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Response to Carol Symes's review of Peter Haidu, *The Subject Medieval/Modern: Text and Governance in the Middle Ages*.

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*The Subject Medieval/Modern* poses a major challenge to the discipline of history. The challenge is amicable: the book relies on history for its framework, and makes history the creative subject of its narrative action. It proposes that the "subject" of the title, usually considered as a construct of philosophy, politics, or theory, is, rather, the product of history. Part of the demonstration of the subject's historicity occurs in three chapters that are directly historical. But most of the demonstration occurs in the twelve chapters that deploy sophisticated forms of critique mixed with literary analysis: the historical subjectivity, it is argued, appears first in "literary" works, in multiple ways, and with multiple significations. The thesis of the book can be stated in historical terms, but its evidence has to be in the analysis of "literary" texts, complex written artifacts whose status is--taking the term broadly--"aesthetic."

The challenge to history lies in history's use of "literary" artifacts. The use of narrative details as *realia* was a historical norm in the early twentieth century. It was thrown into disrepute by the deconstruction of literary "realism." The next stage was a radical separation of history and literary textuality: for a while, art for art's sake and history did not communicate. The re-establishment of communications started a while back: my own first effort was a series of articles in the early 1980s.[1] Now comes *The Subject Medieval/Modern*, which argues that the subjective heart of textuality is a product of historical political evolution, and demonstrates it by sophisticated, theoretically informed analyses of poetic and fictional narrative texts, nourished by extensive historical research regarding the shape of European history.

Carol Symes's response to the challenge is an egregious failure. Its outrageous, slash-and-trash farrago is made up of misapprehensions, straight-out mendacities, and intentional disinformation. Whatever the weaknesses of *The Subject Medieval/Modern*--I'm aware of some, there certainly are others--Symes's text is a gross, inexcusable deformation, both of the book and of professional norms. The claims of *The Subject Medieval/Modern* are large and debatable. Debate depends on understanding the claims. Rather than a review of the book in question, Symes unfurls a polemic *blitzkrieg* of misrepresentation that deforms professional discourse. Symes's dereliction as reviewer presents an obstacle to rational debate and evaluation of the book's claims.

That dereliction is itself pertinent to the book's thesis on the fragility of the subject's constitution. What was there in *The Subject Medieval/Modern* that occasioned this particular historian's skid into falsifiable discourse, as unacceptable in the discipline of history as that of literature? Symes's contradiction of the disciplinary ideologeme of truth is so insistent it can only be a reaction to something seen as a negation of the subject's ontology or existence. There is that in *The Subject Medieval/Modern* which denies, unforeseeably--I never heard of Symes before--the very status of Carol Symes as a disciplinary subject.

The dysfunctional cyber-encounter between an independent work of interdisciplinary scholarship of large intellectual claims and a reviewing subject of impressive depths of ignorance and utter lack of professional ethics was orchestrated for cacophony by chance. I am grateful to Michael Wolfe and H-France for the hospitality that offers the occasion to reflect upon this *meshuggenah* mismatch. I must

implore the reader's patience: rational evidentiary rebuttal is more painstaking and takes longer than the slap-dash smear that knows no limit to falsity.

The first section will address specific points made by Symes. But Symes's polemic requires more than pointillistic rebuttal. The second section deals more discursively with a major theoretical difference regarding the encounter of two cultures, the oral and the written, and the issue of *mouvance* in relation to codicology.

Symes states that the choice of texts in *The Subject Medieval/Modern* is "random" and "subjective." This is false. The Introduction specifies that the book addresses the canon of medieval French literature, established during the nineteenth century's solidification of the state. The canon parallels state evolution, both in the medieval period when the texts were composed and in the nineteenth century when philology canonized them. There are two major exceptions: the *Roman de Silence* and Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*. Both entered the canon recently, in the United States only (French medievalism continues largely to ignore both), as a result of the politics of gender identities. To claim, as does Symes, that the St Alexis, the Roland, Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, Raoul de Cambrai, the Roman de la rose, or François Villon figure merely as personal, random, subjective favorites, is "idiotic" in the sense of the irrational pronouncement of a singular individual. As Bill Clinton might have said, had he found himself improbably in my position, "It's the canon, stupid!"

Symes states that *The Subject Medieval/Modern* reduces Europe, the world, and the Middle Ages to France. This is false. England and France invented the state-form, which then invades Europe and later the world. The book does specify that the medieval state-formation had world-wide effects. To study the beginning of an evolution does not reduce the rest of history to that moment.

Symes picks arguments about issues discussed in *The Subject Medieval/Modern* without acknowledging those discussions: this is a suppression of thought. Symes does not actively disagree with the fundamental distinction of subject and identity, articulated and repeated throughout the book and essential to its conceptual structure: the discussions are disregarded, the distinction obliterated. Easy, anyone can do it: just dance and trample!

The most glorious gross-out of Symes's misrepresentations occurs in the grotesque statement that "Haidu is curiously uninterested in historical context, or in the larger implications of his argument for the study of history." As noted, the conception of the entire book is that history is both the context and the motive force of creation of subjectivity--not at all a foregone conclusion from the philosophical, theoretical or literary perspectives. The "larger implications" are obvious and repeatedly stated in the book: the concepts of "medieval" and "modern" have to be rethought fundamentally--the book's conclusion, which Symes's text, having cast all manner of deceitful misinformation, filches for its own conclusion.

