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Sodomy, Allegory, and the Subject of Pleasure

This study looks at the opposition set up in medieval exegetical discourse between allegorical and euphemistic expression, an opposition that comes to name the difference between “proper” and “sodomitic” modes of reading. The allegorical and the euphemistic were understood to be irreconcilable positions in relation to textual meaning. When made to speak to one another in Jean de Meun’s section of *Roman de la Rose*, they can only speak past one another. I claim that this incommensurability has its origin in the reading subject’s position vis-à-vis the “body” posited as a figure for textual truth.

[*Lady Nature, speaking to the Narrator*]
While in a construction of this kind he [perverse mankind] causes my destruction, in his combination he devises a division [Lat. *thesesim*, or *tnesis*] in me.

— Alain de Lille, *The Plaint of Nature*

La tnèse, source ou figure du plaisir [...]

— Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*

Tnesis, origin or figure of pleasure; tnesis, tear in the fabric of nature.

Roland Barthes's discourse of celebration and the medieval discourse of anxiety regarding textual pleasure, although they arrive from opposite points of departure, avail themselves of a very similar set of tropes. In effect, the reading pleasure Barthes details in *Le Plaisir du texte* looks much like the mode of reading that provoked so much anxiety in medieval exegetical discourse that it was likened to sodomy. Most important among these tropes of pleasure is the metaphor of the text as a clothed body. The metaphor suggests that various modes of reading can be distinguished from one another by their respective ways of situating the "body" veiled behind the clothing of language. For medieval exegetical discourse, in particular, the clothing metaphor describes two opposed modes of reading, divided between what Barthes might call an oedipal and a perverse mode or between what medieval exegetes might call an allegorical and euphemistic mode. These modes of reading are not only opposed but are presented as fully incommensurable with one another. It is an opposition that leads to aporia. This study proposes to examine the incommensurability of these two modes of reading as set forth in both Jean de Meun's section of *Romance of the Rose* and Alan of Lille's *Plaint of Nature*.

The comparison of corporeal and textual sodomy, of body and text, is at the heart of both Barthesian and medieval discourse on the literary. Sodomy names a pleasure without aim, a pleasure that exceeds and cannot be reduced to the teleology of reproduction. To that extent the comparison of the body of the sodomite to the "body" of the text of pleasure comes easily. Medieval models of reading required textual meaning to submit to the teleology of allegorical truth-revelation. Both the literal and figurative dimensions of the text were required to function as means to an end, leading the reader ultimately to apprehension of divine truth. But if either the literal or the figurative were to become ends in themselves, or in other words, if the pleasure of poetic language were to become the sole purpose of reading, the text would become sodomitic. The necessary pleasure of reading that *should* propel the reader towards divine truth might always also mire the reader in the pleasure of reading for its own sake. This anxiety of reading and the anxiety of sodomy were so structurally similar — pleasure is necessary to this structure of meaning but also

exceeds it, becoming ultimately unthinkable within it — that they became confused with one another and were often used to designate one another. This confusion explains the referential ambiguity at the heart of *The Plaint of Nature*, which has been hailed both as an invective against corporeal sodomy and as an invective against textual sodomy. But as Alan of Lille would have it, the target of Nature's complaint, whether corporeal or textual, is ultimately undecidable; each can stand in so perfectly for the other. This interchangeability of corporeal sodomy and textual sodomy in medieval exegetical discourse, I would suggest, allows us to reflect on the erotic materiality of reading.

In the section of *Le Plaisir du texte* entitled "bords," Barthes describes two more or less opposed positions vis-à-vis the body, which represent for him two distinct modalities of reading, two orders of pleasure. The first order of pleasure he describes is simultaneous and part of language itself. Barthes names it *intermittence*:

L'endroit le plus érotique du corps n'est-il pas là où le vêtement bâille? Dans la perversion (qui est le régime du plaisir textuel) il n'y a pas de "zones érogènes" (expression au reste assez casse-pieds); c'est l'intermittence, comme l'a bien dit la psychanalyse, qui est érotique: celle de la peau qui scintille entre deux pièces (le pantalon et le tricot), entre deux bords (la chemise entrouverte, le gant et la manche); c'est ce scintillement même qui séduit, ou encore: la mise en scène d'une apparition-disparition (19).

