

In her post "Let Us Now Stand Up for Bastards: The importance of Illegitimate Publics," Eileen Joy "believe[s] ... in cultivating what [she calls] a "biodiversity" of practices and modes of thought within and outside of the Academy." In calling for multiple "biospheres,"[1] Joy urges us to "[harness] all of the energies of the tools and platforms (old and new and futural) at our disposal in order to create the most richly tapestried and noisy public commons." [2] Joy urges, not to forget "the importance of *play*." [3] This sense of play I have discovered has not yet been drained from students' imaginative possibilities, allowing for creative and witty insights into medieval women's lives.

## ABOUT THE HISTORY OF THIS ASSIGNMENT: INFORMATION & SUGGESTIONS

Teaching a course called *Faith, Sanctity, and Gender: Medieval Women of Action* as both an undergraduate class and graduate seminar, I enlisted students in co-creating pages for a website on medieval women. As I specified in my assignment to the students, they were required to prepare "a website page on a woman of the Middle Ages, research her, and create a webpage site about her...with images, written description, images, and full citations and bibliography." I suggested that the target audience be ages 12 and up since this gave them some confidence in writing about medieval women in a way unlike Wiki or other excellent sites. Some stipulations included at least 500 words of text about the person in question in terms of biography; links to relevant (and legitimate) sites; images that are documented; sources cited with bibliography, YouTube video links for appropriate subject matter, and so on.

As I instructed my students:

*Enjoy yourselves with this. It is like preparing for a research paper but the product is for a different audience. Texas State has tradition of preparing teachers. Through your site you will teach a young audience about how awesome medieval women are!! You may touch more people than you can imagine through your work on this site. Plus, you will master website building skills that will come in handy in the future (or you may already have such skills so this will be easy for you). Make the site appealing. I want visitors to leave your page excited and wanting more!*

I gave them a list of reliable websites, and many other suggestions.

I came up with this assignment in part because I wanted to enable students to undertake research about medieval women but create a product that differed from the standard ones. They were already writing several essays for me. Why not try something new? Anyone unable to master the website software was allowed to just send me their material electronically.

I included several "work days" and got students to set up their pages on a WordPress site I specifically invited them to join as authors but not editors. That enabled them to write their own material but not be in control of the website space. I chose WordPress because I already had a website and blog on it and I found the site relatively easy to use. A number of my students likewise already used WordPress and were able to help their fellow students manage some of the technical aspects.

Should you be intrigued by having your students create a website, here are some suggestions: have a very specific audience in mind for your students' webpages or blogposts. Also,

incorporate "work days" into class time to look at various medieval oriented websites. And of course you'll have to heavily edit what you get before you'll want to make it public.

The evaluations for this project indicated that students really enjoyed working on these pages, once the technical difficulties were conquered. I asked, "Do you think it is worthwhile? What did you like/not like about it? Did you learn from it?" Students seemed honest about challenges. Though, one student writes, "It was totally worthwhile...it was hard to reach across the audience while using strictly academic sources."

However, in the evaluations the words "fun" and "creative" came up many times.

- "I loved how everyone had a chance to be creative in their own way. I thought that was very refreshing and fascinating to see so many express themselves."
- "[I] was better to be creative on this than write a research paper."
- "[I] was certainly worthwhile, it exposed us to a whole lot more medieval figures. I loved working in a medium other than just writing (i.e. video, images, webpages, etc.). I learned a lot!"
- "It allowed for a fun way to do extensive research on a specific subject. It also allowed for creativity that is not normally allowed."
- "I think it is a great way to get students to combine academic learning with creativity. It is very cool and we will be able to look back on it forever."
- "I like to be visually creative. So that was more fun than just another paper."

I asked students whether I should assign such a project again. "It's worthwhile and should be done again. Forces us to think creatively and take what we learn about medieval women and apply our new knowledge to our lives. Also teaches us the importance of being mindful of our audience." The issue of being publicly medieval was not lost on my students. "I learned to make things accessible to the public. Learning doesn't take place only in a classroom." As one student concluded, "I enjoyed getting to think so deeply about a topic, and immensely appreciate getting the opportunity to do work that is relevant to a non-academic audience. Thanks for helping me think like a public intellectual!"

In cheering on a "rowdily democratic" public commons,<sup>[4]</sup> we can, as Joy proposes, conspire (to breathe together) with students.

[1] Eileen Joy, "Let Us Now Stand Up for Bastards: The importance of Illegitimate Publics." February 11, 2015, In the Middle. <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2015/02/let-us-now-stand-up-for-bastards.html>

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

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