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# A Brief Account of the Founding of the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship

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## Abstract

Elizabeth Robertson, professor at the University of Glasgow, reflects on the creation of the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship. Robertson identifies the beginnings of the society with *The Medieval Feminist Newsletter*, Third Wave Feminism, the renewed interest at universities in theory and feminism, and the need many scholars felt to study women of the Middle Ages. With this account of the society, its work, and the paths of the many people involved in the project, Robertson illustrates how the society remains relevant in our current social and political environment.

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*The Medieval Feminist Newsletter*, whose first issue was printed in 1986, came into being just as Third Wave Feminism began to crest nationally. The organization that supported the *Newsletter* was founded in that year and in 1992 was renamed The Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship (see <https://smfsweb.org>). The three founding editors of the *Newsletter*—Jane Burns, Roberta Krueger (Bonnie), and myself, Elizabeth Robertson (Beth)—came from different disciplinary backgrounds (Bonnie and Jane were scholars of French medieval literature and I of English) and taught at different kinds of institutions (Jane and I at state-supported universities—University of North Carolina and University of Colorado, Boulder—and Bonnie at a private college, Hamilton College). As undergraduates, all three of us had been involved to one degree or another in the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations of the late sixties (and we remember that the treatment of women in the groups that organized those demonstrations helped encourage feminist movements) and entered graduate school just as Black Power and Second Wave Feminism came to the fore in the United States. Political ferment began to change the academy as scholars and students pressed for representation and produced the first black studies programs and then women’s studies programs, both fighting for funding and regular lines. At the same time, theory of various kinds had begun to spread in the academy. Jacques Derrida came to Yale in 1975, and the Yale Criticism and nascent Marxist historicism spread across the academy soon after. Both feminism and theory initially faced resistance in the academy, but eventually found a place in most institutions. Women’s consciousness-raising groups were flourishing in society at large and those few that appeared in academic institutions slowly began to influence the treatment of women in the academy.

It was within the context of the pressure and excitement of this social and cultural moment that we decided to organize a group of scholars interested in the study of women in the Middle Ages. In a fortuitous chance meeting at the Kalamazoo airport in 1985, we discovered our mutual disappointment in the lack of sessions on women at the conference we had just attended. As a seven-month pregnant Bonnie stepped on to the stairs leading to her small shuttle on the tarmac, she turned back to us and suggested we start a newsletter designed to bring together like-minded scholars. What we sought was an increased presence at the conference of the topic of women in the Middle Ages as well as opportunities for academic discussion about them.

It was not the case that research on women was absent in medieval studies or even in our own work at this time. In 1981, as a graduate student at Columbia University, I was hired as an NEH-supported intern for the first interdisciplinary class on medieval women given at Barnard, taught by Lois Ebin, Suzanne Wemple, and Jo Ann McNamara. In 1985, Bonnie and Jane produced a groundbreaking edition of *Romance Notes* on women and romance. I was writing a book on thirteenth-century religious prose written for female readers. But the academy was resistant to the topic. Although Bonnie was encouraged to include women writers in her courses, I had in 1982 to fight with my department to add to the curriculum a course on women writers of any period (several colleagues refused to speak to me for many years afterwards); it was not until 1990 that I could establish a course in multicultural women writers. In a survey on teaching that we conducted for an early edition of the *Newsletter*, many scholars testified that not only were there no dedicated courses to women in their institutions but also, they were not allowed to teach such courses (see MFN, Issue 3, 1987). In other words, to the extent that my experience stands for that of many women working in medieval studies during these years,

the primary issues we faced in the 1980s ranged from polite indifference to outright resistance: women in the Middle Ages were simply not considered to be of interest.

The first *Newsletters* were typed up on typewriters, reproduced by mimeograph, and posted in the mail. They consisted primarily of members' names and research interests, announcements, and a few notices of recently published books on women (in later years, it was impossible to publish the burgeoning list of publications on women and gender and we relied instead on the generosity of Chris Africa, a medievalist and librarian, who provided crucial bibliography and links to the University of Iowa's medfem listserv). We chose an image for a masthead of a dragon (the devil) trying to prevent Mary from reading and a running colophon of a female knight unhorsing a male knight, both crudely reproduced images traced by a sympathetic artist from copies of the manuscript illuminations (manuscript illuminations were very difficult to access in those days). We debated the advisability of including the decidedly Second Wave feminist image of the female knight, but in the end chose to keep it because of its playfulness. As physical objects, the modest early issues convey the immediacy and spontaneity that defined those years of the organization and reveal the function of the Newsletter not as an object to be preserved but as a means to bring a community together.

