



## Is the Undergraduate Classroom Post-Feminist Yet?

Let us begin by querying the “post” in the term “post-feminist.” We could interpret this word as a marker of obsolescence—that we do not need feminism any more, that we have moved beyond it. Readers of this issue surely will not be surprised to learn that I do not think campus culture is post-feminist yet in this sense. The kinds of pressures female students face in and outside of the classroom clearly demonstrate that our male and female students alike can learn from the feminist perspectives we bring to our teaching of medieval texts. The other reading of “post” is that our culture is indelibly marked by feminism, that it now permeates the way we view the texts we study as well as ourselves. In this sense, perhaps we are, to some extent, post-feminist. Many students are aware of feminist issues and, in my experience, quite ready to engage in debate about them when conditions are right. It is with this notion of having the right conditions for productive debate that I will concern myself in the following reflection.

First, let me situate my remarks in the context of the institution where I teach. Muhlenberg College is an undergraduate liberal arts institution of about 2000 students located in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Most of our students come from the mid-Atlantic, although we are seeing increasing enrollments from places as far away as California. Our most popular majors are Business, Communication, Psychology, Biology, English, and Theater. About thirty per cent of the students are in a fraternity or sorority. Politically, our students define themselves as middle of the road. Almost seventy-five per cent of our students participate in volunteer activities such as literacy programs or homeless shelters, but few belong to organizations committed to changing social inequities or voted in our last election. As for me, since 1996 I have been teaching in our languages and literatures department where we have got about thirty French majors and minors. I also teach a comparative course on medieval literature for our English department.

I will begin with an anecdote from the women’s bathroom, where I actually learn quite a lot about students. Not too long ago as I was in my stall, two female students entered the bathroom already engaged in conversation. I heard one woman say to the other as she was at the sink washing up, “Why are professors always so liberal?” The other student responded something like “Yeah, it’s weird isn’t it? It’s like you always know what they’re going to say.” Before I could emerge from my stall and ask them what they meant by “liberal,” they were out the door. I thought about this overheard exchange for quite a while after that. “It’s like you always know what they’re going to say.”

This phrase, in addition to being a bit of a blow to the professorial ego (what academic likes to be thought predictable?), kept gnawing at me. It seemed to mean something that had important implications for my teaching. Then, one day, I figured it out. I had often felt after discussing feminist issues in class that students were stubborn, a bit blind—that they refused to admit that there was a need for feminism. Neither male nor female students seemed willing to say that they were feminists, as though it was something shameful or laughable. But after hearing that remark in the bathroom, I started to think that maybe the problem is not simply that my students refuse to accept that there still are biases against women today (although there is definitely some of that). Maybe part of the problem is that they think they have heard it all before and that they know what I am going to say. And if they know what I am going to say, that reduces their role to telling me what I want to hear—and what is so interesting about that? As a professor I am perhaps, as Ann says in her essay in this issue, “positionally uncool.”

So, I have been finding ways to be a little more sneaky, a little less obvious in getting feminist issues on the table. One strategy I have adopted is to frame my questions in terms of female *and* male roles. When I teach Chrétien’s *Erec and Enide*, rather than asking about the ways in which the romance shows a subordinate role for women, I ask students to see what kinds of expectations are in place for both characters according to gender. I have found that this makes the men in the class more willing to share their observations. Early on in my medieval literature course, I have students read Vern Bullough’s essay “On Being a Male in the Middle Ages.”<sup>1</sup> It is a straightforward explanation of the various medical, religious, and cultural traditions that defined masculinity in the Middle Ages but also addresses how the construction of masculinity entailed certain consequences for women. Talking about women in the context of masculinity created less of a perception that I was expecting students to toe a particular line, and yet several students still ended up creating paper topics specifically concerning the treatment of women in the courtly texts we had read.