The second order of pleasure Barthes describes is mediated and sequential. He names it *strip-tease* as he outlines the opposition between these two modes of reading:

Ce n'est pas là le plaisir du strip-tease corporel ou du suspense narratif. Dans l'un et l'autre cas, pas de déchirure, pas de bords: un dévoilement progressif: toute l'excitation se réfugie dans l'espoir de voir le sexe (rêve de collégien) ou de connaître la fin de l'histoire (satisfaction romanesque). Paradoxalement (puisqu'il est de consommation massive), c'est un plaisir bien plus intellectuel que l'autre: plaisir oedipéen (dénuder, savoir, connaître l'origine et la fin), s'il est vrai que tout récit (tout dévoilement de la vérité) est une mise en scène du Père (absent, caché ou hypostasié) (20).

Interruption is thus simultaneous, immediate, and perverse, while strip-tease is sequential, mediated, and intellectual (that is, oedipal).

Intermittence names the gap between writing and its referent, between the material and the ideal, always there, "là où le vêtement bâille" in any kind of writing. It is not a revelation because it is immediate, always part of language itself. The particular pleasure one encounters in this gap Barthes describes as perversion. The perverse reader fixates on the skin that shines out of the gap between two edges and does not care to know the truth ("connaître l'origine et la fin"). Strip-tease, by contrast, names the desire to know; the oedipal reader is (s)he who must peel away progressive layers of figuration — in proper sequential order — while dreaming of naked truth. Dreaming of it, but also delaying its final revelation in endless layers of unveiling.

The first order of pleasure is built on the body of the mother — impossible to sublimate — while the second is built on the — necessarily sublimated — body of the father. The gap itself is erotic and glimmers, in the first case, while the hope for a naked body to be revealed (coupled with a fear of this same body) becomes erotic in the other. In neither case is a body revealed. Both strip-tease and intermittence, that is, both the oedipal and perverse positions vis-à-vis this "body" are incommensurable with one another. This incommensurability, I will suggest, originates from their means of "coping" respectively with the fact that no body is revealed, that there is no naked truth, so to speak. Strip-tease is predicated on a necessary but illusory hope, while intermittence depends on a kind of disavowal. The opposition (op - position) of these two "means of coping" suggests a certain positionality of the subject of pleasure. To the extent that Barthes uses voyeuristic metaphors to situate the reader in relationship to the text (as a "mise en scène"), both of these orders of pleasure are construed as positions and as such reference a question of subjectivity. That is, intermittence and strip-tease could be understood to reference two subject positions, two subject positions which Barthes seems to understand as being incommensurable. The positionality of the subject of pleasure becomes quite important in *Romance of the Rose*, where the oedipal and perverse subjects of pleasure are made to confront one another in a staged debate.

In *Romance of the Rose* this incommensurability is represented in the form of a scholarly debate wherein two arguments are upheld as irreconcilable with one another. The opposition Barthes stages between oedipal and perverse modes of reading finds a parallel in Jean de

Meun's opposition of scholarly and courtly discourse, which speak more *past* one another than to one another.

The aporetic quality of this confrontation is epitomized in the debate that takes place between Lady Reason and the Courtly Lover. Their famous debate turns around the castrated testicles of Saturn, used as an allegorical referent. Reason upholds proper literal reference to these testicles because proper literal reference is necessary to the grounding of allegorical meaning. The Lover, in contrast, upholds the use of euphemistic expressions which prevent these testicles from being designated literally because the codes of courtly love require lovers to engage in "courtoise parole." The linguistic debate is critical because their failure to agree ultimately causes the Lover to part ways with Reason. Their positions are irreconcilable. The two can only speak past one another.

The debate reads as follows. While telling the story of Saturn's castration and the birth of Venus, Reason uses the word *coilles* to refer to Saturn's testicles. The Lover protests, claiming she had violated the codes of courtly love in using such a base word:

Vous, qui tant estes sage et bele,
Ne sai com nommer les osastes,
Au mains quant le mot ne glosastes
Par quelque cortoise parole
Si com preudefame en parole.

I do not know how you dared name them, you who are so wise and fair,
without at least glossing the word with some courteous utterance [quelque cortoise parole], as a virtuous woman would when speaking of them.
(lines 6924-32)

Reason retorts: she should lose no respect in naming a beautiful thing by its proper name. As long as the referent is itself a "noble chose" then it should be referenced openly, using its proper name. Testicles qualify as a "noble chose" because God endowed them with the power of generation. As such, they are to be revered; they are in essence a lesser emanation of divine creation: "Mist dieus en coilles et en viz / Force de generacion [...]" (lines 6959-63). Her veneration of the sacredness and nobility of the "force de generacion" harks back to an

earlier discussion in which Reason warns the Lover of the danger of venal love, which like sodomy, takes pleasure as an end in itself.

