

ENG-462-01 Gender & Sexuality in Medieval Literature  
Abstracts

**Course Overview**

Our course, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval Literature, examined the construction of gender identities and sexual orientations in British and French literature from the eighth century to the fifteenth century CE. The students addressed the historical continuity and change in classifications of femininities and masculinities, as well as the development of related ideas about sexual orientation in marriage, family, and class structure. All the students worked diligently and gained an understanding of how gender intersected with social, economic, political, educational, and religious structures in premodern Europe, as they considered the merits of various critical and theoretical approaches to gender over the past several decades.

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**Presenter: Maxwell Chase:** “For wel he wiste a womman hath no berd”: Transgression and Hegemonic Masculinity in Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*

This gender and queer theory analysis of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale* offers insight not only into the tale, but also into Chaucer’s personal sexual life and gender expression. Each of the characters in the tale showcase gaps and dissonances from the societal gender and sexual norms. These characters are also signals pointing towards Chaucer’s own leanings as an individual, not just as an author. Working in the frame of previous Chaucerian scholarship on the *Miller’s Tale*, my research supplies evidence of the fourteenth-century sexual and gender norms in which the poet lived and worked. Through this analysis, I conclude that it was Chaucer’s own transgressive sexuality that influenced his decision to deliberately write characters that challenge hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, and the societally established gender roles. (Image: Huntington Library, EL 26 C 9 f. 40v)



**Presenter: Tori Congdon:** “I’m a mirrorball:” Gender Nonconformity, Homosocial and Homoerotic Bonding, and Phallic Imagery in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*

Gender and queer theory allows intersectionality and complexity as it poses questions among various forms of art and literature; and it is no different for Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. This paper specifically focuses on the gender nonconformity embedded in the Canterbury pilgrims and how that nonconformity affected the types of tales they tell on their trip to Canterbury. In addition, this paper explores Chaucer’s own views of gender and sexuality and how that may have affected him in the composition of *The Canterbury Tales*. Previous scholars in this

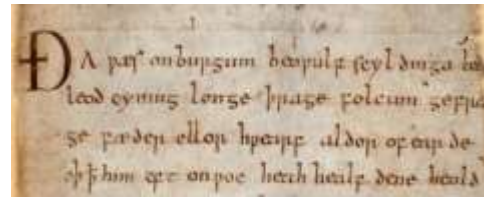


field examined “star” characters like Harry Bailey or the Wife of Bath and how not only gender and sexuality have affected their narrative. Building on their work, I examined less significant characters such as the Friar and the Reeve and how their descriptions and relationships influence their gender performance, and how Chaucer carried these aspects into his alter-ego character, Pilgrim Chaucer. Poet Chaucer plays with the spectrum of gender; even though these characters are inherently gender nonconforming, they all still perform their gender at different levels. As a result, we see Chaucer’s perception of gender may have been varied and strayed from the expectations of the fourteenth century. (Huntington Library MS EL 26 C 9 f. 72r)

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### **Gabby Cassone:** The Perfect Warrior: Gender Performance and Toxic Masculinity in *Beowulf*

In the anonymous epic poem of *Beowulf*, I explore the gaps and dissonances between men and women; and what we see from this is toxic masculinity and homoerotic tension that support and challenge the Anglo-Saxon patriarchy. My analysis explores research the questions: Do men feel as though they need to act in a toxic way towards one another because of masculine competition? Why are women painted as such powerless beings? Using the findings of Butler and Marylin Gottschall I fundamentally find that gender and sexuality are calcified in Anglo Saxon poetry and the poem itself offers no mitigation to the strict normativity of gender performance and sexual orientation. (Image: British Library Cotton Vitellius A VX f.130r)



### **Maia Hoffmann:** “I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare”: Chaucer’s *General Prologue* and the Disruption of Gender Expression

In Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, specifically the *General Prologue*, I explore gender theory and gender expressions in characters such as the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner, and the Knight. What I discovered is these characters are surprisingly heterodox. Moreover, there are significant gaps between expectations and characterization when we look at hegemonic expectations of knights, women, and secular clergy. Upon comparison we see that the Pardoner, the Wife, and the Knight defy stereotypical feminine and masculine attributes. All three exemplify an open mesh of possibilities and dissonances within their sexuality and break fourteenth-century gender roles and gendered expectations. Their sexual and gender defiance becomes even more important when examining Pilgrim Chaucer as a narrator. Ultimately, Poet Chaucer uses all four characters to question, complicate, and ultimately break formulaic gender



expressions in the fourteenth century. (Image: Huntington Library MS EL 26 C 9 f. 138r)

**Sarah Keithan:** Queering Geoffrey Chaucer: The Gender Binary, Hegemony and Code Switching in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*

