CHAPTER ONE

At this moment in the history of literary studies, the word *historicism* - indeed, the very word *history* - has become highly charged both in the specific field of Medieval Studies and in literary criticism in general. (Lee Patterson)¹

Recent discussions of the state of Medieval Studies, sparked by such books as Lee Patterson's *Negotiating the Past*, provide an important impetus for this thesis because they highlight the critical abyss which exists between Medieval Studies and other areas of literary studies. For one entering the field of Medieval Literary Studies this revelation is disturbing and inhibiting. However, the history of Medieval Studies cannot be ignored by those now working within the area. If Medieval Studies is to survive it must come to terms with its past and recognise the precarious position in which the discipline now stands as a result of its academic isolation. Patterson's statement identifies two factors in particular which are deepening the crisis within Medieval Studies today; the growing progression within other areas of literary studies toward a more critical, self-reflexive historicist methodology, and the recognition of the particularity of the position of Medieval Studies within the
field of English Studies. An understanding of these two factors is vital to any attempt to rejuvenate the critical practices and improve the academic image of this field.

The traditional periodisation of history is largely responsible for the marginalisation of Medieval Studies within academia. Since the Renaissance, the medieval period has been positioned within literary and historical discourse as the 'other' against which the 'modern' is defined. Early Humanism rewrote history in order to establish the identity of the 'new' founding era of enlightenment. The medieval period became viewed as a time of ignorance, conflict and disorder which stood between the civilisation of Antiquity and its re-birth in the humanism of eleventh- and twelfth-century Italy.

The academic segregation of Medieval Studies is widely acknowledged by medieval practitioners. From his European context Paul Zumthor exclaims that, 'the study of [medieval] literary texts...still has dusty and old-fashioned qualities discarded a good while ago by social history and the analysis of economic structures.' However, it is only over recent years that
such isolation has become a source of anxiety. Patterson points out that segregation was often encouraged by earlier medievalists who regarded the distinction as an expression of their academic élitism.5 The scholarly prestige of Medieval Studies is fast diminishing and those now working within the field fear that the isolation Medieval Studies once cultivated may bring about its downfall. Eugene Vance complains that Medieval Studies has become a bastion of traditional literary and historicist criticism because of this 'artificial cloistering'.6 It has become a critical backwater, removed from the modern trend toward the development of theory.

The return within literary studies of historicist discourses is far more problematic for Medieval Studies than one would anticipate. This is largely due to the fact that Medieval Studies never relinquished old historicist practices, despite the progression in other disciplines toward new ahistorical methodologies such as psychoanalysis, structuralism and deconstruction. The recent critical turnabout from purely textualist practices must not be mistaken as a vindication of Medieval Studies' staunch preservation of old historicist
criticism. Contextualist and historicist readings, informed by post-structuralist theory have discredited many of the positivist assumptions of traditional historicism. Traditional historicist readings are termed naïve and have been shown to conceal the presumption of a white, male institutionalised perspective.\(^7\)

In the opening chapter of *Negotiating the Past*, Patterson investigates the continuing influence of positivism within the medieval area. He states that there are two critical formations which have retained a stranglehold on Medieval Literary Studies long after being displaced within other fields. These practices are Exegetics and New Criticism. Ironically, these two critical practices stand in perpetual conflict, Exegetics being, in its way, fiercely historical and New Criticism remaining, on the whole, dismissive of the importance of the historical context.

Exegetics was developed during the nineteen fifties and sixties largely through the work of D. W. Robertson. 'Historical Criticism', as he named it, disputed the conventional use of history to elicit universal principles of nature. Robertson
contended that human nature alters with changes in human relationships and that people of the past consequently may have been essentially different. However, because Historical Criticism regarded itself as a disinterested project it produced a reading of history informed by its own unacknowledged critical bias. It remains hopelessly flawed because it attempts to establish the historical alterity of the past without accepting that the critic, too, is embedded within history and subject to social and political influences. This critical naivety led to notorious generalisations, such as Robertson's definition of the medieval period:

We project dynamic polarities on history as class struggles, balances of power or as conflicts between economic realities and traditional ideas...but the medieval world with its quiet hierarchies knew nothing of these things.\(^8\)

The conservative, institutionalised political ideology which informs the often suspect 'pragmatic' interpretations made by Historical Criticism has enabled Exegetics to retain its influence. Patterson contends it is the very lack of a cohesive methodology which makes Exegetics so difficult to combat on a
theoretical front and which has permitted Exegetics to function virtually unopposed within the medieval field. Its continuing influence is testified to by Stephen Greenblatt, who, in 1982, is still complaining that much of literary history's methodology is 'monological; that is, it is concerned with discovering a single political vision, usually identical to that said to be held by the entire literate class, or indeed the entire population.'

