

Mirabile dictu!

The Newsletter of the Center for Medieval and Early Modern Studies (CMEMS) at the University of Colorado



Medieval Materiality and CMEMS

A Guest Editorial by Professor Anne E. Lester

Mirabile dictu!

It has been a long winter, but we have weathered the season by thinking about all of the exciting events that CMEMS has in store for the late summer and autumn of 2014. In May, we will announce a full event schedule for the 2014/2015 academic year, but in this month's guest editorial by Professor Anne E. Lester (History) will introduce you some new events taking place on campus in the fall.

The study of medieval materiality is coming to CU Boulder! During the fall of 2014 Professors Anne E. Lester (History) and Katherine C. Little (English) have planned a national conference on medieval materiality featuring a stellar line-up of plenary speakers and will teach an interdisciplinary course to complement this new project. Read on!

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Please Join Us in Welcoming our Spring Front Range Speaker

On March 13, Professor Sarah Pessin (DU) will discuss divine love in medieval traditions.

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The Fine Line Between History and Compelling Fiction

On March 16/17, Professor Bruce Holsinger reads and talks about his new historical novel.

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CFP: Medieval Materialities Conference at CU Boulder!

Announcing a major conference this fall at CU Boulder! Find out how you can participate!

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SPEAKER PROFILE: Sarah Pessin

Sarah Pessin is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Emil and Eva Hecht Chair in Judaic Studies at the University of Denver, where she joined the Department of Philosophy and the Center for Judaic Studies in 2004. She has served as director of the Center for Judaic Studies since 2009. Professor Pessin works on various topics in Jewish and Islamic philosophy, mysticism, and poetry, Neoplatonisms (including the transmission of texts from Greek into Arabic, Hebrew and Latin), medieval philosophy, and comparative philosophies of religion. She is the author of several articles and a new book entitled *Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Embroidering the Hidden in Jewish Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Sarah Pessin is Associate Professor of Philosophy and the Emil and Eva Hecht Chair in Judaic Studies at the University of Denver.

In the history of ideas, there have arisen a number of overly calcified assumptions about monotheisms vs. "paganisms," and about the theological distance between the proverbial Jerusalem and Athens. In this presentation, Professor Sarah Pessin examines a case in point of how these sorts of underlying assumptions have led to centuries of misreadings of divine will and love in a particular Jewish medieval thinker, the eleventh-century Platonist Solomon Ibn Gabirol. More broadly, she uses the case of Ibn Gabirol to push us on what we think divine love is,

and to push us on the extent to which the history of philosophy – perhaps under the tacit influence of a Christian lens – has presented us with unfairly weak and impious versions of Greek, Islamic and Jewish Neoplatonic theologies.

Professor Pessin will present a talk entitled "Divine Love in a Neoplatonic Key: Rethinking God (and the History of Ideas) from Greek, Islamic and Jewish Points of View" at 5pm on Thursday 13 March in HUMN 250. Refreshments will be served and everyone is welcome!



Every semester, the Center for Medieval and Early Modern Studies (CMEMS) at CU Boulder invites a distinguished scholar from the Front Range of the Rockies to present their current work to faculty and students. At 5pm on Thursday 13 March 2014, this semester's Front Range Speaker Professor Sarah Pessin (Philosophy, University of Denver) will share her research on the nature of divine love in medieval philosophical traditions. Please join us!

The Month of March Brings a Faculty Work-in-Progress by Professor Matthew Gerber and ... Murder Most Foul in Late Medieval London!

Twice a semester, CMEMS hosts faculty work-in-progress talks to keep the Boulder community abreast of the current research projects of premodern scholars on campus. This month, CMEMS presents Professor **Matthew Gerber**, the Department of History's reigning specialist on early modern France. Professor Gerber's first book, *Bastards: Politics, Family and Law in Early Modern France* (Oxford University Press, 2012) was praised as "a complex, compelling account of legal and social change surrounding illegitimacy." He is currently at work on his second book project, entitled "Property, Kinship, and Race in the Eighteenth-Century French Atlantic." This book investigates the formation of early modern French colonial law and its relationship to the legal development of metropolitan France. Professor Gerber was recently awarded a prestigious National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship in support of this new project.

