to me that it is our own feminist commitments to collective action that will urge us—historians and literary folk alike—to leave the relative comfort and security of our disciplinary moorings, learn other ways of reading and researching, and thereby, live a little bit more dangerously than we previously have—though hopefully, more openly and honestly as well.

NOTES


I am alluding here to one of the central points Naomi Schor makes in her Reading in Detail, Aesthetics and the Feminine (New York: Methuen, 1987).

In the spirit of collaboration, I wish to thank Professor E. Jane Burns for her invitation to write this piece, for her extraordinary (and completely unwarranted patience) in waiting for its completion, and for her many insights—some of which herein expressed—about the "literature/history/feminism" question.

TEACHING FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE:

In the last MFN we asked for readers to contribute ideas about how to teach specific texts and problems from a feminist perspective. Responses ranged from brief notes to full-scale essays. We thank our contributors and share their comments, as we received them, in alphabetical order.

The Pleasure and Value of Teaching Women Authors in a Course on Sixteenth Century English Literature

Pamela J. Benson, Department of English, Rhode Island College

One of the greatest pleasures of reading the works by many women writers of the Renaissance is also one of the greatest difficulties: for the most part these texts are unannotated and have received critical attention from only a very few scholars. One cannot approach them with any preconceptions about the author's methods or personality but must rely on one's own critical sense and sensitivity to help one get to know and understand the author. Because of that, characteristic, I find texts by Renaissance women to be excellent vehicles for teaching students the skills of literary criticism and scholarship. Reading them enables late twentieth-century students to experience something of the sense of discovery that was available to readers of texts by male and female authors in previous centuries.

Take, as an extreme example, the works of Lady Anne Southwell. As far as I know, her poetry exists only in a single manuscript that is at the Folger library. This manuscript is not in her hand, but it contains her autograph and
a few holograph corrections to the poems. It also includes, among other items, a list of her clothes and her books, rent receipts, a letter asking for patronage for her husband, a defense of poetry, and her epitaph and other tributes to her in her husband's hand; it gives her literary works and a social context for them. I have just begun to work on this manuscript and have not yet taught it to a class, but I intend to do so the first chance I get. My teaching of it will be primarily of two kinds.

First, I will hand out transcriptions of a good number of the poems. Southwell was a great experimenter in verse forms, and I will be particularly interested in having students attempt to describe these forms and think about whether they have encountered similar forms in their reading of canonical authors. I will also have each student do close analyses of several poems, so that together we will build up a portfolio of readings of the poems and we will begin to get a sense of what sort of a poet Southwell is. How skillful is she? What rhetorical devices does she use? What are her major themes? We will then be able to compare what we discover about her with what we know about other authors in the period.

Second, I have a xerox print of the microfilm of the manuscript, and, though I do not expect that my students will be able to read it with any ease, I will use it as a means of showing them the form in which the poet's first readers would have encountered her texts, and I will introduce social history into the course by means of the non-poetic contents of the manuscript. That Southwell attempted to use her influence, gained from her poetic endeavors, to get political favor for her husband, that she owned 110 books of all sorts (including devotional texts, the Orlando furioso, and the essays of Montaigne), that her husband prized her learning and yet found her artistic activity compatible with the definition of her as an "obedient wife" are pieces of evidence available in the manuscript that will allow students to form a notion of the character and circumstances of this particular woman. These facts also indicate the possibilities against which to measure the lives of other Renaissance women they encounter in my course and other courses.

As a result of their examination of Southwell, students will have a real feel for literary scholarship and will have learned the value of the analytic skills they have acquired. To achieve the same results using the works of a male author one would probably have to teach works that an undergraduate would perceive as being tedious—religious tracts or political prose, perhaps, because the field has been so well worked over. Southwell is marginal without being dull or a poor poet. I'm not yet sure how good I think she is, but teaching her will help me find out.

**Female Mysticism and Asceticism**

Sharon Farmer, History Department, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106

This is how I teach Caroline Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* to an undergraduate upper division lecture/discussion class.

Students do not actually read Bynum — I think it's too difficult for undergraduates. Rather, in Elizabeth Petroff's *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, they read selections from primary texts about/by: Mary of Oignies, Christina Mirabilis, Hadewijch, Beatris of Nazareth, Angela of Foligno, Clare of Assisi, Agnes of Assisi, etc.
In lecture, on Tuesdays I provide an analysis of these primary sources drawn, primarily, from Bynum.

Lecture outline:

Themes of these women's mystical lives are basically 1) love, affectivity, mystical union with Christ (in a quite literal/physical sense) and 2) food (eucharistic devotion -- to love Christ is to eat him, combined with not eating other foods, emphasis on physical suffering, and the idea that women's body = food).

Background to these themes are:

1) the growth of towns (which gives rise to new religious movements, a new, more positive emphasis on nature and the body, and a new interest in affectivity)
2) New emphasis on the power of the priesthood, and sacraments (the Eucharist)
3) Women's relationship to all of this, and to food in general
   1) Their accommodation to and resistance to the power of the priesthood (through their miraculous relationship to the Eucharist, they can judge priests)
   2) Their resistance to family pressures, by not eating
   3) The fact that their spiritual choices are limited (they cannot imitate Francis of Assisi by preaching and begging, hence, they give up eating to imitate Christ)
   4) The identification of women especially with Christ's physical humanity (their physical suffering gives women the power to redeem others)
   5) The fact that cross-culturally, women and women's bodies are identified with food.

On Thursdays, after they have heard this lecture and read the sources and Petroff, students break up into groups of five, each group must debate and come to a position on the following statements concerning the sources in Petroff:

A. Thirteenth and fourteenth-century mystics hated themselves, thought women were inferior, hated women's bodies, considered themselves powerless, were unhappy

B. These women were happy, were proud of their femaleness and of their bodies, considered themselves powerful, exercised power

Each group has to decide on either A or B, give 4-5 points to support their opinion, with supporting evidence.

