

# The American Medievalist: A Social and Professional Profile

By David Herlihy

In becoming medievalists and members of the Academy, we assumed a commitment to promote the study of the European Middle Ages on this continent. But to do this well, we ought on occasion to study ourselves, to discover who we are, who we were, and who we are likely to become in the near and distant future. Our arts are long and our lives are short, and we ought frequently to inquire how the changing composition of our profession may be affecting the arts we uphold.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I propose to survey the current membership of the Medieval Academy of America. My chief source may appear singularly pedestrian; it is the Academy's mailing list for 1982, used primarily for the distribution of its flagship publication, *Speculum*. I shall look at the names and addresses of Academy members resident in the United States, with a glance also at institutional subscribers to *Speculum*. These remarks, in sum, do not apply to the many members and subscribers in Canada and overseas.<sup>2</sup> Because the list of Academy members in the United States is long — 3,060 names — and because the questions put to it are somewhat involved, I enlisted the aid of a computer to gather the responses. The computer does this work well. Given the right data to scrutinize, it is an exact observer and an implacable judge.

The information which the mailing list offers is admittedly limited. The register of North American medievalists compiled for the Academy's Committee on Centers and Regional Associations by the Medieval Institute of Western Michigan University at Kalamazoo contains some 7,924 names, better than twice the number of the Academy's 3,289 North American

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<sup>1</sup> Recent and useful surveys of medieval studies in the United States and their recent history may be found in the collection of essays *Medieval Studies in North America: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Francis G. Gentry and Christopher Kleinhenz (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1982). For the early history of the Medieval Academy, see especially the contributions by William J. Courtenay, "The Virgin and the Dynamo: The Growth of Medieval Studies in America (1870-1930)" (pp. 5-22), and by Luke Wenger, "The Medieval Academy and Medieval Studies in North America" (pp. 23-40). See also Karl Morrison, "Fragmentation and Unity in 'American Medievalism,'" *The Past before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, ed. Michael Kammen (Ithaca, 1980), pp. 49-77, with abundant bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> Residents of Canada in the 1982 mailing list number 229.

members. That is to say, only 41.5 percent of those who consider themselves to be in some sense medievalists are members of the Academy. Moreover, the Academy's list does not systematically identify members by their discipline. To be sure, of the 3,060 members resident in the United States, 1,460 have their issues of *Speculum* delivered to them at an academic department. Disciplinary allegiances are thus revealed for some 48 percent of the membership. Slightly more than one-half of the members — 52 percent — do not display through their addresses their special interest in the Middle Ages.

Still, the mailing list invites and rewards close study. Though forming only a minority of practicing medievalists, members of the Academy still make up a substantial proportion of the profession, and contribute perhaps even more than their numbers suggest to the ongoing work of teaching, investigating, and promoting the Middle Ages. The labels tell much about the subscribers, more than might at first be realized. To begin with, first names are almost always spelled out, and the gender of the members is therefore evident. So also is their place of residence. But perhaps the most interesting information the labels supply is the following. The address labels note when the subscriber first joined the Academy, and what has been and is now—his or her type of membership, whether active, contributing, life, honorary, or Fellow. The list for 1982 reflects, of course, the composition of a single year, but the inclusion of these dates opens a wide door into the past, and offers a vista stretching back to the very beginnings of the Academy in 1925 and 1926. Not even the larger register maintained at Kalamazoo offers the opportunity for studying not only the current composition of the American community of medievalists, but also the current directions of change.

Where do members of the Academy live in the United States? To answer this question we can take advantage of the fact that the list is arranged in order of zip codes, identifying postal districts across the country. The districts begin in Puerto Rico and make their continental landfall in Massachusetts. After wandering around New England, they proceed down the Atlantic coast to Florida; they then swing north again along the western slopes of the Appalachians. Next they turn down and up the Mississippi valley. They cover the far west by a similar path, tracing out great sweeping coils. They come to an end, at least for our purposes, in Washington. They thus progress in a general sense from east to west, with broad oscillations south and north.

