


CARLA FRECCERO



Queer / Early / Modern

QUEER/EARLY/MODERN

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edited by

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For Jody

(AND JAMES, IN MEMORIAM)

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Prolepses

QUEER/EARLY/MODERN

☞ In “Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture”—an essay that for many exemplifies the uneasy relationship between new historicism and psychoanalysis—Stephen Greenblatt asks whether psychoanalysis is an appropriate interpretive technique for reading early modern textuality. The issue, for him, is that “the subject”—understood to be the focus of psychoanalytic inquiry—cannot be said to exist before the social order that produces it. In Greenblatt’s view, early modern histories and political economies produce the modern psychological subject that, in psychoanalysis, is taken to be the cause of action.¹ Psychoanalytic interpretation therefore performs a metalepsis on early modernity, belatedly attributing a cause (subjectivity) to what is, in fact, an effect (of culture).²

One equally materialist response to the observation that psychoanalysis seems causally belated with respect to early modernity has been to dispute, on historical grounds, a certain conception of the modern subject as the subject that serves as one of psychoanalysis’s foundational categories. If early modern European textuality foregrounds the status of the subject as linguistically constructed, contingent, textual, and fragmented, then early modern subjectivity has more in common with psychoanalytic and poststructuralist notions of the subject than it does with the modernity that appears in the intervening period of Western European philosophical and literary discourse.³ Jonathan Dollimore argues, in effect, that the notion of the constructed subject is precisely what poststructuralism and postmodernity have in common with early (pre-eighteenth-century) modernity:

Of the few central beliefs uniting the various post-structuralisms (and connecting them with post/modernism) this is one of the most important: human identity is seen to be determined by, for example, the pre-existing structures of language and ideology, and by the material conditions of human existence. Thus is the subject decentred, and subjectivity revealed as a kind of subjection—not the antithesis of social process but its focus.

In the early modern period also the individual was seen as constituted by and in relation to—even the effect of—a pre-existing order.⁴

Whether or not this can be said to be “actually” the case, it serves as a useful and productive heuristic device for a particular—and “queer”—reading of early modernity. Among other things, this conceptualization allows the suspension by the subject, and any particular instance of the subject, of a normative gender and its concomitant heteronormatively other-directed desiring orientation. Only a textual, nonunified, nonpsychologized subject could be said to allow for such a suspension, at least within a heteronormative and homophobic cultural context. (For the moment I bracket the question—fully and well explored by many historians of sexuality—of whether or not early modern Europe could be said to be such a culture.)⁵

Similar objections of belatedness could be leveled at queer theory. Queer theory seems, through its techniques of reading, to deploy categorical and psychoanalytically inflected notions of sexuality and normativity that European pre- and early modernity would produce only later, and its theoretical provenance lies firmly within the late twentieth century.⁶ Indeed, the reversal signified by the rhetorical term *metalepsis* could be seen to embody the spirit of queer analysis in its willful perversion of notions of temporal propriety and the reproductive order of things. To read metaleptically, then, would be to engage in queer theorizing.

Queer/Early/Modern combines the psychoanalytic and poststructuralist dimensions of queer theory in its thinking through the problems of time and rhetorical subjectivity. In referring to the playful and relatively unused opposite of *metalepsis*, *prolepsis*, I want to hesitate about the question of temporal propriety in relations among early modernity, queer theory, and subjectivity. On the one hand, I embrace the accusation of *metalepsis* (with a twist) by pointing to the ways early modern textuality is a product of a kind of queer theo-

rizing. On the other hand, as many current productions of Shakespeare plays demonstrate and as many Shakespearean scholars—some of whom were also early modern studies' first queer theorists—have argued, early modern European textuality proleptically anticipates queer theory and queers modernity. This gesture—turning belatedness into *avant la lettre*—is a kind of historical corrective, but it does not necessarily take seriously the pieties of the discipline that would require the solemn, even dour, marshalling of empirical evidence to prove its point. To the extent, then, that this work queers historicist imperatives, it does so by means of an implicit critique of historicism itself.

