Introduction: Critical Empathy and Heterodoxy

This essay explores various ways we can effectively teach college students about heterodoxy, and how such a venture contributes to the transformative intellectual experience we hope our students will have in the classroom. It includes both an argument and suggestions for praxis: the argument is that teaching heterodoxy is an ideal exercise with which to cultivate critical empathy in our students; the suggestions for praxis are general but illustrated with a few specific examples, and are based on my experiences and observations from teaching an array of Religious Studies classes as a medievalist historian of Christianity, first at Indiana University and then at Washington & Lee University.¹

By “critical empathy” ² I mean an aspirational empathy that is circumspect about the attempt at shared feeling and that simultaneously recognizes and attempts to bridge the differences between self and other. You aspire for empathy, embrace humility, and are provisionally satisfied with increased awareness of both your own position and the position you sought to occupy. It goes beyond simple understanding or analogy-based sympathy in that there is at least the attempt to stand in another person’s shoes and see through their eyes, to work through the same issues they worked through with something like the same feelings of urgency,
passion, or confusion.

Heterodoxy provides an exceptionally valuable opportunity for exercising and cultivating this critical empathy; rather than simply being unfamiliar, heterodoxy by definition is most familiar to us (if it is familiar at all) as “other” and excluded—the word literally means “other belief,” and is used by scholars in contradistinction to “orthodoxy” (“right belief”) to soften confessional designations of “heresy” (Gk. ἁθροσία, “choice,” originally referring to a “school of philosophy” but later, in a Christian context, taking the decidedly negative valence—“wrong belief”—we are now most familiar with). A position could not fall under the category of heterodoxy if there were not an orthodoxy to make it heterodox. But as every orthodoxy is heresy to someone, I should be clear that the heterodoxy I am considering here is of the broadest possible definition, subject to shifts based on the composition of the classroom and even the moment in the semester at which we happen to encounter a particular idea—by no means is this a strictly ecclesiastical understanding (though, to be sure, ideas condemned at Church councils certainly count). Even more broadly, whenever the ideas we are teaching do not arrive on a level playing field with other ideas (which is almost always) we are dealing with heterodoxy to a greater or lesser degree. The greater the disparity and unevenness of our turf, the more skill, knowledge, and critical thought it takes to cross it—a truth well-known to those of us teaching the Middle Ages, as even our “winners” are distant and frequently “other” to our students. To achieve critical empathy with a worldview that you have only known as rejected, wrong, absurd, and/or dangerous, and which, oftentimes, you can only come to know through the mangled remnants found in the rejection letters, carnival mirrors, and unacknowledged inclusions of history’s “winners”—this exemplifies the height of critical thought we aim to hone in ourselves and in our students. Furthermore, the intellectual and visceral discomfort that accompanies an attempt to empathize with the vilified other is also valuable for cultivating critical empathy. It shakes us out of any comfortable complacency and helps set us on a path toward this asymptotal empathy.
Strategies and Tactics

Each of the following six strategies is geared toward allowing students to either achieve empathy with their subjects or to problematize students’ comfort in their own positions. The first three end (ideally) in students acquiring an empathetic understanding of positions originally marked by alterity. The subsequent three help destabilize the student’s assumptions about the fixity of their own positions by getting them to see the fluidity within orthodoxy. In a sense, the first three help move students toward the Other, while the second three force them to step away from the Self.

1. Presuming Sense

This is the most straightforward strategy, and the one I use most often. The goal is to make a position both intelligible and believable by beginning with the explicit premise that the position makes perfect sense and helping students work toward understanding why and how that is true. To accomplish this, simple questions like “How does this make sense?” sometimes suffice to draw students out, though more often I find I need to ask more pointed questions:

- “What would you have to believe for this to make sense?”
  - Answers would rely both on the students’ awareness of historical and ideological contexts and on simple logic operating within the constraints of those contexts.
- “What values would incline you toward this belief?”
  - In some ways a repetition of the previous question, this one highlights that beliefs operate on a broader plane, one that filters into our daily lives and frequently remains unarticulated.
- “Why would this be appealing?” “What larger desires does this tap into?”
  - Asking, logically, what is compelling about an idea is a great way of having students think about its “marketability.” It allows them to state why something
might be appealing without asking them to feel the appeal themselves.

