

SURVEY

SURVEYING STUDENTS' REACTIONS TO THEORY IN A MEDIEVAL WOMEN WRITERS COURSE

In the midst of teaching an undergraduate elective course on *Medieval Women Writers* for the English Department of Texas State University – San Marcos in the Spring of 2003 (26 students),¹ I received the *Medieval Feminist Forum* 34 (Fall, 2002), which contained three essays stemming from a roundtable discussion entitled “Are We Post-Feminist Yet?” that suggest a vexed relationship between feminism and the classroom.²

I decided to survey my students to find out how they felt about feminist theory in the classroom. This is the take-home survey, with some sample responses and my analysis [survey in bold italics; responses in roman].

This is a fully voluntary survey. It is fully anonymous (although you may identify yourself if you wish) and I will look at it only after grades are in. I really appreciate any help you can give. Feel free to add any additional pages. Thanks!

Year in college (1st year, sophomore, junior, senior):_____

Age:_____ ***Marital status:***_____

Number of children (if any):_____ ***Sex (circle one): Male Female***

How much had you read of medieval literature/the medieval period BEFORE this class? If you had, what?

[Responses included: no exposure to medieval literature before; the usual suspects from a high school or college survey class (Bede, Chaucer, *Beowulf*, Wife of Bath; Margery Kempe (in a women’s literature class); and quite a bit of exposure (including medieval history).]

What surprised you about the material we have read (if anything)?

“How long men have been negative towards women”

“I could really relate to what the women were saying and feeling”

“I was not aware there were so many women writers. I was also shocked by the bluntness of the writings. Expected prim and proper (not always the case)”

[Responses suggest students felt they could “relate” to writings from “long ago.” They also were surprised by the virulent tone of some misogynist works and how medieval literature included sex and violence.]

What is a feminist (please don't look this up; I want your instinctive response)?

“Someone who still strongly believes [in] or fights against sexuality inequality.”

“Someone who believes a woman is equal to a man, and should be treated as so.”

“Someone, most likely a woman, who is trying to change the view of women in society, history or literature.”

“A person (man or woman) who believes a woman to be superior to man.” [this from a woman]

[Having encountered deep skepticism, if not hostility, towards feminists in first-year English classes, I was surprised and pleased to read that most students were sympathetic to or able to fairly objectively describe feminism/feminists.]

What is feminist theory?

“I don’t know.”

“A theory about why women are historically perceived a certain way within a given context.”

“Feminist theory is the use of textual evidence to support the idea that women were oppressed as a result of male domination.”

[The responses to this question indicated to me that at some point “feminist theory” or, more accurately “theories,” needs to be defined and discussed in the classroom. While feminist theory implicitly underpinned the course, I had little overt discussion of it and its place in the classroom. I think, in fact, such a discussion would be a good idea early on in the semester, with an occasional reprise.]

What is gender theory?

“Speculation on the reinforcement of gender roles in literature.”

“Gender theory is the belief that gender plays a deciding role in the determination of one’s place in society.”

“Vague, loosely-connected theories by stuffy academics which study how the sexes relate to each other.”

[Again, as with feminist theory, the varied responses and occasional “I don’t know” suggest that there is need to discuss what constitute feminist and gender theories so that all students are on the same page when thinking things through theoretically.]

What is the place (if any) of feminist and/or gender theory in a class like Medieval Women Writers (keeping in mind and acknowledging the anachronistic use of the term “feminist” for the medieval period)?

“It is what the women and men were writing about. It has every place.”

“I feel that feminist and gender theory in the *Medieval Women Writers* class is extremely important in order for students to really understand a woman writer’s position/point of view. Students need to know where these women writers are coming from.”

“In literature we are often looking for common threads to link with present circumstances. Since literature has universal themes, past views of women tell us about present circumstances and reactions.”

“These ideas are central in a class like this. They provide a framework for our thinking on the relations between men and women, even if terms like feminist didn’t exist yet.”

[Only one student suggested that there was no place for feminist and/or gender theory in such a class. The rest were unanimous in maintaining that the presence of theory was key for understanding past literature.]

Is there still a need for feminism and/or feminist theory? Is there still a need for feminism and/or feminist theory in the classroom? Why or why not?

“Yes, I think the media portrays it as ‘power of women’ with the notion of bra burnings; without learning of the male and female history of feminism, one cannot overcome such a stereotype.”

