

ROUNDTABLE: ARE YOU STILL DECIDING WHETHER TO BE A MEDIEVALIST OR A FEMINIST?



INTRODUCTION

The SMFS Roundtable: 'Are you still deciding to be either a medievalist or a feminist?' was held at the 38th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan, Session 253, May 9, 2003 and sponsored by the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship. It was organized and chaired by Francine Nicholson, Eastern Illinois University. The participants were Anne Clark Bartlett, S. Elizabeth Passmore, Mary Dockray-Miller, Wendy Hoofnagle, and M. Wendy Hennequin, whose remarks follow.

That the personal and professional and inextricably related has become axiomatic in feminist theory. Quantitative studies as well as anecdotal evidence amply illustrate that, in both personal and professional settings, women's experience is still primarily evaluated according to male norms. For example, recent research has shown that women die more frequently from heart attacks than men do, because their symptoms don't match the classic 'universal' warning signs of heart attacks reported by male subjects. And when studies of pain management began to include female subjects, researchers learned that women tend to need higher dosages of analgesics than men do, in order to alleviate the same amounts of pain. It's no wonder that women have a popular reputation for having higher pain thresholds than men. Perhaps women have developed a greater tolerance of discomfort in order to compensate for receiving less relief.

Even in many current—and allegedly progressive—university settings, female professors and graduate students are routinely reckoned less valuable, less capable, and less understandable than their male colleagues. Virtually every aspect of our academic experience finds its roots in an androcentric tradition, and our salary increases, job offers, and professional stature depend on how well we can conform to the male norms. But to measure women's academic work according to the conventional standards of a professoriate that only recently admitted female membership is to penalize women for their roles in a history of patriarchal practice.

As the title of this roundtable suggests, we may find ourselves choosing between identifying ourselves as 'medievalists' and acting as 'feminists' more often than we care to recognize. And if we choose to pursue uncritically a profession that admits us largely as 'honorary males' (a term with particular resonance for medievalists), we contribute further to the distorted thinking

that represents the typical professor as a male and the academic lifestyle as a quasi-monastic vocation.

All things being equal, all things are not equal. But the increasing visibility and influence of feminists of all varieties means that institutions and individuals must inevitably stretch to accommodate—perhaps even honor—women’s unique experiences and identities.

—Anne Clark Bartlett, DePaul University

