MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT OF SMFS

It's always daunting to start a new project, and although I'm not new to SMFS, I am new as President, so for those of you who don't know me yet, let me introduce myself. I am a historian of women and political power, specifically queens, and even more specifically, Spanish queens in the later Middle Ages. Because my own work focuses on the fifteenth century, I do cross some chronological boundaries and share my professional allegiances with early modernists. I also cross some disciplinary borders because my work in women and gender history intersects with political and institutional historians, literary scholars, art historians, and cultural historians. This interdisciplinarity attracted me to SMFS in the first place and it remains a tremendous source of intellectual joy to me.

As I begin the work of President for the next two years, I am very grateful to Monica Green for her leadership over the past two years and the lasting and important impact she has had on the Society. Monica Green brought SMFS through some fundamental transitions. The two most important changes were completing the move of the Medieval Feminist Forum from the University of Oregon, where it had been under the direction of Gina Psaki, to Minot State University with Michelle Sauer as the Managing Editor, and the move of the med-fem discussion list from the University of Washington to the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ACMRS) at Arizona State University. It speaks well of us individually and our institutional personality that we emerged from these significant changes while maintaining the hallmarks of feminists—collegiality, collaboration, egalitarianism, and a strong belief in the power of consensus.

Let me say how happy I am to work with Ginny Blanton, the newly elected Vice-President; Michelle Sauer, the Managing
Editor of the *Medieval Feminist Forum*; Chris Africa, the Bibliographer and Book Review Editor; and all the members of both the Advisory Board and the Editorial Board of the *MFF*. I'd also like to welcome the new members of the Advisory Board: Rachel Dressler, Associate Professor of Art History at University at Albany, State University of New York; Elizabeth Freeman, Professor History at the University of Tasmania; Katie Keene, a doctoral student at Southern Methodist University; Megan Moore, Assistant Director of the Center for Renaissance Studies at the Newberry Library; and Jennifer Thibodeaux, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater. They bring impressive scholarly expertise, fresh ideas, and a geographic and disciplinary range and scope that will strengthen SMFS in many important ways.

I would like to also extend my sincere and heartfelt thanks the members of the Advisory Board who are stepping down after two (or more) years of service to SMFS: Kimberly LoPrete, Catherine Mooney, Marla Segol, Nancy Bradley Warren, and Jennifer Borland. They have been invaluable resources who, I know, will continue to bring their intellect, their passion for feminist scholarship, and their always-welcome sense of humor and good will to all the SMFS sessions and meetings. Marla Segol continues on the Editorial Board and will be serving as editor of *MFF* in 2010, after Felice Lifshitz.

I want to continue to work through the implications of these changes while leading SMFS into a more prominent position among professional scholarly societies. We're already there in one tangible way, the Prize for First Book of Feminist Medieval Studies. When I worked on this book prize committee in 2006, we had seven submissions. This year, there are seventeen. That is a truly significant marker of progress. Those of us on the prize committee—Jennifer Brown, Rachel Dressler, Barbara Harding, Megan Moore, and me—have our work cut out for us. This is a genuine embarrassment of riches. The books represented
are impressive in terms of breadth and depth of research and inspirational scholarly feminism.

Yet, surprisingly, given this outpouring of books, the membership of SMFS is much lower than in past years. On the one hand, it is apparent that there is more feminist scholarship than ever, and that the SMFS prize has a high profile among feminist academics and publishers. On the other hand, we’ve lost members. This troubles me while it mystifies me. I’m troubled because the SMFS has been instrumental in bringing prominence to rigorous feminist scholarship. I’m mystified because we have done this through a dedicated and active membership. Some of the loss of membership is easily attributable to the inevitable attrition due to retirement or death of members. Some of it may be due to the change of both the med-fem list and the MFF to new locations, which may have left many members unmoored in the transition. But this doesn’t account for the several hundred members we’ve lost. This loss of membership has direct fiscal implications that have weakened us. There has been some talk of increasing the dues and subscription fees, but the board has been reluctant to do this, worrying that it would be counterproductive and deter renewals.

My first task as President, therefore, is to take up a focused and concerted effort to expand membership. There are several ways to do this, and I’ll outline some suggestions. The first, easiest and most direct, is to ask each of you to make it a goal to recruit new members. We need to be better at outreach and promotion, especially at Kalamazoo and especially to graduate students and junior faculty, but also to everyone who appreciates the mentoring, the scholarly community, and the participation in sessions at Kalamazoo, Leeds, and more specialized conferences. I will be working with members of the Advisory Board to move the membership information to an improved database, and to create a new position, a Membership Coordinator for SMFS. This job would focus exclusively on membership: moving the current member information to a new, better database; developing ways
to increase membership; fine-tuning and improving our service to members; and serving as the liaison among the members, the board, and the wider academic community. This is an important step that I hope will energize the organization and take us in new intellectual directions, and I am excited by the prospect of what this will bring.

We will all meet in person (I hope—I know that the economy is making travel to the US very expensive for the non-US members) at the annual International Congress on Medieval Studies on Kalamazoo 8-11 May. Please, mark your calendars for the five SMFS sessions: “Feminist” Men of the Middle Ages?; Disturbing Women; History, Patriarchy, Feminism: Responses to Judith Bennett’s *History Matters* (a roundtable); Show Me the Money! Grants for Feminist Work (a roundtable); and Fakes, Facts, and Antifeminism in the *Da Vinci Code*. And, while you have your calendars out, pencil in the grad student wine reception and the annual banquet on Saturday evening, 10 May at Saffron. In March I’ll send out a note with details as to time and place, and with information about reserving a space at the banquet, but for now, just save the date.