The *prolepses* of this chapter title also refers to the designation as “early modern” of the period of Western modernity formerly known as the Renaissance. That expression suggests that “early on,” in other words “before” the modern, there was an instantiation of the modern, and so the early modern comes proleptically to figure modernity (in an examination that is, however, always retroactive).⁷ The debate about the “early modern” designation as opposed to the designation “Renaissance” has been tackled at length and for a long time, but I bring it up here to highlight precisely those (ideologically marked and thus significant, for modernity) ways in which the period has stood in for the beginning of modernity, its anticipation, its seeds, so to speak, because those are also what are to be read in the tracing of a queerness that is projected backward to the period and forward from it.⁸ I therefore take advantage of the prolepses of the period designation even as I remain agnostic about its temporal referential value.

The slashes between *queer*, *early*, and *modern* in this book's title, inarticulable though they may be, are intended to interrupt the current notion of the Renaissance as the early modern period and to force a pause on what it means to say that something is historically *early* in our genealogies of Western modernity, as well as to focus in on what is meant by *modern*, and how that term signifies when used in the context of discussions of textuality, subjectivity, and sexuality.⁹ The slashes also point to my recognition that in many ways to use the term *queer* and to speak of a *prolepsis of queer* in early modernity is to engage in a willfully modern act, one that would be called perversely anachronistic by some Renaissance scholars, some of whom were my teachers and whose ranks have sometimes included myself.¹⁰

Finally, the slash between *early* and *modern* also allows me to admit considerable uncertainty about the question of whether what I do in reading queer “back then” has anything to do with “back then” or not. In other words, such reading may finally be a matter of the “mere” juxtaposition of *early* and *modern*. While this sort of critical and analytical juxtaposition could be considered historically illegitimate—and thus also illegitimate in relation to the techniques and theories of historicist literary critical practice in which I was trained—it is a familiar and valid logic in other kinds of analytical practices, especially those, such as psychoanalysis, that attend to the particularity of the articulating subject and the rhetorical effects of language: association, for example, along with others such as condensation, displacement, metaphor, metonymy, repetition, and allegory.¹¹

Psychoanalysis, as an analytic, is also a historical method, albeit one denigrated by disciplinarily historicist practices. On the one hand, it argues for an eccentric relation between events and their effects; on the other, it often challenges the empiricism of what qualifies as an event itself.¹² Psychoanalysis affords the possibility of producing a fantasmatic historiography that acknowledges what Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, and Slavoj Žižek observe to be the mode through which subjects live not only their histories, but “history” itself, to the extent that history is lived as and through fantasy in the form of ideology.

In a sense, then, I am also reading “against” history, for the reading I do here at times works counter to the imperative—appearing in many discourses called literary as well as those called historical—to respect the directional flow of temporality, the notion that time is composed of contiguous and interrelated joined segments that are also sequential.¹³ This does not, nevertheless, mean that the work is anti- or ahistorical.¹⁴ Here I side with Jonathan Goldberg’s comment about the interpretive horizons or limits on reading that apply to two logics, textuality and historicity, which are, for him, one and the same: “The logic of textuality that is the logic of historicity means also that the virtually unbounded possibilities of difference are relatively bound within any textual/historic instance.”¹⁵ Furthermore, it would be nearly impossible for a Renaissance scholar to read “without history.” But I do argue for the possibility that reading historically may mean reading against what is conventionally referred to as history. Not only do I make use of intertextuality, a mode

of figural intra- and intertemporal articulation that might be called “literary” rather than historical, but I also invoke identification and one of its common effects, anachronism, as two intimately related and hallowed temporal processes that make up—like and along with desire—queer time.¹⁶ These analyses proceed otherwise than according to a presumed logic of cause and effect, anticipation and result; and otherwise than according to a presumed logic of the “done-ness” of the past, since queer time is haunted by the persistence of affect and ethical imperatives in and across time.¹⁷

