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Building a City of Ladies with Christine de Pizan and Arkansas State University Honors Students

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In “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” Adrienne Rich—American poet, feminist, and social critic—expressed exhilaration and confusion in being alive “in a time of awakening consciousness” (18). Self-knowledge, Rich emphasized, eludes us until we recognize and question the basic assumptions that shape our perspectives. Re-visioning is an important part of this process. For Rich, re-visioning is not the meticulous correcting of our comma splices and dangling modifiers but “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (18). The task Rich set before herself is not just the work of a feminist poet in the 1970s but an appropriate intellectual challenge for honors students in any decade. Interdisciplinary honors seminars should encourage students to move beyond the platitudes and prejudices of the past and examine a variety of issues with fresh perspective.

In the fall of 2003 I taught an honors seminar at Arkansas State University that engaged students in the act of re-visioning. The course focused on medieval and early modern women writers and was designed to dispel the misconception that the literary, artistic, and cultural contributions of these women were nil or at best insignificant. The audience for the course was a group of junior and senior students from the ASU Honors Program. Their majors were diverse and included Psychology, Radio-TV, Graphic Design, History, Marketing, Theatre Arts, English, and even the ubiquitous Undecided. Not all of these students took the course because they were interested in the subject; some simply needed an honors seminar to fulfill requirements for graduation.

In part at least the model for the course was Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Christine de Pizan was engaged in the act of re-visioning long before Adrienne Rich ever addressed the subject. As Maureen Gillespie Dawson has noted, the aim of *The City of Ladies* “is to contest the contemporary, pervasive belief that women are unintelligent, unfaithful, insatiable, and immoral. The book systematically challenges what men have written about women; it builds an alternative, authoritative female identity grounded in the intellectual, artistic, and moral contributions of women” (17). Recognized as an important contribution to the history of

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the psychology of oppression, *The City of Ladies* begins by depicting the process by which a despised person accepts the judgment of her oppressor and consequently despises herself and all her sex. At the beginning of the work, the character Christine is ready to succumb to the misogynist views of the male authorities she has read, especially Matheolus. Just as she is about to be overwhelmed by self-contempt and despair because she is female, the three daughters of God—Reason, Rectitude, and Justice—appear to her and engage her in the task of building a city of women, a project whose end is to vanquish from the world the same error into which Christine had fallen. Appearing to Christine because she has always been a diligent searcher for truth, the divine ladies proceed to address negative stereotypes about women prevalent in the time by summoning countless examples of those whose lives refute the stereotype. These examples are drawn from scripture, mythology, history, literature, and Christine de Pizan's contemporary experience. In highlighting the capabilities, virtues, and achievements of numerous women, the work counters misogynist voices throughout time.

Unlike Christine de Pizan, our seminar did not have the heavenly assistance of three crowned ladies; rather, we had to muddle through without divine intervention. The course, however, was intended to demonstrate to students that there really were learned women in the medieval and early modern period, that some of these women were responsible for significant works that continue to speak to us today. Our city of women was populated by Hildegard of Bingen, Margery Kempe, Christine de Pizan, Aemilia Lanyer, and Elizabeth Cary. In addition to studying the works of these women, students were responsible for researching and presenting oral reports detailing the contributions of, among others, Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, Marie de France, Bridget of Sweden, Julian of Norwich, Anne Askew, Mary Sidney Herbert, Rachel Speght, Anne Bradstreet, Bathsua Makin, and Katherine Philips.

We began with Hildegard of Bingen because of her current popularity and also because the varied accomplishments of this phenomenal twelfth-century woman can quickly convince students that women were more than bit players swelling a scene or two in the drama of medieval life. The tenth of her parents' children and thus their tithe to God, she was dedicated to the religious life at a very early age. At seven she entered a hermitage attached to the Benedictine monastery of Disibodenberg, Germany with Jutta of Sponheim. The hermitage ultimately became a Benedictine convent, and Hildegard made her profession as a nun when she was a teenager. When Jutta died, Hildegard became head of the convent. After seeking counsel from Bernard of Clairvaux, she responded to a divine imperative to write about the visions of the living Light she had experienced since childhood. Hildegard recorded her visions in three books and supervised illuminations for her texts. She is also responsible for the first extant morality play, *Play of the Virtues*, and she composed a cycle of seventy-seven songs, *The Symphony of the Harmony of Heavenly Revelations*. She is often designated as Germany's first woman doctor and scientist because of her encyclopedic two-part work, *Causes and Cures* and *The Book of Simple Medicine*. Moreover, she carried on such an extensive correspondence with religious and secular figures that she is often likened to a medieval Dear Abby. Hildegard embarked on four preaching tours; she wrote a life of Saints Rupert and Disibod and a treatise on

