

CONFERENCE INFORMATION



CONFERENCE REPORT: GENDER AND MEDIEVAL STUDIES



The annual conference of the Gender and Medieval Studies Group was held at Gregynog Hall in Newtown, Powys on the 4th and 5th of January 1995. It was organized by Diane Watt of the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. The topic of the conference was "Gender and Community in the Middle Ages."

There were sixteen papers presented over two days. The conference began with a stimulating joint session on women's sponsorship of female religious communities by Penny Galloway and Cal Williams (both of Balliol College, Oxford). The theme of women and religious communities was examined rather differently in papers on medieval Welsh convents entitled "The Desire to Corrupt" by Jane Cartwright (Trinity College, Carmarthen); on the visionaries of Helfta entitled "All Girls Together" by Rosalynn Voaden (St. Anne's College, Oxford); and on the use of the vernacular in Dominican convents by Marie-Luise Ehrenschtendner (currently in Cambridge).

Papers relating to the role of women in the secular community were presented by Jennifer Ward (Goldsmith's, London) who talked about the English aristocracy and Trish Skinner (Wellcome Institute, London) who considered the question of whether poverty in the community was a question of gender. In a presentation on women, drama and ritual, Ruth Evans (Cardiff) pointed out that women are often excluded from medieval definitions of community. This prompted a fruitful discussion of notions of community in the Middle Ages. The intersection of secular and religious communities was illustrated in a talk on Margery Kempe by Janet Wilson (University of Otago).

The papers by Richard Ireland (Aberystwyth), Diane Watt (Aberystwyth) and Kay Harris (Southern Mississippi) on respectively, rape, lesbians, and treason and political and economic power in Malory, all explored legal matters. Chaucer was the subject of theoretically-sophisticated presentations on love triangles by Jane Gilbert (New College, Cambridge); landscape and the body by Cynthia Kramen (QMW, London); and the translated female subject by Kirsten Hill (Cardiff). Last, but by no means least, Rhiannon Purdie (Bristol) argued convincingly that internal evidence can be adduced to "sex the manuscript," or prove female ownership, in this case of MS Chetham 8009.

Despite the remote location, freezing weather, and unreliability of British Rail, this conference was a successful one. The program was packed, the papers wide-ranging, and every session thought-provoking. The question asked again and again (but still open in the end) was "Why were women seen to be so threatening in the Middle Ages?" Next year's conference will be hosted by the Centre for Medieval Studies, King's Manor, York and organized by Kim Phillips and Katherine Lewis. The topic will be "Gender and Transgression."

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