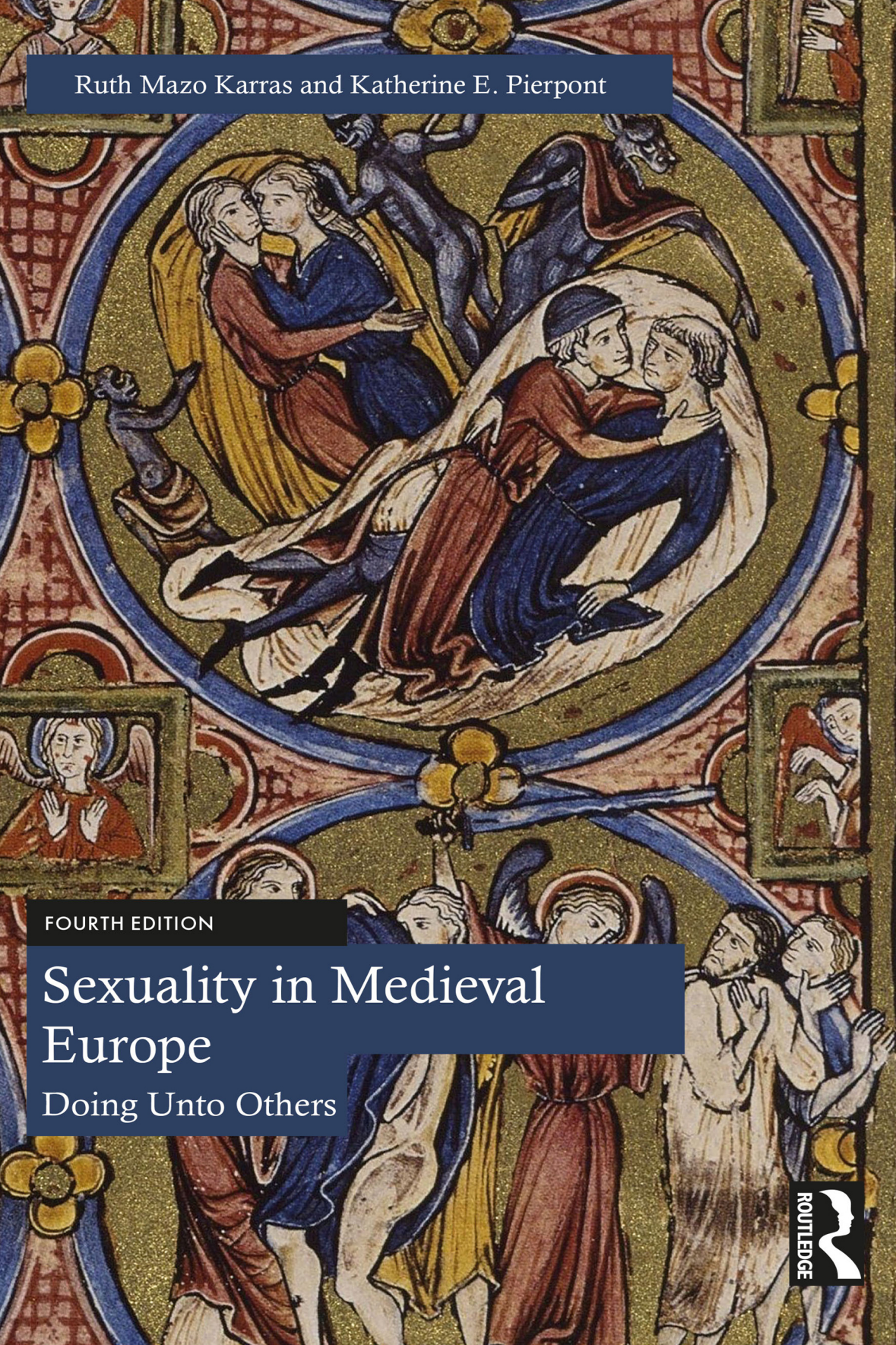


The background of the book cover is a medieval manuscript illumination. It features a large central circular medallion (tondo) depicting a scene with several figures. In the foreground, a man in a blue tunic and a woman in a red tunic are embracing. Behind them, another couple is visible. The scene is set against a gold background. Surrounding the central medallion are smaller rectangular panels, each containing a different figure or scene, also in a medieval style. The entire cover is decorated with gold leaf and blue and red lines.

