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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Arthuriana*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (SPRING 1995), pp. 1-20

Published by: [Scriptorium Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869092>

Accessed: 02/11/2011 16:15

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# Psychoanalysis and Courtly Love

ELLIE RAGLAND

Jacques Lacan argued that courtly love worked against the repressive effect of language on *jouissance*, thereby circumventing a structural non-rapport between the sexes and proving that an ethics of desire *can* govern social practice if the admission of lack governs the debates and rituals in play. (ER)

## *Psychoanalysis*

What can psychoanalysis contribute to Medieval Studies? What can students of Arthurian chivalry learn from contemporary psychoanalytic investigations? What can a return to courtly love tell us about psychoanalysis, or about courtly love, for that matter? And what have the spiritual, the poetic and the sexual to do with the current development of the 'new Middle Ages' as it returns to problems of meaning and being as set forth before Descartes sounded the death knell to any possible study of essence in knowledge? Put another way, can the 'new Middle Ages' help us rethink 'developmental' views of history by adding new axioms – *i.e.*, knowledge of what constitutes structure – to what is already known? Can a reconsideration of medieval thought and practices contribute anything to a re-evaluation of the worst excesses of Cartesian rationalism and its twin sister (or brother), the contemporary discourse of Science, the new God whose truth is located in the 'they say' of scientific discourse?

By the 'new Middle Ages,' I refer to the practice that has grown up within the past decade of referring to the object studied – the Middle Ages – in terms of methodology, particularly to books written or edited by such scholars as Stephen Nichols and Lee Patterson.<sup>1</sup> In 'The (Im)Possibility of the Middle Ages,' the preface to his doctoral dissertation (1994), Richard Glezer describes Stephen Nichols' 'new Medievalism' as a post-structuralist critique of traditional or formalist criticisms whose assumptions are humanist. Nichols seeks to define a 'truer' picture of medieval women and men, Glezer says, by explaining that their chaotic universe was limited by a 'technology' made up of documents and manuscripts that framed their period in terms of absolute meanings.<sup>2</sup>

Glezer argues that such post-structuralist critics, interested only in context, foreclose any investigation of how the context comes to be. Making a leap from

infinity to zero which, then, becomes the ground base from which to dismiss problems of cause along with problems of origin, such critics refuse to consider that the grounds of knowledge might well lie outside the actuality of representation: 'By not acknowledging the Otherside of knowledge or the underside of knowledge, the new Medievalism focuses only on half the equation. Much like the old philology or the old historicism, its primary concern is with the way in which knowledge is represented, both in images and in texts, rather than with the ways in which such representations are themselves modes of knowing' (Glezer, vi). Even critics like Lee Patterson who try to work with the problem of an outside referent return, nonetheless, to a 'plurality of worlds' argument, taking the Middle Ages as a mythical moment of origin which is, then, imaginized into a supposedly true picture, while any consideration of what a possible truth *in* knowledge might be is dismissed (Glezer, vii).

The late French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, now famous for his contributions to a rethinking of epistemology and ontology, arrived at the conclusion that knowledge itself constitutes an imaginary facade over an ordering of impasses he named the 'real,' an order of traumata made up of seemingly contradictory material which is, nonetheless, truth-functional. The 'real' functions at points of impasse to impose discontinuities on the seeming consistencies of thought and being, thereby inserting another kind of knowledge in what is generally taken to be knowledge *qua* unified whole.

More precisely, Lacan referred to courtly love in several of his Seminars, most particularly in *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-1960), but also in *Encore, Seminar XX* (1972-1973) and in *Seminar XXI, Les non-dupes errent* (1973-1974) where he said that love *is* courtly love, given, if you will, the mathematical impossibility of a symmetrical *rapport* of one plus one in the couple of man and woman.<sup>3</sup> That is, opposites do not merge into a synthesis. Even the magic of love, then, cannot make One out of two who are structured in an asymmetry. And courtly love was, in Lacan's view of it, the greatest admission in the history of Western love practices of the non-rapport at the heart of sexual relations. Yet, in admitting the impasse between the sexes, this practice, paradoxically, did not give up on love, or on desire.

In *Encore* (1972-1973) Lacan says that courtly love appeared at the point when homosexual amusement had fallen into a supreme decadence, not inseparable from the political degeneration of the feudal system – the feudal system being, in any case, an 'impossible dream' (*Encore*, 79). But this is not a deprecation of homosexual love or desire, for Lacan praises *hommosexuelle* love in the same Seminar as the supreme love of The Woman, a love that keeps alive an essence of the feminine. These ideas are of a piece with the axiom he advanced in *Encore*: that the non-rapport between the sexes gives rise to culture.<sup>4</sup>

I would suggest that Lacan carefully chose the word *dé-cadence*, which means a falling away from the object he named *das Ding*, the only Good, the supreme 'material' Good, where Kleinians have situated the mythic body of the mother (S. VII, 106). Lacan gives a different description of *das Ding* from Melanie Klein:

*Das Ding* is a primordial function which is located at the level of the initial establishment of the gravitation of the unconscious *Vorstellungen*.... It is precisely as we shift into discourse that *das Ding*, the Thing, is resolved into a series of effects.... You will not be surprised if I tell you that at the level of the *Vorstellungen*, the Thing is not nothing, but literally, is not. It is characterized by its absence, its strangeness (S. VII, 62-63).

But what does Lacan mean by *das Ding*, the Freudian Thing he calls the truth? In 1959-1960, he described the Thing as a series of effects, characterized by its absence. In his course of 1994-1995, Jacques-Alain Miller recently pointed out that Lacan dropped the concepts of the Thing and the object *a* once he began to develop his logic of *jouissance* in *Encore* as a qualitative meaning system equal and equivalent, in scope and complexity, to the quantitative system of representational meaning.<sup>5</sup> Miller's conclusion is of a piece with his clarification of Lacan from 1981 on, to the effect that individuals do not 'enjoy' in language which, rather, cancels out the immediacy of pleasurable *jouissance*, installing absence – loss and lack – as existing places *in* knowledge.

