

Sex, Society and Medieval Women

By N. M. Heckel

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Christine de Pizan presenting a book of her writing to Queen Isabeau of France

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In the Middle Ages sex was considered, as it is now, to be a normal and natural part of life. Most authorities agreed that it was not inherently sinful because God would not have made such a necessary activity taboo (without sex one cannot have children and fulfill the command to "increase and multiply, and fill the earth" given in Genesis 9:1). Natural though it was, however, sex was also morally fraught because of the pleasure associated with sexual activity. When engaged in for strictly defined right reasons, sex was sinless. However, humanity being fallen as it was, human intent was scarcely ever free of the lust that could taint sex, rendering a natural activity unnatural. Therefore, writers who discussed sex had to walk a very fine line between portraying human nature and human sin. That line was, of course, itself debated, as many writers disagreed on the point at which nature ended and sin began. To further confuse the issue, the Middle Ages had writers who used allegorical and satirical styles of writing (much like some writers and publications in our own time) that could be easily misread, as well as "shock jocks" who thoroughly disagreed with commonly held notions of moral behavior and who did their best to cause controversy with their behavior and writings. The following pages detail some of the more commonly used modes of discussing and depicting sex and sexual behavior from medical to moral to literary.

Medieval Medicine

Medieval medicine was both different from and similar to modern medicine. Though medieval physicians lacked knowledge now considered commonplace, they were by no means stupid or incompetent. Because they lacked the ability that we now have to work with the body on a very fine level, medieval physicians' purview consisted as much of natural philosophy as of physical knowledge, which was limited due to strong moral considerations. In predominantly Christian Europe, the body was seen as sacred in many ways, and to mutilate a human body through dissection was not only disrespectful, but also sacrilegious. Therefore, dissections were only rarely performed – perhaps once or twice a year at the larger medical academies – and physicians' knowledge of the human body was limited to gross anatomy. This is where natural philosophy came in; what physicians could not observe, they had to infer. Some classical texts on medicine had survived into the Middle Ages, and physicians and scholars used these as a starting point for medical knowledge. In general, the body's health was seen through an Aristotelian viewpoint. Observing that human personalities could be divided into a few similar groupings, and that many illnesses were caused by and/or produced effects more like some personalities than others, classical and medieval authorities reasoned that the body was governed by substances called *humors*, which ran throughout the body in differing quantities, not only causing variations in personality, but also causing varying states of health. The four main humors were sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic, and melancholy. Each humor was associated with a different body substance, with combinations of heat and moisture, and with a particular element (see chart).

Humor	Substance	Heat/Moisture	Element
sanguine	blood	hot and moist	air
choleric	yellow bile	hot and dry	fire
phlegmatic	phlegm	cold and moist	water
melancholic	black bile	cold and dry	earth

In order for a body to remain healthy, these humors had to remain in balance with each other, as too much of one and too little of another could cause disease or infirmity. The logical step to cure disease, therefore, was to artificially balance out these humors through methods such as blood-letting, intestinal purging, and induced vomiting. Though these methods are often now considered ineffective and even harmful, they made sense in the light of the philosophy of the humors.

Sex and Medicine

Moral authorities grudgingly acknowledged sex to be not inherently sinful, but very strictly delineated the ways in which sex could be used without spiritual consequences. Medical authorities, by contrast, considered sex to be an essential part of bodily health, noting that abstention could lead to a dangerous buildup of the "seminal humor." As a preventative measure, physicians recommended regular, but not excessive, sexual intercourse (too little being as bad as too much). However, they took into account that not all people had a morally acceptable way of engaging in sex, and to this end recommended masturbation, drawing on the authority of Late Classical writers such as Galen, who suggests that physicians or midwives "place hot poultices on the . . . genitals" of a celibate woman and "cause [her] to experience orgasm, which would release the retained seed" (Murray, 201). Unfortunately, this was an area in which the medical and the moral definitely clashed. Moral authorities such as the theologian Thomas Aquinas considered masturbation (also known as "onanism" from the Biblical story of Onan; see Genesis 38:7-10) to be "the sin of uncleanness, which some call voluptuousness" and an "unnatural vice" because it is "contrary to the natural ordering of the sexual act that is proper to human beings" (*Summa Theologica* 154.5). The only way that moral authorities would excuse masturbation was when it was unintentional, as was the case with nocturnal emissions, because "there [may be] an excess of the seminal humor in the body" which needed to be expelled in order to keep the body in balance. Thomas assumes that the body will take care of this balance itself, and lumps all intentional masturbation under the rubric of voluptuousness.

