

---

H-France Review Vol. 14 (February 2014), No. 23

Zrinka Stahuljak, *Pornographic Archaeology: Medicine, Medievalism, and the Invention of the French Nation*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. viii + 338 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$67.50 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-0812244472.

Reviewed by Stephen P. McCormick, University of South Carolina.

*Pornographic Archaeology: Medicine, Medievalism, and the Invention of the French Nation* is in many ways a game changing reassessment of modern French medieval studies in its attempt to answer why and how the discipline has systematically disregarded sexuality in its investigation of early national literature. Zrinka Stahuljak demonstrates that this occlusion of sexuality from literary study took place even though nineteenth-century medical discourse turned to medieval sexuality to build national and colonial ideologies and to consolidate ideas of race and marriage. This work's contribution to our understanding of genealogy as it was understood in the medieval context and how it became medicalized in the nineteenth century provides a productive platform upon which further studies can set out to interpret primary literary documents in a new light. Stahuljak's impressive ability to assemble in a coherent manner disparate source materials—medical treatises, historiographical accounts, manuscript stemma, and even lead badges dredged up from the bottom of the Seine river—contextualizes within cultural history a field that has been dominated by literary analysis.

Stahuljak's book adds a significant contribution to an increasingly vocal body of research into the intimate links between nineteenth-century nation-building efforts and the French medieval past. Previous works have been concerned primarily with the reception and interpretation of French medieval literature, especially epic, within fervent discussions of nationalism. Stahuljak's study is an attempt to understand the cultural and theoretical mechanisms behind this issue. *Pornographic Archaeology* is interested in how medieval instances of sexual deviance factored into the medical discourse of the nineteenth century, and how the nineteenth-century scholars then constructed "medical medievalism" at the juncture of medieval historiography and medical discourse.

Stahuljak divides her study into three sections: sex and blood, sex and race, and sex and love. The first two chapters attempt to establish a fundamental shift in the notion of heredity brought about by the nineteenth century's intense engagement with medicine and biological systems. Issuing from the interplay between history and a reconceptualized notion of heredity, doctor-historians succeeded in firmly implanting the Middle Ages into medical discourse. From a close examination of the use of the noun "heredity" and the adjective "hereditary" in nineteenth-century medical publications, Stahuljak is able to detect a "medicalization" of the notion of the social phenomenon of succession, which was the operating paradigm of the Middle Age's transmission of patrimony. Heredity went from a socio-juridical mechanism to a biological one in which individual traits were passed down to offspring like titles, and lands were passed down in medieval lines of succession.

Through what Stahuljak calls a "pathologic archaeology," historians now wielded the tool of medicine and biological heredity to investigate the degeneration of the Ancien Regime. By understanding the pathologies of the past, historians could secure the purity and stability of the modern French race. To demonstrate how a "pathologic archaeology" works, Stahuljak focuses on the consanguinity debate of

1856-1866, which used hereditarianism as its ideological base. On one side, the consanguinists advocated for in-breeding among the strongest and most vigorous citizens of the French nation. To avoid a "morbid heredity," or the passing on of undesirable traits that could ultimately threaten the survival of the French nation, the consanguinists "taught that cross-breeding cannot remedy morbid heredity, while in-breeding strengthens normal heredity" (pp. 31). On the other side of the debate, led by Dr. Francis Devay (1813-1863), the anti-consanguinists argued that exogamous marriage replenished hereditary blood with fortifying traits. The anti-consanguinists cited the degeneration of the Ancien Regime to argue their case against consanguinity and thus called for "regeneration" of the French race through cross-breeding.

Through the sinuous ins and outs of this complicated debate between nineteenth-century scientists, Stahuljak succeeds in showing that medicine bound itself inexorably to the disciplines of history and philology. Within the purview of medicine, history was recast as an objective, scientific, and knowable undertaking; without medicine, history is only an art. Nineteenth-century positivist doctors and thinkers were confident that the causes of civil degeneration could be unraveled through specific examples of historical pathologies. "Doctor-philologists" could now dissect historical medical cases like Louis XIV (who suffered from an anal fistula) and Francis I (who was riddled with wounds and stricken with syphilis).

