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Gender and Medieval Studies: Gender and Aliens, 7-10
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Gender and Medieval Studies: Gender and Aliens, 7 – 10 January 2019, Durham University

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The 25th annual Gender and Medieval Studies conference was hosted by the Institute of Medieval and Early Modern Studies at Durham University from 7 - 10 January 2019. It was supported by the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship and the Centre for Academic, Researcher, and Organisation Development, Durham University. This year's theme was 'Gender and Aliens,' spanning topics from medieval Japanese women's salvation to late-medieval Icelandic sagas, from Arabic poetry to homoeroticism in Hildegard von Bingen's writing.

For postgraduate students and early career researchers, the conference started with a workshop chaired by Amy Burge. In preparation, two texts by Kathleen Davies and Geraldine Heng about race and the Middle Ages were read by participants. In a wide-ranging discussion, subsequently questions concerning intersectionality and opportunities for junior scholars in the field were considered.

The main conference then started with Halle O'Neal's plenary on 'Life and Death on the Margins: How Women Wrote Salvation in Medieval Japan.' She introduced the audience to the concept of blood pool hell, a rather gruesome place reserved for women dying without having had a child, and showed examples of women writing sutras to gain salvation from it. The day ended with a welcome reception and the launch of the 2017 conference proceedings.³

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³ Victoria Blud, Diane Heath, Einat Klaffer (eds., 2019), *Gender in medieval places, spaces and thresholds*. London: Institute of Historical Research. [Open Access, available online: <http://humanities-digital-library.org/index.php/hdl/catalog/book/gender>].

On the first full day of sessions, the morning started with a panel on ‘Alienation and Belonging in Norse Culture(s)’ with the authors of this report. Markus Eldgrad Mindrebø considered ‘The Alienation of Female Power in Early Medieval Norway’ using the kings’ sagas as sources, through the examples of Gunnhildr, Sigríðr and Álfífa, each shown as foreigner and opponent of one of the great Norwegian missionary kings. Next, Rebecca Merkelbach turned to ‘Exploring the Gendered Experience of Belonging and Alienation in *Bárðar saga Snafellsáss*’ and discussed how gender and religion intersect with the experience of belonging and alienation in the saga’s trollish protagonists. Andrea Freund’s paper ‘An ethnic “gender gap” in the Norse North Atlantic?’ explored the popular trope of the Irish slave girl taken to Iceland in light of interdisciplinary evidence. In a parallel session, Bart Lambert, Alex Marchbank and Cordelia Beattie discussed aspects of ‘The Economic Experience of Aliens and Alienation’ with a focus on late medieval England.

This was followed by the Early Career Plenary, a tradition introduced at last year’s Oxford conference with great success. This year, Amy Burge discussed ‘Displacement, Gender, and Precarity, from Medieval Romance to the Modern Academy,’ making crucial points about the difficult situation many early career researchers are finding themselves in, drawing parallels to the literary hero Bevis of Hampton.

In the next panel, ‘Marginalisation, Byzantium, and the Middle East,’ delegates heard about three rather different areas with similar issues: Jesús Rodríguez Viejo discussed a portrait of the devil from twelfth-century Castile, Othering him by showing him as a hybrid African-Byzantine creature. Stephanie Novasio then discussed gender in Medieval Byzantine Romance while Ines Aščerić-Todd detailed the crisis of masculinity in *The Thousand and One Nights*. All three papers showed fascinating new insights into areas rarely discussed at ‘conventional’ Medieval Studies conferences.

Subsequently, delegates were treated to a storytelling performance of ‘Broken Shells’ by Daisy Black based on Chaucer’s ‘The Man of Law’s Tale,’ minus the misogyny, recounted from the female protagonist Custance’s

perspective. It was a touching, sometimes hilarious, sometimes gruesome view of gender in medieval literature from a wholly new angle.

The second full day started with parallel panels. Beginning the day in one of two parallel panels, Jianing Li started off the panel on ‘Gendered Bodies from Medieval to Modern Media’ with a paper on ‘Drag-Aliens: Performing Masculinity through the Body of Gawain and Superman,’ in which she compared the way masculinity and heroism are constructed through masks, disguises and clothing in both the romance and the comic series. Next, Lucy Allen explored ‘The Alienation of the Lesbian Body and Belle Sarrasin Romance,’ discussing the depiction of Floripas as both a ‘watery woman’ and its stony opposite in two Middle English versions of the same romance, and illuminating that reading by drawing on modern culture: the movie *Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same* (2011) on the one hand, and Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) on the other.

Simultaneously, and moving on to questions of ‘Dynasty and Ethnicity,’ the second panel focused on medieval England. Tom Chadwick explored the role of women in ethno-political discourse and showed that ethnicity played an important role in memorialisation, making the ethnicity of noble women more important for authors than previously recognised. David Mason discussed the role of family and visionary power in the experience of two very different migrants in thirteenth-century London, namely the Anglo-German Arnold Fitz-Thedmar and the Cornish cleric Peter of Cornwall, demonstrating how both use their writing to claim their place in society.