In contrast, New Criticism which flourished into the post-war period in the works of medieval critics like W. Wimsatt and J. M. Manly assumed that poetry (and literature) was able to transcend the 'merely historical' and communicate with all ages by touching the universal element of human nature. Derek Pearsall, in his analysis of the history of Chaucer criticism, explains that New Criticism developed 'in response to the break up of the old consensus concerning the relationship of literature and history [and] worked to extract literature from history.' History was relegated to a secondary position, making it a condition of literature but allowing it no influence or determination over the literary work. Examples of this construction of history are found in the writing of numerous
traditional medievalists like E. M. W. Tillyard whose book *The Elizabethan World Picture: A Study of the Idea of Order in the Age of Shakespeare, Donne and Milton* reveals, in its title alone, the complete and coherent status assigned to history.

The kind of formal approach, most clearly exemplified by New Criticism, regard texts as inviolate entities, detached from their cultural positioning within history. The text is extracted from its historical context and revered as a 'verbal icon', a 'well wrought urn' which contains within itself all sources of meaning and fulfilment. Jean Howard claims that all formalist practices throughout literary studies view texts, 'as ethereal entities floating above the urgencies and contradictions of history and of seeking in such texts the disinterested expression of a unified truth rather than some articulation of the discontinuity underlying any construction of reality.'

Positivist practices have continued to dominate historical as well as literary scholarship of the medieval period. Prior to the development of social history, and still influential in our school curriculum today, stands 'old' historicism, encompassing regnal,
military and constitutional history. The distinction between 'old' and 'new' history and their oppositional methodologies can be summarised in a simple semantic formulation provided by Hayden White, where 'old' history maintains the belief in 'History' and new historians feel only able to speak of 'histories.'

The construction of a monolithic edifice called 'History' contains several assumptions which differentiate traditional history from its newer counterpart. The first assumption is that history can be recovered, that it is fixed, inert, closed and can therefore be recorded in its entirety. Leading on from this belief is the idea that history can be constructed to produce a unified, continuous and coherent picture, complete within itself. Such a view has often led to the trivialisation of literature as an object that must in some way reflect historical reality. In this role literature simply becomes a pointer to something more real (ie. History) and is denied any active or formative part in the historical process. The other important assumption of 'old' history is that the critic, unlike the work analysed, is able to stand outside the historical process to express an objective
truth. Geoffrey Elton, a well known constitutional historian, assures us that the 'simple' task of the historian is, 'to discover the truth as best he can, to convey that truth as truthfully as he can, in order both to make the truth known and to enable man, by learning and knowing the truth, to distinguish the right from the wrong reason.'

His views are shared by Gertrude Himmelfarb who deplores the advent of 'new'/social history. Speaking from her own position as a traditional historicist who regards constitutional/'old' history as normative, she resents the rise of 'new' history which, 'in devaluing the political realm, devalues history itself. It makes meaningless those aspects of the past which serious and influential contemporaries thought most meaningful.' She has little time for the Marxist contribution to social history, (she sees Marxist historiography and social history as almost synonymous):

Having failed in so much else ...Marxism has succeeded in this: in demeaning and denigrating political events, institutions, activities and ideas.
Himmelfarb and other traditional historicist scholars continue to resist the changes brought about by social history and remain dismissive of the historiographical methodologies they employ.

Himmelfarb positions the initial rise of 'new' history in 1912 when James Harvey Robinson proclaimed its advent in his own work and pleaded for a history of the common people which would incorporate research from, 'anthropologists, economists, psychologists and sociologists.' However, this method of historical analysis did not achieve its great aims. It suffered from the same generalisations and resulting inaccuracies experienced by its later literary counterpart, Historical Criticism. Although it became popular as an historical methodology it did not succeed in developing a new socially-oriented reading of history.