Consistent with his return to Freud *via* a logic of the real, and his return to Aristotle's impasses in thinking the structural causes of the relation of the universal to the particular, Lacan attributed the invention of courtly love to an heroic effort – an art, an artifice, he says – to circumvent a necessary impasse between the sexes. The impasse at issue – built up around the sexual difference – makes an equivalence between the universal in structure as a logic of the whole or all (on the masculine side of sexuation or psychic sexual identification) and the particular as a logic of the not-all (on the feminine side of sexuation). Thus, the impasse that marks the order of the 'real' by a logic of paradoxes is the third term of the difference itself – that is, the sexual difference – out of which culture itself arises in interpretations of and accommodations to that difference.

At the moment when the feudal system collapsed, Lacan says 'something was no longer working for Woman' (*Encore*, 79). Moreover, he says, there is no thesis-antithesis-synthesis logic at work in the invention of courtly love. Put another way, the concept of thesis-antithesis is as asymmetrical as any other imaginary opposition wherein a totalizing misperception is taken for the whole of the picture, such that even the American legal system works on the imaginary principle of innocent *versus* guilty, good *versus* bad. And the jury supposes

some structural third term of dialectical synthesis, the judge functioning ultimately as the 'fourth party' of the Name-of-the-Father; that is, the law, the one who decides in the final moment, or breaks an impasse. A true dialectics is to be found, rather, in the paradoxical impasses of the real where two antitheses, for example, give rise to this synthesis: It is *appearance* that envelopes the truth of the 'real.' And such a structure is precisely that of courtly love which Lacan described as 'a meteor ... [which] has remained enigmatic' (*Encore*, 79).

This 'meteor ... [which] has remained enigmatic' was replaced, he says, by the Cartesian scientific discourse that owes nothing to the Antique soul – that of Socrates wherein being, meaning, teaching, loving, and desiring were not compartmentalized into false categories of public *dis*-affection and private *affection*. Psychoanalysis, in contrast to the alleged rationalisms of contemporary science, owes much to the Antique soul. In psychoanalysis, one talks into a void, for nothing, so to speak. But, paradoxically, this 'talking for nothing' turns out to be a talking for something unexpected – for the pure loss of words. But this loss is not innocent. For losing words means losing the *jouissance* that first welded them together in a compacity of *fixions* that delineate being in fixed sets of identifications made up of the coalescence of a density of words (the symbolic), the indelibility of images (the imaginary), and the unremitting presence of libidinal effects (the real):

The function of these *fixions* is nothing less than that of filling up the place of a central void (S[Ø]) in knowledge. Thus, they take on the character of immutability. Insofar as the fictions that define one's being are not finally separable from the real of the body, 'fiction' does not mean untrue, then, but rather, fixation in the sense of Freud's *Fixierung*. It is not surprising that the question of the ages has been to ask where being or thought, divided into ontology and epistemology in philosophy, come from. Contemporary studies in cognition locate the source of being in genetic codes, neural synapses, or a yet to be found 'seat of thought' in the brain.

To circumscribe the *place* of ultimate knowledge, of 'divine' knowledge, was the focus of medieval philosophy, rhetoric, and theology. Is it *in* heaven? Insofar as knowledge had a *cause* where the spiritual and intellectual joined in one supreme Godhead, the person who attained the highest plane – manifesting the immanence of spirit within mind – disdained the lowly base of the flesh. The phenomenon of courtly love is all the more astounding then, insofar as it pinpointed Woman as the cause around which a system of thought circles. Even if the system of thought in question was love poetry, courtly love emerged

in an era when the baseness of the flesh was inseparable from the concept of sin. But the idea of Woman as cause is, nonetheless, a paradoxical one.

In courtly love, Woman is elevated to the position of an Ideal, a feminine 'essence,' if you will, who serves as man's cause, at least as the *cause* of love poetry. But the cause is paradoxical because it concerns the ineradicability of loss at the center of knowledge, being and body. Moreover, this void is constituted in response to the partial drives whose demand for *jouissance* follows the loss of objects associated with the mother's body (or primary Other) in the experience of the cut. Concretely speaking, then, the void in being will always be inseparable from the problem of the existence or inexistence of a feminine essence. In this structural view of what gives rise to the soul or 'substance' of cultural myths, a progressivist theory of History would be false. The 'truth' Lacan finds in the system of courtly love is, moreover, an intellectual and ethical triumph over the decline of concern with cause ever since Nominalism won the day for Western thought in the seventeenth century. Courtly love was, one might suggest, well in advance of contemporary 'scientific' thought in the sense that not only was mind not opposed to body, but the flesh, the spirit, and the mind were interwoven in a serious practice that prefigures the Borromean unit by which Lacan formalized the topological shape of the mind/body linkage. To allow you to consider the possibility that Lacan may have shed new light on the meaning of the practice of courtly love, and that that practice has some connection to psychoanalytic theory, I shall offer a simple schematization of what Lacan meant by structure.

In the third period of his teaching, Lacan introduced a new geometry *via* mathematical topology which enabled him to formalize the linkage of meaning to being. Conscious thought depends on an *imaginary* order veil of semblances which obscures the join between the *symbolic* order of words and the corporal *real* of the drives. That is, the world of the visible triggers associative thoughts (*i.e.*, words linked to images), functioning as an ever-moving – thus, present and seemingly full – picture show. That the world of the visible is structured around partial, even invisible, yet palpable, real objects or entities, such as the gaze or the voice, is not an idea most people would entertain. The picture is usually taken to be the thing itself.