The gathering of medievalists from multiple fields that the International Medieval Congress meetings at Kalamazoo allowed greatly facilitated the creation of the Society. At the beginning, we collected names of those interested in joining us through earnest conversation with the friends, colleagues, former teachers, and acquaintances we encountered in Kalamazoo at sessions, in the hallways and on the pathways between the "Valleys" where sessions took place. We handed out slips of paper asking for those interested in scholarly discussion about women in the Middle Age to provide their name, institutional affiliation, and specialty. Those slips of paper were often hastily thrust to each of us and were stuffed in pockets and bags (how many were lost?). I have a distinct memory of arranging them alphabetically on the living-room floor of my Sunshine Canyon home in the Colorado foothills where I then lived. I typed up those seventy-three names and interests, mimeographed them, and sent them out by mail to everyone who had expressed interest. We then rotated who would organize and type up the next newsletter. Soon after, Thelma Fenster (Fordham University), also a scholar of French literature, suggested we add to the *Newsletter* a commentary section and joined us as editors. The first of the commentaries consisted of responses to a questionnaire on teaching women in the Middle Ages which recounted the resistance most of these scholars faced in their attempts to run classes on medieval women at their institutions.

The material circumstances for the creation of the newsletter and indeed the society that emerged from it are not what they would be today. The yearly newsletters and sessions came into being primarily through conversations on the phone between first the three, then the four of us. We had no computers, no email, and no cell phones. We were geographically separated—Bonnie in Clinton, New York; Jane in Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Thelma in New York City; and I in Boulder, Colorado. It is worth noting our gratitude for the help of our departments: secretaries volunteered to type up lists and early newsletters; the University donated postage. Those organizing societies today face entirely different material circumstances of production. While the present digital age makes communication swifter and more efficient and the production of newsletters much easier, it is worth considering what has been lost. In our phone conversations it was easy to gauge tone and to deliberate before reaching consensus. In some ways the collaborative spirit we hoped to foster was enhanced by

the very difficulties we faced materially. For organizers who wish to establish societies now, we stress the importance face-to-face conversation plays in building momentum for the project.

At the same time that we edited the Newsletter, we submitted proposed sessions on the topic of women in the Middle Ages to the organizers of the Medieval Congress and a record number of those sessions were accepted. (One year I submitted fifteen proposals and five were accepted.) It is also important to acknowledge the help we received from Jane Chance (a professor of English at Rice University, Houston, Texas) who had worked closely with the then director of the Institute, Otto Gründler; it was in part because of her persuasion that our initial proposed sessions were accepted. We also organized a cash bar followed by a planning meeting.

The sessions at Kalamazoo increasingly drew attention. We directed the first sessions by, for example, sending out a set of questions to facilitate discussion of Caroline Bynum's pathbreaking study of women mystics, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (1987). We then organized a commentary section of an issue of the Newsletter responding to Howard Bloch's book *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (1992). Ideas for session topics quickly emerged from the members during discussions at our business meetings. Initially, there were a dozen or so attendees at the sessions that took place at Kalamazoo, but that number quickly mushroomed to hundreds, so many that the conference organizers were forced to reconsider the small rooms they had initially assigned to our sessions. While we four came from literary departments (three in French and one in English), the sessions grew to address the needs of scholars in a variety of fields including history and art history. As the Society expanded, the desire for conversations about women and gender in our various fields spread to other conferences; after negotiation with other societies, we were able to guarantee places for sessions that we now regularly put together for such organizations as the American Historical Society of America and the International Modern Language Association.

The four of us shared several convictions. We resisted the idea of hierarchy in the organization of the group and in leadership, made easier by the fact that there were so few of us. We agreed that each of us in turn would take responsibility for the production of the *Newsletter*. We discussed possible topics or concerns we wished to address in the *Newsletter* over the phone and our interests and commitments were shaped by the interchanges we had during those calls. The direction of the *Newsletter* was also importantly guided by the discussions that took place at the business meetings. These meetings were lively events in which attendees proposed sessions for the next year based on their responses to the ones that they had just heard and made additional suggestions for topics to be taken up by the Newsletter. We also set up a cash bar which encouraged others who attended the conference at Kalamazoo to join in (they were held in Fetzer and often spilled out into the hall; one male scholar declared excitedly that this was the only gathering he knew of where a woman might buy a man a drink). As the Society has grown, planning meetings have necessarily become less spontaneous and session proposals are now submitted in advance of the conference and voted on at the business meeting. The excitement the organization generated spread into other areas and helped foster the creation of new organizations such as the Feminist Art History Project (first discussed at Kalamazoo in 1991) and the Society for the Study of Homosexuality in the Middle Ages (now the Society for Queer Medieval Studies) which came into being shortly after. BABEL: A Working Group was born in 2004, in part as an effort to rekindle the extemporaneity of the early days of SMFS. The Society is

dedicated to intersectionality and has helped foster the important discussions of race and racism in medieval studies that are now taking place at Kalamazoo and in the field at large.

