



**Accessus:**

A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media

**Accessus**

---

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 1

---

2018

## Foreword

Georgiana Donavin

*Westminster College*, [gdonavin@westminstercollege.edu](mailto:gdonavin@westminstercollege.edu)

Eve Salisbury

*Western Michigan University*, [eve.salisbury@wmich.edu](mailto:eve.salisbury@wmich.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus>



Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, European Languages and Societies Commons, Film and Media Studies Commons, and the Medieval Studies Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Donavin, Georgiana and Salisbury, Eve (2018) "Foreword," *Accessus*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus/vol4/iss1/1>

This Introduction has been accepted for inclusion in Accessus by the editorial board of the journal and administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



## Foreword

We are pleased to dedicate this issue of *Accessus* to Kim Zarins' "Intersex and the Pardoner's Body," a timely work that engages a most sensitive and relevant topic just as medievalists are endeavoring to show how the study of the Middle Ages sheds light upon contemporary concerns. Putting the past into conversation with the present, as Zarins' contribution does, offers another perspective on transhistorical correspondences and in so doing furthers the journal's commitment to urging research and writing about premodern literatures that have resonance with twenty-first century concerns. In keeping with Zarins' views on traversing temporal boundaries without fear, the editors of *Accessus* do not shrink from charges of anachronism but rather revel in the journal's capacity to foster a dialogue between the Middle Ages and contemporary events and media. Like John Gower, whose poems are the center of The Gower Project, sponsor of this journal, we see the writings of the past as a means by which we may situate our present moment within a broader historical context. We wish to encourage the rethinking of what we presently know and the application of that knowledge to a renewed understanding of the world around us.

Zarins pushes back against the "fear of anachronism" to enable the Pardoner to speak his own truth and to challenge those who would ventriloquize his voice and define his identity in abstract terms. Words used to explicate the Pardoner's body no less than the words he speaks have ramifications in this regard, especially when tales from the Canterbury collection are taught in present-day classrooms to vulnerable young adults. It is no coincidence that Zarins locates the moment she began to rethink the Pardoner's sexuality as occurring shortly after she had written

her young adult novel, *Sometimes We Tell the Truth*,<sup>1</sup> an adaptation of the *Canterbury Tales* in which American high school students on a field trip to Washington, D.C. tell tales to pass the time. Having come to new terms to describe both the Pardoner's sexuality and a revised reading of *The Pardoner's Tale* in which she applies those terms, Zarins reflects on her progress in teaching this character in the real, heterogeneous world of her university in a classroom full of students sensitive to the issues surrounding gender and sex identity. She recounts how her character, "Pard," provoked a response from a student who disclosed his close identification with her character. As Zarins tells it, "[T]his Pardoner-identifying student didn't look full of the kind of despair we read about in Pardoner scholarship. Recognition in his eyes, he looked thrilled to find himself in the pages of a novel, and by extension in the pages of an old, revered book" (46). Fully aware of the vulnerabilities of this new audience of readers, Zarins argues that the Pardoner's social position among the other Canterbury pilgrims points to a model of "inclusion and affirmation" rather than exclusion and denial. For all of us in communities that embrace a multiplicity of gender and sex identities, the shift from a lexicon of despair to one of hope and joy is no small matter.

Zarins' revisionist reading of the sex and gender of one of Chaucer's most provocative characters illuminates modern medical practices regarding bodies that present as atypical. As do many of the field's queer readings, hers empathizes with the Pardoner but turns toward more material discussions of his body to encourage a more comprehensive understanding of the physical condition implied by the language used to describe his features. Many will find it counterintuitive that Zarins' inquiry depends in part on Beryl Rowland's much maligned 1964

---

1. Kim Zarins, *Sometimes We Tell the Truth* (New York: Simon Pulse, 2016).

article on the Pardoner as “hermaphrodite.”<sup>2</sup> Freighted with mythological and moral significance, “hermaphrodite” is a term that Zarins rejects, preferring instead to craft a lexicon that emphasizes variation and difference rather than absence and lack. Like Rowland, Zarins researches clinical descriptions of intersex features showing Chaucer’s character to be a “real” body inhabiting a fictional world. She takes us through the development of the medical discourse, including what Alice Dreger has called “The Age of Gonads,” to arrive at a place where we can acknowledge the need for change in how we talk about intersex.<sup>3</sup>

