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In May 2006, The Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship sponsored a session celebrating the foundation and development of an organization devoted to conversation about feminist work on medieval topics in a range of disciplines first known as the Medieval Feminist Newsletter. That organization that began in 1985 has developed into a now vibrant group of scholars, the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, and the Newsletter changed its name to the Medieval Feminist Forum. In considering that session, the founding mothers of the Medieval Feminist Newsletter, (originally Roberta Krueger, Jane Burns, and me, though shortly thereafter we were joined by Thelma Fenster) agreed that a brief history of the organization’s accomplishments might be useful, especially for younger scholars who were not at Kalamazoo when the society began in the mid-1980s. We hope that by reviewing, a new generation will come to realize that a number of aspects of medieval feminist study now taken for granted did not exist twenty years ago: the Newsletter, which was the first publication to consider the relationship between feminism and medieval studies and among the first to value collaborative work and the various functions our organization performed then and still performs, now did not come into being without struggle. Furthermore, although we hope that groundbreaking new intellectual paradigms will be envisioned not by us but by the society’s younger members, we thought that some of our concerns about where medieval feminist study is now and some directions we might take in the future might help stimulate productive debate about the future of the organization.
PROGRESSION THROUGH CONTRARIES
PART ONE: OUR PAST

The discussions fostered by the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* and the sessions it sponsored helped stimulate and develop feminist work in medieval studies. In her comments, Jane surveys the rich and varied intellectual contributions feminism has made to medieval studies. Our organization has thus contributed to the legitimization of research on medieval women, gender, and sexuality from a feminist point of view, some pursued directly by members who found their voices in the Society, and some by scholars outside of the Society unaware that its existence may have in some ways made that research possible. I wish to focus here on the ways in which our methods—that is, how we interacted, commented upon each other’s work, and engaged with those outside of feminism—contributed to some of the paradigm shifts that occurred over the past twenty years. Crucial to me in the formation of the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter/Forum* and Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship and, in my view, crucial to its future health are the following three features: spontaneity, collaboration, and dialectical critique.

Our beginnings reflect the ad hoc spirit and intimacy born of collaboration that I hope can continue to shape the organization. The *Newsletter* sprang into being because of shared dissatisfaction—and the history of the *Newsletter’s* foundations testifies to the fact that dissatisfaction and grumbling can be productive. Most readers probably know the story of the Society’s beginnings, but in case it is not familiar to new subscribers, here it is: I was standing in line at the Kalamazoo airport in 1985 and happened to notice Jane Burns’s luggage tags. We had a mutual friend who was suffering from breast cancer so we struck up a conversation. I mention this because I like to think that female alliance around women’s health undergirds our organization. In response to Jane’s query about my reactions to the conference we had just attended, I expressed my disappointment that so few sessions had considered women and none had been feminist. Sharing my response, she introduced me to her like-minded friend, Bonnie Krueger. As we talked while waiting for our planes, we felt mounting excitement in our shared dissatisfactions. Frustrated by having to cut the conversation short because her plane’s departure had
been announced, Bonnie’s last words as she fled to the tarmac were “let’s start a newsletter.”

The Newsletter came into being in a halting and haphazard manner born of animated conversation and excited exchange. It initially grew from scraps of paper, hastily scribbled names and specialties passed to us in the hallways or pathways between Valleys I, II, and III in Kalamazoo. I remember sitting on the floor of my mountain house in 1985 sorting through 79 strips of papers with names of those who had first expressed interest in a forum for feminist discussion. I found two images to adorn our first issue. The image of a dragon chasing the Virgin Mary as she read a Book of Hours, which headed many early issues of the Newsletter, was drawn by an artistic neighbor, Megan Brill, in order to avoid copyright infringement. This simple drawing reminds me of how much the Newsletter in its early days depended on the generosity and collaboration of friends, even those who were not medievalists. The image we chose seemed an apt reflection of the difficulties we as feminists experienced reading the way we wanted to, with the dragon of patriarchy breathing down our necks. The other image that we reproduced to run along the bottom of the page was of a female knight de-horsing a male knight. We had originally considered reproducing the latter in a larger format, but decided that it might be perceived as aggressive and ultimately male-oriented. We did not want our Newsletter to be an occasion for women to unleash their frustration and anger on men, but rather instead to be a forum for feminists to discover and foster their interests by speaking with other feminists. With these images chosen and the scraps of names organized, we compiled the first Newsletter.

