

## CALL FOR PAPERS



The Center for Medieval Studies of Fordham University invites abstracts for its XV Annual Conference, March 22-23, 1996 (at *The Lincoln Center Campus*), on the topic: **LEARNING, LITERACY AND GENDER IN THE MIDDLE AGES.**

We encourage multidisciplinary approaches to topics such as: literary and artistic representation, theories of education, household manuals, *laymen* and Latin, the politics of literacy, women as literary consumers, scribal and notarial culture, manuscript production and readership, old texts and new readers, institutional policy and debate, and personal libraries in the Middle Ages. We are especially interested in papers that rethink linguistic and socio-linguistic aspects of gender/Latin/vernacular/oral-written discourse.

Send two-page abstracts with cover information to H. Wayne Storey, Director of Medieval Studies, Keating 107, Fordham University, Bronx, NY 10458-5162. Fax: (718) 295-0366; Information: (718) 817-4655. **DEADLINE FOR ABSTRACTS: OCTOBER 27, 1995.**

## COMMENTARY: FEMINIST MEDIEVAL GRADUATE STUDIES AND THE FUTURE OF THE PROFESSION



The following brief comments continue a dialogue on graduate student concerns that was featured in *MFN* 18 (Fall 1994). We hope that these remarks will be useful not only to graduate students and the faculty who teach them, but to medievalists more generally who might be in a position to advise or mentor undergraduates interested in pursuing graduate work in feminist medieval studies.

## WE'RE HERE. . . GET USED TO IT



It is troubling to me that feminist medieval studies is still engaged in an identity struggle of its own making. In the Fall 1994 issue of the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* devoted to a dialogue between Graduate Students and faculty on the current state of feminist medieval studies and the job market, the main issue seems to be representing feminist medieval studies to medieval studies. We are still endeavoring to justify feminist and gender studies to medieval studies at large, to worry about the antipathetic relationship between feminism and medieval studies, and theory and traditional methodologies, and to argue the legitimacy of feminist approaches to the Middle Ages pedagogically. The titles of some of the articles circulate around these major concerns of identity and self-representation: "How to be a Feminist Medievalist on the Job Market Today," "The Medievalist and Feminist Theory: Prejudices and Problems," and "Feminist Studies: Bridging the Gap Between Job Markets and Intellectual Excellence?"

Eight years and 18 issues after the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* was founded, we are still worrying and interrogating our identities as scholars and our reception in the larger community of medieval studies. This is a peculiar state of affairs—one that is not paralleled in other areas of feminist studies, such as Early Modern feminist scholarship.

I would certainly agree with the writers of these essays that feminist medieval studies continues to face challenges within the profession and on the job market, but I am bothered by our need to rationalize yet once more the use of theory, the study of gender, and our own identities and training as feminist medievalists. It just seems to me that after eight years (and more) of medieval feminist scholarship, we should be able to join the ranks of queer activists to say (though somewhat less poetically) to ourselves and to the profession, “We’re here, we’re feminist medievalists, get used to it.”

I am well aware that this is easier for feminist scholars with tenure to say than it is for graduate students, and I think it is very important for faculty and graduate students to discuss ways of doing feminist medieval studies and forging professional identities. I am worried, however, that our conversations sometimes become stuck in an iterative pattern of interrogating medieval feminism. I would like to see us refocus our energies in these dialogues about medieval feminism away from identities and rationales and towards an interrogation of—and debate about—the diversity within medieval feminism—that is, medieval feminisms. In addition, we need to begin widening the scope of dialogue to include and actively intersect feminisms of other periods. It is still a problem that medieval feminism borrows much from early modern and modern feminisms, but that little of our research, theorizing, and conversation finds an audience in the larger forum of feminist scholarship. As Judith Bennett recently suggested in her essay, “Medievalism and Feminism” in the *Speculum* gender volume, we need to “cast our voices a bit farther afield” (p. 329). To avoid merely spitting in the wind we must actively construct dialogues with feminisms of other periods in this *Newsletter*, in journals, and in conferences devoted to the project. For I am not as optimistic as Bennett is that medieval feminism “is already altering feminist scholarship and theory” (p. 329). Nor is it likely to happen that our feminisms will eventually trickle down, up, or across to other feminist scholarships unless we deliberately and aggressively seek out conversations with them. I think this kind of dialogue will ultimately remedy some of the identity crisis we continue to experience and write about, but in more productive ways than we are able currently to do among ourselves.

Such a dialogue will also challenge medieval feminisms both to articulate publicly their own internal differences and to engage contemporary feminists in our discussions. We cannot be afraid of confronting our differences and airing our disagreements in public, as we were at the *Speculum* session at last year’s International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not the academy is indeed witnessing the rebirth of the “public intellectual,” as the *New York Times* has claimed, feminist medieval studies will remain vital only if we cast our voices farther afield, as Bennett suggests, and finally get used to the fact that we are here.

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1. For a fuller treatment of the *Speculum* session, its significance for feminist medieval studies, and the need for public debate of our differences, see Karma Lochrie, Clare A. Lees, and Gillian R. Overing, “Feminism Apart: A View from Medieval Studies,” in *Figuring Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Kari Weil, under consideration at Stanford University Press.