The rough guide to love:

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The Rough Guide to Love: Romance, History, and Sexualisation in Gendered Relationship Advice

Abstract:

Sexualisation is changing the way we think about romantic love. According to recent research, young people are increasingly confronted by narrowing ideals of sexual attractiveness making romantic intimacy increasingly difficult (American Psychological Association, 2007) forcing a choice between "raunch or romance" (Bale, 2011). This article investigates the alleged distinction between romance and sexualisation, in the process challenging claims that the current crisis of sexualisation is a product of societal change in late modernity.

Responding to a call to consider sexualisation from a hitherto neglected historical perspective (Egan and Hawkes, 2012), the paper employs critical discourse analysis to identify the formation of gendered meanings and practices in *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, a late medieval advice text for young women, and twenty-first century advice from the *MyBliss* website. Focusing on sexualised clothing, contact with others, reputation, and social status, the paper argues that in both medieval and modern advice, discourses of romantic love and sexualisation are mutually dependent. In addition, similarities between medieval and modern advice reveal that our current sexualisation crisis is not solely a product of modern life, but is part of a longer pattern of gender normativity and inequality.

Keywords: sexualisation; romantic love; gender; historicisation; critical discourse analysis, class.

Word count: 6996 (excluding reference list and notes).

Introduction

It seems like everything is about sex these days. Cultural and social shifts have produced a twenty-first century characterised by sexualised imagery and incited a global moral panic about sexualisation, specifically of young women and girls. Concerns about a crisis of sexualisation (which, at its most basic means 'to become sexual' or the "act of giving someone or something a sexual character" (Rush and La Nauze, 2006, p. 1) have centred on overlapping areas of the inappropriate imposition of sexuality (American Psychological Association (APA), 2007; Papadopoulos, 2010), whereby young people (especially women) can become sexual too soon: "early and inappropriate" sexualisation (Kehily, 2012, p. 255), or the 'adultification' of young women (APA, 2007). Key areas of focus have been:

commerce, in particular the production of inappropriately sexy clothing for young women (e.g. padded bras and high heels); that sexualisation is an external threat (in the form of the media, and other people) to the types of cultural environments in which children should be nurtured (APA, 2007; Gill, 2007; Kehily, 2012); and ideas about sexualisation damaging young people's reputations (Buckingham et. al., 2010; Egan and Hawkes, 2012; Sharpe and Thomson, 2005).

Crucially, it has been argued that the crisis of sexualisation is changing the way we think about romantic love, threatening the future of intimate and caring relationships (Egan and Hawkes, 2008). According to recent research, young people are increasingly confronted by narrowing ideals of sexual attractiveness making romantic intimacy increasingly difficult (APA, 2007) and forcing a choice between 'raunch' or romance (Bale, 2011) as intimate relationships become sexualised (Attwood, 2006, p. 80). The idea is that 'raunch' (a term coined by Levy in *Female Chauvinist Pigs*) and romance are binary opposites and that young people have to choose one or the other. Yet, is there really such a distinction between romance and sexualisation? Furthermore, are these narrowing ideals a product of "the 'sexed up' cultural landscape" (Garner, 2012, p. 325) of the twenty-first century as has been claimed (Papadopoulos, 2010; APA, 2007; Attwood, 2006), or is there a more longstanding relationship between sexualisation and romance?

Recent research has pointed to the importance of history for the study of sexual culture, arguing that the twenty-first century is not the first time concerns have been raised about threats to intimate relationships: sexualisation has a longer history. Egan and Hawkes (2012), in their study comparing today's sexualisation with the Social Purity Movement (1850-1905), argue that the current discourse of sexualisation employs many of the same epistemological foundations as the Movement and reproduces the same problematic assumptions about the child and sexuality. Wouters, building on Elias' work on emotions and manners, takes the Renaissance – the historical period directly following the medieval – as his starting point, arguing that sexualisation is a long-term social process (2007). In other words, sexualisation is not exclusive to the twenty-first century, but forms part of a longer and more substantial process of social change.

But, concerns about sexualisation and its damaging effect on romantic intimacy are evident in pre-Renaissance material. Surviving texts from the late Middle Ages (1350-1500), a period of urban expansion that, arguably, formed the beginning of urban social and cultural patterns,

indicate similar social concerns about the behaviour of young men and women, suggesting a connection between the medieval and twenty-first century. Several studies of medieval sexuality have highlighted its role in understanding current sexual cultures: Sylvester (2008) traces cultural ideas of heterosexual masculinity and femininity back to the medieval period, arguing that medieval romance is the root of today's romance constructions of gender; Dinshaw's work makes "connections across time… with a clear agenda for contemporary (twentieth-century) queer sexual politics" (Dinshaw, 1999, p. 1); and elsewhere I have drawn direct connections between representations of gender in medieval and modern popular culture (Burge, 2014, 2016). For many scholars, the study of medieval sexuality (often seen as oppositional to twenty-first-century sexuality) is vital for a deeper understanding of our current sexual culture.

