff.
- 3 Among the first to insist that even biological sexual difference is a social construct was Gayle Rubin: *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'political economy' of sex*. In: *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Edited by Rayna R. Reiter. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975, pp. 157-210. See also Gayle Rubin: *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*. In: *Pleasure and Danger*. Edited by Carole S. Vance. New York: Routledge, 1984, pp. 267-319. The best known study may be that of Thomas Laqueur: *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- 4 For instance Jonathan Culler: *Reading as a Woman*. In his: *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982, pp. 42-64, who like most literary critics at that time was only concerned with our contemporary readings.
- 5 Caroline W. Bynum: *Why all the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective*. In: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 22, 1995, pp. 7, 26-27, 30-31, is especially concerned with this problem.
- 6 Jane Roland Martin: *Methodological Essentialism, False Difference, and Other Dangerous Traps*. In: *Signs*, Vol. 19, 1994, pp. 640-641.
- 7 For patronage, see the recent collection *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*. Edited by June Hall McCash. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1996, including M. H. Caviness: *Anchoress, Abbess and Queen: Donors and Patrons or Intercessors and Matrons?*, pp. 105-153.
- 8 It cannot be said often enough these days, especially in response to attacks on psychoanalysis as an anachronistic approach to the middle ages, that history is a modern (Hegelian) invention, and all historical narratives are modern constructs. Hayden White: *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, provides useful insights.
- 9 Traditional iconographers found perfect agreement between art and theology in the middle ages: e.g. Emile Mâle: *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the thirteenth century*. Translated by Dora Nussey. New York: Harper & Row, 1972. (First published as *L'Art religieux du treizième siècle en France*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1958); and Erwin Panofsky: *Gothic Architecture*

- ture and Scholasticism. Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., 1957.
- 10 A classic study of the social unrest surrounding the Cathedral of Chartres is that of Jane Williams: *Bread, Wine and Money: The Windows of the Trades at Chartres Cathedral*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
 - 11 Emily Apter: *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991, p. ix.
 - 12 Juliet Mitchell: *Four Structures in a Complex Unity*. In: *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays*. Edited by Berenice A. Carroll. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1976, pp. 397-98.
 - 13 *The Life of the Virgin, Chartres window 28b*, is described by Jean-Paul Deremble / Colette Manhes: *Les Vitraux légendaires de Chartres: Des récits en images*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1988, pp. 60-61, 185. Her parents, Joachim and Anne, figure too, but only once with her, in fact at the scene of parting.
 - 14 Marina Warner: *Alone of all her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*. New York: Knopf; distributed by Random House, 1976.
 - 15 For the image of St. Anne teaching the Virgin to read, and its social implications, see: Pamela Sheingorn: „The Wise Mother“: The Image of St. Anne Teaching the Virgin Mary. In: *Gesta*, Vol. 32, 1993, pp. 69-80.
 - 16 Adolf Edmund Max Katzenellenbogen: *The Sculptural Programs of Chartres Cathedral: Christ, Mary, Ecclesia*. New York: Norton, 1964, plate 47.
 - 17 A. G. Rigg: *Gawain on Marriage: The Textual Tradition of the De Coniuge Non Ducenda with Critical Edition and Translation*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1986, pp. 88-91. There is some basis in *Ecclesiasticus* 26: 9-16. For an excellent collection of texts in which women are either idealized or denigrated, see: *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*. Edited by Alcuin Blamires. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.
 - 18 The clearest outline of the theory is that of Christine DiStefano: *Configurations of Masculinity: A Feminist Perspective on Modern Political Theory*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991, pp. 1-65.
 - 19 Deremble/Manhes (Note 13), fig. 12.
 - 20 Warner (Note 14), pp. 290-92.
 - 21 For relics of her milk: Warner (Note 14), pp. 221, 292. The bath in which she is said to have cleansed herself after menstruation is still shown to pilgrims in Nazareth, but apparently the Franciscan custodians are unaware of its purpose: Charles T. Wood: *The Doctors' Dilemma: Sin, Salvation and the Menstrual Cycle in Medieval Thought*. In: *Speculum*, Vol. 56, 1981, p. 723. I am grateful to Angela Rosenthal for this reference.
 - 22 Cited in translation by Katzenellenbogen (Note 16), p. v.
 - 23 I am translating Lacan's grand A for *autre* as the great „O“ – one might also say „object of desire“; Jacques Lacan: *Écrits: A selection*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: W. W. Norton, 1977, p. 193; Toril Moi: *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London and New York: Methuen, 1985, pp. 100-101, discusses Lacan's formulation of desire for the Symbolic Order of language in light of feminist theory.
 - 24 A more elaborate argument for this reading is made in M. H. Caviness: *Obscenity and Alterity: Images that Shock and Offend Us/Them, Now/Then?* In: *Obscenity: Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages* (Harvard Medieval Studies Conference, in press). Edited by Ian Ziolkowski. For an explicit scene of birthing, from antiquity, see: Eva C. Keuls: *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985, fig. 124.
 - 25 Tamar was presumably shown in childbirth because, like Eve, she was a bad woman (she was seduced by her brother). The manuscript, which dates from about 1350, has been published in full: *Velislai Biblia Picta* (Editio Cime-lia Bohemica, XII). Edited by Karel Stejskal. Prague: Pragopress, 1970.
 - 26 Michael W. Cothren: *The Iconography of Theophilus Windows in the First Half of the Thirteenth Century*. In: *Speculum*, Vol. 59, 1984, pp. 308-341.
 - 27 Reprinted in a ground-breaking collection that examined representations of sex, class and race in literature and culture: Michèle Barrett: *Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender*. In: *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*. Edited by Judith Newton/Deborah Rosenfelt. New York: Methuen, 1985, pp. 65-85.
 - 28 Such sado-eroticism has been looked at by Martha Easton: *St. Agatha and the Sanctification of Sexual Violence*. In: *Studies in Iconography*, Vol. 16, 1994, pp. 83-118. A longer consideration of the theoretical implications forms a chapter of my book.
 - 29 Colette Manhes-Deremble: *Les Vitraux narratifs de la cathédrale de Chartres: Etude iconographique*. Paris: le Léopard d'Or, 1993, pp. 368-369, Pl. 46. (*Corpus Vitrearum*, France: Etudes II).
 - 30 She is the womb that bore God (genetrix dei), the star of the sea, the moon, the bride of Christ, the portal of the temple, the institution and fabric of the Church (Ecclesia), the throne of wisdom.
 - 31 Sarah Stanbury: *Feminist Masterplots: The Gaze on the Body of Pearl's Dead Girl*. In: *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*. Edited by Linda Lomperis/Sarah Stanbury. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993, pp. 96-115.
 - 32 Jo-Anne Berelowitz: *L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art and the Body of Marilyn Monroe*. In: *Genders*, Vol. 17, 1993, pp. 22-40.
 - 33 *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*. Edited by Clare A. Lees/Thelma Fenster/JoAnn McNamara. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. (*Medieval Cultures*, 7).
 - 34 Judith Butler: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 25.
 - 35 Marilyn Frye: *The Possibility of Feminist Theory*. In: *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference*. Edited by Deborah L. Rhode. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, pp. 174-184.