

Afterward: Memory in Feminist Cultures

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DO YOU WORRY even now about equal treatment for women in our professions? Even now? You should. Let's remember that the much-needed Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009 was the first congressional act signed into law by President Barack Obama. Even now, the United States of America does not have a constitutional amendment requiring equal rights for women. Even as medievalists struggle to understand medieval mentalities, feminist medievalists often enter into the Great Forgetting of their immediate foremothers' tough work both to enter and to achieve heft, if not parity, in the Academy. Probably the medievalist with whom we most associate groundbreaking work on memory is Mary Carruthers, author of *The Book of Memory* (now in its second revised edition).¹ Do you remember or can you imagine that Mary Carruthers was denied tenure at Smith College in 1971? Smith's English Department argued that her research was "derivative, tendentious, and unpublishable."² Carruthers sought recourse through the usual college channels. When these were denied, she pursued legal remedy through the office of the EEOC.³ It took ten years for her suit to be settled, and the complexity and harassment of the process itself in part led her to recommend to Dolores Frese that she by-pass the nice-girl EEOC process and go straight to the law.

Mary Carruthers had been reduced to the unemployment lines when, through happy circumstance, I was unexpectedly asked by the female chair of a department I was leaving (Case Western Reserve University) to help choose my replacement. By 1973, the job market had crumbled, and even a medievalist with very strong credentials had slim chances of employment. How many universities would hire a faculty member who was embroiled in a legal tangle with her previous institution? Wonderfully, at E. Talbot Donaldson's recommendation, the chair and I were deliberately complicit in presenting Mary's case and CWRU hired her.

Sometimes it takes a village—in this case a temporarily preoccupied administration, two women, and three feminists (for Donaldson, an eminent specialist on Middle English literature, was certainly that)—to achieve a happy outcome. One remembers Talbot's reports of testifying on Mary's behalf; he was deeply offended by the injustice and cruelty of her former colleagues. Meanwhile, Mary moved on to a stint in Chicago, then to New York University, where she served as an esteemed dean and is now Erich Maria Remarque Professor of Literature. She is a Fellow of the Medieval Academy, which still has too few women Fellows, and has served as its president, just as she served as president of the New Chaucer Society. And during all this time, she wrote book after book about memory and truth.

In the 1970s through the early 1980s, it seemed that most of the women I knew who received tenure did so upon appeal while their male colleagues sailed through. Ironically, those who, like Carruthers, were forced to seek remedy through legal processes outside their own colleges and universities, are even now legally constrained from speaking specifically about the process and outcome of their cases. As Mary says about her own case at the end of this process, "Nor was there anything about public apology or anything else that might have helped to 'make whole' my academic reputation." For a very long time (even when the chair and I were able to undermine the letters), several Smith colleagues took it as a special duty to write damning letters about her, one of our model teacher-scholars. We all know that, in the end, Mary's career has been immensely successful (in her view "despite the legal suit, not because of it").⁴ But we don't know, and thus can't collectively learn from, the particulars of the settlement. This is why it is so important to have the public and permanent record of Dolores Warwick Frese's professional travails.

Writing about her professional formation and career in a previous issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum*, Mary said of her tenure denial that it

taught me to respect luck more than merit, to understand just how circumscribed and weak the criteria of "merit" are in actual practice, and how very much merit needs vigilant protection. It also taught me that human intervention, for good and ill, really does shape the

fates of actual people's careers. I "lucked out" through the decency of many people, some of whom were my friends, some of whom didn't know me in person but thought I deserved better than I'd gotten. I have tried to remember this when I've had a chance to help the career of others; I make no apology for doing so, because I owe everything to the critical invention of other scholars at crucial points in my career.⁵

We feminists need each other's stories and we need a roll call of our brave foremothers who simply refused to accept injustice. This issue of *MFF* is aptly dedicated to the memory of the beloved Jo Ann McNamara, who refused inequality in all forms. Some of you might not know that Jo Ann was elected as a Fellow of the Medieval Academy. She refused the honor because she found the division between the paying members and the "Illustrious Self-Perpetuating Fellows" (as she called them) to be contemptible. Since I thought the Medieval Academy under Rick Emmerson's direction (and with the aid of such eminences as Mary) was working hard to open up the process of nomination and election, I urged Jo Ann to accept the position, but she was adamant that any distinction among members was invidious. JoAnn kept us on our toes about equality, and the strength of women like Mary Carruthers and Dolores Frese gives us the memories upon which to build. Even now.

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∞ END NOTES

1. Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990; 2nd rev. ed., 2008).

2. Mary J. Carruthers, "The Agony of Influence," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 31 (2001): 43-47, p. 45.

3. In 1971, there was no federal remedy possible; thus, the entire procedure took place in Massachusetts (through that state's EEOC). As Carruthers notes, "I was very lucky in that way because many other states at that time had no such laws. The Federal law came in 1972" (personal correspondence, June 17, 2009).

4. All quotations from Carruthers from personal correspondence, June 17, 2009.

5. Carruthers, "The Agony of Influence," p. 46.