THE THEORETICAL ARCHAEOLOGY GROUP holds a conference in Great Britain annually. This year it will be held in December ca. 15-17th at Bradford and will include a session on Women in Archaeology organized by Pamela Graves, Department of Archaeology, 10 The Square, The University, Glasgow G128QQ, GB. (Inquiries may be directed to her.) Her research is in the later Middle Ages.

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TEACHING WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE AGES: A SURVEY

What follows is a report on the informal survey on "Teaching Women in the Middle Ages" distributed to MFN subscribers last month. We received 41 responses (out of 146 mailed), a 27% return. (Another seven answers were received too late to be incorporated here.) The goal of this survey is to share work done by colleagues and to exchange perceptions and insights into our teaching scholarship; it is not intended as a formal analytical study.

We found the course descriptions and suggestions for reading most illuminating, and we print them much as they were submitted. (We have excerpted some of the syllabi and omitted the specific directions to students about assignments and grading. Although we have attempted to complete many of the bibliographic suggestions, we have not been able to verify all information. We apologize for any misleading errors.) We were also intrigued by your answers to the more substantive questions, and we have tried to summarize, in a very informal manner, your responses. Several people requested that their names and words not be used, and we have respected their wishes.

We would like to thank all of you - too numerous to mention - who answered so promptly and gave so generously of your time and thoughts!

1. Courses on women and the Middle Ages that you teach or that your institution offers, with a brief description. See below, "Courses offered on Women and the Middle Ages."

2. Is this course offered under a department or as a Women's Studies course? Does your school have a Women's Studies program, either a major or a minor?

Courses are cross-listed in women's studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; University of California, San Diego; SUNY Binghamton; Clark University; New York University; University of Pennsylvania; University of Colorado at Boulder.

Readers report that 24 colleges have Women's Studies programs; a major is possible at 13, a minor alone at 8. Ten people reported no program at their universities.

3. If NO such course is offered, is there a particular reason?
Twelve respondents said that no courses specifically on the topic of women in the Middle Ages were offered at their institutions. The most common explanation was that such a course might not attract enough students to justify a course, or that it would be considered too specialized by the department. One person noted that in her two year institution there was little student interest in literature of any form. Another remarked that she was too busy with numerous departmental commitments to teach such a course, and that no one else was specifically interested in this topic. Of those who do not teach such a course, several expressed the desire to do so.

4. How do you incorporate material on women in your subject into other medieval courses?

Responses ranged from "no one here does" and "little opportunity in my courses" to "every which way and all the time" and "I bring a feminist perspective into all my courses." Among the many who reported positively on this matter, there seemed to be two basic strategies: 1) to make a point of including women writers or material about women in all general survey courses and 2) to use gender and relationships between the sexes as an essential organizing principle or theme in a standard course.

One professor remarked that she pointed out "constantly that documents used as sources were all produced by the same 'organization' that was Christian and patriarchal in nature." And another explained that she tried "to introduce gender-based concerns in the context of analyzing texts: e.g. the tension between Chaucer's courtly rhetoric and the real political power of women in the late Middle Ages." The problem of finding a standard textbook or anthology which incorporates works by women into the "canon" of literature was noted, although one person remarked that introductory texts in composition seemed to do a better job of this than more "advanced" anthologies: "resistance to change is greatest where the 'canon' is most clearly defined."

5. Particular texts that you use or would recommend as good for teaching about women in your field. Please refer to the list "Texts especially recommended for teaching" at the end of the survey, pp. 21-22.

6. How do you incorporate feminist theory into your presentation of the subject matter?

Responses ranged from the skeptical to strongly positive, but with more evident resistance to teaching feminist "theory" than to incorporating material about women into coursework (question 4). One historian noted that "Fundamentally, I resist all 'theory' but my opinions are all-pervasive;" an art historian commented that she did not see how feminist theory was relevant to the teaching of art history at the undergraduate level. And one literary scholar put it, "Perhaps this is negligent, but my inclination is not to teach feminism or theory at all except to point out that there is a problem."
Others, however, suggested that incorporating feminist theory was unavoidable: "Gender contextualizes everything I say." A number of respondents explained precisely how they used theory, for example: by "delving beneath the surface verbalizations that mystify the position of women in courtly literature; by "tracing the religious roots of patriarchy in the Western world; by "pointing out how patriarchal structures affect the lives of both men and women;" by asking the students "to examine the question of female authorship: just how important is it that a work was written/produced/painted by a woman? (the question debated by Nancy Miller and Peggy Kamuf in the Diacritics feminist issue.)"

Several people replied that they did not know enough about feminist theories per se to incorporate them explicitly into their teaching, but that they felt they did so "intuitively" or "by osmosis." Another professor explained that she was just beginning to explore the relevance of feminist theory to teaching medieval literature, "I use more feminist theory in my critical theory class than I have in teaching medieval texts. That will soon change!" And another commented astutely that "more integration is needed between historical and theoretical approaches."