My aim in this paper is to extend Wouters' historical reach to include the late medieval period and explore how medieval discourses of sexualisation – in particular, behavioural expectations regarding speech, dress and contact with others – relate to twenty-first-century discourses of sexualisation. My argument is that examining current advice on romantic relationships for young women alongside medieval advice can offer new perspectives on the crisis of sexualisation. First, I discuss in more detail the relationship between romance and sexualisation in the context of the source material. I then introduce the advice texts on which the analysis is based, offering some context for the medieval sources and an outline of my critical discourse analysis approach. The remainder of the paper will explore representations of dress and appearance, external threat and public space, and reputation in advice literature: key areas of concern in sexualisation discourse.

Romance and Sexualisation

The perceived crisis of sexualisation is largely centred on commerce, the media and young people: as Attwood points out, "sex is increasingly linked to youth and consumer cultures" (2006, p. 80). Political and media opinion opines that there is a type of cultural environment in which children should be nurtured and that sexualisation (embodied in the media and in other people) is an external threat to this environment. Concerns are raised about the "sex-on-show" (Kehily, 2012, p. 255) in a wide range of areas: television, music videos, music lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video games, the Internet and advertising (APA, 2007): in short, the "proliferation of discourses about sex and sexuality across all media forms" (Gill, 2007, p. 151). While some attention has been paid to the effect of sexualisation on boys and

men (e.g. Garner, 2012), the main focus of the sexualisation crisis has been on commerce and on clothing for young women that is seen as overtly and inappropriately sexy (Buckingham et. al., 2010); for example, the 2010 'Paedo bikini' row led by *The Sun* newspaper over padded bikini tops for children on sale in several UK high street shops ("Paedo heaven on our high streets", n.d., n.p.).

Sexualisation has been the subject of several policy reports for governments in Australia (2006), the USA (2007) and the UK (2010; 2010; 2011). Critical attention has recently been paid to the elision of gender from these public commentaries on sexualisation. Earlier reports took an explicitly gendered view of the issues and considered them within a gender equality framework (Coy and Garner, 2012). More recently, policy framings have shifted towards a child protection agenda (APA, 2007; Papadopoulos, 2010) and, according to Coy and Garner (2012), gender has been eradicated from policy discourse. Kehily notes that this is unhelpful: "in prioritising protection, the … report and campaigns … disconnect from the social worlds of girls and young women by retreating into invocations of childhood innocence" (2012, p. 266). Policy-informed decision-making now emphasises a right-wing moral agenda that promotes abstinence and obscures the structures of gendered heteronormativity which underpin the discourse of sexualisation. Given that "gender is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated" (Scott, 1999, p. 45, cited in Bachechi and Hall, 2015, pp. 549-50), this eradication of gender from public and policy discourse is problematic as it obscures the gender structures crucial to the effect of sexualisation. The lack of engagement in both academic and public policy commentary of sexualisation with discourses of romance is equally troubling. Beyond asserting that sexualisation damages the ability to form intimate, romantic relationships, academic, media, and political rhetoric does not extensively explore the connection between romance and sexualisation. This disregard for romantic discourse seems more surprising when we consider that the gender structures which underpin sexualisation similarly construct the discourse of heterosexual romantic success.

Broadly defined, romantic discourse, as expressed in advice literature, prioritises aspects of life important to a (middle-class, white, western) idea of romance.[1] It promotes love and monogamous relationships which will eventually lead to sexual behaviour (so thus distinguished from platonic, friendly love) (Illouz, 2012; Teo, 2005). Traditionally, romantic discourse is heterosexual and structured by conventional expressions and concepts: marriage; dating/courtship; attachment; and "intimate disclosure of the self" (Teo, 2005, p. 344). The discourse is supported by reference to films, books, and music that offer intertextual richness.

Thus, the twenty-first-century relationship advice analysed in this article refers to: "the world of love"; "first dates, ideal dates and the all-important how to mend a broken heart"; "red roses and a box of yummy chocs"; "romantic meals for two"; "in-depth conversations"; and "that someone special". In the context of this advice, then, romance indicates an emphasis on monogamy, dating, and intimacy, oppositional to the perceived 'raunch' culture of sexualisation.

