

Gender and Sexuality in Medieval World Literature

Dr. Jenny C. Bledsoe



Images (left to right): (1) Bayad plays the oud to the Lady, from *Hadith Bayāḍ wa Riyāḍ* (*The Narrative of Bayad and Riyad*), a 13th-century Arabic love story; (2) a scene from the early 15th-century French romance of *Lancelot du Lac*, Paris, Bibl. Arsenal, MS 3480, fol. 33r; and (3) an 18th-century painting of Mulan, a legendary female warrior about whom the 6th-century Chinese *Ballad of Hua Mulan* was written, British Museum no. 1936,1009,0.83.

As an upper-division world literature elective, this course includes authors from various early literary cultures, including medieval Arabic, Chinese, English, Ethiopian, French, German, Japanese, Latin, Mongolian, Persian, Sanskrit, and Welsh. From lyric poetry and romance to saints' lives and letters, the premodern primary sources in the class represent a variety of literary forms as well as visual artworks. Reading premodern world literature and art alongside gender studies scholarship and feminist theory, we will examine how literary works comment upon and construct gender and sexuality.

One unit will focus on conflicting depictions of the Queen of Sheba in Christian, Islamic, and Jewish traditions; another primary source, *Silence*, is a medieval romance that features a cross-dressing daughter (Silence) who transitions to live as a male knight. We will also read nine chapters of *The Tale of Genji*, the Japanese novel written by Murasaki Shikibu. Our other literary works will address consent, marriage, sexual orientation, crossdressing, gender performance, transgender saints, same-sex relationships, and virginity, among other topics.

By examining literature, gender, and sexuality from a global perspective, we will have the opportunity to analyze readings both comparatively and in specific cultural and historic contexts. The course will use the “global Middle Ages” as an organizing principle, while also introducing the limitations of the framework and the challenges of analyzing literature in translation. We will discuss and debate concepts related to world literature, canon formation, and literary history.

BOOKS

- Peter Abelard and Heloise, *Abelard and Heloise: The Letters and Other Writings*, trans. William Levitan (Hackett, 2007). ISBN: 9780872208759.
- Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence: A Thirteenth-century French Romance*, trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi (Colleagues Press, 1992). ISBN: 9780870135439.
- Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Waley (Tuttle, 2010). ISBN: 9784805310816.
- *A Tale of Genji: A Reader's Guide* (2009) by William Puette is recommended, especially if you plan to write your final research paper on the *Tale of Genji* (ISBN: 9784805310847).
- All other readings are excerpts and will be posted as PDFs to the course website.

ASSIGNMENTS

Requirement	Deadline	Percentage of final grade
Attendance	ongoing	10%
Participation	ongoing	10%
Blackboard discussion questions You will sign up for 2/10 weekly slots during Week 3 of class. Submit two discussion questions on Blackboard for the two weeks you choose. You should write about 3–5 sentences per question. During the two assigned weeks, you must submit discussion questions on Blackboard by 11:59pm on the Tuesday night before class. You should focus on specific passages in a primary source and its representation of gender and/or sexuality.	Weeks 5–7 & 9–15 Due by 11:59pm on Tuesday night before assigned class	5% each (10% total)
In-class discussion leadership For up to 10 weeks of the semester (depending on student preferences), we will have an assigned discussion leader or leaders for a portion of the class. The discussion leadership will be either in pairs or as a solo assignment (you can choose). He/she/they will lead a discussion based on the questions classmates submitted to Blackboard. Prepare for this assignment by reading the primary sources closely. Do not prepare a slideshow or presentation. Focus on understanding the readings and generate a few questions of your own. Lead the class in a discussion of the primary sources for about 10–15 minutes, using the questions from Blackboard as a starting point.	Individual presentation dates vary (weeks 5–7 & 9–15) 250-word reflection due by 4:30pm on following Thursday	10%
Literary analysis A close reading and literary analysis of a primary source from Weeks 1–7. The analysis must incorporate some discussion of gender and/or sexuality in the literary work. The paper can incorporate secondary research, but it is not required. 4–5 pages.	Thursday of Week 8	15%
Visual analysis A close reading of an artwork from the Philbrook Museum, focusing on the way the work represents gender and sexuality. You will select the artwork during our trip to the Philbrook	Sunday of Week 11	15%

during Week 8. The paper should incorporate research on the historical and cultural context of the artist and work. 3–4 pages.		
Research project		
• Rough draft of proposal (1 paragraph identifying primary source(s) and at least one secondary source)	Week 13 in class	part of participation
• Proposal (1 page) plus annotated bibliography of 3 secondary sources	Sunday of Week 14	5%
• Research paper, 9–12 pages The paper should focus on one primary source or a set of related primary sources, or it can be a comparative study. Focus on the literary source(s). Secondary research should be incorporated to enhance your argument about the primary source(s).	Week 17	20%
• Presentation, 4–5 min	Week 16 in class	5%