The *queer* of this collection of critical interventions is difficult to define in advance. Over the past decade and a half, this term, as taken up by political movements and by the academy, has undergone myriad transformations and has been the object of heated definitional as well as political debates. Each chapter here seeks to redefine it or to exploit its relative undefinability, its strategic usefulness as a term that in many situations can be said to elude definition. It is a term that, here, does have something to do with a critique of literary critical and historical presumptions of sexual and gender (hetero)normativity, in cultural contexts and in textual subjectivities. It also has something to do with the sexual identities and positionalities, as well as the subjectivities, that have come to be called lesbian, gay, and transgender, but also perverse and narcissistic—that is, queer.¹⁸ At times, *queer* continues to exploit its productive indeterminacy as a word used to designate that which is odd, strange, aslant; in this respect, I will argue that all textuality, when subjected to close reading, can be said to be queer. Ultimately, if this book can be said to have a position on *queer*, it would be to urge resistance to its hypostatization, reification into nominal status as designating an entity, an identity, a thing, and to allow it to continue its outlaw work as a verb and sometimes an adjective.¹⁹

Each chapter in this book addresses theoretical and historical issues related to debates in queer theory and in early modern studies; each also juxtaposes readings of “early” and “late” modern texts, sometimes canonically literary, as in chapters 2, 3, and 4, where I discuss lyric poetry and short narrative fiction, sometimes “archival,” as in the discussion of the PACS (Pacte Civil de Solidarité) legislation in France, the collection of discourses that together form the text of the “Brandon Teena” case, and Jean de Léry’s sixteenth-century ethnography

of the Tupinamba in Brazil. The status of these texts as canonical or popular cuts across their generic designations, so that, for example, the lyric is not confined to a high Western literary legacy but includes the popular lyric of rock and roll, and the mundanity of the travel narrative is in some respects elevated to the status of the literary or poetic. Each of these texts is enlisted to articulate a theoretical problem posed by current critical debates in queer theory, feminism, the history of sexuality, history, and early modern studies. The first part of the book—Past, Present—takes a critical approach to a series of problems or issues in feminism and in sexuality studies; it proceeds in the mode of critique by examining the work of others against textual readings and a variety of theoretical concerns in order to deconstruct and reinscribe various histories and problematics. In other words, it performs the work of negativity.

Chapter 2, “Always Already Queer (French) Theory,” introduces the problematic of *queer* as deployed in institutional and critical contexts by examining a recent response to the term’s use by Donald Morton. Morton criticizes the rise of the queer as an avoidance of materialism that is part and parcel of the “linguistic turn” of poststructuralist theory. I take up the accusation of “immateriality” in relation to the queer, explore the legacy of French and French-influenced poststructuralist linguistic, philosophical, and literary theory in the definition and practice of queer theory, and argue that the indeterminacy of the queer—an indeterminacy eroded from both the right and the left—may in fact constitute its usefulness as a deconstructive anti-identitarian critical and political practice. I return to a moment in feminist academic debates around deconstruction that focused on institutionalization as a way to understand and interrogate the drive to consolidate and institutionalize queer studies. Thus the *always already* invoked in the chapter title refers not only to the way queer theory functions as a deconstructive practice in relation to heteronormativity but also to the way the contours of the debates around *queer* assume the form of a certain earlier feminist problematic as well.

I then turn to the lyric as the paradigmatic instance of the explicit construction of a presumptively heterosexual desiring subject that turns out to be strangely queer and ask what it might tell us about romantic love and its institutionalization as discourse in Western modernity. This, too, is an example of how the always already

queer subject inhabits heteronormative and masculinist culture from within, even as late modern instances of the lyric—in this chapter, the songs of Melissa Etheridge—bring this deconstructive insight to the fore through disassembling subject-object relations founded on sexual and gender difference.

Chapter 3, “Undoing the Histories of Homosexuality,” looks at the “acts versus identities” debate seen to stem from a passage in Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* for the way that it has been adopted or refuted in relation to the historical question of early modern sexual identities.²⁰ Through a close examination of two essays by the principal U.S. explicator of Foucault for the history of (homo)sexuality, David Halperin, I revisit the narratives of the history of sexuality for the way “modern” homosexual identity and “premodern” sodomitic acts depend on the tacit assumption first that the identity under construction is gendered and, second, that it is culturally generalizable or universalizable in modernity.²¹ Thus, for example, I ask the question of what would obtain in the examination of acts and identities in the premodern era if the category of gender were included alongside sexuality, why a universal model of modern homosexuality might be problematic, and what these two questions might have to do with each other.