7. Particular texts on feminist theory that you would recommend?

The many who remarked that they did explicitly present feminist theory as they taught suggested a variety of books and articles, listed under "Feminist theory recommended."

8. Please share any ideas for class organization, assignment, topics for discussion, etc.

Only a handful of specific suggestions, but good ones, so we share them all:

a) I ask students to take a Biblical text or historical event whose gender implications have bothered them, and to re-imagine and re-write it so that it is satisfying to them.

b) I ask students to read as "feminists" even if they are male, posing questions such as "How do you think a female audience will respond to this? Do you feel that the fact that the writer is female changes this text in any way?" etc.

c) Two projects for a course on love:

First project: Students are asked to describe the ideal man/woman of their dreams in a short essay. Responses are collated and cliches about love, women, fantasy, etc. are noted.

Second project: After having looked at slides depicting love in the Middle Ages (chiefly in the garden of love), students are asked to search contemporary magazines for modern-day equivalents, especially prominent in advertising.
d) An assignment for the Correspondance of Abelard and Heloise:

A fifth "personal letter" signed by "Heloise" has just been discovered. Evidence suggests that it was written in Heloise's voice by an astute, cultivated, and forceful twelfth-century woman (whether Heloise or not) who was dissatisfied with the "Letters of Direction" as a conclusion to the Correspondance. Write "Heloise's" letter in such a way that you incorporate a feminist critique of gender relationships in the Historia and the Letters into your response.

e) (From a male professor) Raise the issue of gendered reading early; try not to co-opt the notion of "reading as a woman," in order that women can occupy the position.

f) Make students aware that there is not one feminist theory - one feminism - but that there are feminist theories, feminisms. Students appreciate learning about the various perspectives one can take on feminist issues.

9. How do your students and colleagues respond to your feminist scholarship and to teaching about women?

The answers to this question suggest that a lively discussion could be held on the reception of feminist scholarship among our academic colleagues and students! A wide range of answers attest to very different experiences. We summarize the answers of people who did not request confidentiality, although we report them anonymously.

Responses, again, ranged the full spectrum from negative - i.e. "They think I'm out of date, that the battle has been won and it's a dead issue." - to strongly positive, "The department perceives feminist criticism as one of the most important fields in literary criticism." Many reported a mixed reception from colleagues ("indifferent") and from students ("enthusiastic"); in fact, four people used precisely these terms to describe the respective reactions of colleagues and students.

Student reception, overwhelmingly, was seen to be "positive." "It seems to engage people; makes them see how the old literature touches their own lives and interests." There were a few exceptions: one person noted that male students occasionally objected, and one noted that even a few female students could be "violently anti-feminist." Several noted the lack of real feminist consciousness among students. One person commented on some students' perception that Women Studies' courses tended to accentuate the "negative, self-pitying, and depressing aspects" of women's history: "Few seem to realize that this says more about the history of women than it does about our teaching methods."

Six people reported that colleagues were in general supportive and seven people commented that their female colleagues were especially supportive. (Another four said that both men and women
colleagues were supportive). One person, however, noted that female colleagues interested in feminist theory were "disdainful" of her work as a medieval feminist. Another felt too isolated to respond to this question; she suspected that her colleagues considered her work part of a "fashionable trend."

Interestingly, two people specifically noted that colleagues reacted very differently to work on women writers (acceptable) than to feminist approaches to canonical literature (questionable):

"Colleagues who think it is acceptable to teach medieval women writers (even if they do not) are horrified that someone would teach feminist approaches to Chaucer."

"They respond well to teaching literature by and about women, but both colleagues and students are largely ignorant of feminist theory."

On balance, more people reported positive responses than negative ones, although the anecdote recounted by one of our colleagues suggests that the terrain may not be as receptive to feminist scholarship within the established disciplines as we might like to think:

"At dinner with major medievalists at a professional meeting this year, I said rather casually that my next project would be to do some serious application of feminist theory to my field and, in chorus, the men said, 'But you're too good for that!'"

10. Are there any suggestions or insights that you would like to add?

Most of the responses here have been incorporated into the questions above. Several people thanked the Editors of the MFN for their efforts and said that they looked forward to working further on the questions posed by the survey.

Courses offered on Women and the Middle Ages

ANNE BARSTOW, SUNY College at Old Westbury

Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance

Texts: Medieval Women, by Eileen Power; Not in God's Image, ed. by Julia O'Faolain and Laura Martines; "Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes: Women in Medieval Theology" by Eleanor McLaughlin, in Religion and Sexism.

JUDITH M. BENNETT (History), University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill