



MEDIEVALISM

Key Critical Terms

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WHEN SIGMUND FREUD famously took up the question of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and asked why individuals unconsciously repeat patterns of suffering in their lives, he exemplified such traumatic repetition with a scene drawn from Torquato Tasso's epic of the First Crusade, *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581), penned by the poet in the triumphant wake of a Christian victory over the Ottoman navy at the Battle of Lepanto (1571).¹ Tasso used the matter of pagan epic as an imperial mirror and repetitiously sought to annex to his imaginary Christian Jerusalem (*translatio imperii*) things Trojan (the matter of Homer's *Iliad*), and things Roman (the matter of Virgil's *Aeneid*). Freud, too, thought epically. He conceived his *Interpretation of Dreams* as an epic: "[it] becomes in effect, Freud's *Aeneid* because of its recurrent focus on 'the matter of Rome.'"² Freud was also intent on the matter of Troy as explicated by his hero Heinrich Schliemann, the excavator of Troy, whose archaeological account, *Ilios: The City and the Country of the Trojans*, first appeared in German in 1881.³ The utter confusion of Turks and Trojans, whose entangled genealogy dates to the medieval period, and which was revived contentiously in Renaissance histories of the Ottoman Turks, traumatically haunts Freud's matter of Rome in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and, I shall argue, haunted Tasso's epic as well.⁴ Both are medieval-

¹ For an introduction to the structure of trauma see Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), and more specifically on the traumatic structure of medievalisms see Kathleen Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1997). For an important recent study with a useful bibliography see Patricia Clare Ingham, "Chaucer's Haunted Aesthetics: Mimesis and Trauma in *Troilus and Criseyde*," *College English* 72 (2010): 226-47.

² Elizabeth J. Bellamy, *Translations of Power: Narcissism and the Unconscious in Epic History* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 42.

³ Richard H. Armstrong, *A Compulsion for Antiquity: Freud and the Ancient World* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 114.

⁴ For an indispensable study of the entanglements of Trojan and Turkish genealogies see Margaret Meserve, *Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West: Renaissance*

isms that mobilize the tropes of massacre and martyrdom that fueled Christian accounts of the overthrow of Muslim rule in Jerusalem in 1099.

Epic and psychoanalysis are closely bound; yet, students of Freudian trauma have reflected more on the traumas of medievalism than on the medievalisms of Freud's theory of trauma. They have not questioned the entanglement of *translatio imperii* with the unconscious of psychoanalysis. This essay addresses the medievalism of Freud's trauma in an effort to gain insight into what happens when the trauma of *translatio imperii* is foreclosed in the very theory of psychoanalytic trauma.

Freud drafted his dream book in the wake of several excursions in the Balkans. Under Ottoman hegemony since 1463, the western edges of this geopolitical region had only come under Austro-Hungarian rule with the Treaty of Berlin in 1878. Freud collected a series of anecdotes about his Balkan journey in an essay published under the title "Psychic Mechanisms of Forgetfulness" (1898). In an account of a dream from this Balkan holiday (April 1898) sent to Wilhelm Fliess, Freud had imagined himself as a kind of Dante descending into the Inferno, encountering "Tartarus" when he (like Virgil) descended into the cave at St. Cangian: "If Dante saw anything like this, he needed no great effort of imagination for his inferno."⁵

Freud tells a more complicated Balkan story in the published essay. Posing as a Habsburg ethnographer, Freud describes how a colleague, who treated Turkish patients, informed Freud of their fatalism and the over-riding importance "these Bosnian [Turks] attached to sexual enjoyments." Here Freud ventriloquizes the colonial psychiatry of his day, epitomized by the influential Algerian school of French psychiatry. These doctors disseminated a scientific literature that measured the psychiatric difference between Muslims and Europeans by the sexual violence of the former. The exclusion of colonized Muslims as psychiatric subjects also had the effect of leaving them behind in the high stakes of fabricating a psychiatric and psychoanalytic discourse of trauma after World War I.⁶ French colonial psychiatrists examined a large number of "colored" (Muslim) regiments who served under the French flag in Northern Africa and argued that they were to be exempted from

Humanists and the Ottoman Turks (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); and J. Harper, "Turks as Trojans and Trojans as Turks: Visual Imagery of the Trojan War and the Politics of Cultural Identity in Fifteenth-Century Europe," in *Translating Culture: Postcolonial Approaches to the Middle Ages*, ed. A. J. Kabir and Deanne Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 151–79.

⁵ J. M. Masson, ed. *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1877–1904* (Cambridge MA: Belnap Press/Harvard University Press, 1985), 309; Sigmund Freud, "The Psychical Mechanism of Forgetfulness (1918)," in James Strachey, trans., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 3 (London: Hogarth Press, 1962), 287–97.

⁶ Freud's stereotypes need to be read within their powerful discursive frame of medical medievalism in the nineteenth-century metropolis and colony: Zrinka Stahuljak, *Pornographic Archaeology: Medicine, Medievalism, and the Invention of the French Nation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 71–98; Richard C. Keller, *Colonial Madness: Psychiatry in French North Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 51–7.

a more humane treatment of traumatic war injury because these Muslim soldiers played out an impoverished emotional life imprisoned by basic instincts.⁷

Here is how Freud condenses the Balkan dream matter in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He dreamt, he tells the reader, that he entered a great hall of machines, which reminded him of an "Inferno." He saw a colleague strapped onto an apparatus. As the dream unfolds, Freud is told that he can go, but because he cannot find his hat, he cannot leave. The dream prompts Freud to make an important revision of his dream theory to include the possibility of negation. At this juncture Freud adds a footnote that refers to a primal scene. First, he associates the permission to leave to a famous quotation from his beloved Schiller: "The Moor has done his duty, the Moor *may go*." He continues in the footnote: "And then follows the waggish question: 'How old is the Moor when he has done his duty? One year, then he may go.' It is said that I came into this world with so much black curly hair that my young mother declared me to be a Moor."⁸

Freud thus inserts into this vision of a mechanical inferno a fantasy of Muslim infantile sexuality (and recall that his birthplace in Moravia had been seized by the Ottomans in the seventeenth century). Since, according to Freud, infantile sexuality is the site of amnesia, he thus assigns the lack, the very traumatic structure that prompts desire, to a Muslim fantasy, an impersonation, and such impersonation, as we shall see, is what drives the epic plot of Tasso in *Gerusalemme Liberata*.

Freud's Muslim fantasy shaped his reading of Tasso. Readers of *Gerusalemme Liberata* will know that Freud truncated the account of the second wounding of the Muslim warrior Clorinda by the Christian crusader Tancred in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

The most moving poetic picture of a fate such as this can be found in the story told by Tasso in his romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*. Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armor of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree, but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again.⁹

⁷ Antoine Porot, "Notes de psychiatrie musulmane," *Annales Médico-psychologiques* 74 (1918): 377–84.

⁸ Freud is citing from the Schiller play *Fiesco, Or the Genoese Conspiracy* (1783) (Act 3, Scene 4). Set in Genoa in 1547, it features Muley Hassan, a "wooly pated" Moor of Tunis, who acts as spy and hired assassin and speaks these words. See Patricia Cotti, "Hunger and Love: Schiller and the Origin of Drive Dualism in Freud's Work," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 88 (1) 2007: 167–82. Freud thus conflates Islam and race. I am using A. A. Brill's translation of *Die Traumdeutung* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 225–7.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in Strachey, trans., *Standard Edition*, vol. 18 (1920–22) (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 1–64 (22). Kathleen Biddick, "Unbinding the Flesh in the Time that Remains: Crusader Martyrdom Then and Now," *GLQ* 13 (2007): 197–225, and Sigrid Weigel, "The Symptomatology of a Universalized Concept of Trauma: On the Failing of Freud's Reading of Tasso in the Trauma of History," *New German Critique* 90 (2003): 85–94. For a bibliographic introduction to Tasso and his epic,

In Tasso's version, Clorinda lets Tancred know that she is not alone when she speaks through the wound of the bludgeoned tree. Buried with her, she explains, are fellow martyrs, Christian crusaders and Muslim warriors, who fell with her in the crusader battle for Jerusalem. Tasso fashions the crypt of the tree as a burial place for the archive of the medieval First Crusade – an archive stained as it was with massacre and cannibalism.¹⁰ So successful was his encryption that Freud falls right into its traumatic trap and fails to mention that Clorinda mourns a collective trauma. She is not alone in her leafy tomb, which is also inhabited by Christian crusaders and Muslim warriors. Here is the plaint of collective trauma penned by Tasso, which Freud seems not to have heard when reporting Clorinda's speech:

How could you [Tancred] be so cruel to resume
War with your adversaries in the tomb?
I was Clorinda. Other spirits dwell
Beside me in this rough, hard plant: for all
Those fighters, Saracen and French, who fell
And left their dying limbs beneath the wall,
Are here pent up by some unheard-of spell,
And incarnation, or a burial,
I cannot say. Their limbs, ensouled, feel pain,
And if you cut you murder us again. (13.42–43)¹¹

Tasso's literary efforts to encrypt the ghosts of crusaders past are deliberate. As a good student of the widely disseminated printed editions of the chronicles of the First Crusade, he knew the generic conventions of crusader martyrdom and used them to stage Clorinda's "first" death at the hands of Tancred.

To appreciate the complexity of Tasso's "martyring" of martyrdom, some plot review will be helpful. In *Gerusalemme Liberata* (as in the First Crusade) Tancred is one of the leaders besieging the city. He has fallen in love with Clorinda, a mysterious female knight, who is one of the city's leading Muslim defenders. Her religious genealogy is as transvestite as her gender. She learns of it from her beloved eunuch as she leaves Jerusalem on a dangerous mission to the Christian camp. The Egyptian eunuch discloses that she was born the white daughter of a black Ethiopian queen. To avoid scandal the queen decided to place her infant in the eunuch's care and to send them into exile. Before their departure, the queen made her eunuch promise to baptize Clorinda. Tasso drew his ethnography of

Ethiopian Christianity from a popular travel account (translated into Italian and widely circulated) of a visit to the court of Atani Tingil (King David of Ethiopia) made in the 1520s by a Portuguese priest, Francisco Alvarez.¹² Alvarez found the Ethiopians practicing a "Judaized" Christianity, meaning that they observed the rite of circumcision and the Saturday Sabbath (the Inquisition regarded such Judaized practices as heretical crypto-Judaism). Nor did these Ethiopian Christians practice infant baptism like their orthodox Roman counterparts, hence the queen's request that the eunuch see to Clorinda's eventual baptism. The eunuch failed to fulfill his promise and ended up raising Clorinda in Egypt as a Muslim; she now defends Islam as one of its fiercest warriors. Clorinda thus embodies the fractures of unstable religious identities (Judaized-Christianity – or crypto-Judaism becoming Muslim); the fractures of race (black becoming white); the fractures of gender (she "passes" as a male knight among the Christians as long as she is helmeted; her Muslim comrades know her as a female warrior and deeply value her military leadership).

Tasso martyrs Clorinda, but what exactly does her martyrdom mean when she is so complexly embodied? Who or what is being martyred? To flatten out her fractured identities into a domesticated, feminine, Christian one, Tasso crafts a striptease. This is how the scene unfolds. Tancred mortally wounds a Muslim knight outside the crusader camp, unaware that his foe is his beloved Clorinda. He plunges his "blade" into the breast of his adversary and in a fit of chivalric *jouissance* drinks blood from the wound: "Into her lovely breast he thrusts his blade, drowns it, eagerly drinks her blood" (12.64). For the titillation of the reader (who already knows that the dying knight is Clorinda), Tasso next describes the breast-binder beneath her cuirass, which is "sweetly lined with gold that held her breasts with a light and tender pull" (12.64), and which is now filling with blood.

In this scene of the first death of Clorinda, Tasso closely parallels crusader narratives to stage his medievalism. He draws on the accounts of cannibalism and martyrdom to be found in medieval crusade chronicles such as that of Raymond d'Aguilers.¹³ He revels in the seduction of martyr narratives; he draws attention to Clorinda's underclothes just as the story of St. Pelagius has the young Christian boy disrobe in front of the caliph in protest at the lavish clothing in which the caliph had dressed him.¹⁴ Tasso also inverts the trope of impending rape by a Muslim in the story of Pelagius, since it is Tancred, the Christian warrior, who bludgeons ("rapes") and vamps ("cannibalizes") his Muslim victim.

The scene continues. The dying Muslim knight begs Tancred for baptism. It is only when he removes his enemy's helmet to minister the sacrament that Tancred

see Bellamy, *Translations of Power*, as well as Sergio Zatti, *The Quest for Epic: From Ariosto to Tasso*, ed. Dennis Looney, trans. Sally Hill with Dennis Looney (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Elizabeth Siberry, "Tasso and the Crusades: History of a Legacy," *Journal of Medieval History* 19 (1993): 163–9.

¹⁰ For an overview of the medieval sources used by Tasso see Siberry, "Tasso and the Crusades," and Quint, *Epic and Empire*.

¹¹ I have used Anthony M. Esolen's translation, *Jerusalem Delivered* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), and Lanfranco Caretti's Italian edition, *Gerusalemme liberata* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 1967). I cite by canto and stanza.

¹² I rely on David Quint's superb reading of Tasso and his sources in his *Epic and Empire*.

¹³ Raymond d'Aguilers, *Historia Francorum Qui Ceperunt Iherusalem*, trans. John Hugh Hill and Laurita L. Hill, *Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society* 71 (1968).

¹⁴ Mark D. Jordan, "Saint Pelagius, Ephebe and Martyr," in *Queer Iberia: Sexualities, Cultures, and Crossings from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, ed. Josiah Blackmore and Gregory Hutchinson (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 23–47. The story is set in the caliphate of al-Andalus.

realizes that it is Clorinda whom he has killed. He manfully holds off his grief until he performs the baptism. Clorinda then dies and later appears to the bereaved Tancred in a dream in which he can hear her words and behold her transfigured martyrial body: "Behold how beautiful I am, and blessed, my faithful lover. Let your sorrows rest. I am so by your grace" (12.91–2).

Clorinda's apparition as a martyr accomplishes several important theological supersessions in this epic of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. The normalization and medievalizing of her fractured religious identities disarm the threat of theological undecidability (Protestants who look like Catholics, Catholics who look like Protestants, crypto-Jews, crypto-Muslims). The infidel Muslim Clorinda, by birth-right a questionable "judaized" Christian or crypto-Jew, is converted by Tasso to orthodox Roman Christianity. The conversion settles once and for all the triumph of Christian martyrdom over Muslim martyrdom and permits Tasso to use the Middle Ages as a crypt in which he strives to bury the First Crusade forever and in so doing buries also the contemporary enemy, the Ottoman Turks that haunt his epic.

So powerful is Tasso's traumatic spell of encryption that Freud repeats this traumatic pattern and encrypts the First Crusade in his own paradigm of Western trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Like Tancred, Freud medievalizes his Muslim fantasy and thus represses the Turko-Trojan *translatio imperii* that conflicted with his epic interest in the matter of Rome. My reading does not ask the ghost of Freud to get over the trauma of the First Crusade and the trauma of his Muslim fantasy. It asks instead what happens when, as I have argued, the trauma of *translatio imperii* is foreclosed in the very theory of psychoanalytic trauma.

Let the Byzantine historian Michael Critoboulos, who served as governor under Sultan Mehmed II (1430–81), Ottoman conqueror of Constantinople (and also, of Bosnia), have the last word. He wrote in his *History of Mehmed the Conqueror* (c. 1467) that the Ottoman sultan, like Xerxes, Alexander, and Caesar before him, travelled to Ilium to pay his pious respect: "He observed the ruins and the traces of the ancient city of Troy ... He also inquired about the tombs of the heroes – Achilles, Ajax and the rest."¹⁵ By disentangling the medievalisms of Tasso and Freud and understanding the Christian expedition to Muslim Jerusalem in 1099 as a collective trauma that repeats itself in the very heart of psychoanalytic theory, we are able to understand the implications of a contemporary psychoanalytical impasse which stages *translatio imperii* as the "clash of civilizations." Take, for example, the complaint of the Lacanian pundit Slavoj Žižek who imagines that the "Balkans is structured like the unconscious of Europe" – and the critique of contemporary Muslim psychoanalysts (for example, Fethi Benslama) who ask what psychoanalysis would look like if it worked through its traumatic foreclosure of Islam.¹⁶

¹⁵ Michael Critoboulos, *The History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, ed. and trans. Charles T. Rigg (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), 181–2; also, Meserve, *Empires of Islam*, 43.

¹⁶ For Žižek on the Balkans as the unconscious of Europe, see Euronews 9: [http://www/](http://www/euronews.net/2008/09/12/euronews-talks-films-and-balkans-with-slavoj-zizek/)

Further Reading

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euronews.net/2008/09/12/euronews-talks-films-and-balkans-with-slavoj-zizek/ (accessed 17 April 2013). Bjelić and Benslama provide a critical overview: Dušan Bjelić, *Normalizing the Balkans: Geopolitics of Psychoanalysis and Psychiatry* (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2011); Fethi Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).