

ENGL 2315  
Saints and Sex Demons  
TTR 5:15-6:45 pm  
Prof. Caz Batten  
Course Prospectus



### **Content**

Witches and demons attack victims at night by ‘riding’ them in their beds, crushing them to death. Knights kiss one another in vows of eternal love – and dress as courtly maidens. A religious ascetic adopts a eunuch disguise, then new pronouns and a new name. This course explores ‘queers before queerness’: the fascinating, fluctuating ways gender, sex, and sexuality were defined and experienced in the premodern literary tradition. We will examine the porous boundaries of gender and sexuality – and the ways those concepts express, uphold, and undermine normative ideas and anxieties about power, embodiment, immortal souls, and erotic desires – in medieval English literature, from epic poetry to Arthurian romance. We’ll explore how much work it takes to establish certain gender performances and sexual behaviors as ‘normal’ and marginalize others as ‘deviant’, and engage with current gender and queer theory, learning to use these frameworks to read literature productively. Most importantly, we’ll discover the ways in which medieval ideas about gender, sex, sexuality, and the self continue to inform contemporary discourse and shape modern culture.

Texts will include: the testimony of a fourteenth-century sex worker who blurred gender lines; Old English epic and religious poetry celebrating masculinity; devotional

books for women who walled themselves up in church cells; medieval pulp fiction romances about sex, extramarital affairs, and homoeroticism; and the filthiest narratives from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. We'll look at short excerpts from theoretical texts together as a class, to get familiar with Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Susan Stryker, among others.

No previous experience with premodern literature is required, and we'll read all of our texts with facing page translations or interactive digital glossaries.

### **Structure**

Our most frequent class format will be seminar-style discussions and small group work, with a few helpful lectures sprinkled in. One of our sessions will hopefully take place in the Kislak Center, where we'll examine (and even handle) medieval and early modern manuscripts.

### **Assignments**

Wherever possible our weekly readings will be uploaded as PDFs on Canvas or links to online interactive editions, including a few helpful secondary sources. You will write a midterm paper and a longer final paper, with 'short writes' of around 600 words in between. We'll also do some (very) informal in-class presentations.