Ruth Mazo Karras and Katherine E. Pierpont

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Sexuality in Medieval Europe

Doing Unto Others

4th Edition

Ruth Mazo Karras and
Katherine E. Pierpont

Designed cover image: Couples embracing the moralized meaning of Eve's temptation by the serpent. Moralized Bible, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Codex Vindobonensis 2554, fol. 2, detail © Austrian National Library/Interfoto/Alamy Stock Photo

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For Verity, Edward, and Caroline
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1 Sex and the Middle Ages

The combination of “medieval Europe” and “sexuality” conjures up one of several images in most people’s minds. One is a vision of total repression. A church controlled by celibate men defines all sexual acts and thoughts as impure and sinful. Even marital sex for the purpose of reproduction is barely tolerable; it becomes a sin if the participants enjoy it. Sexuality threatens human salvation: it is a nearly irresistible force, and the devil is always at the ready to use sexual temptation to drag humankind to destruction and damnation.

Plenty of medieval texts support this vision of negative and repressive medieval attitudes toward sexuality. We can look, for example, at the Desert Fathers tradition. In the late antique period (fourth to fifth centuries), there were several collections of the sayings and deeds of monks who lived in individual cells (eremitic monasticism) or in groups (cenobitic monasticism) in the Egyptian desert. These texts were translated into Latin and then into the various European vernaculars, and became quite popular. The tales include stories of heroic penance for sexual thoughts. In one story, the devil sends a woman to tempt a monk. She claims to be lost and asks to stay in his cell because she is afraid of wild beasts. As a thirteenth-century French poetic version tells it:

The monk soon had great desire of her ... and he knew well that it was the devil who caused him so much anguish.... And when he burned with the most passion he said, “Those who do such things go into torment. This will test whether you can suffer the eternal fire where you must go.” And he extended his finger and put it in the flame.... But the finger did not feel the heat, because he was so filled with fleshly fire. Thus one after the other he held his fingers in the fire, so that they were all burned by daybreak.¹

When we reflect on the pervasiveness and popularity of stories like this, we cannot help but think of medieval Europe as a culture with a very negative attitude to sex. Sexual desire had to be combated even at the cost of great personal hardship; it was a pollutant and a threat to the soul. This book

2 *Sex and the Middle Ages*

treats the whole period of the Middle Ages in western Europe – roughly 500–1500 CE – and attitudes of course changed over this time period, but, as the 1000-year popularity of this particular story indicates, some understandings of the role of sex in human affairs were very persistent.

Opposite this strict and sin-wracked image stands an earthier one. Lusty priests seduce the women who confess to them; noblemen keep mistresses; monks and nuns engage in secret liaisons; peasants couple behind hedge-rows. This view dismisses the church and its repressive teachings as full of hypocrisy and generally ignored by medieval people, who went about their daily business with a zest that disappeared later in a more puritan age.

Medieval texts support this lustful, playful version as well. The stories of Chaucer, Boccaccio, or the French fabliaux (humorous rhymed stories) are good examples. In one story of a wife deceiving her husband with a young lover:

She, acting as guide,
ushered her paramour inside
and got him underneath the quilt,
and right away he went to tilt
in the tourney prescribed by Love.
Less than a nut's all he thought of
playing at any other game,
and, as for her, she felt the same.²

In stories like this, both men and women find joy in sexual intercourse. Sin is not an issue, nor is reproduction. This story is not subversive, underground literature, nor is it hardcore pornography. Scholars argue about whether the audience for fabliaux like this one, and similar literature, was nobility or townspeople, but these stories were read and enjoyed openly by both men and women, no doubt including many members of the church hierarchy.

