

## PREFACE

This issue of *Feminist Studies* opens with the theme of ambivalence and ambiguity, a posture toward the historical predicament of womankind favored by Mary Beard. As Bonnie Smith tells it, this celebrated, but misinterpreted, foremother of women historians rejected the compulsion to reduce history to the narration of raw facts and unitary interpretations—even feminist interpretations. Beard chose instead to invite a multiplicity of American women to speak their own history in their own, unique voices.

You will hear the voices of many women in this issue of *Feminist Studies*. They include black tobacco workers as well as white housewives in the United States, and range as far away as Zimbabwe and as distant in time as the fourteenth century. Contrary to Beard's preferences, however, few of these women speak in uncensored idiom. We hear them translated by feminist scholars who, despite Beard's invocation many years ago of modernist nonlinear history, still strive to construct a systematic body of knowledge out of the diversity of female, and male, experience. For example, almost every article in this issue persists in judging its subjects by some standard of feminism. Most authors presume, as well, that groups of women can be placed in social categories and related systematically to other social phenomena. Beverly Jones, for example, does not shy away from generalizing about race and gender when discussing black tobacco workers in the American South, and Gay Seidman formulates propositions about the relationship between socialist revolution and gender constructions in her analysis of contemporary Zimbabwe.

Still, contemporary feminist scholarship, as represented by this issue of *Feminist Studies*, hardly replicates the arrogant positivism of the male "masters" of the historical profession scorned by Beard. All the authors in this issue attend carefully to the voices and perceptions of their subjects, be they found in the diaries of Mormon wives or in the images of Christine de Pizan's *Cité des dames* as described by Sandra Hindman. Contemporary feminist scholars also recognize the hermeneutic, subjective quality of their work; they will find merit, for example, in the two different, but not incompatible, interpretations of Mormon polygamy that Joan Iversen and Julie Dunfey contribute to this issue. Other feminist scholars, like Alicia Ostriker, employ their systematic, rationally incisive modes of analysis in order to demonstrate the value of ambiguity and paradox. Ostriker finds that the three poets she studied illustrate how unmitigated anger can be confin-

ing and blinding, a replication of the dominant/submissive structure of patriarchy. When she incants Amy Lowell's exclamation, "Christ! what are patterns for?" she echoes Beard's impatience with the simple constructions of linear thought.

Thus *Feminist Studies* and contemporary feminist scholarship walk a fine line between an anarchy of female voices and a tyranny of monolithic interpretations. Yet we do not find this cause for distress. And there are exceptional moments of transcendence, as when poets like Ruth Stone and Marilyn Hacker move well beyond the passionate, but often single-minded anger that, according to Ostriker, characterized and entrapped American feminist poetry a decade ago. These poets and Beard also recommend another resource to feminists, one which we regularly employ and yet too seldom accord public recognition. That special resource is our sense of humor, the joking, romping, and high kicking with which Mary Beard and her American characters went "laughing their way" through even the most difficult periods of women's history, and which, not incidentally, carries the editors of *Feminist Studies* through many a meeting.

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for the editors