

Journal of Trainee Teacher Education Research

**What can a study of gender enable pupils to see?
A theory-seeking case study investigating what kinds of historical learning
occur when Year 7 pupils use gender
as an analytical lens for understanding the medieval period**

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Abstract

This paper explores the possibilities and challenges of introducing gender history in the classroom. Whilst in recent years, history teachers have pushed for the inclusion of women's history in the curriculum, very little has been written on gender history. Drawing on works by Olivey (2019,2022) and Benger (2020) on historical perspective, this paper considers how gender as an analytical lens for a historical period might be introduced in the classroom. It also considers what assumptions students have about gender roles in past societies, particularly surrounding the role of women. This case study centered around a four-lesson enquiry, focusing on the lives of two extraordinary women who challenged students' initial assumptions about gender roles in the medieval period. This paper argues that students had deep misconceptions about medieval gender roles, and that for some, being introduced to these complex historical figures helped nuance their understanding of the medieval world.

What can a study of gender enable pupils to see? A theory-seeking case study investigating what kinds of historical learning occur when Year 7 pupils use gender as an analytical lens for understanding the medieval period

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Introduction

In September 1934, in a country house in Derbyshire, a group of friends made a remarkable discovery. Whilst looking for ping pong balls in an old cupboard, they found a book, the cover eaten away by mice. The book turned out to be *The Book of Margery Kempe*. The daughter of a wealthy merchant, Margery was born in King's Lynn around the year 1373 and lived an extraordinary life. A combination of guilt from committing a sin, as well as the birth of her first child, left her experiencing vivid hallucinations of demons, which only subsided after she experienced a visit from Christ. Over the next fifteen years she opened several businesses, gave birth to thirteen more children, and continued to experience hallucinations and visions. Then, she decided to change. She began wearing white, negotiated a chaste marriage with her husband, and began the first of several pilgrimages. Margery was not always well liked. There was distaste towards the way that she wailed and wept loudly and was often abandoned by the groups that she travelled with on pilgrimages. Town officials associated her with Lollardy, due to her habit of telling stories from the Bible in public, and Margery seems to have managed to escape being burnt as a heretic several times. She had all of this written down at the end of her life.

Margery's *Book* is a fascinating window into the spiritual world of a medieval woman. And it's easy to see Margery as an exceptional case – but I have long been interested in how medieval women worked within the world around them. Women like Margaret Beaufort, who gave birth at thirteen years old, and went on to see her son on the throne as King of England. There are countless examples of women, throughout history, who had agency in their own right. How did these women experience their womanhood? What did they make of the ideals and expectations imposed upon

them? These questions became the starting point of this research. Having studied gender during my undergraduate degree and noticing its complete absence in the school history curriculum, I wondered why this absence existed. I also wondered how far it was possible to really explore the lived experiences of women in the past with students without properly unpacking the way that gender operated within their societies, and how it impacted their lives.

Literature Review

How have historians used the category of gender?

Perhaps the most famous assertion of gender as a category comes from Simone de Beauvoir's ground-breaking *The Second Sex*, in which she argued that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.' (De Beauvoir, trans. Parshley, 1997, p.253). The physical form, she suggested, did not equate to destiny. Instead, attitudes towards women and their status in society were a result of socialisation. This idea was not entirely new – female philosophers as far back as Mary Wollstonecraft had suggested that women's apparent lack of ability to reason was a result of their inadequate education, rather than an intrinsic quality (Wollstonecraft, ed. Brody, 2004). Since De Beauvoir's work, a multitude of authors have worked with the category of gender, exploring the ways in which female bodies are conceptualised and socialised.

However, gender did not appear in any significant way within historians' work until the 1980s, although women's experiences had begun appearing in historiography from the 1920s. Eileen Power was one of the first to research the lives of medieval women, publishing books such as *Medieval English Nunneries*, published posthumously in 1922 (Power, 2010). Works like Powers', and others which aim to uncover the lives of women, are included under the broad term of 'women's history'. Some historians have used women's history to challenge dominant narratives of the past, for example, Humphries undertook a study of women in the Industrial Revolution to critique the high wage economy interpretation (Humphries, 2013). However, works of women's history are primarily concerned with the lived experiences of women rather than with interrogating the category of 'woman' itself. It was only after Scott's seminal article (Scott, 1986) that historians began to study history through a gendered lens. Like De Beauvoir, Scott rejected biological determinism, the idea that human behaviour is controlled by physiology and genes rather than environment or culture, and advocated for a history that used gender as an analytical lens to explore

how gender has worked in different societies, defining gender as cultural attitudes to the perceived differences between the sexes. She argued that gender was present in all aspects of society as one of the main organisational categories, including those aspects which were traditionally considered the male domain, and identified four objects through which gender could be studied (symbols, institutions, norms and subjectivities) (Scott, 1986, pp.1057-1067). Furthermore, Scott drew on a Foucauldian idea of power as relationships and argued that gender was ‘a primary way of signifying power’ (Scott, 1986, p.1067). The article led to a growth in ‘gender history’ – works which interrogate how gender has operated in various societies, as well as the relationships between the sexes, gender categories themselves, and ideas about femininity and masculinity. Historians also began to question the categories themselves. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) argued that there was no natural link between ‘man’ and ‘masculine’ or ‘female’ and ‘feminine’, characterising gender as something that is performed. Some historians also question the idea that there is one ideal of ‘masculinity’ or ‘femininity’ – for example, Griffin (2018) suggests that different groups of men can actually subscribe to very different ideals of masculinity depending on class and context. Other historians question that gender is always a primary organisational category across time and space, for example, Oweyumi (1998) argued that in Yoruba culture, age was the primary signifier of status, whilst gender was relatively insignificant.

