

List III Hilary Term

HIU33108, Reading the Queer Middle Ages (Ruth Karras)

Assessment: Three 1000-word assignments



In 1394 'John Rykener, having been detected in women's clothing and calling himself Eleanor', was arrested in London for 'committing that detestable, unmentionable, and ignominious vice' with John Britby. This case went unremarked for decades despite the printing of a calendar of these records, because the editor summarized it only as 'Examination of two men charged with immorality'. This module takes this case as a starting point and asks: was Eleanor Rykener a trans woman? Was John Rykener a man in drag? Were they genderfluid? Are these terms applicable in the Middle Ages? Did this case even happen or was it all a political satire? We will read comparable cases from elsewhere, recent scholarship on the issue, other sources relating to queer identities in the Middle Ages, and historical fiction focusing on Rykener as a character.