Having students read scholarly articles is also useful because it gives them a perspective other than my own. In choosing articles for students to read, I look for essays that provide clear and fairly broad explanations of pertinent historical and cultural background and that are relatively jargon free—not always an easy task, since many articles are written for a select audience of medievalists. (Perhaps a future issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum* might be devoted to successful case studies on the use of secondary articles in the classroom.) For an article to stimulate debate, however, students should read it only *after* they have already discussed some of the issues in class so that they will have some feeling of investment in their own opinions as they read. For example, when I teach *Erec and Enide*, I use Michel-André Bossy’s excellent article “The Elaboration of Female Narrative Functions in *Erec and Enide*.”<sup>2</sup> His article helps them to see that Enide’s dilemma of whether to speak to her husband to save his life, even if it means disobeying him, is part of a larger ideology of wifely submission that is fused with the notion of

courtly love. Although Bossy credits Enide with intelligence, he downplays it to show how she is silenced not only by Erec but by Chrétien. My students, especially the women, usually get a little indignant, because they admire Enide's courage and quickly point out how she repeatedly disobeys her husband. Reading Bossy's article makes them more aware of the way they have invested themselves in the text, and more importantly, motivates them to look closely in the text for counter evidence.

Their disagreement also leads to a key question in thinking about gender in the Middle Ages: although we can identify an ideology meant to keep women in their place, we should also consider the uses that medieval readers may have made of the literary text, and ask how women, in particular, may have read against the grain. I want students to recognize that there was not one "medieval view" and that all medieval women did not respond in the same way. I find it useful to point out examples from television and film today where students likely disagree with each other in terms of whether they represent women in a positive or negative light. Is Buffy the Vampire Slayer an empowering figure? What about Britney Spears? Is Ally McBeal a feminist?

The last point I want to make is that although my students have a fairly caricatured idea of feminism as a sort of strident yelling at men to give women equal rights, in my experience, students recognize that the term is thrown around too loosely. When I ask, "Is Christine de Pizan a feminist?", I can count on there being at least one student in the class to respond, "Well, I guess that depends on what you mean by feminist." They know this word probably could not mean the same thing five hundred years ago. By teaching medieval texts with a (strategic) feminist perspective, we enrich the concept of feminism for them. They are more able to find room for their own concerns and perspectives in this label that has been rather one-dimensional in their minds. Feminism can become not so much blaming men for oppressing women but a deeper understanding of how social institutions and cultural practices shape the lives of men and women both. By giving them the experience of inhabiting the Middle Ages (akin to a foreign culture in many ways) through the experience of reading medieval literary and historical texts for four months, we challenge them to see their own social institutions with a fresh eye.

And so, at semester's end, I hope that my students have learned that maybe it is not so easy to know what I am going to say. But even more importantly, I hope that they have also come to see that they might not always know what they themselves are going to say—that they might have to think a bit before rendering an opinion. As feminist medievalists we are well situated to help our undergraduates learn about themselves. However, we need to remember that although perhaps a few of our students will go on to do feminist work in graduate school, most of them will not. They will be working in marketing or sales, teaching in schools, or maybe they will work for a non-profit organization. Hopefully, they will also vote, participate in community organizations, write to their senators, or belong to the PTA of their child's

school. These are, of course, all places where a feminist perspective continues to be urgently needed. If we, through the medieval texts we teach, have enabled our students to look for the sometimes subtle ways that family, work, and civic realms entail policies and behaviors that have implications for women's lives, then I think we have done our job.

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<sup>1</sup> Vern L. Bullough, "On Being a Male in the Middle Ages," in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare E. Lees, Thelma Fenster, and Jo Ann McNamara, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 31-45. Professors will want to qualify some of Bullough's overstated claims, such as his claim that a man felt "the need to perform the sex act to the satisfaction of the female partner" (43).

<sup>2</sup> Michel-André Bossy, "The Elaboration of Female Narrative Functions in *Erec et Enide*," in *Courtly Literature: Culture and Context*, ed. Keith Busby and Erik Kooper (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1990), 23-28.