Some historians have also sought to reconcile gender history with the history of subjectivity, which considers the emotions and perspectives of people in the past. For example, in his article ‘Slipping Out of View’ (2005) Michael Roper explores this intersection, which considers the links between masculinity, mother-son relationships and the emotions of soldiers in World War One. In *Oedipus and the Devil* (1994), Lyndal Roper explores the phenomenon of women accused of witchcraft in the sixteenth century who admitted to having a relationship with the Devil, and how gendered expectations impacted their psyche.

How have education researchers used the category of gender?

There is a considerable body of work exploring the ways in which children make sense of gender, in particular, their construction of gender roles. In his recent article Gelir (2022) suggests that construction of gender roles begins in the preschool years. His study of Kurdish preschool children in a Turkish nursery school showed that children at this age already held assumptions and ideas about what was appropriate for girls and boys. For example, in a discussion about face painting,

girls stated that pink was an unsuitable colour to use on a boy's face because it is 'for girls' (p.306). In a British context, Francis has researched the ways in which primary school children construct gender through role play. She observed that girls often positioned themselves and were positioned by both children and adults in what she characterises as a 'sensible-selfless' role, for example, by working hard, being quiet and not arguing with others. In contrast, boys positioned themselves, and were positioned as 'silly-selfish' (Francis, 1998, p.32). Thus, it appears that children dichotomised the roles of girls and boys, seeing them as opposite and oppositional to each other. For example, children commonly reported that boys 'muck around more' whereas girls 'work harder and talk less than boys' (ibid.), and that 'the women think that girls are the best and the men think that boys are the best' (ibid.). Furthermore, in her research exploring children's constructions of gender and power in role-play, she found that because girls positioned themselves as sensible-selfless, they often abandoned power to the boys in their group, letting them have first pick of roles or giving up first if an argument over the roles ensued (Francis, 1997, p.185). Boys recognised that girls were being selfless but thought that this was the right thing to do and acknowledged that they probably would have refused to accept the last choice role (ibid., p.186). Boys also appeared far more ready to exploit their power. For example, a boy playing a hotel-manager used his position of power, as well as the support of the boy playing the chef, to accuse a girl playing a hotel-receptionist of leaving her bra in a hotel room, implying that she had committed some sort of sexual misconduct. The boy playing the chef stated that if she tried to tell the police, he would chop them up and make them into soup. The boys therefore used their positions to sexualise and ridicule their female classmate (ibid., p.187). Thus, children often constructed gender in ways that disempowered girls when choosing roles and during the role-plays themselves (ibid., p.179).

In an English context, there appears to have been no articles which consider the teaching of gender history. However, in recent years there has been more of a push for including women's history in the English Secondary History curriculum. For example, Carr (2021) has suggested that using case studies of elite women can provide a powerful window into how kingship worked in the medieval period. Perhaps the most significant recent advocacy for women's history in the classroom comes from Boyd (2019). She noted that although women's history had been appearing in academic contexts since the 1920s, there was very little, if any women's history in the curriculum. She argued that the inclusion of women in the curriculum was simply good history, considering that they account for half of the population, and identified five 'stages' of the inclusion of women. This ranged from Stage 1, which entailed the inclusion of certain 'Great Women' figures like Elizabeth I,

to Stage 5, in which students are introduced to women's history to challenge dominant narratives (Boyd, 2019, p.18). However, Boyd also identifies that women's history is distinct from gender history – and that what she was advocating for was the inclusion of women's lived experiences, rather than an interrogation of gender, gender-based organisation or relations between genders (ibid., p.17).

Where might a study of gender fit within the curriculum?

In English Secondary History education, the experiences of people in the past have perhaps most commonly been framed using similarity and difference as a second-order concept, whereby students are asked to compare the different experiences of people in the past. The current national curriculum treats difference in a way that does not specify what kinds of difference students might explore, stating that the purpose of historical study is to 'help pupils understand the complexity of people's lives, the process of change and the diversity of societies and relationships between different groups' (Department for Education, 2013, p.1). One example of work which focuses on the experiences of people through the framework of similarity and difference is McCrory (2013), using an enquiry on migration within Essex. Using a series of case studies, she encouraged students to pick out their own themes which linked individuals' experiences together (p.16). However, given that I wanted students to focus on gender itself, I felt that similarity and difference was perhaps not the best fit for my enquiry. I did not want students to *compare* how gender worked in different contexts or argue about how far we could make generalisations about gender.

