ART I: SCHOLARSHIP

Thelma Fenster, who retired in 2006 from the Modern Languages Department at Fordham University, New York (though emphatically not from active research and other professional work), was one of the founding mothers of Medieval Feminist Newsletter (now Medieval Feminist Forum), serving as its General Editor for two years and as co-editor for seven years. All feminist scholars owe her a debt both for that, and for the excellent model she has provided throughout her career. She early established herself as a highly skilled scholar and editor, an excellent translator, and a penetrating cultural critic and thinker: her work has always been marked by originality, irreverence for outmoded pieties, and fresh and vigorous thinking around and outside as well as within her discipline. She is particularly known to her many colleagues and friends in the profession as a collaborator of genius. Throughout her career, and in whatever situation she has found herself, she has always identified and realized productive enterprises and collaborations, producing idea after idea for new combinations of disciplines and new enquiries.

Thelma’s collaborative publishing began with the massive edition of Lion de Bourges [Lion of Bourges], 35,000 lines of late medieval epic, whose hero, Lion, is initially brought up by a lioness. There followed her edition of Christine de Pizan’s Le Livre du duc des vrais amans [The Book of the Duke of True Lovers], subsequently translated in a separate volume jointly published with Nadia Margolis, and editions and translations of de Pizan in French and medieval English in a joint volume with Mary Erler, Poems of Cupid. In addition to her own collection, Arthurian Women, Thelma has collaboratively organized conferences leading to collections: Medieval Masculinities with Clare Lees and Jo Ann McNamara; Gender in Debate with Clare Lees; Fama: The Politics of Talk and Reputation in
Medieval Europe with Daniel Smail. She edits the French of England Translation Series [FRETS] with Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, to which the editors themselves are contributing two volumes on the vernacular saints’ lives by Matthew Paris, which circulated among thirteenth-century élite women. For 2007, Thelma has collaborated in organizing two conferences, one in New York and the other in York, UK, on the French of England. With Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Delbert Russell, she is editing a large volume on The French of England: Theory and Practices c. 1100-1500. Further individual works by Thelma include her special issue of the journal Thought on Gender and the Moral Order in Medieval Society, a pioneering work of feminist criticism and scholarship published in 1989, and large numbers of articles and essays, principally on de Pizan and Isotta Nogarola.

One of the notable aspects of Thelma’s career is that although she has spent most of it in a department without a graduate program, she has turned what some might consider a lack into an enormously productive situation. She has repeatedly ventured out from her home department to develop team-taught graduate courses on, for example, “English and French Medieval Romance” with Richard Horvath; “Self and Other in the Middle Ages” with Lara Farina; “Epic and Romance in Medieval Spain and France” with Xavier Jimenez-Belmonte; and three pioneering graduate courses on the French of England (“Texts and Territories,” “Texts and Manuscripts,” and “Documentary and Literary Cultures”) with Jocelyn Wogan-Browne. She has also done sterling service in her own lively, committed, and provocative undergraduate teaching. Here again, she has also team-taught, developing, for instance, a collaborative honours course on “Tolerance and Intolerance in Medieval Literature.”

Her service to the discipline includes not only warm and generous personal support of many students and colleagues, but also the running of Fordham’s well-respected and very active Center for Medieval Studies from 1986-1993, and the co-directorship of the Medieval Center and Program in 2001-2002. She has been a leading light in medieval and feminist activities at Fordham for many years.

As all her colleagues and friends know, Thelma is an astonishingly generous person: the fruitful collaborations of her career have only been possible because she is at once a most patient,
good-humoured, realistic, pragmatic, and intellectually visionary person. Her flexible and creative ways of working, making the best of other people and constantly and cheerfully challenging herself, are exemplary. Not all who know her know that everything she achieves is often done against a background of severe family illness: she has never ever been heard to complain or whine, however tough the going has become in managing a demanding job and commute and many professional activities. Her intellectual iconoclasm, always productive, amusedly and penetratingly sceptical, has not let her accept any easy certainties and sends her constantly out across disciplinary boundaries, asking questions and identifying new issues at every turn. Thelma’s career is one of exemplary feminist praxis, not only in her explicit commitment to and development of MFN itself but in the rewarding example she has repeatedly set her students, colleagues, and admirers. Her career is a worthy and inspiring model for all the members of the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship and for the profession as a whole.