The kind of advice given in modern relationship texts accords with what Johnson calls the 'sex-love model' that regulates sexual encounters; it is the perceived presence or absence of love that discursively frames sexual activity and that says whether particular encounters are permitted or not (2005). Johnson notes that this discourse is deeply gendered, producing particular feminine and masculine forms of sexual expression that are defined by varying levels of appropriateness (2005). While medieval advice is not framed according to romantic discourse in such an overt way, it still possible to observe how the poem endorses heterosexual marriage as the best possible (and indeed for women only) outcome. As such, it similarly exploits the sex-love model, although less overtly, to structure its guidance. Based, as it is, on structures of heterosexuality and gender roles which highlight behavioural differences between men and women, romantic advice offers a rich arena in which to examine the ways sexualisation and gender can be co-located.

Advice Literature, Method, and Data Collection

The focus of this paper is on the *producers* of discourse; I am interested in how sexualisation is implicated in discourses of romance and what this reveals about the wider social and cultural context in which the authors were writing. Advice literature offers a unique standpoint from which to examine social and cultural ideologies at the interface between the formation of principles, their translation into practice, and their dissemination.

I focus in both periods on advice aimed at young women mainly because, as the alleged 'victims' of sexualisation (Attwood, 2009), young women are far more likely to be advised, willingly or not, on their sexual behaviour (perhaps because, as Bragg and Buckingham point out, there is an assumption that boys always already know 'how to do sex' (2009, p. 142)). Furthermore, as I will outline below, the labour of romantic success is disproportionately distributed to women, therefore advice for young women is more likely to demonstrate the

collision of romance and sexualisation that is of interest to this study. Yet, it is true that sexualised popular culture plays a role in shaping how young men understand ways of 'doing gender' (Garner, 2012, p. 328) and that it also narrows possible sexual identities for men and boys. I recognise the need to consider the place of both genders within discourses of sexualisation, thus while this article focuses on texts written for women, it is open to potential conclusions relevant to men and boys.

Advice literature has a long history. Also referred to as conduct literature or didactic literature, it was first written in medieval Europe in the twelfth century. Yet, it was from the fourteenth century that a wide range of advice material began to circulate in the vernacular, largely in response to a growing urban, mercantile population. The main audience for this emerging material was aspiring middle-class and moderate elites (Phillips, 2003, p. 83). The migration of teenagers to towns and cities from the countryside, the rise of bourgeois and mercantile classes, and an increase in young men and women working away from home in other households meant that social and family structures were changing (Riddy, 1996). Absent parents meant that "in urban households, mistresses and female employers played a central part in the upbringing of young women working within the household" (Phillips, 2003, p. 76); high status young people would have learned behaviour at home and so had no need for texts (Phillips, 2003, p. 83).

Early advice, usually contained within multi-text manuscripts, focused on topics such as manners at the table, or the duties of boys in service. However, reflecting shifting patterns of social interaction, later texts are more likely to focus on marriage and intimate relationships, in particular texts aimed at women. Medieval conduct texts are central to understanding medieval women and gender identity: for Phillips, conduct tests are "attempts at engineering gender" (2003, p. 92).There are few surviving medieval English conduct texts aimed specifically at girls or women (Lewis, 1999, p. 27), although young women would almost certainly have accessed other forms of literature included in the same manuscript which offered various models of femininity (Phillips, 2003): romance, for instance.

This article analyses one of the most popular advice texts circulating in late medieval England: *How the Good Wife Taught her Daughter* (composed c.1350), which survives in approximately five separate manuscripts dating from between 1350 and 1500. *Good Wife* is one of two related texts: the other (*How the Good Man Taught his Son*) is addressed from a father to his son. The text is written in Middle English rhyming verse from the perspective of

a mother advising a daughter, and is 209 lines long. The text is colloquial and frequently uses proverbial expression to offer advice on general life – attend church, pay your tithes, maintain household order – on intimate relationships with the opposite gender, and negotiating a potential husband.

I compare this medieval text with twenty-first century advice aimed at young women that specifically focuses on relationships, and that similarly offers guidance from an elder to someone younger (i.e. the 'agony aunt' model). Magazines have been a particular site of attention for research into sexualisation; Bachechi and Hall argue that studies of 'lifestyle' magazines over the past two decades have indicated a move towards including more sexually explicit content, although this is much more marked in magazines aimed at young men (i.e. lad's mags) (2015, p. 551). In general, magazines for both men and women are heteronormative, objectify women, and sexualise their content in specifically gendered ways (Garner et. al., 1998; Krassas et. al., 2001; Taylor, 2005).

Digital media has equally been an area of focus for sexualisation research, in particular the availability of sexually explicit material on the internet, the risk of engaging in inappropriately sexualised behaviour (e.g. chat rooms), and the dangers of "sexualized self-presentations" online (APA, 2007, p. 9; Pascoe, 2011). The internet is also where young people seek information about health and relationships (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001) on social media, as well as a range of sites produced explicitly for young women (e.g. *BeingGirl*, a site run by Proctor and Gamble promoting their menstrual brands *Always* and *Tampax* which offers advice on menstruation in addition to relationships and other life issues). Moreover, as Bragg and Buckingham note, the media is swiftly replacing schools and other organisations as locus of sexual knowledge (2009). In other words, young people are now far more likely to turn to advice on websites like *MyBliss* for advice rather than to previously-dominant non-media sources.

