The Sophomore Survey and the Inclusion of Explicit Women[1]

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Since I started teaching several years ago, I have kept a list of some of my favorite lines from student papers. Some of them are funny, unexpected, or clever, while others give insight into the values and ideologies of the writer. I have found this to be particularly true in relation to discussions of women in early English literature. Despite my insistence in class that women were neither silent nor powerless in medieval England, many students persist in the belief that, as one writer put it, "as far back as the Medieval Era, women have been documented as the more primitive sex." Exactly what he or she means by primitive or what evidence he or she has in mind, I cannot say for certain. Another student made the observation that "medieval women are weak, but when bound by the strongness [*sic*] of men, they can become stronger." Paradoxically, women can gain strength only when strong men bind them, and they cannot do it on their own. If they ever free themselves of those men, they will go back to being weak, according to this student's logic.

Some students recognize that the nature and definition of women's power has changed dramatically. One points out that "no one can deny the overwhelming progress we have made in fighting the battle of explicit women." This student's use of "explicit" is especially provocative considering its several meanings. Perhaps this student means that we have made progress in overcoming graphically portrayed nude or sexually active women; or maybe he or she means that we have made strides in opposing women who engage in forthright and unreserved expression. I suspect that this is not exactly what the student intended to say, though it does point to a real challenge many undergraduate students seem to face in defining and understanding what constitutes power for women in medieval England.

All of these comments appeared in essays and exams from my sophomore survey of early British literature, which covers the Middle Ages through the Restoration and Eighteenth Century.

While the past twenty years have witnessed the movement of feminist scholarship in general and medieval feminist scholarship in particular away from the margins toward the center of scholarly inquiry, some undergraduate students seem actively unwilling to accept the notion of feminism as positive, empowering, or even as a legitimate approach to scholarly inquiry. As part of the "SMFS at Twenty" panel on "teaching," I came prepared to talk about both the importance and the challenges of incorporating women writers in the "Middle Ages" section of the sixteen week survey class. Though a newly-minted PhD, I had taught the class several times, but was not satisfied with it. Overall, the classes had gone well, the students seemed pleased, and my evaluations were good. I felt, however, that something was lacking. When putting together my syllabus each time, I followed the model that was taught to me, focusing on the time-honored male writers of the period. I added "The Wife's Lament" and Marie de France's *Lanval*. I work primarily with Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, and thus felt confident in my ability to teach romance. I liked the idea of bringing in a woman writer or two, but felt compelled to keep my attention on the same authors I had studied a few years earlier.

The focus of my presentation at the conference arose from two primary concerns. Despite the general success of my course, I knew the syllabus and my approach needed some revising. The seventh and eighth editions of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* that I used offered a much broader selection of women writers than the one I had studied as an undergraduate. I was hesitant to spend time on them in my class, though. I knew relatively little about them, and my own professors, whom I admired and tried to emulate, had not felt it necessary even to acknowledge them. Moreover, I had noticed, as the lines from the papers and exams indicate, my students knew very little about the role and status of women in the Middle Ages and did not feel comfortable talking about them. Consequently, I came to the session interested in talking about ways of creating syllabi that would address students' misapprehension of the role and status of women in early England. Having thoroughly enjoyed teaching *Lanval*, I wanted to consider ways I might give women like Margery

Kempe, the Paston women, and Julian of Norwich a voice in my class. I brought more questions than answers, though, wondering how to balance their voices with those of Chaucer, the Gawain poet, Malory, and others, whom I also want my students to know and appreciate. My fellow presenter, Jeb Grisham, took a more specific approach, considering the value and importance of teaching the dreams of Christine de Pizan, highlighting their inherent appeal and relevance to modern undergraduates.

The questions raised in both papers sparked an open, decentered conversation about the possibilities and challenges posed by teaching medieval women writers. About twelve people attended the session, mostly women, and almost all current graduate students or new faculty members. Some of us were still in elementary school when the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* was founded in 1986. Though as a group we could offer little in the way of retrospective, we all have a vested interest in the current state and the future of medieval feminist scholarship and teaching. Moreover, as latecomers to the conversation who have benefited from the work done over the past twenty years, we all agreed that women writers should have a place on a sophomore survey syllabus. We recognize that despite the recent proliferation of texts about medieval women and valuable editions of their work, including them is easier said than done.

