

scholars have shown that the construction of homosexuality and heterosexuality as binary opposites is at the very core of modern societies.”

The construction is so flimsy, according to adherents of “queer theory,” as to call into question the adequacy of the very terms *lesbian* and *gay*. Sexuality, in the queer theorists’ view, cannot be contained “within the fixed boundaries of a stable identity,” Corber explains, and the idea that people are either homosexual or heterosexual fails to take into account “sexualities and identities, such as sadomasochism, transvestism, and bisexuality.”

Yet even while the field is thriving, asserts Jill Dolan, executive director of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the City University of New York, gay and lesbian teachers “remain second-class citizens of the university,” who are “still subject to workplace discrimination, hate crimes, and college and university practices that favor heterosexuality despite the best intentions of even the most liberal institutions.” A case in point: the storm of criticism that followed a 1997 conference at the State University of New York at New Paltz, which featured workshops on sadomasochism and “Sex Toys for Women.” Last June, the AAUP bestowed the Alexander Meiklejohn Award for academic freedom on New Paltz president Roger W. Bowen for his forceful defense of the conference as a matter of free expression. (The citation and Bowen’s comments are reprinted in the magazine.)

Also at issue on campus, according to *Academe*, is the vexing question of whether professors should be able to bed their stu-

dents. The traditional answer—*No!*—“has long been violated, and the violations, except for occasional scandals, have long been tolerated,” writes Ann J. Lane, a historian and director of the women’s studies program at the University of Virginia. Most often, the professors involved are older, male, married—and figures of authority. Their (usually female) student lovers often “suffer,” Lane says. “Some collapse emotionally, and even attempt suicide. Others change their majors or graduate schools, or drop out permanently.” Though the young women ostensibly are consenting adults, the reality, Lane says, is that most “are not yet fully adult.”

She favors putting such relationships completely off limits. “Sexual relations between a teacher and a student are more than private conduct; they affect the community the professor and student share with other students and teachers. . . . Becoming the lover of a student constitutes an abuse of power and a betrayal of trust.”

But Kal Alston, a professor of education and women’s studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, insists that the university should not intrude. It should not be assumed that a student is not a full adult, she says, and it is up to individual teachers to decide “what it means for them to be a ‘good’ teacher and an ethical person.”

“Most teachers recognize their influence over students and are careful not to misuse it,” Ann Lane observes. But the others exist, and they are not always aware of the harm they may be doing to the students. The teaching profession, she suggests, may well be in need today of an academic Hippocratic oath.

## *The New Medievalists*

“Medievalisms Old and New: The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies” by Paul Freedman and Gabrielle M. Spiegel, in *The American Historical Review* (June 1998), 914  
Atwater, Indiana Univ., Bloomington, Ind. 47405.

Continuing its long march through academe, postmodernist thinking has now reached even into the field of medieval studies. There it is upending American scholars’ long-cherished conviction that the Middle Ages provided the seed bed of the modern, progressive West. In its place, report historians Freedman, of Yale University, and Spiegel, of Johns Hopkins University, has

come a new, postmodernist Middle Ages, which is—depending on one’s tour guide—either utterly strange and different from the modern world or a repellently familiar harbinger of the evil modern West, full of persecution and repression.

The now-passé idea that the modern, progressive state had its origins in the feudal monarchies of 12th- and 13th-century

England and France, the authors say, was “essentially the creation” of Charles Homer Haskins (1870–1937), a Wilsonian progressive and “the first true professional medieval historian” in America. In *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (1927), he challenged the assumption that modern Western civilization began in the Renaissance, pushing its origins back, as his title indicates, to the 12th century. Haskins’s protégé, Joseph Reese Strayer, equally dedicated to investigating “the medieval origins of the modern state,” maintained in a famous 1956 article, that French king Philip the Fair (1268–1314) was not a tyrant but a “constitutional” monarch.

Today’s medieval historians, such as Caroline Walker Bynum, the author of *Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (1995), came of age during the 1960s and ’70s, note Freedman and Spiegel, and bring to their work the era’s “profound suspicion of order, hierarchy, authority, and patriarchy.” They are

interested in showing how gender differences were historically produced, and in rescuing the marginal and excluded. They treat documents as “texts” rather than “sources,” and regard history as a recovery of past images rather than the truth of the past.

These new medievalists have “demonized” the Middle Ages, observe the authors. Some have highlighted its “grotesque” aspects, making the period seem almost incomprehensibly strange. Bynum, for instance, the authors note, examines medieval women who, in the name of spir-

itual transcendence, “drank pus seeping from wounds, fasted to the point of starvation, and submitted to horrifying acts of self-deprivation.” At its best, write Freedman and Spiegel, this sort of postmodernist approach offers “a more intriguing, more colorful, and less familiar Middle Ages, in which the state is more predatory, piety is more intense, and mentalities more foreign” than previously portrayed.

Other new medievalists, such as R. I. Moore, the author of *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250* (1987), have made the Middle Ages “darkly familiar, the analogue of a negatively construed modern West,” say Freedman and Spiegel. Instead of being “the center of a modern, rational progressive movement,” the 13th century has been transformed at their hands into “a Foucauldian Panopticon of discipline and colonization.” The focus is on heretical groups and



*Torturing a heretic during the Inquisition: was it all in a medieval day’s work?*

such once-marginalized subjects as incest, masochism, rape, and transvestism.

Indeed, by some accounts, report the authors, “the most popular topics in medieval cultural studies in America at the moment . . . are death, pus, contagion, defilement, blood, abjection, disgust and humiliation, castration, pain, and autopsy.” The goal of the postmodernist medievalists, conclude Freedman and Spiegel, “is not so much an expansion, enrichment, or even complication of our understanding of medieval culture but rather its ‘undoing.’”

## Testing America

“Is America an Experiment?” by Wilfred M. McClay, in *The Public Interest* (Fall 1998), 1112 16th St. N.W., Ste. 530, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Extreme multiculturalists, rejecting the very idea of a common American culture, often proclaim that this country has no fixed

beliefs or standards, but rather is a continuing “experiment.” Their view reflects a misunderstanding of both America and experi-