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TEXTS AND TEACHING

Teaching Premodern Women and Gender

*Lucy C. Barnhouse
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In her influential *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*, Judith Bennett asked “Who’s afraid of the distant past?” Fifteen years after this book’s publication, the question remains relevant. Teaching the history of women and gender in the premodern world presents linked pedagogical challenges. Most students enter college with little to no background in premodern history. Many find premodern primary sources, when taught with the same pedagogical scaffolding as modern sources, inaccessible due to real or perceived strangeness. These challenges can be compounded by the challenges of teaching women’s and/or gender history. This roundtable addresses strategies for productive pedagogy — in both curriculum design and student engagement — in areas of history that may be doubly unfamiliar to undergraduates. The authors, who have experience at institutions of varying sizes and types, and of teaching to diverse audiences, engage with questions such as:

- How do we help students deal with the (perceived) challenges of studying the premodern past?
- What do students find most exciting in the history of premodern women and gender?
- How can we help students process emotional responses to this material?
- In teaching women’s and gender history, how do we help students think critically about resonances between the present and the premodern past?

In my own experience of teaching the history of women in the premodern world, students articulated strong emotional reactions to the injustices and inequalities of past societies. To discourage a view of history as inherently progressive, and to encourage frank discussion, my students and I came up with a collective class ritual. We committed to discussing the sources with intellectual rigor and historical empathy... and ending each day with a mutual exhortation: be angry, make change! At the end of the semester, students wrote of their plans to use what they had learned in conversations with friends and family, as well as in future coursework. I could ask for no better outcome. The articles below present a range of ways in which students can be not only introduced to an unfamiliar past, but shown how to use that past to engage the present.

Lucy Barnhouse is Assistant Professor of History at Arkansas State University. Her forthcoming monograph, Houses of God, Places for the Sick, examines the place of hospitals in the religious and social networks of late medieval cities. She has made an edition and translation of leprosy examination letters for punctu's Medieval Disability Sourcebook: Western Europe, and contributed to the collection Leprosy and Identity in the Middle Ages: From England to the Mediterranean. She teaches a wide variety of courses in premodern and medical history, and is a founding member of the Footnoting History podcast.