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Abstract

This essay explores the challenge — and importance — of teaching gender- and sexuality-focused medieval studies in the undergraduate classroom. It particularly considers pedagogy in the Southeastern United States and teaching students who come from backgrounds with a strong focus on censoring practical and non-normative knowledge about gender, sex, and sexuality. Drawing on Miranda Fricker's theory of hermeneutical injustice, this essay argues that medieval literature provides a crucial space for students to recognize and resist the silences and distortions surrounding their own sex education. By exploring the inventive, playful, and creative ways that medieval texts approach sex and gender, students learn to see the unjust limits of their own education and are invited to see and explore — through traditional and creative class projects — alternative ways, new and historical, of understanding sex, gender, and sexuality.

When I first began teaching a course called "Medieval Sex Ed: Sex, Gender, and the Body in Medieval Literature" in the spring of 2018, I was surprised by several students' explanations for joining the class.[1] At the time, I was teaching at Birmingham-Southern College, a small liberal arts college in Alabama whose student body was largely from the Southeastern United States. In their start-of-class surveys, students expressed their eagerness to connect the medieval with the modern. My students felt that the various forms of sex education they had received had been in some sense "medieval." Writing with a sort of terrible cheerfulness, one student, a rising junior from rural Mississippi, explained the matter succinctly: "I feel like I've already had medieval sex ed! No practical knowledge, creepy euphemisms, and awkward silences where no one acknowledges HUGE gaps in the discussion? I want to know what medieval jousting coaches were saying."

Many other students also spoke of encountering such gaps in their state-mandated, abstinence-only middle and high school classrooms, as well as the feelings of shame, guilt, and fear (rather than practical knowledge or curiosity) that such spaces sought to cultivate. These gaps and their attendant feelings of shame were and are familiar to me as someone who grew up in the rural Deep South. In the absence of concrete and affirming talk about sex, gender, and the body, the institutional and social structures of school, church, and home inevitably create a culture of suppression, shame, and silence. Desires and bodies are discussed neither directly nor practically but through obscene comparisons: people are like tape that has lost its stick, like chewed up gum, like wild, uncontrolled animals. Particular forms of sexuality and sex are described primarily in whispers and snickers — "he loves his mama, too much;" "they're all on the path to Sodom and Gomorrah." Many forms of life and embodiment are deliberately never described or discussed at all.

In the years since I first began teaching this course, I have discovered that this initial class was not an anomaly. Many students come to my medieval literature classes expecting to find — and are purposely seeking out — resonances between the medieval and modern. And they are particularly interested in cultural silences. They want to hear about medieval censorship, the ways that medieval authority figures and texts obscured knowledge about sex, gender, and the body. Some students pursue study of medieval sex and sexuality because they want at least one culture, at least one person, to have had a worse experience than they have had. Others are looking for trans-historical, trans-generational community, searching for traces of their own lives and experiences in earlier generations. My students have, often unconsciously, articulated a desire for knowledge about

[1] My thanks to Lauren Pawlak who helped me craft the title for this class many years ago.

sex and sexuality, a knowledge that can stop them from feeling so ashamed and isolated. They are in search of knowledge that can comfort them as they confront the damaging lessons with which they have grown up.

My students are inevitably surprised by what they encounter in medieval literature because it goes against the understanding of the Middle Ages that they've gathered from the popular imaginary. In popular culture, the Middle Ages are still very much a Dark Ages, a time marked by rigid moralizing overseen by constrictive religion and a corrupt church, by deep sexual repression and the violent subjugation of women and the marginalized (Hines 2022). When they actually encounter the medieval, students are surprised, however, to discover that many categories of sex/gender/sexuality were less rigid in the Middle Ages than they are now. And while some of the texts we study together contain elements that many students expect — efforts to control, police, or obscure knowledge — medieval texts are also often curious, playful, and inventive when it comes to questions of embodiment and desire. Medieval texts like Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae* or Etienne de Fougères's *Livre des Manières* railed about the sin of sodomy: about male subjects that act like predicates and take the passive part (Alain de Lille 1972, 3), or women who joust without a lance and behave too mannishly (Etienne de Fougères 2001; Amer 2008). Such texts invoke social shaming and advocate for the repression of "sinful" types of gendered behavior and sexual desire. But those texts also existed alongside the proliferation of medieval representations of Jesus birthing the church from his side wound (Sexon 2021). They kept cultural company with Julian of Norwich's theorization of a gender-binary challenging god (Moncion 2018) and with Ovidian retellings that, to us in the modern day, echo contemporary narratives of trans embodiment and celebrate queer love and desire in tales like those of Iphis and Ianthe, Narcissus, and Caeneus (Traub et al. 2019).

