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## Visualizing Women: Teaching Modern Images and Medieval Texts about Pre-Modern Women

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*This paper examines two visual texts for teaching a course called “Saints, Wives and Witches” at the University of Houston-Victoria: Jennifer A. Rea’s graphic novel Perpetua’s Journey (Oxford, 2018), which illustrates the eponymous North African martyr’s third-century prison diary, and the film Vision: From the Life of Hildegard von Bingen (2009), directed by Margarethe von Trotta, who drew on feminist readings of Hildegard of Bingen’s writings for the purposes of dramatization. The course itself followed a chronology that took students from antiquity to the early modern period and was divided into thematic units that highlighted women’s intersecting identities with regards to religion, marital status, and social class. The graphic novel and film helped achieve two goals. The first was to give students broad exposure to ancient, medieval and early modern history, presenting the history of women and gender as one with themes and analytical frameworks that can be applied to different cultural contexts. The second was to allow students to visualize women through artistic media, depicting these women’s own words. The strategy to achieve both goals required laying groundwork early on in the class, having lectures that introduced pre-modern history and key concepts in women’s and gender studies.*

What animates my teaching at a relatively small, regional Hispanic-Serving Institution is the challenge of getting students interested in women and gender in the pre-modern world—a subject about which I am passionate—when pre-modern and non-US history are not seen as important to higher education in the Texas curriculum. I called my upper-division medieval course “Saints, Wives, and Witches” (rather than a more accurate title such as “Women in the Pre-Modern West, 200-1800”). In this course, women and gender are examined within the context of social rank and marital status, such as the noblewoman who influenced major political developments, the townswoman who served as merchant and producer, the wife and mother who provided the basis of family life, and the singlewoman

who formed her own household independent of male relatives. I also devoted discrete weeks to marginalized women and religious minorities, such as Muslim and Jewish women, as well as non-elite women who were peasants, indentured servants, serfs, and slaves.

While the course followed a chronology that took students on a journey from antiquity to the early modern period, I divided the course into thematic units that highlighted women's intersecting identities with regards to religion, marital status, and social class. This organization allowed lectures and discussion sessions to be focused on women's and gender issues that my predominantly older and first-generation college students could relate to in their own lives. Because much of pre-modern writing on women's lives was created by men, the course mainly covered attitudes towards women in legal, religious, and secular literature of the period. The main texts assigned for this course were Emilie Amt's *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook* (second edition) and Sandy Bardsley's highly accessible survey *Women's Lives in the Middle Ages*. To highlight women's voices, I relied on primary source texts written by pre-modern women, including two that engage with more recent media in very distinct ways: Perpetua's diary as it appears in Jennifer A. Rea's graphic novel *Perpetua's Journey*, and the film *Vision: From the Life of Hildegard von Bingen* (2009), directed by Margarethe von Trotta, who drew on feminist readings of Hildegard's writing for the purposes of dramatization.

Several weeks at the beginning of the course are dedicated to discussing women's religious identities as they developed alongside Christianity in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Rea's graphic novel on Perpetua and Felicity, whose martyrdoms occurred in early third-century North Africa (and were recorded in a diary written by Perpetua), is an impressive piece of scholarship. It not only depicts the events as told by Perpetua (and the male author who continued her story after her death) in vibrant images, but also provides a critical translation of the primary source, historical

essays written for an undergraduate audience that places the diary in its context, and—crucially, in my case—a set of reading questions for students, who may use these questions to guide their analysis or come up with essay topics. For this assignment, I asked students to first read Part I of the book, which is the graphic history of Perpetua and Felicity’s martyrdom, and Part III, which is the translated text of Perpetua’s prison diary. Then, students were to answer a few of the reading questions in the back of the book that deal with the topics of identity, making the graphic history, and the primary source itself. In answering these essay questions, students were to draw information or evidence from Rea’s scholarly essays included in Part II of the book. Though the graphic novel illustrates how Christianity developed as a minority religion in the Roman Empire subject to sporadic persecutions, the story itself is told by Perpetua and through her eyes as drawn by artist Liz Clarke. The modern, artistic interpretation of the story—from the skin color and dress of the protagonist to the conditions of the prison and the transformation of Perpetua into a man as part of a divine dream sequence—turned out to spark a very productive discussion thread with the students.