The third image of medieval sexual attitudes and practices is much darker, born out of a twenty-first-century awareness of sexual violence against women, gay men, transgender adults, children, and anyone who is vulnerable. This image appears most prominently in neomedieval cultural artifacts like the *Game of Thrones* television series, in which not only sexual assault but also sadism appears to be endemic.³ It is true that in the Middle Ages women who traveled without men's protection, like Margery Kempe, could fear sexual assault; that Christians could envision sexualized torments inflicted by pagans, who could cut off women's breasts to get them to renounce Christianity; that for girls to be married as soon as they hit menarche was, if not routine, at least not surprising; and that for clerics to molest boys under their educational regime was not uncommon.⁴ And yet the pagans in medieval texts torture Christians because they want them to stop being Christian, not because they get pleasure from it; men

who rape in medieval texts generally do so because they want to have sex, not because they want to dominate, unlike in modern depictions of the medieval period (although as we will see, these two things were in some ways not entirely separable in a world that thought of sex and penetration as being largely synonymous). It is the difference between the medieval text in which the pilgrim Dante observes sinners tortured by demons, and a videogame: in the game, Dante is a crusader who inflicts sexualized torment not found in the poet Dante's work.⁵ Despite this, before proceeding, it is worth issuing an overarching trigger warning. All the chapters in this book deal with various types of violence, sexual, and otherwise, and the nature of the book, as well as certain aspects of medieval sexuality, makes it impossible to separate out these conversations from the larger landscape of sexuality. Even if the reader avoids subheadings that signal discussions of violence, engaging with the medieval world means occasionally engaging with its darker side.

All of the above views of medieval sexuality are based on modern readings; yet, they all have some truth to them. It is more complicated than just attitudes changing over time, although they did; it is also the case that many different attitudes coexisted within a single culture. Medieval Europe, of course, was not a "single culture"; Latin Christendom can be seen as one, in many ways, with some regional variation, but there were also Muslim polities in Iberia and in Sicily, as well as Jews under Christian and Muslim rule throughout. Sexuality in the medieval Islamic world is also subject to the same sorts of cultural stereotypes as in Christian Europe, and perhaps even more so: the harem as a place for elite men to indulge themselves entirely, the sexual exploitation of male and female slaves, and the seventy-two houris who are the heavenly reward of the martyr are part of Western cultural vocabulary.⁶ Here too there is some support in the medieval texts: the frame tale that begins the *One Thousand and One Nights* in its oldest existing version involves the infidelity of a queen and her slave girls with African slaves in the palace:

The private gate of his brother's palace opened, and there emerged, strutting like a dark-eyed deer, the lady, his brother's wife, with twenty slave girls, ten white and ten black.... they sat down, took off their clothes, and suddenly there were ten slave girls and ten black slaves dressed in the same clothes as the girls. Then the ten black slaves mounted the ten girls, while the lady called "Mas'ud, Mas'ud!" and a black slave jumped from the tree to the ground, rushed to her, and, raising her legs, went between her thighs and made love to her. Mas'ud topped the lady, while the ten slaves topped the ten girls, and they carried on till noon.⁷

The wife and the ten slaves, who the text makes clear are the king's concubines, are put to death (the story does not say what happened to the

4 Sex and the Middle Ages

male slaves), and the monarch's conclusion that there is no such thing as a chaste woman leads to his regime of sleeping with a different woman each night and putting her to death in the morning, a regime broken only by Shahrazad's successful storytelling. Even in the Middle Ages, this story was set in the remote past and in a distant country (India), so it hardly describes actual practice. There is a great deal of other Arabic writing about erotic love which indicates that the discourse is far from unitary – indeed, within the *Thousand Nights and a Night* (commonly known as the *Arabian Nights*), sex is depicted in many different ways. But the grains of truth in the modern stereotypes are clear: relative freedom for (at least elite) men that emerges from texts across the Islamic world is accompanied by a cultural concern for female chastity, so that here too a frankness about sex is combined with a stringency reinforced by religion. Where enslaved women were also available, men had more extramarital opportunities, but free women fewer.

Yes, these images are contradictory, even within Christian culture. So are many of the views on sexuality found in contemporary culture. If you think about the sexual attitudes of people you know, you will find not only that different people have different views but even that a single individual may hold many different views, depending on circumstances. People learn and understand culture at many different levels. Sex is a particularly complicated issue because it involves questions of religious morality, public order, gender relations, and representational cultures, as well as the individual psyche. It should not be a surprise that a complicated issue generates a complex web of attitudes. This book, then, will not search for the medieval view of sexuality, but rather for the multiplicity of views that describes the medieval experience.

