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Introduction

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Essays in Medieval Studies, “Happy Accidents”: Twenty Years of Essays in Medieval Studies, (Article)

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Introduction

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The Illinois Medieval Association (IMA) began thirty-seven years ago, with Alan J. Frantzen as the first executive director. Frantzen envisioned an organization that would promote medieval studies in the state of Illinois and surrounding regions, since Illinois has so many institutions of higher education and, by extension, medievalists in a range of fields. The organization would sponsor a conference and a conference proceedings volume each year. To my knowledge, there has been only one year without a conference since 1983, and the proceedings volume has appeared nearly as regularly, with very few gaps in production. Under Dr. Frantzen, IMA thrived, establishing itself as a state/regional organization of the highest quality. The conference proceedings volume, *Essays in Medieval Studies (EMS)*, became a peer-reviewed journal and established itself with the West Virginia University Press, which publishes it to this day. Since 1993 the journal has been thematically focused based on the theme of that year's conference, and since 2001, the journal has been published electronically through Project Muse. In 2005 Mark D. Johnston took over as executive director and proceeded to lead the organization until his ten-year term concluded. Dr. Johnston's term inaugurated IMA's website (<http://www.illinoismedieval.org>) and refined the site to include updates on the organization's activities, links to conference programs, and an archive of volumes 1–17 of *EMS*. During that time, the organization grew, as conference participation increased and as the organization adapted to new communication avenues. In 2015 I assumed the executive director position.

After thirty-seven years, it seems fitting that IMA reflect on where it has been and where it is going. The conference is still a strong draw, and volumes of *EMS* continue to offer high-

quality scholarship. In fact, the organization receives multiple requests per month for articles from volumes 1–17, a testament to the quality of scholarship in the journal. With the help of Sara Georgi, managing editor at West Virginia University Press, I accumulated some statistics to see which articles had been accessed the most. Data was available from 2001, when Project Muse took over distribution of the journal. The data is striking, and the results of my data analysis formed this volume. Although articles on a variety of topics rose to the top, most clustered around gender studies, feminist approaches, women’s studies, and LGBTQ issues. Of the most downloaded twenty-five articles, twelve (nearly one half) focus on gender and sexuality. As such, it seemed prudent to produce a volume based on this theme with the most downloaded articles reproduced here.

That this topical cluster would be so popular is not surprising. Sexual orientation, femininity, masculinity, and LGBTQ issues are not just popular academic topics, but they are pressing social issues and have been for decades. The need for continued research and activism on these issues has not diminished; in fact, I would argue that it has increased with the attention that the #MeToo movement has brought to sexual assault and the current administration’s push to reverse Obama-era LGBTQ discrimination protections.

Articles in this volume cover a wide range of topics. Two focus on witchcraft. Michael D. Bailey looks at how women were constructed as satanic witches, arguing that “clerical misogyny and typical notions of gender actually made difficult the belief that women might be the chief practitioners of powerful, threatening, and terribly effective demonic sorcery,”¹ at least until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Peter Broedel looks specifically at the link between anti-sodomy and the feminization of witches in Heinrich Institoris’s fifteenth-century *Malleus Maleficarum*. Two articles focus on Chaucer. Josephine A. Koster offers an interpretation of

Criseyde in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* that foregrounds the subtle domestic and spatial cues in the text: "Looking at what Chaucer specifically says about Criseyde's environment, her physical surroundings, her behavioral patterns, and her social interactions, I hope to show that Criseyde's behavior is more understandable—if, perhaps, still as unforgivable."² Tory Vandeventer Pearman examines military language in Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" to show that "what is suppressed in 'The Knight's Tale' is both political and feminine; thus, the text's unconscious reveals that the marginalized voices of the text—those of ethnic women—must be suppressed in order to uphold one dominant ideology, that of Theseus's 'civilizing' missions."³

Others focus on a range of topics. Jessica A. Coope examines the disjunction between what Shari'ah law says about women and the actual practice as recorded in a range of sources, showing a disjunction between codified law and actual practice. Roberta L. Krueger looks closely at the late fourteenth-century *Le Menagier de Paris* to argue that this conduct book for women "dramatizes the difficulty of regulating conduct within the household, where a tension between order and disorder prevails," showing that "through its internal contradictions and its portraits of rebellious women, this text opens a discursive space for the reader's reflection."⁴

Julia Simms Holderness analyzes three accounts of Semiramis—Christine de Pizan, Louise Labé, and Boccaccio—to show that Christine and Labé both reinterpret the story to "explore the question of women's intelligence in a new way."⁵ Elizabeth Kempton offers an ecocritical view of the Irish Morrigan through the lens of Donna Haraway's model of networks or knotworks, arguing that "larger critiques of violence emerge and female voices within the text are amplified. New critiques of subjectivity, violence, and gendered roles in early Irish society come to light."⁶

E. L. Ridsden looks at five filmed versions of *Beowulf* to show that each film "shifts the weight of the story from a praise and critique of what J. R. R. Tolkien called the 'Germanic theory of

courage' to a critique of male libido and female power."⁷ Michelle Sweeney explores a number of medieval romances to show that the seductive act has the ability not only to tempt the protagonist-knight but also to save that figure, using "the love of, lust for, and temptation by a woman to force the examination of intentionality in the main characters."⁸ Finally, Sarah Westphal delves into the German *Sachsenspiegel*, the earliest collection of Germanic laws, to explore the complex phenomena of legal gendered guardianship, arguing that later explanations of guardianship necessitated upon weakness and ignorance are too simplistic to explain fully this legal concept.

This volume of *EMS* celebrates thirty-six years of proceedings from the IMA conference. The theme is, in Bob Ross's words, a "happy accident." Rather than a miscellany of the most accessed articles, this volume represents not only some of the most popular articles but also the most popular theme from the last twenty years of the IMA annual conference. Scholarly interest, technology, and circumstances have changed radically since the organization's inception. What has remained consistent is the high quality of scholarship presented at our annual conference and published in *EMS*. The Illinois Medieval Association faces some serious challenges now and in the years to come, with the COVID-19 crisis and the stresses it has placed on mass gatherings and budgets. IMA will face and overcome these challenges to continue with our mission to promote medieval studies in Illinois and the surrounding regions.

Notes

- 1 Bailey, p. 1.
- 2 Koster, p. 79.
- 3 Pearman, p. 32.
- 4 Krueger, p. 23, 35.

5 Holderness, p. 98.

6 Kempton, p. 31.

7 Ridsen, p. 111.

8 Sweeney, p. 175.