As Jacques-Alain Miller has shown, Lacan took this structuration of the subject *qua* object – response of the real – as a universal.<sup>6</sup> To make sense of this proposition, let us take these four notions together, as does Miller in 'La Topologia en la Enseñanza de Lacan': structure, metaphor, the real and the Thing (*das Ding* or *la chose*).<sup>7</sup> In *Encore* Lacan replaced Freud's second topic (id, ego, superego) with the Borromean unit of the imaginary, symbolic, and

real, thereby defining structure as topological. That is, mind and body are joined in a logic that the Borromean knot formalizes (107-123). These orders – language, the image, and the real of the libido (or the drives) – are knotted together by the signifier of a ‘fourth party’ that Lacan names the order of the *sinthome* (the knot, or the paternal metaphor).<sup>8</sup> This ‘fourth party’ arises from the third term for sexual difference around which structure develops, interpreting the difference in terms of a plus or minus value.<sup>9</sup> That symbolic order authority is frequently associated with a signifier for the Father’s Name comes, in part, from the fact that man’s being is first confused with his having the anatomical symbol for difference, an imaginary fact which is interpreted in the symbolic at one remove from the mother who is identified first and foremost with the ‘real’ of the drives.

Paradoxically, this confusion gives rise to the structure feminists have described as the patriarchy. That is, the male conflates ‘having’ the sign of difference with his being to the point of taking his opinions to be true and just. What one might call masculine discourse – the logic of the *tout* – is structured as an identification with difference away from the sameness of the feminine, a difference which gives rise to the social as a distance from *das Ding*. Given that the feminine position in knowledge relies on an acceptance that something lacks in knowledge – the logic of the *pas-tout* – one wonders how the divide between two such positions can be bridged? The answers given by contemporary feminists rely, generally speaking, on a master/slave view of the masculine and the feminine, rather than on any consideration of them as different positions in knowledge.

Lacan taught that the difference is bridged by love which is operationalized by the agency of metaphor. That is, the function of substitution gives rise to the possibility of the social, the possibility of exchange. Substituting another beloved for the first lost objects, objects associated with the mother, means taking a distance from *das Ding* – from the sexual Thing. Insofar as men take Woman as an equivalent of the mother, Woman is *de facto* associated with *das Ding*. In Lacan’s teaching the object-*cause-of-desire* – be it attributed to a man or a woman – is always on the side of the feminine. Although the sexual ‘object’ choice may be male or female, the object *in* the fantasy that causes desire is a montage of details linked to the real of the sexual body which has, sorrowfully, been exiled into the law of language.

We first *desire* at the level of the breast, the feces, the voice, the gaze. We first *love* certain images, words and effects of the ‘real’ that coalesce to excite desire and idealization. We love what we desire, in other words, and desire what we love. And what we first love is the familiar. But love is not compatible with

desire insofar as each subject desires what defines him or her in the unconscious. Men are defined as men insofar as they substitute away from the real of *das Ding*, away from the real of the drives associated with woman *qua* mother. And women are defined as women insofar as they respond to the exile of men from a primary *jouissance* into the prisonhouse of language.

Although the mother is equated with Woman because she first signifies the drives which Freud described as 'silent,' Lacan named the first object that signifies difference to children – comparing their bodies within the predominant function of the visual – the phallus or phallic signifier. While little girls confront the problem of trying to link a valorization of the masculine in society with the mystery of an anatomical difference, little boys (except those who are psychotic) are rather quickly exiled from the *jouissance* of the Thing – the 'real' of the feminine which commands sexuality by its link with the primordial objects-cause-of-desire. Yet, one's first connection to the 'real' is not, as Miller says, something one can leave behind. The principle at the base of causality, then, is the sexual cause which derives from a fundamental identification with an irreducible kernel at the heart of being: the object *a*. Discontinuity, not continuity, is the law which produces the effects that come from causes, Miller argues, thus explaining what David Hume, typical of idealist philosophers, sought to understand in positing an anterior creative imagination, prior to the functioning of reason, which can solve the problem of whether, for example, a tree has fallen in a forest if one has not heard the tree fall.<sup>10</sup> One's cause, Miller argues, is concretely structured by what one desires, not by a comparative imagination. And one cannot desire what one has not seen or heard or touched. The tree's existence is not the problem, then, but the essence Lacan called *jouissance* that gives rise to oneself as an object *a* which exists as the cause of which one is oneself the effect.

This brings us to the Lacanian idea of the 'real' whose basic truths bear on Lacan's most important matheme – the object *a* – which marks the point of limit in originary attachments. Insofar as the object *a* denotes an absence and an imagined consistency in the drives, it is recognized (*i.e.*, re-cognized or known again as an object of value) at the point where the sexual first inscribed itself as Eros at the site of a loss. And paradoxically, it is on the basis of this experience of loss that Woman *qua* mother – site of the primordial drives – is taken as a guarantee of wholeness, goodness, truth, solidity, trust, continuity, a principle of the 'natural.' One might say that this is why woman 'counts' as all or nothing. In the symbolic, counting begins with a differential, not with the absoluteness of sameness. Yet, paradoxically, it is on the grounds of an assumption that the other, the beloved, is a constant that individuals function

in the social *as if* they were whole, *as if* continuity – not discontinuity – were the fundamental law of being.<sup>11</sup>

Insofar as metaphor is the *function* that makes it possible to repeat in a context of minimal difference by the substitution of one thing for another, Lacan brings the temporal dimension into the psychic (*tychic*) domain. By referring to *das Ding* as the constant against which variables multiply, he is able to situate the dimension of space in being. Yet, it was only in isolating the cause (and the structure) of psychosis that Lacan discovered space and time as dimensions of being, for in psychosis the temporal dimension is absent. Psychosis is a likely outcome when a child is the *jouissance* object of his or her mother's fantasy. In response to an omnipresent mother or an omniabsent one, this subject fails to symbolize a lack-in-being. Consequently, no loss of an imagined consistency of the Other occurs for this child. Later, this subject cannot barter the primary objects of satisfaction, always already lost for other subjects, in the *dialectic* between desire and *jouissance* which circumscribe the social by 'laws' of exchange and reciprocity. The social order is thus constituted only insofar as a subject loses the illusion that he or she lacks nothing.

