ENGL 429-01 Sexualities in History: 1200-1600
Ruth Evans

This course is limited to students accepted into the English Department's Research Intensive track (RIT). Other students can petition to enroll through special permission of the Director of the RIT, Dr. Ellen Crowell (crowelle@slu.edu). Limited to 12 students.

As the French cultural historian Michael Foucault observes, our modern terms for sexualities – including “sexuality” itself – are nineteenth century, and carry with them the freight of their origins in particular discourses: sexology, psychoanalysis, medicine, and criminology. How adequate are these terms for describing premodern sexualities? What is the evidence for sexual behaviors and sexual identities during the period 1200-1600? What connections can we make today with people in history and why might it be valuable to make such connections? Drawing on a range of literary texts and visual evidence, including medieval romances, saints' lives, and fabliaux, works by Chaucer, Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Rochester, and medieval and early modern “erotica,” we will consider a number of sexual categories from the period: the spectral “homosexual,” the invisible “lesbian” and tribade, “heterosexuality” (by no means a transparent term), courtly love, virginity (which is a sexuality), “cross-dressing,” “exhibitionism,” “masochism,” and hermaphrodites, to name only a few. We will study the institutional construction and regulation of sex and desire in law, religion, medicine, anatomy, and popular culture. Students will be encouraged to use conceptual models from Foucault and from psychoanalysis to explore the literary and visual representation of sexualities in the period, and to consider what we can learn from the past about sexualities today. Additionally, this seminar will host a guest critic, chosen by the seminar leader, who will participate in the seminar and offer a public lecture. The course will lead to a fifteen-twenty page final research paper, with written assignments throughout the course helping students toward that final paper.