In this earlier discussion Reason maintains that not a single person is exempt from love — “touz le mondes va cele voie” — but any person who experiences love will be tempted to deviate from the path of “proper” or “reasonable” love. The God of Love is responsible for all such deviations, Reason explains, *with the notable exception of the sodomites*, who apparently were never on the right path to begin with:

C'est li dieus qui touz les desvoie,
Se ne sont cil de male voie
Que genius escommenie,
Pour ce qu'il font tort a nature.

For he is the god that leads everyone astray except those excommunicated by Genius because their evil ways are an offence against Nature.
(lines 4339-42)

According to her metaphor, love is a path and sodomy and “improper” love are deviations (“desvoie” or “de male voie”) from that path. The notion of a straight line or path refers to the linear succession of generations and to the notion of “proper” love as one that keeps the lines of genealogical succession “straight,” without interruption or deviation. The association of courtly love with sodomy would suggest that courtly love, like sodomy, is deviant because it takes pleasure as an end in itself, ignoring the teleology of sexual pleasure and thus interrupting the straight path of genealogical succession.

Thus when Reason insists on the literal meaning of testicles as being “force de generacion,” it becomes clear that she is in fact rather preoccupied with sodomy. Her argument suggests that in his horror at the word *coilles* the Lover is implicitly guilty of sodomy. If the literal meaning of the word *coilles*, as Reason claims, is “force de generacion,” the Lover’s disgust with the word’s literal meaning is tantamount to disgust with reproductive sexuality, which aligns him with the sodomites.

Reason also considers the euphemistic codes of courtly love to be a perverse *linguistic* practice that deviates from the proper path of allegorical signification. Throughout the debate she is especially insistent on the importance of transparent literal signification. Literal

meaning must first be transparent so that it can later be elevated to a spiritual/figurative meaning. One must, for instance, understand the literal meaning of the word *coilles* before one can use this word with allegorical intent, as she claims to have done in her rendition of Saturn’s castration. The courtly Lover is a bad reader of her allegory because he short-circuits this progression from the literal to the figurative. He does not gain access to the figural meaning of Reason’s discourse because he will not allow the word *coilles* to signify literally. While Reason argues that things can and must be named in order to become readable figures in the service of truth, the courtly Lover argues that bodily things, and especially sexual referents, should never be properly named — they should never be referenced literally. Rather, the *coilles* should be covered with figures, draped in euphemistic metaphors.

Reason argues that the Courtly Lover’s resistance to the literal meaning of the word *coilles* prevents the word from becoming an allegorical signifier. The horror that the Courtly Lover demonstrates when the sexual body is named literally would indicate a resistance to the process of figuration that Reason upholds. By refusing literal designation of the body, the Courtly Lover refuses to allow the body to be figured, thus jamming the sequence whereby it is elevated to the spiritual. His horror at any proper literal designation of the body, which leads him to cover the body in veils of euphemistic words, is a way to hold onto the body. Euphemism prevents its very corporeality to be first signified and then figured or spiritualized — that is, decorporalized. In contrast to what we might expect, the Lover’s horror at literal designation of the body does not indicate that the Lover is horrified by the body itself, but rather that he refuses to move beyond the body to the spiritual. By refusing to name the body, by covering this body with euphemisms, courtly discourse would in fact protect the body from being made to signify in the service of a higher truth. So when Reason opposes the meaning she intends for *coilles* (“en ma parole autre sen ot”) to what she deems the Lover’s intended, or as she puts it *desired*, meaning (“celui que tu i veuls metre”), she is speaking in fact of his desire for the body to remain corporeal — resistant and unmeaning. The body veiled by euphemistic discourse resists appropriation into the symbolic and is to that extent a perverse object.

But while Reason is articulate and faultless in her appraisal of the Lover's perversion, there is reason to be suspicious of Reason's own linguistic practices. According to her, *coilles* does not just name male genitalia. The word refers to male genitalia which are construed as "beautiful" and "noble," because God endowed them with the power of generation. As such they are to be revered because they are like a lesser emanation of divine creation. As much as Reason insists that *coilles* must have a literal meaning, she does not allow the supposedly literal meaning of *coilles* here to signify the bodily referent (i.e. the fleshy sac attached to a male body). Rather, the supposedly literal meaning she constructs is in fact already an ennobling figure: Reason indeed elevates the testicles by claiming that they are the embodiment of a divine-like "force de generation." She first restricts the literal meaning of testicles to one meaning — testicles as an organ of procreation, an instrument for the perpetuation of the species and not an organ of pleasure to be used by an individual — and then claims that this procreative power of testicles is supposed to be *like* the divine power to create. This makes it a figure, a simile. Since procreation is like divine creation it can be ennobled as such, predicated on a likeness. But this happens at the moment she is most forcefully arguing for the importance of literal signification. The literal meaning she puts forward is already a figure. In making the supposedly "literal" testicles signify the divine-like power of generation, Reason not only elevates and spiritualizes them, she also in a way severs them from the body. The *coilles* which supposedly signify the generative power of sex are meant to function as an allegorical signifier in a myth that stages their castration. There is an apparent contradiction between the literal meaning of the *coilles* (force de generacion) and their allegorical presentation (cut-off and thus no longer generative in the literal sense of the word). Reason must disavow this contradiction in order for her argument to effectively shut down the Lover's argument.