Perhaps the closest teacher researchers have come to exploring ideas relating to gender is the idea of historical perspective. This is a very recent development in English History education which came from teacher-researchers (Benger, 2020; Foster, 2014; Olivey, 2019) identifying that there was a lack of a second-order concept which encompassed the idea of exploring the perspectives, identities, and ideas of people in the past. Uncovering the ideas and perspectives of people in the past had been included under the name of 'empathy' in the first GCSE frameworks, but articles by Low-Beer and Knight in 1989 drew attention to the weaknesses of how this concept was being used in the history classroom. Low-Beer argued that empathy was not being used consistently across schools, was very difficult to assess and that it was often being conflated with students imagining fictitious feelings for fictitious characters (Low-Beer, 1989). Knight identified similar problems, in particular the conflation with empathy and imagination which emerged from a lack of a coherent

definition of empathy (Knight, 1989). Both authors also identified the deficit of research on the use of empathy in the classroom.

This left questions as to where enquiries focusing on perspective, ideas or identities could fit, and this has most clearly been identified by teachers aiming to bring cultural history into the classroom. When teaching an enquiry on the cultural legacy of the First World War, Foster (2014) noted that although ‘culture’ did appear in the 2008 and 2014 curricula, it did so as a substantive concept. In practical terms, this meant that ‘culture’ could be treated as a factor to explore, say, change and continuity, but not as something which itself could be interrogated. Olivey (2019) also struggled to fit an enquiry on what class meant to chartists within the existing second-order concepts. Although designed as a similarity and difference enquiry, Olivey found that asking pupils to consider ‘class’ as a substantive concept for the historian whilst simultaneously considering why chartists had different ideas of class led to confusion. Whilst they identified that ‘class’ as a concept was of limited value to a historian trying to explore the diversity of Industrial Britain, they had failed to grasp that ‘class’ was still of immense importance to historical actors (Olivey, 2019, p.68). In a re-teaching of the enquiry, Olivey framed the question around ‘history from the inside’, rather than tying it to similarity and difference. Focusing on ‘history from the inside’ allowed students to consider what class actually meant as an identity for Chartists (ibid., p.69). Building on from the work of Olivey in particular, Benger (2020) made the case for re-framing empathy as ‘historical perspective’. Inspired by the kinds of questions that cultural historians ask, Benger designed an enquiry using his great-grandfather’s letters from the First World War, asking ‘what did the Great War mean to Theo Reid?’. As a result, students approached the source and made inferences about Theo’s perspective (Benger, 2020, p.31), and some used either internal or external context to further suggest what the war ‘meant’ to Theo (ibid., p.32). Recently, Olivey (2022) also explored using the curriculum as the progression model for historical perspective. Olivey suggested that by Year 9, pupils should see that people in the past had the capacity for thought and feeling, but that they did not always see the world as we do (p.11). Historical perspective in fact does exist in some international curriculums. For example, in Canada, it is strongly promoted by the Historical Thinking Project, directed by Seixas, as one of the big six historical thinking concepts (The Historical Thinking Project, 2014). However, Seixas’ idea of historical perspective focuses on giving pupils’ an understanding of the social and cultural context which shaped past societies (The Historical Thinking Project, 2014), whilst Benger (2020) encouraged students to consider perspective on both a societal and individual level.

Contrasting the work of academics and teacher researchers.

Evidently, there is a huge gulf between gender history's place in academia and its place in the classroom. This is also the case with the place of women's history. Whilst there are huge bodies of academic works on both gender history and women's history, Boyd's article (2019) remains the most significant piece of teacher theorisation on the teaching of women's history. Moreover, Boyd does not attempt to theorise how gender history might be brought into the classroom.

Rationale for the investigation

Nature of the investigation

After identifying the discrepancy between gender history's place in academia and its place in classrooms, I sought to undertake research that could act as a starting point to theorise how students could work with gender history. Although some teachers such as McCrory (2013) have framed enquiries based on considering the experiences and perspectives of people in the past through similarity and difference, I was unsure that this would be the best fit for my sequence of lessons. After reading the work of Foster (2013), Olivey (2019, 2022), and Benger (2020), I considered whether what I was really trying to do was more similar to how these teachers had explored cultural history. I was interested in whether students could discuss gender in terms of the cultural and societal norms that operated in medieval society, but also discuss how women reacted to these, and whether these norms were always adhered to. Historical perspective therefore seemed much more appropriate for my study than similarity and difference, particularly since students would not have been introduced to gender before. I was concerned that problematising how far we can generalise about gender roles would create too much confusion for students.

Context of the investigation

Due to the exploratory nature of my research, I conducted my research with two mixed-ability year 7 groups, totalling 61 students. They had begun to encounter the medieval period through enquiries on the Norman Conquest and the Crusades. They therefore had substantive knowledge of key aspects of medieval life, such as the importance of the church and the monarchy.

Purpose of the investigation

The overall aim of the research was to explore how students might work with gender in the classroom, and what the limitations or merits might be of using gender history as an analytical lens in the classroom. What did it actually allow pupils to see? I was also interested in the preconceptions that students brought with them to the topic, in particular what they thought life was like for medieval women, and whether they had any existing ideas about how gender roles operated.

Research questions

With the above goals in mind, I developed two research questions:

RQ1: What ideas about Medieval women and gender roles did year 7 seem to be operating with at the start of the enquiry?

RQ2: How did pupils' thinking about Medieval women and gender roles appear to shift throughout the enquiry?

