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Editors' Introduction: The Time of Psychoanalysis

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Editors' Introduction: The Time of Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

This is the Introduction to the cluster of essays on “The Time of Psychoanalysis.”

This cluster of essays has its origin in a session, “The Time of Psychoanalysis,” that we organized for the 22nd Biennial Congress of the New Chaucer Society at Durham University, 11–14 July, 2022. Four of the speakers in that session contributed to this cluster, which addresses the question of what psychoanalysis still offers to the way we read and teach Middle English literature. We intended the ambivalent temporality of “still”—which can mean “now, as it was before,” “and it continues,” and “still here, against the odds”—to provoke a number of questions. “Still” in the adversative sense brings to mind the familiar observation that psychoanalysis has never been central to literary criticism of any period (Rabaté 2014, 1), let alone central to the field of medieval studies as a whole, as Louise (now Aranye) Fradenburg (1995) has observed. Its marginality, even in medieval literary studies, arises in large part from the dominance of historicism as a methodology in the field, but the vexed relationship between psychoanalysis and historicism concerns more than methodology.¹ Other theoretical approaches—feminism, Marxism—have not drawn the same ire. There are, of course, bad psychoanalytic readings of literature: for example, the naïve and reductive search for phallic symbols and what Jean-Michel Rabaté (2014) calls “wild allegorizations” (2). Yet it is crucial to take seriously the proposition that psychoanalysis offers readings of medieval texts that are useful, necessary, and important.

Those readings differ from those afforded by sociology, political theory, rhetoric, or—indeed—historicism. In terms of practice, the aim is not to find modern critical issues in medieval texts but rather, as Fradenburg (1989) argues, to exploit “the capacity of modern theory to understand medieval texts in ways sometimes different from the ways in which those texts seem to understand themselves” (72). The essays in this cluster use the insights of psychoanalytic thinkers (Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Melanie Klein, Hortense Spillers, Frantz Fanon, Anne Anlin Cheng) to address sex and sexuality, gender, race, affect theory, medieval allegory, and female conduct. They do so with an awareness not only of the historicity of this moment but of the historicity of the Middle Ages. Their readings are analytical but also of necessity speculative, because they use theory to try to work out the meanings of complex literary texts and other discursive practices. What is more, they give us ways to think about teaching medieval texts using psychoanalysis. The remainder of this introduction will detail some of those uses for understanding medieval texts and for teaching them.

Medievalists have engaged productively with psychoanalytic concepts for more than five decades because those concepts continue to have great explanatory force for literary analysis in understanding the representation of—inter alia—sexual difference, female mysticism, subjectivity, race, and the effects of a text on the reader. Fradenburg (1998a) documented very fully that engagement for the period 1970 to 1997, noting its key areas of interest: loss, desire, courtly love, the absence of the sexual relation, extimity, the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, the family, the father of enjoyment, the maternal imaginary, the family romance, incest, the drives, *jouissance*, sacrifice, enjoyment, and the medievalism of contemporary theorists (254–55). It is crucial to recognize that a great deal of work has been published since Fradenburg’s survey. Before we go on to consider the place of psychoanalysis

¹ The most outspoken critic of Freudian analyses of Middle English literary texts, on the grounds of their questionable historicism, is Lee Patterson (2001).

in the classroom we briefly survey some of the material that has appeared since 1997 and consider its pedagogical value.