Symes's own text disproves Symes. Attempting to establish a reviewer's objectivity, Symes says a few good things about the historical chapters as "artful critique." If the chapters that limn the process of state-formation and provide the framework for the literary chapters are deemed acceptable, how is the charge of disinterest in "historical contextualization" tenable?

Of course, Symes taketh away what Symes giveth. Symes belittles even what Symes praiseth. *The Subject Medieval/Modern* is indebted to historians--a sin for Symes, a historian. I, on the other hand, am grateful to professional historians, and happily acknowledge debts to Joseph Strayer and R. I. Moore, whose importance Symes recognizes. Symes does not recognize equally important debts to historians like Georges Duby, Pierre Bonnassie, and Robert Fossier, debts that further strengthen *The Subject*

*Medieval/Modern*: perhaps Symes considers French historians of the French Middle Ages secondary by definition.[2] Symes claims the book's thesis is "axiomatic", and asserts it is "not new", but neglects to say where what is "axiomatically" "not new" has been articulated previously. *N'importe quoi!*

The historiographical problematic is addressed throughout the book: the introduction concludes with discussion of "historicism", the conclusion with a section titled "Historicisms: Sacred/Profane" (pp. 359-364). Symes's charge of disregarding historical contextualization is a desperate, mind-boggling falsehood—a "Big Lie."

To distortion and mendacity, Symes adds gratuitous insult. If the teaching of medieval history changes after *The Subject Medieval/Modern*, it is going to be hard work, but nowhere near as hard as researching, writing, revising, and editing the book: the glancing suggestion of authorial sloth is gratuitous insult, a minor snide, sneering, sniggling falsehood in a much larger web.

Some of Symes is too ridiculous for belief. For someone to supposedly have read *The Subject Medieval/Modern*, and believe that I privilege prose "as the only serious discursive mode", is truly asinine: the book is mostly about poetic texts, taken very seriously indeed. Prose is the ordinary vehicle for discursive ideology, but in the Middle Ages, prose is rare until the thirteenth century (on the beginning of prose, see pp. 281-287). Therefore I claim, against Symes's lying innuendo to the contrary, "lyric poems, poetic epics, verse narratives, verse histories" (p. 72) in fact bear the weight of functioning as ideology.

In addition to outright mendacity and gross deformations, Symes's use of language, though vigorous, is ambiguous because imprecise. What is meant is sometimes difficult to ascertain. The absurdity of Symes's rhetorical question, "what makes Haidu think...that the clergy was a species of political animal readily distinguishable from knights?" is breath-taking. Given Symes's ignorance of modern theory, I take that "political animal" does not intend to suggest a comparison of human society in the European Middle Ages with that of ants, gorillas, or wolves, in the wake of reflections by Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben.[3] The trope is merely another vigorously meaningless gesture whose function is to distract the reader from the absurdity of the discourse in which it is embedded.

It is a historiographical cliché that medieval clerics, especially those who reach positions of high power like abbots and bishops, were often the younger sons of noble families, destined to a clerical career by the rule of primogeniture, who retained aristocratic prejudices throughout their clerical careers. But primogeniture made a difference, and the rest of life was profoundly changed! What distinguished knights from clerics? Signs: clothing for one; language for another; rituals for a third; practices such as reading vs. illiteracy; membership in institutions; the architecture of buildings erected at their commands; and then the little matter of values, including ideology, as revealed in the animals they rode, the food they ate, the songs they sang, etc. The fact that both knights and clerics lived by extracting surplus value from peasants did not prevent the elaboration of major differences in culture and ideology. No medieval person thought knights and clerics indistinguishable, except perhaps when *fabliaux* reveled in the trickery of one disguised as the other. Their opposition is as widely and as frequently repeated as that between men and women; indeed, there is a partial overlap, as priests were said to wear dresses like women. Symes, ignoring the evidence of medieval texts, credits the notion of an eleventh-century ideological crisis but not the social differentiation and conflict at its base!

Does the last sentence of Symes's second paragraph attempt a summary of the book's thesis, or its denial? Is *The Subject Medieval/Modern* accused of arbitrarily imposing postmodern definitions of the subject onto medieval texts, or does it argue that those definitions start in the Middle Ages? Having reread the eighty-five word sentence a number of times, I still can't tell. What cannot be gleaned from

Symes is the fact that the book includes at least five medieval definitions of subjectivity: those of Benedict of Nursia (founder of the Benedictine Order), the *Serments de Strasbourg*, Philippe de Beaumanoir, Christine de Pizan, and Alain Chartier.

The status of such historicist self-definitions is frankly problematic. Unfortunately, when Symes stumbles upon a theoretical problem, its *membra* are left *disjecta*. My work is firmly committed to historicizing, but quite skeptical of “historicism”, the doctrine that a period is to be understood in terms of its own self-understanding—Symes doesn’t know the difference. [4] The self-understanding of historicism is tinged or strongly colored by ideological commitments and cultural blinders. On the other hand, it cannot be disregarded. It would be irresponsible to ignore the potential universalism suggested by the juxtaposition of certain historical formulations from the sixth to the fifteenth centuries, with those of the most advanced contemporary theoreticians of subjectivity. These medieval definitions of subjectivity are not adduced as determinative: they are subjected to the evidentiary confirmation of the vernacular texts. The particular mix of historicism and presentism required by a particular research project is a matter of particular negotiation.