The first practitioners to produce a sustainable methodology of social history are the Annalistes. Deriving their name from the journal, *Annales d'histoire economique et sociale*, founded in 1929, many scholars from the Annalistes school have gone far towards introducing elements of modern disciplines into social
history. Their institutionalised status has helped to promote the overall rise of social history in France and subsequently in most other countries. Despite their interest in the history of the common people, it should be noted that, in comparison with Marxist approaches to social history the outlook of the journal is substantially apolitical, emphasising instead demographical and geographical influences and the mentalité of people.20

One branch of this new social history, which stands in almost complete opposition to the regnal history of Himmelfarb, in content and methodology, is exemplified by the work of three medieval practitioners; Georges Duby, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Jacques Le Goff.21 Each of these critics focuses on members of the lower classes and other marginalised groups until recently obscured by traditional historicism:

In the past historians could be accused of wanting to know only about 'the great deeds of kings' but today this is certainly no longer true.22

The lack of source material and documentation about the lower classes in pre-industrial times makes the research difficult,
especially as such little information as exists, is largely mediated by its upper-class, literate authors. In a revolutionary attempt to achieve an understanding of such under-represented groups as peasants and women, these scholars use a methodology involving intensive and very specific research into surviving documentation in order to extract from the smallest facts insights into aspects of medieval life which have remained hidden. These practitioners are all indebted to the influence of Marxist historicism and owe much to the work of Michel Foucault on the subject of history.23

Within literary studies recent historicist practices have also begun to set themselves against the monologic idealism of traditional historicism. The advancement of the historicist enterprise is most clearly visible within Renaissance Studies where New Historicism, through the work of such practitioners as Louis Montrose, Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Goldberg and Stephen Orgel has produced innovative and increasingly radical re-readings of the period.24 More recently, other areas of literary studies such as Romanticism and American Studies have felt the influence of these contextualist methodologies. The
term 'New Historicism' is no longer able to be applied to this movement as a whole. Not only is it hopelessly vague but it fails to account for the diverse interests and critical assumptions of those now writing within the discourse. Feminist scholars have already begun to contest the political assumptions of New Historicism's practitioners and there is a general dissatisfaction with the label, even amongst those who first coined the term. Howard Horwitz has suggested a broader term, Critical Historicism, borrowed from Nietzsche, who employed the term to distinguish his brand of historicism from the uncritical objectivism of academic historicism. This label has the benefit of being as yet unappropriated by any single group with specific political or critical intentions. It is also wide enough to accommodate a number of different historicist methodologies.

The desire for a true dialectical relationship between history and literature, where both are recognised as mobile and generating forces influencing one another, is fundamental to New Historicism discourse. Louis Montrose, one of New Historicism's better known practitioners, explains that the
discourse seeks to 'resituate canonical literary texts among the multiple forms of writing and in relation to non-discursive practices and institutions of the social formation in which those texts have been produced - while at the same time recognising necessarily the textual constructions of critics who are themselves historical subjects.'\textsuperscript{28} Such an undertaking requires a re-definition of the traditional demarcation between history and literature, inviting an examination of the mutual influence of history and literature on one another. New Historicism denies the conventional segregation of literature and history into separate bodies of knowledge and seeks to break down the dichotomy between the two by revealing, in Montrose's words, 'the historicity of texts and the textuality of history.'\textsuperscript{29} For Montrose this constitutes a recognition of the text's cultural specificity and its entrenchment within its social and political situation, and also an acceptance that history is an unstable construct mediated by the limited available documentation of the society in question.

The diverse critical strategies of Critical Historicism all have as their centre the anti-humanist belief that people are
creatures of history and culture, with no transhistorical human essence linking them to previous eras by an unending chain of humanity. Rather, author and text are both products of the social forces at a particular historical juncture; even conceptions of self and basic instincts and desires are products of the socio-cultural values of a given environment. This emphasis on the discontinuous nature of human identity parallels the immense rupture perceived between the past and present and is heavily reliant on Foucault's work on historical discontinuity.

