Editor's Introduction

Feminist intersectionality: Centering the margins in 21st- century medieval studies

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In a 2016 blog post entitled ‘Antifeminism, Whiteness, and Medieval Studies,’ Dorothy Kim modified Falvia Dzodan’s oft-repeated phrase that ‘my feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit’ for Kim’s own scholarly field, noting that medievalists should approach their work thinking, ‘my medieval studies will be intersectional or it will be bullshit’ (Kim, 2016). The response to Kim’s words (and to her subsequent 2017 post on medieval studies and white nationalism) was intense and violent. Academics dismissed Kim’s ideas; a tenured female academic criticized the untenured Kim in a blog post, tagging a journalist with connections to the alt-right, who subsequently wrote a piece about Kim illustrated with a drawing of a white woman holding a spiked club. Intersectionality may be an essential paradigm for medieval studies, but it is one to which the field – majority white and still dominated by white men – has reacted with disproportionate hostility. Or, perhaps, this antagonism has been rather an acknowledgement of the fundamental power that an intersectional medieval studies wields against the ingrained hierarchies of established medievalisms.

Medievalist feminism has a spotty record of aligning its passions for gender equality with antiracist, anti-elitist critique. The feminism that has been a force in medieval studies since the 1980s has been primarily a white, elite feminism, with little hitherto invested in examining or reconfiguring medieval studies' domination by the white and the wealthy. Medievalist feminism has likewise maintained a somewhat tense relationship with other forms of critical analysis, particularly those that have emerged over the succeeding decades. The move to the study of gender and sexuality rather than the study of 'women' as one half of a binary was the hard-fought battle of the 1990s, following the revolutionary work of scholars like Judith Butler and, in medieval studies, Karma Lochrie. And yet, as Madeline Caviness noted in her 2010 survey of the state of medievalist feminism, the turn away from gender essentialism was eagerly reinterpreted as a sign of feminism's flagging energy by 'the most prominent male pundits who dominate cultural theory by constructing its historiography' (Caviness, 2010, 30). In these pundits' eyes, each new articulation of a politically-charged, justice-centered literary criticism was not so much a new 'turn' for the field as it was evidence of one micro-interest group taking their 'turn' in the disciplinary limelight. The effect was not deemed developmental but sequential: one trendy tempest after another.

That is certainly how many elite medievalists have treated these critiques. In the distribution of conference panels and journal space, they have sought to contain politically-charged scholarship to one narrow niche, employing a 'replacement model' of analysis, where feminism would be replaced by queer study, to be superseded in its turn by race or postcolonial studies. The space thus allotted never changes; the entrenched powers of privilege maintain most of the field and ignore the visions of those who are not privileged, heterosexual, male, and white, doling out only a sliver of the academic pie to the burgeoning intellectual movements associated with social justice that nevertheless, in spite of this contempt, continue to grow in popularity, particularly among the young.

A compelling recent example of the 'replacement model' mentality in action can be found in the 2018 rejection, by the organizers of the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, of four out of five panels sponsored or co-sponsored by the Medievalists of Color. These included panels entitled 'Globalizing Medieval Pedagogy'; 'How to be a White Ally in Medieval Studies 101,' and 'Translations of Power: Race, Class, and Gender Intersectionality in the Middle Ages' I and II. By way of contrast, other organizations received all or nearly all of their requested sessions. These included Cistercian Studies, which proposed seven sessions and was allotted six; the Early Book Society which proposed six and was allotted six; De Re Militari which proposed five and was allotted five, as well as several other organizations with similarly-successful rates of panel acceptance (Joy and van Gerven Oei, 2018). While conference organizers cited 'fairness' and a desire to strike 'a balance between respecting tradition and encouraging innovation,' their actions rested upon un-

interrogated notions of several concepts crucial to their argument. As Seeta Chaganti has pointed out, the concept of ‘fairness’ is based on the notion, inaccurate in this case, that we are dealing with ‘a neutral situation where all voices have always received equal privilege and protection’ (Chaganti, 2018). ICMS decisions regarding the conference, Chaganti noted, ‘were made without critical thought to what a space of real academic and intellectual freedom would look like,’ ignoring the fact that ‘[s]uch a space would acknowledge the necessity of actively seeking out and dismantling those structures by which “tradition” [...] camouflages white supremacy’s particular forms of repression’ (Chaganti, 2018). The desire to ‘balance tradition with innovation,’ Chaganti noted, ‘cannot suffice to ensure academic freedom because it does not aggressively interrogate the meanings of either “tradition” or “innovation”’ (Chaganti, 2018).