Symes claims *The Subject Medieval/Modern* disregards “the texts’ interest in their own incipient textuality.” Again, what this means is unclear. I see two possibilities. First, if Symes means self-reflexivity, then structures of textual self-reflexivity are what I have worked on since my earliest work on irony and symbolism. After parenthetical amplification of the concept, the index to *The Subject Medieval/Modern* lists a dozen entries on “self-reflexivity.” I hold to the odd belief that medieval writers and their texts engaged in the activity of thinking, and did so powerfully. In some areas, they anticipated us. Our historiographical prejudices about what were “the Middle Ages” or “the medieval mind” blinds us to the brilliance and the profundity of their works. There is a danger that self-reflexivity can suggest vacuity, nothing but self-mirroring. That approach is not unknown in medieval studies today; it is not mine. On the contrary, I insist on the political content of self-reflexivity. I argue for political constitution of self-reflexivity in *The Subject Medieval/Modern*.

Secondly, if Symes means the oral work’s implicit potential for being turned into a written text, the brief response is that it is irrelevant. *The Subject Medieval/Modern* is concerned with the connection between texts and political evolution: the prior process by which they become texts is irrelevant. What counts is that the edition put to use contain a reliable, authentic medieval text. Symes does not take issue with a single text or edition employed. For the fuller response, see the discussion of *mouvance* below.

On the other hand, *The Subject Medieval/Modern* introduces a hypothesis regarding the “extraordinary *prise de conscience*” which led the culture of writing designated as “romance” to take cognizance of a disappearing oral culture, to save and preserve its remnants...an effort to which we owe the survival of the epic texts we have (p. 40).

It is perhaps time to introduce a description of *The Subject Medieval/Modern* (without attempting a review of it, not mine to write). The thesis is as follows: Responding to the increased size of the territory under governance, state-formation in England and France during the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries produced bureaucracies of representation to which fell functions of extraction and surveillance. With the representational function, an ideological domain, already announced in the Peace Movement, was constituted which achieved a state of relative autonomy, both enacting and transgressing the subjectivizing function of ideology. This bureaucracy was the core of a momentous change: a civilization of discipline was initiated. Its textual explorations of subjectivity recorded, inscribed, and partly created the self-reflexive contradictions of divided subjects, explorations of ideology and subjectivity performed by vernacular texts in all their contradictory complexity, as the occasion of freedom.

The thesis's historical argumentation is mostly located in chapters one, eight and nine. The evidence of its claims is located in the twelve chapters engaged in fairly intense analysis of individual works of "literature." These "literary" chapters track diverse forms of subjectivity textually inscribed from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries, from the *Vie de Saint Alexis* to Villon's *Testament*.<sup>[5]</sup> These analyses address issues of violence, domination, ideology, identity, class, colonialism, gender, and incipient nationalism--the themes specified in the back-jacket copy that occasion more Symian sneers. Maybe such issues are unimportant to Symes?

The intersection of history, literary criticism and history, and "theory" constitute a historico-textual analysis which is also a reflection on social, political, and cultural life, mediated by the central ambiguity of representation. It establishes a common ground for social, political, bureaucratic, historical and literary practices.

One form of representation is ideology. Symes objects to the notion that ideology "takes on a life of its own." The phrasing oversimplifies: it is not mine. On the contrary, *The Subject Medieval/Modern* insists that ideology must retain connection with what it ideologizes. In the chapter on the eleventh-century Peace Movement, which is simultaneously an exercise in medieval history and a twenty-first century political reflection on theory of ideology, the book refers to Althusser:

An imaginary relation to real conditions of existence, [ideology] addresses real practices, institutions, and interests. Its (re)constitution of subjects can succeed only if it helps them to operate in the real parameters of their social formation... It negotiates the potential subject's conditions of existence, his or her real-life interests (p. 33).

Among the diverse statuses attributed to "ideology", *The Subject Medieval/Modern* chooses the Althusserian formulation of a "relative autonomy" (e.g. pp. 38, 55, etc.), in the full ambiguity of that expression: partial autonomy, more or less attached to its original functions, but with partial indetermination. In a complex, historical society, such as both the Middle Ages and the present, ideologemes of different origins circulate, contaminate each other, and recombine. Ideological identity is never a given. Its instability is a condition of freedom.

