Love, Sex, and Desire in the Middle Ages (LT 20)

In the Middle Ages, as today, the categories which organised love, sex, and desire were sites of contest and argument. This course explores these contested zones to ask how love, in all of its varied forms, shapes medieval literature and culture. From devotional writings to manuals for seduction, a vast array of medieval texts examine licit and illicit desires. Each seminar attempts to approach the difficult and obscure realm of love from a new direction, but, as will be seen, different kinds of text and different ways of thinking overlap to a considerable degree. Each seminar invites participants to read a number of ‘core’ primary and secondary materials, which will be circulated electronically in advance.

The ‘Useful background’ section lists a formidable range of theoretical approaches and wide-ranging historical and literary overviews of the medieval period. It would take a very long time to read all of these studies in the detail they require, but dipping into one or two that interest you would be a useful and rewarding exercise; some you might return to later in the term.

Useful background

Some foundational primary materials


St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans.  
[Can be read in any good study Bible, but try to access the Douay-Rheims version, which closely follows the Vulgate. If you wish to consult the Latin text, use *Biblia sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, ed. Robert Weber et al. (5th edn, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007; first pub. 1969).]

Some influential theoretical approaches


**Important wide-ranging studies**


—— *Sex and the New Medieval Literature of Confession, 1150–1300* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2009).


Nicolette Zeeman, ‘*Piers Plowman* and the Medieval Discourse of Desire’ (Cambridge: CUP, 2006).

1. Spiritual desire: The Song of Songs

Primary material


Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermons 1–9 on the *Song of Songs*, in *On the Song of Songs I*, tr. Kilian J. Walsh and Corneille Halflants (Kalamazoo, MI, 1971).


Secondary material


Further reading


[A good starting point for any detailed work on the Gawain-poet]


Denis Renevey, *Language, Self and Love: Hermeneutics in the Writings of Richard Rolle and the Commentaries on the Song of Songs* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2001)

2. Courtly love?

Primary material

Three lyrics (to be circulated in advance):
Bernart de Ventadorn, ‘Can vei la lauzeta mover’
‘With longyng Y am lad’ (MS Harley 2253);
John Gower, ‘De fin amour c’est le droit et nature’, Cinkante Balades


Secondary material


David Aers, Community, Gender, and Individual Identity, English Writing 1360–1430 (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), TROILUS CHAPTER

Further reading


3. Seduction, misogyny, violence

(Some of the materials we will address in this session include scenes of sexual violence; at the beginning of the seminar course we will discuss and decide how or whether to discuss this in the seminar)

**Primary material**


Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Lecoy: the discourse of Ami; the discourse of La Vieille

Chaucer, Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale, in *Riverside Chaucer*.


**Secondary material**


[compare the discussion that emerged in the wake of Bloch’s publication of a version of this piece in *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* 6 (1988), 2-15]


**Further reading**


Peter L. Allen, ‘*Ars amand i, ars legendi*: Love Poetry and Literary Theory in Ovid, Andreas Capellanus, and Jean de Meun’, *Exemplaria* 1 (1989).


4. Ordering the Body

Primary


Secondary


Further reading