The stereotypical images of medieval sexuality are heavily gendered. It is fair to say that the first, repressive attitude, associated with the medieval church, carried over into the secular culture more commonly with regard to women's sexuality, seen as active but sinful; the second, earthy attitude, associated with lay culture, carried over into the ecclesiastical realm more commonly with regard to men's, seen as active but celebrated; and the third involves women mainly as passive victims. Women's behavior was sinful, polluting, or simply irrelevant; men's was obeying the dictates of nature. Again, the concept of a double standard is familiar to any modern reader, and we will encounter this double standard again and again throughout this book. Some scholars have critiqued the very notion of a female sexuality in the Middle Ages, suggesting that this is a modern way of looking at things and solidifies categories that were actually more fluid at the time; but if we talk about "sexuality" as gender neutral, we risk taking the masculine bent of so many of our sources for the universal.⁸ Our argument throughout this book goes beyond saying that the same act was seen differently for men and for women. In many cases, medieval people did not see what the two partners did in sexual intercourse as the same act at all.

Medieval people, for the most part, understood sex acts as something that someone did to someone else, in particular the act of penetration. The subtitle of this book, *Doing Unto Others*, reflects this idea. The most common verbs used for sexual intercourse today – “to have sex” and “to make love” – are intransitive. They are actions that two people do together and not actions that one person does to another: a person (ideally) has sex with another person as a mutual act. Part of this is the modern acceptance of sex as an act that takes a variety of forms – vaginal, oral, anal, etc. – rather than just intercourse or penetration, often coded specifically as vaginal penetration. But it is also about the modern perception of sex, including penetration, as a mutual act, even when partners think of themselves in terms of “tops” and “bottoms,” somewhat analogous to the medieval idea of “active” and “passive” participants. Even “to fuck,” which began as a term implying one person penetrating another, has come to be used intransitively, or interchangeably of men and women: “they fucked” or “she fucked him” are perfectly comprehensible descriptions of vaginal sex.

Medieval terminology was different. The subject of the French verb *fou-tre*, for example, in modern French can be a man, a woman, or a couple, but the older meaning was “to penetrate” and the subject was always a man. The same was usually true of the English *swiven*, which, according to the *Middle English Dictionary*, could mean “to have sexual intercourse” or more specifically “to have sexual intercourse with (a woman).” There are many more examples of the second, transitive meaning, and in all the man is the subject and the woman the object.⁹ The Latin *concubere* has an original meaning of “to lie with” and might seem gender neutral but in fact is most often used with a masculine subject. For example, a 1395 document records the interrogation of a person it refers to as a man who was caught selling sex to another man, while dressed as a woman. The summary of the sex worker’s testimony reported that a certain priest “lay with him [*concubuit*] as with a woman,” but that he himself “lay [*concubuit*] as a man with many nuns.”¹⁰ In the first example, the priest is the subject of *concubuit* and the person selling sex is the object, because the priest is enacting the masculine role of penetration and the other is playing the feminine role of being penetrated. In the second example, the sex worker is lying with (penetrating) nuns, making him the masculine subject. A medieval English text sums up these subject/object roles by explaining that the sinfulness of lust was on both parties, “the man that doth and the woman that suffreth.”¹¹

These linguistic forms reflected a general way of thinking about sex in the Middle Ages. Indeed, the relation between the active and passive in grammar and the active and passive in sexual intercourse was not lost on medieval people. In the twelfth century, Alain of Lille wrote a poem entitled “The Plaint of Nature,” in which he drew an analogy between grammar and men who pervert nature by playing a passive role in intercourse. The poem went on to have a wide manuscript distribution. “The active sex shudders in disgrace as it sees itself degenerate into the passive sex.

A man turned woman blackens the fair name of his sex.... He is subject and predicate; one and the same term is given a double application." Personified Nature herself says that "the human race, fallen from its high estate, adopts a highly irregular (grammatical) change [metaplasma] when it inverts the rules of Venus by introducing barbarisms in its arrangement of genders."¹² The role of nature and the natural in medieval understandings of sexuality will be discussed later in this chapter; for now, the important point is that medieval people in general understood the active and the passive role in sex to be two very different things.