### *Courtly Love*

Having set forth these basic principles of Lacanian psychoanalysis – structure, *das Ding*, metaphor, and the real – I can return to a consideration of courtly love as a practice that combines the spiritual (structure), the sexual (*das Ding*), and the artistic (metaphor), around the 'real' of the sexual non-rapport. As a social construct seeking to circumvent the impasse between the sexes, courtly love, paradoxically, gives an eloquent testimonial to an eternal (*i.e.*, structural) problem: there is no ratio for a natural harmony between the sexes. What Lacan proposed in his use of topology to explain the intertwined structure of mind and body is nothing less than an analysis of the sexual difference at the heart of cultural practices.

There is no Multi-Culturalism in Lacan, only the myriad practices arising out of a non-rapport in sexuation. Nor is there History with a capital 'H,' only the symbolic order practices that try to build bridges over a non-rapport that defines culture around a set of impasses arising out of a structural lack constituted in the wake of the traumatizing effects caused by trying to link one's sexuality to one's body and being. When it dawns on boys that they are not the same as the mother who first resonated for them at the level of 'the same as' in the 'real' of the drives, they must interpret (*i.e.*, symbolize) a difference, the perception of which wounds the masculine illusion of bodily integrity or wholeness already taken on in successive mirror phase moments. When it dawns on a girl that the

standard of social value circulates around the boy whose only visible difference from her is the male sexual organ, she too must symbolize this fact in the imaginary and real. The problem for both sexes is how to symbolize (*i.e.*, 'interpret') an anatomical fact found in images of the body and described by words. The resultant symbolization constitutes the 'real' of sexual feeling in an eroticism particular to a singular subject, even as the erotic is shot through with impasses of interdiction and trauma.

In the third period of his teaching, from 1974 to 1981, Lacan began to develop his theory of the subject as an object *qua* response of the 'real,' a *jouissance* object whose supreme value lies in being loved, basically an affair of the drives. Yet, real men and real women are lost in the substitutive lies of metaphor by which they skirt around the insistent urgings of metonymy that one might name the call to connection, which is a call to re-connection. Moreover, love bears the burden of joining the real of the drives to the lack-in-being from which desire first arises. But, one may well ask, what is love? Love is the demand for the nothing (*rien*), Jacques Alain Miller said in his Course of 1993-1994.<sup>12</sup> Nothing, that is, but the visible signs that he calls 'divine details' elsewhere, details that let the other person know he or she is seen, fed, heard, valued as a *jouissance* object in the drives.<sup>13</sup> Yet, this is terribly difficult precisely because this 'nothing' is given (or not) in the field of the drives which trouble men and women because they concern the body in its multiform sexuality, marked as it is by primordial interdictions.

It is not just man's or woman's animal nature that is at stake here, then, but the *jouissance* which, paradoxically, is constituted around the 'real' of non-dialectical *jouissance* that returns into the symbolic order of 'intellectual' *savoir* to bring the discomfiting *connaissance* of an excess – of another kind of knowledge. It is not surprising that most cultural treatments of the body give rise to various genres of the comic. Courtly love is admirable precisely because it refuses the comic dimension in the matter of Eros versus Thanatos.

In an article published in 1975, 'Matrice,' Jacques Alain Miller argued that all Lacan's work circles around one central principle: that truth has a name *because* it has a place and a structure. And Lacan claimed that courtly love isolated both the name and structure of this place, central to the human, although it had never been formalized before in philosophy, theology or psychoanalysis. Indeed, courtly love remains an enigma even today. Lacan says that courtly love spoke of Woman in a way that, I would add, can only be taken as 'feminist,' if you accept my definition of feminism. The feminism at issue concerns each woman's grappling with the problem of finding a signifier to valorize her (in)existence as Woman because she enters the field of

signification for both sexes as mother. And 'mother' is not an adequate signifier to represent Woman's being, given that 'mother' is identified with the silence of the drives and the logic of sameness, attributes that have the properties of an absolute and, thus, are not easily countable within the logic of dialectical thinking which assigns value oppositionally. Trying to make of the mother's body – itself an ensemble of drive objects – a signifier, Melanie Klein failed to understand that people are not in and of themselves good or bad objects, anymore than is a breast. Bad 'object' effects come, rather, from a negative experience of the voice or the gaze which can give rise to a rejection of the other *qua* global object of satisfaction.

Lacan taught that the truth named in courtly love is that Woman substitutes for the lost object denoted by the object *a*, the name he gave to the *jouissance* that is left over after the operation of language has anesthetized *jouissance*, thereby evacuating experiential moments of pleasure. There is a remainder of *jouissance*, however, that dwells in the wisps of image, sound, corporal effect – *i.e.*, traces that resonate from within the concrete palpability of a literally empty place. A small bit of *jouissance* remains in memory, sustained by fantasy. The object sought in love, as well as in fantasy, is not an actual person or object, then, but the annullment of a void that is to be found in the field of the (partial) drives. And Lacan says, in further praise of the invention of courtly love, that all the talk about love was not just words, but words insofar as they constitute a compacity or density of being that must be decomposed if any true learning – any apprehension of the truth of the 'real' – is to occur. Most talk is master discourse talk based on the denial of unconscious desire fueling it. In this discourse of narcissistic pomposity,  $I = I$ . In courtly love, as in medieval rhetoric, the discourse was fixed on a question to which the answers were not apparent. Indeed, the lack of a pat answer was essential to the belief in the value of ongoing questioning. Although contemporary knowledge laughs at such modes of thinking, calling them neo-scholastic circularities, they miss a fundamental point. Whether one speaks to know what God is, or what love is, one speaks into a void of not-knowing, even if certain pre-determined answers are awkwardly placed in conclusion.

