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Past, Present, Future Perfect: Paradigms of History in Medievalism Studies

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Abstract

Brian Helgeland's film, *A Knight's Tale*, is usually taken to exemplify a paradigm of desire compatible with a capitalist narrative of continuous acquisition and achievement. In the film, another form of desire is evident, however, at odds with the capitalist narrative. Helgeland has introduced elements of that paradigm of desire usually termed courtly love, based on the deferral or renunciation of satisfaction. These elements appear to have been drawn from one of the seminal narratives of courtly love, Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot*. Since the study of a medieval or a medievalist text always involves a kind of historiography, a comparison of these two texts, viewed in the light of psychoanalytic understandings of desire and the history of desire, offers a way of investigating theories of history which underpin medievalism studies.

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Brian Helgeland's film, *A Knight's Tale*, is usually taken to exemplify a paradigm of desire compatible with a capitalist narrative of continuous acquisition and achievement. In the film, another form of desire is evident, however, at odds with the capitalist narrative. Helgeland has introduced elements of that paradigm of desire usually termed courtly love, based on the deferral or renunciation of satisfaction. These elements appear to have been drawn from one of the seminal narratives of courtly love, Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot*. Since the study of a medieval or a medievalist text always involves a kind of historiography, a comparison of these two texts, viewed in the light of psychoanalytic understandings of desire and the history of desire, offers a way of investigating theories of history which underpin medievalism studies.

'[C]ourtly love has ... left traces in ... a traditional unconscious that is sustained by a whole literature, a whole imagery, that we continue to inhabit.' (Jacques Lacan)¹

'History does not explain a discourse, it frames it and defines its conditions of acceptability; fixing the parameters from which a question – or a discourse – can articulate itself at a given moment in time.' (Jean-Charles Huchet)²

'History is not the past. History is the past in so far as it is historicised in the present – historicised in the present because it was lived in the past.' (Jacques Lacan)³

How we study a medievalist text is always a question of history since it asks for a theorization of our relation to a past. Although the three quotations which herald this paper are all psychoanalytic accounts, each suggests rather different ways of understanding this relation. This article traces the appearance and function of desire

1 *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. and notes Dennis Porter, Book VII of *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* (New York: Norton, 1997), p. 112.

2 *L'amour courtois: La 'fin'amor' chez les premiers troubadours* (Paris: Privat, 1987), p. 15.

3 *Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*, trans. and notes John Forrester, Book I of *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* (New York: Norton, 1991), p. 12.



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