

FEMINIST APPROACHES TO MEDIEVAL  
VISUAL CULTURE:  
AN INTRODUCTION  
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I came of age as a scholar during what I now recognize to have been a heyday for feminist scholarship in the field of medieval art history. This period was marked, in particular, by the work of the original Medieval Feminist Art History Project as a sponsoring organization at the annual International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo. Between 1991 and 2000, the Project regularly sponsored one or two sessions per year on topics including women as creators of medieval art, approaches to female sexuality, representations of the Virgin, women and death in medieval visual culture, and gendering images of royalty.<sup>1</sup> My strongest memory is of the 1993 session on “The Gaze:” one of the larger rooms in Fetzer Hall, packed with people, the table up front filled with presenters and discussants. The participants included such leading scholars as Madeline Caviness, Jeffrey Hamburger, and Linda Seidel—my professor and soon-to-be dissertation director. Having attended this session as a fairly young and fairly naïve graduate student, I hope I can be forgiven for having assumed that feminist work on medieval art had already attained a secure and established place in the field.

That assumption has not been borne out by subsequent developments in medieval art history. As Rachel Dressler—another of the discussants in the “Gaze” session—showed in a recent essay in this publication, feminist work on medieval art has struggled to find acceptance in both feminist and medieval art history.<sup>2</sup> To document the marginalization of medieval materials in feminist art history, Dressler looks to the series of anthologies edited by Norma Broude and Nancy Garrard that are among the major monuments in the field. The tables of contents for these volumes show a declining interest in, and thus a perceived irrelevance of, medieval art.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, to examine the status of feminist work in medieval art history, Dressler surveys the major

journals in the field and discovers that feminist scholarship's representation in *Gesta*—the organ of the International Center for Medieval Art and thus the premier journal in the field—has actually declined over time.<sup>4</sup> The first of Dressler's points resonates with Judith Bennett's observation (in *History Matters*) concerning the increasing presentism of women's history, and so suggests a pattern in feminist work across the disciplines. As Bennett writes, among non-medievalists the Middle Ages tend to be constructed simply as the antithesis of modernity and then as either a golden age or a "wretched abyss."<sup>5</sup> Broude and Garrard's use of Renaissance humanists' perception of a "Dark Age" preceding their own as an analogy for feminists' identification of patriarchy suggests that, for them, the medieval past is the abyss—and why study an abyss?<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the declining role of feminism within medieval art history seems to be an issue specific to that field. Bennett notes that women's history is now well established within the academy and that feminist analysis flourishes within medieval history, although she argues that this success has come at the expense of political engagement.<sup>7</sup>

To redress the precarious position currently occupied by feminist work within medieval art history, a group of scholars led by Dressler and including Jennifer Borland, Martha Easton, Corine Schleif, and me, have revived the Medieval Feminist Art History Project with sessions held at Kalamazoo in 2007 and 2008, and others planned for 2009, all co-sponsored with the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship.<sup>8</sup> Borland's contribution to this volume has its origins in a presentation made at the 2008 session, while Elizabeth L'Estrange's essay returns to the issue of the gaze from the 1993 session that I remember so well. Indeed, a concern with the gendered politics of looking links the contributions by Borland, L'Estrange, and Kristen Grimes. Both Borland and L'Estrange argue for the position of viewer as an active role open to medieval women, whether an Irish nun's unfettered look at the Sheela-na-gig sculpture at Clonmacnoise or a courtly woman's desirous gaze at the male bodies in secular ivories, while Grimes considers how lines of sight inside fourteenth-century images of St. Monica contributed to her construction as an idealized saintly mother.

Furthermore, Borland, L'Estrange, and Karen Britt all address a major concern for feminist scholarship on medieval art, outlined in Dressler's essay: feminist scholarship in art history is increasingly concerned with the possibility for female agency, but has increasingly identified that agency with the work of women artists, creating a problem for medievalists who know little to nothing about the makers of the works we study, whether men or women.<sup>9</sup> Here again Dressler's analysis resonates with Bennett's, as both authors point to the problematic assumption that women under patriarchy, including medieval women, were simply passive victims of their society and so were deprived of agency.<sup>10</sup> Borland, L'Estrange, and Britt all argue for extending the notion of agency in relationship to a work of art beyond the figure of the artist to include those of the viewer—as described above—and the patron. Britt's essay explores both the possibilities for and the limitations on women's agency as patrons of early churches in Byzantine Palestine and Arabia, in connection with their donor portraits that appear within those spaces.

Furthermore, as L'Estrange demonstrates in her essay, considering viewing as an active process (and so as a potential site of female agency) begins to break down many of the binary divisions that have structured feminist work on medieval art to date, in particular those between active and passive and between male and female, and as mapped onto the viewer and the viewed. The essays in this volume all point towards the future of feminist work on medieval art, as they break down additional structuring divisions. L'Estrange and Grimes' essays are both notable for their full interdisciplinarity, their equal engagement with both images and literary texts, while Borland's essay addresses the question of what art history has to offer to interdisciplinary feminist medieval studies. Borland's contribution also takes on the basic division between past and present, as she argues that contemporary art can provide models for active engagement with medieval visual materials. In this way, her work carries on from the foundational feminist scholarship of Madeline Caviness.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the inclusion of Britt's essay aims to dismantle the geographical division between Byzantium and the west that is a structural feature

of medieval art history, while the essay's attention to elite but non-imperial women begins to break down class barriers in our approach to medieval women and medieval art. This essay in particular signals the opening of our discourse to include the wide variety of medieval women, and the full diversity of their interactions with visual culture.

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#### END NOTES

1. This series of sessions was primarily the work of Paula Gerson and Pamela Scheingorn.
2. Rachel Dressler, "Continuing the Discourse: Feminist Scholarship and the Study of Medieval Visual Culture," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 43.1 (Summer 2007): 15-34.
3. Dressler, "Continuing the Discourse," p. 15.
4. Dressler, "Continuing the Discourse," p. 22, 28-9.
5. Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2006), pp. 37-9, 43, 82-3.
6. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, "Introduction" in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (Westview P, 1982), pp. 1-18; pp. 1-2; Dressler, "Continuing the Discourse," p. 17.
7. Bennett, *History Matters*, pp. 20-21, 33.
8. The 2007 session, organized by Dressler and Easton, entitled "Whither Feminist Art History Now," included papers by Borland, Schleif, and me; the 2008 session entitled "Feminisms, Medievalisms, and the Histories of Art," was organized by me, and included papers by Borland, Elizabeth Hudson, and me, along with a response by Dressler.
9. Dressler, "Continuing the Discourse," pp. 19-20.
10. Bennett, *History Matters*, pp. 10-11, 59.
11. Madeline H. Caviness, *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages: Sight, Spectacle, and Scopic Economy* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2001). See in particular chapter three, "The Broken Mirror: Parts, Relics, Freaks," pp. 127-74.