

Actively Engaging Students in Culture, Gender, and Class Issues in Medieval Literature

Colleen E. Donnelly
University of Colorado Denver

Students often find it difficult to understand the literature and culture of the medieval world that seems so foreign to their own. In many cases, students only experience with feudalism is from fantasy representations in movies such as *The Lord of the Rings*. Thus, discussing the gender issues and culture dynamics of the Middle Ages is challenging. Students come with preconceptions, believing that medieval women were passive victims, such as those portrayed in fairy tales and nineteenth and early twentieth century novels, and that the era was solely defined by misogyny. They have no knowledge of the socio-economic realities of the three estates or the impact of the emergence of class society and how that altered the lives of both women and men. They have had no exposure to women who ran estates, businesses, and abbeys, who penned texts, and who had the ear of the pope and other Church leaders. Students believe women were simply derided for causing the Fall of Man and are unaware of the positive portrayals of religious icons and contemporary women that countered antifeminist tradition. As John Black notes, “a shared body of knowledge about Christian ethos and history is becoming less and less a given” (908) for today’s more secular students, and their experiences of current Christianity are often not applicable to the medieval world. Students lack the foundation for understanding a world where the Church was an authoritarian institution equally as powerful as any monarch or governing body. They are not familiar with the doctrine and theology that shaped the Church, its schisms and heresies, or the philosophies that developed during this period when universities

first emerged. They do not realize that the common people were not literal fundamentalists, since they were illiterate and had no access to the yet unprinted Bible, or that people learned about their religion from listening to priests and other teachers and by seeing iconography and art that transmitted not only doctrine but the ethics and mores of society.

When teaching, it may be useful to consider how much our students resemble the commoners of that era; they too live in a visual culture, though more diverse and rapidly changing than that of medieval men and women. Arguably, our students are more influenced by visual and audio bytes than by closely reading texts. While close textual consideration of canonical texts teaches students about the literary, religious, and philosophical traditions of the age, it may be equally valuable to encourage students to connect with medieval society in an attempt to experience the world as people then did, looking for similarities between the past era and present day, while digesting the cultural differences and being receptive to the “alterity,” or the otherness, of that age. Their teeming experience with audio-visual culture primes them for exploring the oral and visual experience of the medieval audience. With attention to cultural relativism, as Harris advocates, we can introduce our students to social aspects of the medieval world so that the “resonances between the Middle Ages and our contemporary world emerge, wh[ile] questioning the structures, aesthetics, and audience of both...engag[ing them] in belief systems other than their own, as they master principles of medieval culture” (895-6).

Such an approach uses New Historicism as its grounding literary theory. New Historicism seeks to go beyond a traditional literary, historical approach that often emphasized how an individual, canonical author embodied and reacted to the dominate events and philosophies to include a broader range of produced and disseminated texts and art that reflect

the social-economic structures and ideologies of the time, offering a window into the views, values, and life of the larger society. Going beyond reading and lecture to frame close textual reading with visual and active learning experiences can pique students' interest and invites them to engage the culture they are studying. The three activities discussed here—the analysis of illuminated manuscript pages, the creation of hagiography trading cards, and the mock trial of a medieval figure for heresy—immerse students in medieval culture. Students are invited to engage visual and iconic representations of ordinary people and revered religious figures, consider the dissemination of visual and oral information to the general public, and investigate and evaluate religious and socio-political rules, customs, and conventions. While the class referred to in this discussion focused on medieval women, the insights gained apply to medieval society as a whole and the assignment can be easily redesigned for a broader survey.

Illustrated Illuminated Manuscripts

An analysis of illustrated medieval manuscripts engages students in (re)assessing the lives of people in medieval culture; students begin to visualize medieval society for themselves, as they observe men and women in various occupations and roles and see how different estates and classes interact. Using their own visual acumen, they see how medieval society differs from their own, as well as societies of more recent centuries, while attending to similarities to their own present culture that they might not expect. The British Museum offers a catalogue of illuminated manuscripts;¹ there are also several art books that instructors can utilize in the classroom. Students who see women selling goods, writing, sculpting, reading, mining, fighting,

tending to the sick, and performing surgery immediately reexamine their preconceptions about the period. Realizing what roles and occupations were available to women, as well as how they were presented in art by that society, disrupts the students misguided twenty-first century feminist notions that women's positions have progressively improved over the past millennia and the common misconception that history has steadily progressed toward a more positive future. Other aspects of medieval society can also be addressed. By observing men and women working in the fields and in small businesses and interacting in recreational and social settings, students can consider differences between single sex gatherings and those of mixed company as well as consider the influence of class and estate. Students see representations of the structures and spaces people inhabited and can also begin to evaluate how religion and politics are present as influences in their lives. By working with images from the period and participating in their own symbolic "archeological dig," students are introduced to New Historicism and archival research, a difficult endeavor in a classroom, particularly for more distant periods.