Foucault's work has also led to the knowledge that one can never stand outside history and exist beyond the influence of one's own historical moment. This has led to the inevitable acknowledgement that the critic is also embedded within history and that any reading which relies on a simple syntagmatic understanding of history is invalid. All interpretative strategies involve an appropriation of the present into the past because the past is unavoidably used to serve the critical and ideological needs of the present. Textual meaning, and thus any reading of the text must be viewed as relative, not absolute.
This recognition, 'that the pursuit of history is neither objective or disinterested' has had important implications for feminist scholars.\textsuperscript{30} Since the nineteen seventies feminist critical practices like 'gynocriticism' and 'herstory' have been reassessing the dominant patriarchal construction of history that has shaped our understanding of the past by obscuring and suppressing women's presence within history. The emergence of contextualist practices designed to re-locate our forgotten past has given feminist historicist projects added popularity and attracted new critical attention. Over recent years the medieval period has become one of the major new focuses of this wide-ranging project.

Joan Wallach-Scott, in her study of feminist historicism, states that women's history does not have a long-standing and definable historiographic tradition. It is marked by a considerable diversity of ideology, methodology and interpretation. Yet there is a common dimension to all feminist historiographic scholarship - to make women the focus of inquiry and to construct women as historical subjects.
The earliest approach to the problem of constituting a history in which Woman exists as an historical subjectivity in her own right and not merely as the opposite, or mirror-image, of Man, was to gather information about women previously ignored or dismissed, and re-write 'her-story'. As the pun suggests, the aim was to re-emphasise the historical experience of women and to 'insist on female agency in the making of history.' In 1976, Joan Kelly, one of the most prominent early feminist historians declared: 'Women's history has a dual goal: to restore women to history and to restore our history to women.' The titles of books which launched the women's historicist movement in the early nineteen seventies reveal the act of retrieving women's history, for example, *Becoming Visible, Liberating Women's History, Retrieving Women's History* etc...

Early feminist historicism developed concurrently with social history and is indebted to its methodologies in several ways. The social historian's detailed research techniques into an individual or small community, exemplified in the work of Georges Duby, was quickly adopted, as was the incorporation of
interdisciplinary borrowings from sociology, anthropology and demography. Feminist scholarship additionally benefited from social history's re-conceptualisation of traditionally universal concepts of 'family' and 'sexuality' as culturally generated and subject to change. As a third benefit, social history's focus on previously ignored sectors of the social community, like peasants and children, opened the way for feminist re-assessment of the narrative line of history from a uniquely female viewpoint.

The re-examination of historical events from a feminist perspective has challenged traditional constructions of periodisation and historical progress. Joan Kelly, in her famous essay, "Did Women have a Renaissance?" disputed the historical construction of the Renaissance as a period of enlightenment.\(^{34}\) As far as women were concerned, she believes, the rise of humanist thought brought about a curtailment of the rights and freedom women had experienced in the late Middle Ages. It has been similarly contended that industrialisation and the rise of technology have not led to women's liberation, in the workplace or at home.\(^{35}\) Feminist historical narratives are beginning to
dispose of traditional masculine periodisation. Major social upheavals like war are being analysed to expose the effects which they had upon women as distinct from men. As the logical extension of such feminist narratives of history we may find that the invention of the Pill, for example, comes to play a far more significant role in our view of modern history.

The central aim of most feminist historicist scholarship remains, however, the inclusion of a new historical subjectivity - woman - into received historical categories. The strategy of interpreting women's actions, in terms recognisable to social and political historians, has successfully achieved several aims. The accumulation of enormous amounts of information about women throughout history has disproved initial claims from traditional historians that women had no history worth mentioning and played no significant role in the shaping of the past. Additionally, work on the power women maintained within the domestic sphere has altered scholarly perspective on the significance of personal, subjective experience and its ability to influence public and political arenas. Thirdly, it has insisted on the need to conceptualise gender and sexuality historically.
In this area much work remains to be done. Although it has been widely recognised that gender explains the different histories of men and women, it has failed to theorise about how gender operates historically. The work in this area is still largely comparative rather than analytical.

There are two major traps into which the feminist scholarship, known as 'herstory', falls. The first is the temptation to reduce the re-evaluation of women's role in history to the positive assessment of all women's behaviour. The second common criticism is that gynocentric discourses risk isolating women as a specialist topic of history, consigning women's history to a 'separate studies' area, practised by women for women. If feminist scholarship remains isolated it will continue to be ignored by mainstream historical research where male gender continues to be considered the 'norm'.

