Medieval Feminisms

What is a “medieval” feminism? In light of contemporary actions for gender equality and queer rights, calling any feminism “medieval” might seem tantamount to an insult—a move designed to reclassify a progressive agenda as retrograde, or to demonize a movement that seeks social reform. This course explores the possibility that, far from being retrograde or rudimentary, medieval feminist writing was an extraordinary force of dissent and expression, one that shares far more with contemporary feminism than we might think.

Over the course of the semester, we will explore three possible lenses for refracting writing by and about women in the Middle Ages: genre, dissent, and “voice.” Beginning with the great writer of early England, Marie de France, we will make our way through a selection of literary and visionary texts—from theologians like Julian of Norwich to poets like Geoffrey Chaucer—before arriving at the centerpiece of the course, Margery Kempe’s beautiful, if challenging, autobiography, The Book of Margery Kempe. Along the way, we will read influential texts in the history of twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminism, from the foundational efforts of Simone de Beauvoir to the more recent work of writers like Lauren Berlant and Sara Ahmed.

Weekly readings will consist both of primary texts and of secondary readings from contemporary critics and theorists. Since this course links medieval and modern visions of feminism by its very premise, one of its ancillary goals will be to introduce a selection of influential texts from contemporary feminist theory; as a result, completion of both primary and secondary readings each week is essential. Since the first purpose of this course is to prepare students to write the junior essay, a long critical work of roughly twenty to twenty-five pages in length, be on the lookout as you read for critical approaches and primary texts that stir your imagination. Detailed course requirements, along with a list of required texts and a grade breakdown, are listed at the end of this syllabus.

Note: this syllabus is subject to change after the first meeting with students.

Introduction

9/3  Geoffrey Chaucer, Troilus and Criseyde, Book II, lines 78-147
Carolyn Dinshaw, “Reading Like a Man”, from Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics
Simone de Beauvoir, from The Second Sex

Section I: Literary Writing

9/10  Marie de France, Lais
Howard Bloch, from The Anonymous Marie de France
9/17 Christine de Pizan, *Epistre au dieu d’Amours* and *Dit de la Rose*
Thomas Hoccleve, *Letter of Cupid* (an adaptation of Christine’s *Epistre au dieu d’Amours*)
Luce Irigaray, “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine”

9/18 **Lunch (at 12 PM) and group liaison with Odile Harter in Widener Library**

9/24 Christine de Pizan, from *The Book of the City of Ladies*
Selections from Saint Paul, Jerome, Jean de Meun, and Jean Gerson
Jennifer Summit, from *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History*

10/1 Geoffrey Chaucer, *Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale, The Clerk’s Tale*
Carolyn Dinshaw, more from *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*

10/2 **Short Paper (5-6 pages) due by 5 PM in my box (Barker 075)**

**Section II: The Visionary**

10/8 Marguerite Porete, from *The Mirror of Simple Souls*
Amy Hollywood, from *The Soul as Virgin Wife*

10/15 Catherine of Siena, from *The Dialogue* and from *Letters*
Caroline Walker Bynum, from *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*
Lauren Berlant, from *Cruel Optimism*

10/16 **Prospectus (2-3 pp.) and Bibliography due by 5 PM in my box (Barker 075)**

10/22 Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*
Nicholas Watson, “Yf Wommen Be Double Naturelly’: Remaking ‘Woman’ in Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love.*”
Sara Ahmed, from *Queer Phenomenology*

**Section III: Life Writing**

10/29 Margery Kempe, *The Boke of Margery Kempe*, 1.1-1.57
David Lawton, “Voice”
Julia Kristeva, from *The Powers of Horror*

11/5 Margery Kempe, *The Boke of Margery Kempe*, 1.58-end
Lynn Staley, from *Margery Kempe’s Dissenting Fictions*
Judith Butler, from *Gender Trouble*

11/12 Osbern Bokenham, *Life of Saint Margaret, Life of Saint Katherine, Life of Saint Elizabeth*
Catherine Sanok, from *Her Life Historical*
Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys (and Other Willful Subjects)"
11/13 Junior Essay 10-page Draft Due by 5 PM in my box (Barker 075)

11/19 Joan of Arc, from Letters and from The Transcripts of the Trial of Joan of Arc
  Judith Butler, “Gender Regulations”
  Michel Foucault, from The History of Sexuality, Vol. I

11/26 No Class (Thanksgiving)

Conclusions

12/2 Junior Essay Full Draft Due by 5 PM in my box (Barker 075)

12/3 Student Presentations / Draft Workshop

12/10 Junior Essay Due by 5 PM, one copy to me, another to the department

Required Texts

Marie de France, The Lais of Marie de France, tr. Burgess (Penguin)
Christine de Pizan, The Book of the City of Ladies, tr. Brown-Grant (Penguin)
Julian of Norwich, The Writings of Julian of Norwich, ed. Watson and Jenkins (Brepols)
Margery Kempe, The Book of Margery Kempe, ed. Staley (TEAMS)

Course Requirements

In addition to the junior essay (roughly 20-25 pages in length, due on 12/10), you will be required to submit a short paper (5-6 pages); a two- to three-page prospectus of your junior essay, along with an annotated bibliography of 8-10 sources minimum; and a ten-page partial draft of the junior essay, built upon this prospectus. In addition to writing assignments, you will be evaluated on the quality of your participation in class; on two short presentations, each on a critical essay assigned that week; and on your attendance in class and at course events.

Please note that the most important requirement of this course is the completion of the junior essay. If you do not complete the junior essay, you will not receive a passing grade for this tutorial.

Grade Breakdown

  Attendance and active participation: 10%
  Two presentations on critical essays: 15%
  Prospectus and annotated bibliography: 15%
  Junior essay drafts (10 pages and full): 25%
  Junior essay (20-25 pages): 35%