Like the moralizing endings tacked onto great novels (such as Laclos's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*), the 'advanced knowledge' contained in the courtly debates on love lies in their not dismissing the 'real' from their questioning, as does contemporary science, thus setting the standard for contemporary debate by having already concluded that the 'real' has nothing to do with knowing, thereby foreclosing the possibility of a question. Lacan's concept of 'advancing in knowledge' is neither an enlightenment concept, nor a positivistic one, insofar

as any advance in knowledge about the truth – *i.e.*, knowledge that gives rise to an operational law or axiom – must ultimately take account of *jouissance*. Most such debates run ashore on the impasses of Zeno's paradox. Even Aristotle lacked the means of proving how points of limit can be established except within actual time. Twentieth-century topology enabled Lacan to erect differential clinical categories within the realm of a logic that demonstrates how meaning and being intersect to produce knowledge. Lacan was concerned to answer one of the pressing questions that has troubled thinkers over the centuries: To what does the referent refer when its object is invisible? Indeed, psychoanalysis cannot function as a viable theory or practice without answering this question. What, within (or beyond) the visible object, is aimed at when the object *appears* to be the thing targeted, but upon greater proximity, turns to ashes? Einstein taught that physical phenomena are relative in reference to a fixed point. Jacques-Alain Miller has taken up the work of Quine, and other analytic philosophers, to say that words refer to a void.<sup>14</sup> But – and this is the key – the void has a structure. In *Seminar VII*, Lacan says:

Now if you consider the vase ... as an object made to represent the existence of the void at the center of the real which is called the Thing, this void ... presents itself as a *nihil*, as a nothing .... The introduction of this signifier *façonné* which is the vase, is already the whole notion of the creation *ex nihilo* ... [which] finds itself coextensive with the exact situation of the Thing as such (146-47).

But what is the Thing? Is it the vase as signifier, or the hole around which the vase is fashioned? It is, Lacan says, the Thing 'which is not a signifier, and around which all the human is defined, even as just what the human is escapes us' (150). Lacan's topology of the real parallels Einstein's law of physics. Meaning is relative in reference to a fixed point: *das Ding*. Fantasies seek to fill up lack, cycling rapidly through an interior void, causing a quickening of feeling we call affect. In other words, *jouissance* is the goal that unveils the headless subject Lacan describes as the *caput mortuum* of the signifier, in moments when one feels intimately seen, heard, cherished, rejected, and so on – *i.e.*, valued or not.

It is precisely the material effect of erotic *jouissance* that courtly love sought to capture and sustain by elevating the Freudian Thing – the sexual Thing – to the dialectical dignity of a signifier. Indeed, this is the definition Lacan will give of sublimation. Woman, usually circumscribed by her maternal function within the drives is, in courtly love, celebrated as the primordial object *cause* of desire. Insofar as *jouissance* is, for Lacan, a meaning system – that is an organization of *connaissance* – on a par with representational knowledge (*savoir*), each person's *true* cause resides in the real of the flesh where being fed equals being cared for in the oral drive, where spending and wasting bear on control

arising from the anal drive, where being heard brings the invocatory drive into play, and being seen constitutes existence within the scopical drive. The subject is truly in play as an object of surplus value whose worth goes up and down within the *jouissance* of the drives. Here the burden placed on women is nothing less than the implicit demand that Woman replace the inexistence of a feminine essence, supplying a guarantee of a consistency and continuity insofar as she is imagined as a unified being – is the semblance of such – from within a disparate set of partial functions.

When Lacan speaks of the inexistence of Woman ( $\text{L}\bar{\text{A}}$ ), he means that no ideological solidity, no law of language, no grounding in social contracts, can compensate for the loss from which the drives issue in a circuitous effort to return to an imagined originary place of oneness and unity, which turns out to be an actual void place created by the loss of *jouissance* that first gave rise to the quest for objects meant to fill up literal holes created by the loss of objects. In this sense, the voice is an object sought in the Other – be it a person, a radio or a television – to fill up a concrete lack-in-being by soothing and reassuring, and thus quelling, anxiety.

Courtly love went straight to the point of the drives, Lacan said. The *trouvères* or *troubadours*, as Picasso said of himself, did not seek: they found. They knew what they were looking for and heeded their knowledge that the value of life lies in *la chose*. The troubadours knew that only love of the feminine can mitigate the suffering caused by a central loss. Underlying all knowledge quests – and this is a topological structural theory – Lacan locates the human cause *par excellence*, the one that moves *jouissance* back and forth as affects surrounding castration (a lack-in-being), to identification with the local universal language conventions Lacan called the ‘reality principle’ or the phallic signifier – *i.e.*, the language in power – to the limits of the capacity of language to quell the anxiety that arises from a central void, (S[Ø]), a void that is *in* us. It is at that point that myths have arisen, Lacan argued, throughout recorded history, to project the void outside in theologies, philosophies, folk tales, conventional wisdom, and so on.

