

“THE AMERICAN MEDIEVALIST: A SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL PROFILE” REVISITED

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In 1984 David Herlihy turned his Cadasto-trained statistical skills onto the Medieval Academy of America and its mailing list.¹ Admitting that the list revealed data on only 41.5% of those who considered themselves medievalists, and acknowledging that a mailing list from Kalamazoo would substantially change his findings, he still went on to figure the sex ratio of the Academy at 182, a statistic this audience will not find surprising. Breaking down this figure, History and German had sex ratios most unfavorable to women: History at 410 and German at 450. English Literature and Modern Languages fared somewhat better.² Among Fellows of the Academy there were 7 women and 82 men in 1984. Again, this prompts little surprise.

What interested Herlihy most was that the masculine dominance of the Academy had been changing since 1952 as fewer men and more women entered medieval studies. The trend did not, for Herlihy, portend “growing equality between the sexes and suppression of differing sex roles in society” but rather men’s flight from the Humanities. Men had withdrawn from academia as teaching positions on the college and university level become “second income jobs acceptable to women.”³ There is a certain irony in the fact that Herlihy was deeply implicated in the trend he analyzed, having inspired or trained numerous women to enter the field.

I doubt today that the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter*’s audience is as alarmed as Herlihy over the “feminization” of medievalism. The ratio of Fellows in the Academy has evened out a bit but many men have entered the field since 1952 and they have no difficulty securing positions of leadership and prestige. Indeed there is reason to believe that women medievalists have not changed their minority status appreciably. However they continue to enter medieval studies in great numbers although they face less rosy job prospects than the men who enter the field today.

Herlihy missed one salient feature of the trend: women’s entry into medieval studies is interest-driven with an urgency that many men might find difficult to match. This may mean that that future pool from which colleges and universities will draw their medievalists may be populated by equal, or even greater, numbers of women candidates. What Herlihy did not take into consideration was the propensity of women to consider their inherent interest in the field before considering questions related to remuneration and prestige when they made decisions about vocation. Apparently women in the professions often behave in this fashion, or at least there is significant literature on women in the professions that makes this claim.⁴

Two questions come to mind when considering this trend: first, why is medieval studies chosen by women and second, what does this signify for the future?

Certainly the easier question to answer is the first. The urgency with which women take up medieval studies reflects the perception that for medieval times, in contrast to classical or modern times, women were “present.” This is an absurdist notion but as a bright undergraduate headed for graduate school breezily stated it, she could study the Middle Ages because women were “there.” Now, that did not necessarily mean she planned to actually study women, or indeed that she even identified herself as a feminist. However at some primary level, some women find the Middle Ages accessible because the rigors of archives, linguistic challenges, and comprehending the contours of a society

remote from our own in chronological and spatial terms places them at no greater disadvantage than men entering the field. As a discipline, medieval studies has become a more neutral playing field. Of course it is also true that women scholars have now opened new questions about medieval women's historical agency and the construction of gender. These are fruitful debates that draw in more investigators. And feminist medieval discourse represents one of the few radical discourses left in academia; it attracts inquiring minds for that reason.

To turn to the second question, because of this attraction future search committees will continue to find more women—well trained, first rate scholars, I might add—to choose from when they make an appointment in medieval studies. This leaves search committees with two choices: 1) appoint a woman and accept the possibility that she will construct her courses and her scholarship around her interests, which may include a feminist agenda of women or gender, or 2) find grounds for excluding women candidates. In these days of Affirmative Action the latter is a peril-filled path but, of course, that may change due to political action. Perhaps more importantly such exclusion would eliminate some of the finest products being turned from our graduate schools today, and few first rate institutions are prepared to take that path.

Is it possible that we are entering a seller's market? Now that would be a new twist.

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1. David Herlihy, "The American Medievalist: A Social and Professional Profile," *Speculum* 58,4 (1983): 881-889.
2. *Ibid.* pp. 882-885.
3. *Ibid.* p.889. That women might represent a first family income was not discussed.
4. The literature on this question is vast. For two example see Barbara J. Harris, *Beyond Her Sphere: Women and Profession in American History* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood, 1978) and *Interpreting Career*, ed. by Richard A. Young and Audrey Collin (Westport, Ct.: Praeger, 1992).

READING ABILITY: NEGOTIATING ACADEME ON CRUTCHES

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Question: Medievalism, feminism, and disability: where do the three intersect?

Answer: Where I'm standing.

It was clear to me that the three terms somehow conveniently intersected in me, a disabled feminist writing a thesis on the poetry of the *trobairitz* and aspiring to a career in academe (though not necessarily in that order). That was the best I could do when the topic of this piece was first proposed to me. Beyond it, I had only questions: why would I want to write it? Frankly, it reeked of -isms: Medievalism, Feminism, Ableism...to say nothing of the mental masochism involved in trying to combine the three of them in what was to be a "short" piece. Secondly, why would anyone want to read it? The topic struck me as too subjective—self-indulgent, even—and not theoretical enough to be of interest to anyone in the able academic community. Such cynicism is certainly due to years of trying to convince professors of the legitimacy of studying a topic—the representation of disability in literature—in which I have such a "personal" investment.