These exclusionary practices are an unsustainable pattern for work in our field. We are left in the position of the charity cases in the Hebrew Bible, the widows and orphans who were allowed to glean the grain from the corners of the fields, which farmers were instructed to leave untouched as *pe’ah* (Lev. 19:9–11). Like those widows and orphans, we are expected to bicker amongst ourselves for what is given in ‘charity’ to the powerless, while those who cling to exclusionary practices of race and gender reap the bounties of a privileged harvest that never ends, its roots sowed by centuries of men planting only for their sons.

Let us say, no more gleaning! Enough with the *pe’ah*! Intersectional feminism claims the whole damn field. It recognizes that the study of race in the Middle Ages, of the colonial practices and heritages of the Middle Ages, of queer sexuality, of the disabled body, of the nonhuman and nonliving, and of so much more, are all inseparable from the study of gender. And it recognizes that there is no field of medieval studies unavailable to these modes of analysis. There is no paleography untouched by race, no Middle English literature unhaunted by the Jew, no legal code removed from female hands. The Middle Ages were a wild and vibrant time, featuring the interweaving of many different cultures, ideas, and beliefs. It is only our analysis that has narrowed and restricted our understanding of this complex and dynamic world. To fail to be intersectional is to fail to be just, but, even more importantly, it is to fail to be accurate. It is an intellectual, as well as an ethical, error.

Yet privileged men continue to dominate medieval studies, and now seek even to dominate the fields of intersectional analysis. In a recent blog post, Sierra Lomuto notes that the editors of the *Public Medievalist*’s series on ‘Race, Racism, and the Middle Ages’ are neither race scholars nor activists, nor even scholars of color with experiential knowledge about racism. Wondering how white scholars without expertise in race could have been tapped to edit a series on race, Lomuto notes that while ‘[i]t seems too simplistic to point to the patriarchal whiteness of Medieval Studies itself for an answer [yet] that is where we can find it: white men have always held the most authority in our field; and

so, it seems, the field turns to them for leadership even in conversations about race and racism' (Lomuto, 2019). This is not the vision of justice that we imagine. Men must participate in feminism and in intersectionality, but they must do so not as Men, that vaulted category of authoritative privilege, but as the peers of their marginalized colleagues. It is not enough to let intersectional feminism spread throughout the field if women and POC are kept to the corners. Let those who have been marginalized lead the field; recognize them as the authorities they have always been. Let feminism find its value in feminists.

This special issue was born from a desire to represent the Middle Ages more accurately, but also from the necessity of negotiating feminism's place within medieval studies. When scholars or activists treat women and gender as if they might be divorced from the concerns of class, race, and the environment, when they center the social constructions of the 'female' body as if it might be separated from the social constructions of all those other, overlapping bodies in the world, they sever the wholeness of the feminist epistemology and do violence to the feminist vision of the world as it may one day be.

And yet, even as we crave a different approach, we wonder what it will look like. How will our different theoretical and ethical commitments come together with our feminisms? The entangled whorls of our ideas must coexist without diminishing their complexity, a knotted skein in testimony of our belief that no form of justice, no form of intellectual truth, can be unknown or antithetical to another. Our special issue offers one vision of how this feminist geography can be undertaken, although its execution remains flawed. We hope that the 'New Feminisms' issues of the future, for example, will contain a much larger proportion of work by medievalists of color.

Show us your feminist entanglements, we asked our contributors; uncover your knotted skeins. This is an issue about overlaps and twists, about the inseparability of multiple means of critique – ecocriticism and disability studies, art history and race studies, legal history and modern activism – from a feminist perspective. The feminist scholarship in this issue moves in many different directions and examines the medieval past (and its role in the present) from many different angles. What remains consistent throughout is the dedication to reconfiguring medieval studies, a commitment not to be content simply with adding women on as an extra in conventional European patriarchal accounts, or with analyzing gender in history or literature without fundamentally re-envisioning the intellectual foundations upon which those fields of study have been built.

