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Afterword: Psychoanalysis Across Medieval Studies

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Abstract

In this short afterword, I speculate about two scenarios in other disciplines where thinking through psychoanalytic categories might afford new historical sensitivities. In experimenting with the possibilities of psychoanalysis, I draw examples from fields that are non-literary or at most adjacent to literary studies. The provocative contributions to this colloquium, “The Time of Psychoanalysis,” showcase the advantages of psychoanalytic perspectives in the study of medieval literature, whether in teaching or in further research. How might we imagine these advantages in other disciplines, and indeed, how might those literary scholars who work inside the frame of psychoanalysis demonstrate its value to colleagues in other linguistic and disciplinary traditions, persuading scholars in other fields to use it?

Most medievalists across the world and across disciplines—from material texts and archaeology to social and economic history, theology and histories of religion, legal studies, histories of medicine and science, art history, hermeneutics, philology, and philosophy (to name only some of the bigger umbrella fields)—do not work with psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is a preserve of a small subset of one area of medieval studies, literature, and even in that group it has been somewhat a minority field in English and French medieval literatures. Its traction decreases sharply when we turn to other fields of medieval literature, including Italian, Iberian, German, Slavic, Scandinavian, Arabic, Hebrew, Latin, and Byzantine Greek. Even historians of emotion in the Middle Ages do not work significantly with psychoanalysis, as their interests lie mainly with medieval philosophies of emotion (influenced in recent years by the work of Simo Knuutilla [2002]), social histories of emotion (influenced in large part by Barbara Rosenwein [2006]), or emotion and culture broadly writ (represented by the substantial work of Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy [2015]). For the most part, historians of emotion have not crossed over into the affect theory of the twenty-first century, with its strong psychoanalytic resonances. These examples are not to suggest that most medievalists are innocent of psychoanalytic language—the unconscious, libido, trauma, desire—but their familiarity is more a result of living in a culture saturated with psychoanalytic assumptions than of scholarly interest.

Thus, the question I pose here, by way of an afterword, will not be whether psychoanalysis can *still* be relevant, for indeed it has hardly ever been relevant as intellectual capital in most fields of our discipline. Rather, my question is what does psychoanalysis have to offer for *any* field of medieval studies? How can research or teaching in any field of medieval research profit by working with psychoanalytic categories? The point of such speculation is not to enjoin fellow medievalists to embark on further conversations with their modernist colleagues: this will always be a one-way conversation, as we medievalists may learn their materials and absorb their theoretical output, while they will remain stolidly unembarrassed by their ignorance of ours. Rather, my question is what “leavening” does psychoanalysis offer to medieval studies, how might it help scholars in any field—within but especially beyond literature—to think, with greater texture, through the complexities of a past world that remains in most ways profoundly alien to us.

In this short afterword, I speculate about two scenarios in other disciplines where thinking through psychoanalytic categories might afford new historical sensitivities. In experimenting with the possibilities of psychoanalysis, I draw examples from fields that are non-literary or at most adjacent to literary studies. The provocative contributions to this colloquium, “The Time of Psychoanalysis,” showcase the advantages of psychoanalytic perspectives in the study of medieval literature, whether in teaching or in further research. How might we imagine these advantages in other disciplines, and indeed, how might those literary scholars who work inside the frame of psychoanalysis demonstrate its value to colleagues in other linguistic and disciplinary traditions, persuading scholars in other fields to use it?

I begin closest to the literary realm with the field of hermeneutics, which literary scholars share—often intimately—with theologians, philosophers, and historians. This may be, in some ways, the field most obviously receptive to approaches through psychoanalysis. Whether the object of study is scriptural exegesis or philosophical commentary, categories of psychoanalysis can afford a stark and indeed revelatory awareness of the dynamics of surface and depth—for what else is the layering of letter and spirit, the literal and the allegorical (or moral or anagogical), or simply integument and inner

truth than the interplay of surface and depth? Augustine’s refusal to forget the sensuous beauty of poetry, confessed in that well-known passage in *De doctrina christiana* (2.12–14, 2.6.7–8) on his enjoyment of the Song of Songs (“it is much more pleasant to learn lessons presented through imagery, and much more rewarding to discover meanings that are won only with difficulty” [Augustine 1997, 33]), takes on even more value when we see it through the productive interchange between psychoanalytic depth and affective surface that Jessica Rosenfeld (2024) describes in her essay.

In a broader sense, psychoanalytic categories test the terms by which we can know medieval, indeed, premodern hermeneutics. It becomes easier to grasp what is at stake in the premodern when we foreground the notion of consciousness. Earlier interpretive theories, both of theological and philosophical writings, are predicated on assumptions of a certain plenitude of meaning beyond individual consciousness, an external source of corroboration, to which the exegetical technique can give us a key. On those models, texts, however confusing they seem on the surface, will yield a meaningful certainty. We pull back mists and veils to reveal salvation, or a metaphysical truth; we go from seeming disunity or falsity on the surface (the *fabula* of the Neoplatonists, the ambiguities of scriptural language) to a deeper message of unity and self-consistency.¹ The irrational gives way to a firm truth. Freud’s reversal of this long tradition, predicated on his rejection of the rationalist equation of mind with consciousness, gave us a language with which to contend with the denial of completeness. In Freud’s work on dreams and culture, we pull away a veil of seeming rationality (for example, the surfaces of our dreams as we try to remember them narratively) to get at a deeper message of the irrational, the “unknown” (*das Unbenusste*), the unconscious. What we extract from beneath the surface is neither salvation nor metaphysical plenitude; it is a deeper knowledge of the psychic condition of transgressive or unfulfillable desire. In his essay for this volume, Paul Megna (2024) offers another insight into the psychic drama of surface and depth by thinking about Freud himself as an allegorist: on Megna’s argument, Freud’s expositions generate the kinds of allegories that we might recognize from medieval literary texts.