At many schools, the sophomore survey is a requirement for all literature majors and minors as well as for secondary education students in English. In some cases, it is the only access they will have to early English literature, and it is our only chance as instructors to inform, challenge, and correct misperceptions and erroneous thinking about the Middle Ages and especially about the women who lived during this time. The course asks instructors to cover about 1800 years of writing in sixteen weeks (fewer for those on quarter or trimester schedules), forcing them to choose between breadth, which allows students a sense of the overall development of English literature with little focus or specificity, and depth, which allows students to understand a few texts in detail, but denies them access to some of the minor writers or secondary works. Many of those in attendance had the shared experience of first reading medieval literature under the guidance of a male professor close to

retirement. While most of our professors were talented teachers and engaged scholars, they did little to introduce us to texts by or about women. Almost invariably, these well-intentioned teachers, as many still do, subscribed to the breadth approach, devoting the allotted five weeks to the traditional canonical voices. Most did not include women writers, allowing the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* to represent the "women's voice" of medieval literature (if they choose to address the topic at all). This approach makes some sense considering the rather spare selections the major anthologies offer. The sixth edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, published in 1993, devotes a mere twelve pages to writing by medieval women. By the eighth edition, the selections have increased to forty out of 484 pages of the *Middle Ages* volume.

The inclusion of more texts by women writers gives instructors greater flexibility and more options for including them when constructing a syllabus for the survey class. Like the *Norton Anthology*, the most recent editions of the Longman and the Broadview anthologies offer expanded coverage of writing by and about women in the Middle Ages. Though each of the texts varies in terms of specific texts and selections, they all make an effort to acknowledge the ways in which women authors have affected the canon. In contrast, the Oxford and Blackwell anthologies continue to neglect women's voices, (with the exception of "The Wife's Lament"), each including only one or two brief selections about women. Despite this overall progress, the brevity of all of the selections limits the amount of time an instructor can devote to early English women's writing and women's concerns without bringing in supplemental materials and readings. If we choose to spend more than a couple of days on the topic, we must then decide which of the canonical figures to cut from a class that is already pressed for time. We do not want to overwhelm students by assigning too much reading or too many topics. Equally, we do not want to deny them access to some of the traditional male voices, whom we continue to read for the insights they offer into life, love, politics, society, religion, and a host of other topics.

When I taught the class, I found that my students were most comfortable with the *Canterbury Tales*, *Beowulf*, and *Sir Gawain*

and the Green Knight. Many of them had encountered these figures in high school classes or introductory literature courses, and they came prepared to rehash past lectures and offer familiar insights. However, none of them had ever read "The Wife's Lament" and most were unfamiliar with *Lanval* or *Laustic*. Some of my students were genuinely surprised to learn that there were women writers prior to the Victorian age and many were unsure of what to make of their voices and stories. Students enjoyed "The Wife's Lament," initially reading it simply as the story of a powerless, isolated woman mourning the loss of her husband. They soon recognized, however, that the very fact that she was speaking–and speaking against her husband for his lack of faith–indicated that she did not passively accept her situation. Students were also drawn to *Lanval*, the story of the knight and his beautiful, secret lady, but some struggled with interpretation. They found themselves fascinated by Guinevere's attempted seduction of Lanval and her subsequent accusations, aghast at the hero's desperate revelation of his lady's identity, and impressed by the lady's final triumphant rescue of her knight in distress. Try as they might, the students could not deny the fact that she was even more powerful in some ways than King Arthur. As we moved beyond plot summary, they began to notice the ways in which the romance draws attention to social constructions of gender, reveals attitudes toward homosexuality, and illuminates the problems inherent in traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity. Just as the discussion got going, though, our two fifty-minute class periods allotted to the text ended, and we all felt a little let down and cheated. Though I did some review and brought some closure to our discussion the next day, we had to move on to another text in order to make it through the syllabus.

At the conference session, I wanted to explore the possibility of teaching the course without such a packed syllabus to make it through. In order to engender a deeper study, I considered the possibility of focusing on just a couple of writers as representative voices of the Middle Ages. While students might leave the class without having read *Piers Plowman*, excerpts from the *Morte d'Arthur*, or *Beowulf*, they will be able to understand and appreciate

more fully an individual writer and text. The real challenge of this approach involves determining "representative" authors and texts. Understandably, many who teach the course in this way choose to focus on the conventional male writers of the period. However, it also allows an instructor with an interest in promoting an awareness of early English women writers to assign complete texts, or at least significant sections and to increase awareness of the female voice in the Middle Ages. In recent years, a number of reliable and affordable editions of many medieval women writers have been published, such as Lynn Staley's edition of *The Book of Margery Kempe* (2000) or A. C. Spearing and Elizabeth Spearing's edition of *Revelations of Divine Love* by Julian of Norwich (1999), rendering a study of representative voices a feasible option for the sophomore survey. Some of those in attendance at the session shared stories of their experiences teaching two or three complete texts for each chronological period of the course. One instructor appreciated the way in which it allowed her to allot relatively equal time to male and female writers. Another commented that she had great success challenging her students' perceptions that women in the Middle Ages were voiceless, powerless, and insignificant. Both instructors hailed from rather progressive departments amenable to less traditional or standardized approaches and therefore faced no opposition to their pedagogy.