The re-orientation of feminist historicism from gynocriticism to gender analysis, initiated by Kelly and Zemon Davis in the mid nineteen seventies, attempted to overcome the isolation of feminist scholarship within historical discourse. They declared
that women's history needs to be more than an alternative or compensatory history. Unlike Christine de Pisan's version of women's history, which we will discuss later, it is not enough for modern feminism simply to restore women who participated in male versions of history - the so-called 'exceptional' women who were as tough/clever/courageous 'as a man'. Zemon Davis firmly states that gender analysis is, 'not the recounting of great deeds performed by women but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organisation of most societies.'

Instead of focusing exclusively on the experience of women, the study of gender investigates how both male and female identities are formed. Comparing differences in the production of sexual identity, new converts from the older historicist project, like Elaine Showalter, are hoping to make discoveries applicable to both sexes. By analysing the vital relationship between the sexes in this manner it is hoped that gender analysis will permeate into every area of study from history and literature to sociology and anthropology. Kelly wishes to make
gender 'as fundamental to our analysis of the social order as other classifications such as class and race.'

The desire to incorporate women's history into mainstream historical discourse has raised some doubts. Some believe that gender studies, like social history, is too integrationist. Women become only one of the groups liberated by 'the particularising and pluralising' of the subject of historical narrative and have to compete for attention along with other forgotten groups. If women's history is not kept separate it is feared that it will be assimilated back into the masculinist system of historical criticism where the affirmation of women's position and significance within history will be lost again.

The efforts of the feminist historians, whatever their critical methodology have, until recently, focused almost exclusively on the eighteenth-, and nineteenth-, centuries. The post-industrial period has succeeded in establishing itself as a cornerstone of women's studies. It has done so for a number of obvious reasons. From the nineteenth-century onwards there is simply more written material available for examination. More importantly,
there is more written about women and by women. From this
time on, women begin to produce a sustained record of their
individual and collective experiences in a wide range of genres.
There is a wealth of material and within it the origins of the
women's movement will be rediscovered.

In the pre-industrial period there are substantially fewer
female writers, not only because of widespread illiteracy but
because prevailing cultural discourses prevented women from
conceiving of themselves as authors. What remains of women's
early writing is largely produced by women of the upper classes
because of the restricted access to education and the
prohibitive costs of either copying or printing. Consequently,
there is not a wide range of women's historical subjectivities
available through surviving women's writing from which to
compile a full picture of women's lives in the pre-industrial
past.

Despite these obstacles the medieval period has recently
obtained a high profile amongst feminist historians; one might
even say that the Middle Ages has become fashionable. Speaking
at an interdisciplinary conference on pre-industrial women in Sydney not long ago, Susan Dixon raised concerns about the way in which research into medieval women was being conducted. She expressed the belief that many feminist scholars are using the example of women in pre-industrial cultures as a contrast to their research into women of modern cultures but are not conducting effective research of their own into these women. Rather they are relying on second hand information and summaries which are often generalised and inaccurate. This lack of adequate research leads to unnecessary errors and perpetuates the over-simplified and distorted representations of medieval women. Some feminist readings of Christine de Pisan, for example, reveal ample evidence of historical inaccuracy and the distorted characterisation which can result from the unquestioning acceptance and re-use of second hand material.

In 1983, Karen Alkaly-Gut articulated her own fears about the damage caused by some 'herstorian' scholarship to an accurate feminist understanding of Chaucer. She claims that feminist scholarship conducted by those outside the field of Medieval
Studies has been haphazard, and on occasion dangerously superficial and ahistorical. Commenting on inaccuracies in the work of Arlyn Diamond and Ann Haskins she calls for feminist critics to make 'a straightforward acknowledgement of the limitations of their professions' at a time when all knowledge has become highly specialised:

A medievalist is more likely to spot partial truths and errors because medieval history and literature are her field. A feminist - albeit a feminist scholar - is less likely to catch errors because her field is women.42

Feminist scholars specialising in the medieval field express similar anxieties about this incursion into their area of expertise. The overriding concern is for the inaccuracies that result from careless research in areas already problematised by incomplete or inconclusive evidence. Sheila Fisher and Janet Halley, in their introduction to women's writing of the late medieval and early renaissance period, explain that one of the major problems facing medieval scholars is 'the difficulty of understanding an area of history whose accessibility is limited by the loss of material to time and to the vagaries of script and early print culture.'43 Dixon adds that the study of women from
pre- and post-industrial cultures is vastly different because of the lack of sources and the mediation of our knowledge by almost exclusively male writers. Women's marginalisation and misrepresentation in the records of the past necessitates intense and very thorough work. Feminist medievalists, like medieval social historians have become suspicious of generalisations and fear that untrained scholars may only be rediscovering medieval women at the expense of accuracy and the integrity of the historical subject.

