

## ÉTAT PRÉSENT QUEER THEORY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

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Though it might surprise many, the Middle Ages are emerging as a kind of queer utopia, a historical period in which institutional state regulation as we know it hardly existed, in which marriage practices were not yet controlled entirely either by state or church and varied widely by class and region, in which same-sex segregation was a norm, particularly in intellectual communities, and in which love stories between men were common, if covert.<sup>1</sup> Texts, both literary and historical, actually spoke of same-sex eroticism, albeit it in a derogatory way, referring to such relations as sodomy, *bougrerie*, or heresy. Over the course of 1000 years, (c. 500–1500), when almost any sexual act or impulse which did not focus on sex exclusively in terms of procreative potential was branded as sodomitical, all readers conveniently find themselves in the same crowded boat, cast out one and all as sodomites. When that sodomite's every thought is ripe for interrogation, as we see in many of the major penitentials and theological works, we arrive, however proleptically, at that magic moment when the inviolable modern status of hetero and homo as polar opposites simply dissolves.<sup>2</sup> This perversely satisfying scenario finally promises a degree of equality in rejection and it requires a redefinition of the parameters within which we read medieval texts. When all readers get to play at being marginal and subversive, without ever having actually done anything other than that which seemed natural, it redefines the literary landscape. Like Perceval at his chess board competing against an invisible opponent, we feel what it is to confront an autonomous social force that claims to play by the rules, even when those rules are always of its own making.<sup>3</sup>

Such a scenario is particularly satisfying to scholars. What other period offers such fertile ground for the investigation of power and language, duplicity as the very essence of speech, heteroglossia as norm? I suppose many would spring to mind, at least in political terms; but when we add to the mix sex as an essential marker of culpability, then we have found

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<sup>1</sup> Love stories between women are less commonly known but by no means inexistent. See *Same Sex Love and Desire among Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Francesca Canadé Sautman and Pamela Sheingorn (New York, Palgrave, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> According to Nikki Sullivan, 'humanist ontology indicates that heterosexuality is naturally occurring and is the polar opposite of homosexuality', in *Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York University Press, 2003), p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> *Continuations of the Old French Perceval: The Second Continuation*, ed. by W. Roach (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), IV, ll. 20000–255.

our Foucauldian wonderland. A space in which unspoken laws govern behaviour, exclusion is not yet the norm, and the subject forms within the social yet without the humanist status of unique master of its fate — what could be better? Double consciousness reigns, full play between the signifier and signified is recognized and accented, everyone clearly aware that they are in ideology even as they undermine it. It is therefore doubly noteworthy that queer theory *avant la lettre* is so rare in medieval scholarship before the 1980s. It took until then to note, at least in published form, the homoerotic subtexts of romance, the predominance of rape, the appeal to voyeurism and the perverse in hagiography, the absolute primacy of the homosocial bond over all other erotic ties.<sup>4</sup>

John Boswell, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and the early publications of Judith Butler changed all that, and by the 1990s, discussion of the queer topoi of medieval writing come to the fore.<sup>5</sup> But what of France? Why is it that with the exception of Christiane Marchello-Nizia's groundbreaking article on homosexuality and Georges Duby's indirect but very useful studies of masculinity and social practices, there has been so little on queer practices in the Middle Ages?<sup>6</sup> Despite having set the groundwork for what would eventually be called queer theory, Michel Foucault largely skips over the period in his final works, though he apparently intended to address in more detail the matter of confession in the Middle Ages. Jacques Lacan contributed much to an opening up of love lyrics to queer readings with his remarks on troubadour poetry, but his influential lectures have been read as both essential to poststructuralist interpretations of the troubadours' games and firmly anchored in profoundly homophobic thought.<sup>7</sup> Guy Hocquenghem's brave and important work, also based largely on psychoanalytic thought, is preoccupied entirely with contemporary questions,