Groups discuss the issue for 40 minutes, then for the final 30 minutes we reconvene as a class, representatives from each group give reports, and I write down major points on the blackboard. This approach will probably be revised next year but the small group discussion method will stay. It has worked very well in getting the students to talk themselves out of their prejudices toward these women, and to come to an understanding of the complexity of asceticism.

Medieval Women at Minnesota

We (three graduate students in medieval history and literature) applied jointly to team-teach "Women and Family in Medieval Europe, 500-1500" hoping to rely on our various areas or specialization to cover most of the time-period and subject matter of the course. The course was geared to upper-level undergraduates, who did not necessarily have any previous knowledge of the Middle Ages. Aside from the challenge of trying to fit 1000 years of history into a ten week quarter, we encountered some unexpected difficulties in teaching the
course, but in spite of that, we feel that we benefitted enormously from the experience. More importantly, our students left the course feeling the satisfaction of having done some original research in reconstructing a relatively unfamiliar area of women's history.

Our main objective for the course was to free our students to explore their own interests of the period. We continually stressed that we didn't know all the "facts" about women in the Middle Ages, but that we wanted the course to function as a workshop (even with 30-40 students) in which we worked together to construct some ideas about women's history, based on reading a wide variety of mostly primary and some secondary sources—some we read as a class, and some ideas the students would bring to the discussion based on their own research. Our two major difficulties were, first, getting many of the students to accept that we weren't going to present them with a "master narrative" for this period of history, and, second, familiarizing the students with our team-taught structure. We felt that it took longer to build their trust given the structure of the course, and three different instructors leading the class at different times. It wasn't until the last few weeks of the term that our students began to "blossom"—they grew more comfortable with our non-traditional, collaborative format, and they began to accept that we valued their exploration and discovery.

We required a lot of written work, and we particularly stressed primary source analysis. All written work was geared toward a final research project, so that students wrote two document (source) analyses and one book review, all focused on some aspect of the Middle Ages, either an individual woman, a comparative study of two women, or a "concept"—marriage, peasant women, mothers and children, witchcraft, mysticism, etc. Some students excelled in this relatively unstructured format, and did some original and creative research, combing their sources for maternal images, or the relationship between Catherine of Siena and the pope. Some students (those still looking for the "master narrative") floundered, and typically wrote about witches or mystics, unfortunately using twentieth-century sources on the occult for their research. Most students fell somewhere in between, and several who started out poorly really developed some interesting angles of research by the end of the quarter. Once our students broke down some of their own misconceptions about history—namely that it's completely distinct from literature, and that it's true and objective—they felt much freer to explore the texts for the things that interested them, and they realized the validity of their own ideas.

Each of us led classes according to our own areas of specialization. Below are three examples of ideas that worked well in our course.

(1) Discovering Wealththeow

Shari Horner, University of Minnesota

Although we did not have our students read all of Beowulf, they did read selected portions that involved its women. Additional background/context reading included parts of Tacitus, "The Wife's Lament," "Judith," and "Wulf and Eadwacer." Using this contextual material, I briefly discussed Jane Chance's ideas about the "peace-weaver" and tracing all of Wealththeow's appearance in the poem, we constructed her socio-political role within the poem's society. Using this background information, I then asked the students (in small discussion groups) to reconstruct Wealththeow's appearance, based on the passages from Beowulf they had read, and to compare her to other women in OE poetry they knew about (especially Hygd, Freawaru, and Hildeburh). Although the text itself
does not yield many physical details, students felt quite specific about what Wealththeow looked like to the warriors as she passed through the hall. Most agreed that she was tall, regal, graceful, had good posture, etc., but several students disagreed about her age. Interestingly, a male student believed she was young, fresh, and pretty, and that was how she could succeed in exhorting the warriors to battle. The women students quickly shot this idea down, believing her to be older (particularly in the context of Hygd and Freawaru) because of the emphasis on her wisdom. Close, analytical reading of the text revealed to the students a great deal about ideals of feminine beauty and strength in the Beowulfian society, and the exercise also showed them the dangers of reading old texts according to our twentieth-century ideals.

(2) Early Medieval Demography

Elizabeth Dachowski, University of Minnesota


Emily Coleman's article on female infanticide elicited a lively discussion on demography, the reliability of early medieval evidence, and female infanticide in medieval society.

Coleman derived her conclusions from an analysis of the polyptych of Saint-Germain-des-Pres, an early medieval tax roll. By calculating the sex ratio of the households surveyed, Coleman discovered that the inhabitants of Saint-Germain-des-Prees had an unusually high sex ratio, especially among children. She could account for this ratio only by female infanticide, which she found condoned in earlier texts, such as the early Germanic law codes and saints' lives. Coleman concluded that the early Franks, even after Christianization continued to practice infanticide, primarily on girl babies, for economic and social reasons.

I used Coleman's discussion of methodology as the starting point for a brief lecture on medieval demography and that led into a discussion of her conclusions. Discussion began with the students posing general questions about the study of demography. From these questions, I was able to lead into a critique of Coleman's analysis. Students considered the quantitative value of early medieval documents, the validity of conclusions drawn from isolated case studies, and the use of literary and legal evidence to back up quantitative analyses. Assuming for purposes of argument that Coleman's conclusions were accurate, the class then discussed the economic and social pressures that might have led to infanticide. Students who had studied other cultures that practiced infanticide compared these cultures with early Frankish culture.

As a rule, I prefer to have undergraduates read primary texts and draw their own interpretations, but tax rolls and other administrative texts pose special problems of interpretation that usually cannot be overcome in a single class period. Most students enrolled in history classes are not prepared to perform sophisticated statistical analyses. By having the students read Coleman's article, I was able in a single class period not only to confront the problems raised by medieval records but also to discuss the implications of conclusions drawn from these records.
(3) Margery, The Wife, and "Document Analysis"

Patricia Price, University of Minnesota

This presentation was designed to draw together a number of themes introduced earlier in the quarter: reading on women's roles in the emerging towns, lectures on apprenticeship and mystics/beguines, and a discussion on the use of sources, both "literary" and "historical." The class was due to turn in their second source analysis later in the week, so we wanted to remind the students of what kinds of approaches make for successful document analysis.