The roles of "active" and "passive" partner did not necessarily have anything to do with who was pursued and who was pursuer, or who enjoyed sex more. Many medieval writers thought women were more lustful than men. Their supposed passivity didn't mean that they did not initiate the sexual relationship, nor did it mean that they were expected to lie still on their backs. It meant that they were the receptive partners; they were penetrated. Similarly, the distinction between "active" and "passive" in male-male intercourse referred to the penetrator and penetrated. (This distinction sometimes breaks down in discussions of fellatio, but as noted in Chapter 5 such discussions were rare in the Middle Ages.) But women's "passivity" as it was understood in medieval grammatical and medical theory does not mean that they were not considered and expected to be in control. Indeed, badges of cheap metal that people wore on their clothing in the later Middle Ages, many of which show disembodied vulvas and penises, never show either organ being handled by a man, but frequently show penises being ridden, handled, and even roasted by women and may be related to women's control of the sex act – not in terms of desire, but in terms of reproduction (Figure 1.1).¹³

Since sexual intercourse was seen as something that one person did to another, the two partners were not understood to be doing the same thing or having the same experience. Mutuality was not important in the medieval conceptualization of sex. Since our evidence most often deals with two partners of different sexes, it follows that medieval people understood men's and women's experiences of sex acts as quite different. Where the partners were of the same sex, medieval people did not always know how to understand them. Medieval texts reveal, for example, a good deal of confusion about the moral status of erotic acts between women, which often were not considered sex unless one of the women penetrated the other with a dildo.

The fact that men and women were seen as experiencing sex differently dictates in part the organization of this book. Although modern scholars have recognized that the experience of rape in the Middle Ages was different for the perpetrator and the victim, traditionally they have seen other sex acts (fornication, adultery, sex work, same-sex relationships) as a single type of act, roughly the same in social and moral terms for both partners, and even the best recent scholarship focuses on a typology of behaviors not



Figure 1.1 Vulva carried by phalluses. Lead-tin badge from Bruges, 1375–1435. Van Beuningen Collection, Rotterdam, 0967.

initially broken down by gender.¹⁴ Because the acts were not really the same for both partners, this book is organized not by the type of sex act but by the gender and marital status of the individuals who committed the act (or who did not commit it, in the case of the chapter on chastity).

Organizing the book with separate chapters on men and women may not seem particularly controversial, but it is worth making explicit the underlying assumptions. Some scholars have argued that medieval understandings of sex and gender were not binary. Some say that for medieval scientists who followed Aristotle, for example, there was only one sex, the male, and females were defective males.¹⁵ Others argue that because sexual reproduction was so common an expectation for men and women in medieval society, those who chose celibacy and renounced reproduction became not men or women, but a third gender.¹⁶ Still others argue that medieval gender was fluid, that people could occupy a variety of gender positions depending on the situation.¹⁷

There is truth to all these arguments, but nevertheless, the binary opposition between men and women was extraordinarily strong in medieval

society. Although theorists might write that females were defective males, their defects were significant enough that no one seriously considered them the same as males; they were in a quite different category. The category was lower in the hierarchy, and the category difference was very real both to scientists and to other medieval people. Similarly, those who did not reproduce might be considered in some ways “not real men” or “not real women,” but no medieval person would have any problem identifying nuns as women and monks as men. The question this raises is: what does it mean to say something like “women who transgressed the expectations for their gender became not-women”? If it means that medieval people could no longer perceive that they were women, or that medieval people somehow accepted them as men and allowed them to live as such, it would be underestimating medieval people in the first instance and perhaps giving them too much credit in the second. We would be on firmer ground if instead we postulated that they would still be identified as women, but ones who moved outside normative gender roles in a way that was meaningful for both the person transgressing and those around them. There could be real social and moral implications of such behavior, and there was also surely personal meaning for the understanding of self, though we cannot necessarily access that personal meaning.

Gender non-conformity did exist in the Middle Ages, and people understood that individuals could behave in ways that could be seen as more masculine or more feminine, but that does not mean non-conformity was embraced. Gender non-conforming people were considered deviant in the Middle Ages. Indeed, sometimes such deviants would even be considered hyper-feminine or hyper-masculine, deviating from expectations by taking to an extreme the qualities that others of their gender kept under control. The dichotomy between masculine and feminine remained entrenched in society, even if that dichotomy proved insufficient for many individuals who we might call queer, trans, or genderqueer (as will be discussed later in this chapter).

