

Like a Virgin: Gender and Sexuality in Medieval and Early Modern European Literature

Upper-division English and Women's Studies course



Course	English 340, Section A / Women's Studies 345, Section A
Instructor	Ms. Jenny Bledsoe
Time and place	T/Th 10:00–11:15am, Buttrick 205
Office hours	T 12:30–1:30pm, Th 11:30am–12:30pm, and by appointment
Office location	Dana Fine Arts Building 107
Contact	jbledsoe@agnesscott.edu

Course description, objectives, and texts

Course description

Reading medieval and early modern European literature alongside recent gender studies scholarship and feminist theory, we will examine how these literary works construct femininity, masculinity, and sometimes a separate, third gender for the chaste monk or nun. From virgin martyrs to cross-dressing saints to castrated theologians, medieval religious literature often shaped the individual's relationship to God through gendered imagery. Bernard of Clairvaux characterized the soul as feminine in a spousal relationship to Christ the bridegroom, and Julian of Norwich represented Jesus as a mother in her *Revelations*. Gender was not conceived in binary terms in medieval literature. One of our primary readings will be *Silence*, a medieval romance that features a cross-dressing daughter (Silence) who transitions to live as a male knight. Our medieval and early modern readings include treatises on idealized female communities, love letters between nuns, antifeminist literature, both Chaucer's and Shakespeare's treatment of the rape of Lucretia, and a fifteenth-century Welsh woman's "Ode to the Vagina." Assignments for the course include several literary analysis papers, a critique of a gender studies article, discussion leadership (in teams of two), and a final revised and expanded paper. The course can fulfill the following SUMMIT requirements: Arts & Humanities, Global Elective, and Global Social & Cultural Analysis. Prerequisite: any 200-level English course.

Learning objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to ...

- ❖ analyze medieval and early modern literature within its historical and cultural context
- ❖ articulate and apply concepts from feminist theory and gender studies to literary works
- ❖ compare and contrast pre-modern and modern conceptions of gender identity and sexual orientation
- ❖ situate their interpretations of medieval and early modern literature, gender, and sexuality within scholarly conversations
- ❖ compose writing assignments and presentations which evaluate texts from interdisciplinary and comparative perspectives
- ❖ understand and practice writing as a recursive process, involving research, drafting, revision, and reflection

Required books and other readings

Required textbooks:

- ❖ William Levitan, trans., *Abelard and Heloise: The Letters and Other Writings* (Hackett Publishing Company, 2007). ISBN: 9780872208759.
- ❖ Sarah Roche-Mahdi, ed. and trans., *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, rev. ed. (Michigan State University Press, 1999). ISBN: 978-0870135439.

These books will also be available on reserve in the library. Since we will read many works in excerpted form, most readings will be available as PDFs on Moodle.

Course policies

Academic honesty policy. The Agnes Scott College honor code embodies an ideal of character, conduct, and citizenship, and is an important part of the College's mission and core identity. This applies especially to academic honesty and integrity. Passing off someone else's work as your own represents intellectual fraud and theft and violates the core values of our academic community. To be honorable, you should understand not only what counts as academic dishonesty, but also how to avoid engaging in these practices. You should:

- ❖ review each course syllabus for the professor's expectations regarding course work and class attendance.
- ❖ attribute all ideas taken from other sources; this shows respect for other scholars. Plagiarism can include portraying another's work and ideas as your own, buying a paper online and turning it in as if it were your own work, or not citing or improperly citing references on a reference page or within the text of a paper.
- ❖ not to falsify or create data and resources or alter a graded work without prior consent of your professor. This includes making up a reference for a works cited page or making up statistics or facts for academic work.
- ❖ not allow another party to do your work/exam or submit the same or similar work in more than one course without permission from the course instructors. Cheating also includes taking an exam for another person, looking on another person's exam for answers, using exams from previous classes without permission, or bringing or using unauthorized notes or resources (i.e., electronic, written, or otherwise) during an exam.
- ❖ not facilitate cheating, which can happen when you help another student complete a take home exam, give answers to an exam, talk about an exam with a student who has not taken it, or collaborate with others on work that is supposed to be completed independently.
- ❖ be truthful about the submission of work, which includes the time of submission and the place of submission (e.g., e-mail, online, in a mailbox, to an office, etc.).

