

## ON FUNDING

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A good friend and mentor, the leading authority in his field of specialization and a well published and highly-regarded scholar, once told me that he could wallpaper his house with the sheaves of rejection letters that he had received over the years, some specious, others innocuous, but all, ultimately, disappointing. Other accomplished academics, men and women alike, astonished me by admitting how many times they had applied to various prestigious funding agencies before being successful (if ever). Even noted scholars who have obtained multiple, prestigious research fellowships may not have garnered funding for every project, or from every agency to which she or he applied. The more I have spoken with trusted senior colleagues and mentors, the more I have realized that perseverance is a key component in securing research funding. This point cannot be overstated. It is also worth remembering that a number of other factors come into play in most grants competitions. The role of luck in some selection processes, for instance, should not be discounted, no matter how strong the candidates' proposals and supporting documentation. Success is possible, however. Rather than going immediately for the big guns, you could build a strong dossier by seeking more modest grants and establishing a successful track record first, as I have done (see my biographical statement). Patience and persistence are crucial, along with a carefully planned and well-executed application. This paper will present some strategies designed to help your submission stand out from the pack.

### PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

Above all, it is essential to ensure that you have identified the best potential sources of funding for your project. Read about and attend panels on professionalization at the national and international meetings in your particular field (such as the Modern Language Association for English and modern

languages or, in history, the American Historical Association) and geographical location (e.g., regional organizations, like the Medieval Association of the Pacific, or, if you are conducting research outside of North America, the British Research Council or ANZAMEMS, the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies), in addition to the general meetings of medievalists like the Medieval Academy of America and International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo. Closer to home, attending and participating in more specialist seminars, like those held at major research centers, institutions, and libraries (e.g., the Center for West European Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, Medieval Seminar at Columbia University, Medieval Club of New York, Newberry Library in Chicago, the Getty, etc., as well as the medieval and women's studies programs in your area) all provide wonderful opportunities to learn about top-flight scholarship and to obtain informal feedback on your project and the application process. In addition to providing essential networking opportunities and offering a stimulating environment in which to refine your ideas, these organizations often confer awards of their own, to help offset the costs of publication or to conduct longer-term, independent research.

There are many excellent sources of funding, but doing your homework and identifying those that dovetail with your individual research goals will go a long way toward ensuring that your application stands the best chance possible of obtaining financial support.

#### THE RIGHT FIT

Seeking a mix of internal and external awards can help you to develop and realize your research project, but it is imperative that you know your audience and formulate your proposal in accordance with the goals of the granting institution, a strategy that cannot be emphasized strongly enough. This is not to say that you should look at the financial resources available to support work in the humanities and then try to devise a research program that fits a particularly generous or attractive grant. Rather, you

should think about your project critically and make an informed decision about which sources of funding might be best aligned with your own research. Consider the following questions as you explore your options. Does the sponsoring institution seek to bring together a wide variety of scholars from across the globe? Does the endowment supporting the institute guide the selection committee's choice in specific ways? More specifically, have there been many (or any) recipients with research interests similar to your own? (If no awards have been made in your field in recent years, this does not mean that your application will be categorically eliminated from the competition, but simply that the agency does not have a history of funding like projects; such a gap just might indicate that the time is ripe to support a project like your own!) It is also important to note whether the granting organization funds the projects of both junior and senior scholars. If so, are your credentials in line with those of previous recipients, or must you be working on your second (or third) book to be, realistically, in the running? Would a more modest award now provide you with the seed money necessary to conduct primary research that would, in turn, help you develop a better application for a more substantial award at a later phase in your research? Considering these (and any other, similar) factors, can you frame your proposal to underscore how your work may benefit both you and the granting organization? Do not be afraid to ask senior scholars with a history of successful grantspersonship for their insights. Whichever source of funding you choose, review the application guidelines assiduously and make sure that your project really is a good fit so that it will stand a fair shot among the competition from the outset.

With success rates hovering near 7% (or less) for some of the most sought-after fellowships in the humanities, choose wisely and channel your energies into putting together the best application that you can for that competition. One caveat: start well in advance. Do not overlook the fact that, once you have a clearly defined project, the application process itself (from the refinement of the proposal to the formatting and submission of the application) can literally take weeks. In some instances,

dossiers and supporting materials must be submitted electronically and, occasionally, involve waiting periods for the verification process and/or the downloading of special software that may or may not be compatible with your computer. If you miss this year's deadline, make a note of the grant, its approximate time frame and requirements, and plan ahead for the next year. If it would be a considerable stretch for a project to fall within the scope of a potential funding source, and there are others that might fit your project more seamlessly, it is worth considering how your time would be best spent—and focusing your efforts where they will have the greatest chance of success.

