

Giving Credit Where Credit is Due (Sketching a Trajectory of Feminist Medieval Studies)

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THIS ISSUE OF *MFF*, built around the theme “Giving Credit Where Credit is Due,” is the result of much collaboration. Given the theme, it would be criminal not to emphasize how much others have contributed to the final product. “Giving Credit” grew out of a submission to a previous issue of *MFF* by Liz Scala, showing how Elizabeth Hammond had invented a key concept in Chaucer studies which has been, falsely, credited to another (male) scholar. As a member of the *MFF* editorial board, I read the original submission as a matter of routine, and concurred with the General Editor at the time, Miriam Shadis, that it would not fit well with the other articles in our upcoming issues. But the topic of “credit” struck me.

I suggested to Scala the idea of a devoting a Special Issue of *MFF* to the theme, and she agreed to rework her essay to form part of a larger whole, and also gave me the names of two potential contributors, Douglas Bruster and Thomas Bestul. After Bruster and Bestul had agreed to participate, Sharon Farmer (who had heard about the plan for the issue) wrote to tell me that women had been instrumental in the original discovery and scholarly exploitation of the treasure trove of materials in the Cairo Genizah, but had not been fully credited for that achievement. Happily, Jessica Goldberg was able to point me towards an expert on the Genizah materials, Rebecca Jefferson, who also agreed to contribute an essay. The issue appeared to be set, although it was clear that the stories told by Jefferson, Scala, Bruster, and Bestul would represent but the tip of the iceberg. For instance, just as I was assembling those contributions, I learned that Macrina (c. 327–379 CE) was the true

founder of cenobitic (community-based) monasticism, an achievement with which her brother Basil (bishop of Caesarea) has been erroneously credited.¹ Clearly, it's never too late to set the record straight.

All the scholars discussed by Jefferson, Scala, Bruster, and Bestul have passed away (albeit much more recently than Macrina). It was the inspirational genius of Bonnie Wheeler—who had also heard about the “credit” theme for *MFF* 45.1—that led to further development of the issue: why should this remain an antiquarian exercise? Could I not think more broadly about where “credit” now is due? Could I not invite some living scholars to take credit for their achievements? Exactly a century had passed between the publication of Hammond’s work on Chaucer,² subject of the Scala essay, and my efforts to round up similar discussions for publication in the *MFF*. The very existence of such a journal would surely have stunned Hammond. The conditions in which Medieval Studies are pursued had been transformed between 1908 and 2008, and the credit for that transformation was only in the most minor sense due to Hammond and her colleagues. Credit for our present situation goes to a generation of women (and their male supporters) who struggled to transform the academic landscape from a place where Hammond’s contribution could be swept under the rug, to one in which it could be recovered. And so I approached two distinguished senior medievalists, Dolores Frese and Sheila Delany, and asked them to share their memories of the activism that transformed both higher education and scholarship during the 1970s. Both graciously agreed, and Bonnie herself (having followed the progress of the issue through completion) also agreed to contribute an epilogue.

Readers who work their way through the essays in this issue will discover something of the trajectory of feminist Medieval Studies over the past century. One thing is clear: women have long been able to carry out important scholarship. Rebecca Jefferson describes the work of the twin sisters, Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson, who began publishing scholarly works in the 1890s, and whose activities partially overlapped those of Hammond. Over the course of their careers, they produced more than forty published works based largely on medieval manuscript witnesses (frequently palimpsests) which they themselves discovered. But the sisters had to do their work without

academic affiliations, without institutional support, as “independent scholars”—put bluntly, as unpaid scholars—drawing on their own private financial resources. Hammond too was an “independent scholar,” whose major work appeared when she had no academic affiliation, in stark contrast to George Lyman Kittredge, the Professor of English at Harvard University who has been falsely credited with her discovery. Douglas Bruster’s essay tells a similar story, showing how O. B. Hardison, Professor of English at Georgetown University and the Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, is routinely credited with pioneering the “anti-evolutionary” approach to medieval theatre history, when the ground-breaking work along these lines was actually done by Sister Mary Philippa Coogan in a doctoral dissertation at the Catholic University of America.³ Sister Coogan was not exactly an “independent” scholar, for she was a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Dubuque, Iowa, and thus received a “stipend” from the community which supported her scholarly efforts (and a lifestyle consistent with her vow of poverty). Thus, Coogan benefited from an alternative type of institutional support that has long been available to intellectual women (as medievalists know better than anyone).⁴

