

Theory: Hélène Cixous, "Sorceress and Hysteric" in *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Luce Irigaray, "La Mystérique," in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 195–202.

Film: Lars von Trier, *Breaking the Waves* (1996)

Week 12: Silencing the Female Author

Readings: Margarete Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*; Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *The Answer/La Respuesta*, trans. Electa Arendal and Amanda Powell (New York: Feminist Press, 1994).

Film: Maria Luisa Bemberg, *I, the Worst of All* (1990) ; Michael Tolkin, *The Rapture* (1993).

Theory: Laurie Finke, "The Grotesque Mystical Body: Representing the Woman Writer" in *Feminist Theory, Women's Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

Weeks 13–14: Class Presentations

Week 15: Conclusions; Research Paper Due

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GENDER ISSUES IN THE ART OF THE MIDDLE AGES

In the spring of 1997 I designed and taught a class entitled "Gender Issues in the Art of the Middle Ages" for the Medieval and Renaissance Studies Program at New York University. Although much of the class was devoted to examining images of women in medieval art and the social and ideological implications of such images, the focus was on "gender" as opposed to "women." As I have heard others say, it is difficult to study women without also studying men, and I wanted to examine gender as a cultural construct and not as a biological given.

Through a study of manuscripts, ivories, sculpture and stained glass mostly from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, we examined the way medieval art both reflects and helps construct ideologies of gender. Rather than using chronology or media as a method of organization, I focused on a theme for each class. These

topics were: "In the Beginning: Adam and Eve;" "Virgin Mary—Mother, Intercessor, Spouse;" "The Holy Family;" "Cross-Gendered Depictions of Christ;" "Gender, Violence and Martyrdom;" "Courtly Love;" "The Margins of Medieval Art: Sheela-na-gigs, Misericords, etc.;" and "More Marginalia in Manuscripts." Since we have the good fortune to be located in New York City, three classes were spent either at The Metropolitan Museum of Art or at The Cloisters, the branch of The Metropolitan Museum devoted to medieval art. The class met once a week for an hour and fifteen minutes, and the students ranged from art history majors to those who had never taken an art history course before.

Instead of using a textbook, students read a series of selected materials that addressed each topic in some way. I also provided an extensive supplementary bibliography sorted under thematic headings to provide sources for further individual exploration and to aid students with their final research papers. To set the stage, they read five pieces to provide some general theoretical background and introduce them to "gender" as a tool for art historical analysis.¹ I also placed on reserve basic reference books and surveys of medieval art so that students had access to images (in addition, they had access to all slides shown in class). Students took midterm and final examinations (slide identifications and essay) and submitted two writing assignments. The final paper was a research paper focusing on one object at The Metropolitan Museum that allowed an analysis of the gender issues discussed in class; some of the objects selected were ivories with scenes of courtly love, various sculptures of the Virgin Mary (including a *Vièrge ouvrante*), a set of choir stalls with misericords, an aquamanile depicting Aristotle and Phyllis, and a metal serving plate with a scene of a wife beating her husband. One of the most enjoyable parts of the class was the class presentations; we met at The Metropolitan Museum and the students each delivered a brief talk in front of the objects they had selected for their papers.

For the class on Adam and Eve we examined monuments such as the bronze doors at Hildesheim with its typological pairing of scenes from Genesis with scenes from the life of the Virgin and Christ, the Eve fragment originally from the north door at Autun, and manuscript images such as the one from the Paris Psalter that depict Adam and Eve flanking a female-headed serpent. We discussed the way that images of Eve reflect and underline the medieval theological, medical and social commonplaces of woman as sensuous, lust-filled and susceptible to the wiles of the devil. Images of Eve can be contrasted with those of the Virgin Mary, the anti-model of sin, evil, malleability and the rejection of faith for "experience." (Yet the themes of "Noli me tangere" with Mary Magdalene, and Doubting Thomas, both popular in medieval art, suggest that the desire for experience is not gender-specific. Of course only Thomas is allowed to touch Christ.) One theme we explored in depth was the depiction of

the breastfeeding Virgin, an image that is widespread although Margaret Miles focuses on examples from early Renaissance Tuscany in her article.² Students were interested in the sticky contradictions inherent in the medieval depiction of nudity: Adam and Eve, the personification of Lust, and often the devil are shown nude, but so are some male and female martyrs. The Virgin's breast is exposed, and Christ's genitals can be seen as emphasized in images of the Passion. Nudity can connote both innocence and loss of innocence, both purity and sensuality, both spiritual sustenance and spiritual sterility. Depending on the context and the viewer, such images can suggest both states at the same time.