The chapter on biological heredity and medieval kinship is one of the most important from a literary and theoretical standpoint. Like the previous chapter, this argument traces a "medicalization" of a medieval concept as the notion of blood shifts from the metaphorical to the biological. Stahuljak articulates a fascinating development of blood from a juridical-social concept (like heredity above) in the Middle Ages and in the Ancien Regime to a wholly materialist construct by 1850, grounded in biology and medicine.

Under the rubric of blood, the structures of paternity underwent similar diachronic revisions. As it was imagined by the Ancien Regime, paternity was discursively created through an "act of faith." Paternity and Ancien Regime genealogies rested upon the pronouncement of fatherhood that had to be believed for the genealogies to be validated. Such "genealogical fictions," sustained by blood as metaphor, disintegrated with the arrival of nineteenth-century medical practice. Here, genealogy became a biological act that passed legitimacy through blood as a fluid. "Genealogy's primary signification was no longer based on faith and marriage law but on blood descent, whereby heredity put an end to medieval genealogical fictions" (p. 56).

From this conceptual shift in the notion of blood, modern medieval studies inherited the nineteenth-century medical apparatus that saw blood as a material fluid responsible for inherited traits. Stahuljak offers here a convincing and useful critique of Gabrielle Spiegel's rejection of Michel Foucault's theory of genealogy in our appraisals of the medieval past.<sup>[1]</sup> Spiegel's notion of genealogy is tinged with medical and biological discourse and fails to see that genealogy, apart from this biological function, can also be a mode of analysis, "a paradigm." (p. 63). Stahuljak deftly sidesteps Spiegel's concern for anachronism and argues that Foucault's notion of genealogy "helps contemporaries see medieval genealogy for what it is, a discourse" (p. 68). As such, genealogy in the Middle Ages is an effect of power that is created through the juridical-social nature of blood.

The following two chapters form part two, "Sex and Race," and undertake an examination of the racial implications of morbid heredity and the role the Middle Ages played in the medical reassessment of nineteenth-century France. Chapter three examines the historiography behind the brutal trial and execution of fifty-four Templar knights by Philippe IV (le Bel) in May 1310. At the center of nineteenth-century discussion of this event was a tangled network of connections between the Orient, the Middle Ages, sodomy, and pederasty. From this intersection, Stahuljak argues, emerges the putative moral degradation that is set in motion from contact with non-European cultures. Through the example of the

Templars, nineteenth-century medical discourse traced the origin of disease and vice to long ago, the Middle Ages, and far away, the Orient. This medicalized assessment of the origin of vice and disease (especially syphilis) was a justification against mixing of racial blood, *métissage*. Contamination from the colonies had the potential to degenerate civilized imperial cultures—as per the historical precedent of the Templars—and menace the health and purity of metropolitan France.

In the last section, "Sex and Love," Stahuljak's investigation takes up Paul Lacroix's notion of "pornographic archaeology," which posits that an understanding of medieval society could be reached through a comprehensive review of the period's sexual practices.[2] For Stahuljak the discipline of Romance philology is embedded within this same archaeology. Instead of using monuments, language—and especially the erotic language of the *fabliaux*—could be used in a reconstruction of medieval life. The centerpiece of the fifth chapter gets to the heart of a long-standing critique of Romance philology, namely that the field is, as Bernard Cerquiglini has famously put it, "a bourgeois, paternalist, and hygienist system of thought about the family." [3] Stahuljak meticulously retraces the emergence of the modern discipline of Romance philology as it vehemently separated itself from a more dilettante generation of Romantic medievalists. Philologists such as Paul Meyer considered themselves scientific, equipped with the tools to uncover the history of the French language and to arrive at the origins of the modern French nation. Taking their cue from medieval discourse of the time, the Romance philologists medicalized manuscript families, and the "doctor-philologist" stepped in to correct the morbid pathologies of manuscript exemplars that deviated from the MS O, or the elusive "archetype *Urtext*." As was the case with the Templars and the assumed Oriental origins of sodomitic vice and syphilis, philologists were quick to attach an orientalized origin-theory to the erotic *fabliaux* tradition. Chivalric values, however, were seen as distinctively French in origin, and nineteenth-century philology bridged the temporal abyss between colonial France's *mission civilisatrice* and medieval France's chivalric tradition. Stahuljak concludes that "if chivalry was France's original civilizational export, sex on the contrary corrupted a civilization by importation and imitation of foreign Oriental lifestyles" (p. 162).