The data I focus on are drawn from the now defunct website *MyBliss.com*, a lifestyle website containing advice on health, beauty, friendship, love, and sex, aimed at teenage girls aged 14-17 (although the younger age of many contributors to the website indicates that girls as young as ten were reading this material). The website was an online accompaniment to the UK magazine *Bliss*, which published its final issue in July 2014 (the retirement of the print magazine is further evidence of a shift to websites as a source of information and advice for young people). My focus on this site is the Love section, which offers 20 articles on various

aspects of romantic and intimate relationships and exactly 300 question and answer advice pieces.

Of interest here, is way that advice on 'love' and 'sex' is separated on *MyBliss*. This seems to support the idea that romantic love constitutes a separate (and perhaps incompatible) discourse in accordance with Johnson's sex-love model. Equally, while these are gender specific advice guides, there is an expectation, for both medieval and twenty-first-century advice, that both men and women would read advice intended for the other. The manuscript collocation of *Good Wife* with other texts means it is very likely that young men would have been familiar with it, and the accessibility of websites means a mixed gender audience is likely. However, this does not change the fact that the advice is still very clearly aimed at one particular gender; while a young man might read advice on *MyBliss*, for example, he would be in no doubt that this was gendered advice intended primarily for a young woman. It is important to also note that while *Good Wife* might have a female narrator, it was highly likely to have been written by a man, probably a cleric (Phillips, 2003; Riddy, 1996). Equally, while *MyBliss* presents problems being answered by a woman, it does not indicate the authorship of its articles and it is possible that *MyBliss* too ventriloquises women's voices.

Method

As outlined above, this study is not the first to compare medieval and modern texts and ideas.[2] Yet, it is evident that the sexual and romantic landscapes of medieval England are not the same as those of the twenty-first century. How, therefore, do we 'read' or otherwise interpret medieval texts from our vantage point in the twenty-first century? As a twenty-first-century academic, I recognise that I am not the intended audience for this medieval text. I am thus sensitive to both my research position and approach, and to the need to be cautious about comparisons between two very different historical moments.

I employ critical discourse analysis to explore these texts. Fundamentally, discourse analysis "involves close textual analysis of a text's linguistic and semantic features to establish the meanings that text seeks to impose on the world and the reader" (Griffin, 2013, p. 99). More than description, "the purpose of discourse analysis is to reveal how [a text's] features set up and replicate particular world views" (Griffin, 2013, p. 99); discourse analysis is concerned with the use of language in context. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) "is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political

context" (van Dijk, 2001, p. 352). CDA is of use in this research as it can make evident how underpinning structures of gender that uphold inequality are used to shape advice on sexualisation and romantic intimacy. CDA methods employ micro reading of texts to reveal meaning at a macro level; in this project, I made use of AntConc software to reveal linguistic collocations and examined text at sentence-level. This micro to macro approach is particularly important for this research which is attempting to draw connections between texts from different historical periods.

Lady Gaga eat your heart out!: Advice on dress and appearance

The sexualisation debate has largely centred on three overlapping areas: sexualised clothing, exposure to a sexualised world, and reputation. In his 2011 report for the UK government, Bailey notes that "sexualised and gender-stereotyped clothing, products and services for children are the biggest areas of concern for parents and many non-commercial organisations contributing to the Review, with interest fanned by a sometimes prurient press" (2011, p. 41). In medieval advice, too, the most "often-voiced fear … relates to maidens' and ladies' interest in fashionable dress" (Phillips, 2003, p. 82). *Good Wife* is explicit about sexualisation and appearance, stating: "Look that you wear no fancy clothes / Nor copy any lady / For much shame befalls those / That lose their honour through their pride" (119-122).[3] For women, ostentatious clothing is directly linked to a loss of honour, firmly connecting reputation (always sexual for medieval women) with wearing appropriate clothing (this is also about dressing appropriately for status). The text thus presents a narrowly defined model of femininity, here expressed through the kind of clothing the daughter can wear.

MyBliss echoes medieval guidance, advising young women to avoid fashionable clothing and suggesting a rejection of what might be seen as more fashionable (and sexualised) styles. An article entitled "Love Lessons" that promises to point out "where you're going wrong" and how to "bag that lad" has "don't be too fashionable" as its number 1 tip. It reads:

> If you're always scouring the mags for the latest fashions in the hopes that it'll bag you that lad- stop now! Men are very simple creatures, who like simple things, and if you're wearing a mustard yellow jumpsuit when you usually live in hoodies, he'll suss you straight away! The best thing to do is dress in what you're comfortable in rather

than trying to impress him with the latest trends- you'd be surprised how many lads love the jeans and tee look! ("Love Lessons", *MyBliss*, n.d., n.p.)

