Burn after Reading: Vol. 1, Miniature Manifestos for a Post/medieval Studies + Vol. 2, The Future We Want: A Collaboration

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If I’m going into the future, I want the things I’ve read to come along. Not that I have much choice; they’ll stick with me, anyway. Many of them have doubtless stuck with you, too. They may have stuck us together, you and I. And they’re always nudging us for further introductions—to students, colleagues, friends, readers, lovers, anyone, really, who will invite them to parties and workshops and conversations of all kinds. We shouldn’t begrudge this promiscuous behavior, since time spent with others does not require that they spend less with us. That’s one of their special charms, this temporal non-economy, this unhinging of time from trade.

Let’s begin with a favorite, shall we? We may as well, because it’s here with us, anyway. You know the story
about the couple that gets stuck together? I’m sure you do. Let me (re)introduce you to my version:

Richere, a merchant (yes, I know, a merchant whose name is basically “rich guy,” not exactly subtle, but stick with me) … anyway, Richere, who is in some kind of legal or business trouble, receives shelter at a monastery where the abbot gives him a room not too far from the community’s church. Stuck there with the monks, Richere sends for his wife. When she arrives, she and he have sex. We would think this would be fine, they being married and the sex being uninteresting enough to avoid any pointed description, but God is touchier about these things than we are. Richere and wife were “too nigh” the church for God’s liking—not in the church, not on the altar or anything wild like that, just close enough. Close enough that God is mighty displeased, and the Mr. and Mrs. find themselves stuck together. Stuck together like “dog and bitch,” moreover (which, so I’m told, is a pretty unpleasant thing). They yell for help. The brothers come running (and probably snickering, we would imagine). After getting the Richeres to promise to provide the monastery with support in years to come, the brothers pray for them, and they are released. Everyone is so impressed by this miracle that the abbot has it written down so that it will stick around forever.

The story is filled with macabre humor, but the tale’s staying power is no joke. Circulated in various forms and contexts from late antiquity onward, the narrative has the adhesive quality of an urban legend.¹ The version above, which is the one that lives with me, the one I can recall with no need to reference a printed edition, is based on Robert Mannyng’s 1303 confessor’s manual, Handlyng

My first encounter with Mannyng was in an anthology of medieval literature, in which the Richere story, together with that other story about sticking, “The Dancers of Colbek” (you doubtless know this one too), was offered as a representative exemplum. I’m guessing that this was also your experience, since these two tales—the sticky ones—are mostly what we stick to when we read or talk about *Handlyng Synne*.

Why do we stick to them? Current scholarship is not very well poised to answer this question. That we do stick to them is even something of an embarrassment. By doing so, we slyly refuse to give the larger textual context its expected dues, limiting how we can use the stories to talk about historical subjects like the institution of confession, Mannyng’s relation to his source texts, the intended audience for the work, and so forth. Such willful selection of the juicy bits of Mannyng’s manual is, by our own current standards, unwise, yet we stick to it anyway. Still, we can feel the weight of the profession bear down on us when we read the requisite rationales for writing, yet again, about the only parts that anyone ever writes about: “Although much discussed already, the Richere story is particularly useful for examining …”; “The Dancers of Colbek exemplum is worth revisiting for …” I myself was going to offer one such justification, claiming the tale’s utility for a timely manifesto. But this is a time to manifest, to play, festively, with the hands we are dealt. So—fuck it—fuck me—I’m (re)telling you the story because it sticks with us.

We can imagine why medieval religious like the monks portrayed in the tale would stick to the Richere story, since it would be useful for highlighting their authority vis-à-vis the laity. We can imagine why Mannyng

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3 Since I hear these as imperatives of our profession, these are paraphrases, not quotes from particular analyses.
would stick it in his manual; its usefulness takes a nifty twist when Mannyng turns the tables on the would-be-confessor reader by asserting that he shouldn’t feel so superior to the Richeres since the clerical habit of fucking other men’s wives is so much worse (who’s snickering now, priest-man?). We can imagine ourselves making use of these exemplum—to talk about power, authority, history, form, and language. Can we imagine ourselves stuck? We are not supposed to like sticking. Nor are we expected to like stories about sticking. The critical consensus on *Handlyng Synne* is that it is a terrorizing, or at least sham- ing, work, one that returns us to our fallen state, refusing to offer a durable “cure” for our transgressions. These interpretations require that we be horrified at the imagination of being glued together like dog and bitch (for we’ve all heard that is a pretty unpleasant thing). If we take any pleasure in imagining ourselves fixed like the Richeres, the butt of this joke, we’re fucked. We are used, not using for acceptable purposes.4

Psychoanalytic theory of course offers an explanation of a (fucked-up) desire to stick to things like this. In his essay on “The Uncanny,” Freud proposes that we seize upon unwanted repetition (i.e., experiences of finding oneself back in the same place or situation) because these occasions can respond to a repetition-compulsion that lies deep at the core of our instincts. He hypothesizes that we