As a feminist working in the field of Medieval Studies, I, too, believe there is some cause for concern about the recent flood of scholarship on medieval women writers. The popularisation and growing appeal of medieval literature is reflected in the increasing number of essay collections released by major publishing companies concerned with medieval women and their writing. Most attempt to do little more than introduce these newly discovered writers and offer them as a comparison to contemporary women regarding such issues as women's economic oppression and lack of education. The superficial representation of medieval women in these anthologies is a
cause for great concern because as Alkalay-Gut observes, 'it is in these anthologies that feminists educate feminists.'

Another potential threat in the eyes of medievalists is the proliferation of ahistorical, non-materialist readings of historical women in these anthologies, particularly psycho-analytic interpretations. Most feminist criticism in the medieval area tends to be of a materialist nature as a result of the strong influence which Marxism has had upon the development of recent historical methodologies. Moreover, feminist historicist discourses have also favoured materialist readings because they have felt the need to retain a sense of the 'reality' of women's historical subjectivity. It is vital that constructions of gender, family and individual identity are recognised as being socially-, and politically-, produced and susceptible to change within alternative cultures and within history.

Psychoanalysis, although it offers enormous potential for the understanding of women in the past, is viewed with discomfort because it runs the risk of becoming transhistorical in its
construction of sexual identity. It is threatening because it posits the formation of sexual difference (the equivalent psychoanalytic term for 'gender') through semiotic structures. This makes it vulnerable to the charge of essentialism. Although psychoanalysis allows for the possibility of sexual identity being separate from biological essentialism, in practice sexual difference is always associated with the biological differences between the sexes. Concepts of female and male identity are effectively divided along biological lines. This opposes the fundamental premise of feminist materialist scholarship and has caused a distinctive split between psychoanalytic and materialist feminist scholarship.

The, at times, superficial and inaccurate anthologisation of medieval women has, however, done much to bring to the forefront of feminist attention women writers who have long been absent from our view of the past. Two women who have drawn increasing critical attention as a result of this movement are Margery Kempe and Christine de Pisan.46 Both were relatively obscure figures until their feminist retrieval.
I have chosen to focus on these two women authors of the fifteenth-century because they provide valuable, yet vastly different insights into women's access to the written word in this late medieval period. Christine, for example, is a poet of the French court. She is heavily patronised and has a recognised audience for her writing. Not only is she educated to a higher level than most women of her time, but she has the opportunity to improve her learning through her access to the royal library. Her struggle for literary authority takes place amongst the intellectual circles of Paris and within the literary debate known as the *Querelle de la Rose*. Its context is the emergence of early humanist thought in France and the freer, but equally masculinist, forms of literary expression which developed. Margery, on the other hand, is illiterate, socially ostracised and completely alienated from the rigid medieval forms of textual production which survived until much later in England. Her writing is marked by her long struggle for literary authority, and is further constrained by her dependence on male scribes to record her story.

Despite these differences the two women do share several
things. Both have been the victim of negligent or dismissive treatment by traditional historians who did not consider their stories to be the stuff of which real history is made. Gaps in our knowledge about these women have been exacerbated by a lack of basic research. It remains the case that although Christine is perhaps the most famous woman writer of the late Middle Ages many of her works are still awaiting translation into modern French or English. The text upon which we will be focusing, *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* received its first English translation in 1982. There is still no critical edition published and I have been forced to use a modern English translation of the book in my text. This is in many ways appropriate. The vast majority of feminist scholars who have studied Christine have done so via English translation. The English translation of *La Cité des Dames* was commissioned in America to appeal directly to the popularist revival of woman's history and it is from this part of the world that most work on Christine has taken place. The use of an English translation emphasises the importance of this critical heritage, which has certainly changed the nature of Christine studies and our image of this writer.
Margery's Book has been ignored consistently by literary critic, historian and theologian alike.\textsuperscript{50} When she is not omitted altogether from critical collections of medieval mystics or early women writers, she is systematically accorded less space.\textsuperscript{51} Her right to any place at all is still contested and even those who show interest in her Book frequently treat it simply as a piece of social history.