While there is no specific mention made of inappropriately sexy clothing, the kind of clothing implicitly authorised (hoodies, jeans, and tees) is overtly not sexual.

This is made even more obvious in a quiz in the *MyBliss* Love section titled: "How do lads see you?" The quiz is illustrated with an image of Lady Gaga in black underwear and another of Taylor Swift in a white dress, calling on not very subtle connotations of the Madonna/whore (imagery often used in sexualisation discourse). These are captioned as "a Taylor-esque sweetie pie" or a "Lady Gaga-style crazy vixen." Lady Gaga is emblematic of precisely the kind of sexualised dress and behaviour that is seen as problematic: indeed, many media articles have focused on her. Question 3 of the quiz asks: "What's your fave party outfit?", offering three options: "Leotard, tights and heels. Lady Gaga eat your heart out!"; "Leggings and a pretty top"; or "jeans, uggs and a cute sweatshirt" ("How do lads see you?", *MyBliss*, n.d., n.p.). Collocating this with earlier advice on dressing in 'comfortable' rather than fashionable clothing connects fashion with the kind of sexualised clothing worn by Lady Gaga. Completing this quiz alongside earlier advice cements the idea that there is a 'right' way to appear in order to attract boys and that this is explicitly not sexualised. Furthermore, the emphasis on 'how do lads see you' offers recourse to the discourse of heteronormative romance; young women are told to dress for romantic success.

There is a class dimension to this advice on clothing. For medieval women, their outward appearance (i.e. their clothing) is a clear indicator of their status. Women are advised to dress accordingly because if they don't it is associated with shame from either pretending to be higher status or being revealed as lower status. For readers of *MyBliss.com*, assumptions about class pervade the advice given. Buckingham points out that much of the concern around sexualisation has focused on "those who get it wrong – those who go too far (wear too much make up, wear skirts too short, wear too much flashy gold jewellery) – [and] are considered 'chavs' or 'neds'." (Buckinghamet. al., 2010, pp. 67-8).

As Egan and Hawkes have argued 'the disquiet over sexualisation is, in part, catalyzed by the fear of class contamination' (2012, p. 306). The association of the lower class girl with 'fallen sexuality' is widespread and persistent – a 2007 study on love and sex over three generations

in Norway discovered that this association is one of the few things that has *not* changed over time (Nielsen and Rudberg, 2007).The concern is that displays of overly sexual 'low culture' will disrupt the innocence of upper and middle-class girls. This is clear in the narrow and classist categories of virgin/whore invoked here.

Renold and Ringrose point out that sexualisation narratives rely on and produce dominant fantasies of middle-class childhood (2011, 2013) which endorse and feed into the idea of dangerous, lower class sexuality. This is evidently at work in the medieval poem, but we can also see this in contemporary advice which is concerned with presenting a narrative alternative to the perceived dangers of sexualisation. As Buckingham et. al. write: "in particular the different 'readings' of potentially sexual products as 'tasteful' or 'slutty' implies a distinction based on socioeconomic class structures, and positions working class girls in particular as needing more regulation" (Buckingham et. al., 2010, p. 68). This correlates with Egan's argument for a connection between the 'skank' and working class sexuality; "'the fine line between stylish' (which signifies the middle class) and 'skanky' (the embodiment of lower class) is no longer as clear as it should be" and this fear is at the core of sexualisation literature like this *MyBliss* article (2013, p. 124).

Safety and containment: sexualisation as external threat

For both medieval and modern young women, the dangers of sexualisation are external (Egan and Hawkes, 2008, 2012). In medieval advice, the danger is centred on forbidden spaces, ways of behaving in public, and contact with the opposite gender. *Good Wife* advises its purported listener to avoid taverns and the kind of women who frequent them – "women of ill repute" (127) – as well as male tavern dwellers – "avoid he who haunts the tavern / And all the vices contained within" (67-8). Furthermore, the listener should "acquaint you not with every man / That you meet in the street" (83-4) in order to avoid 'villainy' (88) for "[not] all men are true / Who can speak sweetly to you" (89-90). The daughter is told: "When you walk on the path, don't walk too fast / Nor turn your head from side to side" (57-8) and "Go not as though you were a frivolous person (lit. a goose) / From house to house, to seek distraction / Nor go you to the market / To sell your wares, beware of it (61-4). Women should not accept gifts from men, "for good women, with gifts / May have their honour lifted from them" (93-4) and should not spend long in the company of men "for anything … might happen" (30). In

addition, women should not conduct themselves secretly: if a man offers marriage she should "show him to all [her] friends" (29), "friends" here designating family in addition to non-related acquaintances). This allows for consultation on the offer, but also ensures that the daughter's contact with men takes place under surveillance.