The study of sexuality

Before turning to medieval sexuality specifically, we need to digress and discuss the concept of “sexuality.” Like most other general concepts, it can be used to mean a number of different things, and it is important to specify what it means in a given context. Some scholars argue it is anachronistic even to talk about sexuality with regard to medieval Europe, but this is not the case. It may not be a concept medieval people had – there is no word in any of the medieval languages that translates precisely as “sexuality” – but nor is there any word that translates precisely as “political culture” or “affective piety” or “patriarchal family” or a host of other terms we have no problem using to describe the Middle Ages.

The way people understood particular sex acts is not the same thing as the way they understood sexuality as a field of human experience. The term

“sexuality,” as scholars use it, refers to the whole realm of human erotic experience. As Anna Clark puts it, sexuality is “the desires, relationships, acts, and identities concerned with sexual behavior. Desires, relationships, acts, and identities do not automatically flow from one to another; they must be considered separately, and they are often constructed separately.”¹⁸

In other words, sexuality is the universe of meanings that people place on sex acts, rather than the acts themselves. Therefore, as a field of study, the history of sexuality is different from the history of sex, which has to do with who did what with (or to) whom. Some authors prefer to use “history of sexualities” in the plural to emphasize difference: sexuality is not just one thing, dissident sexualities must be included in any history. But “history of sexuality” is not the same thing as “history of sexualities.” Just as one may speak of different chemistries but “chemistry” can still be used to describe the field as a whole, the study of sexuality comprises the study of different sexualities and also the meanings of sex for people who did not identify themselves with particular sexualities as we now understand them. “A sexuality” is a way of being or a form of desire that is more fundamental to the individual than a preference: “sexual identity” and “sexual orientation” are related (modern) terms used to express this. In the contemporary world, heterosexuality and homosexuality would be the most prominent sexualities, but there are also bisexuality, pansexuality, asexuality, and so forth. A “history of sexualities” would be one that traced the antecedents of those and other categories. But a “history of sexuality” is a more comprehensive term. It is in this sense that we can speak of “male sexuality” and “female sexuality”: there is no one form of desire that can be attributed to all men, or to all women, but it is possible to speak of the universe of meanings of acts attributed to women or to men.

The terms “sex,” “gender,” and “sexuality” (as both scholarly discourse and casual conversation today use them, and as they are used here) have distinct meanings. “Sex” refers to the physical characteristics of male and female bodies: genes, hormones, genitalia, and so forth. “Gender” refers to masculinity and femininity, patterns of behavior, and identity. In a doctor’s office, you might see a diagram depicting male or female genitalia; this is sex. At a restaurant, you might see an image of a stick figure in a dress on the women’s bathroom door and a stick figure in trousers (or, really, not-a-dress) on the men’s room door. This is a reductive and at times problematic, but nevertheless recognizable, rendering of gender. “Sexuality” refers to orientation or desire.¹⁹ Thus, a person today assigned male sex at birth might have a female gender identity and a bisexual orientation. Despite these clear distinctions, even today these entities are often conflated, and, in the Middle Ages, they were seen as even more entangled. If someone deviated from the expected models of sexual behavior, people did not assume that the variation was a matter of biology *or* gender identity *or* sexual desire; the three worked together. Whereas we might say that an individual has a female body, a feminine identity

or behavior, and a sexual desire for women, medieval people would have assumed that the desire for women came from a masculine body and, in itself, constituted masculine behavior. Even chastity, an important form of sexuality in the Middle Ages, as will be seen in Chapter 2, had important implications for gender and gender non-conformity. For them, sexuality overlapped significantly with sex and gender; therefore, this book will have much to say about what we moderns call sex and gender in the Middle Ages as well as about sexuality.

