

# FUNDING FOR MEDIEVAL FEMINISTS: STRATEGIES, CHALLENGES, DILEMMAS

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**F**ind the funding source(s) appropriate for your project, or a part of the project. Then make your project description

- fit the aims and missions of the granting institutions and craft the proposal to address all the criteria listed for evaluation, making sure that your proposal conforms with all the requirements of the application form. Do not ask for coverage of items that are not eligible for funding. Review boards can easily use such features to discard a proposal on formal grounds. Implicit goals of foundations are also important. For example, if the organization only supports research on the Middle Ages, but does not define the Middle Ages, you should refer to an early sixteenth-century illuminated codex that provides the focal point of your study as a late-medieval manuscript rather than as a “Renaissance” book.

2. Decide on your primary strategy/goal/motivation and then overstate your case a bit. There will always be adequate room to qualify your findings and define the limitations of your observations when you write the book.

This might include emphasizing the “discovery” of new documents, the cataloguing of a group of monuments that has never been inventoried, the analysis of a literary work that is unstudied or understudied, or the challenging of the work of previous scholars. More often than not, however, feminist scholarship involves the reinterpretation of old or new documents, monuments, or literary works, the posing of questions that have never been asked before, and the use of new approaches and methodologies that allow us to pressure these works in new ways and thus consider the past in the light of the concerns and sensitivities of the present. I have often pursued a combination of the above goals: exploring unknown material and historical contexts while employing postmodern critical theory. Jane

Chance comments that her projects have become increasingly feminist during the time subsequent to her grant-writing efforts. In retrospect I might observe the same of my own work. The rhetoric of grant application forms often calls for projects that promise tangible results. Later, after the research has been completed and we present our findings, we may be more likely to allow our feminist voices to animate our interpretations.

Both revisionists and traditionalists will react favorably to a well-defined project with concrete goals of describing, counting, or transcribing, and with the promise of closing some gap in the body of historic knowledge. Traditionalists, however, be they positivists, non-feminists or antifeminists, may react negatively to applications, even when articulately written, that propose to engage feminist, gender, or queer theory, since these approaches will call into question scholarly reliance on the verifiable and quantifiable, i.e. so-called dates and facts. Certainly those employing critical theory will never find self-conscious witnesses within medieval sources, as documentation for postmodern analysis, since these models were not yet developed during the Middle Ages. Moreover, for those who choose to think in terms of stable structures, poststructuralist viewing patterns may be particularly unsettling since they call into question the absolutes of roles and orientations.

Another, related problem inherent in these “culture wars” affects how certain objects of feminist inquiry are viewed from outside feminist discourses. The study of medieval women was first taken up by so-called first generation feminists, who were content to unearth and dust off forgotten women; subsequently the study of both women and gender was co-opted by mainstream medievalists who often (and perhaps unconsciously) seized opportunities to re-inscribe gender difference, gender hierarchies, and heteronormative sexuality. The impression has thus been created that the work of studying women and gender is complete. A “been there, done that” attitude may rear its ugly head when a review panel is confronted with new feminist proposals that challenge old paradigms. Exactly how far one might be willing to go in a grant proposal to foreground new theoretical challenges

or to integrate various methodologies (merely paying lip service to some, feigning a more conservative approach in the grant proposal than that which will actually be undertaken, proposing a positivist approach and trying surreptitiously to integrate critical theory prior to publication, or writing a proposal on one topic and actually using the time to work on something completely different) are all issues involving fears of failure and willingness to take risks, as well as practical and ethical questions.

In choosing to “pitch” one’s research as a new discovery, women may have a lot to learn from men who have often been successful in getting support for their work using this claim. Some “discoveries” in fact have been quite conveniently mediated by the work of nineteenth-century European archivists, philologists, historians, and art historians. I have often noticed, however, that what is good for the gander is not always good for the goose. Although setting one’s self up as a Christopher Columbus sailing in the other direction might work for men, it might backfire for women, whose roles have long been perceived as the caretakers of artifacts and art objects, providers of inventories, and the transcribers of documents, as well as the thoughtful nurturers of relationships. Perhaps for these reasons, new discoveries, like posing challenges to previous authors and proposing new terminology, are therefore more acceptable when put forward by a male scholar than a female applicant. It would be interesting to see some statistics here.

Generally, whether one has chosen to be radical or conservative, I would recommend overstating the novelty of the approach and the impact of the potential findings. Hypotheses or notions that one wishes to demonstrate should be stated clearly, in such a way as to facilitate the understanding of colleagues outside of one’s own discipline, and in an easily quotable fashion. Review committees are often composed of individuals from many fields, and reviewers are usually called upon to write summaries of the grant applications under consideration.

3. Unfortunately, due to limited resources in our fields and increasingly fierce competition for only a few grants, one must

also overstate what one can do with the money. Most North American granting agencies will not provide fellowships for longer than a year. To complete an entire book project in one year is, in my assessment, illusory. Yet, to propose the research for and writing of a major article is probably a far too modest, if a more realistic, goal. One can also err on the side of being overly ambitious, since reviewers and granting agencies might be leery about a junior scholar attempting to publish a weighty corpus of material as the definitive reference book, rather than embarking on an interpretive study of more narrowly defined material. Some grant guidelines require applicants (and recommenders!) to assure the granting institution that the grantee will be able to complete their proposed project within the grant period. How does one make such an unrealistic promise? In some cases I have heard colleagues confide that they have written grant proposals when a book was already in press, knowing that the project would certainly reach completion within a foreseeable time frame. They thus had the luxury to use the time to start a new project.