We invited this submission after Zarins presented a shorter version at the fiftieth meeting of the Medieval Association of the Pacific at the University of California in Davis. The conference paper produced a lively and sometimes awkward discussion that demonstrated both intense interest in what Zarins had to say and misunderstandings of her motivations and methods for saying it. After the peer review process confirmed the high quality of Zarins’ work and a notable engagement with her subject, we decided to feature her article in order to highlight these important conversations and dispel misconceptions. The format for *Accessus* allows greater space for explanation, clarification, and presentation of source material for those interested in following up on the topic. In addition, our online medium includes hyperlinks to the informative blogs and websites that can help our readers navigate current views concerning the treatment, medical and social, of intersex people. As Zarins revised her conference paper and journeyed through *Accessus*’s review process, she took opportunities to explain how the construction of her intersex character “Pard” and the response to him by her students inspired her to investigate the

---

2. Beryl Rowland, “Animal Imagery and the Pardoner,” *Neophilologus* 48 (1964): 56–60.

3. Alice Domurat Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medieval Invention of Sex* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

mountain of criticism on the Pardoner's body, from Rowland's early medical research to David Rollo's recent book on "hermaphroditic fictions."<sup>4</sup> She welcomed the scope of our online medium to emphasize the urgency of understanding and respecting the Pardoner, for all our sakes, but especially for our LGBTQIA+ students.

Having begun our careers when feminist and queer readings of medieval texts were finally gaining traction, we are thrilled to promote this next stage of research on sexuality and gender in medieval texts. When Jill Mann's *Feminizing Chaucer*,<sup>5</sup> or Carolyn Dinshaw's *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*,<sup>6</sup> or Glenn Burger's "Kissing the Pardoner"<sup>7</sup> appeared, we were moved by the rich new readings of Chaucer informed by contemporary perspectives on sexuality and gender. Since then, we have participated in this critical enterprise in our collaborations and in our individual scholarly work. Our co-edited anthology, *Domestic Violence in Medieval Texts*,<sup>8</sup> excavates medieval beliefs and practices regarding sex and gender that promote violence, and our recent single-authored books rely on decades of enriching medieval gender studies.<sup>9</sup> Here in

- 
4. David Rollo, *Kiss my Relics: Hermaphroditic Fictions of the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
  5. Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002).
  6. Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).
  7. Glenn Burger, "Kissing the Pardoner," *PMLA* 107 (1992): 1143–56. Parts of this essay appear in Glenn Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
  8. Eve Salisbury, Georgiana Donavin, and Merrall Llewelyn Price, eds. *Domestic Violence in Medieval Texts* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002).
  9. Georgiana Donavin, *Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in the Literature of Medieval England* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), and Eve Salisbury, *Chaucer and the Child* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

*Accessus*, we have intentionally supported similar lines of inquiry in articles such as M.W. Bychowski's "Unconfessing Transgender: Dysphoric Youths and the Medicalization of Madness in John Gower's 'Tale of Iphis and Ianthe',"<sup>10</sup> and in conference sessions that have foregrounded interdisciplinary work between poetry and medicine and poetry and science.

The timing of this offering is fortuitous since it continues along the lines noted above, anticipates a forthcoming issue of *Postmedieval* on "Medieval Intersex, Language and Hermaphroditism,"<sup>11</sup> and looks forward to many as yet unanticipated scholarly conversations celebrating the field's progress in understandings of sex and gender and the contemporary relevance of medieval studies. This is a special issue dedicated to a special topic and to the inclusion of those who have felt excluded in the scholarly discourse. The editors of *Accessus* wish to encourage respectful exchange among our constituents, our colleagues, and our students as well as a renewed commitment to greater diversity and focus on concerns relevant to the present. Let us not allow those who would ventriloquize the voices in our field to appropriate and misrepresent the good work being done to advance the study of the Middle Ages in a responsible and meaningful way.

Georgiana Donavin  
[gdonavin@westminstercollege.edu](mailto:gdonavin@westminstercollege.edu)

Eve Salisbury  
[eve.salisbury@wmich.edu](mailto:eve.salisbury@wmich.edu)

---

10. M. W. Bychowski, "Unconfessing Transgender: Dysphoric Youths and the Medicalization of Madness in John Gower's 'Tale of Iphis and Ianthe,'" *Accessus: A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2016): 1–38.  
<http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1024&context=accessus>

11. Guest edited by Ruth Evans with contributions by Jonathan Hsy, David Rollo, Leah DeVun, M.W. Bychowski, and Iain Morland, the issue is slated for 2018 publication. See [www.palgrave.com/de/journal/41280/volumes-issues/forthcoming-issues](http://www.palgrave.com/de/journal/41280/volumes-issues/forthcoming-issues)