In fact, reflecting bourgeois values, *Good Wife* hugely emphasises the position of the intended daughter as a housewife, organising the running of the house. This is evident in detail of everyday tasks relating to household management, and in frequent exhortations for the daughter to stay in the home: "Stay at home, my dear daughter" (77); "Housewifely will you proceed / On working days in your own home" (111-12). The language of the text emphasises this point – the words 'house', 'household', 'housewife', and 'home' are cited a total of 14 times. This makes clear the idea that women should remain in the home where they can carry out designated tasks but, crucially, where their behaviour can be controlled and their contact with (unsuitable) others minimised. For these medieval women, the strategy is very much one of containment and segregation rather than education for dealing with the external threat.

Looking to modern advice, a similar strategy of containment is evident, that limits contact to particular spaces and situations and which strongly discourages secrecy through a discourse of protection. The romantic discourse that structures advice for young women presents a series of spaces where young women can meet boys (and therefore start a relationship) all of which emphasise public visibility. Suitable locations are: activity clubs; group social activities with friends; bowling on a Saturday afternoon; school events. These are either public places, or spaces where adults can observe young people and ensure appropriate behaviour. There is a strong emphasis on being open about activities with the opposite gender – young people should meet each other in public spaces (where they can be monitored by adults) and should not keep secrets about their activities with others. This is particularly pronounced in advice on meeting people via the internet – a reader is advised "You MUST talk to your parents about this first" ("Should I meet internet mate?", *MyBliss*, n.d., n.p.).

In addition, twenty-first-century advice for young women has a strong emphasis on age appropriate relationships. Ten separate problems on *MyBliss* relate to issues of age, and nine of these are framed in a negative way. Most of these position older men as sexualised and present this as an insurmountable issue; in fact, the word 'sex' is mentioned 20 times in all

300 problems, and 13 times this is related to issues of age. One response advises: "Go after lads your own age, it'll be a lot safer and you won't get into any trouble" ("Holiday Romance", *MyBliss* n.d., n.p.). The message is clear; older men (who are coded as sexual) are bad news.

The way that sexual contact with others is represented on *MyBliss* (i.e. as positive or negative) is illustrative here. A good example of this is the language used throughout the problem pages. Permitted sexual activity (i.e. that which is considered romantic) includes: kissing (usually referred to as snogging; flirting; asking me out; giggling; touching; hugging; smiling; nudging; winks; holding hands; and looking at each other. However, more explicit sexual activity (that which could be considered sexualised and therefore inappropriate) is presented negatively and heavily euphemised: sleeping together; all over me; grinding; kissing using the tongue (gross); having sex; fingering; getting off (with); linking up. So this romantic discourse permits certain kinds of sexual contact (and advises on how to achieve these) but discourages other activities that are generally seen to be more sexualized and therefore inappropriate by both presenting them negatively and, in some cases, not referring to them at all.

This advice (meeting in public spaces, not keeping secrets, age-appropriate partners) seems to fall under the protection discourse of sexualisation, but if we compare this with medieval advice literature, it becomes clear that this is also about controlling sexual contact between young men and women. By constructing these as 'romantic' activities (so the means by which young people can achieve this discourse) this advice has a dual function of maintaining 'proper' social separation and, crucially, surveillance of young people.

This advice too is revealingly classist. In their research, Egan and Hawkes identified "middle-class fears about the infiltration of 'white trash' sexuality into the uncontaminated domain of bourgeois child rearing" (2012, p. 278). The kinds of public spaces and activities endorsed by the *MyBliss* advice indicate a disposable income and middle-class dating (e.g. trips to the coffee shop; dinners in Pizza Express); Eva Illouz has noted that dating is an activity redolent and infused with class connotation (Illouz 1997). Other places have more negative connotations: Maccy D's (a nickname for the fast food restaurant McDonalds) is considered inappropriate as a dating location. Young women are also discouraged from associating with boys with a 'bad rep' or who are from a different social circle or geographical location

(redolent of medieval advice for young women). The effect is that young middle-class women will continue to associate with others from the same social class with the same values. In this way, middle-class young women are protected from the 'white trash' sexuality perceived as inherent to the working-classes.

