

USING STUDENT DRAMATIC PERFORMANCE TO INTRODUCE MEDIEVAL WOMEN WRITERS TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC

As our students come to experience literature created by medieval women writers, they often share in our wish to make it better known. While bridging the gap between the classroom and the “real” world remains a challenge, the dramatization of medieval texts provides one possible means of doing so.

At a small state university in the Upper Midwest, I designed a specialized “topics” course on medieval women writers in which primarily older, non-traditional women students enrolled. Of the authors we read (contained in Katharina Wilson’s anthology *Medieval Women Writers*, supplemented with Edward G. Seidensticker’s abridged translation of Murasaki Shikibu’s *Tale of Genji* and Earl Jeffrey Richards’ complete translation of Christine de Pizan’s *Book of the City of Ladies*¹), Christine de Pizan was the last writer studied. During a discussion of Christine’s *City*, a student remarked, “You know, this would make a good play.” Subsequently, as an out-of-class, voluntary activity, four students and I worked together to develop it as one. The only graduate student in the class, Ann Haugo, a participant in many campus theater productions, assisted me in creating much of the “script” from Richards’ translation, and we selected those episodes which we believed would most interest a general audience.² We also wanted to explain why Christine felt it necessary to “revise” history, so we decided to mention Jean de Meun’s misogyny and to include passages from Christine’s letter to Jean de Montreuil, Provost of Lille,³ in which she refutes Jean’s portion of the *Romance of the Rose*. Realizing that most of our audience would not have heard of Jean or of his masterpiece, we created the character of the ghost of Jean de Meun. As we thought about who should play that one male role, we quickly and unanimously agreed that it had to be Gerald M. Schnabel, a popular history professor known for delivering superb, dramatic lectures. Professor Schnabel agreed, and we found “lines” for him in selected passages of the *Rose*.⁴ It took us about a week to assemble our “script,” which we continued to revise at each rehearsal. Our final product resembled a medieval morality play, certainly an appropriate form for introducing a fifteenth-century work.

The performance was free and open to the public. It was advertised on campus and also in the local newspaper. Although campus theater facilities were not available, we were able to reserve a large meeting room in the student union. It contained a movable platform that served as our “stage.” I prepared a printed program which included a brief biography of Christine and also a selected bibliography. I listed those works from which we had “borrowed” passages and also a few other books about Christine available in our library. My role in the play was that of narrator, and Ms. Haugo played Christine. The other students became the three allegorical wisdom figures—Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice.

The actual “staging” and creation of costumes was simple. Professor Schnabel, as Jean de Meun, wore his academic cap and gown. Ms. Haugo, playing Christine, was able to borrow a “medieval” gown from the theater department. The wisdom figures wore choir robes of different colors and styles, each borrowed from a different area church; Lady Reason, of course, carried a mirror.

At the beginning of the performance, I greeted the audience and introduced Christine as the first female “revisionist” historian, thus linking her with Women’s History Month for which I was the campus program chair. As the narrator in the play, I introduced Christine,⁵ who came onto the stage carrying a book. I then broached the subject of medieval misogyny and introduced the ghost of Jean de Meun. As he entered, I stepped off stage. Jean’s ghost read the selected passages from the *Romance of the Rose* and Christine challenged him, her lines taken from the letter to Jean de Montreuil.⁶ As Jean’s ghost departed, Christine, in a soliloquy, explained her sadness about the way male authors described women. Her lines were excerpted from particular passages at the beginning of the *City* in which she describes her reaction to Matheolus’ book.⁷ Afterwards, the three wisdom figures entered and each individually instructed Christine in dialogue with her.

Our dramatization proved successful in ways that I had not anticipated. After the performance a male colleague asked if we would be willing to perform at a Minnesota State University conference on undergraduate teaching that he was organizing. We agreed, and Professor Schnabel and I submitted the abstract. The following October we traveled to Minneapolis to repeat our performance.⁸ Unfortunately the student who had played the role of Lady Rectitude was student teaching and therefore unable to go, but I had no difficulty in finding a colleague willing to replace her. Responses to our performance at the conference were positive.

One immediate “reward” for me as a teacher was to hear a student say, while in rehearsal, that she had never really understood how medieval allegory worked until performing her role. It is also noteworthy that a student who attended the performance, Gina Fink, then a sophomore in my English Literature survey course, completed her M.A. thesis on Christine at Leeds University a few years later.⁹ On a recent visit back to our campus, Ms. Fink told me that her “introduction” to Christine was seeing that performance. The overall experience has convinced me that dramatization helps bring medieval literature to life for people who are afraid of it or who consider it too obscure to be of interest. So convinced am I that I am undertaking the challenge again: some students enrolled in my current seminar on Medieval Women Writers and I are making plans to perform a play by Hrotsvit later this year for a Women’s History Month event on campus.

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¹ Katharina M. Wilson, ed., *Medieval Women Writers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984); Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Edward G. Seidensticker (New York: Random House, 1985); Christine De Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea, 1982).