To have that comparison throws into relief what is often at stake in premodern hermeneutics: the promises that it holds out. Where for psychoanalytic theory, the gaps, the indeterminacy, and especially the incompleteness of interpretation are important, premodern assumptions rest necessarily on a posited stability and fullness. Thus, Freud’s famous remark, in relation to the work of condensation in dreams: “it is in fact never possible to be sure that a dream has been completely interpreted. Even if the solution seems satisfactory and without gaps, the possibility always remains that the dream may have yet another meaning” (Freud 1955, 297). But then, what do we make of statements about the infinitude of scriptural meanings, the inexhaustible polyvalence of Scripture, such as this from Hugh of St Victor’s *Didascalicon*: “Sometimes there is a single deeper meaning for a single expression; sometimes there are several deeper meanings for a single expression; sometimes there is a single deeper meaning for several expressions; sometimes there are several deeper meanings for several expressions.” Faced with these endlessly forking paths, “a multitude of true concepts elicited from a few words,” the reader can ultimately choose to be satisfied with deriving one “deeper meaning consonant with the faith.” (Hugh of St. Victor 1961, 150: Bk. 6, Ch. 11). Such a capacity to dwell in

¹ Some of these assumptions were still at work in the interpretive method of G. W. F. Hegel (1975), for example, in the *Lectures on Fine Art*.

hermeneutical ambiguity is recognizable in psychoanalysis and, in a different way, in affect theory, as Patricia Ingham (2024) points out. To find that capacity in medieval scriptural teaching affords a way to apprehend premodern hermeneutics—sympathetically, even affectively—as a system that continually confronts existential uncertainty.

For a second illustration I turn to the field of medieval political theory. How did medieval political thinkers enlarge the notion of love to make it a virtue of civic life? In the example I will offer here, love is redefined as civic life or the “common good,” and grafted onto a moral-theological hierarchy of the passions in which love is the first and highest of the human emotions. In *De regimine principum* (1277–81), the most successful of the late medieval “mirrors for princes,” the Augustinian friar Giles of Rome (1607) borrows a taxonomy of the emotions originally from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and *Ethics*, and elaborated in Aquinas’ *Summa theologica* (I-II, qq. 22–48), to lay out an emotional map for princes and citizens. Aquinas had imposed a new order of importance on the passions, placing love at the top as the primary expression of the “desiring” (concupiscible) appetite, which tends to the good; love is the driving force of action, every agent acts for an end, and the end is the good that is desired and loved (Copeland 2021, 216). The conceptual framework of Aquinas’ treatise on the passions in the *Summa* is moral and theological; thus, love is ultimately a love for God. Such a discussion of love (*amor* in the *Summa*) as a desiring mechanism tending to the good and God will obviously invite comparison with psychoanalytic notions of desire and enjoyment. But Giles’ *De regimine principum* takes these considerations one step further, mapping it explicitly onto the political sphere, the *res publica* itself. He develops an analogy—with the body, and less conventionally, with history—about *sacrifice* out of love for the common good, the *res publica*:

For according to the laws of nature, we see that a part exposes itself [to danger] on behalf of the whole, as an arm exposes itself to danger on behalf of the body ... lest the other parts on which the well-being of the whole body depends be hurt, the arm exposes itself to danger so that the whole body not perish. In ancient times, as we have observed, a city was ruled and a monarch was master, because the citizens did not hesitate to expose themselves to death on behalf of the “res publica.” For the affection that the Romans had for the *res publica* made Rome a principality and a monarchy (Giles of Rome 1607, 160: 1.3.3, my translation).

Out of love for the common good, the Romans are said to have willingly transformed their state, beset by tyrants and dissension, into a monarchy, thereby sacrificing some of their own liberties to a greater good.² Such a recasting of individual love (as in Aquinas’ *Summa*) as a collective political virtue can be read on the terms of chivalric sacrifice: as L. O. A. Fradenburg (2002) argues, psychoanalytic inquiry refuses the idea that ethics must oppose desire (appetite) to sacrifice, precisely because that opposition is necessary to the very structure of enjoyment that enables sacrifice (4–6). Sacrifice expresses desire’s need for its own continuation rather than its absolute fulfillment. Thus, in Giles’ political analogy, the Romans’ sacrifice of their republican liberty on behalf of the *bonum commune* can be understood not as a yielding of self on behalf of something exterior to and greater than the self, but as an investment of

² On the likely intertext for this, the pseudo-Thomistic *De regno ad regem Cypri*, see Copeland 2021, 217–19.

self-love in order to enjoy the continuing pleasure of love as desiring. And like the exemplary Romans, the prince himself (whose self-governance is the subject of Giles' treatise) must "feel" the *res publica* as the site of investment for his own loving appetite. There is nothing in the psychoanalytic logic of sacrifice that contradicts the political logic of sacrifice on behalf of the *bonum commune*: indeed, the linkage is already encoded in medieval thought through the logics of chivalry and courtly love, which have long been centerpieces of psychoanalytic interpretation. In terms of *Realpolitik*, Giles' advice to his prince, the future Philip IV ("the Fair") may be fantasy, but there is nothing fantastic about the psychic logic of sacrifice that he calls upon here.

These are only two of a plenitude of untapped disciplinary sites for the potential of psychoanalysis. In this collection, Wan-Chuan Kao (2024) also offers perspectives on race and cultural capital that invite elaboration by social and economic historians. We are not yet all Freudians, nor need we be; but the debate about where we go from here can extend beyond the disciplinary borders of literature.

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