- “What emotional impact might this position have?”
  - This question *does* ask students to feel the appeal, or at the very least to think about what it might feel like to believe the idea.

The “heresy” of Docetism is an excellent example for this strategy, as it is both explicitly foreclosed by early “orthodox” authorities and recurs frequently in Christian history. From the Greek *dokeô* meaning “to seem,” Docetism, broadly speaking, refers to the idea that Jesus Christ only seemed to suffer and in fact only seemed to be human. His humanity was a matter of appearance, not of matter. This is clearly an appealing prospect (because we can avoid the uncomfortable idea that an all-powerful transcendent God suffered the indignities of existing in a material body which ultimately endured the extreme indignity of crucifixion) and also clearly problematic (if Christ’s humanity was illusory, we lose the salvific and emotional power of the immanent God descending to compassion with the created world in all its mess and materiality—not to mention that the crucifixion becomes a pantomime rather than an expiatory offering).

Thus, “presuming sense” of Docetism requires us to explore the worldviews of those to whom it makes sense, in order to make it fully compelling to our students. What follows is an outline modeling some possible outcomes of the above questioning:

- “What would you have to believe for Docetism to make sense?”
  - That God is transcendent and all-powerful; that the material world is inferior to the spiritual world, and that intermingling of the two is problematic and potentially denigrating to the immaterial; that Jesus is fully God; that the transcendent God of Genesis 1:1-2:3 is more compelling than the immanent God of Genesis 2:4-25.

- “What values would incline you toward this belief?”
• That the material/spiritual dichotomy is either insurmountable or undignified to surmount; that the hierarchical order of the world is fixed and makes sense as is, with no room or role for subversion; that material humanity is abject and tainting; that there is no glory in divesting oneself of honor, even for a time.

• “Why would this be appealing?” “What larger desires does this tap into?”

• There is something comforting in the simplicity of a transcendent God, whose personal power is never infringed upon; reiterating and reinscribing the established celestial hierarchy offers a sense of stability; the ease of not having to figure out how God himself could have suffered such indignities as Jesus was subjected to.

• “What emotional impact might this position have?”

• Such a view can be calming, reassuring, affirming, and logically satisfying. It can also be, perhaps, productively and profoundly unsettling, forcing one to question one’s perception of reality.

One necessary feature of this approach is that it operates on and consolidates student knowledge: first, if students do not know why it might be problematic for Jesus to be essentially a hologram, or that this is not the most common interpretation of Jesus’s humanity, we need to make that clear; second, we need to highlight the historical contexts that make these worldviews possible—before I introduce Docetism I always teach about the honor/shame dichotomy in Greco-Roman societal hierarchy, the pervasive organizational paradigm of patron/client relationships, and Platonism’s influence in the Hellenistic world. Thus “presuming sense” is really an exercise in synthesis, bringing together features of the cultures our students have been exploring and asking them to empathize with and embody them.

2. Presuming Nonsense
This strategy, though the opposite of presuming sense, aims to bring students to the same recognition of intelligibility. It simply adds the additional step of highlighting what on first glance might not make sense, pointing to what is odd or idiosyncratic to entice students through drama or humor and then using that “hook” to pivot toward understanding and empathy, further destabilizing any assumption of innate or inherent alterity. Depending on the text and topic at issue, a simple “What jumped out at you?” or “What struck you about the text?” might suffice to highlight the seemingly absurd, but more precise leading questions have their advantages:

- “What seems weird about this text?”
- “Why is this idea problematic?” “Why would [name another thinker] see it as problematic?”
- “Why didn’t this idea ‘win’?” “Why was this text rejected?”
- (After pointing to an oddity yourself): “How weird is this?”