This chapter also addresses itself to the problem—identified by Foucault—with doing a “history” of sexuality. Such a history, I argue, participates in the very regime that, in pursuing the truth of persons through sex, categorizes and thus also “manages” persons on the basis of (sexual) identity. Halperin enlists a fictional text to make, in his own words, a historical point. He thus proposes to find “archives” in the fiction, to reverse the title of Natalie Zemon Davis’s book *Fiction in the Archives*. In my own “literary” reading of Boccaccio’s story of Pietro di Vinciolo and one of its subtexts, Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*, textuality resists the project of constructing normative identity in the past, thus undoing the historiographic practice of developing a progressivist account of sexual (or any) normative identity. My argument here is that archiving fiction as history in this manner risks normalizing the deeply unreliable and riven subjectivities articulated through fictions of the speaking/writing “voice” in any period in which this activity occurs.

Chapter 4, “Queer Nation: Early/Modern France,” links the PACS

—domestic partner—legislation in France to a long genealogy of the French state’s investment in kinship regulation. This chapter also strives to demonstrate what it might mean to analyze problematics of gender, race, and sexuality together in relation to the past. I argue that in sixteenth-century France, in the wake of the discovery of the Salic Law as a forged document, a newly emerging class of state technocrats sought to exclude women from the possibility of succession by developing a scientific theory of genetic transmission restricted to men. Thus, in the interests of phallocracy, early French legists crafted a technology of the state that included a strangely queer theory of reproduction. I go on to look at the way Marguerite de Navarre fashioned a fictional political response to this technology by erecting in its place a theory of female sovereign “parthenogenesis.”

The Heptameron’s story 30, through its depiction of an incestuous mother-son union that, in its issue, produces the perfect couple as the future of the nation, asserts queer kinship as a fantasy of rule (like the more mundane, phallocratic fantasies of rule articulated in instances such as Werner Herzog’s *Aguirre*) and thus also sheds light on the reproductive politics of the state. Here I invoke Claude Lévi-Strauss not as anthropological authority, but as poet of incest, to show how fantasies of kinship express fantasies of the nation. And, because Judith Butler has recently explored one such exemplary fantasy in the figure of Antigone and its legacies in order to interrogate current kinship politics and practices, I look at the way in which female exemplars—Antigone, Lucretia, Marguerite’s “widow,” and finally Elizabeth I—throw into relief and crisis the technologies of kinship that are also intertwined with technologies of rule.²²

The final chapter, “Queer Spectrality,” marks a transformation in the project of the book by engaging in an affirmative “working through” that is open to futurity. It proposes a model of fantastic queer historiography based in recent theorizations and critical elaborations of Derridean spectrality and haunting as historico-ethical practices. To see how haunting might more aptly describe and do justice to the historical and affective legacies of trauma and their implications for political and ethical futures, I turn first to the case of “Brandon Teena,” whose rape and murder in 1993 continue to shape queer political movement, queer historiography, and the national imaginary. By recasting the events and their meanings in terms

of haunting, I explore how those of us who live on might better honor not only the traumatic memory of the person, but also the ethical and political challenges his or her afterlife pose for the present and the future of queer survival.

The second part of the chapter turns to the problematic of haunting and history in relation to studies of European early modern New World conquest and encounter narratives. The question becomes how, on the one hand, to address the historical trauma of European genocidal practices in the Americas and the radical absences they violently produced, and, on the other, what to make of the strange—one might say queer—relations of desire and identification that obtain, both in certain of these texts of the past and between the present and the (imagined) others of the past. The ghostly form that haunting takes, both for New World scholars and for Jean de Léry, writing at the end of the sixteenth century, is the vision and voice, in the text, of an other or others, hallucinatorily superimposed upon and insisting, persisting, in the present.

What role do queer wishes play in this hauntology? To what ethical imperative do these spectral figures respond, and how might such an openness to haunting guide not only our historiographic endeavors, but our present and future political and ethical practices as well? These are the questions I explore at the end of the book, not so much to “solve” a problem of temporal accountability as to suggest alternative ways to respond to—and survive—the not strictly eventful afterlife of trauma in a just, queer, fashion.²³