Women and Medicine

Despite the wealth of material on bodily health, the workings of some bodies were less well understood than others. As in our time, the default subject of medical treatises was male. Women's health was considered to be somewhat mysterious in its workings, and was generally, in practice if not always in theory, treated differently than men's health. The opening of the *Trotula*, a treatise on women's health supposedly written by a female physician educated at

Salerno in the eleventh or twelfth century, notes this problem and claims to attempt to alleviate it. The Trotula focuses exclusively on women's health, discussing everything from conception and birthing to uterine growths and irregular menses. Like many other medical treatises, the Trotula generally remains judgment-free, commenting even on morally questionable practices such as abortion without anything more than a token gesture towards ethical considerations. A Hebrew book on women's health, The Book of Women's Love, also contains passages on abortion as well as some on birth control. Hebrew medical texts are interesting on this topic because Jewish law has been interpreted in such a way as to permit not only abortion but also contraception. Abortion is, of course, to be performed only when a woman's life is endangered by her pregnancy, but contraceptive measures may be taken by minors, pregnant women, and breastfeeding women.

Some other treatises on women's health and women's bodies were not so free of morality. One such book, rather humorous by our standards, was a treatise called *De Secretis Mulierum* (On the Secrets of Women), whose author claimed to be the German natural philosopher Albertus Magnus (a claim which scholars regard as spurious, resulting in the text's author being known as "Pseudo-Albertus Magnus"). In addition to more and less palatable recipes to aid conception, *De Secretis Mulierum* contains some very entertaining passages. In one such, the author claims that a person who consumes sage upon which a cat has ejaculated will have kittens. The text also contains some inescapably misogynistic ideas, such as the belief that menstruating women give off harmful fumes that will "poison the eyes of children lying in their cradles by a glance" and that children conceived by menstruating women "tend to have epilepsy and leprosy because menstrual matter is extremely venomous" (Pseudo-Albertus, 129), and another which declares that some women place pieces of iron in their vaginas in order to wound men with whom they have intercourse (excerpt).

For as moche as ther ben manye women that hauen many diuers maladies and sekenesses . . .

[Because there are many women who have numerous diverse illnesses . . .][\[read more\]](#)

Also þe rote of yres vnder put into þe marice oper subfumygid with yres makith her to lessen her chylde . . .

[Also, the root of iris put into the womb or fumigated underneath makes a woman lose her child . . .][\[read more\]](#)

To induce an abortion: Take half a drachm of *aspaltum lzry*; peony, leek, white hellebore and madder, half a drachm of each; and half an ounce of opoponax. . . .[\[read more\]](#)

Note that if the womb and intestine of a hare are dried and pulverized they become very hot, and similarly a pig's liver is hot in itself . . .[\[read more\]](#)

O my companions you should be aware that although certain women do not know the secret cause of what I shall describe, many women are familiar with the effect, . . .[\[read more\]](#)

Sex and Society

The most difficult aspect of sex, widely acknowledged both by physicians and by priests, was its highly pleasurable nature, an aspect variously thought to indicate its inherently natural and/or sinful qualities. As a consequence of this duality, sex was most often depicted in extreme ways that ignored the well-balanced middle ground inhabited by most medieval people. Celibacy or whoredom, chastity or adultery – in literature and art there was often no middle ground, and these oppositional portrayals bled over specifically into depictions of women. Because of their manifestly "other" nature (not male, and therefore not, when specifically called "women," able to participate in the "default" category that would allow them to exist outside of gender), women became inextricably bound up in sexuality, as a result of which all women in medieval art and literature carry some sort of sexual association – chaste and virginal or depraved and sexually voracious – to a greater or lesser degree. Female figures who participate in sexual activities are noted for their participation, and those who abstain are noted for their celibacy, but very rarely if at all is a non-allegorical woman depicted without some reference to her life or potential life as a sexual being.