At each of the points that map a seeming unity of the subject – itself a temporal pulsion – in the ‘real,’ symbolic and imaginary, a central illusion is in play: that there is an object of constancy, underlying questions or doubts. Yet, Woman cannot be this object, not only because the (partial) drives are not constant, but also because Woman represents the principle that gives rise to the social *via* the law of limits set by the taboo that constructs the social around a paradox: the Good, the only good, is a forbidden object. Lacan showed two faces to the incest taboo: the social as an implicit law against psychosis in

which the drives are never dialecticized into signifiers and so must, themselves, try to substitute for themselves as a distance from *das Ding* (which, by definition, they cannot do); and the Law of the Father which defines the social paradoxically as itself a limit to *jouissance*. 'Thou shalt not ...' creates the lack that begets the desire that gives rise to exchange.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the object *a* denotes an empty place filled by whatever one invests one's *jouissance* in. In the 11th century, a practice of love began to emerge that sustained desire (as opposed to the hurried crudeness of lust) around the figure of Woman whose desirability was elevated to the level of the supreme Good. This practice went against the concurrent debasement of woman, along with the flesh, challenging superego tendencies of cultures to relegate sexual desire to secrecy and degradation. Lacan argued that the practice of courtly love challenged the stasis that Freud first defined as the silence of the drives, a stasis which functions, at the limit, as the death drive. Clarifying Freud here, Lacan described the 'death drive' as repeated attachments to the superego interdictions against pleasure. But there is no superego agency (*à la* Freud) in Lacan, only the fixative power of language to repress the erotic call of *jouissance*.

By raising Eros to a social Ideal, courtly love challenged the private pain of cloistered *jouissance* that rules the lives of many 'would-be' subjects of desire. And Lacan was amazed. Freud had thought that repression was repression of the drives. Lacan discovered this paradox: language represses *jouissance*. Yet one must name things in order to escape the unmitigated torture of living in the unrepresented, unnamed 'real' of *jouissance* that one sees in its pure form in autism.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, one cannot be cured of repression just by knowing that language kills *jouissance*, leaving only a little remainder – Lacan called it surplus value – in fantasy. Yet this excess that Lacan named the object *a* links the body to language, thereby joining the mind to the body. As such, the object *a* is an effect of the 'real' – the sexual Thing – and, thus, is not dialecticized or dialecticizable.

In *Séminaire xx* Lacan says that 'courtly love ... is a completely refined fashion to supplement the absence of the sexual rapport by feigning that we are the ones who put up the obstacle [to it]' (65). Miller has clarified this concept of feigning a rapport where there is none in his description of love as the gift of presence itself. The infant's demand for love has two dimensions, then, that of need – the demand for food, for the breast – and the demand for the 'almost nothing' of the look, the voice, the touch. In short, the demand for love is the demand for the presence of the object that Miller describes in his Course of 1993-1994 (*Donc*) as the demand for 'nothing, almost nothing.'

In courtly love the object-cause-of-desire is sublimated and elevated, without being drained of its components of *jouissance* and desire. In *Encore*, Lacan defined the sublime as ‘the most elevated point of what is at the bottom or base’ (18), which generally masks its cause. In implicitly admitting that *ça ne va pas naturellement entre les hommes et les femmes*, courtly love admits of an obstacle. Lacan calls it the dark-sided face of God – the narcissistic Godhead that is each subject *qua* object of his or her own fantasies. While Descartes put God in brackets, Lacan placed God in the object *petit a*. Miller places the *a* at the site of Descartes’s *ergo*, between the ‘I think’ and the ‘I am,’ supporting the drives that operate drive *in* language as an implicit demand: ‘I ask you this, but what I’m really asking is this.’

Courtly love, by daring to work dialectically with a non-dialectical impasse, was, in Lacan’s words, ‘truly the most formidable thing one has ever tried. But how does one denounce the *feinte* in it? Rather than being there, floating on the paradox that courtly love appeared in the feudal epoch . . . [it is more interesting to note that] courtly love is, entirely, in the most servile sense, for the man, whose subject (*sujette*) is the Lady. [And this is] the only way to withdraw himself with elegance from the absence of the sexual rapport’ (*Encore*, 65). Miller has written the matheme for sublimation thus: The feint or pretense or masquerade *enforme* – <sup>a</sup> – is the object of desire supported by the symbol for castration or lack. Courtly love, like psychoanalysis, admits that there is an obstacle – the real – around which all language and desire circulate. Without being mystical or catharist, Lacan says that coitus in suspense gives rise to poetry and to desire. And in this another paradox lies. The life feeling – Eros – is not fundamentally attachable to sexual acts or their pleasures, but *to the desire for the object*. In *Seminar VII* Lacan equates the practice of courtly love with the artistic technique of anamorphosis: that is, the extimacy of the object-cause-of-desire – the Lady in courtly love – marks the site of an internal void constituted by the marks of ‘nothing’ that cut into an infinity of time, creating the lacks around which being is made out of the marks that inscribe themselves as cuts of the real. These ‘nothings’ or traces of marks build up the divine details by which each particular subject later recognizes the objects he or she desires. What the drive aims at in the dialectics of love and desire, in other words, are the concrete traits of ourselves. In this sense, the object (whose embodiment THE LADY is), is both interior (hidden in the fantasy) and – anamorphotically – exterior to it. Courtly love pulls off the mask over what underlies the quest for knowledge; to wit, that language faces the challenge of accommodating the ‘real’ of the drives.