My favorite example of “presuming nonsense” is teaching the Gospel of Thomas immediately after teaching canonical gospels. The Gospel of Thomas is an early non-canonical collection of Jesus sayings that appears to be indebted to some of the same source material as the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke). Fragments of the Gospel have been known since the turn of the 20th century, but a fuller text was discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Egypt. It is often incorrectly (or over-simplistically) labeled “Gnostic” because it was found alongside texts that had been labeled “Gnostic” by late ancient heresiologists, but it mainly appears to be an encratite text, advocating some form of societal withdrawal and embracing esotericism, with a realized eschatology in which the Kingdom of God is already present to those “in the know.” It opens with a paradoxically transparent claim to esotericism: “These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas recorded. And he said, "Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death.”
I juxtapose this text with the synoptic gospels to highlight both the differences among the canonical gospels and the fact that there were yet more gospels that might have made it into the canon. That is to say, I use the Gospel of Thomas to highlight the instability of orthodoxy. Students come to class having spent the past few weeks discussing the synoptics and having read the Gospel of Thomas. I begin by asking them, with a tone that implies I am expecting them to have found it odd: “What did you think, reading this? Why didn’t this make it into the canon?” Generally one or two will point to the disjointedness of reading a narrative-less anthology of sayings, to the frequent ellipses characteristic of a fragmentary text, or to a particularly thorny image. Invariably, however, a student will point to the most egregious example of ascetic isolation being glorified: “Jesus said: ‘Whoever does not hate father and mother cannot be my disciple.’”

I ask them to say what this could mean for the community that found Thomas authoritative. The two best answers I’ve gotten have been: it’s a rejection of Judaism, as reflected in the rejection of the command to honor one’s mother and father; it’s a “Gnostic” claim—if the material world is evil, you should hate your parents for bringing you into it. Only after these ideas have been voiced and explored does another student, usually timidly, raise his or her hand to ask: “But isn’t this also in Luke?” And it is. Luke 14:26 reads: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” We then discuss how this verse is usually interpreted, as a call to prioritize discipleship to Jesus over all other earthly bonds—a move which Matthew helpfully makes explicit: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt 10:37).

Thus, by “presuming nonsense” of Thomas, we’ve highlighted how similar it is to things of which we presume sense, and also how our presumptions themselves are filtering what we see. We circle from Thomas’s otherness around to its continuity with and proximity to canonical traditions. With presumptions of alterity thus demolished, we can focus on what Thomas is actually advocating (encratism and specialized knowledge) and see how it stands in a spectrum
of continuity with canonical texts, rather than as something radically different and inherently worthy of exclusion.

A note about implementation: the students who volunteered answers were not necessarily wrong; Matthew’s interpretation is not definitive beyond the text (not, that is, in a non-confessional scholarly setting). But showing that a perfectly plausible interpretation can be wrong, flawed, or simply non-dominant is an important part of making our sought-for empathy critical. We need to recognize how wrong we can be, and that we should never be too complacent about or confident in our empathy.

3. Presuming Nothing; or, Presuming Equivalence

This is actually an extension of “presuming sense” to multiple perspectives at once, and it is, in fact, the default when dealing with multiple traditions, as in an “Introduction to Religion” class. By asking the same questions of each perspective, treating each with the same interest and enthusiasm, and holding each to the same level of scrutiny, we are doing our best to level the field onto which our players are walking. But we can also harness this as a deliberate and explicit strategy, putting two (or more) perspectives in direct conversation with one another and giving them the equal footing they may never have had historically by asking our students to debate in character.

For example, staging a debate between Augustine and Pelagius on human nature and free will allows students to see the strengths and vulnerabilities of both arguments. We structured the debate as a “job interview,” with an aristocratic Roman couple deciding which of these two men would be best to hire as their daughter’s spiritual advisor. This mimics the actual historical setting of Pelagius’s *Letter to Demetrias* (413). Demetrias was a young aristocratic woman who sought to dedicate herself to God, and her parents wrote to all the great spiritual minds of their day to find someone who would undertake their daughter’s instruction in the religious life. Jerome and Pelagius responded; Augustine did not. But what if he had? Our students make the
best cases they can from their readings: Pelagius’s *Letter to Demetrias* (in which he argues forcefully that we must constantly strive for perfection and that we can, with hard work, fulfill God’s commandments) and Augustine’s *Letter 196 to Sixtus* (in which he argues that perfection only comes from God, that even the impulse to do good in the first place comes from God, and that God’s commandments can only be filled by humans if God wills them to be). After rebuttals and responses by each side, a few students previously designated to play Demetrias’s parents must ask questions of each side and then declare a “winner.” Pelagius typically comes out on top, a “can-do” attitude trumping meditations on God’s power. The one time Augustine “won,” the students playing Demetrias’s parents decided not to hire anyone, since God was clearly already at work in their daughter and nothing they did would affect that and they might as well save their money. While Augustine would have disapproved of this complacent quietism, I’d like to think that he would have appreciated their trust in divine judgment. In any event, students come away with a clear sense of both arguments and why and in what circumstances they might be convincing.

