

Finally, be empathetic. The interviewing committee has been cooped up in their suite for what seems to them like months. Keep your sense of humor. At the interview (and particularly at an on-campus interview), committee members will be asking themselves: “Would I like to have an office next to this person?” “Could I serve on a committee with this person?” Collegiality is the key. If a department has asked you for an interview, you can assume that they’re confident in your intellectual abilities. In other words, this is not a dissertation defense. Convey in the interview what you (and only you) can offer the department. For example, your answer to the infamous “what do you see yourself doing in five years” question should include activities such as mentoring and advising students (notoriously thankless tasks) and developing courses that you feel students need (be prepared to explain why), as well as publishing. Ideally, you will leave the interview having communicated your enthusiasm for your work, your compatibility with the needs of this particular department, and your confidence in the unique combination of skills that your time in graduate school has shown that you possess.

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“WHY DID WE HAVE TO WRITE A PAPER ABOUT GIRLS?”



Perhaps the most telling comment I received on a student evaluation form after my first semester as a teaching fellow was “She sometimes allows feminism to overshadow the learning material.” So much is bound up in that one sentence. In my own defense, I teach a course on the development of modern Europe and in only two instances do I specifically deal with feminism. I give one lecture on the women’s suffrage movement in Britain and I assign Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. (The latter is what prompted one student to write on an evaluation “Why did we have to write a paper about girls?”) I do, however, attempt to integrate the study of women’s thoughts and actions into the entire course. But, obviously, somewhere I had missed the boat. In attempting to educate and enlighten I had, at worst, alienated and, at best, failed to make the study of women intrinsic to history. To the students who took the time to write the above observations, women are still ancillary to history. They are a distraction from the events of true import. I had not accomplished what I had set out to do.

When I made the decision to go to graduate school I was already a committed feminist. Unlike feminism, which is an intrinsic part of being for me, becoming a medievalist was a choice. It was a choice to do something that still seems almost frivolous to friends and family outside academia. But studying and especially teaching history allows me to have a direct influence on how people think. That is why I went to graduate school. It is amazing to know that I can change the way people view both

feminism and the Middle Ages. After all, the two are similarly challenging. Both are often misconstrued as studies in extremism. The Middle Ages is still seen by many as a “dark” age peopled with knights spouting chivalric promises to women sporting chastity belts while peasants dutifully till the soil. Moreover, all of these mythical citizens are generally perceived to have been nearly moronic in their paradoxically blind adherence to the Church and superstition. Not that medievalists should be smug about lay misconceptions of the period. Let’s face it—excess is entertaining. And, of course, that is clearly borne out in current media representations of feminism. One of my personal favorites was the *New York Magazine* cover story on collegiate responses to campus rape entitled “Crying Rape.” This reference to the little boy who cried wolf too often stemmed from the author’s obvious fascination with the activities of certain students (i.e. marches, seminars, stigmatizing males accused of rape, etc.) who think that every woman who claims she has been raped ought to be believed. Like the Middle Ages, feminism is often misunderstood and caricatured as a monolithic movement. Feminists are supposedly women who are simply “not like the rest of us” and with whom the word “castrate” is very popular.

So, how on earth does one compete with such indoctrination? Certainly, no teacher can reach every student. Neither do I believe that it is my, or any teacher’s, place to forcefully proselytize students. Demanding that someone convert to your way of thinking just tends to get his or her back up. Indeed, “feminist” has already become, to some degree, a dirty word. Many of my students would rather die than be called a feminist. What seems to work best is to show them that they are not as removed from feminist thinking as they might assume. Early in my course, while enumerating the major differences between the medieval and modern periods, I ask for someone to define feminism. The answer usually comes from a worried female student who mumbles that it has something to do with equal pay for equal work. At first I tried to enlarge on this theme to include a more general equality that is not affected by gender. But what works much better is to ask how many people in the room think that every woman is intrinsically inferior to every man in everything solely because of her gender. Before asking for a show of hands, I tell them that I am not going to judge their opinion but that they should be able to support whatever they think with reasonable, cogent arguments. I actually go so far as to supply some reasons why they might justify answering affirmatively. For instance, I talk about the fear that women are too hormonally driven for certain positions of authority or that the biological attachments of motherhood make women less viable economic producers. Then I return to my original question. Thus far, no one has answered affirmatively. In fact, during my discourse on biological determinism they begin to argue against the suggestions that I make for regarding women as fundamentally inferior to men. So, after all of that, I tell them that they are feminists—that feminism, in the broadest sense of the word, is just the belief that (other than a few biological realities) gender has nothing to do with people’s capabilities. Many feminists may take issue with this definition. Certainly feminism can and often does entail much more. But, since feminism is not a monolithic movement, I think the most important thing for a teacher to do is to show students the big picture. They can flesh out the definition for themselves later. At bottom, my little piece of theatrics seems to make feminism less threatening to all of them.