During the next session, in a panel on ‘Mysticism, Mary, and Marginalisation,’ Sam Drysdale offered new insights on female mystics, such as Julian of Norwich, suggesting they were existing in a space of gender partnership rather than gender conflict with men’s monasteries, with women’s prayers even regarded as superior. Hannah Johnson’s paper on homoeroticism in the devotions of Hildegard von Bingen showed the subversion of misogynist tendencies in theological doctrine in Hildegard’s writings with their unmistakable intensity of physical and spiritual attraction to Mary’s virginal body. Hope Doherty reflected on emotions connected with Marian Botany, i.e.

the connection of Mary to the floral world, be it through the trees in Eden or an association with herbal medicine. When Mary is connected to the Tree of Life, she is both integrated within and separate from the Trinity.

At the same time, issues of monstrosity were discussed in the panel on ‘Alienated Bodies.’ First, Diane Heath discussed ‘The Bestiary Hyena as Alien Nightstalker’ in a paper focusing on, in the speaker’s own words, the way ‘sex, death and utter monstrosity’ are embodied in an animal that was considered to transgress the boundaries of sex and gender. Afterwards, Natalie Goodison turned to ‘Gender, Alienation, and Hybridity in *Melusine*,’ drawing on learned perspectives from Augustine to Otto von Freising in an exploration of the possibility of salvation for monstrous hybrids. Goodison argued that Melusine gains this opportunity through her female body and the conformance to the social rules of marriage, but loses it again because of her useless husband.

After this, delegates visited the Oriental Museum and had a bespoke guided tour with curator Gillian Ramsay focusing on artefacts connected to women in the exhibition, ranging from a pair of shoes made for Chinese women with bound feet to the famous Egyptian servant girl’s statue, showcasing the diverse lived experiences of women across the ‘orient’ from the Neolithic to the present. In the day’s plenary on ‘Rape and the Reader: Classic Arabic Poetry Comes to Light,’ Adam Talib reflected on his own practice as an Arabist and how his views on eroticism and sexuality in Classic Arabic Poetry are shaped by his background, education and experiences. He challenged the audience to reflect on their practice, too, asking why we are still teaching Chaucer in the full knowledge how problematic he is as an author.

On the final day, in a session on romance literature, Robert Sturges discussed gender, sexuality and geographical aliens in *Tristan*, a medieval high German text from c. 1210 where its Irish hero Tristan, the dangerous Other, transgresses all categories of identity. The next two papers both focussed on Marie de France’s *Lai de Lanval* but highlighted very different aspects: Amy Louise Morgan showed how the text can be read as a parable on alienation at court, constructing a queer female space as alternative to the masculine court of Henry II, while Jennifer Farrell demonstrated the failure of gendered and

chivalric identity through the interaction of Lanval, an ideal knight let down by his lord, with the fairy queen as his new patron.

Neither of us attended the parallel session on ‘Women’s Experiences of Marginalisation,’ in which Simona Martorana talked about ‘The Latin Romulus between Misogyny and Marginalisation,’ and Hannah Piercy discussed ‘Race, Intersectionality, and Agency’ in Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale, but we have it on good authority that this session, just like all the others, was engaging and stimulating.

The conference was then concluded with a roundtable chaired by Daisy Black and Anum Dada.⁴ Important and challenging questions were raised about decolonising the curriculum, intersectionality, and encouraging BAME students to take up Medieval Studies, thus connecting this conference and its focus further to ongoing debates in the field that have been reflected in other formats, for example, at the past several International Medieval Congresses in Leeds. Surely, this discussion will be ongoing in the field long after the conference, and it is up to us to keep engaging with it. This particular instance, and the practical suggestions given by several scholars, have certainly served as an inspiration to reconsider our own teaching practices.

Once again, the Gender and Medieval Studies conference was an amazing experience for junior scholars. The themes considered were wide-ranging and highly relevant to current public and academic discourse. Moreover, topics which court controversy elsewhere were discussed with respect. Medieval Studies in all its variety found a place in the programme, and many regions, periods, methodologies and disciplines relevant for studying medieval gender were treated with equal weight. Junior scholars were given a platform to present their ideas equally to their seniors, as evidenced by the Early Career Plenary. Most striking about the conference, though, was that it served as a showcase of academic kindness. Both papers and Q&As as well as the roundtable were full of mutual support and respect, even if there were disagreements, and in this,

⁴ Daisy Black’s contribution and considerations are available online in her blog: <https://daisyblack.uk/decolonising-the-medieval-curriculum-critical-questions/>.

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GMS could serve as an example for many other conferences and discussions in Medieval Studies.