You should understand that penalties result from dishonest conduct, ranging from failure of the assignment to expulsion from the college. You should speak with your professors if you need clarification about any of these policies.

Attendance policy. You will have two personal days for the semester. You do not need to inform me of the reason for your absence, and you may use these personal days as you see fit. These include any days when you are sick (except for extreme circumstances). If you miss no more than two days of class, you will receive a 100 for the attendance portion of your grade. After three absences, the attendance portion of your grade starts going down as follows:

- ❖ 3 absences = 90
- ❖ 4 absences = 85
- ❖ 5 absences = 80
- ❖ 6 absences = 75
- ❖ 7 absences = 70

If you have a serious issue that causes you to miss more than two days of class, please inform me about the situation as soon as possible.

Communication. Email is the best way to contact me if you have questions or concerns. Generally, I will respond to all student email within 24 hours (although on weekends and holidays, it may take a little longer). Likewise, there may be instances when I will need to contact you by email. It is your responsibility to check your email account at least once every 24 hours.

Course evaluations. Near the end of the semester you will be notified by email and provided with a link to follow to complete course evaluations online outside of class. I want you to know that your feedback on the course is extremely valuable to me, the department, and the administration. In particular, I take your comments very seriously and use them to improve the course the next time I teach it. Please do fill out a course evaluation when you receive the emailed link at the end of the semester. If at least 90 percent of the class has completed the evaluations for the course by 11:59pm on Friday, May 3, I will award everyone ½ a point of extra credit on the final grade.

Inclusion. This course adheres to the principles of diversity and inclusion integral to the Agnes Scott community. We respect people from all backgrounds and affirm people's decisions about gender expression and identity. Please feel free to correct me if your preferred name or gender pronoun are different from that listed on the class roster.

Late work policy. All assigned work must be completed on time and submitted via Moodle. Assignment will be due on Moodle on the due date by the time specified on the assignment sheet (often but not always 5pm). Late assignments will be lowered 5 points for every calendar day they are late, unless you have received approval from the instructor before the deadline (note: requests are not guaranteed approval). No assignment will be accepted more than 7 days past the due date.

Submitting assignments. All assignments will be submitted through Moodle.

Technology policy. When you are not actively using your laptop or tablet to view a reading for the class or take notes, I expect you to put your devices away and to give your full attention to the discussion. You should not use a cell phone during class unless you are looking up something related to the class and do not have a laptop. I reserve the right to revoke your technology privileges if you use your devices for activities unrelated to class.

Resources

Access and disability resources. I strive to create an inclusive learning environment for all. I am invested in your success in this class and at Agnes Scott, so please let me know if anything is standing in the way of your doing your best work. This can include your own learning strengths, any classroom dynamics that you find uncomfortable, ESL issues, disability or chronic illness, and/or personal issues that impact your work. I will hold such conversations in strict confidence. Agnes Scott College seeks to provide equal access to its programs, services, and activities for people with disabilities. If you will need accommodations in this class, please contact Rashad Morgan in the Office of Academic Advising (x6174) to complete the registration process. Once registered, please contact me so we can discuss the specific accommodations needed for this course.

Center for Writing and Speaking. The Center for Writing and Speaking (CWS) is a peer tutoring organization devoted to improving and enhancing students' writing and speaking skills. Staffed by trained peer tutors, the CWS provides students of all ability levels with individual assistance in writing papers and in preparing and practicing speeches and presentations. The CWS is a great place to bring any project at any stage in your composing process. CWS tutors can talk with you about your purpose, organization, audience, design choices, or use of sources. They can also work with you on sentence-level concerns (including grammar and word choice), but they won't proofread for you. Instead, they'll discuss strategies and resources you can use to become a better editor of your own work. Tutoring is offered Sunday through Thursday from

9am to 10pm and Friday from 9am to 4pm. You can schedule an appointment online at <https://www.agnesscott.edu/writingandspeaking/>. You can also utilize the CWS's open hours on Mondays from 7 to 11pm when students are invited to spend 15 minutes with a tutor on a small task.

