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Expos 20

Respectable Ladies, Rebellious Women

“Ain’t I a woman?” – Sojourner Truth

Our Project This Semester:

Much like the title of “man”, the title of “woman” is something earned – not something biological. Many boys will remember being told to “man up” or “be a man about it,” but there’s often the tendency to believe that little girls will simply grow into women. It is only in modern times that we have begun to understand the role of being a woman as something constructed, something specific to each society.

But what does, or did, a woman look like? Act like? And what happened to those who did not fit the role? Women in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries were accorded special protections, but as Sojourner Truth pointed out shortly after her emancipation, “nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place – and aren’t I a woman?” The truth that Truth pointed to was simple: only certain female humans, generally those who were white and middle- or upper-class, were accorded the title – and thus the privileges and restrictions – of “woman.”

This course will look at those who did not fit the mold: those who were not deemed worthy of respect; those who rebelled against standards; and those who simply were not able to fit it, no matter how hard they tried. Throughout, we will be asking two simple questions: in each time period, what did it mean to be a woman? And what happened to those who couldn’t make the cut?

These questions will be the basis of our real project this semester: learning how to craft a convincing, complex, logical argument. Writing is not just a way of communicating your ideas, it’s a way of *forming* your ideas. We will focus not on the gloss (please, keep your \$10 words to yourself) but on the structure of building something solid and irrefutable. This is a skill that will serve you well not only here at Harvard, but throughout your life.

Unit 1: Foul Creatures

We begin with women who were deemed, quite literally, revolting. The witches of Salem – of the 144 New Englanders accused of witchcraft a staggering 106 were women – were conceived of as less than human. They had devolved from the human state by association with the Devil and become something “other.” In a course this short we cannot dig into the vast complexity of Salem. It would be foolish to say this was only about womanhood. As historians have argued, it is perhaps more than anything about frontier warfare and strained economics in a world where magic was simplest and most likely explanation for all luck, bad and good.

But while ideas about womanhood cannot explain Salem, investigating the patchy records of that weird and terrifying year can reveal much about womanhood. You will read a portion of Cotton Mather’s *The Wonders of the Invisible World*. The young preacher was rising to fame in New England just as his beloved holy region was shaken to its core by the sudden, strange accusations of that spring. A deeply religious and incomparably self-promoting man, Mather turned the crisis into a lesson. But in his writing, his judgment of the women involved seeps through. We will also read two pieces of advice on being a woman in 17th C England and New England. In this first assignment

we will practice reading closely to make small, precise, convincing arguments, trying to pick apart the thorny ideas of a long dead society.

We will take a field trip to Salem itself n February 3rd, visiting the house of one the trail’s judge’s to get a feel for 17th century life, and taking a guided walking tour of the witch memorial and cemetery.

Unit 2: A Respectable Lady

Two-centuries later and a thousand miles to the South, Ida B Wells boarded a train to travel across the state, on an expensive, time consuming journey. Her object? To make a preacher apologize. To her. In front of his congregation. Why bother?

When Wells grew up in Tennessee, the Civil War had long since turned into a prolonged guerilla conflict. Decades after peace was officially declared, reactionaries practiced prolonged terrorism in the form of lynching. Ida B Wells made her career in fighting against lynching, and her pamphlet *Southern Horrors* brought her so many threats she was eventually forced to flee the South entirely.

We will read her autobiography *Crusade for Justice* and put it into context using two scholarly arguments that present theories of what it meant to be a black woman in America. This unit focuses on the idea of using one text as a “lens” for interpreting another. This is an intellectually difficult task, but one that is deeply rewarding. Using these lenses we will focus on understanding what it meant to be a “lady” when respect was a matter of life and death.

Unit 3: Women in Revolt*

In the mid-twentieth century, all the old categories began to break down. As Americans struggled to redefine the way that race and class worked in the dazzling new world of post-war America, many also worked to redefine what it meant to be a woman. This unit won’t focus explicitly on those first or second wave feminists who focused their total energies on that question. Rather, building off our work on Ida B Wells we will look at the role gender played for those who were attempting *other* reforms. How did their womanhood help – or hinder – their respective causes?

To answer this question you will choose one of four figures to research. For all four figures, the Schlessinger library has extensive archival holdings, meaning you will be engaging in genuinely original research. Instead of reciting or synthesizing what you learn in books, the papers you create in this unit will be new additions to the scholarly conversations about these remarkable women. Some of your options include:

Pauli Murray, who as a young student at Howard University participated in sit-ins before rising to become a Civil Rights lawyer focusing on the question of “Jane Crow” – the unique double-bind of black women. In addition, she questioned her own status as a woman herself, never quite at home in her own body. Her complicated gender identity combined with her fierce interest in the meaning of womanhood within the tumultuous context of the Civil Rights Movement makes Murray a uniquely fascinating figure.

Florence “Flo” Kennedy, a Civil Rights lawyer, ardent feminist, and media activist known for her outrageous style. Decked out in an iconic cowboy hat and armed with a foul mouth, Kennedy seemed to spurn even the idea of respectable womanhood. How did she manipulate her public image to help her gain major judicial victories? Is respectability a necessary victim of radical feminism?

I am currently working with special collections to find finalize the set of women, though they will likely include a lesbian poet, a world war two spy, or a Caribbean human rights activist.