The accusation Reason levies against the Lover for engaging in "linguistic sodomy" aligns two modes of linguistic designation — the allegorical and the euphemistic — with two modes of sexual desire — the straight and the deviant. They are presented as two incommensurable positions. What then is the difference between the situation of the

sexual referent in Reason's discourse and the position of the sexual referent in courtly (euphemistic) discourse? How do their positions differ in regards to the relation between the body and literal meaning? It bears reminding: *the bodily referent in question is the castrated testicles of Saturn*, the very testicles which produce desire embodied in the figure of Venus; Venus, who is the personification of courtly love in the *Romance of the Rose*. In other words, it is the relationship between Venus and the body of Saturn, between desire and the castration of the primal father, that is at stake here.

In the myth of Saturn's castration Venus, or desire, is produced from the foam, or excess, released in the act of cutting the father's testicles from his body. The testicles must be cut from the primal father's body in order for desire to be born. Desire is necessary to the process of generation. This cut of the testicles from the father's body is thus necessary, it seems, to the maintenance of genealogical continuity. Jupiter, the son, must take them away from his father in order to desire and ultimately procreate. But this desire is not to be confused with the animal urge to procreate. She is born out of an excess marked as the product of linguistic operations. That is to say, she is born out of the cut which language operates in appropriating body parts as linguistic signs, in making a *penis* into a *phallus*. A cut which is allegorized here in this account of Saturn's castration. For this reason Venus is also associated with the denatured quality of human desire, its resistance to strictly generational accounts of human desire, and its tendency to stray from the path of its supposed aim.

To that extent, Venus's birth allegorically accounts for what Reason considers to be the disorderly nature of courtly love. The euphemistic Lover, as a personification of courtly love, is a follower of Venus. Reading Saturn's castration as an allegory of the cut whereby language appropriates the body into meaning, the birth of Venus out of this cut suggests that we read desire as born from — and straddling — the gap between language and the body. The advent of desire is only possible in the gap between body and language and can only arise in the severing of the primordial body from the body's (already fantasmatic) image produced by its appropriation into a system of meaning. As the allegory of the birth of Venus suggests, this gap is a source of pleasure. To focus on it as the Lover does tacitly acknowledges the gap, even if it is only "felt" in vaguely erotic intuitions. It is

the origin of desire and the reason why desire cannot, by definition, be satisfied.

The euphemistic Lover's rapport with the body focuses his attention on the gap between the pre-discursive body and the body inscribed in language, while Reason posits an *already figural* body (symbolic of the "force de generation") as the ground for allegorical signification in such a way as to elide the gap on which the Lover is focused. She operates as though the linguistically inscribed body were the only body, disavowing the non-coincidence of body and language, denying the silent and resistant materiality of the body. In her account this "real" body can be accessed, but only via endless unveilings; it exists, but only as an endless regression, striptease.

All of these terms come together in a most compact and puzzling manner in Alan of Lille's theological allegory *Plaint of Nature*. Alan's allegory gives voice to the allegorical figure of Lady Nature as a way to reflect upon the relationship between nature and language, and between the body and language. Lady Nature is described as a sexual body: she is, like Barthes's stripper, an allegory representing the object of reading — interpretation that is necessarily fueled by desire for knowledge of the nature of things. The reader is presented with two different desirous positions vis-à-vis the body of Nature. On the one hand her dress is described layer by layer, down to her underwear, in a sequential striptease of sorts that keeps promising to reveal more. On the other hand she is described as already violated. Her dress is torn in one spot. And this tear, we are led to believe, is caused by mankind's sexual perversions. Thus Nature's body shows itself to the reader in two ways. The first mode of showing is sequential, associated with the narrator's desire to know the true nature of things, a gradual unveiling. This is the pleasure that Barthes calls properly intellectual or oedipal. It has a distinct schoolboy sex-fantasy ("rêve de collégien") quality to it. The narrator has to imagine how the gentle curve of her flanks looks beneath her robe and continues to imagine her more private parts.