In the following list we include work on both Middle English and Old French, since the latter significantly influences research and teaching in Middle English. The topics addressed in this archive, which can be compared with those that Fradenburg identified in her survey: courtly love (Kay 2001, Gaunt 2001, Frelick 2003, Miller 2004, Rosenfeld 2011, Megna 2017, Ragland 1995 [not cited in Fradenburg 1998a]); sacrifice and chivalry (Fradenburg 2002, Miller 2010); female mysticism (Hollywood 2002 and 2016, Morgan 2013, Beckwith 1986 [not cited in Fradenburg 1998a]); charity (Fradenburg 1998b); devotion to Mary (Koppelman 2001, Waller 2011); medievalism and film (Burt 2008); law and desire (Fradenburg 1999b); subjectivity and selfhood (Haidu 2004, Koppelman 2004, Partner 2005, Regan 2011); medieval textuality (Scala 2002a); the neighbor (Edmondson 2012); the primal scene (Strohm 2005); love and martyrdom (Gaunt 2001 and 2006); desire (Beaumont 2002, Zeeman 2006); pain and pleasure (Mills 2005); the idea of the “new” (Ingham 2015); the skin of the parchment book (Kay 2004, Kay 2011); death and dying (Gilbert 2011, Fradenburg 1999); sentience (Fradenburg 1999); the unspeakable (Blud 2017); imitatio Christi (Merkur 2007); enclosure (Howie 2007); mourning (Edmondson 2004, Rushworth 2016); metamorphosis (Griffin 2015); sexual difference and sexuality (Watt 2003, Weisl-Shaw 2007/2008, Kłosowska 2005, Thormann 2012, Pitcher 2012); bodily, cultural, and geographical otherness (Oswald 2010; Uebel 2016); dreams (Bachorski 2004, Zeeman 2014); sibling dynamics (Larrington 2015); transgender bodies (Gutt 2019); cannibalism (Champion 2021); the gaze (Gaunt 2004, Mills 2004, Labbie 2022); and asceticism (Megna 2022).

This is not an exhaustive list. Not all of this work is equally committed to Freud's and Lacan's thinking, but all of it takes psychoanalysis seriously. Since our bald listing does not give a sense of the reach, subtlety, and compelling nature of this work, and since we do not have the space to expand on every entry, we give a few examples of what a teacher might want to notice about this material and what one might assign for reading to graduate students, if not to undergraduates. George Edmondson's (2004) essay on Pearl would be ideal for a class on the poems of the Gawain-poet. Edmondson analyzes the poem's representation of sacrificial courtly subjectivity in psychoanalytic terms, reading it as a document of Christian consolation that lays bare the fantastical terms of that consolation. Kay's (2011) essay on parchment as animal skin, and on the implications of that for readers of medieval books, would work extremely well in courses on animal studies, book history, or subjectivity. Beaumont (2002), which analyzes the Lacanian understanding of desire in *The 1001 Nights*, would be a valuable addition to a course on Arabic literature or global medieval literature. Labbie (2022), which, somewhat unusually, directly discusses how she teaches the Breton *lais*, argues that courtly love and desire rely on, and are produced by, the gaze and the voice.

In addition to the work on medieval literature cited above, there is useful analysis of Lacan's debt to medieval thinkers and his relationship to history (Holsinger 2005, Labbie 2006, Murtaugh 2007) and of the grounding of the Middle Ages in modernity (Uebel and Labbie 2010). Michael Uebel (2007) elucidates the value for medievalism of psychoanalysis's distinctive articulations of temporality, which includes the concept of *après-coup*—about which we say more below—as well as Freud's (1964) understanding of clinical analysis as “interminable”—that is, as incomplete in its very nature, in that it does not have a determinate end—and Lacan's “variable sessions” (Forrester 1990, 169–73).

Elizabeth Scala (2002b) pursues Fradenburg's argument that "psychoanalysis is simply in medieval studies now, in a variety of acknowledged and unacknowledged ways" (108, citing Fradenburg 1998a, 250) by analyzing the reliance on psychoanalytic concepts in three works by noted historicist medievalists: Anne Middleton, David Aers, and Lee Patterson. Scala's essay is valuable for laying out the resistances by historicists to psychoanalytic thinking. Patricia Ingham's (2005) essay "Psychoanalytic Criticism" considers the concepts of the unconscious, ambivalence, disavowal, desire, fantasy, extimity, and enjoyment as productive ways of thinking about the meanings of Chaucer's works and the continuing relevance of Chaucer in today's global world. The Freudian insight that the unconscious produces a split in the subject informs Ingham's reading of the self's lack of coherence in the Knight's Tale.