The Newsletters that followed received their impetus not so much from us but from the members themselves, eager to broaden its aims. As we struggled to respond to mounting suggestions and contributions, we were greatly aided by the behind-the-scenes generosity of under-recognized departmental assistants. At the University of Colorado, for example, Colleen Anderson for several years typed up the final versions of the Newsletters without recompense. Shortly after we established the Newsletter, Thelma Fenster joined us and initiated our “Commentary Column.” The
three of us eagerly embraced Thelma's energy, innovativeness, and commitment. We did not seek that energy: it came to us.

The first *Newsletters* were built on that energetic spontaneity and collaboration. It is hard to imagine our Society without e-mail, but our conversations were conducted by telephone. In my experience, the telephone enhanced the dialectical critique at the basis of our organization for in telephone exchange, there was less room for misunderstanding, it was easier to identify each other's tone, and we were able quickly to negotiate and modify positions. Collaboration and spontaneity were foundational to the formation of sessions and the production of the *Newsletter*. That collaboration has now shifted from the telephone to e-mail and from the work of editors to that of an advisory board. An underlying principle of our discussions among ourselves and with the Society as it developed was that no one individual held or was fighting for cultural capital. We all participated in an ongoing mutual conversation where every person had an equal voice—and equal responsibility for tasks. Decisions were made by the group and were reached only after long discussion and consultation. For example, the membership at that time (as it has several times in subsequent years) debated setting up a more formal journal with peer-reviewed journal essays. The membership voted against that, valuing instead the *Newsletter/Forum's* unique characteristic—spontaneity.

Indeed spontaneity characterized most of the *Newsletter's* early operations. Our first sessions and planning meetings at Kalamazoo were exciting events. It should be acknowledged, however, that our efforts might never have had the success they did without the help of Jane Chance who convinced Otto Grundler that he should acknowledge our organization. As a result of his acknowledgment, we were allowed to sponsor many sessions a year—five initially, eleven the second year, and from five to ten in subsequent years. However much we like to think of ourselves of outsiders to the institution, it was ultimately institutional approval that fostered our growth. Nonetheless, outsiders looking in were astonished by our energy; small rooms assigned to our sessions were packed to overflowing until even the largest rooms could not hold us in. Meetings after sessions were filled with new voices expressing new dissatisfactions and from those were born new ideas and even new organizations. A session
at Kalamazoo led to the foundation of the Feminist Art History Project and another to the foundation of the Society for the Study of Homosexuality in the Middle Ages, both societies that have flourished.

Characteristic of the early sessions we ran at Kalamazoo and of the planning meetings we held was a spirit of dialectical critique. Any criticism was encouraged and as conversation flourished, proposals dramatically changed and personally cherished ideas were radically deconstructed. For example, early on in a session I organized on feminist theory, I formulated some twelve questions for us to address in our remarks. (The remarks were subsequently published in 1988 in *MFN* 5). One of the respondents, Geraldine Heng, both startled and delighted me when she chose to focus her remarks on deconstructing the patriarchal assumptions hidden within my questions. At the end of the day, my original questions had been replaced by larger, richer, more complex ones. The virtue of our haphazard methods was that they allowed constant motion in discussion, a movement that prevented a hierarchy of ideas or persons to take place or solidify and that allowed continual new growth of ideas.