the Benedictine Rule and the Athanasian Creed; and she is responsible for an invented language. Healer, prophet, visionary, abbess, composer, scientist, herbalist, and dramatist, Hildegard accomplished much in her lifetime. A Penguin paperback of the selected writings of Hildegard edited by Mark Atherton enabled students to sample Hildegard's diverse works. This text was supplemented by several CDs of Hildegard's music. We also viewed *Radiant Life*, a forty-minute film narrated by Reverend Dr. Lauren Artress that provides a modern perspective on Hildegard's spirituality. Students were surprised to learn just how popular a figure Hildegard is more than 900 years after her birth. A guest at Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* and the subject of two novels, Barbara Lachman's *The Journal of Hildegard of Bingen* and Joan Ohanneson's *Scarlet Music*, she is also featured in an opera composed by Brian Inglis and is the subject of several videos. Numerous books both by and about her are currently available. Jany Fournier-Rosset's book even provides us with recipes from Hildegard. Her music is internationally known, and many CDs are available. A publishing company in Bryn Mawr, PA that is designed to promote the music of women composers of past and present has been named after her. An Australian electronic mailing list that serves as a communication channel for teachers involved in science and technology is named after her as well because she was one of the first women to write about the method of scientific investigation. Her medical treatises interest both mainstream Christians who practice traditional medicine and practitioners of New Age religion and alternative medicine.

Our honors seminar explored some of the manifold reasons for Hildegard's current popularity. One is obviously gender: as a woman who lived in what is perceived to be an extremely restrictive and chauvinistic age, she accomplished a great deal and was outspoken in her dealings with male authority figures; her visions of the feminine divine (Sapientia and Caritas) deriving from the ancient Wisdom tradition, strike a modern note; moreover, she discusses human sexuality openly in her writings and specifically treats medical matters of concern to women including conception, birth, complications in childbirth, gynecological diseases, menstruation, and menopause. Secondly, her approach to health care is holistic and encompasses body, mind, spirit, and cosmos. For Hildegard health is more than the absence of symptoms of disease. Health is the harmonious union of body and soul with Nature and with God. It calls for balance and moderation in all aspects of life. In addition, her health care methodology is varied and incorporates herbalism, aromatherapy, diet and fasting, laying on of hands, therapeutic stones, prayer and incantation, light energy, sound therapy, and hydrotherapy—an array of today's New Age and alternative medical practices. Finally, Hildegard's work manifests her ecological consciousness. Her concept of *viriditas*, the greening power of God necessary for physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual health and well-being, emphasizes the sacrality and interconnectedness of all creation. Hildegard respects Nature and recognizes its power. Those currently interested in Green Power cannot help but find the Hildegardian image of *viriditas* intriguing.¹

Certainly Hildegard of Bingen's varied activities and some of the very crucial and contemporary concepts treated in her works should amply demonstrate why a

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course in medieval and early modern women would have the interdisciplinary appeal so crucial for honors classes. A study of Hildegard should intrigue not only students in literature but those in drama, music, art, religion, history, and the sciences.

The other readings also convinced students that not only Hildegard but Margery Kempe, Christine de Pizan, Aemelia Lanyer, and Elizabeth Cary had something to say to them in the twenty-first century. After reading selections from Hildegard we moved to *The Book of Margery Kempe*. The life of Kempe, who discovered affective piety long before Mel Gibson, always removes the adjective “docile” from students’ stereotypical view of medieval women. A middle-class housewife, mother of fourteen children, businesswoman, mystic, and pilgrim, Margery Kempe underwent a mystical conversion which changed her understanding of herself, the world, and her relationship to God.² Her mystical experiences—both visual and aural—led to her unique religious vocation. Unlike a nun devoted to a religious order, Kempe did not live a cloistered life apart from the world, yet her desire for a celibate relationship with her husband, her spiritual marriage to Christ, her donning of white garments, her copious expressions of her gift of tears, and her pilgrimages to religious sites set her apart from the worldly. Whenever I teach Margery Kempe, my goal is to demonstrate that her behavior is not aberrant but firmly rooted in medieval spiritual traditions, as Clarissa W. Atkinson has so cogently demonstrated. Atkinson clearly places Kempe’s work in the tradition of affective piety and the democratization of mysticism. She concludes that Kempe did exactly what the great Cistercian and Franciscan writers had directed the devout to do: she made an emotive connection to the humanity of the incarnate God. The aim of affective piety was “not so much to teach doctrine or offer formal worship as to move the heart of the believer” (Atkinson 129). Lynn Staley’s Norton Critical Edition provides useful contexts for such an emphasis with its supplemental readings, especially the excerpts from Bridget of Sweden, and Jacques de Vitry’s life of Marie d’Oignies. Moreover, Kempe makes a nice contrast to the visionary Hildegard. Hildegard provides elaborate analysis of her visions, analysis designed to teach doctrine and emphasize theological points. Kempe’s response to her visions, on the other hand, is a purely emotive one. In addition to appealing to English majors, Kempe’s work should also interest honors students in history, sociology, and geography.