As for the other things which an inner chamber hid from view, let a confident belief declare that they were more beautiful. For in her body lay hidden a more blissful aspect to which her face showed the introduction. However,

as her countenance revealed, the key of Dione's daughter had not opened the lock of her chastity (75).

The narrator's reverie on Nature's genitalia corresponds uncannily to what Barthes describes as the "espoir de voir le sexe." The sight of her face promises something more, a "blissful aspect" hidden in her body. In other words he dreams of seeing her genitalia while at the same time acknowledging that they must remain hidden. And like Barthes in his description of reading as a striptease, Alan of Lille intends Nature's striptease to describe the pleasures of reading. The pleasure comes from imagining the "more blissful aspect" whose existence is pointed to by the sight of the face. Nature's figured virginity creates a temporal narrative difference between the nature we can see and the nature hidden away by the lock of chastity, between nature clothed and nature unclothed, between a nature mediated through figures and a literal (i.e. naked) nature. Although it promises, or points to, the revelation of a final naked truth, this mode of unveiling can never fully unveil the true "nature" of Lady Nature because nature is always already mediated by language. This "always already" mediatedness is the full meaning of her figured virginity. Nature describes it herself:

In all these things [seasons/aging] the effects of my power shine forth to an extent greater than words can express. However, for many I have decided to cloak my face in figures in order to protect my secret from being cheapened, lest, if I should grant them an intimate knowledge of myself, what at first had been held in honour by them because they lacked knowledge of it, should when known be regarded as of less value (123-24).

The value of knowledge depends on its constant deferral, the deferral of "naked" truth. But Nature's body also glimmers through the tear in her dress. Here is the second mode of showing:

[Narrator, addressing Lady Nature] I wonder why some parts of your tunic, which should approximate the interweave of a marriage, suffer a separation at that part in their connection where the picture's phantasy produces the image of man.

[Lady Nature, in response] From what you have already sampled you can deduce what is the symbolic signification of the representation of the parenthesis-like rent. (142)

This tear occurs where synthesis should occur, synthesis figured by the idea of heterosexual union (the interweave of marriage). Instead of marriage, though, this tear represents the gap between the material and the ideal, a gap that is necessary to the very possibility of upholding the idea of "nature." The poetic pleasure gained from contemplating this tear is what Barthes considers a perverse pleasure, what Lady Reason considers a sodomitic pleasure. Lady Reason is suspicious of euphemism because, in refusing to name the body, in refusing literal designation, it holds the body in a state of unmeaning. Euphemism thus opposes itself to the intense logocentrism of allegory (which is oedipal, sequential, etc.) in favor of a mode of corporeality that refuses to sublimate in the way allegory does. Lady Reason's position is then irreconcilable with that of the euphemistic Lover because no system of meaning can be built from his position. The Lover, on his side, cannot be reconciled with Lady Reason because she has disavowed the gap between body and language in order to build a system of meaning. To disavow this gap would foreclose the possibility of finding pleasure or meaning in any given instance of language, any given body.

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Divergences et *Queeriosités*: Ovide moralisé ou les mutations d'"Iphis en garçon" (XII^e-XVIII^e)

L'analyse des plus célèbres traductions moralisées qui se multiplient entre le Moyen Âge et le XVIII^e siècle souligne le rôle hétéronormatif considérable que la fable d'"Iphis et lanthé" des *Métamorphoses* d'Ovide (Livre IX) a pu jouer dans la construction de relations plus tard catégorisées lesbiennes. Leur reconnaissant d'abord une certaine *queeriosité* (Harvey et Le Brun-Cordier), quoique condamnée, elles les ont ensuite "fantômées" (Wittig; Castle, *Apparitional*) par des interprétations allégoriques, morales et médicales qui les ont détournées, à savoir redressées, pour consacrer une binarité hétérosexuelle obligée que des interprétations contemporaines (XXI^e) remettent à nouveau en question de nos jours.

Ovide, on le sait, a probablement été le poète latin le plus estimé du public lettré de la période prémoderne, doublement classique par son antiquité familière aux jeunes écoliers (Moss 1), avant de devenir l'"inspirateur des décors monarchiques" au XVII^e siècle, en France du moins (Apostolidès 63-87; Bardon 69-83). Mais si ses *Héroïdes* ont consacré pour longtemps le motif victimaire des femmes séduites et abandonnées, l'influence de ses *Métamorphoses* sur la définition mouvante des sexes et des genres a peut-être été plus considérable encore. La fable d'"Iphis et lanthé" du Livre IX en témoigne par les distorsions identitaires variées qu'a permis son motif particulier — le travestissement en homme, et la passion troublée, d'une jeune fille