Après-coup: attention and reflection in the classroom

These powerful critical readings can make a huge difference to our teaching. The scene of pedagogy, however, also has many psychic dimensions: desire, anxiety, *jouissance* (jubilation about a text or a theory), transference and countertransference (between instructor and student), resistance (to meanings, learning, interpretations), identification (with a topic or a historical period, with characters in a text, with the instructor), misrecognition, fetishization (of grades, of methods, of periods), to name only a few. The sometimes wildly opposing views of instructors on student evaluations indicate the role that fantasy plays in learning and assessment. The student's projection of the instructor's function as (in Lacan's phrase about the role of the analyst) "the subject who is supposed to know" (*le sujet supposé savoir*) (Lacan 1979, 232) complicates the dynamics of the classroom and the student's relation to knowledge (Davis 1987, 752). Yet the teacher knows that their task is not to pass on information magisterially but rather to provoke the student to find a place from which to produce their own knowledge. That the student must be an active agent in the process is confirmed by historical etymology: Latin *disciplina*, from which we derive our words for both punishment and a branch of learning or knowledge, is from *discipulus*, pupil, from *dis-*+ Proto-Italic**kapelos* ("one who takes"), influenced by the (unrelated) verb *disco*, to learn. So, the pupil is the one who takes, who works to make meaning.

There are also psychic dimensions to medieval *paideia*. If the classical period invented the eroticism of the teacher-pupil relation, the European Middle Ages took it and ran with it. Peter Abelard's *Historia Calamitatum* (c. 1132) records his eroticized disciplining of Heloise in educating her, which draws in turn on monastic educational practices in which bodily and mental trauma—spanking, hitting—was used to inculcate knowledge (Parsons 2015). The gendered dimensions of trauma—its horrifyingly asymmetric effects on male and female subjects—emerge in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, in which the different affective levels of the two voices (Abelard and Heloise) are heartbreaking. In English, "discipline" was originally (c. 1225) ecclesiastical punishment, mortification of the flesh as penance (OED), and then (c. 1350) "Instruction or teaching intended to mould the mind and character and instill a sense of proper, orderly conduct and action; training to behave or act in a controlled and effective manner; mental, intellectual, moral, or spiritual training or

exercise" (OED). In the early modern period, a "discipline" was also "a whip" (1586), a meaning that links learning with both penitential punishment and the fetishistic.

Many US college students have never read Freud's work in high school. If they have encountered it, they may have only read it in summaries that are at best reductive. So, assign some of Freud's texts ("The Uncanny," "Dora"). Assign some of Lacan's texts on desire and use his theorization of desire in the classroom to think about students' love of medievalism, medieval games and gaming, or Arthurian legend, and ask them to compare these with their love of Taylor Swift.

Our main consideration in this section, however, is the pedagogical implications of the concept of *après-coup* (Freud's "Nachträglichkeit," translated by James Strachey in the Standard Edition of Freud as "deferred action," and by Jean Laplanche [1992, 2017] as "afterwardsness"). By *Nachträglichkeit* Freud meant the reinvestment of a memory in the past with traumatic or cathected meaning in the light of a subsequent event: a retrospective structure. For Sergio Benvenuto (2018) *après-coup* describes a clinical structure of subjective thinking in which the "before" of an event "is caused by the 'after' [and] the after is the cause of the before," or alternatively, "the sense of a later event gives an earlier event a causal power . . . because the reality of the earlier event isn't modified: its force is modified" (82–83). There is no absolute before, no primary cause that is then resignified. Notice that for Benvenuto the structure is not retrospective, but bidirectional (House 2017, 776). It points both backwards and forwards. *Après-coup* is an after without a before. This is, for Benvenuto (2018), a condition of being human: "we are always in *après-coup*, always in the conditionality of the future perfect" (85).