<sup>4</sup> Some of these earlier works include: Glenn Burger, 'Kissing the Pardoner' *PMLA*, 107 (1992), 1143–56; Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); William E. Burgwinkle, 'Knighting the Classical Hero: Homo/Hetero Affectivity in *Eneas*', *Exemplaria*, 5.1 (1993), 1–43; Roberta L. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Some of the key theoretical and historical texts include Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago — London, University of Chicago Press, 1980), Sedgwick's *Between Men* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 1990), and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (New York, Routledge, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Christiane Marchello-Nizia, 'Amour courtois, société masculine et figures de pouvoir', *Annales*, 36 (1981), 969–82; and Georges Duby, *Mâle moyen-âge* (Paris, Flammarion, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Didier Eribon dedicates three chapters of his *Une morale du minoritaire* to a critique and exposure of Lacan's negative contribution to what he calls the straitjacketing of French thought. He attributes the barrage of reactionary rhetoric coming from a portion of the psychoanalytic community during the PACS debate of the late 1990s to hardcore Lacanian influence. Though it has been pointed out that Eribon bases his argument on early essays by Lacan, some dating from the 1930s, he counters that the supposed later turnaround in Lacan's thought did not extend to an embrace of the possibilities of alternative sexual and parental couplings. See Chapters 3 to 7 of *Une morale du minoritaire* (Paris, Fayard, 2001), pp. 235–84, and also his *Sur cet instant fragile: carnets, janvier–août 2004* (Paris, Fayard, 2004), p. 42.

with essentially no consideration of queer identities or practices before 1968. This French silence is often read as resistance to extending political critique to the challenging of patriarchal norms, especially as instituted by religious thought, preferring instead to attribute sexual identities exclusively to the power of institutional state apparatus. Jeremy Carrette has shown how Michel Foucault's own thinking on this question remained muddled. Foucault claims in his *Discipline and Punish*, in terms that resonate in the later work of Judith Butler:

It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of power that is exercised on those punished — and in a more general way, on those one supervises, trains and corrects.<sup>8</sup>

The terms in which Foucault discusses the soul are uncannily close to those used by Judith Butler when discussing embodied gender and the sexual identities that proceed from it. Foucault's use of the monastery as a source and model for disciplinary power is really only the beginning of an examination into the ways in which such same-sex environments (and of course the point can be stretched to include how boarding schools, fraternities and the military are similarly structured around homophobic exclusion) enhance love of the same while at the same time disavowing it.<sup>9</sup> The disciplinary practices of Peter Damian, the theology of Aelred of Rievaulx, the embodied poetics of any number of allegorical dream narratives, the mystical and eroticized relations between God and the Christian soul — medieval theology fairly teems with texts that create, in the guise of theology, a theory of embodied sexual identity.<sup>10</sup> So what effect has queer theory, post-Foucault, had on current research on the Middle Ages? I would like to point out just a few topics or areas in which it has, or will, make a difference: sacrifice and the way in which subjects offer themselves up, in the name of a higher goal, for cultural consumption;<sup>11</sup> melancholia;<sup>12</sup> the discourse of knighthood, women's utopic spaces, and

<sup>8</sup> *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London, Penguin, 1991), p. 29 (originally published as *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris, Gallimard, 1975)), cited in Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Religion* (London — New York, Routledge, 2000), p. 109.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford University Press), p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> See Peter Damian, *De laude flagellorum et, ut loquantur, discipline*, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*: 205: cols. 333–35; Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Mary E. Laker (Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications, 1974); *Le Roman de la rose*, ed. by A. Strubel (Paris, Livre de Poche, 1992); and further discussion in William Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). See also Cary Howie's forthcoming book, *Claustrophobia* (New York — London, Palgrave, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the forthcoming book by Simon Gaunt, *Martyrs to Love: Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2006) and studies on blood by Finn Sinclair, *Milk and Blood: Gender and Genealogy in the 'chanson de geste'* (Oxford, Peter Lang, 2003) and Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Sylvia Huot addresses this topic from one particular perspective in *Madness in the Middle Ages: Identities Found and Lost* (Oxford University Press, 2003), but Judith Butler's work on the role of melancholia in the construction of gender and sexual identity and Didier Eribon's quite separate writings on the same

the organization of time and space in a more general sense. How spaces are conceived (as in urban planning, monastic sites, garden, imaginary cities, the religious houses of Robert d'Abrissel with their gender mixing, taverns, theatres), and how the past relates to the present (I am thinking particularly of Walter Benjamin's sense of history as the eruption of events, in photographic style, into the consciousness of the present). These topics open up a rich archive within which to examine key, queer, theoretical topics such as: inclusion, exclusion, abjection, mimesis, and the formation of sexual identity. In the remainder of this essay, I will survey just a few recent projects that point toward the future of the field.<sup>13</sup>