Embedding rules on sexual behaviour into romantic discourse also positions responsibility for policing them with women. This echoes Giddens' (1992) argument about the gendering of sexualisation where sexual intimacy and relationships are associated with women. Attwood has pointed out that this gender disparity is still evident in magazine culture (2009) and it is clearly at work in these advice texts. *Good Wife* is addressed to a female listener and imagines a community of women beyond the narrator mother and daughter, indicating that accountability for successfully securing a husband and becoming a good wife lies with the daughter herself. *MyBliss* more explicitly associates romantic discourse with women, specifically labelling men as disinterested in and disengaged from romance. A young woman writes in to say: "I always send my boyfriend cute and romantic texts, but he hardly ever sends them back. He'll just reply and take no notice if I've said something nice. Does this mean he doesn't like me?" ("This lad is lacking the love", *MyBliss*, n.d., n.p.). The response reads:

> Boys do not use text messages the same way as girls. Fact. Numerous studies show that girls love to write sweet texts and reply instantly, whereas boys tend to be much more brief and often don't even answer direct questions like, 'where do you want to meet?' ("This lad is lacking the love").

The labour of romantic discourse thus lies with women. For young men, the implication is contradictory. One the one hand, young men are excused from this discourse of romantic success and, by extension, from responsibility for ensuring appropriate sexual behaviour and reputation. On the other hand, situating romantic discourse solely with girls means that boys are excluded from defining, learning about, or controlling this romantic discourse. Thus, just as romance controls young women's behaviour, it simultaneously, as Garner suggests, limits the ways of being a man (Garner, 2012).

Superflirts and shy gals: Reputation

Finally, I focus on the relationship between sexual activity and reputation. In late medieval England, reputation was crucial to social identity, especially for women. It is of particular importance in *Good Wife*, because this text is trying to uphold a narrow status identity (what Riddy [1996] has called bourgeois). The importance of what others think of you is evident from the numerous references to 'neighbours' (4), 'friends' (4), family (1) and 'servants' (3) in the text, many collocated with the word 'your', indicating what exactly is at stake in following (or not following) the advice given.

Indeed, the daughter is predetermined as a wife from the very start of the text: line 5 of *Good Wife* reads "and thou will be a wife". Her reputation thus becomes a function of her sexual behaviour. This results in rules that are numerous and limiting. The language of *Good Wife* is focused on negative instruction (i.e. advising not to do something). The words 'not' (26), 'no' (21), and 'ne' (19) appear frequently, and are often collocated with actions. *Good Wife* advises its female listener on three occasions not to laugh loudly and adds: do not "yawn (gape) too widely / for anything might happen" (51-2). Four further limitations on speech are mentioned: "do not swear" (59); "be sweet of speech" (53) and "truthful" (54); "do not gossip" (22); and be of "good tongue (i.e. talk cautiously)" (24). Furthermore, the word 'shame' features three times in *Good Wife*. Overall, this constructs a quite over-determined image of a medieval woman who should be appropriately dressed, and appear meek, mild, and well-spoken. For medieval women, threat to reputation was everywhere.

In *MyBliss* advice, this concern for reputation is still evident, although it is less overtly connected with social status. One submitted problem reads: "Boys always chat to me over Facebook and ask me to meet them. I'm scared of rumours being spread, as many of them have friends at my school. What do I do, as most talk about 'linking up'?" ("Lad linkup", *MyBliss*, n.d., n.p.). This is clearly a concern about gaining a reputation for engaging in sexual behaviour. Any kind of sexualized contact with boys is seen as a potential threat to reputation. One *MyBliss* problem reads:

> I'm really flirtatious and love chatting to boys. I'm not shy about being upfront! But other girls – including my mates– are star[t]ing to get annoyed with me and I've heard people calling me names. I can't change who I am but I don't want people to hate me. Help! ("Too flirty?", *MyBliss*, n.d., n.p).

While the response advises "being bold and flirty is fine and you shouldn't be ashamed about being confident with boys" it also notes that "not all lads like obviously flirty girls" and she might "let someone else make the first move occasionally" ("Too flirty?"). Indeed, in response to another problem about shyness, the advice given includes "In fact superflirts make boys want to run a mile" ("Too shy to date?", *MyBliss*, n.d., n.p). This feeds into the idea that women should be more submissive than men; this is repeated elsewhere on the *MyBliss* site where women are regularly advised 'not to make the first move' (e.g. "Love lessons").