What then are the consequences of this for thinking about the teaching of Middle English literature? In terms of the big picture, the complex, non-linear temporality of *après-coup* returns us to the meanings of "still," and to the fact that psychoanalysis has been a constant—and necessary—provocation to historicist thinking insofar as it unsettles the chronology of past, present, and future, calls in question causality, and raises the issue of repetition. On a more basic level, the fact that what we teach may not have an immediate impact on our students but that its force may nevertheless be felt by them later, often years later, is also an effect of *après-coup*.

The concept of *après-coup*, further, shows us how psychoanalysis might productively be brought to bear on subjects not always understood to be under its purview. Here, we might consider race (but see also the still foundational work of Khanna 2003). James Baldwin's (1963) observation that "people are trapped in history and history is trapped in them" (146) highlights the trauma of slavery, in which there is no simple before and after, in which the Black subject battles a past that they are not able to be free of. The fourteenth-century (c. 1330) English romance *The King of Tars* (Chandler 2015) presents the racialized fantasy of miscegenation in terms not of the binary white/black, or past/present, but matter/form. The child of the Muslim Sultan and his Christian wife is all matter, lacking the Aristotelian principle of form as active. It is a "rond of flesche," without limbs, without "blod and bon," that "lay ded as the ston" (ll. 576–582). The gaze of the other here seeks the signifier of form as validation of a desire for essentialized racial difference in a time before race. That essentialization is undercut both by the very form of the poem—the insistent rhyming of non, bon, and ston in the lines above—and by the mapping of a racial binary onto a gender binary: female matter/male form. *Après-coup* suggests, however, that the formless child, who awaits its father's conversion to Christianity to become fully human, exists in the conditionality of the future perfect, in

which it will have found its form, and which thus challenges settled and normative understandings of what it means to be human. In a less extreme form—and indeed, what could be more extreme—this waiting is a model of *après-coup* at work in one's education.

Why psychoanalysis (still) matters to medieval studies

The four essays in this cluster suggest why and how psychoanalytic readings can make a critical difference to our understanding of texts from the past and how medieval texts can speak back to modern theory. Patricia Ingham (2024) considers how interpretive shifts in the reading of Freud keep psychoanalysis still meaningful in literary criticism. She argues that the roots of both affect theory and other critical practices that challenge suspicious (paranoid) readings of the object lie in Kleinian psychoanalysis. The distinction that Melanie Klein makes between the paranoid-schizoid position, in which the object is seen in starkly polarized terms (now the good mother, now the bad mother), and the depressive position, in which ambivalence towards the object is accepted and worked through, informs both Eve Sedgwick's and José Esteban Muñoz's embrace of "non-dualistic thought" in their notions of "reparative reading." Their work in affect theory draws indirectly on psychoanalysis as an interpretive resource for their reworking of ambivalence in the name of a queer politics. Lacan has shifted our understanding of Freud, but so have Klein, Sedgwick, and Muñoz. And this shifting continues. In the same vein, but this time in relation to race, Ingham notes that Hortense Spillers reads Frantz Fanon's ambivalent accounts of the Black body as prompts for "ethical self-knowing," moving readers—as does Spillers' own work—to take up less polarized positions. In pedagogical and scholarly terms, what might be gained by refiguring the central, harmful opposition within medieval studies (history vs. theory) as Kleinian or Spillerian ambivalence? Ingham urges a non-defensive self-analysis of our positions and attachments in order to decentralize and disperse what we think we might be able to know.

