

Stephen Partridge, UBC, English

English 344: Women Writers of the Middle Ages

Term 1, 2002-2003

Textbooks:

The Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan, trans. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Kevin Brownlee, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (Norton Critical Edition)

A package of photocopied readings available at the Bookstore in week 2

The Book of Margery Kempe, ed. and trans. Lynn Staley (Norton Critical Edition)

The Lais of Marie de France, trans. Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby (Penguin)

Week 1 (Sept. 4-6)

Introduction and overview

Literature in the later Middle Ages: authors and authority; translation; the dream vision

Christine de Pizan, from *The Path of Long Study*; "A Letter to Eustache Morel"; "Morel's Answer"; from *The Book of the Deeds and Good Conduct of the Wise King Charles V*

Week 2 (Sept. 9-13)

Christine's life: from *Christine's Vision*

Clerical antifeminism: Christine de Pizan, *The God of Love's Letter*; from "The Debate on the *Romance of the Rose*"

Course package #1, Ovid, *The Art of Love*; #2, Jean de Meun, from the *Romance of the Rose*; #3, Jean de Meun, from the *Romance of the Rose*; #4, "(ii): Scripture" and "(iii): Physiology and Etymology"

Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Christine de Pizan and the Misogynistic Tradition" (in Norton *Selected Writings*)

Week 3 (Sept. 16-20)

Christine's case for women: from *The Book of the City of Ladies*

Beatrice Gottlieb, "The Problem of Feminism in the Fifteenth Century"

Sheila Delany, “‘Mothers to Think Back Through’: Who Are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pizan” (in Norton *Selected Writings*)

Week 4 (Sept. 23-27)

M: Short response #1 due

Middle English; marriage among the Pastons: course package #5, “Some Paston Letters”

Week 5 (Sept. 30-Oct. 4)

Middle English poetry; manuscript culture; attributing the anonymous; rewriting courtly love: course package #6, “Fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century poems”

Course package #7, Sarah McNamer, “Female Authors, Provincial Setting”

Course package #8, Julia Boffey, “Women authors and women’s literacy”

Course package #9, Middle English Lyrics; course package #10, The Findern Manuscript

Week 6 (Oct. 7-11)

The body and childbirth: course package #11, “Middle English Trotula Texts”; review course package #4

Images of the Virgin Mary and the Nativity: course package #12, “Mechtild of Hackeborn and Gertrude the Great”

Week 7 (Oct. 14-18)

M: Thanksgiving, no class

The Virgin Mary and the Nativity, cont.; affective piety: course package #13, “Elizabeth of Hungary”; course package #14, “Bridget of Sweden”; course package #15, “Dame Eleanor Hull”

F: translation exercise

Week 8 (Oct. 21-25)

The Passion; vernacular theology: course package #16, “Julian of Norwich”; course package #17, “Julian’s Revelations”; course package #18, “External Rules”; course package #19, Elizabeth Robertson, “Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality”

Week 9 (Oct. 28-Nov. 1)

Women’s social and economic conditions; establishing authority; pilgrimage

The Book of Margery Kempe; chapters 1-30

Contexts and Criticism in *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Norton): from *The Life of Marie d'Oignies*; Clarissa W. Atkinson, "Female Sanctity in the Late Middle Ages"; Lynn Staley, "Authorship and Authority"

M: short response #2 due

Week 10 (Nov. 4-8)

The mystical marriage; social and religious dissent

The Book of Margery Kempe, chapters 31-55

Course package #20, "Wycliffe and the Lollards"; course package #21, Middle English Lyrics

Contexts and Criticism in *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Norton): from *The Constitutions of Thomas Arundel*; from *The Book of St Bride*; Nicholas Watson, "Arundel's Constitutions"

Week 11 (Nov. 11-15)

M: Remembrance Day; no class

The Passion; Margery's later life; creating her Book

The Book of Margery Kempe, chapters 56-end

Course package #22, Nancy F. Partner, "Did Mystics Have Sex?"