Virginity

The positive qualities of virginity were almost universally agreed upon by both religious and secular authorities. However, the end use of virginity was in debate between the two. Religious authorities saw virginity as a way to salvation, a treasure to be locked away and promised only to the Divine Bridegroom, Christ. It was a way to keep the filth of earthly existence from soiling the soul, and allowed a woman to distance herself from the distractions of worldly existence and hopefully, therefore, sin. Secular authorities, on the other hand, saw virginity as something to be guarded and kept, but eventually dispensed in a legal and faithful marriage. In an era long before paternity tests, husbands needed some sort of assurance that the children borne by their wives were indeed of their blood, and taking a virgin wife was one way that a husband could increase those odds in his favor. The main quarrel between religious and secular authorities was whether virginity was spendable earthly coinage or ethereal heavenly treasure. The Church encouraged young women to take vows and become nuns, giving their wedding dowry to ecclesiastical treasuries and saving their souls, whereas most fathers preferred that their daughters marry up in earthly society, giving their dowry to a man, but in return gaining connections and possibly wealth for their families. The decision to take the veil was not a choice that most parents would approve; many convents required the parents of the aspiring novice to pay a dowry to the Church, often one commensurate with what the parents would have given had they actually married her to a mortal man. It is easy to see why all but the most devout or the very well-off would be unhappy with such a situation.

The signs of chastity are as follows: shame, modesty, fear, a faultless gait and speech, casting eyes down before men and the acts of men. Some women are so clever . . . [[read more](#)]

Virginity's monetary importance created a desire for ways to assure that a woman was indeed a virgin. Virgin brides generally came with higher dowries, making them more attractive to

prospective grooms, and these prospective grooms, in return, were more likely to feel generous when it came to giving a return gift to the bride's family. In order to help grooms ensure that the bride's family was truthful about her "condition," many medical texts included descriptions of methods and processes that could be used to prove or disprove a woman's chastity. *De Secretis* advocates a number of [different methods](#), which variously involve observing a woman's behavior, urine inspection, and sometimes actual intercourse. Other texts offer not only the tests, but also ways to *restore* a woman's virginity. One example from the Hebrew *Book of Women's Love* dictates that in order to restore lost virginity one must "take myrtle leaves and boil them well with water until only a third part remains; then, take nettles without prickles and boil them in this water until a third remains. She must wash her secret parts with this water in the morning and at bedtime, up to nine days" or, if that will take too long, to "take nutmeg and grind [it] to a powder; put it in that place and [her virginity] will be restored immediately" (Caballero-Navas, 142-44). The chastity question seems to have sparked a bit of a debate between authorities, for not only does the *Book of Women's Love* recognize the desire for chastity tests, but *De Secretis* also recognizes that there are methods available to fool chastity tests. It notes that a man must be careful about relying on difficulty of entry and post-coital penile sores for evidence of chastity, for "[t]his is only true, however, if she did not cause her vulva to contract by using an ointment or another medicine so that she would be thought a virgin" (Pseudo-Albertus, 129).

Women in Courtly Love

One area in which these dichotomies were somewhat broken down was in the genre of courtly love, which had its own set of binaries. Rather than being binaries of virgin and whore, women of courtly literature are divided between attainable and unattainable. The "cult" of courtly love caused a great deal of controversy when it first began to emerge in French literature during the lifetime of Eleanor of Aquitaine. A practice that may have only been extant in literature, and never actually applied, courtly love has as its focal point the [male] lover's adoration of a lady, who is either sympathetic to her wooer or standoffish (*dangereuse*) and unattainable. The unfriendly and unsympathetic lady is most often found in the lyric poetry of courtly love, where she remains distant from the narrator, spurning all his advances and scorning his company. If the woman is indeed sympathetic to her wooer, and welcomes his advances, there may be other impediments to the union, such as an existing marriage on her part. This does not, however, always put a damper on the relationship. Literature of courtly love often encourages adultery; in I.iv.7 of Andreas Capellanus' *The Art of Courtly Love*, the "wise woman M., Countess of Champagne [Marie of Champagne]" (Capellanus, 107) declares that true love cannot exist between a husband and wife ([the letters between M. and her supplicants, Lady A. and Count G.](#)).

