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.”

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 chastity and salvation through devotion to a Christian God, leads to a more nuanced understanding of the history of contemporary representations of female sexuality.

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.

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.