Research design

Defining the research

In *Case Study Research in Educational Settings*, Bassey (1999) characterises the differences between a positivist and interpretivist approach to research. Whilst positivist research assumes that there is an objective reality 'out there' to uncover, interpretive research does not accept that there is an objective reality and rejects that idea that factual statements can be made about the social world or human action (p.42). Instead, interpretivist research aims to describe and interpret phenomena, looking for perspectives and insights on certain issues. Crucially, since interpretivists reject the idea of an objective reality, interpretivist research cannot offer certainties, only possibilities (ibid., p.43). I began from an interpretivist standpoint - I accepted that there was no objective truth about how gender history should work as an analytical lens that my research could uncover. Koshy has also noted that the ontological perspective needed in action research is that social reality (for example, as found in classrooms) is itself socially constructed and not something that can be independent of the research. In other words, participant responses will be subjective and influenced by their

environment, as will a researcher's interpretations of these responses (Koshy, 2005, p.23). Using Bassey's categories of case-study research, I identified my research as being theory-seeking, rather than evaluative or story-telling, since I was focusing on exploring an issue itself (Bassey, 1999, p.62). I could not test ideas that already existed in literature about using gender in the classroom (which evaluative and theory-testing case studies would involve) because there is currently no existing literature I am aware of. Similarly, my research was not story-telling because this would also involve probing a particular aspect of an existing theory.

Determining the data

My research was therefore a case study which was interpretivist and exploratory in nature. I needed to interpret meaning from the data that I collected. The data collection methods therefore needed to be consistent with this stance (Koshy, 2005, p.22). Since I sought to understand a phenomenon in its context by generating 'thick descriptions', qualitative data would be the most useful. I chose to use several types of qualitative data. The data types that I collected for each research question can be found in Table 1.

Research Question	Types of Data Collected
RQ1: What ideas about Medieval women and gender roles did year 7 seem to be operating with at the start of the enquiry?	Student classwork, mentor's observation notes, lesson evaluations, interview with students.
RQ2: How did pupils' thinking about Medieval women and gender roles appear to shift throughout the enquiry?	Student classwork, mentor observation notes, lesson evaluations, interview with students, students' final written task.

Table 1: Types of data collected for each research question

In addition to my own lesson evaluations, my mentor made observation notes in lessons. This allowed me to collect data from students who were quieter and less likely to contribute to discussions in tasks. It also added another perspective and interpretation of students' responses to my own, which, as noted by Bassey (1999, p.76), increases the validity of findings. I also collected written responses from students, including a lengthier piece of writing at the end of the enquiry which would allow me to analyse what students did with the content that they had learnt. Finally, I conducted a 15-minute interview with four pupils. Whilst I would have preferred to conduct this interview at the end of the sequence of lessons, I conducted it after the penultimate lesson due to various disruptions creating time restraints. Since my research was theory-seeking, I decided to

choose four pupils who I hypothesised would give interesting responses, rather than attempting to take a random sample. I hoped that these students would be able to ‘bounce-off’ each other (Hopkins, 2014, p.133), and so used a round-table format to create a more relaxed environment, used neutral, open-ended questions and reassured pupils that their opinions were important and that there was no right answer (ibid., p.134). This approach aimed to take full advantage of the benefits that an interview could offer – whilst their written responses could feel like a ‘test’ to students, an interview would allow them to discuss their ideas tentatively without feeling like they would be judged on them. Furthermore, it would allow me to seek out certain information directly and I could work with students’ responses (ibid., p.135). I remained mindful of the limitations of how qualitative data can be analysed, for example, my interpretations of qualitative data would inevitably be influenced by my own assumptions and social context (Koshy, 2005, p.112), and a process of selection was involved with what I chose to record in evaluations and what my mentor chose to record in his observations. Furthermore, one limitation of doing interviews is that they can be time-consuming and it can be difficult for younger children to articulate their thoughts and feelings (Hopkins, 2014, p.135). I had wanted to interview two or more small groups but ended up only having time to conduct one interview.

Analysing and interpreting the data

As discussed above, the analysis of qualitative data will necessarily be impacted by the researchers’ own background and assumptions. Therefore, it is important to increase the trustworthiness of the data analysis to increase its validity. Making the methods of data analysis and interpretation clear is an important aspect of this. I decided to take a hermeneutic approach to my data, reading inductively for themes rather than reading deductively with pre-conceived ideas or categories in mind. This would allow me to be more exploratory in my research rather than distorting it to fit my own assumptions. I also made sure that my data was visible in my findings.

Ethics

Finally, I took into account the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines and Bassey’s recommendations to ensure that my research was ethical. I ensured that my research adhered to the BERA guidelines (BERA, 2018) as well as considering Bassey’s advice on the ethical considerations needed when undertaking classroom research (Bassey, 1999, p.78). The

teaching activities were not intended to detriment or cause harm to the education, confidence, motivation, or self-belief of the students. The interview was completely optional and I obtained consent from the students involved to make a recording, and deleted this recording once a transcript was complete. I made it clear to students that they had the right to withdraw from the interview at any time. Students are referred to by pseudonyms throughout and my mentor oversaw the lessons involved in this research.