First the class reviewed the information available about the Wife of Bath—her relative status (class, marital), personal information (deafness, vanity, cleverness at argument, attitudes to men/sex), and what these might mean in terms of her economic behavior, relative independence, freedom to travel. The Wife is such an engaging character that she absorbed about 15-20 minutes of discussion. I also emphasized her "fictionality," tying her to "real" counterparts yet reminding the class that Chaucer was not necessarily depicting a realistic character. The Wife is Chaucer's creation.

From there we moved on to Margery, discovering many traits in the selection in Katarina Wilson's anthology which might well apply to the Wife: intelligence, experience in business, vanity, awareness of social status, independent spirit, travel habits. I then posed a question for discussion: "If you were using this 'document,' what kinds of information could you draw from it?" Suggestions included attitudes toward marriage and children, "Typical bourgeois life," whether or not Margery was a "typical religious woman," and body image (as expressed through clothing).

In the remaining time we went page by page through the text trying to find examples useful to each of the topics. We discovered that "attitude to children" would not work, but "childbirth" offered some scope. We contrasted her husband's behavior to the Wife's husbands' concluding that John Kempe seemed in some respects quite kind and supportive (as in returning her keys or agreeing at length to chastity) but a lively discussion broke out over whether he was justified in fathering 14 children on an obviously unwilling wife, and whether or not Margery was as unwilling as the text protests. This led naturally to questions about bias and purpose of the text, and the reliability of Margery's narrative. (And ultimately the conversation ended with the question of how much Margery's text was "edited" by the amanuensis, and how the voice of this text differed from Chaucer's presentation of a woman's words.)

I introduced the concept of clothing as metaphor (fine clothing, white clothing, black clothing, hair shirts, etc.) which likewise could be used to explore the Wife's attitudes. Finally I closed with the issue of silencing: Margery's inability to confess contrasted to her "cryings," her ultimate report that "the Father of heaven conversed with her soul as plainly and as truly as a friend speakes to another through bodily speech" (311).

Juxtaposing the Wife and Margery made the students aware of a number of issues pertinent to the "history" of the period, the analysis of documents, and problems of fiction vs. fact.

Portrayal of Women in The York Plays

Gerald Kinneavy, University of Colorado - Boulder

The following observations are the result of team teaching a course in Gender Issues in the Middle Ages.
While there can be little doubt that salvation history is the substance of the cycle plays, attention to the portrayal of women expands significantly the context of that substantive history, mixing the historically orthodox with the more contemporary renderings of women's roles in that history. I wish here to provide three brief examples of how particular women represented in the York cycle bring into view sometimes in surprising ways issues which relate to feminist studies of medieval texts. Female characters often focus attention on how words and understanding come to males and females from different sources, how communication (and therefore a relational view of experience) is actively sought by females, and how power often results from efforts to know.

In "The Fall of Man," the general outlines of the Genesis story are followed, clearly giving primacy of guilt to Eve. But it is interesting that in the dramatic rendering of Eve's temptation, Eve seems extraordinarily inquisitive, asking Satan responsible questions about who he is, what the advantages of the forbidden fruit are. She wants to know. Indeed, the specific explanation by Satan is that Adam and Eve will be as gods "Of ill and good to have knowing, / For to be as wise as he" (11. 72-73). To have knowledge is the end sought by Eve. That is Adam's ultimate motivation, too, but the way he is approached and the way he responds to Eve's invitation is quite different from Eve. He invokes authority immediately:

   Alas woman, why took thou this?
   Our Lord commanded us both
   To tent the tree of his.
   Thy work will make him wroth --
   Alas, thou hast done amiss (11. 84-88).

Adam's fear expressed here is based on recognized authority of God's commands. Eve responds as a teacher; she instructs Adam not to grieve because "I shall say the reason why" (1.90). There is a degree of role reversal here in terms of gender stereotypes: Eve assumes the role as teacher and rationalist; Adam, on the other hand, fearfully responds, perhaps even blindly, to power and authority of the Lord. It is also relevant that when Satan is at first put off by Eve's recounting of the commandment not to eat of the fruit, Satan introduces a theme of distinguishing between words and meaning--between what God said and what he really meant. Though Eve is taken in by Satan's wiles, it is clear that she sought to know, to understand, to get at the meaning of it all. This is not Adam's interest. And he is slow to understand what has happened. As he chastises Eve and charges her with enticement (line 109), it is clear to the audience that Adam understands the meaning of it all too late.

Female concern to know things, to have understanding of what is going on is no more clearly illustrated than by Noah's wife in "The Flood." Amidst a good deal of traditional slapstick clubbing of each other, the fact becomes known that Noah has been building the ark, has had his special information from God, for one hundred years--and never mentioned it to his wife:

   Noah, thou might have let me wit.
   Early and late thou went thereout,
   And ay at home thou let me sit ... (11. 113-114).

Clearly, even the shrewish wife makes explicit her desire to know and understand the plans. She resents not receiving information and complains bitterly (and violently) about it. At several points in the brief play, the wife explicitly refuses to rest until she does understand: "Now certes, I shall not sit / Ere I see what he mean" (69-70). While the context and presentation in this play are comic, perhaps, the wife's demands are, finally, reasonable and to be seen not unlike Eve's very reasonable demands for explication: they both
wish to know the meaning of the words. These characters are not merely intractable; they are intellectually curious, especially when the stakes are high. Noah's wife, for instance, is not reluctant only to be difficult. She does not want to leave her gossips—her friends and relations. This is an understandable detail and a trait that identifies her view of life in relational terms. Noah never exhibits such a view or concern; his role seems to be to follow the plan issued by the authoritative voice of God without question.