A recent publication by Richard E. Zeikowitz, presents in a schematized form some of the ways in which queer research might proceed in the coming years.<sup>14</sup> Instead of excavating the past to find forebearers or 'models of prior and stable homo-selves', Zeikowitz advocates unsettling heterosexual paradigms of scholarship by seeking unread or distorted texts, unloosening hetero-homo binaries in our reading of romance, looking for the homo inside the hetero (and vice versa), and locating culturally specific codes of desire, such as those that operate within the chivalric order. This scrambling of the supposed barriers between the normative and the transgressive is characteristic of queer scholarship, most of which eschews essentializing readings of either gender or sexuality. Zeikowitz is particularly good at drawing distinctions within seemingly unified topics. For example, he argues that the prevalence of attacks on male-male intimacy in the Middle Ages does not represent a knee-jerk rejection of such intimacy, but rather a rejection of those relations as they occur in particular historical settings. A condemnation of same-sex relations between a king or heir to the throne and his lover, or a monk and his confessor, does not necessarily mean that a similar condemnation would be made of such relations if they occurred between men of other classes or circumstances. The political and contingent are far more essential to an understanding of medieval texts than are the universal and essentializing categories of men or women, homo or hetero.<sup>15</sup>

Much of what Zeikowitz has to say follows on from the early insights of Judith Butler, especially her insistence that gender is not so much constructed, as it is inseparable from identity itself: it emerges, takes form,

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topic indicate an untapped frame through which to read much of the melancholic love lyric and romance topoi of the eleventh to fifteenth centuries.

<sup>13</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval* (Durham, NC — London, Duke University Press, 1999) has been particularly influential in arguing for a non-linear history of queer figures and relations and for including religious thinking as part of a queer domain.

<sup>14</sup> *Homoeroticism and Chivalry: Discourses of Male Same-Sex Desire in the Fourteenth Century* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> *Homoeroticism and Chivalry*, p. 14.

through subjection. In Butler's paradigm, confrontation with the law is essential to the development of a gendered body.<sup>16</sup> Feminist and queer issues emerge as almost inseparable in her work, such that any consideration of gender requires a first stop at the question of sexual difference and the role of subjection. Psychoanalysis is, as always, in the background, but equally present are Foucault and Althusser. Her insistence, for example, on the malleability of the Lacanian symbolic order (a simple 'sedimentation of social practices' allowing for a 'queer poststructuralism of the psyche') is one that argues against what she calls the 'structuralist presuppositions' of psychoanalysis and in favour of an alternative model, in which altered kin structures and parental configurations could enact a new, non-masculinist symbolic.<sup>17</sup> Gender becomes a 'practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint'; it is performed through and for an interacting audience.<sup>18</sup> Affect and desire are both staged and structured by norms until they feel like the innermost core of the self, the thing that makes me truly makes me.

It is this emphasis on the development of an inner self through a process of possession, an unconscious and involuntary ingestion of someone else's norms, that ties Butler, in an admittedly curious way, to theological questions. Her descriptions of the process of gendering and subjectivation sound suspiciously like medieval conceptions of the body and soul, in which the body (the material) is treated as the source of corruption (the role of the unconscious in Freud) rather than the corrupted, while the soul (the immaterial) is figured as what precedes that unconscious (much as the body precedes the unconscious in psychoanalysis) and is most in danger of corruption. Diabolical possession, the notion of another entity in the driving seat of the soul, therefore has much in common with Butler's Foucauldian-nuanced notion of an interpellated subjectivity that follows another's directives (through the ingestion of norms) when most convinced that what is driving them is the most authentic part of the self. In Butler's world, gender, that thing that precedes and traverses us, is always constituted elsewhere and it is disciplined through confession and the exercise of pastoral power.<sup>19</sup> Like Foucault before her, Butler is drawn to the study of disciplinary techniques inherited from medieval models, but she emphasizes the production of bodily truth through the performative force of verbal utterance rather than through the emptying of the self and its reconstruction through confession.