While spontaneity and lack of hierarchy were major principles for us, we eventually were foiled in our desire to maintain these by the IRS, which contacted us once we began to take in money as a non-profit organization. We were required to nominate a president, vice president, and secretary. We resisted the convention of organizing ourselves hierarchically. We also resisted the creation of a formal journal, hoping to maintain the character of the *Newsletter* as an immediate record of discussions: a journal would inevitably involve delay and would force us to submit to institutional pressures and agenda which we wished to avoid.

But it was always the wish of the four of us that the members of the society would determine its future direction, and we were committed to making room for others to act as leaders by stepping back. Jacqueline Murray was elected as the first president—and she was followed by many committed and energetic presidents from a variety of fields—a distinguished journal was established, and over time the society came to be a more formal, less scruffy, more regular, and undoubtedly more coherent society. While we maintained a nominal rotating presence on the advisory board, we four retreated from organizational work. Our membership grew by leaps and bounds, reaching over a thousand in the early 2000s. Membership then declined for a few years in the early 2010s. Had we become too complacent in our success? But numbers jumped back after a noted medievalist published his attack on feminist medievalists in 2016.

As the Society developed, so too did its agenda for the support of junior scholars and graduate students. From the beginning, the organization was dedicated not only to the consideration of scholarship about women in medieval society, but also to the difficulties colleagues, especially beginning assistant professors and graduate students, faced in working on feminist topics in their institutions. We set up a mentoring program and sessions devoted to discussions of working conditions experienced by feminist scholars. We established a first essay prize and then a first book prize and then, in large part due to the generosity of Judith Bennett and Ruth Karras who donated their royalties to the society, we were able to set up travel funds, research grants and more substantial prizes. In order to raise funds for these efforts, the Society began to sell merchandise at the conference (tote bags and pins and the like). Concurrently, Bonnie Wheeler, a professor of English at Southern Methodist University, set up a fellowship for women scholars in medieval studies which helped foster members of the Society. It is a pleasure to see that those who won prizes early in their careers have become influential tenured professors whose feminism still guides their work. Most recently, the Society established a transfund to encourage safe attendance at conferences or travel to archives for our trans colleagues. For these and all other matters, the Society now maintains a full and informative website.

Although the meetings of the Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo were international, the Society was primarily made up of American scholars until 1996 when Liz Herbert McAvoy, a professor of English at Swansea University, joined the Society and brought to it her energetic commitment to linking it to the British community and thus opening it up to a broader international audience. There were already about forty members from Britain in the Society, but Liz helped solidify the British presence as well as to encourage feminists to join from all over the world, including Japan and Australia. She began in 2007 as an Early Career representative on the Advisory Board, then moved up



to become President of the Society in 2014. She set up an annual roundtable, cash bar, and banquet at the International Medieval Congress held annually at Leeds (an astonishing 120 people signed up for the first banquet and that event resulted in the enrollment of many more postgraduates and lecturers to our roster). Once she was invited to join the steering group of the Gender and Medieval Studies Group, she allied it with SMFS, which now provides an annual grant of \$500 towards the group's annual conference in January. The president of our advisory board now sits on their organizing board.

We five are now retired. Jane, Bonnie, and I are all delighted to have been celebrated with foremothers' sessions and lunches in our honor. Some might think that the urgent need for such a Society has passed, but the recurring political backlash against women across the globe (consider, for example, the recent events in Iran, Afghanistan, and the United States), the dire cuts in academia, and the increasingly polarized discussions concerning identity politics make clear that the work of the Society is as urgently needed as it ever was. We are grateful that the Society is now in the hands of younger and more social-media-savvy members and can see that their dynamism (especially exhibited by the present energetic and committed Advisory Board) promises to take the Society to even greater heights.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Works Cited: Printed**

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Roberta Krueger, Liz Herbert McAvoy and Thelma Fenster for corrections and contributions.