Modern Miscellanies

Presented by Members of English 290:
Medieval Pagans, Muslims, and Jews

Project description:

In our senior seminar this semester, we have been reading medieval texts from England and France that define national, ethnic, and religious identity through the representation of religious others—pagans, Muslims, and Jews. The central research question we have sought to answer in our modern miscellanies is how (and whether) a nuanced understanding of medieval representations of pagans, Muslims, and Jews can offer a useful historical perspective on contemporary discourses about religious, political, and cultural conflict, including, for example, Donald Rumsfeld's characterization of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi as a personification of "the dark, sadistic, medieval version of the future."

Format:

Inspired by our analyses of the texts in the *Cotton Vitellius A* and *Auchinleck* miscellanies, we have presented the results of our research as modern miscellanies. Miscellanies are collections of texts from various sources and genres into a single volume; in the case of *Cotton Vitellius A* and the *Auchinleck* manuscripts, we discovered that the relationships among the texts allowed us to interpret the individual texts in new ways. We sought to replicate this kind of intertextual dialogue in our miscellanies by linking works from different genres and historical periods, in order to create an analytical picture that emphasizes complexity and connection.

It is our hope that these miscellanies will encourage readers to re-imagine what a text is, and each of the three miscellanies has interpreted what a modern miscellany might be in a different way. "Love in Religion" uses a PowerPoint presentation to juxtapose words and images, and the texts progress according the medieval ideal of the Nine Worthies. "Married Women and Power" emphasizes the text as a living record of evolving choices and borrows from the raw design of a medieval manuscript itself, complete with marginal scribal commentary and visible traces of the editing and revision process. "Distance and Religious Others" chooses a blog format to mirror the miscellany's interest in globalization and to allow the reader to participate in the scholarly debate that the collected texts perform.

Method:

The creation of these miscellanies required us to identify and select texts related to our interests, to edit those texts to highlight the miscellany's central themes and ideas, and to write a critical introduction explaining how the texts work together to create an argument and why we chose the format that we did. These miscellanies reflect medieval notions of textual production as a creative process of compilation and revision—new texts and ideas emerge out of re-arranged pieces of older texts. Even as we have sought to make connections between the past and the present, we have also been careful to draw nuanced distinctions between the medieval past and the modern moment.

Results:

Love in Religion: Medieval Women's Downfall through Lust and Ascension through Divine Love
Compiled and edited by Natasha Burns and Alexandra Mulrow

This project explores how religious ideologies shape ideals of femininity in literary representations of medieval women. Building on the medieval ideal of the Nine Worthies, the texts selected and edited in this miscellany represent pagan, Jewish, and Christian women who are victimized by lust, whether their own or the lust of some male figure. These medieval and modern texts illustrate how medieval ideals of feminine purity continue to influence modern representations of women. Understanding the religious origins of this feminine ideal, which stresses chaste purity and salvation through devotion to a Christian God, leads to a more nuanced understanding of the history of contemporary representations of female sexuality.

Married Women and Power in Modern and Medieval Times
Compiled and edited by Emily Goodman Means and Margaret Reybitz

Our miscellany explores the relationship between spiritual and political power in representations of medieval women saints and modern women politicians and focuses, in particular, on the significance of marriage to these representations. Interestingly, representations of medieval women saints and modern women politicians share an emphasis on the power of advantageous marriage to effect political and religious transformations, though our project also attends to key differences in the ways that advantageous marriage gets defined. The virgin martyr saint enters into a marriage with Christ that preserves her chastity and establishes her as a vessel for Christian spiritual and political leadership. The modern female politician is, in contrast, represented as defeminized and united with a powerful husband to propel her public career. This project focuses on the ways that marriage, far from being simply a romantic ideal, has often served as a tool in representations of medieval saints and modern female politicians alike that anchors their political and spiritual power in an iconic husband.

Distance and Religious Others in the Middle Ages and the Era of Globalization
Compiled and edited by Berc Kalanyan, Michael Murawinski, and Gary Ritacco

This miscellany examines the significance of physical and geographical distance in modern and medieval representations of religious others. In particular, each of the texts we chose engages questions about religious difference in terms of physical space, from the violation of physical space in the medieval era of invading and invaded forces, to the "virtual" space of the internet, and into the age of globalization. What we have found is that despite the advances in communication and the shortening of distance in modern culture, there are striking similarities in terms of the representation of religious difference between the Middle Ages and today. We chose the blog format for our miscellany in order to correlate our focus on globalization, increased communication and technology, as well as our understanding of the importance of scholarly dialogue, a popular literary form in the Middle Ages.