Sexual difference and universals become the real sticking points in her relation to psychoanalysis. Since in Butler's terms, sexual difference is neither fully given nor ever fully constructed, the two poles of masculine

<sup>16</sup> 'Gender Regulations' in *Undoing Gender* (New York — London, Routledge, 2004), p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> 'Gender Regulations', p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler, 'Introduction: Acting in Concert', in *Undoing Gender*, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> 'Bodily Confessions', in *Undoing Gender*, pp. 161–62.

and feminine work as a chiasmus in which the rhetorical figure itself takes precedence over the two criss-crossing terms.<sup>20</sup> The universal is always only under construction in Butler's terms. It becomes itself only through challenges to its existing formulation, especially from those who find themselves excluded from it.<sup>21</sup> Feminine sexual freedom and same-sex couplings trouble formal, humanist, universal categories and institute others; they show up the constructedness of each of those universals rather than their status as inviolable social norms, the patriarchal heterosexual family being just one case in point. The melancholia which, in Butler's terms, accounts for a heterosexual identity (that is, not in the active sense of sexual preference but in an act of self-definition through negation: I am he to whom such desires are prohibited) is instrumental in explaining her critique of sexual difference as a given. Though she argues that sexual identities are built on unconscious repudiation of same-sex relations, not all heterosexuals are hostile to same-sex relations and not all queer identities are built on failed Oedipal crises and identification with the opposite sex.<sup>22</sup> Her most powerful contribution to a queer theory of the Middle Ages would be the simple recognition that there is a preheterosexual history to the development of heterosexuality, such that the Oedipal crisis is actually the second in a series of foundational crises, out of which the subject can develop any number of different and entirely normal dispositions.

Nikki Sullivan addresses a wide range of issues relating to a number of these issues in her recent book, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. Staying largely within Butler's anti-universalist stance, Sullivan insists on the role of particular knowledge and practices as instrumental in the development of sexual identities. Though she chooses contemporary phenomena as her examples, her point that texts posit and construct queer sexualities is particularly relevant to the Middle Ages. Medieval texts do not just comment on queer sexualities as if those categories existed already; they actually construct those categories and it is the categories themselves rather than the sexual acts or inclinations of the actors, that point up the most significant differences between the premodern and modern periods. Such unlikely bed partners as Christine de Pizan (*La Cité des dames*), the *Eneas* romance, Peter Damian's *De flagellatione*, hagiographic martyr tales, the *Roman de la Rose*, the *Livre des manières*, and the countless disciplinary texts that condemn and ridicule sodomitical relations, actively construct these relations and the universal categories into which they figure.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler, 'The End of Sexual Difference', in *Undoing Gender*, p. 186.

<sup>21</sup> 'The End of Sexual Difference', p. 191.

<sup>22</sup> 'The End of Sexual Difference', p. 199.

<sup>23</sup> Some examples: sodomy is largely a commercial relation, in which sexual activity is sold or equated to money; effeminate men are reprehensible because they are so appealing to women and therefore pose a direct threat to heterosexual men; sodomites seduce pretty girls so as to use them as bait for attracting randy young men, singing and hunting lead to same-sex temptation, and so on.

Sullivan's consideration of the frequently posed questions: 'is queer a verb or a set of actions; a question of being or doing?' needs a medievalist's rephrasing: is parody already a way of queering? Is heresy queer by virtue of its turning away from truth? Is 'race' or 'madness' implicated in 'queer' as a category already marked as *hors-norme*? The imaginary body or body imago, a concept discussed by Catherine Waldby and Moira Gatens serves as a way of addressing some of these questions.<sup>24</sup> This body is one constructed by a shared language, configured both socially and historically through common institutional practices, and it thereby defies the ready-made categories of homo and hetero.<sup>25</sup> In Calvin Thomas's terms, the true distinction is not one drawn between love of one sex or another, but the difference between 'teleologically narrativized sex: sex with a goal, a purpose, and a product' (heterosexual) and sex for pleasure (sodomy). When virtually all sexual acts fall into the latter category, as in medieval literature, then we often find theology the common link between the modern and medieval.

Amy Hollywood provides another example of this erasure or linking in her work on Georges Bataille. She argues that his notion of sexual ecstasy, that moment of dissolution of the self, the fleeting break with the communitarian bond, is just medieval mysticism in another form. And Leo Bersani and Didier Eribon take a similar, if unacknowledged, line in their respective analyses of André Gide and Jean Genet.<sup>26</sup> Their rethinking of the masochistic bond as an essentially religious tie, involving questions of power, control, and ritual, is as applicable to monastic disciplinary practices as to nineteenth-century Vienna. Masochism emerges not so much as a Foucauldian liberation, a self-fashioning through submission to discipline, as a staged performance that actually serves to strengthen the homosocial bond.<sup>27</sup>

One other contemporary critic has argued at length that the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual is as difficult to make as that between one reading practice and another. Alexander Doty is most interested in how ostensibly heteronormative texts can contain queer elements, to which the knowing reader responds with a wink and the non-knowing

<sup>24</sup> Catherine Waldby, 'Destruction: Boundary Erotics and Reconfigurations of the Heterosexual Male Body', in *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism*, ed. by Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn (New York, Routledge, 1975); and Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality* (New York — London, Routledge, 1996), p. 12.

