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Psychoanalysis after Affect Theory: The Repetitions of Courtly Love in Chaucer

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Abstract

For a time, if one wanted to capture the emotional landscape of late medieval literature, psychoanalysis appeared to be the most acute and persuasive analytic tool. From the subjectivity of courtly love to the identification with a suffering God to the defenses against the pleasures of others and neighbors, psychoanalysis offered illuminating frameworks in startling sympathy with medieval texts. With the ascendance of affect theory and its associated (if varied) attention to the non-discursive, the biological or natural, and the conscious or self-understood, the role of psychoanalysis has become less clear. My essay explores the productive intersections between psychoanalysis and affect theory, and especially Lauren Berlant's suggestion that we think again about sex and sexual desire as possible sites of individual and cultural transformation. The phenomenon of repetition is a focus shared by psychoanalysis and affect theory, and I propose the reiterative conventions of courtly love as a place where the tensions between the two approaches may provide a window into medieval meditations on sex, love, and cultural change.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century and first decade of the twenty-first, psychoanalytic medievalism had a claim as one of the most powerful paradigms in medieval literary criticism (Fradenburg 1998). As newer generations of critics have turned more often to queer theory, transgender studies, and affect theory to describe medieval bodies and desires, psychoanalysis has appeared either to wane or to be absorbed by these new accounts. The popularity of affect theory, in particular, would seem to suggest that the time of psychoanalysis is past, since affect theory constitutes itself in opposition to Freudian and Lacanian approaches. The two discourses have distinct and implicitly opposed vocabularies, with psychoanalysis speaking about origins, civilization, language, and desires, while affect theory speaks of atmospheres, ideology, bodies, and intensities. José Esteban Muñoz (2009) put the tension between the two discourses pithily in his introduction to “From Surface to Depth: Between Psychoanalysis and Affect,” a special issue of the journal *Women and Performance: a journal of feminist theory*. There, he acknowledged the “stark dichotomy” (123) between affect and psychoanalysis, reading it as a choice between surface and depth. Yet Muñoz reminds the reader that psychoanalytic criticism is also interested in the surface, or exterior, and he describes the fold that Gilles Deleuze uses to show that interior affect is the other side of the exterior—a continuous surface that includes the supposed depths of the interior. So, too, the psychoanalytic focus on the symptom demands attention to the exterior body and the registration of the inside on the outside. Muñoz thus “cautiously” argues that “we need not think of affect and psychoanalysis as simple opposites” (124). We can, in terms of both the temporal register and the physical, dwell in the space between. This space between, as I suggest below, turns out to be particularly generative for our study of what we might call the time between, or the medieval.

Indeed, the nexus of psychoanalysis and affect theory opens up a particularly charged liminal space between sexuality and sex—two poles of particular significance in medieval studies. In an essay published along with Muñoz’s, Lauren Berlant (2014) explores the same dichotomy between affect theory and psychoanalysis, aligning sexuality with the former and sex with the latter. Berlant guardedly laments the absence of sex from recent work on sexuality, as each discourse finds different paths toward possibilities for social change, and for the emergence of the new. Within these kinds of conversations, “sex” means not only some form of physical, erotic encounter, but a corporeal, libidinal encounter that “undoes the subject” (Berlant and Edelman 2014, 4). Here Berlant is following Leo Bersani (1987), who influentially read sex as a “self-shattering,” drawing on Freud to speculate that the infant’s future relationship to sex is formed via early experiences of “the jouissance of exploded limits” between pleasure and pain (217). As Bersani puts it at the end of “Is the Rectum a Grave?”, “If sexuality [meaning here physical sex] is socially dysfunctional in that it brings people together only to plunge them into a self-shattering and solipsistic jouissance that drives them apart, it could also be thought of as our primary hygienic practice of nonviolence” (222). Berlant observes that at some point in the mid-20-aughts, sexuality—as a locus of affect and pedagogies of emotion—became the more “interesting place” to consider the workings of ideology and the possibilities of queer resistance. And

yet, she notes that with some of these works, “there’s barely any sex in them” (264).¹ For other writers—and here she is talking about the books *Intimacies* by Adam Phillips and Leo Bersani and *What Gay Men Want* by David Halperin—sex itself remains the practice that “creates openings for better futures” (Berlant 2009, 264). These futures emerge both despite and because of the inescapability of narcissism, aggression, and the death drive. History, memory, world-making, and affect are minimized, with the emphasis instead on the irrationality and non-sovereignty of sexual desire. While Halperin writes outside of psychoanalysis and Bersani from within, both authors find in the sexual subject’s dissolution a path toward creativity and freedom that does not require the inflation of the ego or a submission to normativity.

