

“MAKE IT WORK”: GRANTS(WO)MANSHIP JANE CHANCE

Medieval scholars might well adapt, to their own academic fellowship applications, Tim Gunn’s signature advice to competing “Project Runway” fashion designers on the popular Bravo reality-television show: if some aspect of your proposal seems askew, then revise it, “make it work.” Just as the magic that the contestants work into their creations to transform them into winning projects involves humbly accepting Gunn’s incisive criticism, then reshaping and even discarding their original designs, so fellowship applicants also need to follow similar strategies in crafting their submissions. The following suggestions are intended to facilitate that process, from first idea to submission (or resubmission). Afterwards, by way of example, follows a critique of Dr. Pepper’s proposal in the light of those suggestions.

First, know your subject. Complete enough of the initial research to identify your primary and secondary materials, and to frame a contextualization and argument that will express the project’s relevance and significance relative to previously published scholarship. What new idea or direction will it add? Perhaps your current project is a spring-off from a first book/dissertation, or perhaps you’ve published an article or two in that area that you would like to expand into a full-length study. You will probably need to research what has appeared in print in the past few years to supply a brief, core bibliography on the topic. Make sure you have read what you list.

Second, research the fellowships for which you will be eligible to apply. How many fellowships does the institution grant per year from the total number of applications? Does the organization provide feedback on proposals? Read the list of qualifications carefully. For example, do not apply for an editing grant from a fellowship grantor that normally funds scholarly monographs. How much publication do you need to be competitive? A big problem with the highly competitive National Endowment for the Humanities and John Simon Guggenheim

Fellowships is that, even to be in the running, a junior professor will likely need at least one published book (for the former grant) and a more senior professor several (for the latter). Is there a particular theme for a specific on-site university institute fellowship to which your research contributes? This is important because the community of scholars needs to enrich itself often through overlapping disciplinary work. Does the organization publish a list of funded fellows and their projects? *The Chronicle of Higher Education* routinely offers lists of successful fellows for various competitions. Check out the fellows' published work to see what kind of research is being currently funded. Is it heavy or light on theory? Are the fellowship adjudicators looking for traditional scholarship? What are the trends? What fields have been funded recently, if this is a humanities fellowship? If you can, identify how many applicants there were in a particular field. An applicant in a field with fewer applicants (such as Medieval Studies) stands a better chance of being funded than one in a huge field such as English or History. The same applies if there is an explicit or implicit geographical or size quota. Faculty from the East Coast and big research universities often dominate in such competitions, although among government-funded grant agencies there is usually some requirement both for geographical and institutional balance and for racial and gender diversity. You might ask a colleague in your department or field, either at your university or elsewhere, to share a successful proposal with you. Models provide excellent means for learning what works.

Third, know your audience. For whom are you writing? Will the adjudicators be medievalists? Feminists? Art historians? An interdisciplinary group? Professors at a university looking to add a few fellows in needed fields for the next year? Who will be doing the choosing plays an important role in whom and what is chosen. Follow all instructions to the letter. If the fellowship requires a statement on the humanistic relevance of your project, think big, talk about the relevance of your topic. Because your adjudicator may know little or nothing about your field, take care to write clearly (without theory or jargon), describe details relating to the project that specialists might know but not those

outside your field, and assume nothing. Write and rewrite drafts of your proposal before submission to make sure it is as excellent as you can make it.

Fourth, be self-critical about your prospects. Put yourself in the place of the fellowship adjudicator who may have to read one hundred proposals in a short time: why should *your* proposal be funded? Fellowships have always been highly competitive, but the few currently available for humanists appear to be decreasing, which ratchets up the need for excellence of the proposal. In 2008 the ACLS funded only sixty five fellowships out of a total of 1034 eligible applications—a 1:16 ratio. What makes your proposal more distinctive, original, and worthy than some other? Is it credible and convincing in its knowledge of the field? Does it stand out? Ask someone to read your proposal before you send it out. Note that the NEH, at least, supplies feedback from reviewers for applicants who are unsuccessful. Ask for this: it is very helpful, and will allow you to revise the proposal for next year if you are not funded. The NEH Summer Programs also will give potential directors feedback during the application process, as well as afterward if their applications are not funded. And they supply a sample successful application from the year before as a model.

Fifth, ask the most distinguished recommenders who are knowledgeable about your work and your particular field to write for you, but remember that adjudicators in different fields from yours may not recognize their names. For this reason, also make sure the recommenders will say positive things about you. Choose your dissertation director, the editor of a journal/series in which you have published an article/book, the director of an NEH Summer Seminar in which you have participated, the reader for an article you have written (if her identity is known), or a book reviewer for your book (and possibly a colleague at your university, if this is allowed). I highly recommend that unfunded and lightly published applicants apply for an NEH Summer Seminar directed by a distinguished professor who might then support their applications for funding, something that can be especially important for those who teach at institutions without much research emphasis. Also, apply within your institution for

grants. Once you can demonstrate some local (university) funding, you will gain some credibility outside its hedges. And, of course, do have some publication to show for those grants. That is the catch-22 of grants(wo)manship: generally, it is difficult to obtain grants until you have published, but you may not have the time to research, write, and publish until and unless you obtain release time or a grant from your college or university. This holds doubly true for book publication.