A third example is "Joseph's Trouble About Mary," a play in which the authorized voice comes to the female, this time leaving the male in the dark. Joseph's very human concern about Mary's inexplicable pregnancy is understandable but overplayed. The concern for his own reputation and honor prevent him from accepting the word (or the meaning) of Mary's speech. It is true that she does not go out of her way to give him all the details of the Angel's visit, but she does state the truth—that she has not been unfaithful to him, that she is a maiden clean, that she has God's dispensation. She does not react to the charges he makes, but says the truth, even if a bit diffidently. Joseph, on the other hand, pursues the issue with single mindedness asking always the same question: "Whose is the child thou art with now?" (1. 198). Apparently, he either does not hear or listen to the answer Mary provides or, when he does hear, he disbelieves.

"MARY: Forsooth, I am a maiden clean.
JOSEPH: Nay, thou speaks now against kind" (11. 208-9).

His response certainly suggests that, if compared, say, with Noah's wife who also has not received direct information, the wife listens better and ultimately exhibits greater faith. For Joseph, an angelic dream is required before he will believe.

I do not suggest these as comparisons of the moral worth of either males or females in the context of sacred history. What is of importance, I believe, is to recognize the variant impulses ascribed to male and female characters, especially when they are engaged in efforts to know and understand. There is enough variation in these brief examples, I think, to warrant much more detailed study of the cycle plays to draw out in fuller argument the gender issues embedded in these texts in ways quite different from the traditional critical assertions about "the anti-feminist tradition" in medieval texts.

Saints/Visionaries, Witches and Madwomen

Carole Levin, State University of New York at New Paltz and Elaine Kruse, Nebraska Wesleyan University

Images of visionaries, witches, and madwomen have both frightened and intrigued people for centuries. Some historical periods have perceived visionary experiences as saintly. In other periods some visionary women have been labeled as witches, or have been called insane. We will examine the topic of cultural definitions and limits upon women from the Middle Ages to the present, using theoretical, historical, and literary studies. Some of the questions we will be asking include: How do we define madness and how is it different for women and men? What is society's role in defining women as mad? This course is designed to illuminate the sources and forms of "deviant" behavior in women, centering on the visionaries of the fourteenth century, the persecutions of witches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the diagnosis of women as mad in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This course is very popular at each of our institutions and registration always closes with a waiting list. Levin's course, offered at a branch state
University, has an enrollment of 30-35. Kruse, who teaches at a small liberal arts college, is able to work more closely with fewer students usually about 10-12. The course was originally developed by Levin, and Levin and Kruse share resources both in terms of readings, potential class assignments and curriculum. While the course material goes from the Middle Ages to the present, the first third to half of the course may be of interest to others who teach medieval and Renaissance studies from a feminist perspective.

The first few classes are devoted to having the class members start to feel more comfortable with each other and to discussing theories of women and madness and of power and powerlessness. One goal is for our students to feel empowered by the material in the course. The introduction to Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* is a very useful theoretical frame for questions of perceptions of madness and its relation to power or the lack thereof. The first unit is Revelation and Religious Experience in the Middle Ages. For these classes students read selections from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, from Julian of Norwich, letters by Catherine of Siena, and selections from Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*; St. Hildegard’s *Theology of the Feminine*. Kruse's students report on different women mystics chosen from Elisabeth Petroff's collection, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* and Katharina Wilson's *Medieval Women Writers*. We find having them read both primary and secondary material is very useful. We also give them background on the medieval church and medieval attitudes toward women; many of our students take the course as an elective and are not history majors. When discussing Hildegard of Bingen we play some of her musical compositions (available on cassette) and show slides both of Hildegard's visions and paintings depicting key scenes in the life of St. Catherine of Siena. Students react strongly to all these women. There is usually more disagreement among class members about Margery Kempe; some admire her greatly while others see her as an exhibitionist. They are probably most intrigued by Hildegard.

The next unit is on Joan of Arc: *Saint, Witch, or Madwoman?* The students read George Bernard Shaw's play, *Saint Joan*, Anne Barstow's article, "Joan of Arc and Female Mysticism" (*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 1 #2, Fall, 1985, 29-42). Students also read from Joan's trial transcript. It is necessary to give some background on the Hundred Years' War. After this, Levin begins the class by asking students to write on what labels fit or do not fit Joan. This usually leads to a lively class discussion. Levin also shows the trial scene from the film version of *Saint Joan*, which is available on videotape.

The course then moves on to Renaissance Women, Madness, and Power. We first give background into changes in the Renaissance and such powerful women as Elizabeth I. Then we have the class read Judith Brown's *Immodest Acts: A Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Venice*. Brown’s superb study provokes great discussion. We then read Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*. This play is not only fascinating for the character of Lady Macbeth and her quest for power and descent into madness, but is also a bridge into the question of witchcraft. Joseph Klait’s *Servants of Satan* provides historic context to the study of European witchcraft, and focuses on such important issues as the identity of the accused and the accusers.

The second part of the course deals with Salem, the Victorian madwoman, and twentieth century perspectives. Our students do a great deal of both reading and writing in this course. Because they are intrigued by the topic, students from many majors (such as Psychology, English, Drama, even Business) enroll and become fascinated by the history. We believe that their own lives today they are validated and empowered by the material.
Resources for Teaching About Medieval Women

Jacqueline Murray, University of Windsor, 25th Annual Medieval Congress, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo MI

(This paper was delivered at the TEAMS section on "Teaching about Medieval Women" at Kalamazoo in May, 1990. Professor Murray graciously consented to let us print her paper.)