Berlant agrees with these authors that sex itself can show people how to live, while also acknowledging that pursuing one’s appetites can threaten as well as sustain life, and these threats are wildly different for different people. In the face of the compelling accounts of sexual attachment to life offered by both Bersani and Halperin, she reminds us that “[i]t’s important to remember that some subjects of biopolitical negation, some of the racialized, sexualized, over-embodied, poor, migrant, sarco-political subjects associated with appetitive incompetence and lack of self-control, feel unlicensed to sustain the ego swelling whose privilege has been poisoning the privileged classes for so long” (Berlant 2009, 271). Berlant’s own work takes account of “[t]he multiple tethers of the subject to the world (and of the world’s affect of the subject)” which, she notes, often exceed the analytic scope of either psychoanalytic theory or affect theory alone (Berlant 2011, 287, n30). These tethers include “the overdetermining work of ideology, atmosphere, the unconscious, distraction, ambivalence, attention—in short, the many ways the subject takes up a position in any episode and in the world” (Berlant 2011, 288, n30). The questions of how one negotiates one’s own singularity amidst the radical difference of other people may well stand at the center of sexual desire and sexual experience. But although many people experience sexual desire as a centrally important means of negotiating the social, there are others for whom such desire is merely one way in which they invest themselves in the world, or by which the world makes its mark on them.

This dwelling between sex and sexuality, between psychoanalysis and affect, can be enormously productive in framing our teaching of medieval literature. Many instructors teach medieval European literature guided by a sense that it is a resource for thinking historically about contemporary society, a way to consider where the ideas and practices of our own culture came from, for good or ill. For a period famed as giving us the origins of Western “amorous subjectivity” (Fradenburg 2002, 2), sex and love are often the hooks that bring students into the classroom and keep them paying attention. The Middle Ages gives us the simultaneously outmoded and ever-present phenomenon of courtly love, as well as the emergence of affective piety as an exemplary form of religious devotion. As Erich Auerbach (2001) explains, the high Middle Ages saw the beginnings of the transformation of *passio* from a passive suffering to a “creative, ecstatic love passion” (295). In the ongoing scholarly debate about whether we should understand premodern sexuality as continuous with or different from modern sexuality (see especially Sedgwick 1990, 44–48; Halperin 2002, 1–23), the medieval period has

¹ One of the authors Berlant mentions, Heather Love, discusses the supersession of psychoanalysis by affect theory within queer studies, also noting that the two fields are so closely aligned (affect and queer studies) that they constitute a unified field (Chinn 2012, 126).

the potential to serve as a kind of fulcrum point at which certain origins emerge while yet other narratives are foreclosed. For if the medieval is a point of origin, it is also a reminder of paths not taken and (supposedly) obsolete subjectivities, a provocation to rethink modern self-transparency, inevitability, and teleology. Considering medieval culture as both middle time and beginning, the space between psychoanalysis and affect can direct our attention to the articulation of sexual desire, as well as to the surrounding historical context, the training of affect, sense perception, and cognitive intuitions.

It is my suggestion here that instructors of medieval literature may productively see medieval texts as the psychoanalysis and affect theory of the Middle Ages and, at the same time, should see this literature-as-theory as speaking back fruitfully to the relationship between psychoanalysis and affect theory in contemporary discussions. One fruitful locus of attention is repetition—an interest shared by both psychoanalysis and affect theory, and which is also a local and global aspect of literary texts. In fact, the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, often translated as the *après-coup*, or “afterwardsness,” is one of the psychoanalytic terms that has retained a significant purchase in affect theory (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973 [2018], 111–14 Laplanche 1992). *Après-coup* refers to an event, initially non-traumatic, that is, upon repetition, assigned a new meaning and re-read as overwhelming the subject. Berlant (2011) draws on and expands the *après-coup* to theorize her “crisis ordinary” (80–81). She suggests that “trauma”—being suffused by the terror of the past such that one cannot attach oneself to the present—is only one “style” (81) of managing being overwhelmed. The traumatic event can also inaugurate “modes, habits, or genres of being” (82). In literary terms, we might think of such styles of habituation as *conventions*, simultaneously social and literary forms that Berlant (2012) herself was often interested in exploring as “placeholders for desired political as well as personal transformation beyond the horizon of the ordinary appearances and immediate sensations of belonging” (81). Conventions consolidate, but they also provide sites for experimentation. For Susan Crane (2002), social performance and ritual, as repeated performative acts, provide a ground for both cultural expression and cultural change, with repetition giving way to variation and new interpretations (5).