University of West Virginia & University of York and Fordham-York French of England Project

PART II: FRIENDSHIP

Friendship. Theories and accounts of friendship, both medieval and modern, are the subject of some considerable analytical attention in these early years of the new century. To this growing work, medieval feminists can contribute a distinctive archive of their own through which to trace cross- and inter-generational relationships among colleagues who share commitments to women, gender and sexuality studies, and medieval studies alike. This is a good time, then, to honour Thelma’s remarkable, long-lasting and ongoing contribution to these goals as we also mark her retirement from Fordham University (though not, as Jocelyn and Lara have already stressed, from research in Medieval Studies).

I first met Thelma Fenster within a week or so of joining the faculty of the English Department at Fordham University in the late
1980s. She set the tone of our friendship at the outset, not only by engaging me in challenging questions about my own research, about feminism in the UK and in Europe, and about Medieval Studies in general but even in finding me a place to live in New York—in her apartment, as it turned out. Personal and professional have combined ever since, though I wonder whether or not such terms hold, or indeed whether we yet have a capacious enough expressive language for these kinds of relationships. Certainly collaborative working friendships cannot simply be measured in conferences co-organized, books co-edited, or articles co-written. Like projects of editing and translating, which Thelma has also made central to her career, collaborative work is often under-appreciated. Administrators, as well as the members of appointments and promotion panels, tend to view collaborative work in Medieval Studies with some skepticism, haunted as they often are by questions about who wrote what and how much. My own experience of collaborative work with Thelma indicates, however, that such questions simply do not apply. Our working relationship has always been in excess of institutional measures that seek to identify contributions or page and word counts. What Thelma has offered instead is an ever-renewing surplus of idea and knowledge, energy and commitment—and generosity. Without Thelma and her partner Jim’s generous offer of the study in their barn on Cape Cod one hot August, it would have taken me a lot longer to write the introductory chapter of my first book; without Thelma’s firm belief that feminists needed to think hard about masculinities, we would not have worked on *Medieval Masculinities* together with Jo Ann McNamara; without her equally firm conviction that I needed to learn more about the “querelle des femmes,” we might never have co-edited *Gender in Debate*.

This is a friendship built, in short, on long and regular phone calls, many emails, endless productive revisions of draft documents, and, above all, on a lot of talking, in conferences or at home, in restaurants, in bookshops, and in clothes stores, when taking a walk, over coffee, lunch, dinner, whenever we can. For these very reasons, as many of us already know, collaborative working friendships discomfit models of authorial possession, they frustrate masculinist and heterosexist ideas about female relationships, and they challenge Oedipal accounts of cross-generational affection and intellectual
engagement. As a founding mother of the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* (as it was then), Thelma has consistently built her intellectual work on models of relations that reach well beyond those of the familiar, powerful (powerfully forbidding as well as nurturing) "mother."

Jocelyn and Lara’s abbreviated account of Thelma’s career (above) shows how rich can be the intellectual rewards of a commitment to working alongside and with friends. Although Thelma has remained firmly a scholar of medieval French, she has consistently worked across disciplinary and methodological boundaries; with historians, theologians, and cultural critics, as well as literary scholars, editors, critics, and translators. She displays a tenacious and passionate intellectual curiosity that encourages her to make an intellectual home in many places—in New York and on Cape Cod, in gender and feminist studies as well as in Medieval Studies, in French as well as, most recently, in the major French of England project. And throughout all of this, she remains a good, kind, generous friend, and scholar.

*King’s College, London*

*Left to right: Thelma Fenster, Clare Lees, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Lara Farina; NYC, Fordham Medieval Conference, 2007*