I am also careful to acknowledge to my students that I understand that, whether one subscribes to the backlash theory or not, the word “feminism” currently tends to connote the most radical feminist thinking. A wise professor of mine once told me that the biggest mistake most of his colleagues made was to forget that the personal decisions being made by their students far outweigh any academic considerations students face. Undergraduates are forging their identities and the personal relationships that could define them for the rest of their lives. They want dates. Young women are, understandably, unwilling to risk social ostracization by associating themselves with the opinions of radical feminists that they may not agree with or even understand. Many of my students and my friends of both genders, while pursuing non-traditional roles in their careers and their relationships, have told me that they would never call themselves feminists. Certainly their actions are much more significant than the words they use to describe them, and most feminists hope for a world in which sexism simply is not an issue. I try to communicate to my students that the problem is that our patriarchally based culture has not yet been questioned enough for us to have even fully identified what is sexist. We cannot jump to a world of total integration until we have done the necessary groundwork. This is not to say that we have not made tremendous progress in the past thirty years or so. What I consider sexist differs radically from what my mother considers sexist. Yet I was raised in a patriarchal culture and I still stumble over the ruins of it in my mind.

Along with the fundamental problems linked to whether or not we continue to call ourselves feminists, there are also pedagogical concerns to consider. In an academic setting one lives and dies by the -isms. So, rather than dumping the terminology, I try to point up the differences in opinion available under the umbrella. I contrast the more militant form of feminism that grew up in Britain with the maternal politics of pre-war Germany to explain that, like everyone else, feminists need not always agree.

While this preoccupation with “feminism” is a less obvious issue in teaching the Middle Ages, it is linked with the omnipresent difficulties of how we speak and how we speak about history. How does one discuss the need to avoid gender-exclusive language without sounding petty? At first I made the fatal mistake of underestimating my students and tried to approach the situation practically. I spent several years in the business world before going back to school so I attempted to explain, complete with anecdotes, that in today’s marketplace one must be sensitive to a more multi-faceted workforce. That fell completely flat. The theoretical approach is what grabs my students. I think that the way we speak influences the way we think—especially when you tell a three-year-old that the word “man” means his or her daddy as well as every human. How can a child help but think that what is male is normative? I also explain that the reason gender-exclusive language evolved was because that which was male was considered normative. Pointing to Aristotle’s ideas about women being deformed men is always helpful. Then I tell them that, while they should decide for themselves whether or not they should be concerned with discursive issues, in my classroom I want them to avoid gender-exclusive language. I even include it in my grading criteria.

I am constantly trying to find new unobtrusive ways to integrate women’s history and feminism into my pedagogy. The key for my students seems to be a conscious effort on my part to avoid any semblance of blaming men for the sexism in society—especially

the white male students who feel they are under enough attack as it is. This thinking was reinforced for me by a white male student who told me that when he first stepped into my class he thought he had “walked into P.C. hell.” But then, he said, after I had taken time to explain the reasoning behind my desire to avoid things like gender-exclusive language, he agreed with me. It is equally important to students that I meet debate over issues like gender-exclusive language head-on. Several of my students took great joy in pointing out to me that the textbook I had assigned contained an etymological defense of gender-exclusive language. It happened to be easily refutable since the authors imprudently chose to slip the argument in with a discussion of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*. I was able to ask my students why, if the authors were right about “man” including everyone, Olympe de Gouges thought it necessary to contemporaneously publish the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen*? But the fact that I had included that reading in their assignment, although I disagreed with it, apparently enhanced my credibility.

Some of these strategies may seem overly obvious or unnecessary to those of us who have fully embraced feminism in our lives and our work. The most difficult part of teaching for me is to convey the importance and cogency of an idea that I have so deeply integrated into my thinking as to sometimes render it inseparable from the way that I view history. Of course, as medievalists we also face the issue of whether the application of feminist terminology and critique to the Middle Ages is even acceptable. But hopefully, as feminist scholarship rewrites history, we will all be better able to integrate women and history so that our students will find feminism to be unquestionably part of the learning material.

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BOOK REVIEWS



Goldberg, P.J.P. *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300-1520*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. Pp. xii, 406.

Much recent work by historians of medieval women has concentrated either on religious women or on representations of women. Here, by contrast, is a work on real women living their everyday working lives in the secular world. Goldberg discusses in detail the kinds of work women did and how this affected their choices about where to live and when or whether to marry. This is not a book for the undergraduate or general reader: even for a graduate course I would assign a few of Goldberg’s many articles on these topics, rather than the entire tome. For the specialist, however, Goldberg has made available an abundance of data and a thought-provoking interpretation.

In chapters dense with both anecdotal and aggregate data, Goldberg discusses the various types of work women performed, the role of service employment as a life-cycle phenomenon, patterns of marriage and marriage formation, and migration. He argues