Indeed, Raymond Williams (1977) has taught us not to dismiss conventions as simply representing an “old rule” or “somebody else’s rule”—the attempted naturalization of limited truths and practices—but to see them as sites where one can understand the tacit agreements that make social life and communication possible (173). Medieval courtly love is one such site of conventions, and in psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s (1999) memorable formulation it is “the only way to elegantly pull off the absence of the sexual relationship” (69). From the Deleuzian anti-psychoanalytic perspective, however, expressions of “[t]he desiring sexual relationships of man and woman (or man and man, or woman and woman)” do not signify absence but plenitude; they are “the index of social relationships between people” (Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 352). Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2009) state categorically that “it is certainly not, as Freud believed, the libido that must be desexualized and sublimated in order to invest society and its flows; on the contrary, it is love, desire, and their flows that manifest the directly social character of the nonsublimated libido and its sexual investments” (353). In Lacan’s terms, literary convention provides a solution to the repression of the libido that living in the social world demands; courtly love offers an imaginary world in which the impossibility of reaching the object of one’s desire is rendered pleasurable, an opportunity for investing oneself and

one's activities with meaning. From the Deleuzian perspective, the desire for particular love objects is an expression of one's particular enmeshment in the social field itself, determined as it is by economic, political, historical, racial, and cultural contexts; any individual desire is not a repression but an expression of libido. How, then, do the repetitions of the conventions of courtly love—within a single text or across various texts and genres—give voice to the relationships between the self and one's desire, and between the self and the various forces that form and restrict one's particular choices and freedoms? Is literary production and other social activity the sublimation and expression of a repressed (because impossible to realize) desire, or do the conventions of erotic poetry and courtship have an indexical relationship to the social?

Rather than trying to figure out which theoretical model best explains the depiction of love and desire in medieval erotic literature, we might explore conventional moments, considering the questions that emerge in the space between affect theory and psychoanalysis. Staying in this space can help us see the stakes in those obsessive moments in medieval texts where the beginnings of erotic desire and the condition of desiring are unpicked with endless fascination for their simultaneously bodily/cognitive, irrational/rational, determined/chosen, and political/ethical structures. And staying in this space can spark classroom discussions of literary passages that we might otherwise stop talking about as soon as we identify their sources in convention: the arrows of Cupid, the gaze upon the beautiful love object in the garden, the dwelling on the ideal qualities of the beloved, or the paradoxes of love. Do these moments speak to the sublimation of a singular and excessive desire that must be aestheticized for the subject to manage existence in the world, or do they speak to the way that—as social subjects—people express their enmeshment via expressions of erotic desire? Do these moments speak to desire as engaging with radical singularity, or with the social field, with the dissolution of the self in sex, or the affective and habitual cultivation and revision of the self?

These binaries are reductive, but keeping tensions in play can help illuminate scenes that resist interpretation, that render attempts to find meaning beyond genre and convention overly earnest, absurd, and counter-productive. Instructors of Chaucer are often faced with such a scene early on in *The Canterbury Tales* (CT): the doubled descriptions of falling in love at first sight toward the beginning of *The Knight's Tale*. The episode is repetitive of any number of scenes of falling in love at the sight of the beautiful love object in the springtime garden, the *hortus conclusus*. The number of conventions activated are many: the prison of love (here a literal prison), the garden of love, the spring opening, the yellow-haired love-object Emelye, the wounding of the heart through the eye's opening, the pale and suffering lover Palamoun, the idealizing of the beloved as a goddess. Moreover, the entire structure is then repeated in the love-wounding of Arcite, Palamoun's companion in prison. And yet if Arcite's falling in love seems belated, a needless repetition of his companion's trauma, it does not necessarily lend it retrospective meaning (as in the *après-coup*), but rather calls meaning itself into question. As Lee Patterson (1991) observes, the entire narrative structure of *The Knight's Tale* is built on specularly and repetition: "The argument in the prison becomes the battle in the grove and then the tournament in the amphitheater" (209). Like many readers and scholars of Chaucer, students are typically pulled in two directions when reading the tale: either seeking meaningful differences between Arcite and Palamon or resolving that they are finally interchangeable. Is it enough that Arcite claims to love Emelye "as to a creature" (Chaucer 1987, CT I.1159) while Palamon took her for a goddess? If, within psychoanalytic frameworks, "[r]epetition is what enables you to recognize, even