<sup>25</sup> *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality* (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> See Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago — London, University of Chicago Press, 2002); David Halperin, *Saint Foucault* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 95; Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1996); Didier Eribon, *Une morale du minoritaire*.

<sup>27</sup> See William Burgwinkle, *Sodomy, Masculinity, and Law in Medieval Literature*, pp. 53–65, and 'Visible and Invisible Bodies and Subjects in Peter Damian', in *Troubled Vision*, ed. by Emma Campbell and Robert Mills (New York, Palgrave, 2004), pp. 47–62.

reader responds with discomfort.<sup>28</sup> The moment in which one notices such an occurrence, then tries to make sense of it, is akin to what Freud called the uncanny, that uneasy sense that something else is present and at work, and the reader has lost control. Doty sees in such occurrences the eruption of a queer element, always present within heterosexual normativity, but usually invisible, renamed, or disavowed. Medieval romances are full of such moments, in which purportedly heterosexual narratives, presented as prerequisite to the accomplishment of chivalric status, fall apart under the reader's gaze. Social institutions such as knighthood, guilds, monasteries and religious houses of all types were generally same-sex milieus, and in classic homosocial fashion, they appeal to the queer gaze while disavowing it. Often medieval texts either get around or highlight these uncanny readings through a process of play between competing voices and points of view within the narrative, including those of narrators addressing the reader, diegetic characters, allegorical figures and the framing of such encounters in dream narratives or extended allegories.<sup>29</sup>

To return to the particular question of the French reception of queer theory, in November 1998, Didier Eribon organized both a continuing seminar at the École des Hautes Études and the École Normale Supérieure, which introduced queer theory to the French academy, and two specialized colloquia on topics of 'the couple' and 'l'engagement'. Both series attracted considerable attention, not all of it positive.<sup>30</sup> What Eribon calls the 'famille ou folie' scare-mongering tactics of the PACS debate took no account of earlier periods' massively different conceptions of marriage, the family, and child-rearing. The social body, the body of the Bourdieusian habitus, is, according to Eribon, a socialized and contingent body, marked by class, learning, and training. He proposed quite reasonably that this notion of habitus be expanded to include not only social determinations and their historical markings, but also categories of the sexual, as in whether, by virtue of gender or sexual preferences, one belongs to a stigmatized sexual category.<sup>31</sup> This one crucial adjustment to the equation considerably expands and complicates any universal notion of the medieval queer.

A recent paper by Zrinka Stahuljak highlights some of the ways in which many of the distinctions made by queer theorists operate in a wider, even heteronormative, landscape.<sup>32</sup> Stahuljak begins by examining the romance

<sup>28</sup> *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> For a very interesting analysis of one of the most famous of these texts, see Simon Gaunt, 'Bel Accueil and the Improper Allegory of the *Romance of the Rose*', *New Medieval Literatures*, 2 (1998), 65–93.

<sup>30</sup> *Sur cet instant fragile*, p. 127.

<sup>31</sup> *Sur cet instant fragile*, p. 36.

<sup>32</sup> 'Errancy, Insanity, Morality: Finding "la droite voie" in Chretien de Troyes', unpublished paper delivered at the French Medieval Seminar in Cambridge on 19 May 2005.



commonplace of there being a 'right way', as in Dante's 'dritta via' or Chrétien de Troyes's 'droite voie'. What is this right, or straight, way, and where should it lead? To God, it would seem, in Dante's case, but in the case of Chrétien's knights? Using the romance of *Yvain* as an example, Stahuljak posits a reconfiguration of the whole idea of *aventure*, that old standard from chivalric romance. Following other men's leads and attempting to better their performance leads, almost inevitably, to madness and indirection. A cognitive disjunction exists between *aventure* and its interpretation such that *aventure* is always already what the knight has passed through, though its proof and interpretation beckon from the distant future. The gap between occurrence and interpretation, the present moment in which the knight is suspended between a receding past and a future out of reach, corresponds to that uncanny moment, decidedly queer, of loss of bearings and even identity. This moment of vertigo could also be called the moment of insanity, an affliction that in medieval fiction targets primarily young aristocratic knights.<sup>33</sup>