The issue begins with Kathy Lavezzo's study of gender in English antisemitic writings. Disturbingly, as Lavezzo reveals, antisemitic writings allow a kind of gender liberation for Christian women, configuring praiseworthy women who are centered as rational voices on the side of right in a culture that was elsewhere aggressively associating the female with the subhuman, the irrational, and the marginal. The unsettling manner in which racial, ethnic, and religious hatred

enables a kind of liberation for women of the dominant religion and culture, Lavezzo points out, has analogues in the way that modern American racism honors and enables white women.

Likewise concerned with the overlapping pressures of race and gender, Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh examines the strong and willful presence of an Arab woman refusing to conform to white Christian society within a white male authored religious text. Drawing on feminist theory by black feminists and other women of color, Rajabzadeh analyzes the figure of Alisaundre, the Arab mother of Thomas Becket in the *South English Legendary*, noting how even though Alisaundre converts to Christianity, adopts a Christian name, and moves to England, she resists total assimilation into European Christian culture by retaining a commitment to her native language. In this way, Alisaundre bears witness to a multilingual, multicultural Christianity wherein racial and cultural identity markers are not erased by conversion and represents one of the earliest examples in European literature of racial identity being conceived of as distinct from religious identity.

A feminine refusal to submit to the trajectories of patriarchal narrative is also the subject of Heather Blatt's essay on the story of Albina and her sisters in two narratives of Britain's founding in *The Riming Chronicle* and the prose *Brut*. Although both narratives seem, on the surface, to uphold a patriarchal narrative of domination of women and land, Blatt uses feminist materiality and ecocritical theories to demonstrate how the descriptive detail in both texts suggests an agential quality to the landscape that integrates with its female inhabitants to exert nature's own agenda in the narrative.

Feminist materiality theory and ecocriticism continue to be relevant in Emma Le Pouésard's examination of a walrus ivory pyx from the eleventh century. Noting how the carving on the pyx makes reference to its animal origin, while its nature as a vessel recalls the Virgin's gestation of Christ, Le Pouésard argues that the pyx becomes a site where boundaries between human and animal, divine and earthly, masculine and feminine, are blurred and interrogated.

Mary Beth Long provides a strong critique of the lack of attention that has hitherto been given to the emotional devastation of medieval mothers who experienced reproductive and maternal losses, arguing that these intense and all-too-common tragedies of motherhood permeate many of the female centered texts of the period, including the *Book of Margery Kempe*. Likewise, Eliza Buhrer looks at the historical records of medieval women's lives to note how gender and disability intersected and amplified one another. Her study of the way in which medieval men could exploit false claims of female disability to alienate property from its female holders offers a crucial exemplum of how powerfully the body's different social manifestations might be layered upon one another, and betrays the limits of one form of social capital (wealth) to liberate women from the limitations of their 'inferior' flesh.

Helen Brookman similarly delves into the complexities of the human body as it spans the crises of flesh, time, and space. Her study of the scholarship of the nineteenth-century medievalist Anna Gurney locates the female person within the intellectual achievements, and contextualizes both of Gurney's identities (as woman and scholar) within the experience of her disability. Brookman gives us the picture of an intersectional life, and asks us to rise to the challenge of its multiplicities.

Finally, Michelle Sauer provides a strong overview of some of the more recent works in medieval feminist studies, drawing our attention back to the state of the field as it is today, and inspiring us to imagine the field as it is in the very process of becoming. As the academic world transforms and universities enforce austerity practices upon vulnerable and contingent faculty, as white nationalism tries publicly to assert its strength and our colleagues find themselves to be the targets of racial hate, we must reassess our strengths and our commitments.

Kathryn Maude reminded us in 2014 that women and POC are always in danger of being written out of academic literature, out of the academy, out of the history of our field (Maude, 2014, 256). So this special issue writes about feminism now, about gender and the field of medieval studies at the close of the second decade of the 21st century. At its best, we hope, the issue offers its readers both a moment of reflection and a call to reenergize their commitments, a chance to grapple with the ongoing inequities of an exclusionary past, but also an opportunity to situate ourselves within the work that has already begun.

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