unconsciously, your desire as a quality of yours” (Berlant 2012, 20), what do we do with a canonical story of desire like *The Knight’s Tale*, which uses repetition to cast doubt on the possibility that one’s desire belongs to oneself? That it could not just as easily belong to another? Here one might well turn to Lacan (1998): “man’s desire is the desire of the Other” (38 and *passim*). As Arcite suggests in outlining the plan for his lovers’ duel to the death with Palamon, if his foe should win, then “Thow mayst wel have thy lady as for me” (Chaucer 1987, CT I.1619). The question of whether either knightly figure deserves victory and the hand of Emelye is a political question about chivalric subjectivity, but also about desire more broadly, as is made legible by the response in *The Miller’s Tale*—a critique of chivalric perspective that nevertheless demonstrates the investments of the non-chivalric subject in desire and singularity. *The Knight’s Tale* stages a competition for the recognition of one’s desire as authentic, self-originating, and unique, while raising the possibility that such desire may be formed as much by politics and the social rituals of chivalric community as by the subject himself. In making plain this interpretive context, the tale articulates romance narrative as the place where such theoretical questions are rightly adjudicated.

Troilus and Criseyde (TC) also explores the inauguration of desire, but as repeated across time, not, as in *The Knight’s Tale*, across twinned lovers. In this romance, in many ways a narrative of origins and genealogies, Chaucer is fascinated by the repetitive structure of falling in love, refracting for his audience the many ways in which desire begins, for both characters. While the language of beginning haunts Troilus throughout Book 1 of the poem, I will focus here on the “sodeyn love” (Chaucer 1987, TC, II.667) of Criseyde for Troilus at the poem’s center. The narrator dwells on the figure of Troilus as he returns from battle, focalizing our gaze from Criseyde’s point of view. He is, like Emelye of *The Knight’s Tale*, seemingly divine (the god Mars has nothing on Troilus, we are told), and yet also the perfect human combination of vulnerable and powerful, battered by fighting and yet still fresh, young, and “weldy” (TC II.636). The image sinks into Criseyde’s heart, seeming to her as if she has taken a strong draught, and yet here the narrator anticipates his audience’s protest at the conventionality of the scene—a conventionality that strains belief. He assures us that she did not love him “[r]ight for the firste syghte” but instead “gan encline” toward him (TC II.669, 674). It took time, thereafter, for love to work its way into her heart, softened as it was by Troilus’s manliness and suffering. And yet this explanation is still not deemed narratively sufficient to explain Criseyde’s fall into love. She debates within herself the pros and cons of falling in love with Troilus, asking herself about her life’s “fyn” or ultimate ends (TC II.757). She hears a song in praise of love sung by her niece Antigone that further lessens her hesitations about love. And she sleeps and dreams of an eagle tearing her heart from her breast and replacing it with his own.

This ostentatiously excessive attention to the provocation and process of desire allows Chaucer to explore the complicated feelings that desire entails—the way it appears to come on all at once, fully formed, and yet also follows an arc of development. It may be rooted in the sight of the beloved, but also rooted in reflection upon the worthiness of the beloved’s character. It may seem to work against one’s own happiness, while at the same time it may seem the only way to guarantee that happiness. In total, given Criseyde’s status as a vulnerable widow, the daughter of a traitor in a time of war, the multiplication of stories about her desire calls into question the very fact of her ownership of that desire. Unlike the love in *The Knight’s Tale*, Criseyde’s love for Troilus does not seem to belong to the Other, adopted as a means of striving for recognition, but instead seems determined by her radical

vulnerability and impossibility of choosing love from a position of stability and sovereignty, even a fictive sovereignty. As always, in Chaucer's narratives, people act and feel for any number of overlapping reasons: the influence of the stars, the influence of the gods and goddesses, generic requirements, the authority of sources, the authority of genres and conventions, familial and political circumstance, and unaccountable individual desire. As Aranye Fradenburg (2002) observes, medieval society was fascinated both with responsibility and with freeing oneself from it, with the attraction and fear offered by all of life's "complications, responsibilities, habits, dispositions, histories" (202). Criseyde's leap of love is both radical and unaccountable—an unconscious commitment to desire as well as a slow negotiation of social pressures. A psychoanalytic framework preserves the possibility that no matter how much conscious thought is dedicated to her decision, there is something unknowable in her that drives her along, attaching her to life and to the world by means of eros. In multiplying the narrative causes for Criseyde's desire, Chaucer makes the audience less rather than more confident that it is explicable at all: the conventions of falling in love are both utterly natural and wildly unbelievable. Affect theory preserves the possibility that this unknowability is not only about Criseyde's singularity and attachments, but also about her multiple and fraying tethers to the social world.