Insanity thereby becomes a part of *aventure* — a necessary part — but this fact is generally buried and repressed, or labelled and celebrated as heroism so as to avoid the admission that the knight's experience is personal and traumatic as well as an encoding of the social — a wedding of his actions, thoughts, mystical experience and loss of self, into the fabric of culture and ideology. To rip apart that stitching, to pull your thread out from that social tapestry, represents the most drastic and subversive of acts, approaching in its political force the Lacanian 'Act'. That moment is one in which, in Lacan's terms, you are in yourself more than yourself and the self that acts is almost unrecognizable. Because the self that you have come to recognize is already so wedded to the social, it hardly responds to primordial drives except in such a disguised form that you hardly seem to have been present when the Act occurred.<sup>34</sup> What Stahuljak says is that error and errancy are essential to the knight's development and that no master narrative, no 'droite voie', however inscribed by social practice, can ever lead to the discovery of self that is offered as the prize in humanist versions of the tale. Travel, then, is not a teleological quest for truth but a deconstructive allegory that moves the subject from false knowledge (social and ideological narratives) to a state of madness or non-knowledge (the *aventure* tells you that you have failed at something even as you succeeded). In the case of *Yvain*, and in Stahuljak's words, 'he will only be what he has always been'; and that, I would argue, is the essence of a contrary, anti-deterministic psychoanalytic queer theory,

<sup>33</sup> On this point, see Sylvia Huot, *Madness in Medieval French Literature*.

<sup>34</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'The Superego and the Act', paper delivered at the European Graduate School ([www.egs.edu/faculty/zizek/zizek-superego-and-the-act-1999.html](http://www.egs.edu/faculty/zizek/zizek-superego-and-the-act-1999.html)).

which argues that identity is only perceptible once the gap has been embraced.

This linking of event and cognition through an absent space (or period of madness) which calls out for explanation before the subject can reach a state of understanding raises the question of topography, of configurations of time and space. Which pole comes first, event or cognition? Does either exist only in relation to the other? Do they mean anything at all once apart? To close, I want to return to Eribon's suggestion that linear and teleological understandings of queer history be abandoned henceforth in favour of the Foucauldian notion of the episteme — not historical periods that flow into one another, as in a positivist narrative, but groupings of years separated from other such groupings by cataclysmic epistemological breaks, affecting both the ways we see things and the paradigms we use to interpret them.<sup>35</sup> The particular social formations of medieval society, in which marriage arrangements meant different things to different genders and classes of people, and all were sexual sinners, has to be conceptualized differently from the modern era, but certainly not in any way as inferior in development or deficient in relation to abstract notions of freedom of thought and expression. The exclusions on which Foucault founded much of his thinking, the marshalling of populations according to principles of reason, simply do not operate in the same ways in the Middle Ages.<sup>36</sup> Apropos, Eribon cites Roland Barthes's musing on the continual and invisible exclusions that the homosexual suffers, in response to which he imagines 'une utopie (à la Fourier): celle d'un monde où il n'y aurait plus que des différences, en sorte que se différencier ne serait plus s'exclure'.<sup>37</sup> When differences are meted out according to class and learning, social status is malleable, urban society is developing, money economies are novel, and same-sex communities offer advantages beyond the obvious, the queer is much more and much less than a question of sexual preference. Queer theory offers the medieval reader the chance to perform corrective and ethical readings, founded on justice, reaching out to the past, incorporating it into the present, and most importantly, offering it as a gift to the future.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Sur cet instant fragile*, p. 127

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Eribon's suggestion that Foucault's *Histoire de la folie* might actually be read as an 'histoire de l'homosexualité qui n'aurait pas osé dire son nom' (*Sur cet instant fragile*, p. 177).

<sup>37</sup> Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes, in *Œuvres complètes*, IV, 1972–1976 (Paris, Seuil, 2002), cited in *Sur cet instant fragile*, p. 86.

<sup>38</sup> I am paraphrasing here Eribon's one-word definition of 'queer' as 'generosity' (*Sur cet instant fragile*, p. 158).