Charity Cannon Willard’s edition of *The Writings of Christine de Pizan* enabled us to examine not just *The Book of the City of Ladies* but selections from a range of Christine’s poetry and prose, including her autobiographical *Christine’s Vision* and *The Treasury of the City of Ladies*. Designated Europe’s first professional woman author, Christine was responsible for a body of work that expresses concern for the position of women in society as it attempts to respond to a misogynist trend.³ Married at fifteen and a widow at twenty-five, she found herself the sole support of her three children, her mother, and a dependent niece. As a result, she well understood the vulnerable social, economic, and legal position of women. Her writings often speak out against inequities in society and spring to the defense of women. Moreover, she is concerned about women in a range of social classes. In *Treasury of the City of Ladies* or *The Book of Three Virtues*, she addresses queens and other noblewomen, wives of artisans and agricultural workers, and even prostitutes, who she believes can be

reformed. In *The Book of the City of Ladies* Christine, through interaction with her divine mentors, asserts the innate abilities of women and sees the inequality of their education as the reason for their lack of achievement. She addresses economic problems and domestic violence. She also directly deals with the accusations that women invite rape and that “No” really means “Yes.” Through Christine’s writing, students in the honors seminar recognized that many of today’s gender issues are centuries old, as is women’s recognition of and response to those issues. Her texts can be valuable to students of literature, history, sociology, psychology, and economics.

We next turned to Aemilia Lanyer’s 1611 *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, a work that nicely reinforced our readings from both Kempe and Pizan. As Barbara Lewalski has shown, Lanyer’s many dedicatory poems create an important community of good women. Through these dedications Lanyer constructs a miniature Book of the City of Ladies, but her ladies are very English and very Protestant.⁴ The title poem, a long meditation on the passion and death of Christ, is certainly in the tradition of affective piety and is designed to elicit a decided emotional response from the readers. In this respect comparisons can be drawn to Kempe’s work. Lanyer’s meditation differs from others in this tradition, however, by insisting on the centrality of women in Christ’s life, in his ministry, and in his death. In her dedication “To the Vertuous Reader,” Lanyer notes that Christ was “begotten of a woman, borne of a woman, nourished of a woman, obedient to a woman; and that he healed women, pardoned women, comforted women: yea, even when he was in his greatest agonie and bloodie sweat, going to be crucified, and also in the last houre of his death, tooke care to dispose of a woman: after his resurrection, appeared first to a woman, sent a woman to declare his most glorious resurrection to *the rest of his Disciples*” (49-50; italics mine). Lanyer ultimately argues misogyny is unchristian, that the example of Christ should “inforce all good Christians and honourable minded men to speake reverently of our sexe” (50).

The last work we examined was Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam*. Stephanie Hodgson-Wright’s Broadview Press edition of that work provides useful contexts through its supplemental materials. Extracts from Cary’s main sources are provided as well as portions from selected didactic and polemic texts of the period. Cary’s determination to learn in spite of opposition from her mother and then her mother-in-law and also the difficulties she experienced as a result of her conversion to Catholicism underscore the precarious position of women in seventeenth-century British society while at the same time suggesting the inner strength of character and conviction possessed by Cary. Like Kempe her religious experiences had a significant impact on family dynamics. For Kempe, visions led her to seek a life of chastity, something her husband only consented to after twenty years. For Cary, conversion to Catholicism brought her Protestant husband’s disapproval, serious financial constraints, and separation from her children. *The Tragedy of Mariam* examines the various ways women deal with patriarchal power, from the subservient flattery but behind-the-scenes maneuvering of Mariam’s mother to the sexual manipulation practiced by Salome, Herod’s sister, to the ambivalence and then stolid opposition of Mariam that ultimately leads to her death.