#### THE APPLICATION

Once you have identified a group of potential sources, it is also imperative to remember that one size does not fit all and that you should tailor your application specifically to address the aims and objectives of each granting organization. Keeping the following questions in mind as you prepare your dossier can help you stay on target. Does your project have a clearly delineated goal? Have you had the opportunity to review successful proposals that may be used as models for your own? Could certain features of your study be brought into sharper focus for a particular application or agency? If you are seeking funding from an institution with a residency requirement, how might you, your project, and your expertise benefit the sponsoring organization and its community of scholars? Have you explained the necessary background information for an audience unfamiliar with your topic (but familiar with women's studies, medieval studies, or devotional texts, depending upon the audience)? Have you asked experienced scholars with a track record of successful grantspersonship of their own for feedback on your project description and incorporated their suggestions? Have you requested letters from trusted and esteemed colleagues who know and respect your work? Finally, have you carefully and painstakingly reviewed—and reviewed again—all of your materials for typographical errors, correct punctuation, and spelling mistakes? If you have made any last-minute changes, have

you carefully re-read everything to make sure that you have not introduced any new errors?

If, after all of your hard work and careful planning, your proposal does not receive an award, do not despair. As disappointing as it may be, try to remember that no matter how strong your dossier, the competition will be stiff. Many excellent projects go unfunded one year, to be funded, in some cases, by multiple granting organizations, the next. If it is not your time this year, request feedback on your application whenever possible, try to keep an open mind, and seek input from trusted mentors and colleagues so that you can improve your chances in the next round. While this can be difficult, try not to let disappointment cloud your judgment: an application that was not a finalist in a given competition does not necessarily indicate that the project is irrelevant or unworthy, or even that the proposal was poorly formulated. Stay focused, refine your statement and bibliography, and try again. It will be easier the next time around. Finally, when you have succeeded, you can look back on your own quest for funding, share your experiences with others, and return the favor.

#### **DR. PEPPER'S PROPOSAL**

Bearing in mind the excellent advice offered by my colleagues in this series, I will propose only a few additional suggestions here.

The most important element of this application is the project description itself. Unfortunately, the goal of Dr. Pepper's project is buried mid-way through the third page, under the sub-heading, "Justification of Project." A pithy statement at the outset of the proposal will go a long way toward capturing the reader's attention and setting the stage for a more detailed exposition of the project. Focusing on the fact that the manuscript is unknown is probably not enough; there are many manuscripts that deserve critical attention. What is unique about this codex and the family who owned it? What can this manuscript teach us about lay devotional practices and the lives of women of this period more generally? If applying to an organization that funds projects from a variety of disciplines in the humanities, why would a study of

this text deserve special treatment, over scores of other proposals to examine original documents, or indeed, over hundreds of other applications? Try to view your project as an outsider might. How might you highlight its—and your—strengths to your best advantage?

After carefully and succinctly outlining the project in the overview, Dr. Pepper should refer back to her goals and bring any elements to the fore that set her study apart from the crowd. What makes Dr. Pepper's project distinctive? What is her theoretical framework and approach? Does she have a proven track record in the discipline? More specifically, what preliminary work has she already completed and how will the fellowship year or grant enable her to realize her project? Why has she chosen the manuscripts listed in her overview and how do they inform her examination of the primary text? In preparing a description of the manuscripts to be consulted, it would also be helpful for Dr. Pepper to indicate her expertise in the field and her preparation in the study of primary sources. Has Dr. Pepper presented any preliminary findings in conference presentations or other venues? Has she already published in this area, or does she have any publications forthcoming on the topic? Finally, what are the expected outcomes of her study: a book, an edition, or a series of articles? How will the granting organization benefit from funding this project and how can it enhance our understanding of women's devotional practices in the late Middle Ages, or, more generally, of the humanities? How might other disciplines benefit from this research? Answers to these questions would help to refine a project that has the potential to enrich our knowledge in the field and augment the growing corpus of important research on medieval women's studies.