A CRITIQUE OF DR. PEPPER'S PROPOSAL

In the light of the strategies described above, how might Dr. Pepper's proposal fare in a fellowship competition? Obviously its reception would depend on where she submits it. Because the proposal involves work with manuscripts, the British Neil P. Ker Grant competition might be an ideal venue, however limited its actual monetary support, or else her home university, where support for faculty development most likely exists along with the desire to move junior faculty towards promotion. But if we imagine she will submit the proposal to the NEH and ACLS individual fellowship competitions, or for a Mellon Fellowship at one of the medieval or humanities institutes supported by various universities, then it will likely need to be tailored to meet the specifications of each individual competition.

More importantly, Dr. Pepper needs to completely overhaul the proposal to highlight its originality and its importance for medieval studies. Although the proposal is generally impressively researched, well-written, well-organized, and knowledgeable about both its critical and scholarly field and the manuscripts the applicant needs to see, nowhere is the importance of the project for the understanding of medieval religious devotion, or of late medieval women, articulated. Why should medievalists need to know more about the Gilbert family? Are the Gilberts important for issues of class ("This project aims to examine the Gilbert family, one made by the marriage of a rural squire to a wealthy merchant's daughter")? And what precisely does this potential study seek to learn about medieval women (or aristocratic women) in relation to the announced topic in the

“Introduction to the Project,” when Dr. Pepper writes that “This project aims to . . . study their patronage of this devotional text in relation to the religious reading of other East Anglian women, especially aristocratic women, of the time”? What exactly is the specific critical problem the proposal seeks to solve, and why is it important? One way Dr. Pepper might answer this question is to provide a critical contextualization that demonstrates how the projected purpose (currently defined in the Justification for Project) fits into the current body of published scholarship.

In this regard, while Dr. Pepper does acknowledge at various points that five subtopics will be “documented,” she does not explain why they are important, or how they interrelate to fit into one overarching thesis, nor does she contextualize that missing main idea by a meaningful survey of the relevant scholarship. That is, given her bibliography, she does not indicate how her research extends in an original way what currently exists in print. These five subtopics—related implicitly, but without explicit clarification by Dr. Pepper—include, first and most generally, late medieval English devotional reading practice (“This project aims to document the devotional reading practices of well-to-do merchant and lower gentry families in late medieval England”); second, recusant reading practice (nowhere defined) as an example of lay devotion; third, types of devotional behavior of women “who,” according to Dr. Pepper, “imagined themselves as higher status ladies”; fourth, Flemish manuscript decoration and styling in Norwich workshops; and, fifth, lay female devotional reading practice in Norwich. By the latter Dr. Pepper means Mary Bale Gilbert’s personalization of her standard Book of Hours by means of the addition of decorated initials for her family members’ name-saints, in imitation of aristocratic women’s practice in Norwich. Dr. Pepper concludes that “Principally, however, this study will investigate the lay devotional practice of Mary and her daughters, linking these practices with the larger network of devotional readers in the Norwich area, as Eler, Wogan-Browne, Delany, Gibson, and Coletti have shown.” Even when combined with full references to the works of these critics on the bibliography, such a brief litany of scholars’ names is not

sufficient for the purposes of a grant proposal. Dr. Pepper needs to indicate the conclusions other scholars have reached and how her study will extend them in some significant new (or necessary) way. More important, the lack of a single, clearly demarcated, thesis—not just what the proposal will cover but what ideas it will reveal—undermines the project. Either Dr. Pepper has not completed enough of the research to understand its significance (another catch-22) or she has not adequately revised the proposal, perhaps in the light of a colleague's vetting.

To revise, Dr. Pepper needs to indicate confidently what her project is from the beginning. If she moved the last sentence of the introduction to the opening of the proposal, she could then make explicit (and much more precisely than is now the case) the proposal's implicit class and gender aims in the light of the East Anglian religious reading practice of women as previously delineated by scholars. She should also subordinate the discussion of Flemish influence on the Norwich Book of Hours to her main thesis (the feminization of lay devotional practice), or at least explain briefly why the artistic and political context is important and how it relates to another point which has been neglected in this proposal, namely, why the Flemish workshop flourished in Norwich, given the general antipathy between the Flemish and the English during the earlier Peasants' Revolt. The specific description of the manuscript, its provenance, and the family relationships can be used to develop and support this "thesis statement" once it is clarified. With further research, or else rethinking of the proposal, she will be able to explain recusant Catholic resistance to a growing Protestantism or to pinpoint Norwich's role in the larger history of English religious dissent. For example, the author needs to mine the buried treasure in the following sentence in making explicit the significance of her project: "Little research has been done on the Gilbert Hours, but an initial examination shows that there is a note in another hand, which indicates that Mary willed the manuscript to her daughter Margaret at her death. In still a different hand, a note indicates that Margaret willed the book to her daughter, Agnes, perhaps named for her aunt Agnes who died before the book was finished.

A short investigation shows that Margaret married into the Binham family, which is known to have been a recusant Catholic family in the middle 1600s.” In short, there are several ways Dr. Pepper might improve the proposal without adding another ten pages, primarily lifting out its historical, cultural, and critical contexts.