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In addition to their brief oral reports, honors students also focused on semester-long research projects. These were individualized as much as possible to accommodate students' disciplines: an art major/philosophy minor interested in mysticism read several works by and about women mystics and created several art works responding to the imagery in the mystical treatises she read; a young man began the semester wondering if women had any role in warfare and wrote a very detailed report on women warriors in the medieval period. Two young women, amazed that Margery Kempe convinced her husband to live chastely, collaborated on a project about sexual mores and marriage in the medieval period. An English major in the class investigated some early modern women poets, and a drama major focused on women and drama in the early modern period. The incredible diversity and range of experience of these women allows for numerous projects for students in many disciplines: A geography major might, for example, map the peripatetic Kempe's travels and consider the difficulties encountered by female pilgrims in the middle ages; an art major might examine the illuminations accompanying Hildegard's visions; a psychology major could explore the ambivalence or the jealousy inherent in *The Tragedy of Mariam*; business majors could learn about the economic position of women in earlier societies by focusing on Kempe or Pizan or Lanyer. Pre-law students and pre-medicine students would also find relevant issues in the lives and texts of these authors.

The Book of the City of Ladies engendered another course assignment. Students were to assume the role of a modern-day Christine de Pizan. Their task was to identify current stereotypes about women and, like Christine, provide concrete examples of women whose lives refute the stereotype. Like Christine, they could draw from a wide range of sources for their examples. Students covered diverse negative attitudes that have hindered women's full participation in military endeavors, sports, politics, business, and science. Some of their examples included public and notable figures like Benazir Bhutto, Madeleine Albright, Hillary Clinton, Winona LaDuke, then NSF director Rita Colwell, mathematician Emmy Noether, the Danish physicist Lene Vestergaard Hau, and Oprah Winfrey. Some, however, also wrote very well thought out and moving personal tributes to private individuals who had an impact on them—a sister, an aunt, a mother, a teacher—who through their actions had dispelled stereotypes about what was and wasn't possible for women. The assignment clearly engaged honors students in the act of re-visioning as they considered public figures and private lives.

For me one of the most difficult things about building this city of ladies with ASU honors students was the necessary exclusion of so many women from our study. The constraints of time and the prohibitive price of texts necessitate such exclusion. There are anthologies I had considered using to give students a greater sampling of writers: Katharina Wilson's *Medieval Women Writers* or Elizabeth Petroff's *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* for medieval materials and Randall Martin's *Women Writers in Renaissance England*, Betty Travitsky's *The Paradise of Women*, or James Fitzmaurice's *Major Women Writers in Seventeenth-Century England* for early modern British materials. Ultimately, however, I settled on our five texts and had students explore other writers individually and then present their findings to the class. While

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I have regrets about the material we could not cover, a fully realized city of ladies cannot be built in a semester. A foundation for that city, however, can be established. With readings and assignments designed to stimulate honors students' analytic and critical skills and to develop their oral and written communications skills, an interdisciplinary honors course about early women can motivate students to re-vision the past and recognize the accomplishments of women from the twelfth through the seventeenth century, women who were neither silent nor submissive, women whose voice should be heard in our own time. As re-visioning a distant past replete with capable women encourages honors students to reflect on their immediate present, it could also direct them in shaping their future. Given the often-cited majority of women students in honors programs and colleges throughout the United States, recognition of the powerful roles of their forebears may have special relevance and value within the context of honors education.

NOTES

- ¹ For a fuller treatment of Hildegard's current popularity and the reasons for it, see Malpezzi, "Evergreen: The Enduring Voice of a Nine-Hundred-Year-Old Healer."
- ² Although not a guest at Chicago's *Dinner Party*, Kempe is included in the Heritage Floor of that work.
- ³ Like Hildegard, Christine is a guest at Chicago's *Dinner Party*.
- ⁴ Lewalski notes that while Lanyer does not imitate Christine de Pizan, she does provide "a comprehensive 'Book of Good Women,' fusing religious devotion and feminism to assert the essential harmony of those two impulses" (218). Since there was an English translation of *Book of the City of Ladies* by Brian Anslay in 1521, there is the possibility Lanyer was familiar with the work (396, n. 27). For the Protestant connections of her dedicatees, see Lewalski, 221.

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