Students work in small groups and share observations, followed by class discussion which facilitates the depth of their inquiry. Students are guided by a worksheet designed to offer an overview of society as a whole, supplementing and expanding upon the texts they read that are produced by the more privileged, powerful, and educated. The graded worksheet includes the following questions:

New Historicism Worksheet

1. In what occupations and hobbies do women participate?

2. Whose company do they keep? What can you tell about hierarchy, subordination, or equality of women from the pictures? (Consider separately the situations where only women are present and where men and women are seen together.)
3. What do they wear? What makeup do they appear to apply? Do they wear jewelry? Can you tell anything about the materials used and how their apparel and accessories were constructed? What do their clothing and accessories indicate about them?
4. In what situations and places are they shown? Can you tell differences between people of different classes? How?
5. How do women seem different from the men portrayed? When and where do they appear to participate in the same activities or behave in the same way as men?
6. What surprises you about their lives?
7. Based on the observations you have just made, how do their lives compare to that of modern women?

Through completing the worksheet and discussion, students demonstrate that they have learned about the occupations, roles, and interpersonal relations of women. By comparing medieval women with women today, they realize that their preconceptions about women's lives in earlier periods may be erroneous and begin to develop a more nuanced and informed historical perspective. In beginning to visualize the culture, students are often more receptive and ready to proceed to engage in the alterity of another time and culture.

Hagiography Trading Cards

Living in today's visually rich culture, it can be advantageous to compare how we receive and respond to information about celebrities, figureheads, and (in)famous people with how medieval people learned about exemplary religious figures in their day. With that in mind and to introduce hagiography, I have students create and exchange trading cards on saints. Such cards are familiar to them through Pokémon, Magic: The Gathering, sports, and gaming (a more digital approach can be developed by using social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter). Each student chooses and researches one saint, and, since this is intended to be a brief assignment, they are provided with a list of suggested internet sites to conduct their research. They choose three to five symbols or visual elements that represent their saint for the face-side of the card, which is then used to introduce the concepts of iconography and allegorical imagery in art and literature as a way medieval people identified saints. On the backside of the card (limited to 200 words), they write a short biography, giving the approximate dates of the saint's life, or noting that the story is probably myth and including miracles ascribed to the saint and whether and how s/he was martyred. In addition to evaluating the correctness of the material and selection of images, their peers' ability to recognize the significance of the chosen symbols can also be used to assess the student's success in conveying the saint's attributes. What is more important than the product is the discussion that ensues, introducing issues of audience and reception that pertain to the discussion of subsequent texts.

Observing the large number of women added to the rolls of saints in the late Middle Ages stimulates an inquiry into the medieval reassessment of women's role in the redemptive history

that resulted in an increase in the veneration of female religious figures, impacted female piety practices, and provided positive images that challenged the antifeminist tradition of the period. This assignment also highlights how art and storytelling were essential to the dissemination of primary tenets, beliefs, and the practice of Catholicism during the Middle Ages. A discussion of visual and oral transmission should inherently include how and why medieval Biblical stories differ from Scripture, addressing what elements are considered key and therefore repeated, why other elements are deleted or altered, and what novel elements are sometimes introduced by different cultures and for what purpose. (Consider, for example, the midwives of the nativity plays.) Students gain insight into how medieval people perceived history, used myth, and why they celebrated versions of events and figures that today we reject entirely or regard as highly fictionalized.

This unit ends with a comparison of religious veneration in the Middle Ages to the creation of cultural icons today. It is useful to ask what we really know of the athlete whose stats are recorded on the back of a trading card, from the tweets and selfies of a political figure or celebrity, and the Google searches of a contemporary icon. What we engage is an idealized or somewhat fabricated representation of the individual. How does our celebration of heroism and celebrity today compare to the veneration of saints in which medieval people participated? Students realize that image, both today and in the Middle Ages, is controlled, censored, and “manufactured” by those circulating information, often intending to deliver a specific message or perspective. The difference between then and now lies in who controls and disseminates the message—e.g. the Church versus corporations—and their purpose for doing so. Such

comparisons encourage students to see how historical studies lead them to become more discerning consumers of information today.

Mock Trial

For a medieval women's class, as for all medieval classes, I choose texts from various "genres," to use a modern term, that include representations of the three estates of feudal society, as well as the emerging mercantile, bourgeois society of the later Middle Ages. These texts include those by or about Margery Kempe, Joan of Arc, Julian of Norwich, Abelard and Heloise, Marie de France, St Bridget, Christine De Pizan, the Pastons, Chrétien de Troyes, and the Gawain Poet. After close analysis and discussion of the texts, the class concludes with a mock trial of Margery Kempe for heresy. (In a medieval literature class not focused on women, Abelard, Geoffrey of Monmouth, or Chaucer could be tried by considering whether their works were heretical).