Furthermore, ideology is not always a separate category of representation, clearly labeled and titled. It is also an aspect of cultural activities, including fiction, poetry, art and ritual. Precisely because it is borne by fiction and other cultural practices, surprising juxtapositions and transformations occur. Fictions are not entirely determined by a unitary ideological content: they are sites of traversal, e.g. feudalism and monarchy in a series of epics (the *Roland*, *Le Couronnement de Louis*, etc.) and Chrétien's novels. To read fiction as totally determined by a single ideology is to wear old-fashioned blinders indeed! Fiction, as well as other texts, produces significations, in the plural, including ideology. Neither meaning nor ideological import can be "read off" as if they were obvious at the surface. It requires digging and recognition of medieval perspectivalism.<sup>[6]</sup>

A corollary is the difficulty of pin-tacking texts on a prior grid of socio-political structures. Texts and socio-political structures do not line up one-to-one. On the contrary, cultural and political codes traverse texts with remarkable independence. Thus, one finds socio-political critique and even economic analysis in an aristocratic courtly romance, and stirring accounts of peasant rebellion in royally commissioned histories.<sup>[7]</sup> I would not consider the *fabliaux* courtly texts; nor would I assign them to a purely imaginary set of "scandalous" obsessions, sexual and otherwise, above or beside all social structure.<sup>[8]</sup> If they are close to any social group, it is the urban bourgeoisie, with the emphasis on tricky manipulation, fairly crude sex, and money, but they often ridicule burghers, male and female, as well as knights and peasants. Insofar as they are urban bourgeois self-representations, they know self-

ridicule and self-directed critique. Identity can self-deconstruct in discourse. Medieval texts do not reproduce ideology in a simple, unified manner. So-called “chivalric romance” in fact performs critiques of knighthood, aristocracy, and royalty.

But no medieval text I know of is, in Symes’s phrase, “demonstrably popular”—none, not a single one, zero! The notion of “popular” is not innocent. It assumes the existence of “a people”, of which there is little evidence in the Middle Ages before the inception of a “nation” at the present level, which started in France in reaction to the Hundred Years’ War.[9] Medieval thinkers formulated their thought in terms of multitudes (*multitudo*), even though their acquaintance with the works of Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, and even Hobbes and Spinoza was distant and imprecise.[10] “The people” implies a cohesion absent from “the multitude”: it is not a given, it is the result of historical process, the same as that which forms “nations.”[11] More important, the social groups that would be candidates for the role of “the people”—the peasants, the urban proletariat and sub-proletariat—almost never write themselves. The best we can hope for is a sympathetic transcription by a faithful scribe, such as Thomas Bisson finds.[12] In the Middle Ages, all “popular” utterance is mediated by scribes, sympathetic or hostile, but always constituted as subjects in a scriptorial technology as well as the associated culture and its ideology, that sets them off from their interlocutors.

The texts cited by Symes, that *The Subject Medieval/Modern* ought to have considered but unaccountably omits, are the scripts of theater pieces with clear clerical influence—the *Jeu d’Adam* boasts Latin stage directions, sure to be understood by a large, popular audience! If it is essential to identify the social and political codes that traverse particular texts, it is not in order to establish allegories of social classes in a putative system of “literary” genres. It is to allow the texts to speak to the social conflicts or tensions that produced them, and to hear them with respect for their utterances, possibly more sophisticated than we expect. Texts think and speak in polysemous terms, medieval texts as much as modern. Above all, instead of presenting neatly wrapped “meanings” for purchase and carry-out, they are constituted as texts by the contradictions that traverse them. Accompanying the state-form is increased reliance on writing, bureaucracy, and archiving. Hence the necessity of focusing on that sign-system which is crucial in the state-form: writing, which grounds bureaucratic stability, reiterability, and the possibility of textual verification, rather than the ever-shifting shapes of orality or *mouvance* (more about which below).

The quotation marks around the word “literary” are not scare quotes. They mark a complex situation of historical epistemology. “Literature” in the modern context designates a complex institution.[13] Around author and the act of writing as the original center, there gather accretions, an enormous set of “secondary” activities which overwhelm the initial creative act, from the publisher’s establishment, its financial concerns, their publicity campaigns, journalistic and television reviewing, to academic departments of study, including print and internet media such as this. Associated with these institutional accretions is an aesthetic ideology that does not pertain to medieval textuality: valorization of individual originality, devalorization of overt repetitions, and generic distinctions of the serious and the comic, of the fictional and the historic. What does exist in the Middle Ages is an enormous amount of writing that constitutes a domain of practice outside our own, prior to our own, marked by a degree of cultural and cognitive alterity, but which responds remarkably well to the sophisticated tools of analysis developed both by traditional medieval scholarship (the analytic tools in the *trivium*, namely grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic) and by contemporary theory (semiotics, deconstruction, etc.): their continuity is defined by the centrality of language and representation. Furthermore, when texts are examined closely, the “medieval” turns into modernity incrementally, bit by bit or wholesale. Opposites turn into each other, and wind up inhabiting each other in reversal of our presuppositions. It is that combination of disjunctions and conjunctions between the medieval and the modern that the quotation marks around “literary” seek to caution, along with the necessity of negotiating combinations of those

opposites. Even recognizing the medieval texts' alterity, we cannot undo our own modern constitution.[14] The resultant positioning of the critical subject is not easy; its demands are the price of honesty.

