

Introduction: Microaggression, Harassment, and Abuse—How Medieval Are We?

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PREAMBLE: MY APOLOGIES if this introduction—and the articles of this Subsidia issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum*—engage any triggers among our readers. All of us involved in this project feel strongly that these issues need to be discussed in open and honest discourse, but we all also realize that for some, what follows could cause emotional responses that might be unwelcome.

When I was a youngster growing up in the sixties and early seventies, I received a lot of mixed signals. My flute teacher told me that my interpretation of a Mozart flute concerto was “too masculine” but that my approach to Bach was “exceptional”—sufficiently masculine, perhaps? My biology teacher tried to talk me into studying biochemistry, not specifically because I was actually pretty good at it, but in order to matchmake me with his star College Prep Bio pupil—he thought we would have geniuses for children. I was a band geek—secretary of the band, worked in the band office—and was told that I should be flattered and feel appreciated because the assistant band director (I was fifteen, he was around thirty) hit on me constantly. Two of my best friends, at the same age, were having “affairs” with married teachers; both suffered serious mental anguish when their parents and the school “interfered” (as we saw it—officially it was an “intervention”) and removed the teachers from the junior high school we were attending—they bumped them both up to the high school. I did not consider the school’s move to be appropriate because I believed, as did my friends, that the attention of these teachers was flattering and romantic.

Looking back from a distance of forty-five years on my teenaged self I am all too aware of how these experiences shaped my view of the place

of women in the world, of how the Foucauldian panopticon of patriarchy and sexism interfered with my confidence in my abilities and autonomy. Attending a predominantly women's college provided me with a more stable sense of self, but did not fundamentally alter my psychosexual position in the world: I was young, female, white, privileged, and susceptible to inappropriate sexual overtures from men who should have known better. White privilege opened doors to employment in New York City in the seventies and eighties; femaleness tended to slam them shut again, unless one was willing to use sex as a bargaining tool. Too often I accepted what Deniz Kandiyoti coined the "patriarchal bargain" and allowed myself to be used—or refused knowing I would be removed from the competition.¹

Women in academic careers often experience, I think, a kind of ebb and flow of feminism. There are times when challenging the patriarchy seems "appropriate" and other times when it seems "dangerous." There are times when one finds oneself falling into traditional modes of discourse that erase the female: a common situation in western civilization lectures and medieval history surveys. Remaining vigilant of one's feminist bona fides can be taxing and exhausting—and people, including students, just don't seem to care. I teach surveys of women's history in the ancient and medieval eras and have received student evaluations in those courses that complain about the fact that I talk about women all . . . the . . . time. Sometimes it just takes too much energy to respond to all the mansplaining and to interrupt the manalogues that saturate faculty meetings.

Events of the last two years, however, have convinced me that I no longer have the option of sitting back and rolling my eyes. Feminism might be commodified and commercialized in the post-third wave world of social media, instant and fake news, and Beyoncé videos, but it is still relevant, it is still a very hot hotcake to juggle, and it is still the most revolutionary notion that Western white people have come up with—and that feminists of color have shaped into something far more vital and significant than the simplistic equations of the second wave.

1. Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender & Society* 2, no. 3 (1988): 274–90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/190357>.

We are currently on a razor's edge with respect to the relevance and acceptance of feminist perspectives, even in the world of academia, where sensitivities to and about feminist principles are far more common than outside our "ivied" walls. The significant growth of reporting on assaults on women and girls all over the world; the seemingly new awareness of the prevalence of sexual assault, sexism, and harassment in the military, on college campuses, and in business and government; the backlash against progressive ideas in general and feminism in particular following the election of November 2016: these are all various canaries in the coal mines of modern civilization telling us as feminists that we have to raise our voices, support and protect those who are dependent on us, and do more than wear buttons on our caps that say "more feminism, less bullsh*t" (although this is my favorite button of all the buttons I wear on a particular baseball cap I use when demonstrating or making a statement).

When I was elected Vice President/President Elect of SMFS, I did not anticipate that my tenure in the position would include drafting numerous letters of protest and support in favor of inclusivity and equity. I did not think that the job would include reading emails—or the results of the SMFS survey on sexual harassment in academia—that made me nauseous with distress for the authors or participants. I thought the job would be focusing on developing support for feminist scholarship on the Middle Ages and encouraging young feminist scholars. That certainly is part of the job, but these other activities—of which this *Subsidia* issue is one—have taken precedence, and they are what keep me awake at night.

The SMFS Advisory Board originally conceived of a special issue surrounding questions about microaggression, harassment, racism and other forms of bigotry, and sexual violence in the wake of the survey distributed in 2015 that queried the readers of the *Medfem* list on such topics. Our intention was not to publish merely opinion pieces or blog-writ-large, but instead to engage these issues in scholarly and educative ways: to provide options for feminist scholars to look at medieval events and medieval texts in light of current understandings of issues such as microaggression and harassment, and to formulate new interpretations of medieval "stuff" based on the premise that, although the terminology

might be relatively new, medieval texts can be read productively through these newer and more recent notions. We also decided that providing some basic educational information on phenomena like Title IX and the survey results would also prove beneficial to our readership, and we were very fortunate that Liz Herbert McAvooy, the President of SMFS, was able to make contact with Ann Olivarius, who as a young student was a plaintiff in one of the first Title IX cases, *Alexander v. Yale*, and instrumental in creating the term “date rape.” Dr. Olivarius kindly agreed to produce an article for the issue; the result, “Sexual Harassment and Assault in the Academy: Observations from a Title IX Lawyer,” is a superb and very personal history of the ways in which Title IX came into being and how it has been deployed since its inception.