**4. Blurring Boundaries**

Deliberately confusing the boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy is a helpful strategy for showcasing the instability of orthodoxy, the inadequacy of categorizations, and the sheer quirkiness of history. The Gospel of Thomas exercise had this effect, de-naturalizing the canons with which students are familiar by showing the continuities and discontinuities between canonical and non-canonical texts.

But there are more precise and overt ways of blurring boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy for our students. The first and perhaps most obvious is to focus on figures who themselves straddle that line, or whose teachings and traditions are implicated in and used by competing orthodoxies. Joan of Arc’s singular progress from condemnation to canonization is particularly illustrative. For Joan, materials from her trial indicate many of the axes on which
Determinations of orthodoxy could be made: the authority of revelation; a leader’s appearance, habits, clothing, and relationship to social norms; an individual’s heroism or charisma; a movement’s political alliances, etc. Joan’s condemnation in the 15th century and ultimate rehabilitation in the 19th and 20th highlights the importance of political and religious contexts to classification as orthodox or heretical, as well as the fundamental interpretability and instability of our source material.

A second option is to follow Maureen Tilley’s model and rename our champions, so as to “avoid spoilers” offered by history books. Her retelling of the Catholic/Donatist schism in terms of parties following Mensurius and Majorinus does wonders for leveling the playing field—students tend to forget which party is the eventual victor, and have to work harder to avoid mixing them up, as the names are much more similar to one another than Catholic and Donatist or Caecilianist and Donatist or Catholic and “African Christian.” Students weigh each position on the merits of the surviving arguments as if the verdict is still out on how their stories will end and how history will classify them.

A final option is to emphasize, through close readings of our primary sources, how representatives of “orthodoxy” and “heresy” present themselves as orthodox and their opponents as heretics. They frequently use the same polemical tropes (claims of antiquity, gender-based insults, de-humanization of opponents by comparing them to animals, hierarchies of value based on race, ethnicity, and civic identity) and argumentation styles (personal appeals, assertions of pedigree, logical reasoning, biblical proof-texts), and none of our authors self-identifies as a heretic. I discovered the value of embracing this similarity accidentally: in my “Orthodoxy and Heresy” class a student was absent and missed my comments about the next day’s reading, which was an excerpt from Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromateis* in which he attempts to argue against “Gnostics” by claiming that his is the real knowledge, that he is the “true Gnostic.” The student came to class the next day firmly convinced that Clement was, in fact, a representative of
the “Gnosticism” we had encountered in Layton’s *Gnostic Scriptures*. The process of unpacking why that was not the case and what role rhetorical posturing plays in the articulation of polemics about orthodoxy was vastly more illuminating than had all my students examined Clement as a bulwark of proto-orthodoxy.

5. *Speaking Through History*

Allowing historical figures to make our cases for us is always a good idea. Especially when dealing with touchy subjects like the instability of the New Testament manuscript tradition, after which discussion some of your students are liable to consider you a heretic of the first order: it is far easier for me to make the case that textual variants do not delegitimize faith in our texts when I can show that earlier authorities, like Jerome, recognized that there were multiple variants in circulation and remained largely unfazed by that fact.\(^{11}\)

This tactic also helps our students see how differently events could have transpired. Because we are watching authors respond to situations in real time, so to speak, we are seeing their reactions to contemporary struggles and imbibing their sense of urgency.

“Speaking through History” also enables us to test the boundaries of our empathy. Asking the same question of the Gospel of Peter as I do of the Gospel of Thomas (“Why didn’t this make the cut into the canon?”) I typically receive several answers having to do with the gargantuan, sky-scraping Jesus leaving his tomb accompanied by a walking, talking cross, when in actuality Serapion, the bishop whose notice secured the text’s censure, only found problematic its Docetic undertones.\(^{12}\) Which is not to say that contemporaries might not also have found the walking talking cross objectionable, but that Serapion’s overriding concern was with the nature of Jesus’s divinity.

