

SENSITIVE SUBJECTS

in Teaching and Research
in Medieval and Early Modern Literature

A CUSO doctoral workshop
on dealing with violence, race, religion and gender

University of Fribourg
July 18th-19th 2025



Includes performance of *'The Interlude of the Godly Queen Hester'* and a *Purimshpil* by Edward's Boys

This two-day workshop will look at 'tricky topics' in teaching and research – subjects that students might find sensitive and researchers might be somewhat nervous about broaching, but that at the same time are of great interest in today's universities and that can, perhaps, helpfully be approached with a historical perspective. Two familiar areas of tension – gender, and race and religion—will be addressed.

Attitudes to women in medieval and early modern texts can be alienating: female characters often seem without agency, valued only for their looks; girls are married off without reference to their own wishes; rape and gender-based violence abound. Martyrs all suffer violence, of course, but the violence to which female martyrs are subjected often focuses on their female bodies, and rape seems to bring with it a shame that we would now call victim-blaming. These attitudes may be mirrored in modern products of medievalism, from Tolkien's almost woman-free *Lord of the Rings* to the semi-pornographic *Game of Thrones*. How far do any of these works reflect the historical realities of women's lives? When might literature shape, as well as reflect, history – and how dangerously? Historical constructions of a religious 'other' have received considerable scholarly attention, but it

seems now more important than ever to interrogate texts that illuminate relations among Jews, Muslims and Christians. This doctoral school will consider the *Thousand and One Nights* as culturally important to all three traditions, and dramatisations of the story of Esther, in the Jewish *purimshpil* and in a number of free-standing dramas in Christian Europe that related the situation of the Jews to the contemporary situation of many European Protestants or Catholics, and explored ideals of womanhood reflected in Esther and Vashti.

The larger themes will therefore be gender and religious-racial discrimination, particularly islamophobia and antisemitism, and historical trauma: the doctoral school will reflect on these themes today, and encourage participants to explore the challenges presented by discussing such matters in the classroom, particularly in relation to cultural appropriations. It will include a 'bring a text' session in which participants can discuss texts-medieval / early modern, or 'medievalist'—that they have found particularly problematic, either to study or to teach; it will also include workshops on the use of drama in the classroom, and on story-telling.

Organisers:

Prof. Elisabeth Dutton & Dr Aurélie Blanc (Uni Fribourg), Dr Juliette Vuille (Uni Lausanne)

Teachers :

Dr Benedetta Viscidi (Uni Fribourg) will introduce the presentation of rape in French romance texts. **Dr Juliette Vuille** will talk on domestic abuse in modern adaptations of the *Wife of Bath*, and **Dr Daisy Black** (Uni Wolverhampton, UK) will give a brief talk on gender and medievalism in board game culture: she will then lead a workshop in which conference participants can try their hand at story-telling techniques useful in the university classroom. **Prof. Cora Dietl** (Uni Giessen) will introduce some German female saints' plays, and will participate in a 'Q and A' session, alongside **Mr. Perry Mills** (King Edward VI School, Director of Edward's Boys) on staging plays as a pedagogical method, particularly as an approach to discussing gender and race. Perry Mills will be accompanied by some of his boy actors and conference participants will be given an opportunity to try their hand at directing them. **Prof. Daniel Boyarin** (UC Berkeley) will give a presentation on gender and Judaism, and will participate in a workshop with **Prof. Ulrich Marzolph**, an expert on Islam in medieval and early modern texts. Doctoral students will be invited to present aspects of their research which might touch on these topics, and will receive help and advice from these experts.

NB The doctoral school is scheduled to coincide with the International Medieval Theatre Conference, to be held in Fribourg in July 2025: this will include a performance piece based on the *Niebelungenlied* on 18th July, and performances of three plays about Esther— one in German, from Fribourg, that focuses on the question of marriage (18th July), one in English (from the 16th century) and one in the tradition of the Jewish 'purim play', that will be presented by all-boys company Edward's Boys (19th July). CUSO participants will be allowed to attend these performances, which will occur after the CUSO workshop sessions, for free.

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