Like all my work outside of theoretical reflection, the component of literary criticism in *The Subject Medieval/Modern* focuses intently on individual texts, analyzing both language and overall structure in most cases. Unlike my earlier work, however, the methodology of *The Subject Medieval/Modern* is eclectic, from word counts and distributions to stylistic and narrative analysis, with ventures into philosophical excavation. This eclecticism was a conscious choice, decided by theoretical consideration. Contemporary theory of the subject, briefly tracked in the Introduction, starts from Louis Althusser's notion of ideology as constitutive of the subject, but variously modifies it to allow some degree of freedom to the subject. Methodological eclecticism allows for tracking differences in the subjectivities examined by the "literary" texts. This openness allows the "literary" chapters to register the evidence for the historical and theoretical claims announced at the beginning, and to establish it in different ways, as determined by the character of the texts. In spite of certain disconnects, the historical and the "literary" are strongly interdependent.

Thus, the reason the *lais* of Marie de France "are touted [sic!] as 'postcolonial'", is that (1) historically, they are most likely to be located in England, in the wake of William the Conqueror's invasion and annexation of England to his Norman base; and (2) that, textually, the collection of the *lais* insistently triangulates their own position toward the "Breton" past as a scene of narrative loss to be memorialized. Their structures orient a contemporary theoretical consciousness to identifying their performance as post-colonial—even if *The Subject Medieval/Modern* as a whole does not present itself as "post-colonial." Post-coloniality, in my book, is first a historical matter, before it turns into a cultural or a theoretical matter. Marie de France's *lais* are post-colonial in a perfectly literal sense, remembering that medieval theory identified the literal and the historical.

Symes seems innocent of the meanings imparted to "text" and "performance" by contemporary theory, i.e. reflection about language, literature, and meaning. "Text" is construed as something merely flat and written, in opposition to "performance", what the actress can do with (or to) the text that, as script, is her designated victim. For forty years or so, "text" has been whatever complex entity can be construed as a signifying whole that can be represented and analyzed in terms of the analytic instruments initially developed to address "literary texts." This includes, of course, popular texts such as "spinning songs, folk tales, and proverbs." Indeed, should Symes wish to take the trouble to learn, the sophisticated contemporary study of narrative, historical and other, had as one of its beginnings the formalist study of the folk tale.[15] It also includes a social whole, or the narrative of history.[16] "Performance", on the other hand, has been around for only fifteen years or so, and designates the possibility of individuals "performing" various social scripts—such as gender—with variations from the script going to the point of parody...an element of freedom analogous to that I claim within an Althusserian framework. [17] Symes makes this ignorance foundational. It functions as an entitlement to arrogant superiority over the field defined by ignorance. Instead of awareness of contemporary intellectual history, there is an insistent cathexis on trite, smoothly-worn, journalistic meanings, and a totalizing commitment to one unquestioned methodology, codicology, reconceived as an all-purpose, universal nostrum. To differentiate this totalization from the serious, professional use of the discipline, call it "coco-dicology".

Symes waves the coco-dicological gonfanon as a methodology to solve all interpretive problems for textual criticism, in particular that of *mouvance*. Codicology, the technical study of the book as physical object, examines bindings, the material of the pages, their ruling, their pricking, the stitch marks at their edges. It appeals to the American taste for the technological concrete unclouded by theoretical vapors. More recently, codicology has spread to overlap with paleography and text-editing. It is an honorable

calling, insofar as its concerns are a necessary part of the archival civilization. It is, in fact, the latest reincarnation of philology. A philology that dares not say its name, and sometimes repeats its predecessor's errors.

A brief review of well-known history is appropriate. Finding that manuscripts did not give them texts they considered correctly "medieval", nineteenth century scholars--brilliant, dogged men of enormous learning but limited theoretical consciousness--postulated that the multiplicity of manuscripts lying in European libraries were but degenerate versions of better but lost originals. The task of the scholar was to reconstruct the lost original, the Ur-text. The practice was punctured by Joseph Bédier in the early twentieth century: the Ur-text was a fiction, the editor's invention, subjectively ahistorical. Bédier argued for the selection and reproduction of a single, unreconstructed, "uncorrected" manuscript as the basis of text edition.[18] Bernard Cerquiglini tracked this history accurately and shrewdly, but concluded in direct opposition to Bédier.[19] Rather than seek fidelity to an authentic medieval text, Cerquiglini urged equipping students with Hypertext and all the variants of a given text on their computers, to have them recompose the text, thereby establishing today's regnant *doxa* of fluidity, scattered fragmentation, and free recombination. I admired the politics of his proposal but not its historiography, and told him so: that was not how to construct historical understanding of the past, nor how to reconstruct the present world. It institutionalized ahistorical revisionism on an individual, anarchic basis. Sadly, Cerquiglini's imaginative, hypothetical pedagogic suggestion has rigidified and is uncritically foisted on students as the dogmatically imposed ideology of one variant of codicology. *Mouvance* becomes the critical equivalent of "Montjoie!", Charlemagne's battle-cry, meaning: "free variants...*ne varietur!*"

Codicology has also attempted to recapture a unity of material criticism and literary interpretation that obtained "before the fall" which separated philology and criticism even before WW II. It has most recently expanded to the study of entire manuscripts as the "authorial" creation of the person who commissioned them--rather like reconstructing the collector's mind from his or her library. The exercise is valid in itself, but does not resolve the interpretation of the books themselves. The discipline's undoubted utility is less certain when bloated to include textual interpretation and cultural criticism. Nothing in the discipline of codicology itself licenses such textual interpretations or analyses. Their validity depends on extra-codicological considerations.