If we divide the 3,060 address labels exactly in half, and thus find the midpoint of the distribution, where in continental America do we find ourselves? The median value, as statisticians would call it, in the distribution of zips is 30329; we are at Atlanta, Georgia. The spatial distribution of the 89 Fellows — the Academy's elite — is even more skewed to the east; the midpoint of those resident in the United States is University Park, Pennsylvania.<sup>3</sup> On the assumption that the postal districts contain roughly the same

<sup>3</sup> The Fellows resident in the United States currently number 79. Of the remainder, 6 live in Canada (all in Toronto) and 4 in Europe.

numbers of people, then the eastern seaboard from Maine to Georgia, in which reside 50 percent of the Academy membership, holds only some 30 percent of the American population. If we test to see where the first quartile of the distribution is found, then the zip value of the distribution places us in Mount Vernon, New York. One-fourth of the membership lives to the east of the Hudson river.

In 1968, the number of Academy members from eleven far-western states was 340, or 13.98 percent of all members; the comparable figure in 1982 was 490 persons, or 13.64 percent.<sup>4</sup> The geographical distribution of Academy members (or at least the representation among them of residents of the far west) seems to have remained remarkably stable over the past fifteen years.

The concentration of Academy members in New England and the eastern seaboard is in itself not surprising, but the degree of this concentration, which our figures emphasize, is nonetheless disconcerting. To offer one further illustration, we can compare these results with the distribution of the institutional subscribers to *Speculum*, which ought to show objectively where interest in the Middle Ages is located across the country. The median code for institutional subscribers is 39210, which carries us all the way along the trail of zips to Jackson, Mississippi. To be sure, there is evident even here a bias toward the east. Among institutional subscribers, 50 percent are apparently found in eastern areas containing slightly less than 40 percent of the population. But the tilt toward the east is much less pronounced among institutional subscribers than among Academy members.

I would draw from these figures the following conclusions. Out west — and the meaning here is west of the Appalachians — medievalists rely in large measure on libraries to secure copies of *Speculum*, on the assumption that they read it at all. They manifest comparatively little personal loyalty to the Academy. Clearly, the Academy must strive to enlarge its national influence: the west has yet to be won.

What is the relative size of the disciplines which make up the Academy? I have prepared a table showing the distribution across disciplines of the 1,460 members whose scholarly specializations can be identified in 1982. To lend these figures a temporal dimension, I include in the same table the comparable distribution as found in the directory of its members which the Academy published in 1973. In fact I utilize here the figures based on that directory which an ad hoc committee on the governance of the Academy prepared in 1978.<sup>5</sup> The chair of that committee was our incoming president,

<sup>4</sup> The figures for 1968 are taken from a report dated 5 April 1968 in the Academy's archives. The states, the number of members in 1968, and the number in 1982 are as follows: Washington (26, 41); Oregon (29, 26); California (224, 316); Nevada (2, 6); Arizona (17, 25); Idaho (1, 5); Montana (1, 1); Wyoming (0, 2); Utah (7, 15); Colorado (27, 40); New Mexico (6, 13).

<sup>5</sup> The report of the committee is dated 11 January 1978; the committee members were James D. Breckenridge, Robert J. Brentano, Virginia Brown, Robert E. Kaske, and Fred C. Robinson. The report may be found in the Academy's archives.

TABLE I  
 Members of the Medieval Academy by  
 Academic Discipline, 1973 and 1982

1973 Number	Percent*		1982 Number	Percent*
English	786	33	456	31
History	690	29	413	28
Modern Languages	408	17	258	18
Art History	115	5	98	7
Classics	79	3	39	3
Philosophy	58	2	41	3
Music	33	1	31	2
Other	183	8	106	7
Unspecified	1,380	—	1,600	—
Total	3,732		3,060	

\* Based on total numbers for whom profession is known.

Fred C. Robinson. To facilitate comparisons I use in the table the professional groupings contained in the committee's report.

