



## THINKING ABOUT CAREERS: THE MEDIEVALIST-FEMINIST DIVIDE

We panelists who spoke at the SMFS Roundtable at Kalamazoo are all at various stages of our careers, and it seemed appropriate to comment on the medievalist/feminist decision from the very practical viewpoint of career building and career management. We're medievalists, and we're feminists, but I think that it ultimately must be our feminism that advances us within our larger profession of academia. Hence, I am proposing that we need to highlight—dare I say 'market'?—our feminism as we seek tenurable positions, apply for promotion and tenure, and urge our scholarship on an academic community wider than those who subscribe to the medfem-l listserv.

English, comp lit, history, art history, French, and others—in all of our disciplines, the academic job market is fraught with peril, rife with competition, and cloaked in secrecy. Who has interviews where, who gets the 'big jobs,' and who crashed and burned on the market form the basis of many conversations at many conferences, including the International Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo. The reality check on the academic job market, as Donald Hall points out in *The Academic Self*, is that most graduate students who are lucky enough to get that tenure-track offer find themselves moving from the highly specialized world of the dissertation and the graduate seminar to the infinitely generalized world of the undergraduate classroom. The shell shock can be staggering (I speak from experience) as that new assistant professor moves from study of exquisitely specific paleographical detail to an attempt to explain the plot of *Twelfth Night* to a freshmen with a hoop in her eyebrow and a desire to get her general-education-literature-box checked with as little effort as possible.

I don't think my situation is at all unusual. I teach in a small undergraduate college within a large university and most of my classes are 'general English lit,' not medieval literature at all. Most of my students are studying to be teachers, and (pierced eyebrows aside) I am happy to declare my confidence that the elementary and secondary classrooms of America will be richer for their entry into them. My job is to provide them with lower-level surveys of literary history and more specialized study in upper-level classes. I got my job *although* I am a medievalist. I was hired because I knew the Massachusetts Department of Education regulations for the certification of public-school English teachers, because I could teach a wide range of writing and literature courses—*Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf— every year, and because the committee that interviewed me understood my feminism immediately even if they, quite honestly, were not all that interested in my medieval scholarship. That I am a feminist was much more important to the hiring committee than that I am a medievalist. The chances are far greater that today's graduate students will

be interviewed for generalist jobs by feminists than for medieval-only jobs by medievalists. For every 'big job' at a top-tier research university, there are probably 10 jobs at small schools for professors who will teach mostly generalist courses and a specific upper-level medieval course once a year or so. And it is for those jobs that our feminism needs to be made prominent.

The next career hurdle after getting that tenurable position, of course, is the promotion to associate professor. I'd highly recommend both Donald Hall's book, which I mentioned earlier, and *Ms. Mentor's Impeccable Advice for Women in Academia*; they were both enormously helpful for me, working in an institution with something of a *laissez faire* attitude towards support of junior faculty. I have just gone through the promotion process, which is more or less excruciating depending on the institution. Lesley University is most noted for the experimental and non-traditional models it uses in its graduate education programs; there are many feminists on campus but no other medievalists. A good part of my success in the promotion process, I think, came from the identification of the promotion committee members with the feminist focus of my medieval scholarship: they were impressed by publication in the *National Women's Studies Association Journal* but they had never heard of *Exemplaria*. To my promotion committee, 'women's history' seemed more institutionally meaningful and academically worthwhile than 'manuscript tradition' or 'philological analysis.' I'm not arguing that women's history is intrinsically more or less important than manuscript study; I'm not saying that publication in *Women and Language* is intrinsically more or less important than publication in *Studia Neophilologica*. I am arguing that when we examine our career paths and plans with a realistic eye, work framed as specifically feminist will advance us further and faster than work framed as specifically medievalist.

Finally, such career success will enable us to bring our scholarship to the world of women's studies more generally. We know that they are not going to come to us. It's rare to find a general women's studies essay collection that includes the Middle Ages; most begin with the early modern period. In 2002, the Berkshire Conference on Women included five or six sessions on the Middle Ages out of its 200-odd panels; as far as I could tell, there were no sessions that mixed presentation of research on the medieval period with that from other periods. Even more dramatic, the last five volumes of the *National Women's Studies Association Journal* include only one article about the Middle Ages, despite repeated calls for papers on the medfem listserv. In the past ten years, I have been to numerous sessions like this panel at Kalamazoo, sponsored by SMFS; in an annual ritual, we medieval feminists talk about integrating ourselves into the wider feminist community, but we don't do it. We still define ourselves primarily as medievalists, or we would be having this session at the next Berkshire conference. We need to stop talking and start doing, and I challenge all SMFS members to send their next article to a women's studies publication rather than a medieval journal. Such action will broaden the terms of our own work, and it will probably give our careers a boost as well, showing that we have entered into scholarly conversation outside the chronological boundaries of the Middle Ages.

Through presentation of ourselves as feminists, then, we can advance our careers; we can engage in critical dialogue with feminists who work in other time periods; we can highlight for our students a period usually rushed through in survey courses. It's time to move out of the floor of the ivory tower marked 'dusty and obscure' and into a corner office with a full time research assistant, a reserved parking space, and a water view.

—Mary Dockray-Miller, *Lesley College*

### Works Cited

Hall, Donald. *The Academic Self: An Owner's Manual*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002.  
Toth, Emily. *Ms. Mentor's Impeccable Advice for Women in Academia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997.