Symes acknowledges as much indirectly. In a long paragraph that inveighs against the eschewal of codicology--"bizarrely, intemperately"--Symes cites a text that has, in fact, received a good deal of codicological attention, the hagiographic *Vie de Saint Alexis*, generally considered the first masterpiece of Old French "literature." [20] The point of the brief discussion in *The Subject Medieval/Modern* is that the *Saint Alexis's* lesson of *askesis* and the avoidance of identity takes narrative form in the saint as anti-hero, which paradoxically allows for the first expression of "passionate, carnal love in French" (p. 55; pp. 52-56). In an oddly contorted sentence, Symes comments: "The fact that the conditions that shaped this particular text (in England, for the record) could be said to support Haidu's argument does not excuse him from dismissing them." Thinking about this sentence, I take its meaning as follows: my interpretation is unexceptionable; codicological analysis would not add anything substantial; but I ought to have performed an act of codicology to satisfy this codicologist's faith!

The codex in question is the *Saint Albans Psalter*, in Latin except for illuminations, one letter from Pope Gregory, and the *Saint Alexis*; its Latin sections include documents pertaining to the monastery of Lamspringe, calenderical materials, signs of the zodiac, the Psalms, the Canticles, the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, the *Gloria in Excelsis*, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the litany, and a collection of prayers in Latin. One of the major theses of *The Subject Medieval/Modern* is the necessity of ideology in the vernacular: "Ideology must encounter the subject addressed on its own terrain..."

Ideology must speak the subject's language—in every sense—addressing the subject's own culture and value systems.” (p. 33). That is why *The Subject Medieval/Modern* focuses on vernacular works. The Latin sections of the *St Albans Psalter*, whatever their intrinsic interest, lie outside its research parameters. At best, Christina of Markyate, for whom the Psalter may have been assembled, might offer a story reconstructed from multiple sources outside the Psalter as an edulcorated counter-narrative: like the saint, she stood up her spouse on their wedding night. Since her “biography”, however, offers the continuing relationship (supposedly innocent) with Geoffrey, Abbot of St Albans, it counters the saint's radically exclusive fixation on God with a complex, on-going female-to-male relationship, readily absorbed by American romantic sentimentalism and the individualism of post-industrial ideology. At best, the codicological study Symes calls for would introduce a pointless distraction, and add nothing to the thesis or the evidence of *The Subject Medieval/Modern*.

Symes treats dates light-heartedly. The *St Alexis* is usually dated ca. 1030-1040. The *St Albans Psalter* dates from about a century later, in the 1130's. The *Vie de Saint Alexis* had an independent existence prior to Christina. It was included in the Psalter as testimony to its power (as it would again figure in Peter Waldo's life: see pp. 55 f.). The codicological object is posterior to the textual object by a century or so. The codicological object is irrelevant to the discussion of the *Vie de Saint Alexis*, which sets it in the time-frame of its composition, as a clerical response to feudal violence alongside the Peace Movement.

Similarly, the work known as the Oxford *Roland* is normally dated ca. 1100 on the basis of internal evidence, at the nadir of the Capetian monarchy, when feudal fragmentation held sway over France. In this context, the poem's narrative balances the opposition of feudalism and monarchy on a knife's edge and implicitly critiques their cohabitation.[21] The physical manuscript, “Digby 23”, in the Bodleian library at Oxford, dates from roughly a hundred years later, at the very end of the twelfth century, during Philip Augustus's territorial expansion of Capetian *dominium*, and the tightening control monarchy exercises in that governance. Collapsing the distinction between work and manuscript rips the poem out of its cultural and political context, and replaces it in a different historical context, where its significance is either nostalgic antiquarianism or royal self-glorification. That is why I said, in the passage that Symes finds bizarre, intemperate, and carefully disfigures, that a chronology based on manuscripts rather than works “would radically reorganize literary history.” It would. It would also falsify it, and its relation to political history. The *Roland*, climax of the early heroic period of the oral epic, would become contemporary to Raoul de Cambrai, which marks the defeat of the nobility at the manipulations of Philip Augustus, and a decline of orality.[22] Collapsing the distinction between work and manuscript makes hash of history, and disregards the problematics of the encounter of oral with scribal culture. Symes seems incapable of grasping the argument. The *Alexis* and the *Roland* exemplify Symes's cavalier disregard for dates (or the relative dating that is available), remarkable in a historian, as well as for the historicization and contextualization that chronologies allow for.

I will not add to the voluminous literature on medieval orality with a discussion of *mouvance* that could only be inadequate and repetitious. The term, as used since Paul Zumthor's introduction of it in 1972, has at least two references.[23] One is to the fluidity of oral textuality and its permanent state of verbal and narrative flux. The other is to the glimpses into that world of perpetual metamorphosis allowed by scatterings of scribal inscriptions: manuscripts that, more or less distantly, record the recollection of (a) particular oral performance(s). These transcriptions have the same relation to the oral flux assay—half a dozen occasional, aleatory freeze-frames might have to the complex totality of the movie out of which they were cut. To jump from one to the other, in order to recapture the “original”, pristine work behind and within each of the multiple performances, repeats the empty gesture of the nineteenth century Lachmannian hunters for the Ur-Text that, modern text editors, following Joseph Bédier, conclude were a figment of the philologists' imagination.