Overview of teaching sequence

Deciding what to teach and how to teach it

To fit in with the Year 7 curriculum, my mentor and I decided that an enquiry focusing on the Medieval period would be most appropriate. At this point in the term, students had studied the Romans, early Islamic and Christian empires, the Normans and the Crusades. The Medieval period therefore fit in chronologically, particularly as students would go on to study the Renaissance and the Reformation at the end of Year 7. Due to various disruptions, I ended up with four lessons to teach my enquiry.

Inspired by some of my initial reading, I decided that I did not want students to just look at what the expectations of women were, but also how women operated with these expectations and whether they were always adhered to. I also wanted to explore the dimensions of power and religion and how they operated with gender, wondering whether students would be able to use women's stories as a 'window' into these aspects of the medieval world. Tanner's (2019) *Medieval elite women and the exercise of power 1100-1400* provided a fantastic starting point. This collection of essays explored the way in which elite medieval women used power across Europe and challenged the idea that women's only form of power was through men – posing the questions of how many 'exceptions' to the norms of medieval Europe could be uncovered before we accept that medieval elite women in fact could and did wield power (ibid., pp.1-15). Therefore, I wanted students to think about what expectations there were of women, as well as how women operated with these expectations, and whether the expectations of them were always fixed.

I knew that storytelling could be a particularly powerful way of helping Year 7 to access the experiences of Medieval women and how gender operated within their worlds. Daniel Willingham

has discussed the way in which stories are ‘psychologically privileged’, allowing students to digest and retain information as they are easy to comprehend, are often more interesting to pupils, and are easy to remember as they require medium difficulty inferences which required students to make meaning of the story throughout (Willingham, 2009, pp.52-53). I also drew on work by teachers on ‘world-building’. Hill suggests that students need to build up an imagined version of the past to access what past societies may have looked or felt like, arguing that past time periods were like ‘secondary worlds’. In some ways, they are consistent with our own world, but they also diverge in many ways (Hill, 2020, p.11). Narratives aid in this world-building because of their cognitive weight, and because they allow for a window into this imagined past (ibid., p.15). Finally, I was inspired by Grande’s (2022a) suggestions for effective use of narrative in the classroom, particularly his suggestion of choosing or writing texts which use intrigue or suspense, and painting vivid pictures of the landscape in which the story takes place.

Knowing that I wanted to use storytelling to get students to explore the lives of medieval women and the expectations that people had of them, I needed to choose some women to study. With only four lessons to cover the enquiry, I felt that using just two women would allow students to explore each story in appropriate depth. The first of these women was suggested to me by my mentor. After listening to an episode of Melvyn Bragg’s (2016) radio programme *In Our Time* on Margery Kempe, I was convinced that she was a perfect choice for this enquiry. Margery’s story itself is inherently fascinating, but also provides several windows into themes that I wanted students to explore. She opened businesses, for example, and wrestled with the expectations of women within religion. My second choice came from my sixth-form studies – I had completed an Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) on women in power, looking at Matilda, the daughter of Henry I, as a case study. Drawing from Helen Castor’s *She-Wolves* (2010), I thought that the story of the Anarchy would be a fantastic way to help students access the idea where and how women could hold power. Using these two women, I came up with the enquiry question ‘what can two women reveal about the medieval world?’.

My final conundrum was when to use the word ‘gender’, if at all. I worried that students would have too many misconceptions about what gender is, especially given the increased politicisation of the concept, and the fact that what gender really is continues to be contested and debated. Therefore, I thought carefully about what I really wanted students to be doing with gender. I decided to focus in on gender history in particular, realising that I wanted students to explore what

the *expectations* were of women, but also think about where these expectations were not always met. I decided that I did not need to name gender as a substantive concept, and that keeping tightly focused on ‘expectations’ would be more helpful for students to work with. I did feel, however, that students needed to put a name to what we were actually doing with the stories of these women. I knew that I wanted students to have the language to discuss what they had learnt, but I wanted to avoid misconceptions and confusion. Once again I was inspired by Grande. In a blog post discussing hinterland versus core knowledge, Grande suggests that often, by trying to shortcut to core knowledge, we can actually limit understanding of substantive concepts. Instead, by building up hinterland knowledge, using narrative in particular, this can build up a picture which allows both teachers and pupils to access a richer, more secure understanding of the key concept (Grande, 2022b). I wondered if this could apply to historiography, too. Rather than telling pupils at the beginning of the enquiry that we were going to look at ‘gender history’, when they had no understanding of what this actually was, I decided to build up to this by focusing on exploring expected behaviours, and the experiences of these women before introducing the concept [Table 2 provides a more detailed breakdown of the final lesson sequence].

Lesson	Content
Lesson 1	Students learn the story of Matilda, including the succession crisis and the ensuing civil war. They start to think about why it was not straightforward for Matilda to inherit the throne.
Lesson 2	Students learn the story of Margery Kempe, in particular, her religious experiences. They start to think about what this can tell us about religion in the Medieval period.
Lesson 3	Students consider sources in more detail. They look at an extract from the <i>Gesta Stephani</i> to unpick how the author reacted to Matilda’s attempts to gain the throne, and how the author thought that she should have behaved. They also consider the book of Margery Kempe as a source, thinking about what it can reveal about religion, and why some people at the time reacted negatively towards her.
Lesson 4	Students discuss what we have learnt about what was expected of women, and whether these expectations were always adhered to. They are introduced to the concept of gender history. Using the stories of Matilda and Margery, they are asked to write a response discussing why it is useful to look at history from this perspective.