The topics in “Saints, Wives, and Witches” that struck a chord with the students were the gendered division of labor, the wage gap, attitudes about sex work, and the limits of women’s agency in the political sphere. For the latter topic, I created a separate packet of Hildegard von Bingen’s writings, which included excerpts from her work of mysticism and her letters to political figures, to accompany the students’ viewing of the film *Vision*. As a secondary source, I assigned Carolyn Walker Bynum’s article “Fast, Feast, and Flesh,” which is a good summary of some of the arguments she made in her influential book *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. The assignment prompt asked students to discuss how issues in women’s spiritual and mystical practice, as described by Sandy Bardsley and by Carolyn Walker Bynum in her article, are reflected in the film *Vision*. I also asked them to consider how and when women in this film are able to exercise agency, and how well the film was able to interpret the

sources produced by Hildegard herself. This assignment allowed students to read broadly on a subject, including primary, secondary, and tertiary (textbook) readings, as well as engage with how modern representations of famous medieval women interpret their lives through a historical lens. The result of our discussion was that students were able to better understand how female mysticism and ascetic practice intersected wielding political power in the Middle Ages.

Instead of a final exam, I assigned a short research paper that students presented to their classmates in a seminar scheduled during the allotted two-hour exam period. This final assignment was perhaps the most gratifying pedagogical experience that I have had in my career because it functioned as a type of consciousness-raising session for the predominantly female students in the class. The paper prompted students to examine the theme of continuity versus change, exploring an issue that deals with women or gender in one or more of the medieval primary sources in the assigned sourcebook. This exploration of continuity versus change involved some modicum of research because students also had to compare their chosen medieval topic with a similar women's or gender issue prevalent in contemporary society. I provided the students a guide on how to research their papers by directing them to relevant databases and search engines. The theme of continuity and change is a particularly contested one in pre-modern women's history, given that some of the livelier scholarly debates have centered on whether women had a golden age during the later Middle Ages and then suffered a decline in the early modern period, or, if in fact, the social inequalities women endured continued through the Middle Ages and never really changed in the early modern period.

In this final paper, students engaged with voices beyond their ambits and looked inward at their own lives as people who deal with gendered issues every day. The papers presented in the seminar were interesting, heartfelt, and engaged with relevant literature. One of my favorites was by a Latina student who presented a

paper with the title “Machismo: Gender Socialization in Latino Culture.” She analyzed a male author’s gendered expectations of his aristocratic daughters in the late fourteenth-century manual *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, an excerpt from which we read together in class. According to my student, female inferiority and subjugation to male bravado and social dominance are particular qualities of *machismo* in Latin culture that begin at a young age for both men and women through gendered socialization. Two students wrote on the wage gap, marshaling evidence from contemporary sources such as the US Bureau of Labor, and comparing this information with a medieval source that mandated dairymaids be paid less than men who performed the same tasks. One student, who confessed to me that she was religious and had a keen interest in religious history, examined Caesarius of Arles’ sixth-century rule for nuns found in Amt’s *Sourcebook* and compared it to the type of autonomy that nuns have today after the reforms of Vatican II.

Students that come from underserved populations and public high schools and HSIs have a deep and abiding hunger to learn about social history, women’s and gender issues, and stories that are hundreds if not thousands of years old. The interest may not be immediately there because they have had little exposure to it, but curiosity and desire to learn about pre-modern women can be stimulated by helpful framing, by provocative readings and compelling narratives, visual sources such as films and graphic novels, and, most importantly, by helping students draw comparisons between how gender was constructed, experienced, and often subverted as a category in both the past and the present. It was my hope that students take the class because of its intriguing title but then find unexpected surprises with the primary and secondary source texts that seem interesting and relevant to their everyday lives. Medieval women, it turns out, had very “modern” problems!

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