

A MESSAGE FROM THE SOCIETY



KALAMAZOO ONCE AGAIN afforded numerous opportunities for medieval feminists to get to know each other and extend our networks. The feminist sessions were well-attended—the roundtables were standing room only. Clearly, this group is addressing many issues of pressing concern to feminist medievalists. Look for next year's sessions in the Kalamazoo call for papers under the rubric Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship. Assuming that all our proposals are accepted, there should once again be a balance between roundtables and the traditional format of research papers.

The business meeting this year was a productive one. A number of new initiatives were proposed, indicating the breadth of concerns of our growing membership. Look for notices about the Mentoring Program and the Task Force on Publications under "Notes and Announcements" in this issue. Jennifer Rondeau has almost got a Medieval Feminist discussion list up and running. If you would like to be a part of this e-mail network, send your address to Jennifer at either jrondeau@iubacs.bitnet or jrondeau@ucs.indiana.edu. One final activity in the offing is a directory of Society members that will be coordinated by Nancy Jones. Drop Nancy a line (Romance Languages, Harvard University) if you have any suggestions about the format or type of information such a directory should include.

The issue looming largest on our immediate horizon is the formulation of by-laws in order to become a properly constituted, tax-exempt organization. Watch for these by-laws in a forthcoming issue of this newsletter. You'll be asked to ratify them. The process of becoming a formal society is something of a mixed blessing. Structure necessarily implies a certain degree of advance planning. It does not have to mean, however, hierarchy or a loss of spontaneity. Formalized mechanisms for electing the Society's Executive and Advisory Board can also ensure a broad representation of the membership in all areas of activity. So bear with this period of transition and we'll try to avoid the pitfalls of bureaucracy. But please do remember that this process will also ensure a long-lived, representative, and democratic organization. Let us know your concerns. Send us your suggestions. Volunteer to help with one of the programs. We look forward to hearing from you.

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COMMENTARY



WE HOPE THIS COMMENTARY column and Forum will mark the beginning of a continuing dialogue on gay and lesbian issues in Medieval Studies. Anyone wishing to

participate in the debate should contact Thelma Fenster, Center for Medieval Studies, Fordham University, Bronx, NY 10458.

MFN GAY AND LESBIAN ISSUE

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THE ESSAYS IN THIS ISSUE of the MFN raise large historiographical questions about one significant trend of recent medieval scholarship. Why have we become so concerned about the terminology of sex and sexuality? In terms of the issue at hand, what compels us to seek out possible lesbians in the most obscure corners of medieval history, and then, when we think perhaps we have found them, to wonder if we can really call them by the terms we use to describe our own sexuality? To paraphrase the question Carolyn Dinshaw posed to her students (see her essay below), what is at stake in attributing or denying “lesbian” experiences to medieval women?

These are, of course, questions set in the context of late twentieth-century awareness of culture and cultures, and guided by the hermeneutics of difference. If there is a prevailing sense of “correctness” in our intellectual context, it centers around the assumption that we cannot judge others (other cultures or other historical periods) by our own standards and categories. For those influenced by Foucault, there is a great divide at the beginning of the “modern” period, when introspective self-awareness, especially about sexuality, first came about. Historians of both classical antiquity and the twentieth century have found this a useful paradigm; but medievalists seem to be more wary.

Perhaps our long experience with the inadequacy of such historical categories makes us less willing to believe that “introspection” or “self-awareness,” not to mention “sexuality,” could have been somehow invented at a particular time. This is not so much a reliance on universal human experience as a recognition of our own scholarly history. We have, after all, long dealt with (and even propagated) platitudes about the invention of “the individual” in the twelfth century, or “literature” in the thirteenth, and we have chased “Dark Ages” and “Renaissances” through practically every century of what we call the Middle Ages. Our sense of difference does not seem to be constructed around great watersheds of human experience. Perhaps for this reason, it is interesting to note that none of the reflections in this issue takes the Foucault/Halperin position that “sexuality” is an exclusively modern cultural construct.

Yet the authors of these essays do not deny that there is a great difference between ourselves and medieval men and women, and that the medieval perception and classification of what we would call “lesbian sexuality” is quite a complicated problem. The most insightful portraits are framed with a wide angle, rather than a close-up lens. Mary Anne Campbell challenges us to “take in earnest” the fact that medieval women lived “truly different lives” when not bound to husbands, and that the feminized Jesus of late medieval piety provided an other than totally heterosexual partner for the “marriage” of nuns. Susan Schibanoff reminds us that lesbian characters in medieval literature are often portrayed as “blanks,” and that these blanks are, in fact, fundamental to a medieval understanding of what we would call lesbianism. Sylvia Huot grapples with the overwhelmingly phallogocentric nature of medieval concepts of sexuality, and suggests that as a result romance and eroticism between medieval women might have been categorized as friendship rather than sex.

Echoing this suggestion, the essays make frequent references to Adrienne Rich’s influential proposal of a “lesbian continuum” that developed as a response to the compulsory heterosexuality that was as much a part of medieval society as it is of ours.

Simon Gaunt and Carolyn Dinshaw, reflecting on the nature of compulsory heterosexuality in the Middle Ages, suggest that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of a spectrum of possible sexualities can be very helpful. Sedgwick asserts that a variety of culturally-constructed possibilities for sexual definition arises within each social context, on a spectrum with, and often in opposition to, dominant norms of official heterosexuality. I agree that this is a useful perspective, one which takes us out of the trap of the false dichotomy of essentialism and social construction.

From this perspective, we can only find "medieval lesbians" among the landmarks of medieval culture, on that particular continuum, not ours. This portrait in a landscape will have to consider uniquely medieval, and sometimes idiosyncratic, social constructions: constructions of male and female, marriage and the religious life, roles, definitions, and hierarchy. It will also need to come to terms with the fact that there is very little extant evidence for the type of relationship between women that we are looking for. We will, indeed, have to learn to read the blanks. It will have to bear in mind the fact that the overwhelmingly patriarchal nature of medieval culture significantly modified the evidence for, or even the experience of, women whose primary emotional and erotic relation was to other women. But this research will doubtless be driven by our twentieth-century perspectives on gender and sexuality, and by our own idiosyncratic categories of historical inquiry: gay, lesbian, heterosexual, feminist. This is obvious and needs no apology. Otherwise, why would we bother to do it?

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FORUM: GAY AND LESBIAN CONCERNS IN MEDIEVAL STUDIES



GAY STUDIES AND FEMINISM: A MEDIEVALIST'S PERSPECTIVE



THE ESTABLISHMENT of a Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship and the success of the MFN show that feminism is now a theoretical flag flown by large numbers of medievalists. Feminism is an approach many of us believe is not simply enriching, but essential to a proper understanding of medieval society and its cultural artifacts. Feminists have had to fight to establish a corner in the discipline, and if this corner has been conceded reluctantly, feminism is nonetheless now accepted as a significant feature on the map of our field: witness the number of sessions at Kalamazoo the MFN is now allocated. Gay theory, on the other hand, has had virtually no impact on medieval studies: witness the fact that none of the "Gay Studies" sessions proposed for Kalamazoo 1992 were accepted. What does this show? First, that the academy (as represented by the Medieval Institute at least) has yet to see the relevance of gay studies to medievalists; second, perhaps, that it is still acceptable in some quarters to marginalize gays. Why should gay studies apparently be so marginal to our discipline? Have gay studies—so dynamic in many areas—nothing to offer research on the Middle Ages? Is the position of gay medievalists as gays relevant to their research or were there no gay people in the