

The 2015 Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship Survey on Harassment¹

Jennifer C. Edwards

MEDIEVALISTS, PARTICULARLY FEMINIST medievalists, have long known the reality that harassment of all sorts is a basic fact of life. We have whispered these truths to one another over dinners, at conferences, in bathrooms, and in private messages. Such hushed conversations share crucial information with our vulnerable colleagues, but they do nothing to stop the perpetrators of harassment or to address systems that allow or encourage such activity. The Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, or SMFS, has worked for years to find better ways to deal with this situation, and in late May and early June 2015, the SMFS Advisory Board's Political and Social Issues Committee, on which I served, conducted a Survey on Harassment. The goal was to determine the types of harassment our colleagues experienced, the extent of the problem, and the sorts of solutions SMFS might provide. The SMFS Survey demonstrated that many respondents have known too well and for too long how pervasive misogyny is. SMFS's aim in the survey was not only to identify the kinds of harassment and microaggression frequently experienced by women in academic fields, but also to point out the ways in which women at various career points experience such events differently, and to show that contingent positions place women in particular kinds of danger. With the survey, and in further initiatives developing out of it, we hope to suggest some strategies we can take to help ourselves and each other both challenge harassers and work to minimize their power.

1. A version of this essay was presented during the SMFS Roundtable on Sexual Harassment at the 2016 International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, MI.

More than 420 people responded to the SMFS survey; nearly 70 percent of respondents claimed they had experienced harassment and about the same percentage stated that they did not report it. This included harassment at conferences, in classrooms, mentoring relationships, committee work, applying for promotion, and interactions with students—basically in all aspects of academic life. Respondents cited stalking, unwanted touching, being shamed for life choices, retaliation and career sabotage, a variety of microaggressions, and sexual assault. Individual responses and comments throughout the survey suggest that harassment is perpetrated 1) by repeat offenders, whose actions are well known on campus or in the larger profession; 2) in our institutions, by senior colleagues, administrators, visiting scholars, mentors, students, and peers, especially in graduate school; and 3) at conferences: often, but not exclusively, by older men. Many responses noted that harassment and bullying are also perpetrated by women, and that men can be victims as well.² Some reported that they had experienced harassment multiple times, not always from the same harasser. We had known already that harassment was common in the academy; responses to the survey suggested it was and is a pervasive crisis.

We had advertised the survey on the Medfem-1 listserv and social media, but we did not limit the survey to SMFS members or to medievalists, only advertising it as a survey of harassment in an academic context. We had not requested demographic information, but from context it appears that most respondents were women, with some men; all responses use English, but spelling suggests that the survey included respondents from the UK and Commonwealth countries such as Canada and Australia. We left the definition of harassment vague, allowing respondents to choose for themselves whether to discuss sexual harassment, microaggressions, bullying, or any other interpretation of the term.

The 70 percent of respondents who said yes to question 1, “Have you ever personally experienced harassment in an academic setting?” far

2. Alcohol was often blamed. This is a way of excusing harasser’s behavior; there’s also little evidence that misconduct like harassment declines when alcohol is removed from these situations.

exceeds the results of other surveys of sexual harassment, which typically find that about 30-50 percent of respondents say they have had such experiences. This dramatic difference may be due to the voluntary nature of the survey and the fact that it had no impact on employment or status. The possibility that respondents were also using a broader interpretation of the term could also be a contributing factor to the high number of positive responses.³ In real numbers, 297 respondents said they had personally experienced harassment. This was, of course, intensely troubling. Responses to question 4, “Did you report this harassment,” which presented more or less the same numbers as question 1—about 70 percent answered that they had not reported the harassment—fit patterns identified by larger studies, suggesting that most harassment goes unreported.

When asked why they did not report harassment, respondents noted the lack of a mechanism to do so, feeling that reports would not yield any benefit, fearing retaliation, or being explicitly advised either by colleagues or by their reporting agents not to cause trouble. Some respondents had reported harassment to a variety of campus officers, with mixed results. A very few people said that reporting the harassment had yielded a positive result. A few stated that the details were still too difficult or painful to report, or that they were nervous even responding anonymously on the survey. Others downplayed the significance of the harassment they had experienced by suggesting that others had had worse experiences. Some relied on informal methods rather than reporting, such as warning friends, or setting up informal “naming and shaming” groups. Respondents often reported only to help others or when they discovered that others had been targeted. One response, which encapsulated the feeling of many respondents, asked: “What is the point? The victim just gets blamed, analyzed and demonized. I don’t want my credibility to be questioned.” Many felt that there was no one to report to because conference organizers or the institution had no

3. As noted by Linda Mitchell in the SMFS Political and Social Issues Committee annual report. See Ann Olivarius’s discussion of one such study in “Sexual Harassment and Assault in the Academy: Observations from a Title IX Lawyer,” in this issue.

process for addressing issues of harassment. And the fear of retaliation—often based on actual experience, whether personal or observed—ran throughout these responses.