Through the end of the first half of the twentieth century, institutional resources and public monies did not often flow to female scholars, nor did those women often train graduate students. With no institutions or individuals committed to preserving their memory, it is no wonder that their scholarship, as prodigious and impressive as it was, has not always been fully recognized. At the risk of over-generalizing, I can imagine that well-situated male scholars also found the (generally) asymmetrical situation to be perfectly comfortable, for their female “colleagues” who were independent scholars or members of religious orders made no major demands and certainly posed no threat of competition for resources. Ramona Bressie, the subject of Thomas Bestul’s contribution, served from 1927 through 1932 as a Research Assistant on the Chaucer Life-Records project, a position that was effectively a tiny step removed from that of “independent scholar.” When the funding for her position dried up, she too joined the ranks of independent (unpaid) scholars. The only “external” support she ever received after being cut loose from the Life-Records project was the Alice Freeman

Palmer Fellowship from the American Association of University Women (1933–1934). Although she never managed to secure a teaching position (despite attempts to do so—the jobs apparently all went to men), she carried on at her own expense, and was still actively publishing when Coogan’s work appeared in 1947.

But Bressie’s story does not end there, and the tragedies of her later years set the stage for the feminist responses of Frese and Delany. The 1950s were not kind to Ramona Bressie, as they were not kind to many American women, struggling with social pressures urging a return to the home, with the constraints of a new femininity, and with the first flowering of confident over-prescription of pharmaceuticals to women.⁵ Male scholars not only got all the coveted academic positions, but they also managed to bar Bressie from access to the sources (the Life-Records materials she had helped assemble, then housed in the University of Chicago Library) on which she hoped to base her on-going scholarly activities. With great sympathy, Bestul sketches her successful battle to regain access to the material, one of the many battles (including against involuntary commitment to a psychiatric institute) that would mark her final decades. It is almost as if, during the Eisenhower years, even the traditional avenue of independent scholarship was somehow considered unsuitable for women. Other factors were also at play, as Bestul explores as length, but there is still no denying that the repressive social atmosphere of the 1950s played a role in crushing Ramona Bressie. The feminist uproar of the late 1960s and early 1970s was born in reaction to the oppressions of the 1950s.

Over the past few months, as I have worked with the contributors to this volume, read, edited, and discussed their contributions with them, I have been haunted by a recurring image: it is the 1960s, we are in the University of Chicago Library, in the card catalogue room, or in front of a shelf of reference works on Chaucer, or in some alcove devoted to whatever Dewey Decimal classification concerns *The Canterbury Tales*, and there stands Ramona Bressie in threadbare clothing, almost certainly talking to herself, desperately trying to complete scholarly projects that have been stalled for years, refusing to give up. Just next to her, sitting on the floor (did people then sit on the floors in libraries?), full of hope and promise, is a young faculty wife who

has interrupted her own graduate work on Chaucer to accompany her husband to the University of Chicago and raise their three children, but who will return one day, also refusing to give up. The younger woman is Dolores Warwick Frese. Surely at least once they spoke to one another, and possibly some small spark of Bressie's determination found its way into Frese's heart, fortifying her for her coming landmark legal battle against sexual discrimination by academic employers. The once-comfortable, now apparently less so, gender asymmetries were about to come crashing down.

Ramona Bressie died in April of 1970, probably just as Sheila Delany was learning that she would join the faculty as a tenure track Assistant Professor at Simon Fraser University, while Dolores Frese was back in graduate school, herself only a few years away from a similar tenure track appointment at the University of Notre Dame. Both Frese and Delany have written brief memoirs of their experiences as Assistant Professors during the 1970s, Frese's far more dramatic than Delany's, for Frese's passage from Assistant to Associate Professor, her achievement of tenured security and her ascent of the academic ladder that symbolized the definitive move away from the fraught status of "independent scholar," took place as the result of a successful class action suit charging employment discrimination and filed "individually and on behalf of all others similarly situated" (as the court documents read).⁶ The sixteen-page Settlement Agreement of March 16, 1981, between Frese and the University of Notre Dame du Lac, includes multiple important provisions that have since become standard operating procedure in academic institutions across the United States. It is likely that many of us have benefited from these procedures, and it is even more likely that many of us have not known whom to credit with their existence: Dolores Frese, who helped establish such (at the time revolutionary) procedures as the following:

Consistent with the University's standards of excellence, the University shall make a good faith effort to renew, promote and tenure female faculty at the same rates as male faculty, among those considered for contract renewal, promotion and tenure, respectively, within each of the four faculties of the University[...].