Symes issues a call for a return to abject subjectivism in complaining that “There is no recognition [in *The Subject Medieval/Modern*] that ideas—important ideas, ‘modern’ ideas—might continue to circulate via media only partially or seldom recorded in writing.” Well, of course people talked, even absent a steno, tape recorder, or scribe! Of course they had ideas and shared and argued about them! What an absurd comment! What is even more absurd is for a historian not to notice that limits are placed on what is recoverable by the historian by lack of documentation. What did not leave textual traces is gone, disappeared. The cultural and documentary suppression of the multitude, before it becomes a “people” of political weight, is tragic precisely because the suppressed is irrecoverable. Given the uncertainties noted, I prefer to base my work on authentically medieval texts, rather than “reconstructions”. Call it an odd, old attachment to empiricism! Or at least, to that “empiricism” that remains available when modern epistemological critiques are taken into account.

Oh, yes! I almost forgot: my language, my dreadful language! Symes performs being the victim of linguistic aggression. *The Subject Medieval/Modern* “cannot be read; it must be unpacked... [it is] extraordinarily difficult... turgid and obfuscatory.” Gimme a break! Symes’s plaint is itself obfuscatory. As usual, attacks on language are a feint to cover other, unspoken agendas. Symes wants to implant the notion of the book’s unreadability for two reasons. Oddly enough, Symes’s performance as subject rejoins the theory of the subject in *The Subject Medieval/Modern* (is it a confirmation?). The book’s “performance” radically undermines Symes’s professional status because it disregards two of the subject’s fundamental commitments: the “performance” art of medieval theater and the methodology of codicology. Neither is addressed by the book, both are irrelevant to its thesis. The book addresses texts integral to the transformation whose political armature is the shift from feudalism to the early state-form of monarchy. Theater is an urban phenomenon, and that is of undoubted importance to history, as the Marxist tradition insists. Urban phenomena are essential to a totalizing history of the period, an ambition even beyond that of *The Subject Medieval/Modern*! Embedded primarily in the monarchical side of the divide, it is not part of the shift in question, and remains secondary to the development of the political armature of governance and subjectivity for a long time. The performance problematics of medieval theater—obviously a valid topic of research, if a difficult one—are not essential to the thesis of *The Subject Medieval/Modern*. Of course, I would have no objection whatever to a study of subjectivity in the medieval theater that demonstrated my error in this regard, and extended my thesis to urban theater. I just doubt, on the basis of the evidence at hand, that Symes is capable of carrying it out.

Codicology, by origin and nature, is inherently incapable of addressing orality in its own terms. Orality does not know the stable self-identity of the text that arrives only with writing. The “oral text” is an oxymoron that originates within a writing culture. It is not even a snapshot, it is a freeze-frame. Codicology, as the study of the codex, is not of a nature to examine what is on the other side of the great cultural divide between cultures of orality and cultures of writing. It is the creation of a culture of writing, a culture which reduces everything to text. Once a reliable edition of an authentic medieval text is established, codicology is irrelevant to the questions addressed by *The Subject Medieval/Modern*.

Quite unintentionally, *The Subject Medieval/Modern* undercuts the professional status of the reviewer as disciplinary subject. Neither theater nor codicology, nor even the “performance” that is Symes’s fetish, have any relevance to it. That is why, as the threatening Other, *The Subject Medieval/Modern* must be destroyed. Or at least surrounded by a wall of misrepresentational obfuscation that keeps out readers in order to protect the reviewer from professional desubjectification.

The second reason for Symes’s feint is to cover the absence of any substantive engagement with the book’s dozen chapters of textual interpretation. There’s not a single argument, in the supposed “review”, with any of the textual analyses in *The Subject Medieval/Modern*. Symes leaves absolutely unquestioned the evidence the book offers for its thesis. Indeed, Symes’s willful disinformation aims to dissuade people

from even looking at the book, which is, for the most part, accessible to any curious, attentive academic with a minimal contemporary intellectual culture. There are certainly difficult moments in the book—honest!—often due to elliptical compression: the published text is half the length of an earlier draft. But the book remains accessible to any serious reader of good will, open to doubting the ability of the ready-made language of the daily newspaper and its “conceptualizations” to encompass the world adequately. Shying from such disturbing realizations, Symes prefers linguistic pap undisturbed by critical reflection.

Nevertheless, there is one point on which Symes is right. It was indeed my intent to reveal paradox as the dominant figure at work in the texts, insofar as it revealed itself. Paradox is the most precise figure—of rhetoric, of thought—to present the recurrent oxymoron of human contradictoriness, particularly as it sets into motion determinism and freedom. Paradox, in this view, is the most “realistic” figure of rhetoric: it fits humanity best. Symes is right insofar as paradox requires the mental effort to hold together in the mind things our ideologies separate.