Co-editor Jennifer Edwards, who was responsible for leading the group that created the SMFS survey, breaks down the numbers in her article “The 2015 Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship Survey on Harassment.” She also has written a second more analytical article that focuses on the recent media attention awarded to Allen Frantzen’s blog decrying the supposed feminist takeover of academic discourse and the University of Chicago medievalist Rachel Fulton Brown’s support for a Christian-centric conservatism and her admiration for the Alt-Right personality Milo Yiannopoulos. Her article, “#Femfog and Fencing: The Risks for Academic Feminism in Public and Online,” details the ways in which feminists in academia are in fact underrepresented in public media and are frequently beset with vigorous attacks from antifeminists that attain greater attention in social and popular media than does serious feminist scholarship.

The remaining six articles juxtapose medieval and modern circumstances, ideas, and contexts in order to reveal the relationship between medieval presentations of antifeminism, from microaggression and mansplaining, to the ubiquity of rape culture, to the creation of racialized categories based on whiteness and skin color. Kristen Mills, in “Phil-fog: Celts, Theorists, and Other Others” investigates the ways in which comparative philology reveals the strawman in the argument in favor of the superiority of “Teutonic” literature over “Celtic” in early medieval literary studies and links it to the false dichotomization of

the Germanic as “masculine” and the Celtic as “feminine.” Elizabeth Hubble’s article, “Medieval Trolls, Mansplainers, and Bullies: Reading Gontier Col’s Letters to Christine de Pizan through the Lens of Twenty-First-Century Online Feminist Action,” reveals another interpretive facet to Christine’s body of work: her response to being trolled and mansplained by hostile male authors because she criticized their favorite literary bromance figure, Jean de Meun, and his misogynist continuation of the *Roman de la Rose*. Kate Staples, in “Hidden in Plain Sight,” exposes the blinkered vision of male historians who ignore the presence of women in archival sources because their worldview permits no penetration of the feminine into their masculine narratives; and she makes conceptual connections between this phenomenon and the flaws of student-driven teaching evaluations, which universally discriminate against women and people of color. Lydia Harris reveals, in “Old Ideas for a New Debate: Medieval and Modern Attitudes to Abortion,” that, even in the context of modern-day debates surrounding abortion and contraception, the labeling of something as “medieval” when it is seen as backward, violent, or barbaric often misconstrues the medieval perspective or form of action in the circumstance being discussed. Indeed, medieval thinkers often expressed subtle and complex positions regarding issues that are now discussed in highly oversimplified or tendentious ways. Anna Waymack’s article, “Teaching *de raptu meo*: Chaucer, Chaumpaigne, and Consent in the Classroom,” tackles a question few Chaucer scholars are willing to engage: how did the charges of rape against Chaucer—and the possibility, even probability, of his guilt—shape his literary discourse? Moreover, should scholars continue to give a pass to talented men who have engaged in reprehensible behavior simply on the basis of their talent? When does lionizing an historical figure become a whitewashing? The final article in the issue, Nahir Otaño Gracia and Daniel Armenti’s “Constructing Prejudice in the Middle Ages and the Repercussions of Racism Today,” examines several commonly read literary texts and reveals how they operate as markers for the evolution of racialized categories based on religion, skin color, and migrant status. The authors suggest that these texts, and others like them, rationalized and regularized categories that were later utilized to justify the enslavement of Africans and indigenous people in the “New World.”

The thoughtful and provocative articles in this *Subsidia* issue present compelling ideas about and new ways to investigate medieval sources and medieval culture. At the same time, the authors all challenge us—as scholars, educators, and consumers of scholarship—not to ignore the many ways in which the forms of discourse in which we engage are bound by the false positivism of white male heteronormativity, and that we as feminist scholars are often marginalized as a result. It is not only that feminist scholarship is still—despite decades of cutting-edge research—often perceived as being out of the mainstream, it is that women and non-heteronormative men in general are still subject to abuse, hostility, violence, and constant monitoring by the patriarchal male gaze. The work done—and the work still to do—by SMFS and its officers and Advisory Board is part of the action plan signed onto by those of us involved in this *Subsidia* issue. SMFS has embraced numerous initiatives in the last two years, including the Foremother’s Prize, which through the generous donation of Judith Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras of their royalties for the *Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in the Medieval World*, and individual donations from SMFS members, is able to provide mentorship and professional development opportunities to doctoral candidates in medieval studies; and the SMFS Trans* Fund, which offers travel monies to members of the trans* medievalist community, paid through the sale of SMFS merchandise. We will continue to advocate for inclusion and equity in our communities. We continue to push for conference organizers to accommodate the needs of families, instead of the tradition of assuming that conferees are mostly cis-gendered men and single, childless women. We continue to challenge universities and academic institutions to find ways to erase gender and racial/ethnic bias in hiring and promotion. We continue to fight against the sexual and emotional abuse of women and men, especially harassment and abuse that occurs in power relationships such as between graduate students and supervisors, between department heads and junior members of the faculty, and between instructors and students. We are exploring partnerships with media outlets, such as the *Guardian* newspaper, to get our message of tolerance, inclusivity, and scholarly rigor to a broader circle than perhaps we have had before. We intend to persist and we hope that the readers of this *Subsidia* issue join us in the endeavor.

If we are going to continue confronting and combatting global sexism, racism, ageism, ableism (and so many other markers of difference), we must do so mindfully, intersectionally, and self-consciously: in the classroom, in our scholarship, in our lives. Now, more than ever, the personal truly is political.