“Yes, there still is a need for feminism and feminist theory today and in the classroom. There are still men out there trying to cancel out women power, if you know what I mean.” [from a male student]

“Yes and no—I think feminist has taken on a Nazi-like quality by some who seek to blame men and their ‘rape culture’ for the problems of women. However, historically, it is key to know what led to the attitudes of many women and why they felt oppressed.” [from female student]

[Most students agreed that there is still a need for feminist theory in the classroom, including one asserting (disturbingly) that even today ‘some students are viewed as being more intelligent because of their gender,’ and suggesting that feminist theory allows for equality in the classroom.]

Did this classroom have not enough/too much/just the right amount of feminist/gender theory as an integral part of the curriculum? Explain.

“Just the right amount. The misogynist viewpoints heavily introduced at the beginning of the course set a good starting ground for the rest of the semester.”

“I found it ironic that 3 of the males in the classroom had very little to say in general and that only one was brave enough to ridicule women while I sympathized with them. Women have always been taken advantage of.” [from a male student]

[Most students thought the class had the “right amount,” though there is some difference in how students perceived discussion, especially since the overwhelming number of students in the class were women (only 5 men out of 26 students).]

Are we in a post-feminist age? If so, what does that mean?

“Yes, because there are not as many demonstrations for women now.”

“I think we are still in the feminist stage, but once the glass ceiling is gone, we will be post-feminist.”

“No. If you go to dinner with a group of women and one man you will see this.”

[This question prompted the most varied responses from students and makes me think it would have been a good question to have asked the last day of class.]

How does this course fit into your life? Does it at all? Is there anyway this material or our discussions have affected you intellectually and/or personally? Explain.

“I was motivated by these strong smart women.”

“Actually, I was extremely impressed with this class and pleasantly surprised.

Upon entering, I feared for a lack of interest, but actually I became quite engulfed in a subject I had never studied. Medieval women seemed brave and independent and very motivating. The depth of thought they exhibited seems far superior to a huge population of women that exists today even with all the advantages of the day.... Interestingly enough, many of these behaviors continue to exist."

"The course taught me a lot about the power of written communication, and helped me to develop more appreciation for older literature. At the beginning of the course, I was intimidated by the title of the course and what I thought was going to be covered. As the semester progressed I found myself discussing the readings outside of class and explaining what I was learning to my friends. When I realized what I was doing, I started to analyze how the material affected me: when I want to teach others what I have been taught...that's my definition of learning."

"The class has made me more aware of how society treats women or anyone that they deem to be inferior to the society. We have learned that women and men are both created equally and that both can understand as much as the other. By using this class as a guideline, we can see where white supremacy over other races was learned. I want to take equality of men and woman as well as all the races to each other out of the class. I learned quite a lot about who I am and want to be as well as what to teach others."

[All but one student seemed to love the material and found it "relevant" to his/her personal life. It is gratifying to know that not only I found it interesting.]

I think the results of this unscientific survey indicate that students know both more and less about feminist/gender theory than we might suppose; that students are open to material which intrigues and entices them, perplexes them, and provokes them; that students want to and need to hear about theory in classes; and that the material of interest to medieval feminists is of interest and importance to young people today. This was evident in the single best discussion in the class. On the day we discussed Joan of Arc, one student asked if war rhetoric should be tied to religious rhetoric (this in 3rd week of April, 2003, so at tail end of Iraq war). There ensued a discussion which one student later said was the kind of debate she had come to college for. It is certainly why I became a teacher.

—Susan Signe Morrison

¹ Required texts in the course include: Alcuin Blamires, ed., *Woman Defamed, Woman Defended* (Oxford); *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (Penguin); *The Women Troubadours* (Norton); Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (Persea Books); *The Plays of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim* (Katharina Wilson translator); Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* (Morehouse/photocopy packet); *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Norton); *The Lais of Marie de France* (trans. Glyn S. Burgess); Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, ed., *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (Oxford); *Joan of Arc in Her Own Words* (Turtle Point Press); and two films: *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) and *Anchoress* (1993).

² *Medieval Feminist Forum* 34 (2002): Anne Clark Bartlett, "Defining the Terms: Postfeminism as an Ideology of Cool," (25–30); Lisa Perfetti, "Is the Undergraduate Classroom Post-Feminist Yet?" (31–34); and Lorna Collingridge, "Please Don't Talk about Hildegard and Feminism in the Same Breath!" (35–43).