One of the most famous texts dealing with courtly love is the *Roman de La Rose* ([excerpt](#)), begun by Guillaume de Lorris before 1305 and continued by Jean de Meun after Guillaume's death. The *Roman* is an allegorical poem and dream vision that details its narrator's courtship of a rosebud (standing in for a woman generally referred to as "Rose" by critics). The dream takes place in the God of Love's idyllic garden, where figures of speech and emotions associated with love are literalized and personified. The *Roman* caused a bit of controversy in its time, as it

portrays (albeit through allegory) actions and ideas of questionable morality and truth. Many writers jumped into the intellectual fray either to condemn or praise the text (see the [Christine de Pizan](#) section below).

"To the illustrious and wise woman M., Countess of Champagne, the noble woman A. and Count G. send greeting and whatever in the world is . . . [\[read more\]](#)

The God of Love, who had maintained his constant watch over me and had followed me with drawn bow, stopped near a fig tree, and when he saw that I . . . [\[read more\]](#)

Prostitution

Prostitution was an active and profitable enterprise in the Middle Ages. Historians examining town records have found that most towns and cities had some sort of brothel, often an official one that was actually publicly owned, though this was more common on the continent than in England. Prostitutes, while an inevitable part of urban and town life, existed in a rigorously restricted space, both in a physical sense and in less tangible but no less noticeable ways. In most places, common women were only allowed to sell their "wares" on certain streets or in certain neighborhoods, and sumptuary laws (i.e., laws mandating that prostitutes should dress in a manner different from other women) were passed in order to make whores immediately distinguishable from respectable women.

So why did medieval women go into prostitution? Ruth Karras notes that while most medieval prostitutes were probably not coerced into their trade, becoming a prostitute wasn't any woman's childhood fantasy, either. As for the actual reason, Karras makes this observation:

Whereas for men prostitution sometimes substituted for marriage as a sexual outlet, for women it substituted for marriage as a means of financial support. It was difficult for a woman to support herself outside the conjugal unit . . . [f]or those who did not marry – whether by choice or by circumstance – options might be limited even under favorable economic conditions (Karras, 49).

Prostitution may have been the only acceptable way for some women to support themselves in the absence of a husband who would provide for them economically. Unfortunately, most prostitutes' reasons can only be guessed at due to a lack of records in this area. Historians must generally rely on court records that mention women accused of whoredom; very rarely do records detailing the workings of actual brothels still exist. Since the records in question seldom define what they mean by "whoredom" it can be difficult to figure out if the women in question were truly prostitutes (women whose services were generally available to all and sundry in exchange for a fee) or just a bit licentious (akin to Chaucer's Wife of Bath).

Contributing further to the confusion in England, at least, is that for most women in the trade, prostitution was not their sole occupation. When a woman's normal occupation didn't bring in enough money, she might turn to prostitution in order to make up the difference. Therefore, prostitution may have even been, for many women, a cyclical income source undertaken during whatever was the "off" season for their regular occupations (Karras, 54).

Real Women of the Middle Ages

Despite the disparity in the ways in which medieval women were depicted, actual medieval women inhabited a fairly continuous range that not only included the extremes of virgin and whore but also spanned the gap between the two. Prostitutes were more widely accepted than a modern reader of medieval literature might think, and nuns weren't always as saintly as religious propagandists claimed. In between the two margins were found visionaries, queens, scholars, and warriors.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

