Call for Papers

Reproductive Justice after Roe:
Lessons from the Premodern Classroom

The June 2022 Dobbs decision overturning Roe v. Wade distorted premodern history in its arguments against bodily autonomy, attesting to the need to hone awareness of the premodern period. Our rights might just depend upon this knowledge. As explained in the 44-page amicus brief filed by the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians, Justice Alito’s majority opinion ignores the bulk of historical evidence; these scholars note that, well into the mid-nineteenth century, American law and the English common law it was based on did not recognize, let alone regulate, early abortions, “because the common law did not legally acknowledge a fetus as existing separately from a pregnant woman until the woman felt fetal movement, called ‘quickening,’ which could occur as late as the 25th week of pregnancy. This was a subjective standard decided by the pregnant woman alone.” And as the Roe v. Wade ruling itself asserted, laws criminalizing abortion “are not of ancient or even of common-law origin. Instead, they derive from statutory changes effected, for the most part, in the latter half of the 19th century.” Not coincidently, the six months following Dobbs saw a staggering increase in book bans across the United States that focused especially on gender, sexuality, race, and history, and, as of July 2023, forty bills opposing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at the college level have been introduced in twenty states, seven of which have already been passed into law.

As reproductive justice and academic freedom come under attack, the Medieval Institute Publications’ book series “Premodern Transgressive Literatures” facilitates student engagement with these endangered and empowering premodern histories. Reproductive Justice after Roe: Lessons from the Premodern Classroom, a new volume in this series edited by Maeve Callan, Emma Maggie Solberg, and Valerie Traub, invites proposals for essays of 5,000-7,000 words exploring pedagogy relating to topics including abortion, infanticide, miscarriage, contraception, parental and infant mortality, quickening or ensoulment, bodily sovereignty, the regulation and/or management of fertility, and reproductive justice in the premodern period, making connections to the contemporary challenges of a post-Roe world. Due to Dobbs’ particular distortion of premodern European and American history, this volume focuses on those places and that period, but reproductive rights are under attack around the world and the United States includes people from virtually every race and ethnicity whose rights are being restricted by such historical misrepresentations; thus, we welcome essays focusing on any part of the world between circa 500 CE and 1700, by scholars from anywhere in the world.

Questions to consider:
- In this political moment, what are our responsibilities as educators who teach the premodern past?
- How do we make connections for our students between the past and the present? And how do we help them make connections of their own?
- How do we negotiate the distinctions as well as the continuities between the past and the present when it comes to the concept of reproductive rights and justice?
- What do we do when the content we teach has been put under a local “educational gag order”?

Please send abstracts of 500 words to Emma Maggie Solberg by 1 December 2023 at esolberg@bowdoin.edu. Authors whose abstracts are accepted will be notified by January, with a full draft due by September 2024.