Effective the Spring of 1981, the University shall establish a University Appeals Procedure on Contract Renewal, Promotion and Tenure. This Procedure shall provide female faculty with an internal review mechanism to consider charges of employment discrimination based upon sex in the contract renewal, promotion and tenure process[...].

The impact of the institutional changes precipitated by such legal guarantees should not be underestimated, for it was largely due to their access to stable, secure, and remunerated positions that female scholars were able to take a further step, that is, to go beyond being feminists and scholars to become feminist scholars.

Only by straining, stretching, and speculating could we possibly label the work of Agnes Smith Lewis, Margaret Dunlop Gibson, Elizabeth Prescott Hammond, Sister Mary Philippa Coogan, or Ramona Bressie “feminist.” Was Hammond able to recognize the “Marriage Group” in *The Canterbury Tales* because she was attuned to the importance of such gendered institutions as marriage? Was Coogan drawn to analyze *Mankind* because she recognized, as Bruster would too half a century later, that the drama acknowledged the importance of female labor in society? None of this seems likely. The content and methods of their scholarship were completely conventional, as were their positions as independent scholars and as nuns. Their scholarship would have pleased—probably in fact did please—the numerous older male colleagues of mine from whom I repeatedly heard, during the 1980s, that the highest praise they could afford a work of scholarship by a woman was to say that it could have been written by a man, that is, that the identity of the author as a woman was in no way evident.

It certainly never formed any part of Sheila Delany’s project to hide the fact that personal identity inevitably conditions intellectual interests and scholarly goals. Almost from the very beginning, her publications explicitly engaged with themes of crucial social import, reaching far beyond the realm of gender politics. Here I simply list the immediately evocative titles of some of her more daring early works: *Counter-Tradition: The Literature of Dissent and Alternatives* (1970); “Up Against the Great Tradition” (1970); “Political Style, Political Stylistics” (1974); “Marxism, Art and Social Reality” (1975); “Sex and Politics in Pope’s

Rape of the Lock" (1975); "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*" (1975); "Rewriting Woman Good: Gender and the Anxiety of Influence in Two Late-Medieval Texts" (1982); "Mothers to Think Back through: Who Are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pizan" (1983); and *Writing Woman: Women Writers and Women in Literature, Medieval to Modern* (first published in 1983, but reissued as *Writing Woman. Sex, Class and Literature, Medieval and Modern* in 2007). The term "gender" figured in the titles of Delany's works several years before the appearance of the massively influential article on the subject by Joan Wallach Scott (and indeed before the term "gender" appeared in any of Scott's published titles).⁷

Medievalists were thus in on the ground floor of feminist scholarship. Indeed, this issue's dedicatee in particular, our foremother Jo Ann McNamara, who died just as we were putting the issue into production, has more claim than most to have been present at the very birth hour of feminist Medieval Studies.⁸ Some of McNamara's groundbreaking feminist work of the 1970s and 1980s (undertaken as a tenured Associate Professor) is described by her former Hunter College colleague, Dorothy O. Helly, in an obituary that I am very pleased to be able to publish here. For helping to arrange Helly's contribution to *MTF*, credit is due to Thomas F. Head and Caroline W. Bynum.

Fast-forward through the last phase of the trajectory to 2009: although we cannot predict where resources will flow in the inevitably lean years that lie ahead, it seems as if the material conditions are firmly in place to guarantee the continuation of feminist Medieval Studies. Thirty years after Frese filed her law suit, feminist medievalists have much more than tenured security. For one thing, we have many male fellow travellers, who may or may not relish the idea of being called "feminists" themselves; witness the simple fact that two of the contributors to this issue are men (without forgetting that Dolores's husband Jerry Frese played a major role in the story of triumph and progress that emerges from the essays collected here). For another, this year the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship consolidated its public presence simultaneously in both utterly traditional and utterly contemporary venues: first by becoming an officially-recognized Affiliated Society of the American Historical Association (at whose next annual meeting we

will present three panels of feminist medievalist research, co-sponsored by the Medieval Academy of America and by the Coordinating Council for Women in History), and then by establishing a group on Facebook (SMFS—Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship at www.facebook.com), a move spurred by graduate students who hope it will function as a mentoring exchange.

