Using Medieval Hagiography to Introduce Medieval Society

In speaking of adolescents, Princeton demographer Norm Ryder has stated that, "Society at large is faced perennially with an invasion of barbarians." Each year as the young barbarians enter my room, I face new challenges to civilize the horde. I welcome the task of civilizing those young barbarians as a chance to renew myself with youthful idealism and to invigorate tired ideas by bringing those ideas into line with changing conditions.\(^1\) However, the task of civilizing requires that the young be carefully inducted into the traditions of our cultural heritage. Every year I fear I am about to meet my Adrianople, so I need all the intellectual armament and audio-visual reinforcement I can muster.

My foraging efforts have been richly rewarded these past few years. Under the aegis of the National Endowment for the Humanities, summer seminars are offered for teachers seeking intellectual challenges and stimulating discussions with other teachers from throughout the United States and its territories. The summer of 1988 was a watershed year in my teaching career. I had the incredible opportunity to study the "Lives of St. Francis" using the biographies of Thomas of Celano and St. Bonaventure as source material. We studied \textit{in situ} the life of this saint under the direction of Dr. William Cook of SUNY-Geneseo. Under Dr. Cook’s patient instruction I made historical connections between the classical, medieval, and modern worlds that made the development of western civilization much more meaningful. We began our adventures each day with Bill’s enthusiastic "Andiamo" and \textit{noi andavamo} our way through every \textit{duomo}, monastery, basilica, and \textit{chiesa} in Rome, Tuscany, and Umbria. The frescoes and altarpieces were replete with saints. Learning to read the attributes or symbols of the most significant saints of the Middle Ages was an exciting challenge. I also began to ask myself why certain saints were favored at that time. What qualities did they possess that were considered particularly noteworthy by people of the Middle Ages? Surely those qualities would be the chosen virtues of medieval society. As Thomas Head writes, "Saints were quite literally holy men and women, and venerating them lay at the core of medieval Christianity. Saints demonstrated their holiness through their actions – the willingness to accept martyrdom, the rigors of extreme asceticism, the wise exercise of episcopal office, or the heroic defense of virginity."\(^2\) I became convienced that the study of medieval hagiography and the typology it produced could provide many opportunities for my students to form their own hypotheses about medieval society. Their extrapolations based on medieval hagiography and the art it produced have led to exciting discussions and learning that sticks. They are motivated to seek out more information in an effort to substantiate their theories. They gain new perspectives and begin to understand medieval cosmology. Anyone who has taught adolescents is aware of how difficult it is to help a twenty-first century materialist think and view the world as a medieval moralist. A good starting point is the lives of the saints.

Our study of the Middle Ages begins with an exercise in which students endeavor to match the symbols of saints with short hagiographies. That the Church generally used the saint’s death day as the day to honor that saint helps to underscore the importance to medieval folk of "dying to the world" in the name of Christ. In the discussion, the symbols are referred to as "attributes" of the saints and the students soon pick up on this term. It helps if a foundation for this exercise has been made with the study of the attributes of Greek gods. For example, Zeus is often shown holding his lightning bolts, Athena with an owl, Hermes with winged shoes and helmet, and Poseidon with his trident. If the students have learned how to "read" Greek art, they will have no problem with medieval typology. In addition, when studying the development of early Christianity in ancient Rome, early Christian symbols need to be studied. Using slides I acquired at the Catacombs of Priscilla, the students tour the Christian catacombs, examine early Christian symbolism, and read the early pictorial texts painted before a canonized New Testament was available. The students learn to explain why certain Old Testament stories were significant to the early Christians, since those stories were seen as events that foreshadowed the mission and life of Christ. The stories that were reinterpreted by early Christians to give greater credibility to their new faith remained significant to the Christian faithful in the Middle Ages. If the students are acquainted with the vast number and variety of early Christian symbols, they will understand the medieval use of those same symbols.

After having completed the introductory matching exercise and viewed a few slides of medieval art featuring the saints, students make extrapolations and form hypotheses about medieval society. These theories are then recorded in class logs or journals. As we continue our study of the Middle Ages, the students look for additional material that will corroborate or challenge their original theories about the medieval world view. Gradually, they develop a medieval perspective.

Also, time is spent in research. Each student is assigned an important saint to research for a classroom presentation. He/she must explain why that saint would have had special significance to people in the Middle Ages. What political-socio-economic events or diseases concerned people of Western Europe? What virtues were exemplified? The students dress in costumes with attributive props and there is an informal round of "Name That Saint" before the student reveals his/her "holy" identity. The students must continue to record in their logs or journals whatever they have learned from the presentations, and especially to respond to their original hypotheses.

The concluding activity is the creation of a commercial (skit or poster) in which a saint endorses a particular product peculiar to his/her attribute. The initial reaction of some students is very awkward. Some wonder if it is an appropriate assignment, for it seems sacrilegious. At the very least, it appears disrespectful. Eventually, they are made more comfortable about the project when they realize that medieval guilds selected their patrons along similar lines. Tanners and shoemakers, for example, paid special devotion to St. Bartholomew. According to non-biblical tradition, St. Bartholomew was flayed alive; thus, his skin played an important role for tanners. Doctors of eye disease (other than blindness) favored St. Lucy, the young virgin who plucked out her eyes in order to make herself less attractive to her jailers. She was later executed. People afflicted with blindness invoked St. Thomas, the doubter who had to see and touch the wounds of Jesus. Gunners and any others who followed dangerous trades appealed to St. Barbara, who was locked in a tower that was later blown up. Millers, spinners and wheelwrights paid homage to St. Catherine of Alexandria, whom the Romans attempted to eviscerate on a spinning wheel with knives, but later decapitated. Almost all of the saints’ execution stories are non-biblical and are based on Church tradition. Later, when the Reformation is studied, the writings of Erasmus, Calvin, and Luther make more sense when they attack many of the Church’s teachings as

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non-biblical. The cult of the saints particularly came under attack. The students understand better what the early reformers were talking about on several doctrinal issues as a result of studying medieval hagiography.

When we study the Renaissance, I enjoy watching the students’ excitement when we view a slide of Michelangelo’s Last Judgment. There for all to see, are Catherine with her wheel, Bartholomew with his hanging skin, and Lawrence with his grill. Prior to injecting a study of medieval hagiography into the curriculum, students never noticed particular figures in Western European art or bothered to examine details. "Attribute sightings" by students continue outside of school, documented with photographs from family excursions. For example, the shell motif found throughout Spanish colonial architecture in Texas was identified as the symbol of St. James, Spain’s patron saint.

I developed this unit of study when teaching a sophomore world history class in an East Texas rural public school. There were few non-Christians in the school and most of the students were fundamentalist Protestants with no previous exposure to the cult of the saints. Currently, I am teaching in an independent school located in the suburbs of Houston with a large non-Christian enrollment. Many of these students’ families come from non-Western cultures. Thirteen years of teaching this unit in public and private schools have convinced me that students are fascinated by medieval hagiographies and iconography, and appreciate how this "new view" enhances their understanding of Western art and literature.

As we conclude our study of world history each year, there are certain comprehensive essays that help students focus on the unique features of each age in western civilization. One of my favorite essay assignments is a quote from Oscar Wilde:

To be Greek, one must have no clothes.
To be Medieval, one must have no body.
To be Modern, one must have no soul.

Not only do the students focus on the unique features of each age, they also make significant connections from classical to modern times. I am certain that an understanding of medieval hagiography has provided an important cultural link that joins the classical, medieval, and modern ages of western civilization.

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Additional Resources