Another article, "What's your number?", suggests that young women should not have a large number of sexual partners. Presenting the results of a survey where 9,612 people were asked "Would someone who's been on a large number of dates put you off?", 67% of those who said no were identified as male. The article comments: "Right boys, so if we said we'd dated 50 guys before you, you'd be totes cool with it? Um, no". By contrast, 72% of those who answered yes were female. The article comments: "Too right!" ("What's your number?", *MyBliss*, n.d., n.p.). This supports the idea that young men care about how many sexual partners women have had: too many will decrease your attractiveness to the opposite sex, playing on the idea of bad reputation. Bound up with this is an endorsement of the 'double standard' by which men can date more than women. The article reads: "Out of 14,308 people asked 'Would you prefer the number of dates you have been on to be lower?' 81% of those who said yes were women! And 73% of those who said no were male. Sounds about right, they probs up their numbers anyway!" ("What's your number?", *MyBliss*, n.d., n.p.). The underlying message is about controlling sexual behaviour; the idea that if you engage in the wrong kind of behaviour (one not endorsed by the romantic discourse of the site) then you will suffer socially – you will be singled out and your inability to fit within a romantic discourse will be highlighted. This is, in a way, a threat – a way of stopping girls from engaging in what is perceived as risky and inappropriate sexual behaviour.

It is clear that *MyBliss* is attempting to engineer gendered behaviour through its construction of romantic success. Magazines both endorse and criticise sexual activity for young women, upholding the opposition between innocence and its lack that structures sexualisation discourse, revealing how important reputation can be for achieving romantic intimacy (Sharpe and Thomson, 2005; Egan and Hawkes, 2012). That magazines support wider patriarchal gender structures has been noted (see Carpenter, 1998; Garner et. al., 1998). The

focus on reputation in both medieval and twenty-first-century advice indicates how far the threat of remarks can control women's behaviour; young women are very careful how they behave towards young men for fear of being labelled a slag (Weatherall, 2002, p. 78). The romantic discourse of two-ness, of candlelit dinners, roses, and chocolates, perpetuates the idea that certain kinds of behaviour are necessary for achieving romance. There is thus a sense that young women have to engage in the *right* kind of sexual behaviour – age-appropriate, middle-class and moderate – that is aligned with the values of romance.

Conclusion

Reading twenty-first-century advice for women on love and relationships alongside medieval advice demonstrates that concerns about female sexuality are consistent in two very separate historical moments, and that longstanding and historical narratives of appropriateness underpin contemporary concerns about young women's sexual behaviour. Concern that 'raunch' is damaging for romantic success is clearly not related solely to the twenty-first century; medieval advice was also worried that 'raunch' (represented by sexy clothing, contact with sexualised others, and sexual activity) might harm romantic success. Romance and sexualisation are based on or function according to similar ideologies; the anxieties that structure sexualisation map onto behaviours that ensure successful romantic relationships, and the discourse of romance is used to designate appropriate behaviour. While this is coded as romantic success (so for *MyBliss* girls getting a boyfriend and achieving a perfect kind of relationship, and for medieval women becoming a 'good wife'), it is clear that what is advised aligns with the protectionist 'risk' approach to dealing with sexualisation: encouraging women to avoid particular clothing, spaces, and people to control sexual contact between young men and women. A tension between 'raunch' and romance is thus not a new concern and sex and romance work together in this advice to create gendered sexual identities.

This historical comparison further reveals that gender underpins discourses of romance and sexualisation. Trying to prevent the negative impact of sexualisation by instead endorsing a romantic discourse does not solve the underlying gender issues which, many have argued, are a key cause of the problems associated with sexualisation or raunch culture. Sharpe and

Thomson note that romance is a key value regime expressed by young people that characterises when someone is ready to have sex: sexual encounters are legitimised by love (Sharpe and Thomson, 2005, p. 14). Any sexual encounter not characterised by love falls under sexualisation (and thus 'bad' sexuality). Combined with the 'sex-love model' and with classist assumptions about sexuality, it is clear that these texts are exploiting the social and cultural conventions of romantic discourse in order to police sex.

Attwood (2006) states that: "it is particularly important that a vision of sexual citizenship is not allowed to drift towards the familiar westernized, masculinized, heterosexualized models which we have inherited" (p. 92). The historical approach of this article makes overt the western, gendered, and heterosexualised frameworks of sexuality being promoted to today's young women. It emphasises that sexualisation is not solely caused by a contemporary crisis, but is part of a longer pattern of gender normativity and inequality. Our medieval past, and scholarship on medieval gender and sexuality, are important for an understanding of the development of sexualisation in the twenty-first century. Exploring more fully the sexual pasts (such as the medieval advice discussed here) that influence our sexual present (for instance, *MyBliss* advice), is crucial for understanding, defining, and changing our potential sexual futures.

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[1] The intersection of sexualisation with race and class is an important issue which has been addressed elsewhere (e.g. Krassas et. al., 2003). My focus in this paper is on how a comparison of medieval and twenty-first-century advice can open up a new discussion about sexualisation.

[2] See Burge (2016, pp. 15-19) for an overview of these studies.

[3] All references to *Good Wife* are from Salisbury (2002) and line numbers are given in parentheses in the text. Translations from the Middle English are my own.