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4 In addition to Elliot, see: Mark Miller, “Displaced Souls, Idle Talk, Spectacular Scenes: *Handlyng Synne* and the Perspective of Agency” *Speculum* 71.3 (1996): 606–632; Andrew J. Power, “Telling Tales in Robert Mannyng de Brun’s *Handlyng synne*,” in *The Ghost Story from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*, eds. Helen Conrad O’Briain and Julie Anne Stevens (Dublin: Four Courts, 2010), 34–46; and Robert J. Hasenfratz, “Terror and Pastoral Care in *Handlyng Synne*,” in *Texts and Traditions of Medieval Pastoral Care*, eds. Catherine Gunn and Catherine Innes-Parker (York, UK: York Medieval Press, 2009), 132–148, for discussion of *Handlyng Synne*’s use of shame and horror. I am not arguing here that a view of *Handlyng Synne* as terrorizing is unwarranted. Mannyng himself states his intent to scare his audience with the Dancers of Colbek story (ll. 9254–9255).
desire a return to undifferentiated, intra-uterine experience, but that each time we reimagine this experience, the specter of separation/castration chases us away. Thus, we get stuck in a circle of pleasure and horror. As analysts, we may not want, now, to stick to Oedipus anymore. But Freud’s discussion of the uncanny does fit Mannyng’s exempla like a glove fits a hand—or like a bitch fits a dog. It fits so well it is itself uncanny. Filled with independently acting body parts, doubling and repetition, and genitals that may never come back, “Richere” and “Colbek” seem the exact prequel to the examples of the uncanny Freud cites. The father of psychoanalysis even offers a Mannyng-like exemplum of his own, in which he details his rising dread at finding himself repeatedly returning to a bad part of town despite his efforts to leave.

We might also stick with “The Uncanny” because it concerns literary aesthetics and why we like to read stories about being stuck (and isn’t it the critic’s job to ask why?). Yet, fittingly for a discussion of what it feels like to get nowhere, Freud offers no explanation that lets us be done with the question and move on. Instead, he ends his essay by summoning literature’s affective power, putting himself back into the experience of reading:

... the story-teller has a peculiarly directive influence over us; by means of the states of mind into which he can put us and the expectations he can rouse in us, he is able to guide the current of our emotions, dam it up in one direction and make it flow in another, and he often obtains a great variety of effects from the same material. All this is nothing new, and has doubtless long since been fully taken into account by professors of aesthetics. We have drifted into this field of research half

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involuntarily, through the temptation to explain certain instances which contradicted our theory ...

“All this is nothing new”—this is not analysis but affirmation. Overcome with feeling, Freud lets go of argument and its imperative to make progress. He lets himself drift, half involuntarily, back to his own pleasure, which is our pleasure too, the pleasure of being stuck with a story about being stuck. He lets someone else take charge of his currents and flows. He’s fucked.

If we’re fucked, we can be fucked together through the things that we read. This is not as bad as it may sound to you. It’s certainly better than the alternative of sticking to stories so we can feel ourselves superior to the characters, the author, the book, the culture, or the period. That is an act of separation we can do without. Those of us stuck to the Middle Ages get quite enough of the smug-ness that comes with narratives of cultural progress already. Rather, let us feel ourselves sticking to the Richeres and to the dancers, to Mannynng and even to Freud as he circles in confusion back to the bad part of town.

Having been there before us, and before the father of psychoanalysis too, Handlyng Synne offers us a feel for the pleasures of sticking. In his prologue, Mannynng asks that his readers handle his book often, noting that it need not be read in order, for wherever the reader opens it, or however the pages are turned, we will find ourselves at the beginning. His desire for a repetitive handling of his book, with its promise of lasting accommodation (it can begin wherever you want, whenever you want, and it is always beginning), offers the unceasing caress as readerly delight. This is a sticking of body to text that does not need to move on to avoid boredom or panic. And, yes, the sticking returns us to sin, but Mannynng is well aware that sin is fun; that reading about sin is fun; and that reading about sin is to imaginatively participate in sin, which is

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8 *Handlyng Synne*, ll. 82–146.
both fun and sinful. By handling sin, we are going nowhere, but these are pleasures that won’t be depleted if we linger.

If we stick to the very moment(s) of sticking in the Richere story, we can imagine a non-teleological pleasure. Pleasure out of sequential time is either paradisal or perverse (or perhaps both). The stuck fuck, though it does end in one way, conjures the possibility of a deeply queer being in time: why should we end a good thing? What if the Richeres didn’t yell for the (possibly snickering) monks? What if we choose to ignore the sense that it is time to get back to work or business or the proper life of the laity; time to back off for the sake of production and reproduction? Then we have pleasure that eschews release. We may also have an ethics of sticking together.

Our profession, with its sharply defined levels of achievement, has its own horror stories about getting stuck. We talk about the obsessive who can’t seem to write about more than one text, the endless reviser, the doctoral student who will never finish the dissertation, the Assistant Professor with the 4/4 teaching load who will never be able to “write her way out,” and the defeated Associate who has given up on making it to Full. We hope we don’t stall out like these pitiable figures. As a teacher of graduate students, I occasionally encounter the rare person who is taking classes for personal satisfaction and not to move into a career in academia. We might celebrate such passion, but instead we (other students, colleagues, and myself) are often profoundly disturbed by the presence of people spending so much time and money for “nothing.” We could stand to remove some of these fears—fears that divide us from each other—by reconceiving what it is to be stuck.

The stories that stick with us are standing by, ready to help in this endeavor, and not just by leading us to new ideas about how we spend time or progress. Reading is affective practice. When we read or recall what we read, we practice the feeling of return, repetition, and enmeshment. We practice being together with something or someone. Chaucer, having been there before us, writes
about this all the time. His narrators’ bedtime reading sticks with them and lets them stick by or to others. His poems stick disparate tales and tellers together for the pleasure of seeing what will happen. His more memorable pilgrims play with the possibility of endless prologue, of never getting to it or letting go.

I want a future in which we are not afraid to stick our favorite stories in places where they don’t yet belong. A number of things can happen when they meet other texts; explanation of one by the other is only one of these things. Let’s aim for perverse pairings, so that we can feel what happens when they/we come together. Let’s feel our way around this “we,” this pronoun that is already like a party where the lights have gone out. Let’s find out if we can forge new pleasures by feeling ourselves stuck.

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