6. *Dethroning the “Victors”*

Finally, we should never end a discussion of any topic with a clear historical “winner”
whose notion of orthodoxy is the final word on the subject. There never is one. Even the most thoroughgoing victor is affected by the opponents it has defeated and shaped by what it has excluded, and even the most abject loser leaves its mark—if, that is, we can even distinguish between the two in the first place.13 We can end our survey of early Christian thought in 451 with Chalcedon, but we cannot do so responsibly without acknowledging how unsettling the Chalcedonian settlement actually was and highlighting the Nestorian and Monophysite Christians across the world who did not (and do not) abide by it. We can declare Augustine victorious over Pelagius, but not without mentioning the semi-Pelagian controversy and the Augustinian foundations of arguments on both sides during the Reformation. We must always acknowledge continuing disagreements, long-term trajectories, and the conditional and constitutive natures of victory.

Implementation Notes, Goals, and Pitfalls to Avoid

The first thing to note about these strategies is that, like the topics they address, the boundaries between them are rather blurry. The importance of distinguishing between them lies primarily in the clarity of strategy with which the instructor approaches the class.

The aggregate effect of these strategies, ideally, is that our students walk away from class with new habits of inquiry and new patterns of thought that we can ascertain and evaluate in their comments and written work. These include:

- A non-teleological view of history
- Non-reductive/non-essentialist views of ideologies and historical movements
- An appreciation of complexity and the importance of context
- Acknowledgement of power and violence (both physical and ideological)
- Commonalities between “orthodoxy” and “heresy”
- Artificiality and instability of categories
• Empathy for distant worldviews

These learning outcomes can be assessed on the basis of any classroom comments and written work: even a short essay or research paper will allow us to see how attentive to diversity, complexity, instability, and nuance our students are. Critical empathy will frame their questions in class and improve the queries and methodological parameters that structure their research.

One particularly useful assessment tool is the Document-Based Question (DBQ), which presents students with passages they have never seen before, accompanied by minimal context (a century, a geographical location, a tradition), and asks them to comment. Depending on student abilities and engagement we can be more or less directive, asking either pointed questions about historical or ideological links or broad, open-ended questions that allow students to showcase their analytical skills and particular areas of interest. With no external clues as to how the texts are classified, students are compelled to empathize with whatever the argument is and assess it on its own terms. For my very small (four person), high-achieving and impressive seminar students in “Orthodoxy and Heresy” at Washington and Lee, the exam question was exceptionally vague:

“These are selections from texts you have not read for class. Please analyze two of the three, comparing them to and/or contrasting them with texts and authors you have encountered for class. Identify the assertions and contentions in the texts, explain why or under what circumstances a contemporary Christian might contest those claims, and relate the points of contention to the texts we have discussed in class. Basically, use these as jumping off points to show what you know and how well you can read early Christian texts.”

I included a question bank designed to prompt the sort of empathetic reading that we had been cultivating all semester long:
• What Driving Questions (authority, ecclesiology, soteriology, sanctity) are in play and how?
• What snippet do you find significant and why?
• What is the author saying (“translate” the argument/claims) and what are the implications?
• What can you tell about the author’s concerns/anxieties? How is he going about addressing them?
• What seems shocking to you? Why? Would it have been shocking to the author’s contemporaries?
• Who said similar things? Who said different things? Who would like this author’s point? Who would hate it?
• What strands of thought does this play off of or respond to? What movements might it be in response to?