Title IX. For the safety of the entire community, if you have experienced or have any information about sexual misconduct, the college strongly urges you to immediately report such information to Title IX Coordinator Karen Gilbert at kgilbert@agnesscott.edu or 404-471-6435.

Course requirements & grading

Course requirements

At least one week ahead of the deadline (and usually about two weeks before), you will receive an assignment sheet for each of the assignments listed below. These assignment sheets contain more details about the requirements and goals for each.

Requirements	Deadline	Percentage of final grade
Attendance (see policy above) You are required to meet with the professor at least once during the semester (grade of 0 on 1% of final grade if no individual meeting).	ongoing	10%
Participation	ongoing	10%
Paper 1 (2–3 pages) For this paper, you will select one primary source and at least one secondary source from our course readings to develop an argument about the way the text represents gender and/or sexuality or deals with issues related to gender and/or sexuality.	Sunday, February 3, 5pm	10%
Paper 2 (3–4 pages) Choose one or two of the gender studies articles we read in class during the first three units. Explain, define, discuss, and analyze several key terms from the reading(s). Identify the key questions that the author (or authors) seeks to address in their article. Assess how well-reasoned the author's claims are. Use quotations and paraphrases of important passages to highlight how the author defines and deploys key terms relevant to gender studies.	Sunday, February 17, 5pm	13%
Discussion leadership (in teams of two) with 250-word reflection. This assignment requires two students to initiate the discussion of our readings for the day. Working together, two students will introduce the readings (about 3–5 minutes), giving some initial background and commentary, and then lead the class in an initial discussion of about 10 minutes. It is not necessary to make slides or another visual aid, but you should work together to plan the introductory comments and to create a list of questions to start the discussion. Following the day of your discussion leadership, you will write a 250-word reflection on your performance, assessing what you found most and least effective about your presentation and leadership of discussion. Although the discussion leadership will be in pairs, each student will write their own reflection.	Presentation dates starting February 26; reflection due by 5pm two days after discussion leadership completed in class (Tues. reflection due Thurs. at 5pm; Thurs. reflection due Sat. at 5pm)	12%
Paper 3 (4–5 pages) For this paper, you will select two primary sources and at least two secondary sources from our course readings to develop an	Sunday, March 31, 5pm	15%

argument about medieval and/or early modern gender and/or sexuality.	Tuesday, April 9, 5pm	
Final paper proposal , including an annotated bibliography of 3 scholarly sources you will use to revise and expand either Paper 1 or Paper 3. <i>Note: There will also be an option for a research-based creative final project (more details on assignment sheet).</i>	Wednesday, April 24, 5pm	5%
Final revised and expanded paper (8–10 pages) In your final paper you will revise and expand the argument you made in an earlier paper (either Paper 1 or Paper 3). You will do independent research and incorporate at least 5 new secondary sources in this new version of your paper, and you are free to incorporate new primary sources as well. You are encouraged to include interdisciplinary perspectives in your research; for example, you might incorporate research from psychology or art history as well as literary criticism. You will also write a 500-word reflection discussing your revisions and how they improved the paper.	Wednesday, May 8, 5pm <i>Tuesday, May 7, 5pm for seniors</i>	25%

Grading rubric

You will earn letter grades for all assignments. Individual assignments will have their own assignment sheets which will articulate the standards for grading that assignment. The following is a general description of the standards for each letter grade:

- ❖ Work that earns the grade of “A” will be *substantially above average*, well exceeding all of the expectations of the assignment.
- ❖ Work that earns the grade of “B” will be *above average*, meeting the assignment requirements and exceeding some of them.
- ❖ Work that earns the grade of “C” will be *satisfactory*, meeting the basic requirements of the assignment.
- ❖ Work that earn the grade of “D” will be *unsatisfactory*, not fully meeting all of the basic requirements of the assignment.
- ❖ Work that earns the grade of “F” will be *far below satisfactory*, falling substantially short of the basic requirements of that assignment.