It is in these surprising spaces of inventiveness, even playfulness, around sex, gender, and desire that I first encountered the Middle Ages, and they are what initially convinced me — a queer, working class, undergraduate student from the rural Deep South — that a close study of the Middle Ages would be personally and politically valuable. I had grown up in the shadow of a Loretta Lynn feminism (Martínez 2022), in an Appalachian family that espoused the importance of birth control and abortion access and praised women's strength and outspokenness (at least when it came to protecting family and home). Such feminism meant that I knew enough to identify that at least some of what I was taught in my Alabama public school health class was a lie. But I had also already learned the particular silences and limits of the brand of feminism with which I had grown up. How such feminism could be a trap constricting my knowledge of myself and the world, and how little such feminism had to offer me as I reconsidered my prescribed identity as a straight, cis girl. My language for that reconsideration, however, was paltry, as were my resources for exploring new ways of being in the world. What

my first encounters with the Middle Ages offered me were new ways of knowing and understanding the world as, through study of the medieval, I was exposed to new narratives and new languages for thinking about sex, gender, and sexuality.[2] Some of these narratives were resonant with my experience and, in that resonance, allowed me to seek transhistorical community. I could see my own wrestling with gender in Silence's grappling with identity in *Le Roman de Silence* (Heldris 1992) and my hope for queer romance in John Gower's version of the Iphis legend in the *Confessio Amantis* (Hines 2024). But most valuable for me were narratives that were refreshingly alien and invitingly unfamiliar: descriptions of Jesus as a mother (Bynum 1984), visions of the universe as a cosmic, yonic egg (Hildegard von Bingen 1985), *Yönec* and its description of falling in love with a hawk-man (Marie de France 2018). Even if I didn't want to replicate every form of embodiment or desire described, these narratives made me aware—in new and generative ways—that there had been and could be other hermeneutic frameworks for talking about bodies and desire than the ones in which I had been inculcated. These narratives taught me that one of the best ways to discover other ways of knowing is through playful exploration and through the imaginative stretching of language and metaphor.

Part of what study of the Middle Ages did for me, and part of what it does for my students, is that, through both its kinship and its unfamiliarity, it makes apparent the particular forms of silence and obscurement that shape gender/sex/sexuality in our own cultural discourses and practices. It also offers new ways of thinking around and against that obscurement. I have found the philosophy of Miranda Fricker (2007) to be especially helpful in making sense of why we need that unfamiliar space to think through sexuality and sexual identity. In her groundbreaking work on epistemic injustice, which Fricker defines as "a wrong… done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower," she details a type of epistemic injustice that occurs on the level of language and narrative, an injustice she calls hermeneutical injustice (1). Fricker explains that hermeneutical injustice occurs "when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences" (1). The causes of this gap are various. Censorship is perhaps the most obvious — an outright attempt by a person or institution to prevent others' access to information in order to widen a gap in the others' knowledge. But such gaps can also be caused by other forms of distortion and obscurement that seek to alter a person's language for and perception of the world. They can occur via elision, through acts, deliberate and accidental, of cultural forgetting. Over time, these gaps in knowledge work to

[2] Special thanks are owed Matthew Irvin who was my first, invaluable guide into the Middle Ages in "Non-Chaucerian Medieval Literature" at Sewanee. I owe thanks, too, to Pamela Macfie and Julie Berebitsky, both of whose instruction in gender and sexuality studies opened my eyes to the power of language and narrative in re-imagining the world.

permanently alter and even erase peoples' perceptions of who or what forms of life have existed and can exist (147–75).

Recently the United States has seen an increase in political efforts to enact hermeneutical injustices, particularly those associated with sex, gender, and the body: from censorship of queer and trans texts and bodies in public libraries and schools (Kuhn 2024), to funding cuts for LGBTQ+ and sex positive sex education (Cieslik 2025), to attempts to create narrative distortion by suppressing histories of sex, gender, and the body in government institutions (Gordon-Reed 2025). Acts of hermeneutical injustice have always existed. Fricker analyzes the ways that both the feminist and queer rights movements of the mid-twentieth century sought to combat narrative censorship and hermeneutic lacunae (147–75), and recent work on this topic has also identified key premodern manifestations of hermeneutical injustice dating back to classical antiquity (Bowen et al. 2024). As many of my students and I can attest from our own experiences, the Southeastern United States has long been (and remains) a testing ground for political structures that work to perpetuate distorted, frequently misogynistic, homophobic, and racist views of embodiment and desire through hermeneutical injustice. Indeed, policies like abstinence-only sex education in schools, rampant book bans, and openly transphobic and homophobic laws were once the purview of so-called Southeastern "red states," where the state-level government has been gerrymandered to keep conservative politicians in power. Now, these strategies are being deployed on the national stage at an unprecedented rate and speed (Wehle 2025).

Learning that narrative and linguistic silences and distortions are a form of injustice was one of the most powerful tools of perception that study of the medieval encouraged in me and that I, in turn, seek to give to my students in "Medieval Sex Ed." It is less that I fulfill students' expectations that they will find replicas of their own injustices repeated — although it is important that we do some measure of that work. Students need to learn that ideologies and social narratives like, for example, anti-sodomy discourse and the anti-feminist literary tradition do not occur in a vacuum. They have origins, and even then, there were writers and thinkers who pushed back against them. We therefore read selections from anti-feminist texts like Mathieu of Boulogne's influential *Liber Lamentationum Matheoluli* and Jean le Févre's *Les Lamentations de Matheoulus* alongside Geoffrey Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*, studying how medieval anti-feminist texts worked to construct literary invective and misogynist critique of women as a source of entertainment for audiences – and how Chaucer and Christine used humor and allegory to deflate and critique that anti-feminist mode in turn.