Please mark your calendars and join us on Thursday 6 March at 12 noon in UMC 353 for Professor Gerber's presentation of his new research. His paper is entitled "Nobility and Race in the Early Modern French Atlantic." As always, there will be refreshments. Students are especially welcome to attend!



And on Sunday 16 March and Monday 17 March, we are delighted to welcome Professor **Bruce Holsinger** (Department of English, University of Virginia). Professor Holsinger is a prolific and highly regarded scholar of medieval English literature and critical theory. His books include *Music, Body and Desire in Medieval Culture* (Stanford University Press, 2001); *The Premodern Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 2005) and *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism and the War on Terror* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007). He is also the author of a new historical novel – *A Burnable Book* (Harper Collins, 2014) – set in London in 1385 and featuring John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer as main characters.

CMEMS is sponsoring two events for Professor Holsinger's visit to Boulder. On Sunday 16 March at 5pm he will be reading from *A Burnable Book* at the Boulder Bookstore (1107 Pearl Street); and on Monday 17 March from 10am to noon, he will discuss the challenges of writing a historical novel and the fine balance between accuracy and story-telling, fact and fiction. This event will take place in UMC 425. CMEMS will have signed copies of Professor Holsinger's book to give away, so please make plans to join us for a lively discussion!



(continued from p. 1)

Over the course of the past decade, scholars have argued for a “material turn” at work in the humanities and social sciences. Interest in material culture, material studies, and material networks has begun to transform in profound ways the methodologies of our disciplines and the kinds of questions we ask about the past, about texts, and about human actions, interactions and influences in the social world and on the environment. Strikingly, much of this new research dovetails with the new emphasis on the digital humanities, which has given scholars far greater access to digital archives and digital data about the material past.

Many scholars at CU Boulder have embraced these developments as an opportunity to engage in collaborative, cross-disciplinary inquiry into the premodern past. Through a series of events to take place during the fall semester 2014 we will examine what materiality means for our disciplines and how its study is changing the questions we ask. With the sponsorship of CMEMS, and funding from GCAH, the A&S Fund for Excellence, the President’s Fund for the Humanities and support from other sponsoring departments we have organized a series of collaborative projects on the CU Boulder campus.

First, we have initiated an annual medieval conference at CU Boulder that brings to campus prominent scholars in our disciplines to discuss materiality and a series of related themes that follow from that core idea. The first of these



conferences will take place on 23-25 October 2014. Entitled “Medieval Materiality: A Conference on the Life and Afterlife of Things,” this conference will feature four plenary speakers from different disciplines will address a central aspect of medieval materiality: the religious, the economic, the art historical and the literary. They include **Caroline Walker Bynum** (Professor *emerita* of History, Columbia University/, Princeton, NJ), **Daniel Lord Smail** (Professor of History, Harvard University), **Aden Kumler** (Associate Professor of Art History, University of

Chicago), and **Jessica Brantley** (Associate Professor of English, Yale University). Professor Bynum’s keynote address on the evening of 23 October will serve as the second annual James Field Willard Lecture in Medieval History, the marquee event in the CMEMS calendar. A Call for Papers is now circulating for this conference and we look forward to reading the abstracts that come in (please see p. 6 of the newsletter for submission details). Future conference topics will include

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"Religious History: Material Traces of Belief" (Fall 2015) and "Ecologies: Medieval, Modern, Post-Modern" (Fall 2016).

As a complement to the conference, we will also convene two "Collaborative Discussions" on the topic of materiality. In September 2014, we will gather to discuss Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), which has been influential for scholarship on materiality and ecology across several disciplines. A second discussion will take place in October, focused on Colin Renfrew and Lambros Malafouris' collection of essays entitled *The Cognitive Life of Things: Recasting the Boundaries of the Mind* (2010), which draws on insights from cognitive science, anthropology and archaeology to address the meaning of objects and materiality across time.