Table 2: Lesson sequence

Data analysis and interpretations

My findings and interpretations are necessarily tentative given that this is a small-scale case study and given the lack of literature on this subject. Since my data is qualitative and the research comes

from an interpretivist standpoint, these findings are suggestions and possibilities – they are my own interpretations of what I observed and are therefore influenced by my own assumptions. Furthermore, it is likely that Year 7 students are still constrained by the language that they have available to them, particularly as I decided not to introduce the language of gender to them directly until the end of the enquiry, and even then, only in the form of ‘gender history’. I have therefore had to read for unconscious motivations or ideas within students work, which can be difficult to ascribe. However, I still endeavoured to strengthen the validity and trustworthiness of my findings by being transparent with my analysis and interpretation, as discussed in my research design.

An additional problem was that many of the students produced very short responses – this was particularly true with one of the classes who had less time to write. Since I did not want to over-scaffold and risk students regurgitating what I had told them, I left the final writing task deliberately open ended. Whilst this stumped some students, it did produce interesting results in other cases.

RQ 1: What ideas about medieval women and gender roles did Year 7 seem to be operating with at the start of the enquiry?

Theme 1: Almost all Year 7 students involved operated with ideas about gender which dichotomised the roles of men and women and positioned women as being ‘less than’ men.

Students were asked to complete a starter activity, answering the questions ‘what do you think life was like for medieval women’ and ‘what do you think medieval people believed about women?’. Almost all students responded in very similar ways – these can be broken down into six general themes as presented in Table 3.

The roles of men and women are dichotomised, with women positioned as being ‘less than’ men.		
1. Women took on domestic roles, like housework or raising children.	2. Women were treated unfairly and had fewer rights than men.	3. Women took up subservient roles.
4. Women were perceived to be less important than men.	5. Life was hard or boring.	6. Women were perceived as being less capable than men.

Table 3: Students’ ideas about medieval gender roles

Table 4 (next page) provides summary of the frequency with which these themes were mentioned.

Theme	Number of mentions
1. Women took on domestic roles, like housework or raising children.	53
2. Women were treated unfairly and had fewer rights than men.	17
3. Women took up subservient roles.	10
4. Women were perceived to be less important than men.	8
5. Life was hard or boring.	20
6. Women were perceived as being less capable than men.	17

Table 4: Frequency with which the six main themes in students' initial ideas were mentioned (out of 49 student responses)

Some answers that were typical of student responses included Sophie and Alia's. Sophie wrote that *'I think life for medieval women was really hard because they weren't treated nicely. I think medieval people thought women were not important and are not trustworthy of having a job and living [at] home by themselves'*. Alia wrote that *'Women were probably the ones doing the housework, and looking after the husband. They would also have to raise children. People would not really care about the women, and wouldn't treat them very well. They would not be in power'*. References to housework and raising children were the most frequent, with 34 out of 51 student responses including these ideas. Interestingly, many of the students' responses were reminiscent of Francis' work, in that many students dichotomised the roles of men and women. Many of the themes positioned women *in comparison* to men, in particular that they had *fewer* capabilities or were *less important* than men. Thus, Isla wrote that *'men thought they were better than women'*, and Ellie wrote that *'men thought they had more power, and women were not as clever'*.

I wondered where these ideas came from. I had expected far more students to respond that they did not know, particularly as students had not studied women specifically in their encounters with the medieval period. Yet, only one lower-attaining student wrote that life for medieval women was 'normal' and that medieval people thought 'nothing' about women. All other students held strikingly similar assumptions about medieval women. In an interview I asked a group of four students where they thought these ideas had come from. They responded that that was what they had 'heard' about – for example, Liam said that *'you never really hear of any stories'*. Sharla noted that *'men are always the kings'* and that women were *'always the sidekicks, being there, being pretty'*. All four of the students also mentioned learning about the suffragettes, in particular, learning about Emily Davidson. These students therefore seem to have encountered women's

history in primary school through what Boyd terms the history of ‘great women’ (Boyd, 2019, p.18). This seems to have left them with a fairly flattened view of women in the past – one where they are disempowered, tied to the home and universally seen as inferior.

Theme 2: Most Year 7 students did not seem to be operating with a period-specific set of ideas about women in the past.

Some students responded with period-specific ideas, for example, Malik stated that women were ‘the backbone of farming’, suggesting that he was thinking specifically about the agricultural society that medieval people lived in. A few students also responded that they thought that medieval women were seen as witches. However, many students’ responses suggested that they seemed to view this set of gender roles as being the same and fixed throughout all of history. My mentor and I observed that many of their responses echoed a 1950’s housewife archetype – not only did over half of the students include the idea that women had to do ‘housework’ and ‘raise children’ in their responses, some also specifically used the word ‘housewife’ to describe the role of medieval women. Ellie’s response was particularly revealing of this trend: she wrote that ‘men would have wanted food when they got home from work’.