Exactly a year ago I was putting together the outline and reading list for a course on the History of Women in the Middle Ages. This was my dream course: the course I always wanted to take but never could because such courses didn't exist when I was an undergraduate. It would not have been difficult to put together a reading list back in the mid-seventies. There was the collection of essays Women in Medieval Society edited by Susan Stuard, a volume of enduring importance. There was Eileen Power's Medieval Women, a small book that is still referred to, as much out of respect for the author, I think, as for its content and argument. There were an increasing number of journal articles, as well as those now classic works of women's history written in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But now, while we perhaps still do not suffer an embarrassment of riches, there are at least a multitude of choices. As a textbook to provide a general overview, one can choose between Margaret Wade Labarge's Women in Medieval Life, Shulamith Shahar's The Fourth Estate, Angela Lucas's Women in the Middle Ages and Edith Ennen's newly translated The Medieval Woman. These works can be supplemented by a wide variety of monographs, journal articles, and essay collections on various aspects of women's lives, as well as translations of primary sources such as Christine de Pizan's Treasure of the City of Ladies, or the wonderful lives of saints and holy women distributed by Peregrina Publishing.

But for all this selection I ended up being dissatisfied with my reading list. The reason, I think, was not some easily identifiable cause such as poor selection criteria or readings at a level inappropriate to the class. Nor was it because there were not enough sources from which to choose. Rather, in part, it was the result of the medievalist's perspective. Let me return to my class in order to explain.

Despite gloomy predictions of low enrollment for a course so wholly out of step with the traditional departmental offerings in political and military history, some 25 students enrolled in the course. The class represented a cross-section of the university's population -- almost as if it had been artificially constructed with a deliberate eye for representativeness. Half the students were history majors, the others were scattered across the humanities and social sciences. There was a reasonable gender balance with 16 women and 9 men. The class was also almost equally divided between average undergraduates and mature students returning to university after hiatuses of between half a dozen years and more than forty. There were a police officer and an auto-worker, a number of single parents, a high school history teacher and a high school English teacher who wanted to be a history teacher. Perhaps the most unusual class member was a colleague who teaches industrial relations in our Faculty of Business Administration. One characteristic of this eclectic group was that more than three-quarters of them had no particular interest in women's history and were there for those ubiquitous pragmatic reasons such as timetables and credit hours and breadth requirements. Three-quarters of them, although not necessarily the same ones, had also never taken any course --
history, literature, religious studies, whatever -- that had the vaguest association with the Middle Ages. In other words the students were all over the map, united neither by interest nor training nor background preparation. I think that this kind of a mix is not unusual, especially at smaller institutions and in lower level courses.

At this point my concern was how one set of readings and lectures could adequately serve them all. But as the term progressed my perspective changed and this is the point on which I would like to concentrate. I think that those of us who teach about women in the Middle Ages, whatever the discipline, come at the topic from the perspective of medievalists. We share a training and a background and an interest first in the period and then, frustrated by the perceived exclusion of women, have set out to cross barriers and unearth the lost and forgotten and undervalued of medieval society. We bring to this task our knowledge of medieval society as it has been constructed by conventional scholarship. We share a chronological and geographical framework, an understanding of the social order, and a sensitivity to the co-existing if frequently conflicting institutions of Church, State and popular culture. And it is against this meaningful background that we set medieval women. Even when we move beyond conventional structures, and expose how they obscure or exclude vast segments of medieval people -- peasants, the marginal, women -- we are nevertheless using those structures as definitional.

We discuss women against the background of a conventionally-constructed Middle Ages. This has the advantage that we then speak a common language and share an interpretive framework. But, in the classroom, there are neither shared assumptions, nor common preparation. And so we must ask how meaningful is what we are teaching and what rationale is there for remaining tied to convention. How can and must our perspective and presentation shift when we are faced with the task of teaching medieval women to students who know little or nothing about the Middle Ages? There is a profound difference between teaching about women against an established if incomplete background of medieval society and teaching about medieval society through the experience of women. How then, can we use the experience of women as a means to introduce students to the history and culture of medieval Europe?

This is a challenge that calls for a radical restructuring of our perceptions as teachers and scholars, as authors, editors and translators. There have already been suggestions of this sort of revolution of perceptions from Joan Kelly's critique of traditional periodization to Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser's History of Their Own, which provides us with the tools to completely restructure Western Civilization courses around the experience of women. But I have yet to meet anyone from Utopia U where Western Civilization has been liberated from the constraints of politics and patriarchy and is regularly taught from the perspective of women's experience.

I think that teaching about medieval women allows us just that opportunity or perhaps I should say challenge. I don't know about other universities but certainly at my own the content of Western Civilization is jealously guarded, while as the only medievalist I am given free rein by an establishment that isn't exactly sure what medievalists do anyway. And because the Middle Ages is a society with which most students are unfamiliar, there is less likelihood of encountering resistance from that quarter because the approach is unfamiliar. What I mean is that students know that the nineteenth century is supposed to cover the Congress of Vienna, and the development of ideologies and the impact of industrialization but generally speaking they do not bring such preconceptions with them to the Middle Ages. It is all new and different and they don't always know that they are supposed to learn about the Investiture Contest and
the development of parliament. Thus they are less hostile, if not more open to alternative approaches.

But this unfamiliarity, this lack of a common background, is also the reason we need to think about our perspectives and restructure our approaches. For example, how can we teach about the limitations and opportunities afforded aristocratic women within feudal society if students are unsure of exactly what the feudal system was? But how much of the theoretical workings of feudalism, not to mention the modifications found in practice, is appropriate in a course about women? How many of those precious class hours can be spared to mediate a patriarchal institution in order to then measure women's exclusion from it?

My own course provides another example. I assigned Margot King's translation of Thomas of Cantimpre's *Life of Christina Mirabilis* as the primary source in a section on recluses and mystics. It had been in my mind that such a source would provide an example of a profound manifestation of faith in the medieval world, that it would show the importance of miracles as well as provide a glimpse of popular piety. Instead, my students thought Christina a lunatic and a wholly unsympathetic character in spite of all my attempts to set her within the religious milieu of the early thirteenth century. Now perhaps it was my own fault for choosing such a difficult example, but nevertheless the fundamental question remains: how can we teach about holy women to a group with little sympathy for or understanding of the role of faith in medieval society?