In the fourteenth century *Tale of Sir Thopas*, Geoffrey Chaucer assigns himself the role of the story's narrator, Pilgrim Chaucer. Both Pilgrim Chaucer and the tale's main character, Sir Thopas, deviate from fourteenth-century expected gender norms. While gender expression was strictly policed by the fourteenth-century church, Chaucer created his characters Pilgrim Chaucer and Sir Thopas to deliberately misalign with the expected gender binary. In the late fourteenth century, the hegemony of gender also ensured individuals positions within the socioeconomic hierarchy. This paper seeks to answer the questions: why did Geoffrey Chaucer make the decision to mock the foundational fourteenth-century rules of gender? How does that gendered ridicule also function as socioeconomic satire? Using the work of Butler and Sedgwick, I concluded that Pilgrim Chaucer and his story reflect Geoffrey Chaucer's coded, non-conforming gender expression and satire of the medievalist estate structure. (Image: Huntington Library MS EL 26 C 9 f. 151v)



**Alicia Labrecque:** Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: The Representation of Women in *Beowulf* and Ælfric's *Judith* as a Mirror for Anglo-Saxon Gender Roles

This essay explores how Anglo-Saxon gender norms are reflected in the Cotton Vitellius A VX manuscript, specifically the poems *Beowulf* and *Judith*. By contrasting the unknown author's *Beowulf* and Ælfric's *Judith* we see how historical events can also affect whether gender norms are problematized and coded in late Anglo-Saxon literature. This essay evaluates the female representation in these two poems through the gendered lenses of patriarchal ideas, homosocial bonding, privilege, and public fantasies. What we see are problematic intersection points between literature, cultural expectations and the historical events between @780-1000 CE. Ultimately, I conclude that divergence from these norms is not absolute. (Image: Judith, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV, f. 205r)



**Kaitlyn Michaud:** Typical Male? : Gender Performance, Identity, and Roles in Geoffrey Chaucer's *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*

It is *de riguer* for researchers like Jill Mann and Tyson Pugh to examine the socioeconomic structure within Chaucer's, *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, this paper examined the gender of specific characters, the Wife of Bath, Prioress, Summoner, and Pardoner, as well as their corresponding economic estates. This paper examines four specific characters from Chaucer's poem: the Wife of Bath, Prioress, Summoner, and Pardoner; and it asks the question – how does their gender performance intersect with their social class?

(Image: Huntington Library MS EL 26 C 9 f.81 r)



**Kyra Miles**

So, What's The Punchline?: A Queer Analysis of the Execution of Androgynous Language in Geoffrey Chaucer's Parody Tale, *The Tale of Sir Thopas*

Traditional medieval literature scholars such as Donaldson and Mann claim that Geoffrey Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* is just a parody of romantic literature. But is that all? Is there a deeper, gendered parody embedded in the poem? The cleverest jokes contain underlying meanings and, as my essay proves, Chaucer's tale lives up to that reputation. An analysis of fourteenth-century social ideologies and the range of gender performance in the poem, shows that the tale is not simply a parody of romantic literature, but also a parody of Flemish knighthood and masculinity itself. The main purpose of this dissertation is to draw attention to the various ways that Chaucer creates and transforms queer meaning in the parody tale, *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, as well as to clarify why these hidden elements are in what seems to be an innocent parody. It considers the ecclesiastic and social practices of fourteenth century England. My research analyzes each aspect of "othering" in *Thopas's* characters and plot. It discusses the gender binary (or lack thereof) in the tale, as well as the homosocial relationships and transgressive sexuality in the characters – including Pilgrim Chaucer the tale-teller. We see that Chaucer felt it necessary to insert himself into the tale to portray his views about sexuality and gender without punishment. (Image: Huntington Library MS EL 26 C 9 f. 142v)



**Hannah Nicholson**

Battle of the Sexes: *Beowulf* and the Destruction of Anglo-Saxon Gender Normativity

*Beowulf* (@780) shifts the primary focus of Anglo-Saxon epic poetry away from the traditional male hero. Instead, the poem presents female characters as central and fundamental figures. This essay explores the roles of women in *Beowulf* in a contextual examination utilizing Judith Butler's gender theory. The women within *Beowulf* and eighth-century Anglo-Saxon culture are typically perceived as subservient to the patriarchy and as having no significance or weight in the literary world. This paper specifically scrutinizes this assumption by examining the smaller victories of the female characters as they tackle and mold political powers, peace keeping forces, and the depiction of unorthodox monsters. (Image: British Library Cotton Vitellius A XV f. 167r)





## Josh Sobchak

### A Lady of High Degree: Feminism in the Works of Marie de France

Marie de France, (c. 1140–1200), was a woman who used both her background as a highly educated nun and aristocrat, as well as her poetic skill, to put forth a more equal literary world with regards to women's roles in the late twelfth century. Looking into both the historical background and the works of feminist scholars, I demonstrate that Marie uses her poem, or *lais*, to argue for gender equality. I choose to focus on four *lais*- 'Lanval', "Le Fresne", "Chaitivel", and "Yonec." The *lais* also provide space for male allyship as well as female solidarity. (Image: British Library Harley 978 f. 42v)