The surest sign, however, of our rosy future is the one that will confront the reader who turns the page from Delany's memoir to the next article in this issue: the winner of the first annual SMFS graduate student essay prize. The contest drew many entrants, including a number of fantastic papers, demonstrating that nowadays even graduate students early in their careers (the winner, Sarah Celentano Parker, is an M.A. candidate!) are already pursuing feminist Medieval Studies in substantial numbers. This essay, along with the final essay in the issue by Marla Segol, shows how very far Medieval Studies has come in the past few decades. Neither Parker nor Segol is primarily concerned with male authors such as Chaucer at all, but instead work to situate women in the intellectual landscape of the past. Parker's study of Herrad of Hohenbourg's *Hortus deliciarum* (*Garden of Delights*) reveals how the abbess fostered a rich scholarly community at the house and provided her canonesses with an impressive and wide-ranging education, while Segol's reading of Arabic poetry written by medieval Islamic women spotlights the strong intellectual tradition built by and for educated women in the Dar al-Islam. Although neither author uses the term, both Parker's canonesses and Segol's poetesses clearly are part of a long and deep tradition of "feminist" (or at least female) intellectual endeavor.

The image which closes this introduction, and welcomes the reader into the essays ahead, evokes precisely this long tradition of women's engagement with the life of the mind. It is a 2009 photo of Dolores Frese, wearing a medal (a large gold icon of St. Scholastica, hung on an Olympic-style ribbon) awarded to her in 1981 by the Institute of Women Today (Fig. 1). The medal had belonged to Sister Annette Walters, whose successful sex discrimination suit against St. Ambrose College in Davenport, Iowa is discussed by Frese. Scholastica (c. 480–547 CE), whose very name means "scholar" or "learned one," is one of the many sainted women whom Jo Ann McNamara spotlighted in her writings.⁹



Fig. 1: Dolores Frese, in 2009, wearing the medal awarded to her by the Institute of Women Today at the “Annette Walters Memorial Conference on the Philosophy of Women’s Liberation” (May 15–17, 1981) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

It is probably safe to say that, due to the work of McNamara and many others over the past few decades, the place of Christian women in the intellectual history of medieval Europe is secure. In contrast, however, Segol’s poetesses have been completely left out of recent rewritings of the history of medieval Islam, along with the communal mores and aesthetics that valued them and their work. Clearly we have come far, but there is also still more to do. Segol’s essay, which opens up entirely new vistas, shows that there is an important role to be played by publications such as *MFF* and that there is every reason to be optimistic about the future.

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END NOTES

1. Anna M. Silvas, *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*, *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts* 22 (Turnhout, 2008), pp. 44; 48; 169.
2. Eleanor Prescott Hammond, *Chaucer: A Bibliographic Manual* (New York: Macmillan, 1908).

3. Sister Mary Philippa Coogan, *An Interpretation of the Moral Play, Mankind* (Washington, DC: Catholic UP of America, 1947).
4. As part of her service to the Order, Sister Philippa also taught (until 1957) in the Department of English at Clarke College, which was founded and sponsored by the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. For information on Sister Philippa, I am very grateful to Sara McAlpin BVM, of the Archives Office at Clarke College, who wrote (concerning Coogan's years of training and research at Catholic University): "the goal always was to prepare excellent teachers rather than to finance only research, writing, etc. Philippa, by the way, was legendary in excellence as a teacher" (e-mail of June 12, 2009).
5. Jonathan Metzl, "Mother's Little Helper': The Crisis of Psychoanalysis and the Miltown Resolution," *Gender and History* 15 (2003): 240-67.
6. Settlement Agreement, March 16, 1981, in the case of Dolores Frese, Plaintiff, and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Plaintiff-Intervenor, v. University of Notre Dame du Lac, a/k/a University of Notre Dame, Defendant, United States District Court for the Northern District of Indiana, South Bend Division, Civil Action Number S78-0106 (block quotations from pp. 4-5; 10).
7. Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053-75. Scott's publications are listed at <http://www.sss.ias.edu/community/faculty-cv/scottcv02.pdf>; Delany's publications are listed at <http://www.sfu.ca/~sdelany/published.html>.
8. For instance, with Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne F. Wemple, "The Power of Women through the Family in Medieval Europe, 500-1000," *Feminist Studies* 1 (1973): 126-41.
9. For instance, in Jo Ann McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996), p. 100.