The civilizing power of medieval chivalry in France's colonial age leads to Stahuljak's take on our modern understanding of courtly love and the nineteenth century's invention of "courtly marriage." Contextualized within the debate on divorce, which flared from 1876 to 1884, the period when the right to divorce was reintroduced, Stahuljak proposes a creative and innovative reading of the notion of courtly love as it is read and reimaged in the nineteenth century. Doctors were compelled to act as philologists in order to sidestep moral concerns of divorce and to recast marriage not as simply an act of procreation and instinct, but rather as an act of love. Reading medieval theories of love, especially those of Andreas Capellanus, and the erotically tinged lyric of troubadour and *trouvère* poets, doctors envisioned a renewed vigor and sexual health for the French nation. Philologists and doctors reconfigured the basis of marriage to include love and ultimately arrived at what Stahuljak calls "courtly marriage."

It could be argued that one of the scholarly feats of this book, the integration of an immense base of source material, may also emerge as problematic since the foundation of the work at times cracks under its own weight. The book's treatment of the vexing problem of manuscript families and textual transmission is refreshing, but the cursory treatment of it leaves the reader wanting more. Recent trends have aimed to recast manuscript variance as productive rather than deviant, but have yet lacked the theoretical legerdemain to do so effectively. Stahuljak's reading of manuscript lineage as a "morbid pathology" that menaces the health of the modern nation gives us a promising lead to tackle an old problem.

Stahuljak's revision of textual transmission coupled with the civilizing force of French medieval chivalry offer significant inroads into the murky terrain of medieval literary traditions that fall outside of national literary histories. Franco-Italian epic, Anglonorman texts, and texts from the medieval *outrémer* will all benefit from Stahuljak's conclusions. It could be argued that Franco-Italian epic studies, a

subcategory of epic scholarship that examines epic texts written in a hybrid French-Italian language, owes its initial assessment and its very definition to the medicalizing tendencies described in this book. Famously described as a deformation of the national language, Franco-Italian is an excellent candidate to continue Stahuljak's notion of "deviance, perversion, or morbid pathology of manuscript lineage" (p. 151).

*Pornographic Archaeology's* scope and ambition should be commended. Stahuljak's creativity is exhilarating, and her approach has succeeded very well in demonstrating the interconnectedness of medicine and nineteenth-century discussions of nation and race. This contribution offers an impressive bibliographical array as well as directions for future scholars, and it gives renewed energy to some favorite topics of modern medieval studies such as lineage, courtly love, chivalry and textual transmission.

## NOTES

[1] Gabrielle Spiegel, "Foucault and the Problem of Genealogy," *Medieval History Journal* 4:1 (2001): 1-14.

[2] Paul Lacroix (pseud. Pierre Dufour), *Histoire de la Prostitution, chez tous les peuples du monde depuis l'antiquité la plus reculée jusqu'à nos jours*, 6 vols. (Paris: Seré; Martinon, 1851-1853). See Stahuljak, 131.

[3] Bernard Cerquiglini, *In Praise of the Variant: A Critical History of Philology*, trans. Betsy Wing (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 49. Cited in Stahuljak, p. 150.

Stephen P. McCormick  
University of South Carolina  
[smccormi@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:smccormi@mailbox.sc.edu)

Copyright © 2013 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172