Contexts and Criticism in *The Book of Margery Kempe*: from *Meditations on the Life of Christ*; David Aers, "The Making of Margery Kempe"; Kathleen Ashley, "Historicizing Margery"; Gail McMurray Gibson, "St. Margery"; Sarah Beckwith, "Margery Kempe's Imitatio"

W: Essay prospectus due

Week 12 (Nov. 16-22)

Twelfth-century literature; the romance; the court of Henry II

Marie de France, *Guigemar*, *Equitan*, *Le Fresne*, *Bisclavret*, *Lanval*, *Les Deux Amanz*

Course package #23, Sharon Kinoshita, "Cherchez la femme"; course package #24, Jacqueline Eccles, "Feminist Criticism and the Lay of Lanval"

Week 13 (Nov. 25-29)

Marie de France, *Yonec*, *Laüstic*, *Milun*, *Chaitivel*, *Chevrefoil*, *Eliduc*

Review

M: Term essay due (8 pp.)

Requirements

- Short written responses (2-3 pp. each): 20 points (8 and 12)
 Translation exercise: 5 points
 Term essay: 40 points
 Final examination (identify passages, two essays): 30 points
 Class attendance and participation: 5 points

Essays and short written responses submitted late without documentation of illness or family emergency will be penalized 5% per day.

Contents of the course package:

- 1 Ovid, *The Art of Love*, tr. Rolfe Humphries. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957. Pp. 112-119, 134-39, 190-95.
- 2 Jean de Meun, from the Romance of the Rose. From "Vernacular Adaptations in the Later Middle Ages," ch. 6 of *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, ed. Alcuin Blamires. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. Pp. 148-65.
- 3 Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, tr. Charles Dahlberg. Hanover, N. H. and London: University Press of New England, 1983. Pp. 234-35.
- 4 "(ii): Scripture" and "(iii): Physiology and Etymology." From "The Roots of Antifeminist Tradition," ch. 1 of *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*. Pp. 31-45.
- 5 "15: Some Paston Letters." *Women's Writing in Middle English*, ed. Alexandra Barratt. London and New York: Longman, 1992. Pp. 238-61.
- 6 "16: Fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century poems." *Women's Writing in Middle English*. Pp. 262-91.
- 7 Sarah McNamer, "Female Authors, Provincial Setting: The Re-Versing of Courtly Love in the Findern Manuscript." *Viator* 22 (1991): 279-310.
- 8 Julia Boffey, "Women authors and women's literacy in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England." From *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, ed. Carol Meale. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993. Pp. 159-82.
- 9 *Middle English Lyrics*, eds. Maxwell S. Luria and Richard L. Hoffman. New York: Norton, 1974. Pp. 24-25, 34-35, 46-55.

- 10 *The Findern Manuscript*, eds. Richard Beadle and A. E. B. Owen. London: Scolar Press, 1977. Fols. 153v-54, fol. 178.
- 11 "1: Middle English Trotula Texts." *Women's Writing in Middle English*. Pp. 27-39.
- 12 "3: Mechtild of Hackeborn and Gertrude the Great." *Women's Writing in Middle English*. Pp. 49-60.
- 13 "5: Elizabeth of Hungary." *Women's Writing in Middle English*. Pp. 71-83.
- 14 "6: Bridget of Sweden." *Women's Writing in Middle English*. Pp. 84-94.
- 15 "13: Dame Eleanor Hull." *Women's Writing in Middle English*. Pp. 219-31.
- 16 "8: Julian of Norwich." *Women's Writing in Middle English*. Pp. 108-135.
- 17 "Appendix: Julian's Revelations as listed in the Long Text." From Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1992. Pp. 163-64.
- 18 "Part VIII: External Rules." From *The Ancrene Riwle*, tr. Mary Salu. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1990. Pp. 182-89.
- 19 Elizabeth Robertson, "Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality in the Ancrene Wisse and Julian of Norwich's Showings." From *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, eds. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993. Pp. 142-67.
- 20 "XI: Wycliffe and the Lollards." From Part II, section VII: "The Church in England until the Reformation." *Documents of the Christian Church*, sel. and ed. Henry Bettenson. New York: Oxford University Press, 1963. Pp. 173-82.
- 21 *Middle English Lyrics*, eds. Maxwell S. Luria and Richard L. Hoffman. Pp. 214-221.
- 22 Nancy F. Partner, "Did Mystics Have Sex?" From *Desire and Discipline*, eds. Jacqueline Murray and Konrad Eisenbichler. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. Pp. 296-311.
- 23 Sharon Kinoshita, "Cherchez la Femme: Feminist Criticism and Marie de France's Lai de Lanval." *Romance Notes* 34:3 (Spring 1994): 263-73.
- 24 Jacqueline Eccles, "Feminist Criticism and the Lay of Lanval: A Reply." *Romance Notes* 38:3 (Spring 1998): 281-85.

