

cities of women

Jacqueline Murray, University Professor Emeritus at the University of Guelph, Centre for Medieval Studies Faculty, and Fellow at St. Michael's College invites the public to explore the life and times of mediaeval city women with the revival of the *Mediaeval Symposium* on Saturday, April 5. This 'Modern Symposium at Mediaeval Prices' will include lectures by U of T medievalists, including CMS Faculty, exploratory discussions, and a medieval feast!

What attracted you to the field of medieval studies and the community of medievalists at the University of Toronto?

Entering university, I had been interested in history, but, like so many students today, I floated a bit, not exactly sure on which field to focus. By serendipity, I heard a guest lecture on Libraries in the Middle Ages by a wonderful and engaging mediaevalist, and it changed my life; I was hooked and never looked back. I studied everything mediaeval, including Dante, early Christianity, and Latin, and was accepted to the Honours History Program at UBC. Until then my courses had been mostly about kings and popes, but when Fr. Michael M. Sheehan came to UBC for a term and a series of guest lectures on marriage and family in the Middle Ages, it was another transformative moment. I was transfixed by this new history of regular people, and I proposed the topic "The Position of Women in *Las Siete Partidas*" for my Honours Thesis. This was met with some consternation, as it was basically before historical studies of women, medieval or of any other period. My professors were not enthusiastic, which prompted me to pursue my research of marriage and family under the guidance of Fr. Sheehan at the Centre for Medieval Studies, the place recommended above all others by my UBC professors.

The truth is, I was not admitted to the Centre for my MA. However, at that time, the curriculum was such that I could be registered at the Department of History but take most of my courses at CMS. I attained the MA Level of Latin (as it was then called), the Centre accepted me into the PhD program, and I never looked back. But, my graduate research did not go as planned. Rather than following in Fr. Sheehan's footsteps, my primary sources – manuals for confessors – pushed me in a different direction. Fr. Sheehan and I expected these texts would contain discussions about the family as an affective unit; instead, their main concern was about sex, legitimate, illegitimate, and *contra naturam*, and I followed where these sources led. At the same time, the study of women in the Middle Ages was emerging, and I widened my scope to explore the intersections of sex and gender, and ultimately the history of sexualities more broadly. Sometimes, I've been led by sources, sometimes I've been led by currents in the field; there has been a certain serendipity to my research

questions and sources. In the past decade or so, my research focus has been on men and masculinities and male embodiment, a field in which I maintain an active research and writing program.

I have considered CMS and PIMS intellectual homes since my arrival in Toronto. The strong medieval culture, lectures and seminars, and wonderful library brought me back virtually every summer after completing my PhD. I still consider Toronto one large, integrated, friendly, community – a real centre of excellence. I feel connected here because, although I have had excellent teaching and administrative careers at the University of Windsor and the University of Guelph, Toronto remains my research base and academic community. I am so proud and pleased now to be an Adjunct Professor at the Centre and a Fellow of St Michael's College.

What are the origins and aims of the Mediaeval Symposium?

The Mediaeval Symposium dates back to the 1980s when PIMS Fellow Sheila Campbell began a wonderful collaboration with St. Michael's College Continuing Education. The premise was that one Saturday in April, the doors to the Middle Ages would be open to the public, and a series of lectures centering on a single theme would be given by medievalists from across Toronto (and sometimes beyond). The themes were interesting and could be looked at from various perspectives, beginning with "The Glory of Byzantium," followed by "Charlemagne." Over the years,



audiences were taken from the Holy Land to Russia and Spain; they were introduced to Vikings, Celts, Monks, Pilgrims, Jews and Fringe-dwellers, while the last Symposium in 2006 focused on Great Cathedrals. Medievalists – all experts on some aspect of the topic – lectured and chatted with the audience (sometimes as many as 125 people) over coffee and a Mediaeval Feast.

When I became a Fellow at St. Mike's, I was looking for a way to contribute to the community. I remembered how the Symposia had garnered great interest among a broad audience of non-specialists, and how they elevated all things medieval, showcasing medievalists from across U of T. Given the increasing marginalization of our historical period in the eyes of political and university decision-makers alike, rekindling an interest in the Middle Ages among the wider population seemed a valuable way to give back to all my medieval communities. The real trick will be attracting a new generation and a new audience to the event some twenty years later. I hope medievalists will encourage their acquaintances to attend.

Why “Cities of Women”?

The Symposium's theme “Cities of Women” of course invokes Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies*, but also her *Book of Three Virtues*. I was mindful that the topic needed to be enticing with a broad interest, and also needed to be approached from various disciplinary perspectives. Combining these inspirations – women, cities, various statuses and roles – seemed perfect to attract an audience from urban Toronto. The program is rooted in the experiences of women who lived in different cities across Western Europe – a sampler of women's lives, from different countries, different economic and social ranks – different religious communities who were all part of the surge in urban life that characterized the later Middle Ages.

I am so proud of the scholars willing to spend their Saturday with “Cities of Women,” sharing their research with an audience of interested generalists. Each speaker will take us to a different city, broadening the medieval map, and exploring different wom-



en from different perspectives. For example, Isabelle Cochlin will focus on nursing sisters in a French hospital, while Cathryn Spence reveals a cross-section of women's lives in Edinburgh. Alexandra Guerson and Dana Wessell Lightfoot reveal the complex life of a Jewish merchant woman in Girona during a period of antisemitism and commercial opportunity, and Konrad Eisenbichler introduces a network of women writers in Siena, whose literary exchanges rival those of professional male writers. Finally, Sebastian Sobocki takes us to a court dispute in London involving a servant and Geoffrey Chaucer among others, in the process revealing significant implications for understanding city women against the backdrop of city life. This will be a remarkable event.

Opposite: Jacqueline Murray
Above: Ambrogio Lorenzetti (1290-1348), *Effects of Good Government*, detail. Palazzo Pubblico (Siena)

It is important to point out that this year's registration fee is the same price as in 2006; a Medieval Symposium at Medieval Prices (so to say.) And that while the Symposium is directed to an audience of the interested public – teachers, and professionals, faculty, including medievalists – students may also find this an opportunity to expand their own research areas. Certainly, this was the case in the old days, plus it is always just a great time to be with others who love the Middle Ages.

“A Medieval Symposium at Medieval Prices.”

Mediaeval Symposium: *Cities of Women in the Middle Ages*

Saturday, April 5, 2025 | \$150.00 Includes lunch & coffee / tea
Registration: 8:30 am | Symposium: 9:00 am – 4:30 pm
Alumni Hall, Room 400, 121 St. Joseph St., Toronto uoft.me/bIP

Jacqueline Murray (U of T / U of Guelph) Host and Convenor

Isabelle Cochelin (U of T), *Sisters of Beaune: Caring for the Sick in the Late Middle Ages*

Cathryn Spence (U of Guelph), *From Merchants to Servants: A Consideration of Women in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Scotland*

Alexandra Guerson (U of T) / **Dana Wessell Lightfoot** (UBC), *Constança of Girona: Conversion and Agency in Late Mediaeval Catalonia*

Konrad Eisenbichler (U of T), *Rhyme by Rhyme: Women and Men in Poetic Dialogue*

Sebastian Sobocki (U of T), *Geoffrey Chaucer, Cecily Chaucer, and Female Labour*

REGISTRATION DEADLINE: MARCH 20