The object of the quest, Miller says, is extimate, creating the effect of a 'distant interior.' The subject is the object of his or her own fantasy, the most cherished object being the maintenance of him- or herself as the object of a lost cause. One's lost cause persists, then, not only in what the fantasy hides, but in the belief in a 'beyond,' be it of a fantasized pleasure or a sacred chapel. Indeed, this 'sacred beyond' is something people willingly die for. In joining the belief in a 'sacred beyond' to the 'sexual thing,' Lacan says he aims at its most general term, at its primitive subsistence (*S. VII, 168*). Miller calls this primitive material a gift – the *don*, the symbol itself of the exchange on which social value turns – that defines love as 'the demand for nothing.' But, the nothing – the Thing of the drives – is that which is immediately consumed, be it a meal prepared by the hand of one who cares, the scent of a freshly washed and ironed shirt, the goodnight kiss of the bedtime 'tucking in' ritual. The 'nothings' of *jouissance* are the causes behind our monumental intellectual efforts to understand what we know, how we know, who we are (Miller, *Donc*, June 22, 1994). But we all stumble over how to value what is produced in the temporal moments of the drive. The surplus value of the object *a* is, indeed, all or nothing.

The Lady of courtly love is a semblance, then, a representative of the Thing around which the drives organize themselves in rituals that seek to mediate desire and control anxiety. In the sense that the Thing, paradoxically, reveals a central void, The Lady of courtly love is an icon of something else: the effort of poetry or art to *cerner la chose*, evanescent as it is. Perhaps one need only call attention to the recent discovery of an actual black hole, by definition, invisible. It is knowable by its properties (the gasses surrounding it, intense gravity, speed, heat, the distance between its mass and what is orbiting around it). Perhaps, say contemporary physicists, such masses are even the source of quasars, the mysterious bright beacons of light discovered in this century.<sup>17</sup> In the same way, not even by analogy, the void at the center of human knowledge is knowable by the properties surrounding it. Indeed, the *agalma* sought in courtly love is proof positive of a central lack that humans try to fill with a positive *jouissance*, which depends on continual evacuation of negative *jouissance*.

From the 11th century to the 12th or 13th, an Ideal of *la belle dame* held sway as a principle of morality around which behavior, loyalty, and so on, was encoded (*S. VII, 145-146*). The pivot was not marriage, monogamy or motherhood, but an Erotics. The poetry written to this *belle dame* concerned grief, unhappy love, dissatisfaction; *i.e.*, the structure of desire in its paradoxical feature where want and lack both dwell on the surface of a Moebius form. Not surprisingly, the Lady's value (*La Domnei, Mi Dom*) often lay in her giving grace, clemency, mercy to a suffering (*i.e.*, desiring) lover. Neo-Scholastic debates on love, the

*carte du tendre*, the social art of conversation, all had the same goal: to arouse desire and to keep it alive as a *cause*. And Woman was the cause of such an ethics in an era of feudalism when woman's value was that of mere object of exchange. Seeking in love what they had lost in *jouissance*, the troubadours might well be seen as the feminists of their day, insofar as feminism allows any positive function to desire. There is only one little step between the elevation of the Dame and that of the Virgin Mary to Holy Mother in Catholicism. But the step is crucial, for a virgin mother does not desire, nor inspire sexual desire. She is the purified object of a beatitude of the breast and the gaze, drained of all passion, of all hate, jealousy, fear, hope, reduced to a myth of pure love.

Yet Woman does inspire desire which, in the Middle Ages, gave rise not only to a code of *moeurs*, but also to a rhetoric enshrining the mystery that Woman incarnates for men at the limit point of her inaccessibility. When the lover is deprived of the sexual 'real,' he finds himself, Lacan says, back at the point of pure desire where he first encountered these gifts in a paradox – at the site of the mother's body which he is quickly required to renounce. The Lady, the Domina, is, herself, the anamorphosis of the lost objects that dominate fantasies where images and words are sewn together in seams where love and desire intersect, oscillating around the central obstacles of prohibition, inhibition, or permission.

The love poetry surrounding the Lady erects an inhuman partner, Lacan notes, even a cruel partner. The anamorphic aspect is – You think she's this (your greatest Blessing), but she's really that – she's something Else. Lacan seems to have changed position between 1960 and 1973, however. He wrote in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* that courtly love is narcissistic, the feminine object being voided of any real substance, her real virtues of prudence, wisdom, etc., not being extolled (150-151). In 1973 he wrote that, given the sexual impasse, the only true possibility for love between men and women is in some form of courtly love. By 1973 Lacan no longer confused the object with the person, neither the man as lover nor the woman as beloved. The feminine object had become what in the beloved is more than he or she – the *agalma* – which is approachable only in terms of concrete traits organized around the partial drives, material that can arise from a man or a woman (Dora's father's cigar smoke or Frau K.'s beautiful white body). He no longer equated Feminine with Woman, but with the identificatory position one takes toward the other – lover or beloved.

Indeed, it is precisely the valuing of love with which Umberto Eco at first reproached Lacan.<sup>18</sup> Eco writes that he, as a semiotician, was known as a great critic of Lacan. When Lacan came to Italy at one point many years ago, Lacan

decided, in Eco's words, to 'seduce' him. In a beguiling, soul-baring piece, Eco reveals how Lacan, after a long period of friendly conversations in Paris and Milan, unveiled Eco to himself, unconsciously, unwittingly, having first won Eco's heart in love. Umberto Eco and Lacan talked of everything but semiotics and psychoanalysis, and over the years Eco came to *love* Lacan – to suppose a kind of knowledge to him. His 'Histoire d'Amour' unveils just that. He abandoned his belief that Lacan was a charlatan, a shaman, a seducer of souls, on the grounds of love, and not the grounds of knowledge.