Whereas Ingham argues that psychoanalysis persists *in* affect theory's—and race theory's—embracing of ambivalence, Jessica Rosenfeld (2024) explores the tensions *between* psychoanalysis and the ascendant field of affect theory. Using the work of José Esteban Muñoz (2009) and the concept of *après-coup*, Rosenfeld questions the now-standard narrative that affect theory has displaced psychoanalysis. These discourses are not simple opposites. Rather, there is a space between them that is highly productive for teaching medieval literature, which is the space between the poles of sexuality (aligned with affect theory, and ripe with the political possibilities of queer resistance) and sex (aligned with psychoanalysis and concerned with the undoing of the self) (Berlant and Edelman 2014). This "space between" recalls Ingham's discussion of the political potential of dwelling with ambivalence and of turning it into a radical reexamination of one's paranoid, fixated-on-certainty attachments. In terms of pedagogy, Rosenfeld proposes that each discourse (sex vs. sexuality, affect theory vs. psychoanalysis) offers us ways to think about erotic narratives as both "the psychoanalysis and affect theory of the Middle Ages" (Rosenfeld 2024, 104) (analogous, that is, to the difference between sexuality and sex). These texts speak back to the relationship between psychoanalysis and affect theory in modern theory, for example, in the phenomenon of the temporally complex repetition that is central to *après-coup*, which stops the generic conventions of courtly love from sedimenting into predictable forms but keeps them alive to release new meanings. In the classroom, conventional moments in

medieval courtly fictions (Cupid shooting his arrows; love at first sight; the idealizing of the love object) can be seen not as mere “conventions” to be isolated and identified but as opportunities to explore the richness of their meanings: do they represent the sublimation of desire or social enmeshment through desire? the singularity of the self, the singularity of desire, dissolution of the self, or revision of the self? *The Knight's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde* are full of possibilities for exploring the meaning of these conventions/the meaning of desire/the repetitive structure of falling in love/the meanings of chivalry through the lenses of affect theory and psychoanalysis. Students can be encouraged to ask where they find themselves at odds with the text and how this might denaturalize their own conventional relationships to others and to objects of desire, and that in turn can elucidate medieval literature as a place where sexual love is taken very seriously—but also made fun of. Rosenfeld encourages teachers to see affect theory and psychoanalysis not as opposed discourses but as an opportunity for students to explore their interplay.

The interplay between past and present is the key to allegory for Paul Megna (2024). His essay considers Freud's allegory of the superego, id and ego as an opportunity to teach the history of psychological allegory in late antiquity and the Middle Ages, from Prudentius's *Psychomachia* (c. 405) to William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (c. 1380), and to show that allegory is not static, reductive, or irrelevant. Although the superego is somewhat like the conscience that is described by Augustine and other early Christian thinkers, Freud's aim, unlike that of medieval religious predecessors, is not to instill in his audience a “self-disciplining mode of subjectivity” but rather to weaken the hold of the hostile superego, “the cop in the head.” Megna suggests that students might be encouraged in the classroom to use Freud's view of that hostile superego to think about toxic student/mentor relationships and to compare Freud's tripartite model with medieval views of subjectivity. For example (and this is our example, not Megna's), a passage in the Middle English translation (15th century, second quarter) of Guillaume Deguillaume's fourteenth-century *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine*, the *Pilgrimage of the Life of the Manhood* (Henry 1985), offers a tripartite model of subjectivity based on an allegorization of charity. Christ explains that charity is shaped like a carpenter's square, with the letters “p” [*proximus*, neighbour], “a” [*anima*, “soul” or self], and “x” [*Christus*] on each of its three corners, spelling out “pax” [peace], the “jewel” given by God (33–34). The arrangement of the letters on the square signals the meanings of charity in spatial terms: Christ is set above, but close to, the soul (or self), with the neighbor on the same level as the soul, but further away from it than Christ. Students can be invited to explore the historical aspects of this model, which is based in religion, not psychology, and compare it with Freud's.