Early on in those meetings, a graduate student, Jennifer Summit (now a tenured professor at Stanford), asked if she could help, and in 1993 we eagerly welcomed her as our first graduate liaison—and, as it happened, our first liaison to feminist scholars in England. Here are the comments Jennifer sent by e-mail as she reminisced about the foundation of the Society:

"How wonderful that you are writing on the history of the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship—but can it really have been 20 years ago! I was indeed the first graduate student representative. I don't recall whether it was my idea to be the first graduate representative (I remember being nominated and then elected, so maybe the idea came from someone else.) I did have the idea of the mentoring exchange and took some initial steps in getting some people together, but that was in the days before widespread e-mail and Anne Clark Bartlett really deserves credit for getting it going. I remember that I was living in England and writing my dissertation at the time when I was a graduate student representative so I was a *de facto* liaison to England.

Just remembering this much has reminded me how important the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* and the Society were for me personally and professionally as I was first making my way in the profession.
Medieval Studies at the time seemed so hopelessly and dauntingly patriarchal and the MFN sessions at Kazoo were such a source of energy and inspiration for me and I'm sure for many others. I gave my first paper ever at an MFN sponsored session and there's a small part of me that will always be walking on air from that heady experience. This is also an appropriate place to tell you how grateful I'll always be to you and the other MFN founding mothers (Jane Burns, Sarah Beckwith, and Ann Matter I remember especially) for your many kindnesses: it means a lot to a graduate student to be listened to and taken seriously by people she respects especially if they're women. It's easy to overlook graduate students at busy conferences—something I'm aware of now, which makes me all the more appreciative of those who didn't ignore me when I was in that position.

Our organization has served many purposes. We responded to a need beginning to be expressed by women across the academy for an acknowledgment of women's place in literary history as well as in the present academy. Our organizational meetings and cash bars provided both intellectual and social opportunity for feminists to talk about the history of women, gender and sexuality in the past and to meet feminists in the present. We also acted as mentors and supporters of younger scholars. I remember in the first year of our organization discovering a graduate student crying in the ladies' room overcome with dismay when she discovered that her advisor's encouragement that she attend her first professional meeting carried with it his flirtatious agenda. At the Newsletter cash bar, she found others who had similarly struggled with male advisors unable to separate intellectual advice from personal desire. Now that the Society is in place, such abuse of female graduate students can not happen so easily.

After the first few years of astonishing growth in the organization, we faced a surprising demand from the Internal Revenue Service that we organize ourselves more formally as a society with a structure headed by a president, vice president, and secretary. We didn't particularly want such a governing hierarchy. At the same time, we became aware of the fact that Jane, Bonnie, Thelma, and I were perceived by some as powerful and exclusive and our haphazard spontaneity was perceived by some as whimsical and born of favoritism. We were surprised because we didn't see ourselves that way, but we learned from that experience what bell hooks has
expressed so well, that it is easy not to see what the inside looks like to the outside when you are inside. Our organization still needs to be conscious of the dangers of inadvertent exclusion. A formal organization was set in place with a new first president, Jacqueline Murray, who was dismayed at our slapdash methods. We owe her a great debt for getting us more formally organized, as well to Gina Psaki, Anne Clark Bartlett, Chris Africa (who tirelessly updated bibliography year after year) and several other indefatigably generous laborers. In their hands, the organization grew into a fully fledged Society headed by a series of distinguished presidents and one that produced ever more sophisticated Newsletters and sessions now taking place not only at the Medieval Institute meetings at Kalamazoo but also at the International Congress of Medieval Studies in Leeds and at the Modern Language Association Meetings.