These women have been brought closer still by the recent feminist retrieval of their writing. Both have become the site of recent claims by feminist scholars. Christine has been named the first professional woman writer and Margery has become recognised as the author of the first known women's autobiography in English. These titles have cultivated the image of these women as 'proto-feminists'. Over the last fifteen years, Christine has become so popularised within women's history that she has become known as the most rediscovered woman writer of this period. Mary Beth Rose names Christine as one of the three best known women from the medieval and renaissance periods as a result of this campaign.\textsuperscript{52} Margery's label has a far more ambiguous quality but this, too, has been overlooked by
scholars eager to assert that Margery's mysticism places her in the midst of the first popular women's movement in Europe.

The radically different encounters which these two women had with the dominant textual traditions of their cultures and the similarities in their modern reception make them an ideal combination for my work. Using Margery and Christine as case studies I hope to employ some of the strategies of critical historicist discourse to accurately position these women within their textual and socio-cultural contexts. In particular, I will highlight the alienation these women experienced as writers because of their gender. The true extent of their achievements and their significance to women's literary history can be only fully appreciated if first we understand the way in which they challenged the dominant textual practices of their day and struggled to create a distinctly female identity in their writing.

In addition to this historical re-reading of these women I will address their recent reception and examine, in particular, the validity of the title 'proto-feminist' as it has been applied to
both women. I do not undertake this task in order to undermine the invaluable work already conducted by feminist historicism in this area, however, it is important to correct even the smallest inaccuracies if we are going effectively to restore these women to our past and preserve their historical subjectivity. Moreover, many of the truly 'radical' aspects of these women and their writing are being overlooked by critics too keen to impose our understanding of feminism on this very different historical moment. Through a contextualist analysis and close textual readings I will demonstrate that a more fruitful and sustainable way of viewing these women and their books can be achieved if we preserve their historical integrity.

On a wider scale, this thesis addresses the need to rejuvenate the field of Medieval Studies. The outdated methodologies still employed within Medieval Studies must begin to be challenged from within the discipline in order to bring about swifter change. The isolation of Medieval Studies must also be broken down and the critical assumptions behind the historical construction of this period must be exposed and dismantled. As Patterson notes, 'the renovation of medieval studies requires
not simply the importation of theory but a sustained critique of the assumptions that underwrite the prior alienation of the Middle Ages as a whole.  

It should be emphasised that these case studies do not attempt a wholistic overview. Rather they use emerging historical methodologies to re-locate these medieval women within the textual and socio-political contexts of their period. I have chosen examples from disparate literary and cultural backgrounds to emphasise the range of women's experience of writing, even in this time of women's limited access to textual production. The emphasis in each chapter will correspond to the particularities of the woman's experience. Margery's religious background and her illiteracy, for example, play a significant role in her struggle to create her Book. Christine, on the other hand, has a far more secure position within literary circles and warrants examination for her skilful manipulation of the male textual authorities of her time. Similarly there is a much stronger feminist focus upon Christine which has had a profound influence on our present image of this woman, whereas Margery is only now being brought to the attention of popularist women's
history and is still faced with a strong tradition of anti-feminist criticism.

In summary, this thesis attempts to combine the concerns of the medievalist with those of the feminist literary historian to produce a more accurate and expressly radical contextualist reading of the two medieval women writers, Margery Kempe and Christine de Pisan.
ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER ONE


2. In his latest essay, Lee Patterson discusses in detail the historical construction of the medieval period and the repercussions this has for the academic reception of Medieval Studies. Lee Patterson, Introduction, Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1350-1530., ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

3. Within secondary and tertiary curricula Medieval Studies continues to be ascribed a secondary position to Classical Studies. It is common within school history books to still find the medieval period referred to as 'The Dark Ages'. In the journal, New Literary History, 10 (Winter 1979), several European and Anglo-American medieval practitioners such as Hans Jauss, Paul Zumthor, Eugene Vance and Brian Stock discuss the relationship between Medieval Studies and the present day. Jauss, in particular, addresses the image of the medieval period as 'The Dark Ages'.


5. Patterson, Social Change, p. 5.

Understanding of Understanding," *New Literary History*, 10 (Winter, 1979), 337.