All of these activities intersect with a new interdisciplinary undergraduate course that Professor Katherine Little (English) and I will teach in the fall semester of 2014: "Medieval Materiality: Bones, Books, Bills of Sale: The Medieval Life of Objects in Texts and Context" (ENGL 4693 / HIST 4803 / MEMS 4020). This course examines the place and meaning of objects and things throughout the Middle Ages and will allow our students to see how historians and literary scholars approach the same texts from different angles and demonstrate the importance of material analysis across our disciplines. Look for posters with a longer course description up around campus! The course will have a graduate component as well and will be a required course for any undergraduate completing the CMEMS certificate.

-- Professor Anne E. Lester (Department of History)



Looking Ahead to April

The end of the academic year is fast approaching and the month of April is a busy one for CMEMS. On Tuesday April 1, we will convene our postponed Faculty Round-Table Discussion (see the *postscriptum* on p. 6 for all of the details). And on the morning of Friday April 18, CMEMS will host a symposium on Christian identity in late antiquity featuring our distinguished guest speakers Professors Jason BeDuhn (Northern Arizona University), Eric Rebillard (Cornell University) and Kevin Uhalde (Ohio University). All of the event information can be found on our website: cmems.colorado.edu.

We look forward to seeing you soon!

Servus,

SGB

About the Director: Professor Scott G. Bruce, Department of History



Scott G. Bruce earned his B.A. in History and Latin *summa cum laude* (1994) at York University in Toronto, Canada. He pursued his M.A. (1996) and Ph.D. (2000) in History at Princeton University, where he concentrated on topics in religion and culture in the early Middle Ages and wrote his dissertation under the supervision of Professor Giles Constable.

A specialist on the history of the abbey of Cluny, SGB has published widely on many aspects of medieval monastic culture and literature. He also serves as an editor of *The Medieval Review* (TMR) and plays an active role in the Medieval Academy of America (MAA). For more information, including a complete list of publications, please visit: www.colorado.academia.edu/ScottBruce

CFP: "Medieval Materiality: A Conference on the Life and Afterlife of Things" at CU Boulder (Fall 2014)

On 23-25 October 2014, the Center for Medieval and Early Modern Studies (CMEMS) at CU Boulder will host our first major national conference entitled *Medieval Materiality: A Conference on the Life and Afterlife of Things* and we want you to take part! Organizers Anne E. Lester (Department of History) and Katherine C. Little (Department of English) invite abstracts for 20-minute papers along the following themes: the relationship between objects and their social environments, between objects and spiritual power, the literature and the spiritual in biblical exegesis, between descriptions of objects, theories of ekphrasis, and the literal presence of things, and between medieval and postmodern approaches to "things," as well as gendered things, collecting and collections, networks of trade and travel, and objects of desire.

Abstracts of 300 words accompanied by a brief biographical paragraph should be sent to: Anne E. Lester (alester@colorado.edu) OR Katie Little (Katherine.C.Little@colorado.edu). **Please note that the submission deadline for abstracts is 1 May 2014.** As the conference approaches, more information will become available at the CMEMS website: <http://cmems.colorado.edu>



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IMAGE SOURCES:

The Saint Thomas Becket Reliquary was made in Limoges in the early 13th century and is currently housed at the Musée national du Moyen Âge in Paris.

The illumination on p. 2 is a scene from Dante's *Divine Comedy* by Giovanni di Paolo (c. 1403-1482)

The 13th century stained glass image of King Louis IX carrying the crown of thorns is from Tours Cathedral (St. Gatien).

The man warming himself by the fire on p. 5 appears in a 13th century psalter owned by the Getty Museum (MS 14, fol. 3).

The 14th century ostrich egg reliquary pictured above is from the Quedlinburg Treasure (Photo: Ann Münchow, Art Resource, NY).

Postscriptum: Due to an unfortunate scheduling error, we had to postpone our CMEMS-sponsored Faculty Roundtable Discussion of Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation*. We have rescheduled this event for **Tuesday 1 April 2014 from 1-3pm in UMC 425**. We hope that you can join us at this new place and time for what promises to be an engaging discussion of this provocative book.