Note that, despite the title of the class, “orthodoxy” and “heresy” are nowhere to be found in the exam itself. This was simultaneously an effort to model for students the equivalency of ideas and an invitation for them to meditate on the utility of the categories themselves. I did, however, choose texts that invited commentary on heterodoxy: a letter from Arius to Eusebius of Nicomedia complaining about the heretics who denied that the Son had been created and complaining of his party’s ill-treatment at the hands of Bishop Alexander\(^\text{15}\); selections from Cyprian’s letter to Rogatianus and other confessors extolling their spiritual status and warning them against abusing that status or allowing it to blind them to their continued fallibility\(^\text{16}\); and the martyrdom of Pypylas, Carpas, and Agathonike, which includes both “typical” martyrdoms and a “radical” martyrdom in which a woman in the crowd joyfully throws herself upon the stake
at which two other martyrs had just been burned. In the first instance, we have the infamous “heretic” Arius asserting orthodoxy and accusing others of heresy. In the second, we have an influential Church father warning those whose sanctity is assumed that they are nearing damnation. In the third we see a spectrum of behavior being lauded that would have been deemed heroic or heretical, depending on the reader’s context. Three of my four students chose to use these texts to comment explicitly on the categories of orthodoxy and heresy; the student who did not nonetheless demonstrated a level of nuance that announced her comfort with discarding the categories altogether.

But the same paradigm for cultivating critical empathy through heterodoxy applies in classes where heresy and orthodoxy are not explicitly on the menu. The example that follows (which also shows the more directive option for the DBQ-style exam) represents the type of questions I asked of students in an intermediate level class at Washington & Lee:

<table>
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<th>Gender and Authority in the Middle Ages Final Exam</th>
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<td>Read and respond to two of the three text selections that appear on the following pages. Your responses must include answers to the following questions:</td>
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<td>• Identify two ways that this text works within, against, or around constructions of gender.</td>
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<td>• How does this text establish or assert its authority? (and/or) What commentary on authority is it making? (i.e. say two things about authority in the text).</td>
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<td>• How are gender and authority linked in this text or in the text’s historical context?</td>
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<td>• Connect the text—by comparison or contrast—to two other texts we have encountered this semester. Explain your connections and why they are useful and/or</td>
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illuminating. **NB:** You must use 4 different texts (two class texts per exam text).

You will have four hours to complete the final. It is open book, open notes. Answers may be in any format as long as you explain your reasoning with full sentences (i.e. no elliptical statements or ungrammatical bullet points). **For every answer you must support your analysis with quotations from the texts you are using.**

The texts I chose reflected multiple traditions and divergent views, and I sought to have my students understand each on its own terms by focusing on the text’s internal logic and asking the same questions of each.

In using these strategies to cultivate critical empathy, the two main difficulties I have encountered and continue to guard against are ridicule and relativism. We may momentarily subject an unfamiliar historical position to ridicule in order to engage our students, but we need to be careful: though we circle around from “nonsense” to “sense,” we can only get away with “presuming nonsense” because the people under discussion are long dead—we don’t want to set up a situation where our students are inclined to ridicule contemporary beliefs, even for a moment, as it makes the classroom environment that much less welcoming for all students. Likewise, we want our students to understand and empathize with a variety of perspectives, but we do not want them to sink into an apathetic relativism that would incline them to disengage from class or from the subject. Both of these negative outcomes can be avoided or at least addressed by moderating classroom comments and modeling both respect and excitement for each position discussed in class.

**Conclusion: Sympathy for the Devil?**

During the Q&A session of the panel for which this paper was written, a young scholar asked the essential question prompted by my somewhat glib title: Isn’t it bad to have sympathy
for the devil? Aren’t there situations where that is not something we want to do? And doesn’t that place yet another divide between us and our medieval subjects, who were often inclined to see sympathy for the devil as a very bad thing, a vulnerability that could allow the demonic an entrance into our souls?

The answers are, to my mind, no, no, and yes (but this is where critical empathy becomes even more crucial). Even in the extreme case of an ideology marked as “evil,” foreclosing the attempt at empathy leaves us atomized and vulnerable in active ignorance, prevents us from seeing both potential common ground and essential points of difference, and allows the radical dehumanization of the discretely evil other to stand unchallenged and unnuanced. During our attempt at critical empathy the devil might get in, but it is a defensible pedagogical prerogative to try to understand him and exclude him in a more circumspect and thoughtful fashion. As for placing greater divides between our students and the medieval minds they seek to momentarily occupy—yes, critical empathy would be alien to most of our subjects. But if we are going to embrace the imperfection of our attempts at empathy, what better moment to acknowledge this than the instant we embark on our journey? It underscores the asymptotic, always-approaching-but-never-arriving nature of our project. We may know from the start that we will not achieve empathy, but by seeking it while being critical about our ability to accomplish the task—in that attempt we acquire insight.