Even more critically, however, one of the strongest countermeasures for hermeneutical injustice lies in learning that there have been other ways of perceiving the world than the ones in which we have been fostered and in exploring them.

Medieval literature is an ideal locus for exactly that sort of knowledge seeking. In close reading, for example, the dense symbolic imagery surrounding the figure of the stag-horned, white hind who curses Marie de France's titular Guigemar, we can see the complexity of medieval treatments of gender and sex. The intersex hind is extraordinary in every way, but the *lai* does not condemn the hind for being unnatural, nor does it represent the deer's mixed sex as deviant. Rather, the hind's embodiment and arrival in the narrative signal an important invitation for the reader and Guigemar alike to think more deeply, more exploratively, about sex, gender, and the body. Before his encounter with the deer, the young Guigemar had been dangerously closed off: "De tant i out mespris Nature / Ke unc de nul[e] amur n'out cure [Only in this did Nature make a mistake with him: / that he never had any interest in love]" (Marie de France 2018, lines 57–58). The hind, however, fatally wounded by Guigemar in a hunt, compels Guigemar via a complex curse to embark on a quest for love. That quest will be full of great hardship – both he and his eventual beloved suffer for love with "Issi grant peine e tel dolur [such great pain and sorrow]" that no one else will have suffered as much in loving as they do (line 116). But that quest will also lead Guigemar to understand the paucity of his former life with his lack of attention to understanding either his desires or those of others. That this quest is initiated by the stag-hind draws attention to the important way that narrative plays with categories of "natural" and "unnatural" sex and gender. This sort of play, symbolized and initiated by the deer in *Guigemar*, was — and is — an invitation to self-reflection and exploration, an opportunity for critically rethinking and testing the boundaries of what a person thinks they want and what they think they know about themselves and the world. For many students today, the Middle Ages is distant enough in time and culture to feel like a safe space for exploring alternative cultural narratives — without directly threatening dearly-held contemporary ideologies. Student readers of *Guigemar* are able, without being cursed by a magical white deer, to self-reflect and explore within the relative safety of a literary studies classroom.

I'll conclude with a final practical note outlining pedagogical exercises from my "Medieval Sex Ed" class that facilitate students' individual reckonings with hermeneutical injustice. Throughout the semester, students are tasked with keeping a commonplace book.[3] At least once a week, students must record two passages from their reading that resonate with them. They write down each quotation in full and briefly detail their responses to it, flagging points of interest, question, confusion, and/or irritation. The goal is to encourage both attention and accumulation. In keeping a record, students are encouraged to recall and to reflect

[3] Inspiration for this assignment comes from Jill Hamilton Clements.

on their experience of a text, to consider the places that feel familiar to them but also strange.

Commonplace books also lay the foundation for students' final project: a zine. As a form of ephemera produced non-professionally, typically for a small audience, zines bear some resemblance to medieval commonplace books, but they are the more immediate product of the punk and counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and 70s. Zines are therefore typically invested in amplifying countercultural narratives and viewpoints. Multi-generic and multi-modal, zines collect pieces of literature, art, and ephemeral scraps, combining them into a single pamphlet often focused around a central theme, event, or aesthetic/political statement (Vale 1996). In my class, students are tasked with drawing on course materials that have interested them throughout the semester to craft a zine that takes inspiration from medieval narratives in order to counter a contemporary hermeneutical injustice. Their zines can be practical, correcting historical elisions or censorship by, for example, telling a forgotten story of a medieval person or event, or outlining a long history of anti-sodomy discourse. But challenges to hermeneutical injustice also frequently happen in narrative encounters that are less straightforwardly corrective. These kinds of challenges can be found in works like Julian of Norwich's *Showings* that represent Christ as a loving mother, for example, or in the debates between Nature, Nurture, and Reason about identity and embodiment in *Le Roman de Silence*. Such texts offer complex, frequently confusing or surprising, alternative narratives to those that are dominant in contemporary American culture. I thus encourage students not only to think practically but also to embrace that which is strange and confusing, surprising and inventive, in their own zine. I invite them to retell stories, representing narratives in new and exciting ways through language and images, or to pair surprising texts and ideas together in order to explore the hermeneutic boundaries of sex/gender/sexuality.

Cultural silences around the politically fraught spaces of sex, gender, and the body are inevitable. Lurking behind so many of my students' reasons for seeking out a class called "Medieval Sex Ed" is a sort of despair over their own education into these spaces and a fear of what the future might hold. They are not wrong to fear as much. This class offers students at this particularly fraught political moment what study of the Middle Ages has offered to me since I was an undergraduate: namely, a space of historical, narrative play and experimentation, a site for learning counter narratives and even developing strategies for navigating around and through cultural silence and elision. The medieval offers a space from which and through which to imagine other ways of being in the world, ways that reveal and resist the obstructions of hermeneutical injustice.

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