Mock trials are an excellent way to actively promote students' development of critical thinking skills (Karraker 134). As Hardie observes, students have a "sophisticated visual literacy and familiarity" (217) with the trial genre and conducting their own trial allows them to reflect and reason objectively through their consideration of the presentation, prosecution, and judgment of ideas that they test through lively debate. Students ideally learn to support their views and those of others with evidence that substantiates and upholds their claims, to consider and interrogate opposing ideas, to critically evaluate material, and to reach objective conclusions and reasoned decisions (Hardie 217). Through their research, preparation, presentation, and

consideration of the evidence presented, students develop “higher-thinking skills, such as analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating evidence through group discussion, and cooperative social skills” (Beck 78).

The class can choose to try the accused for only recognized heresies of the time. However, I prefer to give students latitude and encourage them to add charges based on their perceptions of social and religious indiscretions of the day, while still making sure they identify which were real, recognized heresies. In the case of Margery Kempe, students always choose to charge her with preaching, forbidden women, and self-assurance of her own salvation. Charges for refusing to obey Church Militant—evinced by her refusal to cease her public outbursts that interrupted others’ worship and her sometimes haughty and belligerent manner of addressing Church officials—and devilry/possession have also been included.

Students participate in the trial as members of the prosecution and defense teams or as witnesses. The student “barristers” prepare question for the witnesses: the defense tailors questions for witnesses who would support the accused’s innocence; the prosecution tailors questions to prove guilt; both generate questions to cross-examine the opposing side. Student witnesses determine what their assigned person(a)’s position would be on each charge against the accused and then gather support for their position in what that person has said and written or in how they are portrayed in the texts read for class. For example, in the case of Margery Kempe, certain figures may be more suited to defend Margery—Abelard might have defended her tearful outbursts as pleasing to God and Bridget of Sweden her remonstrations against the clergy, while others like Heloise and Christine de Pizan may have been inclined to persecute her for not fulfilling her wifely duties and for her insolence and disregard of the directions of Church

officials. Questions asked of witnesses usually include issues about their lives, as that reflects their views and establishes their authority for their position on the charges levied against the accused; for example, Joan of Arc may be asked why she chose to wear pants in defiance of Church officials or if she believed in her own self-assurance of salvation to establish why she would advocate for the innocence of Margery Kempe.

In addition to their participation in the trial, students are assessed on: 1) their knowledge of the author/character by referencing his or her work; 2) correctly positioning themselves on whether the accused is guilty of heresy based on the views of that person(a). There is room for varying views here: what must be considered is the care students took in interpreting and analyzing material to arrive at their positions. (Notes collected from the trial are posted in an online forum and are helpful in evaluating students' mastery of the material; students can also be asked to write brief position papers providing the rationale for their determination of the accused's innocence or guilt.) Through their crafting of claims, support, and conclusions, students' understanding of key medieval concepts—such as orthodox and heretical religious beliefs and practices, gender roles and social expectations for members of different estates and stations—can also be evaluated.

Conclusion

In a time when our students are more digitally than textually savvy, we can capitalize on their talents to enhance their appreciation and understanding of other periods and cultures. Our students, like medieval people, imbibe culture primarily by visual and auditory means. By

inviting them to reflect on their similarity to the audience of that culture and actively engaging the materials of the period, we coach our students to become more sophisticated in their understanding of the Middle Ages. By encouraging the comparison of cultures and recognizing the importance of the dissemination and reception of oral and visual materials, while noting the differences in content and purpose, our students gain an understanding not just of texts and authors, but of medieval culture and society. Moreover, they gain skills that will help them potentially understand diverse cultures across the globe.

Notes

¹ See <https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/welcome.htm>. Elizabeth Salisbury's video, *Medieval Women*, (Chicago: International Film Bureau, 1987) and Terry Jones, *Medieval Lives: Damsels* episode 4, 2007, as well as other episodes, are also good for starting such a discussion but having students handle materials themselves is preferable.

Works Cited

- Beck, Charles. "Francine, Kerplunk, and the Golden Nugget—Conducting Mock Trials and Debates in the Classroom." *The Social Studies*, vol. 90.2, 1999, pp. 78-84.
- Black, John. "Building Bridges to the Past: Personal Reflections on Understanding Audience, Welcoming Inquiry, and Establishing Contexts." *Literary Compass*, vol. 10.12, 2013, pp. 908-912.
- Hardie, Kirsten. "On Trial: Teaching Without Talking—Teacher as Silent Witness." *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, vol. 5.3, 2007, pp. 213-226.
- Harris, Anne. "Medieval Belief and Modern Secularity: Teaching the Middle Ages to Contemporary College Students." *Literary Compass*, vol. 10.12, 2013, pp. 895-899.
- Karraker, Meg Wilkes. "Mock Trials and Critical Thinking." *College Teaching*, vol. 41.4, 1993, pp. 134-137.