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A New Dimension? North American Scholars Contribute Their Perspective

SUSAN MOSHER STUARD

In North America, over three generations and by an indirect route, a new perspective on the role of women in medieval society has appeared. It now exerts some influence on general understandings of European history, and it constitutes a perspective in which the historical profession may take some pride and which feminists may value and respect. At first glance it may seem more a matter of chance than an intentional challenge to Old World interpretations that this new direction in scholarship has been advanced, but that appearance may be deceptive. It may mask distinctive features in the organization of higher learning in the United States and Canada and important differences in the structuring of historical studies this side of the Atlantic. But surely it would be difficult to make a case for conscious intent. The accomplishment seems to consist in roughly equal parts of the brashness of young nations encountering the high tradition of European learning, incomplete assimilation of the interests governing positivist history (although Americans wrote positivist history perfectly well), and a genuine impulse to rethink the medieval past and apply its lessons in the New World. If, for this development in North American scholarship, it is impossible to make a case for conscious intent, surely disclaimers are not in order either.

New world feminism began early enough in Boston to influence historical scholarship and early in its own course recognized the importance of medieval women. Paulina Wright Davis writing in *The Una* before the Civil War argued that paradoxically women's journey back to the Middle