The interview also proved to be revealing: when talking about the suffragettes, Sharla (a high-attaining student) asked whether the suffragettes were before Matilda and Margery. I was quite surprised at this lack of chronological awareness. Perhaps this was a consequence of students encountering women’s history through the lens of ‘great women’ – getting snapshots of history without being cemented in a broader chronological narrative.

RQ 2: How did pupils’ thinking about medieval women and gender roles appear to shift throughout the enquiry?

Theme 1: Some students saw Matilda and Margery’s stories as exceptions to the rule.

Some students saw Matilda and Margery’s stories as confirming that women were seen as inferior to men and were powerless, and that their agency was an exception to the rule rather than challenging this idea. For example, Ryan’s essay focused on the ways in which Matilda and Margery were restricted by their gender. He stated that their stories revealed that ‘if you were a man you had more rights...women were the opposite, they didn’t have rights.’ Ryan seemed to have

cemented the dichotomy between men and women – women were the ‘opposite’ of men. His amalgamation of Matilda and Margery was presented as an exception to this – acknowledging that although women did not have rights, Matilda ‘didn’t stop trying to be queen’ and Margery ‘escaped prison’. When asked whether the enquiry had changed what they thought about the lives of medieval women, the students that I interviewed also expressed that they still saw the medieval world as being unfair for women. Nicole expressed that ‘men were higher up the hierarchy... that was my view from the start’. Liam went further, suggesting that he had not realised how extreme discrimination about women could be.

This raises a question over how far we need to push students to nuance their view – it is, of course, true that medieval women were seen as the weaker sex, and faced barriers in their lives. Suggesting to students that all medieval women could overcome these barriers, or wanted to, would be a misrepresentation of the past. Yet, Ryan still seems to be operating with a sense that the position of women was fixed. Women ‘did not have’ rights. Women ‘were [a] lower power’. Whilst he stated that women were ‘supposed’ to do housework and stay at home, suggesting that he saw that this was an expectation rather than an unchangeable destiny, he did not seem to grasp that these expectations could really be fluid. Perhaps this was because I did not immediately foreground the idea of expectations – and never really unpacked with students what we mean by ‘expectations’.

Theme 2: Some students saw that there was a set of expectations for women, which were not always met.

On the other hand, some students did see that there was a set of expectations for women. Sharla, for example, acknowledged that these expectations could be challenged. She gave agency to Matilda and Margery, who manipulated the expectations in their society, rather than expectations manipulating them - ‘follow[ing] their own rules and living life how they wanted to’. Her essay more broadly focused on expectations, using Matilda as an example of a powerful woman and stating that her story can ‘reveal a lot about the medieval world and the expectations that they had’. Ellie similarly gave agency to Matilda and Margery, again seeing them as being in control over the expectations people had on them, for example, Matilda’s story showed that women ‘could rule a kingdom and have men support them’. Furthermore, she identified that there is a difference between what was *expected* of women and what they could *actually do*, writing that ‘there was a massive difference between what was expected and what those women actually did.’ Her identification that

some men did support women being on the throne also suggests that she saw that the expectation that women could not rule was not set in stone – it was fluid. Sarah also identified this. Similarly, to Sharla and Ellie, she gave agency to Matilda and Margery in overcoming these expectations - ‘it was expected that [Matilda] was honest and gentle... but she actually did not listen to the barons.’ She also identified that these expectations could be challenged and were not always adhered to – some barons supported Matilda, some did not. The fluidity of expectations was also identified by the students I interviewed. Initially, when asked whether the study had changed their view of what life was like for women they suggested it reinforced their initial ideas, on further discussion both Nicole and Sharla noted that Matilda in particular did manage to work round these expectations – ‘she didn’t get to be queen...but she managed to make sure her son became king’.

Both higher and lower attainers were able to notice this – I was particularly impressed by the contributions of one lower attaining student, Billy. Billy wrote very little for his final essay but made some fantastic points throughout the enquiry. When asked what Margery’s story revealed about the medieval world, he responded that because she was not allowed to preach in church, she preached on the streets instead. Whilst most students simply suggested that Matilda and Margery ‘did what they wanted’, Billy’s response suggests an awareness that Margery had to wrestle *with* the expectations of her society, finding ways around them rather than just disregarding them altogether.

These students could be said to be coming closer to how gender historians work with gender. For example, Scott sees gender as an amalgamation of the effects of institutions, symbols, norms and subjectivities, which are changeable and challengeable, but are still powerful (Scott, 1986, p.1067). However, these students still did not seem to see that gender roles could change *over time*. Whilst students saw that the expectations of women were sometimes different to the reality, they did not specifically reference that these were *medieval* expectations of women.

Theme 3: One student began to wrestle with what expectations actually are

One higher attaining student, Isla, began to wrestle with what expectations actually are. Her essay explicitly referred to ‘expectations’ in her answer. She characterised expectations as being ‘what [people] want to happen, what they believe is right’. She acknowledged that these are not always ‘realistic’, and that to find out more we need to delve ‘further into the lives and minds of people of the past’. Thus, Isla characterised expectations as changeable and only one level of how the past

worked. Furthermore, she linked expectations to the minds and ideas of historical actors, suggesting that she saw that it is historical actors themselves that create these expectations – they are not separate to the people that they are imposed upon. Finally, she accorded great importance to the place of the ‘motivations, ideas and expectations’ of historical actors, claiming that the events of the past are only ‘half the story’. Isla’s emphasis on historical actors and the need to look at expectations of different people across time suggests that she does see these expectations as being fluid *across time*, not just within a specific historical context.