I realize that I have asked more questions than I have discussed specific sources or suggested new directions for publishing. But what I want to do is indicate something of a shift in perspective that, were it to inform all our sources, primary and secondary alike, would in fact help to transform radically how we teach about medieval women and about medieval society. More explanatory footnotes or introductory chapters that describe feudalism and the development of papal monarchy are not the answer. Rather, the whole mode of presentation of texts, the very yardstick by which we measure historical experience, needs to be changed and redirected towards the goal of using the lives and experiences of women as the point of entry into medieval society.

This task demands a radical shift in our perspective. It not only requires us to be sensitive to those absent from traditional history and to move women to centre stage, but it also requires that we realign ourselves in relation to our material. We must abandon the conventional interpretive framework against which we continue to explain and evaluate women. Rather, we must step into the shoes of our students and see the Middle Ages entirely from the perspective of women's experience. In suggesting this I do not mean to advocate either "compensatory history" or "contributory history". Both of these still use a conventional understanding of the past into which we insert women. Rather, I wish to suggest that if we can use the experience of medieval women to understand the Middle Ages, and by extension to introduce our students to the period, then most surely a radical restructuring will have occurred and women's history will not have to be mainstreamed because it will then have become mainstream. But to effect this change we need to produce sources with this subversive agenda in mind.

"The Testament of Cresseid"

Evelyn S. Newlyn, University of Maine, 330 Shibles Hall, Orono, ME 04469

When teaching Chaucer's "Troilus and Criseyde," I like to follow it with Robert Henryson's "The Testament of Cresseid." Perceived in the post-Chaucerian period as a sequel of sorts, this Middle Scots poem was sometimes
included in late medieval manuscripts as the sixth book of Chaucer's poem, since Henryson picks up the story of Criseyde where Chaucer leaves off. After teaching "Troilus and Criseyde" from a feminist perspective, I use Henryson's poem further to illuminate cultural values and their effects on women in the Middle Ages.

The narrator of "The Testament of Cresseid" creates the fiction of merely retelling what he has found in "ane uther quair," but it is undoubtedly quite safe to posit Henryson as the creator of that sequel. The "uther quair" tells of Criseyde/Cresseid's downward spiral, of her sickness and death, after she leaves Troilus, providing the opportunity to discuss what it means that Henryson writes an ending to the story wherein Cresseid is humiliatingly abandoned by Diomeid, becomes a common prostitute, is afflicted with leprosy (which may or may not have been seen as a venereal disease), and dies a death which is not only miserable but ultimately meaningless.

A number of wonderfully interesting aspects of the poem lend themselves to feminist analysis of both culture and literature. From a literary standpoint, in one sense Henryson's poem is "about" Chaucer's poem, echoing not only themes but also rhetorical and poietical devices. The pathetic fallacy at the beginning of "The Testament," for example, not only alludes to and reflects Chaucer's opening but also sets the stage for the brightly frigid treatment Cresseid is to receive in the poem. Also like Chaucer, Henryson's narrator attempts to distance himself from the story he is telling of Cresseid, probably to distance himself as the pronouncer of judgment upon her. Henryson's narrator also, however, reveals the slightness of those narrative boundaries in then Chaucer's poem as well as his own when he violates them with apostrophes to the characters whose lives he claims merely to be retelling.

From the standpoint of cultural analysis, Henryson's poem provides a useful starting place to discuss a wide range of medieval Judeo-Christian mores, such as social and moral hierarchies. For example, although the poem purports to be about Cresseid--she is the subject of the title--the narrator's discussion of the "uther quair" begins and ends with Troilus, and makes clear throughout that our sympathies and concerns are to be largely for him. The suffering of Troilus frames the story of Cresseid, and the poem closes not with her death, but with his life. One can allude here to a number of monastic and patristic traditions, regarding the relative worth of the sexes, and I like to draw parallels to the Adam and Eve story. To elucidate the connections further I often show slides of stained glass from the Great East Window of York Minster that portray the Adam and Eve story.

"The Testament" also provides an excellent opportunity to talk about sex and gender roles as they existed for women in the Middle Ages (and exist now), because Cresseid is an example of the feminine par excellence. When she is abandoned by her lovers and has become an outcast, she criticizes Venus and Cupid, on whom she relied; she points out that they made her beautiful, thus causing her to believe she would always have love, when that has not turned out to be the case. In various ways the narrator also stresses her femininity, which he sees as having been changed into filth by her exercise of her sexuality.

Cresseid's assertiveness with the gods, her accusations against them, cause her to be cruelly punished; the sentence of Saturn and Cynthia (the moon) destroys her appearance, her primary asset for living in the world, and in consequence her spirit and her social status. Participating fully in Cresseid's sentencing are the two female gods, Venus and Cynthia; strikingly portrayed as representing traditional female stereotypes, these female deities also encourage discussion of both gender roles and misogynistic stereotypes in
the Middle Ages. Also illustrating conventional stereotypes is Cresseid's formal "complaint"; although the complaint invites analysis on rhetorical grounds, concerning the use of the ubi sunt theme, for example, the complaint additionally invites discussion of misogynistic stereotypes, since the complaint serves to excoriate women as primarily materialistic creatures.

The place that cries out most ardently for a feminist analysis, however, is the ending for Cresseid, where she tries to say something valuable and redemptive before she dies and is simply unable to do so. Lacking the ideas, the insights, the conceptual frameworks, and the very words with which to translate and interpret her experience into helpful advice for others, she is able to issue only a general warning about the weakness of human nature, rather than the useful moral perspective on her life that she clearly wishes to produce. Very fruitful indeed is a discussion, informed and guided by feminist analysis and theory, of the forces that prevent her from making meaning out of her experiences.