I use the following grading rubric, which I customize to each assignment, to comment on your writing:

Concerns <i>Areas that need work</i>	Criteria <i>Standards for assessment</i>	Advanced <i>Evidence of exceeding standards</i>
	Basic requirements Does the assignment meet the length requirement and format the composition as outlined on the assignment sheet?	
	Claim / Argument Has the writer presented a clear argument or observation about the text? Does the writer make specific, rather than generalized claims, about the text?	
	Evidence Does the assignment include properly cited quotations from the text analyzed? Does the assignment offer sufficient evidence to support the argument(s) the writer is making? Does the writer explain how the evidence offered supports the claim?	
	Organization Is the assignment organized and arranged effectively? Does the writer transition smoothly between ideas and paragraphs?	
	Writing Is the writing stylistically interesting and sophisticated? Is the writing free of grammar and spelling errors?	

Paper comments and grades will be posted to Moodle.

Grading scale

When calculating final grades, please note that I do not round up. Because of this, take note of the significant ½ point extra credit opportunity if the class completes the online course evaluations at the end of the semester.

Points/Percentage	Letter Grade	ASC point scale
93.00–100	A	4.00
90.00–92.99	A–	3.67
87.00–89.99	B+	3.33
83.00–86.99	B	3.00
80.00–82.99	B–	2.67
77.00–79.99	C+	2.33
73.00–76.99	C	2.00
70.00–72.99	C–	1.67
67.00–69.99	D+	1.33
63.00–66.99	D	1.00
60.00–63.00	D–	0.67
0–59.99	F	0.00

Course schedule and logistics

Important dates for Spring 2019

Date	Event
January 8	Classes begin
January 11	Last day to add or drop using AscAgnes
January 18	Last day to add a spring class or change to audit
January 28	Last day to drop without a W
March 28	Last day to drop with a W or change to pass/fail
May 1	Last day of classes
May 3–8 (2–7 for seniors)	Exam period

Final exam. There will be no final exam. Your final revised and expanded paper is due at the end of the exam period since this final paper is completed *in lieu* of a final exam.

Course schedule

The course schedule may be modified slightly during the semester. Check Moodle for updates. I will inform you during class of any changes to the reading and writing requirements. Informal writing assignments may be added during the semester. Other than the readings from our textbooks (*Silence* and Abelard and Heloise), all readings will be available on Moodle, either as a PDF or through a link to a website.

Introductions

T. Jan. 8 Introduction to the course

Th. Jan. 10 “A Beginner’s Guide to Medieval Europe,” *Khan Academy* (only the first lesson, “Introduction to the Middle Ages,” is required; the remaining sections are suggested); Marianne O’Doherty, “Where Were the Middle Ages?” *The Public Medievalist*; Adrienne Rich, “Claiming an Education” (608–11)

Unit 1. Medieval and Modern Conceptions of Gender and Sexuality

- T. Jan. 15 Women and feminism: Monique Wittig, “One Is Not Born a Woman” (103–109); bell hooks, “Feminist Politics: Where We Stand” (2 pages); Judith M. Bennett, “Feminist History & Women’s History,” *History Matters* (6–15, 28–29)
- Th. Jan. 17 Heterosexuality: Karma Lochrie, “Introduction: The Heterosyncratic,” *Heterosyncracies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn’t* (xi–xxiii); Jenny C. Bledsoe, “Heterosexuality,” *A Companion to Sexuality in the Medieval West* (8 pages)
- T. Jan. 22 Virginity and marriage: St Jerome’s *Letter 22 to Eustochium* (74–76); *Hali Meidhad* (3–43, odd pages only); “Against Marrying” (125–29)

Unit 2. Misogyny and Early Feminist Literature

- Th. Jan. 24 Excerpts from Christian Scripture (31–38); Galen (41–43); Tertullian (50–58); Marbod of Rennes, “The Femme Fatale” (100–103)
- T. Jan. 29 Christine de Pizan, excerpt from *The Letter of the God of Love* (279–86); Marbod of Rennes, “The Good Woman,” (228–32); anonymous response to Richard de Fournival’s *Bestiary of Love* (242–44)
- Th. Jan. 31 Robert Gould’s *Love Given O’er: Or a Satyr on the Inconstancy of Woman*; Sarah Fyge Egerton’s response in *The Female Advocate*