Both *The Knight's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde* may be read within the contemporaneous logics of chivalric discourse and courtly love narratives; such contextualization can elucidate the medieval conventions of identity and desire. Yet, viewing these texts in a space between psychoanalysis and affect theory helps us understand their repetitions not only as conventional, as the historical range of possibilities for experiencing desire, but also as experimental, as a set of questions about how literary styles, modes, and genres of feeling might be arranged differently, and how new conventions might come into being. In the classroom, one may be able to have a conversation about how medieval authors and audiences imagined occasions for change, for as-yet unthought arrangements of the self in relation to others. Dwelling between psychoanalysis and affect theory in *The Knight's Tale* can yield insights into the singularity of desire. In what way are the plot-level questions of "who gets the girl" still meaningful to us for their very ambivalence of contingency and determinism? In what way might the tale be about the idea of singularity, at stake in erotic desire, but also in how that desire is shaped by and speaks to social recognition? In *Troilus and Criseyde* this in-betweenness generates productive discussions about whether one can rationally choose one's own feelings. To be sure, one can read Criseyde's role in the love story as caught between individual desire and social pressures without any recourse to the frameworks of psychoanalysis and affect theory. Yet bringing these discourses to bear opens the story beyond her individual situation to a long-historical view of ideas about desire, reason, volition, power, and insecurity. As a variation on the convention of love as both compelled and chosen, external and internal, what does Criseyde show us about erotic desire as cultivation of the self, embrace of or defense against vulnerability, or expression of one's social entanglement? How does her confrontation with her own moment of decision-making explore sex and love as a privileged place of encounter with intractable psychic and social structures and also with the everyday experience of interior life and life with others? Beyond Chaucer and beyond the courtly, one might think about conversion narratives as both convention-bound and producing the possibility for new social arrangements. A work like *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1985) presents its subject as constrained by family, neighbors, church, and her own social and sexual desires, in search of a mode of expressing

her desire and identifications in a way at odds with her environment and herself. The *Book* repetitively stages the social judgment and interpretation of Margery's visceral experiences and actions—interpretations performed for our example and instruction, and possibly for the imagining of a world in which someone like Margery Kempe might be able to flourish.

All of these questions have relevance for students: emotional freedom and emotional change, identity and singularity, and the possible loci for self-fashioning and social action. In the classroom one might begin by asking students to focus on feelings—both their own and the representations of emotions and feelings in medieval literature. Where do they find recognition, or a lack of fit, and where do things not make sense? Where are they confused or bored, attracted or repulsed? Such nearly involuntary reactions can be the beginning of intellectual and ethical inquiry. Where do they see historical continuity and recognition, and where do things seem strange? Can this strangeness help de-naturalize their own conventional relationships to others and to their objects of desire? The language and arguments of psychoanalysis and affect theory, when brought into the classroom, can then elucidate medieval literature as a place where love gets taken seriously (and also made fun of) as a locus of utter restriction and potential freedom.

What does affect theory still need from psychoanalysis? Is this the same question as asking what sexuality needs from sex? Better to ask, I think, what each needs from the other, and to suggest that keeping both in play—cautiously, perhaps—can allow for insight into the narratives and genres and scenes that people find themselves in, their styles, habits, and modes. Both psychoanalysis and affect theory describe a person's experience of the world as not existing solely for that person, as organized around impersonal structures and conventions (Berlant 2011, 125), with life taking place via the translation of visceral response into feeling and emotion. These repetitions of moments within texts, within lives, played at different speeds, across genres, are both unnoticeable convention and places for patient uncovering of layers of bodily, intellectual, and social processes that are not always unified or coherent. Psychoanalysis and affect theory have each taught us that the repetition of that process of translation is both the place where false coherence and misrecognition happen and the place where interruption and difference can begin. If there is a particularly apt place to look for the restrictive and utopian possibilities of convention, it may be in Chaucer, for whom “in forme of speche is chaunge” (Chaucer 1987, TC II.22), with form serving not only as the sedimented evidence of old rules but also as the very place where change occurs—and even where the “nyce” and “straunge” aspects of the past might be animated anew.

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