Question 5 examined what resources were available to victims, and what resources respondents wished were available. The overwhelming response was that no resources were available, that little information was made available about potential avenues for reporting or seeking assistance, or that available resources were ineffective in addressing the reported situations. The dearth of resources for victims of harassment and the failure of most academic institutions to pay more than lip service to those available through Title IX, as well as the failure of many of our conferences to offer proper codes of conduct, means that a culture of harassing and aggression against vulnerable colleagues still pervades academia. Although the organizers of the International Medieval Congress at Leeds in 2017 included in its program a strong “Policy on Dignity and Mutual Respect,” no such statement appeared in the program for the 2017 International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo program.⁴ The lack of transparency and follow-through on these issues is therefore perpetuated.

The blurred lines between our academic, public, personal, and social lives in the academy make issues of boundaries and boundary violations tricky to understand and difficult to police. It is no wonder that there have been so many Title IX complaints in our institutions. Several of these cases have received national attention, such as that of Gabriel Piterberg at UCLA. He was accused of assaulting at least two graduate students and has admitted to acting inappropriately with them. In response, the university suspended him for one quarter, during which it also celebrated him for receiving a prestigious fellowship residency in Europe; he was fined \$3000; and he was not permitted to do certain kinds of service for a probationary period once he returned to campus in 2017. There have been letters of protest from the faculty, demonstrations from students, and the two graduate students have sued the University for the way it mishandled their case, yet Piterberg returned to UCLA

4. The IMC Leeds policy appears on lxviii and at https://www.leeds.ac.uk/ims/imc/dignity_respect_social_media.html.

after paying merely a “harassment tax,” secure with his tenure. There are many others accused of harassment, such as University of California at Berkeley professors Blake Wentworth and Geoff Marcy, Peter Ludlow at Northwestern—who quit in the midst of his termination hearing—and the University of California Santa Cruz professor who resigned while the school agreed to a \$1.5 million settlement of a student’s rape claim.⁵

These cases and the responses to them are often underwritten by the same antifeminism betrayed in attacks on women’s work, value, and safety in #GamerGate or the Men’s Rights Activist (MRA) movement. Such attacks, it should be noted, do not always come from men. There is not space here to unpack the complicated articles and now book that Northwestern professor Laura Kipnis has written in response to the charges against Ludlow, but she herself was accused of attacking his victims and using a public forum to shame them.⁶ Some colleagues have

5. A recent study found a large number of sexual harassment reports throughout the University of California system, including 26 allegations against Joseph Lewis, a UC Irvine dean, over four years. Lewis resigned in 2014. Jeong Park and Ryan Leou, “Twenty-Five UCLA Employees Identified in UC Sexual Harassment Reports,” *Daily Bruin*, 1 March 2017, <http://dailybruin.com/2017/03/01/twenty-five-ucla-employees-identified-in-uc-sexual-harassment-reports/>, accessed 18 April 2017. Wentworth has sued the students who accused him for defamation, with litigation pending: Shayann Hendricks, “Court Makes no Motion on Petition to Dismiss Defamation Lawsuit Filed by Blake Wentworth,” *The Daily Californian* 8 March 2017, <http://www.dailycal.org/2017/03/08/court-makes-no-motion-petition-dismiss-defamation-lawsuits-filed-blake-wentworth/>, accessed 18 April 2017.

6. Laura Kipnis, “Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 February 2015, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Sexual-Paranoia-Strikes/190351/>, accessed 20 February 2017; and Laura Kipnis, “My Title IX Inquisition,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education: The Chronicle Review*, 29 May 2015, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/My-Title-IX-Inquisition/230489/>, accessed 20 February 2017. Also worth reading is Cynthia Lewis’s letter to the editor, “Title IX, Retaliation, and the Facts,” 22 June 2015, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Title-IX-Retaliationthe/231483>, accessed 20 February 2017. Kipnis has been sued by “Jane Doe,” a graduate student whose allegations against Ludlow Kipnis discussed in these articles, for her book on the subject,

responded by sharing information on these cases through social media, not permitting them to be swept under the rug. Faculty Against Rape, a Facebook group, has devoted itself to this cause, and has even started writing universities (such as Northwestern) in response to their policies about harassment and assault.⁷