*Theresa Earenfight*

**MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR**

*Special Issue: Geographies of Gender: Women, Space, and Place in Medieval Europe*

Between 1230 and 1272, the Portuguese noblewoman Constanza Sanches bought a great deal of property. Constanza, a natural daughter of the Portuguese king Sancho I (d. 1211), was wealthy, having inherited a great deal of cash from her father. She used her money to buy land, particularly in the parish of Carnota, in the region of Alenquer. That was a politically sensitive area, being subject to an inheritance dispute/civil war between Sancho I’s legitimate children. Eventually, I hope to map out Constanza’s purchases, and to discern the meaning of this unusual single,
secular woman's economic activity. Why was she collecting estates? Why in this particular region? (I suspect that her collection reflects her close relationship with her royal sisters, Teresa and Mafalda.) To whom did she leave this property (and why) when she died around 1272?

Constanza Sanches’ special economic relationships were to space and place, but it was the form of the charters recording her purchases that inspired the initial call for papers for this issue of the *Medieval Feminist Forum*. This formula was not unique to Constanza, and certainly not to other medieval women of her time and place (that is to say, it was not gendered)—but it was special to medieval Portugal. Here as elsewhere, and indeed into modern times, the property, bought and sold in these charters, was described by its boundaries, but the way the boundaries themselves were articulated caught my eye: “In oriente . . . in occidente. . . . in aguilar. . . . in affrico” [In the east. . . . in the west. . . . in the north. . . . in the south]. The south was Africa. I wondered: how does such delineation and such vocabulary affect the understanding of spatial orientation in these instances? The meaning for Portuguese women was less gendered than it was regional—and yet, I am certain, such women did not transcend their gender, even in the course of buying and selling. What did it mean for a Portuguese woman to acquire property with a boundary “in Africa?” I wanted to know more about the meaning of space and place for medieval women, and to take the questions beyond the well-defined discussions of women’s domestic boundaries (the court, farmyard, bedroom, even study) and transgressions of that place—to a geographic, mappable level.

This issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum* begins to answer my questions, and raises many more. Situating their studies geographically in medieval England, Lisa Weston, Elizabeth Freeman, and Justine Semmens grapple with the problems of space posed (and experienced) by religious women in Anglo-Saxon Barking (Weston), in the twelfth-century Cistercian communities of Tarrant and Marham (Freeman), and in the
theology of Julian of Norwich (Semmens). Following textual clues from Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* as well as the unique Hodilred charter, and using archeological and toponymic evidence, Lisa Weston investigates the transformation of a pagan landscape to a Christian one, surrounding the “foundation” of Barking abbey, and its identification with the body of its first abbess Ethelberga. Ethelberga’s kinships—to her brother the bishop Eorcenwald, to her spiritual father, Theodore of Canterbury, but above all to her community at Barking gendered and sanctified the landscape around the abbey.

Elizabeth Freeman explores the Cistercian experience of marginalization—embraced by male Cistercians especially rhetorically, as they emphasized the transformation of wilderness and solitude to define their space—but perhaps experienced more tangibly by female Cistercians such as those at Marham, who lived literally on the edges of society, were poor, and had limited access to the literary foundations of Cistercian texts. Thus, Freeman continues the discussion interrogating the differences between male and female Cistercians, exploring the uses of space—its exploitation both imaginary and economic—to try to understand the experiences of the nuns themselves.

Justine Semmens examines the idea of interior geography in Julian of Norwich’s *A Revelation of Love*, in which—within the confines or delimitations of a text—Julian moved beyond the physical boundaries of place and space. Julian evoked a vastness of sacred space contained, or enclosed (*beclosed*) within physical space (the anchorhold, the body, the text) through the metaphors of the hazelnut and the city of the soul; the text itself is enclosed by these very metaphors.

These English religious women are a far cry from my thirteenth-century Portuguese secular and illegitimate princess! My advisor in graduate school used to say (apologetically) that the widest, deepest body of water for medievalists was the English Channel. The rift was seemingly profound between the languages, legal
systems, and historiographies of Britain and the Continent. In my own work on French and Iberian royal women, I often find myself following the lead of scholars who work on medieval England, to inspire, clarify—and sometimes complicate—my thinking. A question for the future remains the degree to which England (and France, Germany, Italy, Iberia, Russia, et cetera) was different, especially in regard to women's experience. How did geography affect gender? For further explorations of this dynamic, I look forward to our next issue of the *Medieval Feminist Forum*, which will continue to explore the meanings of space and place for medieval women—the geographies of gender—in the secular world, and on the Continent. These two special issues will combine to confirm geography as an important tool to think with, and through, that is, as another useful category of historical analysis, and one especially important to gender.

*Miriam Shadis*

**MESSAGE FROM MSU'S EDITORIAL ASSISTANT**

Working on a professional journal has been an interesting experience. Learning the steps that are involved in publishing and distributing a journal has allowed me to have a broader perspective on the publishing world. It is an experience that I will take with me wherever I go, and I would like to thank those that allowed me to be a part of *Medieval Feminist Forum!*

*Rebecia McFarland*