Hildegard was a twelfth-century Benedictine nun who not only established herself as a notable mystic and prophet but also as a writer, scientist, composer, and linguist. She was very prolific during her lifetime, writing not only on health and medicine, but also recording religious visions (complete with detailed descriptions for illuminators), composing hymns, and creating her own language (known as the *Ignota Lingua*). Her immense talent gained her enough respect in her own time that her sometimes unorthodox and disobedient behavior never garnered any sort of permanent punishment (excepting, possibly, a refusal by the Catholic church to canonize her). A notable episode occurred near the end of her life, when Hildegard and her monastery were placed under interdict for allowing the Christian burial of an excommunicate. Despite the interdict – which stated that no music was to be used in the monastery's worship services, a true hardship for an abbess who believed music and text to be inseparable companions – Hildegard defied orders to exhume and relocate the body, maintaining that the man had confessed and been absolved before his death. She even went so far as to reproach the bishop of Mainz for greed and un-Christian behavior. Eventually her superiors gave in and lifted the interdict, and Hildegard's beloved music was restored (Gladden, 219-20).

Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122-1204)

Eleanor was one of the more unusual queens in English history. She began her public life as the Queen of Louis VII of France, but their marriage was an unhappy one that produced only two daughters. Very soon after obtaining an annulment of the marriage, Eleanor married Henry, the young Duke of Normandy and heir to the English throne. Between the two of them, they controlled a much greater portion of France than did Louis himself, a fact that caused much strife between them and Louis.

As Queen of England, Eleanor was quite prolific in the most important way: she provided Henry with a total of five male heirs, four of whom (Henry the Young King, Richard, Geoffrey, and John) lived to adulthood, and two of whom (Richard [I] and John) ruled England. She herself outlived not only her (younger) husband, but also all her sons excepting John. She was strong-willed, and refused to see her husband as anything other than an equal, going so far as to join three of their four sons in rebellion against Henry in 1173. Henry imprisoned her for sixteen years because of this act, and she wasn't released until after his death in 1189. Despite this long imprisonment, she had lost none of her ability to lead, and when her son Richard, now king, went on crusade, he left Eleanor in control of all England.

In addition to being one of the most politically powerful women of her time and place, Eleanor was also an important figure in the burgeoning literary and artistic movement of courtly love. Her daughter by Louis VII of France, Marie de Champagne, was a patron of the literary arts whose cadre of poets included both Andreas Capellanus and Chrétien de Troyes. Due to her beauty and high station, Eleanor herself often served as a focal point and subject of courtly love poetry, and poems addressed specifically to her (usually as "England's queen" or "the Norman queen") were written not only in her native France but in [Germany](#) as well. A well-known troubadour, [Bernart de Ventadorn](#), actually served in Eleanor's court for a time, and his biographer claims that the two developed a deep and abiding love for each other during this time, which was consummated in the best courtly love fashion. Although historians cannot establish the accuracy of this claim, it has become part and parcel of the legend and rumor surrounding Eleanor's life.

If all the world were mine
From sea's shore to the Rhine, [\[read more\]](#)

At the sweet song which the nightingale makes
at night when I have fallen asleep,
I wake completely bewildered with joy, [\[read more\]](#)

Christine de Pizan (1363-1429)

Christine, like Hildegard, was a well-known scholar. However, unlike Hildegard, Christine operated in the secular world and did not enter the cloister until the end of her life. She was well regarded by powerful members of the French aristocracy, and her work was known and presented not only to the aristocracy but even to the French rulers. Illuminations in manuscripts of Christine's work often portray such presentations, and therefore we know that she presented work not only to Queen Isabeau, wife of Charles VI, but also to the king himself.

Christine's best-known work is *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* (*The Book of the City of Ladies*), in which she strikes back (excerpt) at the misogynist literature of her day and defends women throughout history from the male scholars' assertions of female infidelity and weakness. In particular, she writes against the *Roman de la Rose*, which, despite its allegorical setting and its narrator's love of the female figure of the Rose, contains numerous incredibly misogynistic statements. Christine's angry reaction to the work provoked a heated discussion that was often less than polite in Parisian literary circles. Christine, despite the derision directed at the "ignorant" and "inferior" woman, acquitted herself well, and was only inspired to write more pro-woman texts.