PART TWO: SOME CONCERNS ABOUT THE PRESENT AND ABOUT THE FUTURE OF MEDIEVAL FEMINIST STUDIES

When I consider where we are now as feminist medievalists and where we are going, I feel that medieval feminist studies have lost some of their critical edge but not their potential. I speak primarily from the position of one who works in Middle English studies. Jane and Bonnie, who work in French, are more optimistic, and while I agree with their sense of the tremendous accomplishments our Society has achieved, I believe their optimism about the state of medieval feminism may spring from their connection to French departments where theory has long held sway and continues to retain its forcefulness. Furthermore, because Jane works in a Women’s Studies program committed to history, she feels less anxiety about the place of medieval studies in the academy more generally than I do working in a discipline where history is under fire. I am also concerned that many of the brightest, most dynamic young critics working in the field of late Middle English studies, while fully supporting feminism in their lives, tend to avoid feminism in their work and to declare it unfashionable; while they willingly acknowledge the importance of studying the “other,” they are distinctly uncomfortable with discussing women, and even gender or sexuality. Feminism, hand-in-hand with theory, seems to be facing marginalization by the academy in my field. Given feminism’s uneasy relationship with theory in the nineties, it is

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ironic that they are now being banished together. I share with Judith Bennett concerns about the fate of medieval feminist studies, her fear that we seem to have "muted our feminist voices," and her faith in its possibilities not only for vibrant growth but also in its potential to have an important influence on the academy.

Our potential can only be realized by continual self-questioning. Now that the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship has become a recognized and influential organization, we need to consider the degree to which our former strategies are still vibrant or effective. Can continued collaboration and spontaneity create visionary questions? Do we need to develop new methods and new forms of critique? Has our institutionalization undercut some of the power of our critique of the academy? Have we become complacent and inward looking? Are we attuned to questions that might make us uncomfortable? How do we place ourselves in relationship to the changes in the academy as a whole? Are we still challenging prevailing paradigms or are we instead the prevailing paradigm? How willing are we now, as we once were, to engage the professionally unknown and unacceptable? How willing are we to take risks? Fundamental issues are at stake for the Society and indeed for medieval studies in general as we move into the twenty-first century, especially the problem created for medieval studies by the academy's drive towards presentism and the impediment to formulating feminist questions shaped by our own commitments to the insights of third-wave feminism.

Some of the problems facing feminism and theory are relevant to medieval studies in general which in most places is fighting to maintain a place in departments driving towards global presentism. Study of the Middle Ages faces the threat of irrelevance as we move towards a radically depoliticized and presentist culture. For this reason alone, it is crucial that we sharpen our edge. I have found medieval feminism to be at its most critically vibrant not at academic meetings, but in the classroom where feminism seems to allow students a way to appreciate both the sameness and the difference of the Middle Ages, and thus to contribute to their development of a critical perspective on the world. Students are surprised that medieval representations of women, gender, and sexuality can provide insight into their own development as sexed and gendered
beings. Furthermore, medieval literature allows them to consider the formations of deeply embedded social structures, such as rape, that bedevil their own experience. As Bennett has so persuasively argued in her new book, the historical perspective that our position as medieval feminists provides has the potential both to invigorate feminism and to unsettle a politically dangerous and pervasive presentism that is permeating the academy and the world.

At the same time, the much-needed developments of third-wave feminism have themselves contributed to undermining the political urgency of feminism. Feminism was rightly assaulted from the point of view of a range of marginalized others who critiqued the universalizing tendencies of white, upper middle-class, heterosexual women in the academy. As a result various feminisms have been born, as well as new strands of politically urgent criticism devoted to exploring race and ethnicity, class and sexual difference. Recently we have even become conscious of religion as an additional legitimate category of analysis. The pursuit of local histories, furthermore, has demonstrated the vast array of possible subject positions occupied by women in medieval culture. Yet some of the new forms of feminist inquiry that have come into being, with their commitments to acknowledging multiple kinds of difference and their fear of potentially ahistorical essentializing run the risk of eclipsing the subject of women altogether. With Bennett, I find useful Linda Gordon and Lisa Vogel's warning against "an uncritical discourse of pluralism and celebration of diversity," and urge us to take note of Mary Maynard’s “useful distinction between universalizing (which suppresses differences) and generalizing (which seeks patterns among differences)." In her essay “Medieval Women/Modern Women,” Bennett shows us how to create a dialectic between the local and the general as she urges us to be careful to situate local evidence about women’s earning power in the context of a larger pattern about women's work. She shows there that despite moments when women appear to be earning more than they have before, the continuous pattern is one in which women earn wages significantly lower than men do—a pattern that persists to this day. However slippery and complex the term “woman” may be and however vague and overgeneralized the term patriarchy may be, perhaps it is time for us to return to the questions of second-wave feminism through the
lens of what we have learned from third-wave feminism and explore what women have in common as a group within oppressive social structures.

