

History 2159B
Midwives, Madonna, Witches, & Whores: Women in Early Modern Europe
Winter 2026

Instructor: Dr. Sara Morrison

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Office: Department of History, Stevenson Hall 2124

Office Hours: Monday 1:00-2:00; Tuesday 11:00-12:00

This is a **draft** outline. Please see the course site on OWL Brightspace for a final version.

Course Description

This course provides critical perspectives on the lives of European women 1500 to 1700. Students analyze early modern perceptions, life cycle, individuals, and various roles of women: wife, mother, nun, martyr, midwife, citizen, soldier, worker, property owner, and artist, plus female rulers and regents.

Although Europe did not yet exist in 1500, the world of “Christendom” extended over present-day western and central Europe. During the early modern period, the witch-hunting craze and the reformation is often considered a time of setbacks for women as they lost economic and political power, along with the prestige they had enjoyed during the Middle Ages. The age also produced female rulers: Mary Queen of Scots, Mary Tudor, Elizabeth I in England, Queen Isabella in Castile and Christina of Sweden. Several Queen Mothers stood in as regents for their underage sons in France during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Catherine de Medici, Marie de Medici and Anne of Austria.

The course explores some of the questions engaging early modern historians studying women in Europe: Did women have a renaissance? Were women inferior or more sinful than men? What was the everyday life for women in different occupations and social groups? How did life cycle influence status? Was life influenced by the reformation and the dissolution of monastic houses in Protestant countries like England? What role did Angela Merici play in the Catholic reformation in sixteenth century Italy? What impact, if any, did a significant cluster of women rulers and regents have in early modern Europe? These are just some of the questions to be addressed in a thematic analysis of the recent historical literature concerned with early modern women, which explores contemporary perceptions and the reality of their everyday lives.

Anti-requisite(s): History 2459F/G

Course Syllabus

Through class lectures, readings, films, oral or written discussions, students will consider the role of women in early modern Europe. Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:

1. Think historically about women, understanding contemporary perceptions and the reality of their everyday lives in early modern Europe.
2. Learn basic content, themes and important events 1500-1700 (the renaissance, reformation, scientific revolution and the enlightenment) and the role women played in these events in the social, economic, religious, cultural, political and military history of Europe.
3. Critically read, summarize, and analyze secondary sources.
4. Understand that historians have biases or perspectives — a product of their life experiences and the times in which they lived and wrote.
5. Understand how things change over time and recognize that the past may be interpreted from different perspectives.

Students are encouraged to attend lectures so they can ask questions and engage more fully with the world inhabited by early modern women. Compared with today, the rules of behaviour, and standards were very different for women 1500-1700. Europe also looked very different; some countries we recognize today were not yet formed. To provide a mental map of Europe c. 1500, students will write a short map quiz. Students will also write a midterm & final exam based on lectures, readings, discussions, and in-class activities. Throughout the term students will have the opportunity to reflect on course topics and their developing ideas in a reflection journal, due on 31 March.

Methods of Evaluation

Students must complete two exams to pass this course:

Map Quiz	10%	20 Jan 2026	In-Class
Mid-term exam	40%	10 Feb 2026	In-Class
Journal	10%	Ongoing due	31 March
Final exam	40%	Date & Locations:	TBA - Final Exam Period

Exams

Students take **two exams**: one two-hour in-class mid-term during class time on Tuesday 10 February 2026, and a three-hour final exam, to be scheduled during the Final Exam Period by the Registrar's Office. Both exams will feature a selection of short written answer questions and a choice of essay questions (one essay for the midterm and two essays for the final). Electronic devices of any kind (e.g., phones) are not permitted to be carried, or near to the student during exams. No video or audio recording permitted in class.

Make-up tests, midterms, and exams can only be approved by Academic Advising. Please see https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for department procedures and requirements involving make-up tests and exams. If accommodation is granted, the designated make-up date will be assigned by the History department.

Course-specific conditions. You must complete all course assignments in order to pass this course.