Thus the genesis of the sexual Thing, as Freud first unveiled it, is not materialist, evolutionary, chemical or biological. Its foundations lie, rather, in one's *prochain*, the *Nebenmensch*. Courtly love may well be an artificial organization of the signifier which tries to orient the conduit of the drive as it detours the object-*cause-of-desire* (S. VII, 181). The point of such an ethics of eroticism is, rather, that Lacan demonstrates a certain truth: that desire is transgressive (S. VII, 182). And Lacan finds this ethics implicit in Freud's 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' 1905) where the *Vorlust* – pleasure in displeasure (waiting, suspension, interrupted love) – points to desire.<sup>19</sup> But what is the goal in such an ethics? It is, Lacan maintains, the pleasure of the other as such, the supreme gift given to the other, which is a pleasure that requires discipline. The hurried, tragi-comic rituals of ordinary sexual commerce transmute the negativity of the superego onto the lived substance – the quintessence of *jouissance* – and Eros, the name Plato gave the son of poverty and necessity, goes a-begging. Such a love can only be ruled, then, by art, artifice – by the attention to detail and discipline that goes against the grain of the push for satisfaction (183).

Lacan's point is that the incest taboo, necessary in order that the social realm of exchange exist, is also a taboo against desire. It evolves as an edifice of superego morality that fixes human desire in negative *jouissance*. The genius of courtly love was to have circumvented the law-against-desire by evolving a means of making the 'real' present. Why, then, if this practice worked for approximately two centuries in England, France and Germany was it not permanently institutionalized? Lacan's answer is that the sexual Thing was not then, and is not now, the object (S.VII, 158). One only tries to attain the Thing – with its implicit promise of two becoming one – by way of the object. The Thing does not stay in place since it dwells in the drives which are not constant, moreover, the sexual Thing is the fantasy turned inside out, the structure of perversion.

The sorrow for sexed creatures is this: we settle for hurried, hasty, unsatisfying, inelegant *jouissances* in the haste of the drive to declare itself satisfied. But the drive always makes new moralities out of *jouissance*, even politically correct

ones. Whether the sexual imperative is heterosexual or homosexual makes no difference within Lacanian thinking. The point is, rather, that *jouissance* is an imperative, the twin sister of the superego. The thin voice of evanescent desire is stifled. Culture settles, then, for the sadism of its moralities and for sublimated desire – for art – which responds to the drives, not to the unconscious.

### *The 'New Middle Ages'*

One cannot but wonder what promise lies in the wedding of courtly love to psychoanalysis for the 'new Middle Ages'? What would it mean to 'return' to a system of love based on the chevalier's revealing, not his 'need' – *i.e.*, *jouissance* – but his castration (his lack/desire)? This leads us once more to Jacques-Alain Miller's Course of 1993-1994. The object, he says, is the *fetish* object. As such, it is metonymic, based on a libidinal connection. This is, moreover, a connection with the 'nothing' – the mark that leaves a cut in the *tout* of space, carving out lacks and simultaneously leaving an erotic trace of its libidinal impact. This makes of cause and effect one and the same.<sup>20</sup> One could extrapolate from Miller's Course of March 23, 1994 (*Donc*), for example, a more concrete understanding of Lacan's ethics of desire. Between the passivity of the object that Lacan places on the feminine side of his sexualisation tables ( $\{\mathcal{S}\}_a$ ) in place of the beloved, and the active *assumption* of one's own desire, we find the subject *qua* symbolic object, articulating its own connections to the Oedipal experience in the *après-coup* of the drives, in relation to the 'nothing much' Miller writes as the feint of courtly love:  $\frac{a}{\emptyset}$

At this point, the drives could be said to combine the demand for something with love, taken as the demand for 'nothing (much),' in an ethics of desire. In courtly love, the lover asks to be loved by showing himself as castrated – the opposite of the patriarchal male. Indeed, this is what Lacan meant by 'the signification of the phallus,' the phallus representing desire, the 'want' that points to a lack-in-being. But desiring what? If imaginary love (Freud's *Verliebtheit*) is quickly used and useless, if *jouissance* is but a reductionist shadow of the passions in play in love and desire, what else is at stake? What did the Lady in courtly love represent? In other words, what is targeted in desire? Lacan said *agalma*: the Lady's soul, the more in her than her, the dark-sided face of God.<sup>21</sup>

Lacan stressed the dilemma of the human subject caught in the drives which do not carry a 'message.' Desire and *jouissance* cannot be conflated into one and the same thing named 'sexuality.' But the 'real' returns anyway in the *parole*, in the spoken word, bearing the *jouissance* effects repressed in the unconscious. These are 'messages' that have lost their code or their *destinatoire*. For desire is a signifier in the symbolic and a part of its *cause* remains in the disassociation of *jouissance* from language, the part Lacan called the object *a*.

But it is sublimation, not repression, that allows us to rethink the relationship of art to language and knowledge. Freud named the four destinies of the drive as sublimation, reversal into the contrary, the return of the drive onto the person him- or herself, and repression, locating the source of the drive in sublimation. But, as Lacan pointed out in *Seminar VII*, neither art nor religion nor science take account of *jouissance*, the true source of what drives any knowledge quest. And he added: 'In any form of sublimation, the void will be determinative. Art organizes itself around this void. Religion avoids it. And science rejects it, envisioning, rather, the ideal of an absolute knowledge.' Psychoanalysis – like the practice of courtly love – aims at the place of the void at the point where it makes a concrete hole in the signifier. What Lacan put into perspective was that the subject, as response of the 'real,' dwells there, between the object and the signifier.<sup>22</sup>

Courtly love, in Lacan's estimation, gave the truth of psychoanalysis in an enigmatic practice that was more than art and Other than religion or science. In a distant period called the Middle Ages, this intellectual practice organized desire around the paradoxical object, an object constituted around its own disappearance, the object that psychoanalysis finds at the base of all material in the real: Woman. Today, in this moment of contemporary intellectual life where thinking, knowing, being, and loving are parsed into tiny positivistic compartments, each one separate from the other – going ever more steadily nowhere – how can one not be interested in the meaning of a practice that truly made of life an art?

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