The distribution of members across disciplines has not changed significantly between 1973 and 1982. The largest discipline then and now is English language and literature, which claimed 33 percent of the members in 1973 and 31 percent in 1982. In second position are the historians, scoring 29 percent in 1973 and 28 percent in 1982. Modern languages and literatures take third position: 17 percent ten years ago and 18 at present. Art history, classics, philosophy, and music follow, each today with less than 8 percent of the membership. The distribution across disciplines thus shows a considerable stability over the past decade. In these years of acute retrenchment in higher education, no one discipline has suffered worse than the others.

The comparison of the two lists does, however, show two differences worth noting. In all fields today there were more medievalists listed in 1973 than can be found today. To be sure, the directory included all members, whatever their residence, and some nonmembers (3,732 names, as against the official membership figure of 3,314 in 1973), while for 1982 my sample includes only members resident in the United States (3,060, as against a total membership of 3,590). Accordingly, the table exaggerates what was in fact a smaller decline in numbers. The second difference may therefore be of greater significance. More members — 2,352 to be exact, or 63 percent of the total — gave an academic address in 1973; only 1,460, or 48 percent, did so in 1982. This slippage may well indicate that diminishing numbers of the membership now hold stable academic jobs. Reduced numbers of subscribers and smaller proportions of members giving proof of permanent academic appointment are ominous signs for the future.

The mailing labels also allow us to calculate sex ratios, among the mem-

bers as a whole, across the various disciplines, and for the various types of membership. We can also judge how sex ratios have been changing in the recent past.

As conventionally denned, the sex ratio of a population states the number of men per 100 women. In 1982, the Academy membership included 1,975 men and 1,085 women, for a ratio of 182. They are not, however, distributed in the same fashion across the different disciplines and categories of membership. We first look at fields. To be sure, the calculations of sex ratios according to fields cannot be regarded as precise. Of male members of the Academy, 1,057 out of 1,975, or 54 percent, show a profession; the comparable figures for women are 403 out of 1,085, or 37 percent. Women prefer to have their copies of *Speculum* delivered at home, either for reasons of convenience — they may be caring for children — or because more women than men are without an academic post. Table 2, giving sex ratios according to discipline, substantially understates the true numbers of women actually associated with the respective fields.

Even if women are underrepresented in the Table, still it is clear that the sexes are not evenly distributed across the disciplines. The category with the largest relative number of women is "modern languages," but used here in a special way. Essentially, it includes those who teach in departments of modern languages or foreign languages with no further specification; these departments are usually found in smaller schools or community colleges throughout the country. The standard discipline, if such it may be called, with the largest relative number of women is French language and literature, and it is closely followed by art history. In ascending order of sex ratios, there come music, English, classics, "Romance languages" not further defined, history, and German. With a sex ratio of 450, German is the discipline with the highest percentage of men, but history, which scores at 410, is not much below it. In relative terms, there are nearly twice the number of women in English literature than are found in history. Women, in sum, are

TABLE 2  
Sex Ratios, by Academic Discipline, \_\_\_\_\_ of Medieval  
Academy Members, 1982

Discipline*	Men	Women	Sex Ratio
"Modern Languages"	30	23	130
French	23	16	144
Art History	61	37	165
Music	20	11	182
English	310	146	212
Classics	29	10	290
"Romance Languages"	46	19	242
History	332	81	410
German	36	8	450

\* Only disciplines with 30 or more members are included.

especially numerous in most languages and literatures and in art history, but are comparatively few in history.

An uneven distribution of the sexes also marks the special categories of members — life, contributing, honorary, and the Fellows. Life members include 40 men and 13 women, for a sex ratio of 308, much higher than the 180 found among the active members. Women are less likely than are men to make the single, large investment required to attain life membership. Contributing members, who donate to the Academy more than the annual dues, are 543 men and 236 women, for a ratio of 230. Males are slightly more likely than females to make a contribution to the Academy. Honorary members are those now retired who have belonged to the Academy for thirty years; they include 83 men and 36 women, for a ratio of 231. By far the sharpest imbalance between the sexes is found within the Academy's elite, the Fellows. The mailing list for 1982 identifies 89 Fellows — 82 men and 7 women, for a ratio of 1171, nearly 12 men for every woman. Men have traditionally dominated the older, richer, and most prestigious cadres of the Academy.