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The introductory courses (25-35 students per section) I am drawing from in this essay are:
“Introduction to the New Testament,” “Introduction to Christianity,” “Introduction to Religion,” and
“Human Nature: Original Sin and Free Will” (assisting Constance Furey of Indiana University
alongside undergraduate assistant Shelby Everett). The intermediate and advanced classes (2-15
students) I am drawing from are: “Early Christian Thought: Orthodoxy and Heresy” and “Gender
and Authority in the Middle Ages.” Only one course was bounded by the Middle Ages, but all
courses included medieval topics, and the tactics used can be easily applied to many settings.

Following but adapting for historical inquiry the critical empathy that Todd DeStigter describes in
"Public Displays of Affection: Political Community through Critical Empathy," Research in the
Teaching of English, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Feb., 1999): 235-244. For DeStigter, critical empathy “refers to
the process of establishing informed and affective connections with other human beings, of thinking
and feeling with them at some emotionally, intellectually, and socially significant level, while
always remembering that such connections are complicated by sociohistorical forces that hinder the
equitable, just relationships that we presumably seek. Critical empathy is a hopeful but cautious
concept, at once a unifying condition and a constantly mutable process that includes but goes
beyond individualistic notions of caring . . . Rather, it is a disposition that urges us to understand the
powerful structures and ideologies that constrain us to think and act in prescribed (often
exploitative) ways, while at the same time challenging us to break free from those constraints. . . .”
(240). Adapting this for historical usage requires us to emphasize the “critical” component,
recognizing how much more challenging it is to achieve empathy with those who are not only dead
but whose legacies have been shaped by survivors who, whether hostile or not, have their own
agendas and constraints.

It is important to note that when dealing with sensitive topics and striving to discomfit our students
we must be extra attentive to making the classroom a welcoming place, being intellectually generous
and assuming that our students’ questions are all coming from places of honest curiosity: one of my
worst failures in my first semester teaching was to scoff at a student’s question: though asked in
honesty, it was so outlandish I assumed my student had been joking. When I realized the question
had in fact been asked in earnest, it was too late to correct my error and the student disengaged for
weeks.

Translation with Annotations and Introductions, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York:
Doubleday, 1987), 380-399 and at: http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/thomas-
scholars.html

This is doubly noticeable, as it appears twice in the text: in logia 55 and 101. I say “invariably”
because I have structured discussion this way three times, once in an Introduction to Christianity
course and twice in a New Testament class, and this pattern has held true each time. If none of your
students bring this up, however, any point of difference can be used to illustrate ultimate similarity.
You can point to difficult parables or narrative oddities in any of the synoptics for a parallel
experience.

This exercise was developed in concert with Constance Furey and Shelby Everett (see note 1).

Another great case study is Tertullian and his Montanism. Karen L. King (“Social and Theological
Effects of Heresiological Discourse,” in Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity, Texts and Studies in
Ancient Judaism 119, ed. Eduard Iricinschi and Holger Zellentin, [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008]:
28-49) highlights the ideological violence effected by demarcating Montanism as a heresy in the
first place.

In addition, for more advanced students, I have found Dyan Elliott’s Proving Woman: Female
Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Middle Ages (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
2004) to be a difficult but rewarding reading.

Maureen A. Tilley, "When Schism Becomes Heresy in Late Antiquity: Developing Doctrinal

10 This claim runs throughout the *Stromateis*, but I assigned Book IV for this exercise. Available at: http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02104.htm


12 See Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 14-16. The surviving fragments of Serapion’s letter, which was preserved in Book VI of Eusebius’s *Historia Ecclesiae*, can be found in English at: http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/serapion.html

13 See in particular David Brakke’s critique of the “horse-race” model for understanding early Christianities in *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 8-10. Movements, unlike horses, are not discretely bounded entities; hybridity, rhetoric, and ethnicity complicate our attempt to discern and differentiate historical groups (14).

14 For a sample grading rubric for this exercise (emphasizing source use, information synthesis, thoughtfulness, argumentation, and insight) see: https://www.academia.edu/14758069/Rubric_for_Final_Exam_DBQs