Another reader, lacking Symes’s invidious agenda, found in *The Subject Medieval/Modern*

[a] majesty of form and style...it is rather wonderful how Haidu...manages to read the texts...with a subtlety and sensitivity that preserves their aesthetic aura...for all the difficulty of his theoretical approach, Haidu’s own language sometimes has an incantatory beauty, written as if Dos Passos had been a scholar of medieval literature[24]

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## NOTES

[1] “Toward a Socio-Historical Semiotics: Power and Legitimacy in the *Couronnement de Louis*,” *Kodikas/Code 2* (1980): 155-169; “Text and History: The Semiosis of XIIth Century Lyric as Socio-Historical Phenomenon,” *Semiotica 33* (1980-81): 1-62; “Semiotics and History,” *Semiotica 40* (1982): 187-228.

[2] Joseph Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (Oxford: Blackwell’s, 1987); Georges Duby, *La société aux XIe et XIIe siècles dans la région mâconnaise* (Paris: SEVPEN, 1971); *Guerriers et paysans* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973); *Les trois ordres ou l’imaginaire du féodalisme* (Paris, Gallimard, 1978); Pierre Bonnassie, *La Catalogne du milieu du Xe siècle à la fin du XIe siècle* (Toulouse: Toulouse-Mirail, 1975); and Robert Fossier, *L’enfance de l’Europe*, 2 vols. (Paris: PUF, 1982).

[3] Jacques Derrida, “La bête et le souverain,” in *La démocratie à venir* (Paris: Galilée, 2004), pp. 433-476; Giorgio Agamben, *L’ouvert. De l’homme et de l’animal*, tr. Joël Gayraud (Paris: Rivages, 2002).

[4] “Medievalism: Testing Ground for Historicism(s)? Roundtable discussion with Peter Haidu, Alexandre Leupin, and Eugene Vance,” *Paroles Gelées 9* (1991): 1-32.

[5] Radically different from that addressed in Michel Zink, *La subjectivité littéraire. Autour du siècle de saint Louis* (Paris: PUF, 1985).

[6] See Chapter five, “Chrétien de Troyes: The Perspectival Novel”; Chapter seven, “Raoul de Cambrai: Haunting Violence”, esp. pp. 147-153; and in the Conclusion, “Perspectivism, Violence, and Ideology”, pp. 344-348.

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- [7] Haidu, "The Hermit's Pottage: Deconstruction and History in Yvain," *Romanic Review* 74 (1983): 1-15; "War, Peasant Revolt, and the Saint Alexis," *The Subject Medieval/Modern*, pp. 47-51, 120.
- [8] Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1957); Howard Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
- [9] See "Alain Chartier's 'Invasion of Words': National Ideology and the Subject," *The Subject Medieval/Modern*, pp. 313-327; Bernard Guenée, "Etat et nation en France au Moyen Age," *Revue historique* 237 (1967): 17-30, reprinted in *Politique et histoire au moyen âge* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1981).
- [10] Thomas Bisson, *Tormented Voices* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); cf. Paul Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- [11] Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
- [12] Raymond Williams, *Sociology of Culture* (New York: Schocken, 1981).
- [13] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude*, tr. Nicolas Guilhot (Paris: La Découverte, 2004); Peter Biller, *The Measure of Multitude* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- [14] On the alterity of medieval literature, see my review of Zumthor's *Essai de poétique médiévale: "Towards a Problematics of Alterity: Making it (New) in the Middle Ages," Diacritics* (Summer 1974): 1-10; Hans Robert Jauss in *Alterität und Modernität Der Mittelalterlichen Literatur*, Munich: Fink, 1977; and Haidu, "The Semiotics of Alterity: A Comparison with Hermeneutics," *New Literary History* 21 (1989-90): 671-691.
- [15] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969).
- [16] Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973)...not to mention the rest of White's bibliography!
- [17] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- [18] Joseph Bédier, his edition of the *Lai de l'ombre* (Paris: SATF, 1913); and a well-known essay, "La Tradition manuscrite du Lai de l'Ombre: Réflexions sur l'art d'éditer les anciens textes", *Romania* 54 (1928): 161-96, 321-56.
- [19] Bernard Cerquiglini's *L'éloge de la variante* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).
- [20] Otto Pächt, C. R. Dodwell, F. Wormald, *The Albans Psalter* (London: Warburg Institute, 1960); Laura Kendrick, "Manuscripts'. 1123? A Richly Illustrated Latin Psalter Prefaced by a Vernacular Chanson de saint Alexis is Produced at the English Monastery of St. Albans for Christina of Markyate," in Denis Hollier, ed., *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 23-30); Rachel Bullington, *The Alexis in the St Albans Psalter: A Look into the Heart of the Matter* (New York: Garland, 1991); Kristine Haney, *The St. Albans Psalter: An Anglo-Norman Song of Faith* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

[21] Peter Haidu, *The Subject of Violence: The Song of Roland and the Birth of the State* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

[22] Sarah Kay, "La composition de 'Raoul de Cambrai'," *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 62 (1984): 474-492; Gabrielle Spiegel, *Romancing the Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Peter Haidu, "Violence, Perspective and Postmodern Historiography in Raoul de Cambrai" *Olifant* 22: 1-4 (Spring 1998-Fall 2003): 39-72.

[23] Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris: Seuil, 1972).

[24] John Ganim, *The Medieval Review* 04.07.04.

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