This tension between the erotic and the religious is seen in depictions of the martyrs. Female martyrs in particular are often shown naked; in literary accounts this nudity seems to be part of the torture endured. In contrast, male saints are rarely stripped unless it is a necessary component of the torture; Bartholomew must be naked as he is flayed alive. Further, female martyrs are often tortured in areas that are part of their feminine sexuality, producing unsettling images of these sacred women. Thus Agatha is tortured by having her breasts cut off; her *vita* lists other more mundane tortures, but it is the forced mastectomy which is almost always selected for artistic representation.³

A more peaceful view of a revered woman might be expected in objects with themes of so-called "courtly love." Yet here too adoration and eroticism are intertwined, often with undercurrents of deceit, violence and rape. Reading the artistic iconography of ivory mirror backs, for instance, in conjunction with written sources such as love poetry and fabliaux suggest allusions to the world of seduction and illicit love, usually through male eyes. One of the most common motifs is the Castle of Love, a castle attacked by mounted knights and half-heartedly defended by women throwing roses. The willingness of women to be sexually overcome is a typical theme in fabliaux. Ultimately, the castle itself serves as a metaphor for the female body, its gates an orifice to be entered; the closest literary parallel is the seduction scene in *Roman de la Rose*, where the sexual consummation is described as an attack and forced entrance upon a barricaded structure.

The repetition of themes in medieval art helps construct an idea of what is acceptable and normal social behavior. It is however in the margins—along the borders of manuscripts, under the seats of choir stalls, outside of and up high on churches and cathedrals—that we find an upheaval of the established social order. Thus a wife may beat her husband on a misericord, a nun may breastfeed an ape in the margin of a manuscript, and two men may have sex on a corbel. Such examples may be subversive, humorous, or apotropaic, but the inversion and upsetting of social roles, particularly gender roles, is a common theme in much of this imagery.

Certain medieval objects suggest that gender was often a fluid category in the Middle Ages. It was a cultural construction rather than biologically determined. Thinking about the nature of gender as malleable also helps to move away from a focus on misogyny. It seems that medieval images of women are often used to underscore the patriarchal nature of medieval society. Thus the bodies of female martyrs are eroticized in ways that those of male martyrs are not, and the artistic iconography of "courtly love" masks a deeply ambivalent view of women. While it is certainly true that a great deal of medieval art was created by male artists for male patrons and male viewers, with all the ideological baggage attendant to such a situation, the Eve/Mary/whore/virgin paradigm masks a situation in society and art which is far more nuanced and complex. I addressed this issue particularly in the class on cross-gendered depictions of Christ; mirroring medieval writings which allot Christ characteristics usually perceived as female, some images of Christ show him with feminine attributes. In particular, some fourteenth-century Books of Hours hold an image of the isolated side-wound which can be read as a vaginal image (this is the subject of an article I have in progress.) A Christ with womanly body parts, performing feminine functions, suggests a reading of the female that is positive. Students who entered class with assumptions about the misogyny of the Middle Ages came to realize that the illustration and ideology of gender was subtle, complicated and contradictory.

Ultimately, I wanted students to be aware that the nature of gender in the Middle Ages might differ from modern notions, to think about the reaction of the medieval viewer (male and female) to the images we saw, and to understand that the conception of gender changes according to the historical and artistic context.

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¹² Jonathan J.G. Alexander, "Iconography and Ideology: Uncovering Social Meanings in Western Medieval Christian Art," *Studies in Iconography* 15 (1993): 1-44; Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, "Introduction: The Expanding Discourse," in N. Broude and M. Garrard, *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (New York, 1992): 1-25; Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages," reprinted in C.W. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1992): 181-238; Jonathan Culler, "Reading as a Woman," from J. Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, 1982): 43-64; and Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053-1075.

⁹ Margaret R. Miles, "The Virgin's One Bare Breast: Nudity, Gender, and Religious Meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture," reprinted in Broude and Garrard, 27-37.

⁴ I explore images of Agatha in my article, "Saint Agatha and the Sanctification of Sexual Violence," *Studies in Iconography* 16 (1994): 83-118.