COURSE SCHEDULE

Unit 1. Introduction to the Global Middle Ages and Gender and Sexuality Studies

Week 1 O’Doherty, “Where were the Middle Ages?” (all PDFs)
Bledsoe, “Heterosexuality,” *A Companion to Sexuality in the Medieval West*
Marbod of Rennes, “The Femme Fatale” and “The Good Woman”

Unit 2. Gender and Sexuality in Buddhist, Christian, and Sufi Texts

Week 2 Buddha’s temptation in Ashvaghosha’s *Buddhacarita* (all PDFs)
Old English *Penitentials*
The Life of Mary of Egypt
Jankowski, “‘Virgins’ and ‘Not-Women’: Dissident Gender Positions”
Poems by Rabia al-Adawiyya and Al-Hasan al-Basri
Al-Ghazali, *Book on the Etiquette of Marriage* (from p. 52 “Sufi Views on Marriage” thru second paragraph on p. 60; skim other chapter headings)

Unit 3. The Queen of Sheba in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism

Week 3 *The Queen of Sheba: Behind the Myth* (YouTube video, 44 min., [link](#))
Hebrew Bible: 1 Kings 10:1–3; 2 Chronicles 9 (all PDFs)
Targum Sheni to the Book of Esther
Midrash
Quran, Sura 27:20–44; Sura 34:15
Muhammad Ibn Abd Allah Kisai’s *Tales of the Prophets* (ch. 78, 81–4)
In class: Premodern visual art representing the Queen of Sheba

Week 4 Later Biblical commentaries: Song of Songs 1:5–6; Mt 12:42; Lk 11:29–32 (all PDFs)
Kebrā Nagast, sections 19–39, 43–62, 84–9, 94–5
Jacobus de Voragine, “On the Holy Cross,” *The Golden Legend*
Belcher, “Medieval African and European Texts about the Queen of Sheba”
A 20th-c. representation: W. B. Yeats, “Solomon to Sheba,” “Solomon and the Witch”
In class: Premodern visual art representing the Queen of Sheba

Unit 4. Love Letters and Courtly Romances in Arabic, Latin, and Japanese

- Week 5 Abelard and Heloise (Letters 1–5, pp. 49–126)
DQ/DL Ibn Hazm, “Of Falling in Love through a Description,” “Of Correspondence,” “Of the Messenger,” from *The Ring of the Dove* (PDF)
In class: Manuscripts of love letters from a variety of premodern cultures
- Week 6 Murasaki Shikibu, *Tale of Genji* (pp. 4–79, “Kiritsubo,” “The Broom-Tree,” “Utsusemi,” “Yugao”)
DQ/DL Recommended: Puette, *The Tale of Genji: A Reader’s Guide*, ch 3–4 (pp. 43–54)
Love poems by Onono Komachi and Izumi Shikibu (PDF)
- Week 7 *Tale of Genji* (pp. 80–184, “Murasaki,” “The Saffron-Flower,” “The Festival of Red Leaves,” “The Flower Feast,” “Aoi”)
DQ/DL *In class*: *The Tale of Genji* in premodern visual art

Unit 5. Gender and Sexuality in Visual Arts

- Week 8 No class today.

Literary analysis due Thursday, 11:59pm

Visit to Philbrook Museum this Saturday

- Week 9 Easton, “Medieval Erotic Art & Its Audiences” (both PDFs)
DQ/DL Green, “How Today’s Queer Artists Are Revising History”

Unit 6. Female Communities and Same-Sex Relationships in Medieval Europe

- Week 10 *The Isle of Ladies* (all PDFs)
DQ/DL Letters between German nuns
Weston, “Virgin Desires: Reading a Homoerotics of Female Monastic Community”

Visual analysis due Sunday, 11:59pm

Unit 7. Dress, Performance, and Gender Identity in French, Latin, Chinese, Welsh

- Week 11 *Silence* (1–153, odd pages only)
DQ/DL Bychowski, “Were There Transgender People in the Middle Ages?” (PDF)
- Week 12 *Silence* (155–315, odd pages only)
DQ/DL
- Week 13 *The Life of St. Marinos* (all PDFs)
DQ/DL *The Ballad of Mulan*
Huw Arwystli, “A Boy Dressed in Girl’s Clothes”
Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”
Rough draft of research paper proposal due in class

Research paper proposal due Sunday, 11:59pm

Unit 8. Jesus as Lover in European Religious Literature

Week 14 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (all PDFs)

DQ/DL Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*
The Wooing of Our Lord (De Wohunge of Ure Lauerd)
Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*
In class: Medieval visual art depicting the arma Christi

Unit 9. Erotica: Medieval Welsh Poetry and the Hindu Tradition

Week 15 Dafydd ap Gwilym, “Ode to the Penis” (all PDFs)

DQ/DL Gwerful Mechain, “Ode to the Vagina,” “To Jealous Wives”
Llywelyn ap Gutun, “A Man and a Woman Making Love”
Vātsyāyana, *Kamasutra*
Doniger, “God’s Body, or, The *Lingam* Made Flesh: Conflicts over the
Representation of the Sexual Body of the Hindu God Shiva”

Week 16

Final research presentations

Week 17

Final research paper due