Commentary:

The largest part of the audience for this class consists of English literature majors. Some take it as one of several courses they can choose to fulfill a major requirement of three courses in areas before 1900. A few have a special interest in the Middle Ages, while others are drawn to a course on women's writing no matter what the period. The class also includes a number of students from our department's English language major; the remainder usually represent a range of majors and minors, such as Medieval Studies, Women's Studies, Religious Studies, Critical Studies in Gender and Sexuality, History, and Fine Arts. The course included 48 students this year, an enrolment inflated by the overcrowding which afflicts all our upper-level English courses; a certain number of students take it due to lack of space elsewhere or because its scheduling is convenient for them. I would guess the "natural" audience is perhaps closer to 30-35.

The course is divided about evenly between secular and religious writing, and the religious writer receiving the most attention is Margery Kempe, whose *Book* offers many opportunities to discuss social issues. The course nevertheless includes a high proportion of religious content relative to others the students are taking, and this makes for one of my bigger challenges. As my experience in all the classes I teach has led me to expect, some students lack any knowledge of the Bible or the theological issues these writers engage. Barratt's choices in her anthology make it fairly easy to remedy this, at least on a basic level, by maintaining a consistent focus on the Nativity and the Passion. Other students, for whatever reasons, seem to be actively resistant to such material, but also seem to have ignored my emphatic attempt at "truth in advertising" on the first day of class. The slowest part of the term thus is perhaps the survey of mystics, though I find it valuable not only for its own sake but also because it provides contexts for Margery Kempe which enable us to develop a much more sophisticated discussion of her *Book*. By the time we reach Margery, students have become accustomed to reading about conversations with members of the holy family, intimate exchanges with Christ as one's spouse, and extended visualisation of the bloody details of the Passion. This is also the most interdisciplinary section of the course, when I show overheads of medieval paintings to introduce the iconography of scenes the mystics describe, use Robertson's essay to discuss the relationship of medical treatises to the mystics' language, and consider the history of religious dissent in the later Middle Ages. The diversity of the class's membership helps offset the disengagement literature students tend to suffer at this point, since when I discuss

historical or theological issues this is “background” for some but an area of primary interest for others.

Teaching some of this material in Middle English presents another challenge. Barratt’s anthology provides exhaustive glosses, so students who apply themselves should be able to comprehend this material. I assign only a few pages of it for each class on the assumption it will be quite laborious for most. (Longman apparently priced themselves out of the market and has let Barratt’s book go out of print; surely this text is a prime candidate for the MART series.) A single term, though, is barely enough to make students comfortable with Chaucer’s Middle English; there’s no way to provide an adequate introduction to Middle English when I have only half a term and the students are dealing with differences in authors (or translators), dialects, and stages of the language (from the late 14th to the early 16th century). On the other hand, since 15-20 percent of the students are English language majors who need to take a course in Old or Middle English, I feel obliged to assign some of the material in the original language. In addition, reading the mystical and devotional treatises in Middle English, for example, makes it easier to discuss metaphor and connotation. Most students manage well, others barely or not at all. Next time I teach the course I hope to provide outlines of the Middle English readings as well as lists of crucial vocabulary.

The less familiar genres of much of this writing also create difficulties for many students. Marie de France’s *Lais* come as a kind of relief and reward in the final weeks. I leave them until then, in violation of chronology, partly so that when students read Marie they will assume and respect her differences from the modern fiction writers with whom they have more experience. I address the material’s generic strangeness by devoting far more time to contexts and critical approaches here than I do in a Chaucer course, for example, where the texts are more recognisably literary and the students feel they know which questions to ask and how to set about answering them. In part with the help of the criticism collected in the Norton Critical editions of Christine and Margery, I try to set up at least one day of debate in each of the course’s major units—for example, on whether or not Christine can be considered a feminist; on how securely we can attribute medieval texts, particularly anonymous ones, to women; on whether historical contexts or modern approaches can reveal more about the sources and nature of medieval mystical writing. This fall a student’s question generated a surprisingly lively debate on the ethics of publishing the Paston letters, some of which the writers clearly intended to be destroyed. (The Paston letters were gratifyingly popular, and next time I will add to the course package some men’s letters about the

marriages of Margery Paston and Margery Brews.) While the essays I assign fit together well, often responding directly to one another, so much is now being written on this material that I plan to refresh the critical readings, in particular, before I offer the course again, perhaps in 2004-05.