The media and popular discourse today frame the discussion about different sexualities around the question of whether they are inborn (“hard-wired”) or a matter of choice or lifestyle. Scholarly discussion has focused on a somewhat different question: are sexualities essential (that is, do they have a reality on their own and exist across cultures?) or are they socially constructed (are they created by the meanings given by different cultures to sex acts)? The general consensus today is that sexuality is socially constructed.²⁰ It is not written in the body but created by society. A person might perform the same acts in a variety of cultures, but they would not express the same sexuality in all those cultures because the acts would have different meanings and are understood differently. As the classicist David Halperin puts it: “Sexuality ... does not properly refer to some aspect or attribute of bodies. Unlike sex, sexuality is a cultural production: it represents the *appropriation* of the human body and of its physiological capacities by an ideological discourse. Sexuality is not a somatic fact; it is a cultural effect.”²¹ While some might argue that sex, too, is a cultural production, we can certainly agree with Halperin that sexuality is very much so.

The difference between the “essentialist” and “social constructionist” positions is demonstrated by attitudes toward sex acts with individuals under the age of eighteen. In contemporary Western society, this would be viewed as sexual abuse of a child. Medieval people would find that idea absurd. There was a concept of “age of consent,” but it applied only to permanent vows, such as marriage or entrance into a religious order. Girls could be married at twelve, boys at fourteen, but someone who had sex with them when they were below this age did not come in for more opprobrium than for non-marital sex with an adult. In fact, for a man to have sex with a boy could be considered more normal than to have sex with an adult man. Thus, the act of having sex with someone under eighteen might be the same in the two time periods, but it had very different implications for the identity of the actor. An essentialist would argue that a pederast is a pederast wherever and whenever you find him; the social constructionist position, that the sexual and social identity of a man who has sex with underage boys (or girls) depends on the culture in which he lives, is much more useful in understanding sexuality within the context of the wider society.

This idea that sexuality is a function of culture and society is especially important given the modern tendency to define sexual relationships as

heterosexual or homosexual based on the sex of the individuals involved. As scholars have become more interested in studying marginalized groups from the past, questions have arisen about how we use modern terms to talk about past people, and not all societies use “what is the gender of the people to whom you are attracted?” as a criterion. “Homosexuality,” as an identity or mode of defining sexual orientation, is not a *thing* that one can find in all cultures. Scholars of the ancient Greek and Roman world argue that people at that time classified sexual behaviors or identities not by the gender of the participants but by the sexual role each plays; thus, a man who penetrates others is simply playing the appropriate male role, he is not a “homosexual” merely because those he penetrates are also male. Some scholars deny there was any concept of the “homosexual” at all before the second half of the nineteenth century, when the term was coined and when sexuality became part of the study of abnormal psychology. Others find that particular sexual identities in other cultures resemble that of the modern “homosexual.” But most would agree that to label anyone in the past who had sex with someone of the same sex as “a homosexual” would be to impose a modern category, not because men did not have sex with other men in the past, but because the sexual roles were more important in these cultures than the genitalia of the people involved. The same argument also applies to other categories of sexual behavior: asexuality, bisexuality, sex work, or any other. Heterosexuality may seem somewhat simpler. It may seem at first glance that, whether or not a certain minority of people in the Middle Ages should be called “homosexual,” the majority certainly were “heterosexual.” In thinking about heterosexuality, however, it is especially important to keep in mind the question of whether behaviors and attitudes add up to an identity. Heterosexuality tends to be an unmarked category: most people assume it is normal and thus often do not notice that it is socially constructed in the same way homosexuality is.²² But heterosexuality, just as homosexuality, depends on a construction of sexuality that defines orientation based on the sex of the desired partner and, therefore, is equally as anachronistic. Again, the acts may be the same, but each society determines the meaning of those acts and whether they create identities. It may be the case that most medieval men had sex only with women and most medieval women had sex only with men, but it would be wrong to attribute to them a consciousness of a heterosexual orientation unless we find evidence for it. In fact, for the most part we do not. Medieval people did not draw the line between gay and straight, but between reproductive and non-reproductive sex. Same-sex activity was not reproductive, but much opposite-sex activity was not reproductive either, and was not excused by the fact that it was what we would call “heterosexual.”