I have often been envious of European colleagues who have access to funding programs that allow for multi-year stipends and consultants' fees for colleagues, or support for a research team including student assistants. Such arrangements further collaboration, which is necessary for more ambitious projects, while they also provide invaluable contacts and "learning by doing" training for graduate students. Most importantly they enable scholars to plan over a longer time period and to set realistic goals rather than "underbidding" each other in order to attain a year of partial salary replacement. Through our institutions and professional organizations we need to begin to think in these larger terms.

4. Try leveraging multiple funding sources. Some home institutions provide seed money for new projects in order to encourage faculty members to write grants. Any funds already received make a favorable impression when mentioned in grant proposals to major funding agencies. Most universities will make up the difference between the amount of a fellowship and the

faculty member's usual salary, as well as continue to provide benefits. Some home institutions will offer money to complete a project. Establishing policies on these matters rather than relying on individual negotiation will usually work in the best interest of medieval feminist scholars. Faculty governance, where it exists, should work toward or lobby for set procedures. Grantees or applicants with joint appointments and affiliations should not be shy about asking each department or program to contribute something. Administrators include faculty grants in their own annual reports. If your project has a component that can be used to address broader public audiences beyond the scholarly community you may be able to tap still other monies, including local businesses, community-centered humanities agencies, and the broadcast media. A radio or television station or production company might be willing to contribute a tax-deductible donation to a project in lieu of paying an honorarium.

5. Do your homework. Despite all my above advice that you overstate your case, stress the importance of your objects, underscore the novelty of your approach, and emphasize the impact of your potential findings, do read broadly before making claims that no other author has broached the topic. Nothing makes a more negative impression on a grant referee than the newcomer who proposes to reinvent the wheel. As a grant reviewer, I am much more inclined to rank a proposal favorably when an applicant disagrees with the positions that established scholars have assumed in their work than when the applicant claims that this work does not exist. References to the previous literature on a topic always make a good impression, even if no bibliography is required.

#### THE CURRENT SITUATION

To the above advice I would like to add what is perhaps a distressing note regarding the availability of grants and fellowships for the work of medieval feminist scholars. For many reasons we may now find ourselves among the disadvantaged rather than the chosen few. In the introduction to this section, Virginia Blanton

and Rachel Dressler recount their experiences with the National Endowment for the Humanities, particularly the Endowment's words of caution in response to a query about funding for *Different Visions*, a journal that provides a platform for scholars using postmodern approaches to the visual culture of the Middle Ages. As Judith Bennett has recently pointed out in her book *History Matters*, the distant past and medieval history are not areas favored among those who decide which positions should be funded and filled at universities, and certainly the same is true for research projects.

For my own discipline of art history, I might add that the tolls that are extracted from us in order to reproduce the images and works that we study have greatly increased our costs during the last decade. At the same time, publication venues, especially for book-length manuscripts and anthologies, have decreased, and the publishers who remain are demanding ever greater subsidies just to print images. Very recently the Getty Grant Program announced that it is discontinuing not only its publication subventions but also most of its grant categories that supported individual or collaborative research through portable grants that could be used for study in Europe. In order to save administrative costs, the program will now concentrate its resources on grants to institutions. Needless to say, most feminist scholarship does not take place under the auspices of museums and collections.

Additionally some newly implemented practices at institutions of higher education are likewise negatively impacting the amount of funds available for the humanities. Many universities are now requiring that grantees in all fields surrender anywhere from fifty-one to thirty-five percent of the entire value of the grant, or of some parts of it, as "indirect costs." The upper limits of grants in the humanities were always comparatively low, and these charges for overhead and administration take valuable resources away from the projects themselves. In light of all of this bad news, we might not only work at honing our individual grant writing skills but also think about acting collectively to assure that grant funds will still be available to medieval feminist scholars in all disciplines. The establishment of a grant to support

feminist scholarship on the Middle Ages would move us toward legitimating our goals rather than feeling pressured to hide them.

#### CRITIQUE OF DR. PEPPER DUNCAN'S GRANT PROPOSAL

Indulging in a bit of art historical nit picking, I would ask what exactly is depicted that leads the author to assume that “the initials show each of the family members beginning prayers for the family’s name-day saints...?” Are images of figures kneeling in prayer nestled within the initials? How do we know their identities? Does the image of Mary Bale Gilbert actually mimic the pose and gesture of the angel Gabriel? However, my foremost critique of Dr. Pepper Duncan’s grant proposal was her failure to demonstrate the importance of her manuscript and the potentially broad impact of her proposed study. I would like to read how and why the applicant expects that by focusing on this one unstudied or understudied object we will learn a great deal more about books of hours, their many meanings and functions, and about those who used them. From my own feminist perspective, I would also like to hear that she is employing methodologies that have not heretofore been applied to books of hours, posing new questions pertinent to the concerns of our day, which might perhaps include re-evaluating the traditional associations of women and books of hours and re-assessing the specifics of this gendering in history and historiography.