Despite the weight given to her proto-feminist prose texts in current studies of Christine's work, these were not the only or, some might argue, the best examples of Christine's writings. She was also a talented poet who produced many poems, both short and long. Her poetry not only demonstrates her talent as a poet but also reminds readers that Christine had a life outside of her writing. At age fifteen, she was married to a well-educated man named Etienne du Castel. Despite the disparity in their ages (Etienne was about twenty-five at the time), the marriage appears to have been a loving one that produced three surviving children during its ten-year duration. However, around 1390, Etienne died suddenly, and Christine was left alone to care for

their three children, a niece, and her mother, who had been widowed in 1387. Poems such as "[Like the Mourning Dove](#)" and "[I am a Widow Lone](#)" seem to be personal expressions of grief, lamenting the beloved husband who was so suddenly taken from her.

Following the practice that has become the habit of my life, namely the devoted study of literature, . . . [\[read more\]](#)

Reverence, honor, and all commendation to you, lord provost of Lille, most precious lord and scholar, sage in conduct, lover of knowledge, . . . [\[read more\]](#)

Like the mourning dove I'm now all alone,
And like a shepherdless sheep gone astray, [\[read more\]](#)

I am a widow lone, in black arrayed,
With sorrowful face and most simply clad; [\[read more\]](#)

Joan of Arc (c. 1412-1431)

Joan of Arc, or La Pucelle (the Maiden) as she was popularly called, is probably the best-known figure of the Hundred Years' War. Her divine revelations led her to become first a mystic figure and then a military leader whose victories allowed Charles VII to re-take his throne and lands. After her claim to be divinely inspired was believed by Robert de Baudricourt (the governor of Valcouleurs and a loyal follower of Charles VII), she permanently adopted male dress. Only once after this point did she again don traditional women's clothing.

Joan's mission as a divinely inspired commander began well, and she was able to lift the siege of Orleans and to clear a path into Reims so that Charles could be properly crowned and anointed. Soon after Charles' coronation, however, her luck ran out, and she was eventually taken prisoner by the Burgundians, who handed her over to the English. Though she was certain that she would either be ransomed by the king or saved by divine power, neither king nor God intervened and Joan was subjected to a [lengthy church trial](#) which ended with her death by fire. Her holy character, which had been seriously called into question during her trial, was reaffirmed before the crowd gathered for her execution, as she did not scream or cry out as she burned, but instead quietly prayed to Jesus, Mary, and the saints.

Joan captured the imagination not only of her contemporaries (see Christine de Pizan's "[Poem of Joan of Arc](#)" in *The Writings of Christine de Pizan*), but also of later generations, up to and including our own time. The twentieth century spawned not only dramatic and cinematic depictions of Joan's struggle, but video games as well, in which the player controls Joan and other important figures from the Hundred Years' War.

. . .the judges went to the prison, and found [Jeanne] dressed in man's clothing, that is, a robe, hood, [\[read more\]](#)

And you, the King of France, King Charles,
The seventh of that noble name,
Who fought a mighty war before
Good fortune came at all to you: [\[read more\]](#)

Useful Links to Resources on Medieval Women and Sexuality

[The Christine de Pizan Society](#)

[Epistolae](#) (Joan Ferrante, Columbia University)

[Feminae: Medieval Women and Gender Index](#) (Margaret Schaus, Haverford College)

[St. Hildegard of Bingen](#) (Johannes-Gutenberg University)

[IMS](#) ("The Internet Medieval Sourcebook") (Paul Halsall, Fordham University)

[The International Joan of Arc Society](#) (Bonnie Wheeler, Southern Methodist University)

[Labyrinth](#) (Georgetown University)

[Medieval Academic Discussion Groups](#) (includes medfem-l, a fairly active listserv on medieval feminist topics.)

[Medieval Medicine](#) (Maggie Krzywicka)

[Medieval Sex and Sexuality](#) at [Decameron Web](#) (Brown University)

[Monastic Matrix](#) (Ohio State University)

[Netserf.org](#) ("The Internet Connection for Medieval Resources")

[Other Women's Voices](#) (Dorothy Disse; a wonderful collection of texts written by women prior to 1700)

[Women in Medieval History and Religion](#) links at the [Medieval Page](#)

[Women Writers of the Middle Ages](#) (Juliet Sloger, University of Rochester)

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