We can now consider how the membership in the Academy has been changing over time. The annual reports of the executive director give for every year since 1926 the total number of members, though not unfortunately a breakdown by sex and discipline.<sup>6</sup> Still, even these bald numbers are intriguing. The Academy's common experience since its foundation in 1925 has been growth, and it has had to endure only two protracted periods of retrenchment. From 1926 until 1931, the number of members grew continuously, from 761 to 1,062. But amid the Great Depression of the 30s, the membership fell by more than 10 percent, to a low of 931 members in 1935. The exodus of scholars from Europe and the outbreak of the Second World War increased the membership after 1939, although the number remained erratic across the war years. From 1945, the Academy embarked on a period of sustained growth, and membership reached its historic high in 1978, with 3,901 members. Since 1978 the trend has been consistently downward, to a figure of 3,590 today, a loss of 311 members in five years. Not since the Great Depression has the Academy endured so protracted a period of decline.

Still, the recent and continuous expansion means that the present membership is quite young. In 1982, one-fourth of the members had joined since 1978, and one-half the members since 1972. The average length of membership for males is 14.9 years and for females 11. On the assumption that most members join between 25 and 30 years of age, the average male member of the Academy is in his early forties, and the average woman in her late thirties.

<sup>6</sup> The report of the executive director is published yearly in the July issue of *Speculum*. See also the study of the Academy's changing membership in the study by Luke Wenger cited in n. 1 above.

Even as the total membership has been shifting, so also its gender composition has been changing, and in quite dramatic fashion. Table 3 shows the sex ratio of the members according to the year they joined, as registered in the mailing list for 1982.

Over time, the sex ratio of the Academy membership shows only two major swings, but these are very powerful: a movement from relative equality between the sexes in the earliest years to an extraordinary male preponderance, which peaks in the early 1950s; and, after the 1950s, an equally powerful turn in the other direction, to virtual equality today.

Those who joined the Academy before 1939 and remained as members in 1982 number 41, and form a little more than 2 percent of the membership. They include 35 men and 26 women, for a ratio of 135. To be sure, superior longevity enjoyed by women doubtlessly affects these figures, to an indeterminate extent. It is nonetheless true to say that female medievalists were relatively numerous in the years before World War II, and were represented even among the first Fellows.

The Second World War emptied colleges and graduate schools of men, and yet from 1939 to 1946 the sex ratio was swinging in their favor. Fifty men then joined the Academy, but only 13 women, for a ratio of 385. The chief reason would seem to be the influx into the ranks of the Academy of refugee scholars, driven out of Europe by politics, persecution, and war. They more than compensated for the small number of young male Ph.D.'s produced under wartime conditions.

This swing toward masculine predominance gained further momentum in the immediate postwar years. New members between 1946 and 1953 include 136 men and only 22 women, for a ratio of 618. In 1952, 19 men joined the Academy, and only a single woman. Over the five years from 1949 to 1952 the sex ratio of new members is an astounding 970. Women had virtually disappeared from the profession, at least from among its youngest members.

What was happening? We can, of course, only speculate, and the following explanation seems the most likely. Returning veterans, aided by generous government support, filled the colleges and graduate schools, to pursue the

TABLES Sex Ratios of Academy Members by Decade

Year Joined	Men	Women	Sex Ratio
1926-38	35	26	135
1939-45	50	13	385
1946-53	136	22	618
1954-63	295	70	421
1964-73	728	362	201
1974-82	717	662	108
Unknown	14		
Totals (1982)	1,975	1,085	182

education that the war had delayed. The war for many of them had also forced postponement of marriage. They now married quickly, and their brides were content to work while the male veterans earned their degrees. The veteran in school and his working wife — was this not a common couple on university campuses in the immediate postwar years? The pattern probably also affected the life styles and career choices of those men who were not veterans, and of their fiancées and wives. The *mores* of the time recommended early marriage, and recommended too that the wife support her husband over his long years of training. The result was a string of *annees creuses*, of empty years, for the higher education of women, in the medieval disciplines and doubtlessly other fields too.

It should be noted, too, that the generation of medievalists trained in the immediate postwar years today forms the leadership of the Academy and the profession. There is little wonder that women are few among them.