Course Preparation Advice

In preparation for students to do well in this course: before attending class lectures, read over the assigned text (a paper copy in the library and available for purchase) and other readings (freely available on Weldon's Course Readings site for History 2158B); use the opportunity to take part in class discussions and in-class exercises; also think about questions raised during the lectures within the wider context. Attendance and participation are important to success, and provide opportunities to ask questions. Students attending weekly lectures and discussions are better prepared for the evaluations; note students are responsible for signing the weekly class sheet, which helps me to learn your names. If you miss a class, you are responsible for accessing any notes related to missed classes; if you require further clarification, I am happy to answer questions after class and during office hours.

Course Materials

Merry Wiesner Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* 4th edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

[<https://www.cambridge.org/ph/academic/subjects/history/european-history-after-1450/women-and-gender-early-modern-europe-4th-edition>.] Paper copy in Weldon library.

N.Z. Davis, *Women on the Margins. Three Seventeenth Century Lives* (1997)

Second hand copies are widely available; if you wish to purchase copies from Western bookstore: students will also be able to see this information on their Personal Textbook list. https://bookstore.uwo.ca/textbook-search?campus=UWO&term=W2024A&courses%5B0%5D=001_UW/HIS2159AURL

All additional materials consisting of book chapters, articles, and illustrations will be available on the course website or through the Western Libraries Course Readings for History 2159B. Weekly Reading List will be found on the final version of the syllabus on the OWL Brightspace course website, prior to the beginning of classes.

Course Schedule and Readings

6 Jan	Introduction to Women and Gender 1500-1700; Europe in 1500 Wiesner Hanks (WH) Introduction; Map of Europe c. 1453)
13 Jan	Ideas about Women (WH Ch. 1)
20 Jan	The Body: The Female Life Cycle (WH Ch. 2) Map Quiz 10%
27 Jan	The Early Modern Midwife (Weldon Course Reading)
3 Feb	Working Women & the Economy: Rural & Urban (WH Ch 3)
10 Feb	Mid-term (40%)
17 Feb	Reading Week
24 Feb	Students & Scholars (WH Ch 4) <i>On the Margins</i> : Marie of the Incarnation
3 March	Exceptional Women: Artists, Scientists and Writers (WH Ch 5) <i>On the Margins</i> : Maria Sibylla Merian.
10 March	Women & Popular Religion in Christendom Catholicism (medieval & reformed); Protestantism (mainstream to radical) (WH Ch 6: 201-243) <i>On the Margins</i> : Marie of the Incarnation
17 March	The Other”: Heretics, Jews, Muslims & Witches Jewish & Muslim Women’s Life, (WH Ch 6: 243-251) Witchcraft (WH Ch 7) <i>On the Margins</i> : Gluckl of Hameln
24 March	Queenship & Power: Female Rulers in Europe 1450-1700
31 March	Women on the Margins Reflection Journal (10%) due 31 March
7 April	Summary and Review
Final Exam December exam period (40%)	

Additional Statements

Communication policies: The best way to contact me is by email, after class or during office hours. Please write using your UWO email account as it is less likely to end up in spam. If my office hours do not fit your schedule, I am happy to talk after class or try to arrange an alternative time to meet. Office hours are useful to clarify any issues concerning the course but are also an opportunity for further discussion.

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Classroom behavior: Please turn off your phone and use laptops for notetaking only.

Use of electronic devices: Participants in this course are not permitted to record the sessions. No electronic devices are permitted during tests and examinations.

Copyright and Intellectual Property: PowerPoint lecture slides and notes are typically the intellectual property of the instructor. Unauthorized reproduction through audio-recording, video-recording, photographing, sharing on social media, or posting on course-sharing websites is an infringement of copyright, and is prohibited.

Use of generative artificial intelligence (AI):

You may not make any use of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, for any assignments in this course.

Please review the Department of History's shared policies and statements for all undergraduate courses at: https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for important information regarding accessibility options, make-up exams, medical accommodations, health and wellness, academic integrity, plagiarism, and more.

1 June 2025