The *Guardian* (Manchester, UK) has also taken up the topic of harassment, bullying, sexual assault, and bias on college campuses, online, and in hiring as part of a series of articles focused on gender- and race-based discrimination. The paper's 2016 series on "the rising global phenomenon of online harassment" included scientific data, self-analysis, and discussion of larger trends—and they put some effort into the presentation of this material with quizzes that readers can use to test themselves on how they would block comments in "The Dark Side of *Guardian* Comments," and eye-catching technical details that enhanced the charts and data in that article.⁸ To their credit, the *Guardian* did not leave this study as a one-off and has made a notable effort to examine harassment and discrimination from a variety of perspectives. These articles can be found under helpful topic tags on their online site, with twenty-one articles, opinions, and letters on the topic published in the first three weeks of April 2017 under "sexual harassment" and another fourteen under "rape and sexual assault."⁹

Given women's experiences with harassment, their frustration with existing methods of reporting issues, and their disappointment that harassers face no or few consequences for repeated harassment, many colleagues are reluctant to risk their own positions in calling out such

Unwanted Advances: Dawn Rhodes, "Northwestern Student Sues Prof Laura Kipnis over 'Unwanted Advances' Book," *Chicago Tribune*, 17 May 2017.

7. FAR's 15 April 2016 letter is available online: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1yXsrWoVGqN725vvpBZfemKuhbUzbgYiMo0ruX38qJJY/> edit, accessed 9 March 2017.

8. Becky Gardiner, Mahana Mansfield, et al., "The Dark Side of *Guardian* Comments," *Guardian*, 12 April 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/12/the-dark-side-of-guardian-comments>, accessed 12 April 2016.

9. The series on online safety is not indexed under those terms—see their continuing analysis of this under the *Guardian*'s tag "the web we want."

problems and many others are too vulnerable to pursue claims in the face of significant institutional indifference if not outright opposition.

As depressing as these data are, it is important to focus on outcomes: what action might we as individuals or as part of SMFS take in the future? In responses to the SMFS survey Question 6, “What sort of resources did you wish you had access to when experiencing harassment?” the largest portion wanted web resources, followed closely by desire for an SMFS contact with Title IX training, another SMFS mentor, or more open discussion about harassment and harassers. Many respondents to this question cited a feeling of hopeless helplessness against an institutional juggernaut. They also expressed a desire for a more robust and active community of like-minded people—victims as well as advocates—with whom to talk. In part as a result of the survey, SMFS sponsored a roundtable on harassment at the 2016 International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, MI. Heightened attention on this issue stemming from the high-profile cases discussed above and the #Femfog affair (discussed elsewhere in this issue), as well as long experience with harassment, made this a standing-room-only session.

Discussion at the roundtable included suggestions to keep focus on the issue, create a code of conduct template for conferences, train SMFS board members in Title IX, provide a web resource on harassment linked to the SMFS page, partner with other academic societies on this issue, emphasize that harassment has no gender, attend to the fact that there are many kinds of difference in our communities, publicly disavow sites that promote a culture of retaliation and bullying, continue making strong statements of support for vulnerable colleagues (both as individuals and as a community), and continue providing ways for SMFS members and allies to make their support visible. This is a list in progress. These discussions have yielded some important resources: the SMFS website now includes a page of “Sexual Harassment and Assault Resources,” and SMFS has created a Trans* Travel Fund to support scholars who identify as trans* to travel to Kalamazoo, Leeds, or the Gender and Medieval Studies Group (UK) conference.¹⁰ Progress has been made on encour-

10. For the resource pages: <http://smfsweb.org/sexual-harassment-and-assault-resources/>; for the Trans* Travel Fund: <http://smfsweb.org/trans-travel-fund/>.

aging conferences to include a code of conduct in partnerships with other organizations. And for 2016 and 2017 SMFS has designed and sold merchandise—everything from buttons, totes, mugs, and tee shirts to USB wristbands—that make their bearer or user visible as a feminist medievalist, with proceeds directly supporting the Trans* Travel Fund.

In future discussion I hope that we can focus on further suggestions, advice, and solutions. One thing I have learned from conducting the survey and discussing it with friends and colleagues is that most of us have a story about sexual harassment, bullying, microaggressions, homophobia, etc.: either a situation we experienced or one we observed. Those anecdotes are important. But the pattern and the larger systemic issues are bigger than our individual experiences, and solutions we pursue with our advocacy will have to focus on that macro level. And they may require a revolution.

Manhattan College