Now that we have established the legitimacy of the inquiry of feminist medieval studies, it also seems to me important that we more frequently bring feminist questions into the center of seemingly non-feminist areas of study. We should be careful not to let our success with this Society mean that we speak only to ourselves. If we place ourselves at the center of discussions that seem to be about topics about men only, we may be able to open up new areas of research. For example, Anne Clark Bartlett has been studying medieval war manuals and discovering the ways in which women used manuals written for men in battle far from home to conduct female-run wars from their homes. She has shown how a topic that seems to exclude women can be productively considered from a feminist point of view. It seems to me that feminist medievalists should not only spend time talking to each other, but also could profitably infiltrate other sessions at Kalamazoo and explore topics seemingly outside feminism’s purview in order to invigorate both other fields and our own. Defamiliarizing our contexts may help us articulate unexpected new questions.

How, finally, can our methods as feminist medievalists contribute to reinvigorating our field? To return to the three categories I mentioned at the beginning, spontaneity, collaboration, and dialectical critique, let me emphasize their importance and their difficulty. Spontaneity is in fact rare. The most productive conversations are those in which we extemporize and experiment and in which, most fundamentally, the outcome is not known. Collaboration is powerful when it is not interested in proving who has the best argument, nor in being merely supportive, but rather in pooling our efforts in order to sharpen our propositions. Finally, I don’t think we should be afraid of criticism for the critique that is at the heart of dialectics is not annihilation or negation. Rather, and here I draw on one of my favorite feminist thinkers, William Blake, who said “opposition is true friendship.” He prefers the word contrary to negation, stating “without contraries there is no progression.” We have progressed so far, but in my view we have only begun our journey. It is crucial that our organization encourage
debate and difference, and applaud organizations that arise either as new directions or in reaction to our blinks spots and potential complacency and self-satisfaction. Recently a new organization has sprung into being called BABEL, initially formed by a group who, I have been told, felt their views were not being heard at Society functions. It is through such experimental spontaneity that the freshest ideas are born. Criticism from the inside and the outside—constant and varied dialectical critique—continues to be essential to our organization. As the voice of the politically correct, we must be the first to criticize the assumptions of those politically correct views. The power of dialectical critique is that it is continual. No one position is ever stable or final.

At the end of our session, we posed the following questions for further discussion. I have added some that came to us from the floor. We hope that members will add many more.

• How can we maintain our feminism when the spirit of inquiry is being squashed by the fascism of our culture?
• What different impacts does medieval feminism have in different settings: for graduate students, in women’s studies departments and departments of women and gender studies, in different disciplinary departments, in the classroom, in the academy in general?
• What does medieval feminism contribute to the understanding of transnational contemporary women?
• Given the fact that women are oppressed worldwide why do we have difficulty mobilizing women as a single group?
• How can we increase the presence of medieval feminist work in feminist journals that tend to publish contemporary material alone (e.g. Signs, Genders)?
• How can we maintain the vibrancy of medieval feminist study when medieval studies is suffering and indeed historical periods of all kinds are threatened?
• Has the development of an acknowledgment of multiple subject positions defused the political power of feminism? In particular, has queer theory eclipsed feminism? (This topic was proposed as one for further discussion at next year’s meetings at Kalamazoo.)

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1. While I was thinking through some of these remarks, Judith Bennett kindly shared with me chapters of her forthcoming book. Many of her remarks seemed applicable not only to the state of feminism in the field of medieval history, but also to the field of Middle English studies. Her book has recently appeared in print, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 2006).

2. See Bennett, pp. 9-10, p. 25, and her general discussion in the introduction.