While constructing a syllabus is often difficult, the greater challenge, it seems, involves discussing women and feminist concerns in a classroom. Most of us in attendance at the session have grown up during third-wave feminism that began in the early 1990s. Due in large part to parents and teachers who influenced and were influenced by second-wave feminism, we are sensitive to the complexities of female identity, gender, and sexuality. Many of our students, though, seem less accepting and even critical of feminism. In an essay on teaching Spenser in the sophomore survey, Judith Anderson observes "students desire to read only realistically–categorically, so to speak–and not simply to ignore, but to want to ignore, alternative and especially complicated dimensions of significance in the hope that these unfamiliar, puzzling things would go away."[2] Though Anderson is referring to the complex allegory

that, in part, defines the *Faerie Queene*, her observation aligns with the experience of everyone in attendance at the conference, particularly in relation to feminist concerns in the undergraduate classroom. Some students regard medieval women, like Spenser's allegories, as unfamiliar and puzzling. They are comfortable in their belief that they were silent, powerless, and unworthy of our time and attention. When presented with alternative readings of women as smart and engaged, some become dismissive and sometimes defiant. Though I always ask these students to explain this response to the text, they often fumble for words, uncertain how to express their thoughts.

When pressed to articulate why they believe that women's issues are unimportant, even in the face of evidence to the contrary, students reveal incongruous and contradictory ideas. In her article, "What Feminism Means to Today's Undergraduates," Kate Dube considers this conflict, observing that often, students say, "they aren't feminists because they don't need to be. Their generation is past all that sexism and labeling stuff, all those distinctions about gender, race, and sexuality."[3] When asked to define feminist, though, some still maintain that they are "bra-burning, hairy-legged, man-hating lesbians. They constantly look for sexism and find it everywhere. In English classes they make students read books only by female writers. They are humorless and militant, always loudly proclaiming their ideology."[4] Even those who keep their bras intact, shave their legs, and appreciate men (or are men) still run the risk of being deemed a "feminist" by students and colleagues alike if they assign Julian of Norwich without giving Chaucer his due or if they spend a significant amount of time meditating on the sexism rampant in medieval literature. Many students, it seems, find it easier to ignore women's issues altogether, retreating to stereotypes and generalities rather than teasing out unfamiliar and puzzling things that would illuminate and complicate their thinking.

These reactions, as vexing as they might be, remind us that our students are not ideologically blank; wittingly or not, their views have been shaped and informed by teachers, parents, and others who share similar misinformed, oversimplified, or problematic perceptions of feminism. It is only by acknowledging these attitudes,

opening up the canon to bring awareness to women writers, and changing our methodologies in the classroom that we can begin to change their perceptions. By bringing in texts by women, we can help our students begin to understand and appreciate the complex gender dynamic that existed during the Middle Ages. Apart from challenging their initial perceptions and biases, such texts can also engender a fuller awareness of women's issues in writing by men. Students will no longer perceive the Wife of Bath as the only woman's voice in medieval literature, as I did, but will see her for what she is: a construction of Chaucer speaking to the clerical tradition about women and not actually a woman at all.

Regardless of the specific pedagogy one adopts or whether one is teaching a sophomore survey or a more specialized upper level seminar, we all face significant challenges in promoting a feminist agenda in the classroom. Many teachers, recognizing the need for a revised canon and modified pedagogies, have added women's writing to their syllabi and spend time considering issues of gender in their lectures and discussions. However, many teachers are required to teach from a predetermined syllabus or to include specific texts in their courses, and others experience departmental pressure to save "nonstandard" writers for upper level courses that most of our survey students will never take. Moreover, benchmark evaluations such as the GRE subject test value knowledge of traditional male voices. If we do not teach their texts, we are potentially putting our students at a disadvantage should they choose to pursue a graduate education at an institution that relies upon this exam as an indicator of a student's preparedness. Teaching an expanded canon, though, forces us to rethink traditional categories and approaches and makes us aware that we can do things differently. Many of us have a desire to move beyond the old "add women and stir" model of teaching–the model I adopted when I first taught the class–to make some fundamental changes. If we want to give women writers, and especially medieval women writers, their due, we have to be willing to destabilize the canon and experiment in our classrooms.