7. Any critical practice that does not take into account the critic's own historicity and ideological bias is susceptible to this charge.


10. Stephen Greenblatt, Introduction, *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* (Norman Okla.: Pilgrim Books, 1982), p. 5. It should be noted that Greenblatt is not referring exclusively to Exegetics, but to all formalist practices that continue to exert their dominance over Medieval Studies.


13. Jean E. Howard, "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies," *English Literary Renaissance*, 16 (Winter 1986), 15. Although Howard's article focuses specifically on the Renaissance, her comments are relevant to formalist practices in other areas of literary studies as well.


17. Himmelfarb, p. 18.

18. Himmelfarb, p. 16.


20. This leads to a stress on historical continuity which many now oppose in the wake of Foucault's work on the radical gaps and absences which permeate our traditional version of history. Susan Dixon defends some aspects of this construction of 'family' stating that in some areas of social history, a sense of continuity over several centuries is not unsubstantiated. However, she observes that such a position ultimately clashes with her own Marxist formulation of history in which society is driven by continual conflict and contradiction. See Susan Dixon, "Theoretical Perspectives on Pre-Industrial Women," *Pre-


23. For Michel Foucault's views on the discontinuous nature of history see especially, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writing, 1972-1977; Michel Foucault, ed. Colin Gordon (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980). A recent critique of Foucault's work on history which goes into the detail which I do not have space for here is found in, John E. Grumley, History and Totality: Radical Historicism from Hegel to Foucault (London: Routledge, 1989).

24. Essays by most of these practitioners can be found together in a recent anthology on Renaissance Studies: Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe, eds. Margaret M. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy Vickers (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986).

25. New Historicism was christened by Stephen Greenblatt in 1982 in his introduction to The Power Of Forms. For feminist
criticism of the term and the practice see Marguerite Waller, "The Emperor's New Clothes: Refashioning the Renaissance," *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings*, eds. Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley (Knoxville: Tennessee University Press, 1989), pp. 160-183. Waller believes some of New Historicism's practices fall into the traps of traditional historicism by seeking to validate the critical perspective from which they write. She believes New Historicism betrays a sense of anxiety about mainstream academic response that Feminism should avoid: 'To be blunt, their own [New Historicians'] discursive practices bespeak a desire for, an investment or belief in, the epistemology of authority' (p. 161). Further on she adds that New Historicians need to examine, 'how they themselves have been shaped by the power/knowledge game which has for so long underwritten white, male privilege' (p. 164).


27. Any future references to New Historicism will refer specifically to the scholarship that associates itself with this label. All broader references to the growing historicist movement will use Horwitz' broader term, Critical Historicism.


29. Montrose, 10.

30. Howard, 23.

31. Joan Wallach-Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New


34. Joan Kelly, "Did Women have a Renaissance?" *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, and reprinted in Kelly's collected essays, *Women, History and Theory*.


40. See Chapter Three, pp. 163-166 for a more detailed discussion of recent feminist scholarship on Christine de Pisan.


42. Alkalay-Gut, 77.

43. Sheila Fisher, Introduction, Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings.


45. Alkalay-Gut, 77.

46. There has been some debate about the correct spelling of Christine's last name. I have chosen to spell it with an 's', although a 'z' is quite acceptable.

48. There is an unpublished edition of La Cité des Dames produced for a doctoral thesis which I have consulted for my research but the general unavailability of the critical edition made the use of an English translation unavoidable. It is, however, appropriate to use the English translation because most scholarship has centred around this translation. Details of the critical edition are as follows: Maureen Cheney Curnow, "The Livre de la Cité des Dames of Christine de Pisan: A Critical Edition," Ph.D. thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1975.

49. Although there was no public statement, it is generally believed that Karen Braziller commissioned a translation of La Cité des Dames from Earl Jeffrey Richards on behalf of Picador to promote the growing interest in women from the Middle Ages. At the end of his introduction to the translation Richards makes special acknowledgement of Braziller's central part in the project: 'I would like to take this occasion to recognise and thank Karen Braziller for her careful and friendly nurturing of this entire undertaking from its inception to its completion' (Introduction, pp. xlv-xlvi).

50. I have chosen to use to capitalise 'Book' when referring to Margery's text to convey both the idea of the title of the book and its structural format.


Author/s:
Watkinson, Nicola Jayne

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