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Jennifer Deane Receives Grants for Research on Medieval German Religious Women

Summary: In the past year, Jennifer Deane, associate professor of history, has received two grants: the University of Minnesota Grant-in-Aid-of-Research and a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipend, which fund her research on the “beguines” or lay religious women of medieval Germany. The grants have enabled her to make several trips to archives and libraries in Germany, and to share ideas and research findings with European colleagues.

(February 20, 2012)—In the past year, Jennifer Deane, associate professor of history, has received two grants: the University of Minnesota Grant-in-Aid-of-Research and a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipend, which fund her research on the “beguines” or lay religious women of medieval Germany. The grants have enabled her to make several trips to archives and libraries in Germany, and to share ideas and research findings with European colleagues.

For years, Deane has been passionate about studying the lay religious women of medieval Europe often known as “beguines”, whose hundreds of independent communities were mainly centered in the Low Countries, the Rhine region, France, and German-speaking lands. Beguines were not nuns, but single laywomen who gathered in pious households and observed a chaste and humble lifestyle in some ways similar to that within a monastery. However, they were also deeply embedded in local communities, had strong connections to secular and religious authorities, and provided charitable service such as prayer and teaching children. Despite their modest and innocuous existence, beguines’ semi-religious status drew inquisitorial attention in the fourteenth century, distorting their image to this day—for those who have even heard of them.

“In 1317, two important pieces of church legislation (known as the Vienne decrees) criticized heretical women called beguines and claimed that they were preaching falsehoods and misleading the laity,” says Deane. “The pope was especially concerned about rumors regarding such women in Germany. But the decrees simultaneously acknowledged that there were pious women whose simple lives of humble piety were to be allowed. So there is this powerful model of bad versus good beguines that troubled medieval popes and bishops as much as it has complicated the work of modern historians. Inquisitors periodically targeted beguines, but just as often local supporters would come to the women’s defense.”

Although beguines have often been described as being largely persecuted or pressured out of existence by the 15th century, their communities were actually surprisingly enduring. Deane’s research began with the question: why did beguines seem to disappear in the late Middle Ages, when there is so much documentation of their communities’ survival in Germany? One outcome of Deane’s research in Germany this year is that after the Vienne decrees, many people associated with the women simply dropped the term ‘beguine’ and chose instead less controversial labels such as ‘sister’, or ‘spiritual woman’, or even ‘widow and virgin’. Records indicate that despite the name change, their way of life remained constant. Instead of the women disappearing from history, in other words, the name temporarily fell away.

“Local people personally knew and respected these women. In fact, the communities themselves were founded by men, women, and even clergy who donated funds as charity in return for the women’s prayers. Beguines weren’t locally
controversial and provided good services, and many people in the community were actually related to them. So a change in terminology was an easy way to deflect any possible criticism,” says Deane. “But to historians looking for broad patterns, it seemed as if the communities themselves disappeared.”

The key to constructing a more accurate picture of medieval German beguine history lies in careful archival research, as well as sorting through hundreds of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German publications. The visits have also enabled her to keep in contact with scholars who are also researching this field, including a colloquium of faculty and graduate students of women’s religious history who are also interested in this topic, the Research Circle on Medieval Religious Women in Europe (AGFEM).

Deane’s research will be published in her forthcoming book, Sisters Among: Beguines and Lay Religious Women’s Communities in Medieval Germany. “The book will provide a bird’s eye view of the patterns of these hundreds of communities across Germany, from the different ways in which they were founded to internal rhythms of the women’s day, and contact with the world around them—city councils, family members, the market place, and contacts with religious figures such as priests and nuns,” says Deane.

Later this year, Deane will also publish a volume she is co-editing with European colleagues on the issue of beguine categories, terminology, and historiography, titled Labels, Libels, and Lay Religious Women in Northern Medieval Europe (Brepols Press).

Considering the necessity of personally analyzing archive material and the opportunities for professional development, Deane says that she is particularly grateful to the Morris campus and University of Minnesota for the extensive research support available through grants such as the Faculty Research Enhancement Funds, the Imagine Fund, and the Grant-in-Aid which have made possible travel between west-central Minnesota and central Europe.

“I have been fascinated by beguine history since I was an undergraduate, and it’s really exciting to be contributing new ideas to the field now as a scholar,” says Deane.

Deane will be traveling to Aachen and Regensburg in the spring and spending the summer of 2012 as a guest researcher at the University of Tübingen.

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