5: Sacrificial Enjoyment

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Volume 80 of The Minnesota Review (2013) contains an essay cluster proclaiming “The Medieval Turn in Theory.” In the introduction thereto, Andrew Cole observes that a great deal of recent scholarship is devoted to demonstrating “how medieval our modern theory really is.” As Cole points out, the contributors to the volume—Kathleen Biddick, Amy Hollywood, Bruce Hol-singer, Maura Nolan and D. Vance Smith—have taught us a great deal about postmodern theory’s premodern roots. Most recently, Cole and Smith coedited The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages: On the Unwritten History of Theory, a collection of
essays that explores the manner in which modern continental philosophy (i.e. theory)—including the work of G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger and Theodore Adorno—is shot through with medieval and medievalist discourses. The volume’s title—“The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages”—constitutes a challenge to Hans Blumenberg’s The Legitimacy of the Modern Age (1966), which indulges in a criminal other-ing of the medieval era as a socio-historical cesspool out of which modernity triumphantly arose. The subtitle of Cole and Smith’s collection—“On the Unwritten History of Theory”—dramatically suggests that, to a large extent, the annals of intellectual history utterly fail to acknowledge modern theory’s debt to medieval discourses. As Cole acknowledges in his introduction to “The Medieval Turn in Theory,” however, scholars have been engaged in this important work for some time. To give just one example, Bruce Holsinger’s The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory (2005)—the title of which, of course, riffs on Jean-Fracois Lyotard’s The Postmodern Condition (1979)—came out in 2005. I remember buying my copy at Borders, when that was still a thing.

The question, therefore, is not “why does the history of theory remain unwritten?” but, “why do we insist upon writing it and rewriting it?” The answer, as any one of L.O. Aranye Fradenburg’s students will readily tell you, is enjoyment. If the title The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages works on
an allusive level, it also works on a purely literal level, insisting that the Middle Ages are legitimate (i.e., worthy of our attention). As medievalists, we enjoy pointing out the legitimacy of the Middle Ages to our friends, loved ones and, above all, modernist colleagues (whether they enjoy hearing about it is an entirely different question). We enjoy this practice for the altogether obvious reason that it legitimates our somewhat esoteric life choices (or so we hope) in the eyes of the others for whose approval we desperately yearn. To be sure, we enjoy stressing the medieval era’s legitimacy because we actually believe that it is important for theorists to recognize the historicity of the ideology to which they cannot help but subscribe. How enjoyable could our chosen subject of study be, after all, if we felt it didn’t urgently require our intellectual labor? Of course, if we’re being honest with ourselves, we enjoy asserting theory’s debt to premodernity because medieval studies involves a lot of beautiful and unusual words, as does theory, and we seem really smart when we’re able to point out how much these two seemingly distinct lexicons actually have to do with each other. It’s a good thing that we enjoy it too, because, as Fradenburg points out, “we could not, even if we wanted to, stop creating, or more properly recreating, new prostheses of memory.”¹ For Fra-

denburg, a plethora of modern subjects—hermeneutic theorists, to be sure, but also practitioners of games like Dungeons and Dragons and the makers of popular movies such as *Babe*—engage daily in an incessant process of becoming-medieval that amounts to a sustained enjoyment of the past. Even when we criticize the past for producing the foundations of cultural biases that still plague us today, we enjoy doing so.

Many might recall the *Exemplaria* panel at the 2011 International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan on “Surface versus Symptomatic Readings,” or the subsequent symposium at the University of Texas at Austin in February 2012 on that topic, “Surface, Symptom, and the State of Critique.” Although the original panel’s participants—Ruth Evans, Mark Miller and Bruce Holsinger—were varied in their enthusiasm (or lack thereof) for new, ostensibly less-skeptical modes of surface reading, for the most part they agreed that “the hermeneutics of suspicion” (by which Paul Ricoeur originally meant the skeptical mode of ideology-critique pioneered by Nietzsche, Marx and Freud) still has a vital role to play in medieval studies. Of course, part of the reason that we breathed a collective sigh of relief upon learning that we are still allowed to be suspicious is that we enjoy suspicion, whether we call it discourse analysis, ideology critique, or deconstruction. Despite our best intentions, however, we enjoy totalizing too. Fradenburg puts this
point best when she states: “containment is a mode of enjoyment.”  

Early in her book Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer (2002), she adeptly asserts that the theory of “subversion and containment” has become “something of an analytical cul-de-sac for Foucauldian new historicism.”  

By pointing out that “containment” is a mode of enjoyment, Fradenburg disturbs the implicit morality under-girding the New Historicism, which almost always casts subversive ideology as radical (i.e., good) and containing ideology as hegemonic (i.e., bad). Fradenburg neither cleanses containment of its oppressive history by associating it with enjoyment, nor does she make enjoyment the utopic experience that subversion can never quite bring about. “Enjoyment,” she writes, “is what it is, and it can entail suffering for the other.”  

If Fradenburg acknowledges that we can potentially enjoy the other’s suffering, however, she holds that we more frequently enjoy our own suffering for the other, which we perform through the art of sacrifice. For Fradenburg, both Chaucer’s culture and our own maintains a hyper-economy of sacrifice, which is fueled by the Western subject’s propensity to enjoy ceding time, energy, life and love to a higher order—the big Other. She neither disputes nor disregards a Nietzschean historiography that sees Christian

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2 Fradenburg, Sacrifice Your Love, 76.
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ideology as effecting “a transvaluation of all values.” She does not deny the need to unmask perfidious ideology. Instead, she argues that when we do so we’re sure to find a kernel of enjoyment. Should we be suspicious of sacrificial enjoyment? Of course; but we should always keep in mind that the same enjoyment that fuels the hyper-economy of sacrifice also fuels the hermeneutics of suspicion. Fradenburg’s work, therefore, does not invalidate ideology critique; but it also doesn’t allow us to consider the historical subjects who we study as mere dupes of ideology. She reminds us that they enjoyed asserting the legitimacy of their sacrifices, just as we enjoy asserting the legitimacy of ours. While the medieval turn in theory is worth celebrating, therefore, it is not enough. Until we “own our stake in enjoyment,” as Fradenburg urges us to do, we can never adequately celebrate how truly medieval our modern theory really is.

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In the preceding remarks, I contextualize Aranye’s theoretical interventions alongside the work of contemporary critics who underestimate the extent to which enjoyment facilitates our writing of history and theory, in and out of the academy. Since writing this, I have been given occasion to reflect more deeply upon Aranye’s intervention into my own life, as did so many of the wonderful papers performances at the BABEL Working Group’s roundtable session on “Thriving” at the
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2013 International Congress on Medieval Studies (Kalamazoo, Michigan) that gave rise to this volume. I’ve recently come to recognize how desperately I initially needed to benefit from Aranye’s thought. Her philosophy of enjoyment has taught me to complicate my natural cynicism without succumbing to an equally reductive optimism . . . or at least to try to adopt a less bipolar worldview. For that I am forever grateful.