**Wife's Prologue/Christine**

Barbara Newman, Department of English, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL 60208

I like to pair the Wife of Bath's Prologue with the prologue to Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*. These texts, written within a few decades of each other, beautifully illustrate the options for women as readers of misogynist texts. Chaucer casts his Wife of Bath as the "bad woman" reading Matheolus, one of Jerome's spiritual descendants. The bourgeois wife and the court lady stand at opposite ends of a spectrum, embodying the bipolar stereotypes that characterized the dominant cultural view of the feminine. Yet both the bad woman and the good woman recognize the oppressive power of misogynist texts, although they employ different strategies to oppose them. The Wife, literate at one remove, uses deliberate misreading, invective, and outright mockery; she is empowered by her anger, but only within the manipulative gender system that imprisons her as a creature of the very texts she wishes to subvert. Christine, the highly literate "good woman," is enabled by her learning to counter misogyny with more straightforward and persuasive arguments, even as she expresses the despair and rage that antifeminist texts have produced in her. Of special interest in this contrast is the role of irony, often considered a subversive trope. But Chaucer's irony cuts both ways, slicing Jerome and the Wife with the two edges of a single sword and thus minimizing the subversive potential of his feminist narrator. Christine largely eschews irony and writes with the high seriousness that Chaucer reserves for his own "good women," such as Custance, Cecilia, Dame Prudence, and the Second Nun.

**Gender Issues in Medieval Literature**

Elizabeth Robertson, Gerald Kinneavy, English Department, University of Colorado - Boulder

This spring, for the second time, Gerry Kinneavy and I team taught a class in Gender Issues in Medieval Literature. This course is an upper division "new directions" lecture course. As a new directions course it explicitly confronts theoretical questions. Since MFN subscribers in the past have asked me for an outline of the course, I print it here. I would like to add that, perhaps surprisingly given the difficulty of both the primary and the theoretical
texts, the most successful part of the course each year has been the section on mysticism. In particular, students respond very well to the conjunction of Simone de Beauvoir's discussion of mysticism in The Second Sex and Luce Irigaray's "La Mysterique" with Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. In discussing Julian, we talked primarily about her hyperbolic images of blood and her focus on the sensuality of Christ as images especially suited to female meditation. This led to a more general discussion about the nature of female symbols (with help from Caroline Bynum whose Holy Feast was assigned as optional reading) and their relationship to Aristotelian essentialist notions about the materiality and fluidity of female nature. We then discussed the political implications of Irigaray's thesis that women subvert notions of female nature by assuming (or hyperbolizing) those notions as their own. This discussion was fruitful in part because we had earlier in the course held long debates about the virtue of the related thesis of "the power of powerlessness" in the "The Clerk's Tale," a tale quite likely to produce debate. We continued to debate Irigaray's point of view in studying Margery Kempe. We began discussion by demonstrating that Margery, far from being an eccentric marginal figure in mysticism actually was exactly at its center. She is difficult to read because she takes male assumptions about Christian belief to extremes. For example, she took literally the idea that one must love Christ in all men, rushing out in the street longing to embrace passionately any passing man who struck her fancy. We then discussed whether or not such literalization of belief is typical in female mysticism, whether or not the habit of literalization is produced by material conditions of women (lack of education, for example) or by the age's assumptions about women, and finally, whether or not Margery's habit of literalization to excess was or was not subversive in an Irigarayan sense.

Course Outline

Part I: Introduction and Background

Medieval Attitudes Towards Women: Ancient and Modern

We introduce the subject of women in medieval literature by discussing Genesis. We assign a one page analysis of the gender issues raised by Genesis for class discussion. We then go on to discuss medieval notions of women with lectures on medical theory (Aristotle and Galen); images of women in the Old Testament; and images of women in the New Testament with a special focus on the Virgin Mary and her cult.

The next group of lectures are on world view and social problems. In this section we discuss the hierarchical and figurative medieval world view, explaining along the way the difference between hierarchical and relational thinking following Carol Gilligan. We then summarize BRIEFLY what is known broadly about women's social position, women and the aristocracy, women and the church, women and marriage, women and the law and women and work.

The reading for this section of the course includes: (Some of the reading assigned for the course was prepared as a photocopied packet which the students could purchase.)

Assigned Reading:
Mieke Bal, "Sexuality, Sin and Sorrow" (from The Female Body in Western Culture, ed. Suleiman); Jonathan Culler, "Reading as a Woman" (from On Deconstruction); Joan Ferrante on Genesis (from Woman as Image in Medieval Literature); Problems of Studying Women in the Middle Ages, MFF #5; Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," (from Abel, ed. Writing and Sexual Difference.)
Recommended Reading for the Course:
Caroline Bynum, Holy Feast and Holy Fast; Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics; Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice.

Part II: Images of Women in Medieval Literature

In this section we examine images of women in some representative pieces of literature within the context of the preceding lectures.

Assigned Texts:

Part III: Women Religious/Religious Men

In this section we examine the differences between male and female spirituality and we consider such issues as the nature and implications of male appropriation of "female" imagery, the ways in which women adopt and manipulate "male" symbols, and the inherent misogyny in male visions of female spirituality. Finally, we investigate the implications of the habitual emphasis in female mystical writing on the pragmatic, non-teleological and emotional in contrast with the male emphasis on the theoretical, abstract and hierarchical.

Assigned Texts:
The Cloud of Unknowing; The Book of Margery Kempe; Selections from the Ancrene Wisse in comparison with selections from St. Bernard's Commentary on the Song of Songs; Julian of Norwich's Revelations

Background Reading:
Bynum, Holy Feast; Simone de Beauvoir, "La Mystique," from The Second Sex; Luce Irigaray, "La Mysterique," from Speculum of the Other Woman; Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater;" Moi on Irigaray and Kristeva.

Part IV: Male and Female Styles

In this section we compare the different styles of male and female writers. We try to identify the distinctive features of feminine style, considering such questions and problems as whether or not woman express a nonappropriative attitude towards nature, how they view their own voice, how women claim authority in their writing, and the ways in which women manipulate traditional imagery and genres.