Perhaps it would be wrong to call marriage the norm for medieval people, since many ecclesiastical writers saw marital sex as a necessary evil, but it was certainly the expectation for most. That does not mean that sexual desire that resulted in reproduction was a good thing, or even the default

condition against which other desires were set; it was “concupiscence,” the result of Eve’s and Adam’s disobedience. As Karma Lochrie writes:

Procreation and chastity more than heterosexuality are the reigning norms of medieval theological culture, and this makes a tremendous difference. Sodomy as a subcategory of lechery, although it is set apart as an abomination, is more or less on a continuum with other “heterosexual” vices in which desire waxes inordinate and gender roles morph.²³

The point of view that social constructionists call “essentialism” would argue that while every culture is different, certain fundamental realities remain the same: there are those with homosexual, heterosexual, and various other orientations. The popular lists of “famous gays in history” are essentialist in conception. Essentialism is implicit in the contemporary search for genetic markers or biological corollaries of a predisposition to homosexuality. It is also congenial to activists who believe society will be more tolerant if it understands homosexuality as something inborn, not chosen. But the social construction of sexuality does not imply that individuals choose their own identities – it is the way the broader culture gives meaning to sex through medical, legal, or religious systems that creates sexual identities for them, and these identities are very real.

This book works from the assumption that we must look at how medieval people thought about sexuality, rather than impose our own categories on them. Some people, however, would go much further and say that not only the particular categories familiar to us but also the very notion of a sexual orientation or a sexuality are creations of bourgeois capitalism. This point of view has its roots in the insights of the French philosopher Michel Foucault in his important work *The History of Sexuality*. According to this argument, only in nineteenth-century Europe and North America did people come to view their sexual desires as part of what constituted them as individuals. People in other societies may have had innate desire for a particular type of partner, role, or act, but these did not define them as a type of person. As Foucault wrote:

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology.... Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.²⁴

A classification of persons based on sexual behavior was a categorization of convenience in earlier eras, but not psychically deep. In this formulation, people were not defined by a specific identity tied to who they chose as a sexual partner, even though individuals might recognize and act on desires for a specific type of sexual partner. (Some influential interpreters argue that saying there was no sexuality before capitalism is a distorted reading of Foucault's views. When Foucault drew his famous acts/identities dichotomy, he was not really saying "earlier there were only acts, in the modern era identities developed," he was speaking of types of discourses or ways of talking about sex. Earlier we have legal enactments that mention only acts; later we have medical and psychological analyses that discuss identities.)

This book rejects the *a priori* argument that sexuality is not a relevant concept for the Middle Ages. As we shall see in Chapter 2, the identities of medieval people were fundamentally shaped by their sexual status – not based on the sex of individuals they were attracted to, but whether they were chaste or sexually active. This distinction created a dividing line between two very different kinds of people in medieval society. When it comes to other sexual categories, we have to look at the medieval evidence and decide what kind of sexual categories medieval people used to think with, if they did at all. To dismiss out of hand the possibility that they could have had a concept of sexuality is just as reductive as automatically assuming that their concept of sexuality was the same as ours.

Recently scholars have used the concept of "queer" to describe a variety of sexual and gender transgressions. This is not the place for a detailed discussion of "queer theory" in the various humanistic disciplines, especially literature, but it is worth saying a few things about the way it is applied to the Middle Ages. In one sense to be "queer" is simply to challenge norms; thus, the term can be associated with homosexuality in the contemporary era, but it can also be used by people who want to claim for themselves an identity that does not map onto the homosexual–heterosexual binary. Anyone who is outside of cultural expectations can be labeled as "queer": thus, Tison Pugh suggests that Harry Bailly, the host in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, is "queer" because his domestic masculinity is impugned by his wife's dominance and shrewishness.²⁵ But "queer" can also signify a new way of looking at medieval texts, rejecting contemporary heteronormativity; approaching a medieval text without assuming that the people and actions depicted in it are heterosexual can open up a new set of interpretive possibilities. This work seeks to "unsettle the heterosexual paradigms of scholarship."²⁶ In this second sense, "queer" is a commentary not just on how the Middle Ages can be seen as queer, but how scholars need to adopt a queer lens to unsettle their own cultural assumptions. It can also include attention to transgression of gender identity since, as many scholars argue and as this book will further discuss, medieval sexual identity is very much about gender identity. To read in this way has become the verb "to queer." Queering the Middle Ages does not mean arguing that particular