Sunday, Feb. 3, 5pm: Paper 1 due

Unit 3. Female Communities: Real and Imagined

- T. Feb. 5 Two love letters between medieval nuns (478–82); Lisa M. C. Weston, “Virgin Desires: Reading a Homoerotics of Female Monastic Community,” *The Lesbian Premodern* (93–104)
- Th. Feb. 7 Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (235–46); Roberta L. Krueger, “Towards Feminism: Christine de Pizan, Female Advocacy, and Women’s Textual Communities in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond,” *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe* (590–606)
- T. Feb. 12 Margaret Cavendish, *The Convent of Pleasure* (a play, 217–47)

Unit 4. Non-binary Gender and Transitioning

- Th. Feb. 14 Theodora A. Jankowski, “‘Virgins’ and ‘Not-Women’: Dissident Gender Positions,” *The Lesbian Premodern* (75–89)

Sunday, Feb. 17, 5pm: Paper 2 due

- T. Feb. 19 *Life of St. Marinos* (intro & text, 1–12); Gabrielle Bychowski, “Were there Transgender People in the Middle Ages?” *The Public Medievalist*
- Th. Feb. 21 *Silence* (3–103, odd pages only)
- T. Feb. 26 *Silence* (105–205, odd pages only) (DL)
- Th. Feb. 28 *Silence* (207–315, odd pages only) (DL)

March 5 & 7 Peak Week – No class

March 12 & 14 Spring Break – No class

Unit 5. Medieval Mysticism, Jesus as Mother, and Spiritual Marriage to Christ

T. March 19 Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 3 of *Sermons on the Song of Songs; Pe Wohunge of Ure Lauerd (The Wooing of Our Lord)* (80–111, odd pages only) **(DL)**

Th. March 21 Julian of Norwich, Jesus as Mother passage from *Revelations of Divine Love*; Jenny C. Bledsoe, “Feminine Images of Jesus: Later Medieval Christology and the Devaluation of the Feminine,” *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 3.1 (2011): 33–58. **(DL)**

Unit 6. Abelard and Heloise

T. March 26 Peter Abelard, *The Calamities* (in Levitan, 1–46) **(DL)**

Th. March 28 *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, First and Second Letters (49–70) **(DL)**
Paper 3 workshop: Identify the four sources for your paper and bring them to class.

T. April 2 *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Third and Fourth Letters (71–104) **(DL)**
Paper 3 workshop: Bring a draft of two body paragraphs.

Th. April 4 *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, Fifth Letter (105–26) **(DL)**
Paper 3 workshop: Bring a draft of your introduction and conclusion.

Sunday, April 7, 5pm: Paper 3 due

Unit 7. Rape, Consent, and Obscenity

T. April 9 Marie de France, *Guigemar* **(DL)**

Th. April 11 Chaucer, “Lucretia,” *The Legend of Good Women* **(DL)**

T. April 16 William Shakespeare, *Rape of Lucrece* (intro, 445–46; text, 451–519, odd pages only)

Th. April 18 William Shakespeare, *Rape of Lucrece* (521–585, odd pages only)

T. April 23 Amy S. Kaufman, “‘His Princess’: An Arthurian Family Drama,” *Arthuriana* 22.3 (2012): 41–56; Laurie Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, “Who’s Your Daddy?: New Age Grails,” *Arthuriana* 19.3 (2009): 25–33.

Wednesday, April 24, 5pm: Final paper proposal due

Th. April 25 Poems and songs: *Come over the woods fair and green*; *The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*; *The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage*; *The Thewis of Gud Women*; *She that hath a wantan eye*; and *O man more then madde what ys thi mynde*

T. April 30 Gwerful Mechain, *Cywydd y cedor* (“Ode to the Vagina”); Dafydd ap Gwilym, *Cywydd y gal* (“Ode to the Penis”); *Le chevalier qui fist les cons parler* (“The knight who made vaginas talk”) from London, British Library, MS Harley 2253
Discussion of final papers

Wednesday, May 8, 5pm: Final papers due

Note: Tuesday, May 7, 5pm is the deadline for seniors’ final papers.