Like Megna, Wan-Chuan Kao (2024) considers the disciplining of the subject, but his focus is models of virtuous female conduct. He reads the female subject of Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* through a racialized and gendered version of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological model of cultural capital, which is inflected with the psychoanalytic insights of Lacan and of the Asian American cultural theorist Anne Anlin Cheng. Custance, the protagonist of Chaucer's tale, embodies fourteenth-century English cultural capital because she is white, noble, Christian, and marriageable. She transmits that cultural capital through being trafficked within the economic flow of people and things—what today we call logistics—and which is symptomatic of race and race-making in both the time before race and our world now. Lacan enters here because it is desire that drives the circuits of capital in logistics, and desire that drives the Sultan to move Custance to him, entranced by her value as the unattainable

object that desire continually circles around. Where psychoanalysis takes desire, disguise, and misrecognition as objects of its inquiry, cultural capital draws on the power of those psychic phenomena to disguise its effects, the more efficiently to work within the circuits of capital. Custance is not just—or even—a suffering heroine, as readers of the text have often assumed, but is rather (in Cheng's words) a “zone of contamination,” in which subjecthood and objecthood are merged (Cheng 2009, 92). Inhabiting this zone, she is a precarious object and yet capable of self-making, and thus functions as a possessor of racialized cultural capital that fails to recognize itself as capital and yet which has the capacity to move and convert others. In psychoanalytic terms, and for readers of Chaucer's text, her contaminated state is a symptom that asks to be interpreted.

Conclusion: The Affordances of Psychoanalysis

These essays give us some sense of what has changed in psychoanalytic medieval studies since Fradenburg's forementioned survey (1998a), as well as an inkling of where we might go from here. Rather than focusing on individual desire and identity, they productively use psychoanalysis to investigate sociological categories: gender, to be sure (it has long been an interest and is well represented in Fradenburg's survey), but also race, logistics, and histories of criticism. Considering the psychoanalytic investments of collectivities likewise helps explain their interest in the way the present regards the past. Working out our libidinal attachments to the past was already a feature of Fradenburg's thought (1997 and 2002, for instance), but it has in the meantime become a central concern of queer theory, inspired by the writings of a medievalist, Carolyn Dinshaw (1999), but central to the conversation in that field since the work of Heather Love (2009). Placing psychoanalysis in conversation with queer theory on this issue reveals another central difference these essays index: the fact that many of the concerns of psychoanalysis have made their way into other methodologies, sometimes acknowledged explicitly, as in the case of queer theory, and other times more usually disavowed, as in the case of affect theory.

And by thinking of the place of psychoanalysis in these other modes of thought, these essays may well point us to a future direction for psychoanalytic criticism, one that takes us back to the “still” of our opening provocation. They show, in short, what is to be gained by thinking of the “still” as persistence, as what maintaining a focus on psychoanalysis within its related fields might show us. Even more apparent than the benefits for queer theory, which has always maintained an interest in psychoanalysis proper, is the fruit that such a persistent focus yields in affect theory. Psychoanalysis, with its concern with the complexities of desire and the dialectic of interiority and exteriority (and self and other), allows for a more critical approach to affect theory, one less diagnostic and more interrogative of the vagaries of the self. Such a self-critical edge might likewise characterize the beneficial application of psychoanalysis to other more distant methodologies, a trend already apparent in these essays and one that will no doubt continue. Think psychoanalysis *and*: psychoanalysis and formalism, psychoanalysis and disability studies, psychoanalysis and medical humanities, psychoanalysis and ecocriticism, etc. Psychoanalysis and whatever methodologies are to come.

That is, psychoanalysis—like other “hermeneutics of suspicion,” especially Marxism—has a claim to be a meta-methodology, a methodology that explains our relationship to other methodologies. In this way, then, psychoanalysis will remain an indispensable pedagogical concern, not solely in medieval

studies or Chaucer studies, but certainly in those subfields as well. It tells us not only about the object of study, but about ourselves, apprehending that object, be it Chaucer, or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or Christine de Pizan, or Farid ud-Din Attar, or Sei Shōnagon, or choose your author or text. It allows us to explore in the classroom our own investments in things, both what we care about and why we care about the things we care about. It necessarily demonstrates to our students a deeper pedagogical concern, that we care not only about what they think, but also about who they *are*.

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