The sophomore survey holds a somewhat vexed position in English departments. Those who teach it have to straddle boundaries of genre and period, introducing students to writers

and texts about which they may know relatively little. As was my own experience, it is often a course taught by graduate students or new faculty members who themselves are just becoming fully aware of the politics of the canon. Since participating in the SMFS teaching session last spring, I have not yet had the chance to teach the survey class. It is hard to find the time as a new faculty member to reframe an entire course, especially one as complex as this, but I look forward to teaching it again soon with a fuller awareness of its rich potential to help students think in new and challenging ways about women and medieval literature. I am fortunate to find myself in an environment amenable to such approaches. Recently, the department voted to change the name of the course from Major British Writers I to British Literature to 1800. Though the shift seems subtle, it recognizes and encourages the inclusion of writers and texts that have not always been covered or considered "major."

Even without enacting fundamental changes to the canon or to our pedagogies, we have many strategies available to us in order to give women writers a voice and a presence in our classrooms. First, we can read their work dialogically with the more prominent male writers, considering shared or divergent themes, genres, styles, and approaches. We must be careful not to teach women's writing in isolation or to isolate it from men's writing, since doing so would deny students the ability to engage in a comparative analysis of gender differences. Such a comparison is necessary in order to illustrate, for example, that men were not always powerful, women were not always powerless, and that they did not live, act, and write in separate spheres. Second, we can study women writers within the historical and cultural contexts that inform their works, as well as within the contexts of their own lived experiences to study how their personal lives influenced their writing. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, for instance, about the author's own pilgrimages, provides an important counterpoint to the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*. By putting the two texts into conversation, we can compare the experiences and ideologies of Chaucer's fictional pilgrim to a genuine pilgrim to gain insight into the experience of medieval women balancing the demands of marriage, family, and other responsibilities while seeking personal and spiritual fulfillment.

Finally, we can appreciate their unique approach to popular modes of expression. Though there are not as many examples of medieval women adapting various literary modes as we might like, Marie de France stands out as one of the only female writers of romance in early literature, offering a unique approach to both the form and content of the genre. By solidly situating women writers into their literary, historical, cultural, and generic milieus, we can generate awareness of their writing and consequently help our students see their work as exceptional for its literary merits and not simply because it was written by women.

We can also take advantage of the growing familiarity many of our students have with women writers and with women's issues. Many colleges and universities have developed women's and gender studies departments or programs in order to draw attention to the social, cultural, and historical contributions of women. Students attracted to these programs often will find their way into English courses such as the sophomore survey in order to fulfill requirements for a major or minor. Most are already well-informed and actively engaged in women's issues and can provide a smart and important counterpoint to some of the more resistant voices. Other students come to the class with little knowledge or well articulated views on women's issues, past or present, but over the course of the semester become increasingly aware of the value and importance of studying writing by and about women. The success of these programs attests to the reality that many students are encountering women writers and women's issues earlier in their careers than ever before. They care deeply about issues of gender and sexuality and will undoubtedly influence the direction the canon and our field will take.

By drawing attention to women writers, we can help our students recognize that these women who lived centuries ago have much to say about their own lives and historical situations. The improved selection of writing by and about women in some of the major anthologies facilitates their inclusion in our classes, yet their writing continues to be relegated to small sections and excerpts. Consequently, we continue to grapple with issues of gender in the classroom, facing challenges of potential biases and striving for a balanced presentation of voices. Those in attendance at the SMFS

session on teaching expressed a tremendous sense of enthusiasm about the mission of teaching medieval women writers despite these obstacles, and we are confident that the "explicit women" will continue to make their presence felt in our classrooms and in the canon at large. Though we have a long way to go, few can deny the overwhelming progress we have made in celebrating the female voices, intellect, and knowledge, explicit or not. We are beginning to appreciate fully the "sentence and solas" they offer in our continuing mission to promote equal rights for men and women, or at least equal opportunity for scholarly inquiry.

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End Notes

1. This paper was originally presented at the 41st International Congress on Medieval Studies, 4-7 May 2006, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, as part of an "SMFS at Twenty" panel on "teaching."
2. Judith Anderson, "What I Really Teach When I'm Teaching Spenser," *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 3.2 (2003): 171-183, p. 177.
3. Kate Dube, "What Feminism Means to Today's Undergraduates," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 50.41 (2004): B5
4. Dube, "What Feminism Means," p. B5.