² The following two examples, both speeches in our script consisting of excerpted passages from Richards' translation of the *City*, would no doubt ring true for a modern audience. In the first Lady Reason, explains why some men attack women:

"Those who attack women because of their own vices are men who spent their youths in dissipation and enjoyed the love of many different women, used deception in many of their encounters, and have grown old in their sins without repenting, and now regret their past follies and the dissolute life they led. But Nature ... has grown cold in them. Therefore they are pained when they see that their 'good times' have now passed them by, and it seems to them that the young ... are now on top of the world. They do not know how to overcome their sadness except by attacking women, hoping to make women less attractive to other men." (Richards, 18-19, section I.8.5)

In the second example Lady Rectitude comments on the cruelty some married women experience at the hands of their husbands:

"How many women are there actually, dear friend... who because of their husbands' harshness spend their weary lives in the bond of marriage in greater suffering than if they were slaves among the Saracens? My God! How many harsh beatings—without cause and without reason—how many injuries, how many cruelties, insults, humiliations, and outrages have so many upright women suffered, none of whom cried out for help? And consider all the women who die of hunger and grief with a home full of children, while their husbands carouse dissolutely or go on binges in every tavern all over town, and still the poor women are beaten by their husbands when they return, and *that* is their supper! ... Am I lying? Have you never seen any of your women neighbors so decked out?" (italics in text, Richards, 119, section II.13.1)

³ Wilson, 342-346.

⁴ All of our "lines" were adapted from Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Harry W. Robbins, ed. Charles W. Dunn (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1962), 349-56, and although it is not difficult to find examples of misogyny in Jean's portion of the *Rose*, we selected lines from the section where Genius pictures the life of the man with an avaricious wife [16347-16706]. Two excerpts "spoken" by Jean's ghost follow:

A MAN who trusts his secrets to his wife
Makes her his mistress. None of women born,
Unless he's drunk or crazy, will reveal
To women anything that should be hid,
Unless he wants to hear it coming back
To him from others. Better 'twere to flee
From out the land than tell his wife to keep
A secret, though she meek and loyal be. (Robbins 349, lines 1-8);

This builds to the following crescendo:

Fair sirs, beware of women, if you love
Your bodies and your souls; at least don't be
So bungling in your conduct as to tell
Them secrets you should keep locked in your breasts.
Beware! Beware! Beware! Beware! Beware!
Good fellows, flee, I charge and counsel you,
Without deceit or guile from such a beast! (353-4, lines 182-88)

⁶ In my narrative introduction, I provided some literary background, indicating that in her title Christine makes allusion to Augustine's *City of God* and that her work was influenced by Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus*, and also commented on Christine's use of the word *dame*, pointing out that in her utopian city, all women could become *dames*, regardless of social class, since their worthiness was determined by their virtue, not by patrimony or matrimony.

⁸ Wilson, 342 -5, beginning with the opening lines of the letter: "Now, by heaven, let us look a little further into the matter. How can it be good and useful that ...[Jean] accuses so excessively, impetuously, and falsely, blames and

defames women for several serious vices, claiming that their morals are full of perversity..."; in order to make a connection with the Genius passage "spoken" by the ghost of Jean de Meun, we went to the beginning of the second paragraph: "He is so insistent about not telling a secret to a woman, who is so bereft of discretion as he recalls, and I can't imagine where in the devil he found so much nonsense and so many futile words as are hurled at them throughout that long trial, but I beg all those who consider this quite authentic and put so much faith in it to tell me how many men they have known to be accused, killed, hanged, or even reproached in the street because of the denunciation of their wives; I think they will find them very thinly scattered" (342); next I excerpted those lines from the third paragraph that mention "the ugly way" that Jean speaks of married women who deceive their husbands (343) and the script speech concludes with Christine's direct attack on Jean: "In spite of the fact that my judgment tells me that Master Jean de Meung was a very learned man and eloquent and would have been capable of writing a much better work ... I suppose that the great lechery which obsessed him perhaps made him more prejudiced than profitable, as by our actions our inclinations commonly reveal themselves" (344-5).

⁷ Richards, 3-4, beginning with the opening lines, "One day as I was sitting alone in my study...," and, omitting several lines, continuing through to the passage on Christine's dismay at reading Matheolus, as demonstrated in the following speech from our "script":

"Because the subject seemed to me not very pleasant for people who do not enjoy lies, and of no use in developing virtue or manners, given its lack of integrity in diction and theme...[.] I put it down in order to turn my attention to more elevated and useful study. But just the sight of this book ... made me wonder how it happened that so many different men—and learned men among them—have been and are so inclined to express both in speaking and in their treatises and writings so many wicked insults about women and their behavior...They all concur in one conclusion: that the behavior of women is inclined to and full of every vice. Thinking deeply about these matters, I began to examine my character and conduct as a natural woman and, similarly, I considered other women whose company I frequently kept, princesses, great ladies, women of the middle and lower classes...To the best of my knowledge, no matter how long I confronted or dissected the problem, I could not see or realize how their claims could be true when compared to the natural behavior and character of women."

⁸ The conference, "Enhancing Undergraduate Instruction," was funded by a grant from the Bush Foundation and was held on October 17-19, 1990 at the Northland Inn in Brooklyn Park, a Minneapolis suburb.

⁹ While at Leeds, Gina Fink also published "Christine de Pizan: Questioning the Litaney," in the graduate student publication, *Serius Intendere: A Collection of Essays Celebrating the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Centre for Medieval Studies*, Leeds (1994): 23-32.

CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF MEDIEVAL WOMEN AND THEIR LEGACY: USING FILM, TEXT, AND THEORY TO TEACH MEDIEVAL WOMEN'S CULTURE

*Actually, I really did catch on fire, but Mr. Preminger just kept on rolling
He used that tape in the film because it was authentic.*

—From the Journals of Jean Seberg

I. 1. Introduction

"Cinematic Representations of Medieval Women and Their Legacy: Using Film, Text, and Theory to Teach Medieval Women" is being taught at Wake Forest University, a private liberal arts university, and at West Chester University, a state university where the course is cross-listed in literature, comparative literature, women's studies, and film. Pairings and modifications of texts and films can be used in introductory courses as well as in more specialized ones. For example, at West Chester, it is taught as a lower-division interdisciplinary course for nonmajors, as an upper-division seminar for literature majors, and at the graduate level.