Assigned Texts:
"Wife's Lament," "The Wanderer;" The Lais of Marie de France; Chretien's Yvain; Christine de Pizan, The Book of the City of Ladies.

Part V: Reading as a Woman -- Writing as a Man

In this section of the course, we study four different representations of a woman, Criseyde, in four different versions of the story of Troilus and Criseyde by Benoit, Boccaccio, Chaucer and Henryson.
Assigned Text:
Gordon, The Story of Troilus

Background Reading:
Donaldson, "Criseyde and Her Narrator," in Speaking of Chaucer. (In this essay, Donaldson argues that the reader, like the narrator, falls in love with Criseyde. In our class discussion, we discuss how male and female readers respond differently—or not—to Criseyde.)

Discussing Rape in the Classroom

Karen Robertson, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

This spring I taught "Literary Perspectives on Women" for the first time. I focused the class on gender and literacy, through plays that involve reading and writing by female characters, then moving to women writers of the English Renaissance. In the fourth week of the class, we turned to Titus Andronicus, a play I have taught before in a course on revenge tragedy.

Previously, I approached Titus through Ovid's Metamorphoses, seeing the violence of the play as Shakespeare's attempt to find dramatic form for the images in Ovid, particularly the horrifying wriggle of Philomel's cut-out tongue.

In the feminist class, filled primarily with women's studies students, not English majors, I began with rape. I told them two of the rape stories conflated in the text: the rape of Philomel and Progne's revenge, and the rape of Lucrece and Brutus's revenge. I summarized theological views of rape and suicide, basing the class on Jane Tibbet Schulenburg's "The Heroics of Virginity" in Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse UP, 1986), my own work on The Revenger's Tragedy and Cynthia Marshall's "I can interpret all her martyr'd signs: Titus Andronicus, Feminism, and the Limits of Interpretation" in Sexuality and Politics in Renaissance Drama, eds. Carole Levin and Robertson (Mellen, forthcoming), representations of rape in Ian Donaldson's The Rapes of Lucretia (Oxford UP, 1982), Heywood's attitude toward rape victims in Oenone, and Gordon Braden's discussion of the revival of Senecan stoicism. An Indian student contributed material about suttee. The class was somewhat less talkative than usual but I was lecturing more than usual.

The next class was much smaller because of a student sit-in and strike over questions of diversity and a multicultural curriculum, which seemed to give a student the confidence to question my historical approach to rape. As a rape victim, she felt the discussion silenced her and failed to confront the pain of rape survivors. I believe my familiarity with the play had blocked my awareness of its effects on new readers, though I had not meant my matter-of-fact tone to sound insensitive.

After discussion with me, two rape survivors spoke in class and explained the pain of their experience of rape reawakened by reading the play. In all, five students in the class told me that they had been raped—one fifth of the class—though others perhaps remained silent. The women who led the discussion had discovered, at a speakout against rape, that speaking empowered them. Student statements in class included the perhaps hyperbolic claim that Lavinia's experience of mutilation was not as bad as rape. Offended by the literary text's analogizing of rape, the student claimed that the contamination and intrusion into private bodily space was worse than permanent dismemberment. The class, though distressing, was informative for students, some of whom had subscribed to the cultural stereotyping of rape victims.
In the class I tried both to be sensitive to the speakers and to move the discussion toward how pedagogy in the classroom could include experience, calling for a 'feeling discourse' or a 'feeling analysis,' my ideas influenced by Stephanie Jed's *Chaste Thinking* (Indiana UP, 1989). Yet the authority of the personal experience of pain silenced some students who felt they could not question these women's statements. One student wrote later that to claim privileged status for the private interior space of a woman's body was to privilege female bodies and reproduce traditional notions of chastity rather than transcend those stereotypes. Further, the student worried that to see the permanent mutilation of dismemberment and delingualization as less severe than rape was to confirm the necessity for the protection and perhaps confinement of women.

I tell this story, first, to raise our awareness about the consequences of teaching older materials in the feminist classroom. Feminist pedagogic practice which invites the active inclusion of personal experience may animate literary texts in unexpectedly painful ways. I had not imagined that I could have so many rape survivors in the class. Second, I want to raise a question about the status of survivor testimony in the feminist classroom. In the late 60s and 70s women found empowerment in 'breaking the silence' and in their analysis of the personal. I fear that the profound political disturbance provoked by the breaking of taboos against female speech may be smoothed out by processes that transform the political into the therapeutic. The woman empowered to speak may be empowered only to reproduce her victimization. Testimony may be a necessary stage in a movement toward political change, but I fear that a cultural process may be recuperating the power of feminist challenge through the uncovering of pain, a question raised by Harriet Goldhor Lerner in her review of self-help books (*Women's Review of Books* April 1990: 15-16). The political aspect of the slogan the "personal is political" may be muted. This classroom incident further illustrates the silencing effects of experience in the classroom analyzed by Diana Fuss in *Essentially Speaking* (Routledge, 1989).

Next time that I teach *Titus* I will begin with the problems of the play for a reader who has been raped and will ask how representations of rape in literature participate in the construction of ideology. I plan to pair the play with Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* and will show *A Question of Silence* (by Marlene Gorris, a 1984 Dutch film available on video). I am considering beginning the class with James Kavanaugh's "Ideology" in Critical Terms for Literary Study ed. Lentricchia and McLaughlin (U Chicago P, 1990), and perhaps Fuss's chapter "Essentialism in the Classroom."

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**REPORT FROM NEW YORK**

**Gender and Medieval Society II: Men in the Middle Ages**

Thelma Fenster, Fordham University, and Jo Ann McNamara, Hunter College Co-organizers

Fordham University's March 1990 conference on "Men in the Middle Ages," a follow-up to its 1988 meeting on "Gender and the Moral Order in Medieval Society," was organized to encourage the study of men as material, gendered beings, different from the universalized, transcendent idea often transmitted by conventional intellectual history. Such an approach, which supposes that