After about 1952, the pendulum begins to swing the other way, quite powerfully and consistently. The sex ratio of new members drops from 618 to 421 in the decade 1954 to 1963, and down to 201 in the ten years from 1964 to 1973. Since 1974, the sex ratio of new members has been 108. In 1975, surely for the first time in the history of the Academy, more women joined than did men. In 1982 the sex ratio of entering members, 92, dropped to its historic low. There are no indications that this fall in sex ratios is abating.

The low sex ratios of new members of course also mark the separate disciplines. If we calculate ratios for the older members who joined in 1972 or earlier, and for the younger members who entered since 1973, then all the disciplines show a precipitous drop: in English literature, from 315 to 131; in history, from 534 to 235; in Romance languages, from 428 to 125; in art history, from 253 to 95. And these figures, as I have mentioned, certainly understate the true proportions of women in the separate subjects.

The conclusion seems certain: we are witnessing a major increase in the proportion of women among medievalists in this country. The trend is especially visible in a field such as art history, but in fact it is affecting all disciplines, without exception. How are we to explain it? By the early 1950s, many of the veterans were successfully launched on their careers; now their wives were free to continue their own education. Doubtlessly affirmative action has played a role, though the swing toward larger numbers of entering women and falling numbers of men began well before affirmative action became national policy. Doubtlessly, too, the women's movement has been influential, but here again the trend began in the middle 50s, well before the women's movement had become established. Changing styles of personal and professional life are surely crucial. The young, college-educated woman of 1982 is expected to pursue a career and not be content, as was her mother, with marriage and a family but no life outside the home. And young women have shown exceptional energy in realizing this ambition.

This trend to lower sex ratios within our profession is satisfying to anyone who believes that all Americans ought to have equal access to education and to professional careers. And yet this sexual revolution in medieval studies, coupled as it is with shrinking membership, has some disturbing aspects. Let me explain, in careful words, what troubles me about it. It is possible that this phenomenon may not at all indicate growing equality between the sexes and the suppression of differing sex roles in society. Rather, it may point to a redefinition of sex roles. As many observers of contemporary higher education in America have noted, college-educated young men are not now entering graduate education in the humanities in large numbers. The male flight from graduate education in the humanities seems especially pronounced in our finest schools. Rather, the young men are entering professional and technical schools, in evident search for a money-making skill. Men seem still to study primarily to find a job when their days of training are over. Women seem less deterred by economic uncertainties. The typical campus couple of the postwar years — the male graduate student and his working wife — is today replaced by another couple, the male student in medical, law, or business school, and the female student in the humanities. Differing sex roles in regard to the professions may not have been eradicated, only redefined.

These powerful trends may also indicate that the teaching and study of the humanities in a college setting is becoming more and more a second-income job, acceptable to women, but not attractive to males. To profess the humanities at a university requires years of training no less protracted and exacting than that required of lawyers or doctors, but much less remunerative in terms of lifelong earnings. Then, too, the humanities enjoyed great prestige in the immediate postwar years, when they seemed to offer guidance in a troubled world; they seem to have less appeal in our present times, to our present young.

This then is the crucial, still unanswerable question: to what extent does the continuing, marked increase in the percentage of women in the medieval disciplines represent the enhanced recruitment of women, or rather the growing failure of those same disciplines to attract young men? If that failure is real and growing, then we must worry that our disciplines are not enlisting the best students, regardless of sex. And recruitment of the finest must of course remain our goal.

These then are the trends hidden within the Academy mailing list for 1982. The computer detects their presence; it is an accurate observer. It remains for us to judge how well its conclusions correspond with our own memories and perceptions of what has been happening, in the long and recent past. Many current members of the Academy lived through, and were trained during, the immediate postwar years, and many more have been witness to the ensuing changes in the profession, in the tumultuous 60s and 70s. Is the computer right in what it finds in the Academy mailing list for

1982, and what do its figures portend? Even if we cannot now flesh out the answers, we must at a minimum continue to monitor these movements, in order to know better than we know today how they are affecting us and the disciplines we profess.

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