Isla perhaps identified what is at the core of ‘historical perspective’, as characterised by Benger (2020) and Olivey (2022). She saw historical actors as having a capacity for thought and feeling, and saw that these ideas powerfully shaped the worlds that they lived in. On reflection, Isla’s answer reinforced that I should have foregrounded expectations more explicitly – perhaps more students could have been pushed to where Isla was if I had unpacked what ‘expectations’ were in more detail.

Discussion and recommendations

One of the main things that I took away from this enquiry was that I should have really pinned down what aspect of gender I wanted students to explore, and also how *I* was constructing gender myself. Despite having spent three years studying gender history in various forms, I still have not really pinned down exactly what gender *is*. At the beginning of the enquiry, I had wanted to explore how gender and power operated together, how religion and gender operated together, the expectations that medieval people had of women *and* how women responded to and worked within these expectations. Still, this does not encompass the significant body of literature theorising gender and its operation in the past. Therefore, instead of trying to do as much as possible with gender, I should have focused in on what specifically I wanted students to take from the enquiry. As it happened, we ended up focusing on expectations. Because this focus developed throughout the enquiry, rather than appearing at the outset, I did not explore more closely exactly what expectations were. Perhaps if I had explored this more closely with Year 7, more pupils might have identified that expectations did not necessarily equal destiny – students like Ryan might have been pushed further beyond their initial assumptions. Therefore, going forward in my own practice, I would make expectations themselves the key point of the enquiry – perhaps using an enquiry question along the lines of ‘What did medieval people expect of women?’.

It was also clear that in whatever ways students had met women's history previously, it had left them pretty much unanimously with the idea that women were confined to the home, were weaker, and held very little power (RQ1, theme 1: Table 3, Table 4). The lack of chronological awareness and the feeling that women only appeared as sidekicks expressed by the students that I interviewed suggested that primary school history has a profound influence of students' ideas about life for women in the past. Furthermore, the similarity between students' initial responses about gender roles and the themes found by Becky Francis (Francis, 1997; 1998) suggests that student responses could also have been influenced by current discourse surrounding gender. I would argue that these ideas really need to be challenged. How can we begin to get students to see people in the past as complex people with thoughts and feelings when half the people of the past have essentially been reduced to a caricature? As Boyd argues, teaching women's history properly is simply good history (Boyd, 2019, p.18). Not only is giving children this idea of women a misrepresentation of the past, it feeds in further to the impression of a deficit past. It could be argued that we do not need to be exploring the past through a gendered lens with students to correct this assumption about women – Boyd's work suggests that putting them back into the stories we teach can give a more nuanced picture of the past and the women who lived in it. However, I question whether we can really be doing justice to the lived experiences of women without exploring gender, in particular through the social norms which shaped the worlds that they lived in. For example, Ryan showed in his answer that he had come away with some understanding of the stories of Matilda and Margery. However, he did not see their stories as showing that expectations could be challenged – the things that they did manage to achieve were anomalies. Thus, his response does not capture the complexity of the Anarchy, and the divide it created, which can only really be explained through the fact that these social norms *could* be fluid and *could* be challenged. Although I acknowledge that my findings have to be tentative, many of the students that I worked with did seem to come away with a more nuanced view of medieval women (RQ2, theme 2) – and they at least came away with the knowledge of two medieval women, presented to them as historical actors with their own agency – both Sharla and Ellie presented Margery and Matilda as being in control of their actions (RQ2, theme 2). Furthermore, given the prominence of gender history within academia, it seems strange that there is almost a complete absence in the school history curriculum.

Finally, I would like to make the case more strongly for the inclusion of historical perspective in school history curricula. Gender is tied up with identity – and the workings of gender cannot be separated from the ideas and beliefs that historical actors were operating with. Of course, identity is

complex. We cannot actually know how either Margery or Matilda experienced womanhood, or whether either woman saw themselves as challenging gender norms. However, doing this enquiry reinforced Olivey's (2019) suggestion that similarity and difference would not necessarily be the best second-order concept to explore identity. Using similarity and difference would have problematised a concept that students had not been introduced to in the first place. I think Isla is right when she says that the events of the past are only half the picture – the identities and ideas of people in the past had powerful influences on their lives, and they are worth exploring with students. Trying to get students like Ryan to differentiate between Margery and Matilda's experiences, for example, might have been counterproductive, since his answer shows that he was already struggling with the idea of gender roles.

In conclusion, teaching medieval history through a gendered lens was not easy. However, I would argue that it is well worth doing. It gives us a way to explore the lives of women which acknowledges the significant role that gender played in medieval society, but also acknowledges that women did have agency. It helps to bring historical actors to life. It gets to the core of what I personally find the most interesting about history – the ideas that they held, and their perspective on the world that they lived in.

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