Decadent Kisses: Oscar Wilde’s Salome and St. Bernard’s Sermons on the Song of Songs

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Postcolonial theorists teach us that to imagine an “authentic other” is to believe in a falsity. Likewise, to believe that we may find the true or authentic Middle Ages subjects us to false hope. Some scholars believe that we should try to reconstruct the Middle Ages “on its own terms,” and imagine that as we gather more and more pieces of the puzzle, our understanding of the Middle Ages will increase. (Part of the problem with medieval studies is that much of the work, cataloguing, retrieving, translating, etc., is yet to be done.) The understanding of the ideal historian, popular since Romanticism, as one who can best reconstruct the past has been recently challenged by postmodern thinkers and is losing support in English departments. The thought that any historical moment is a puzzle which can be put together, given enough time, has been dismantled. Yet this type of scholarship has found somewhat of a haven among medievalists, although some, such as Carolinne Walker Bynum, Lee Patterson, and Umberto Eco, are pushing the field of medieval studies in new and exciting directions.

These scholars, each in their own way, have participated in methods of inquiry akin to Claude Levi-Strauss’ notion of hirologie. Although a less traditional, and therefore sometimes viewed as less “responsible,” form of criticism, it acknowledges that scholars have limited tools and materials, and nevertheless hold intellectual promise. The purpose of this type of scholarship is not to find an “authentic other,” but rather to use a wide variety of tools—concepts, texts, and materials—in understanding any given text or historical moment. In Levi-Strauss’ mind, the notion that one can never truly know an other is not a fact of despair, but rather an occasion for a type of intellectual freedom. Somewhat in keeping with Levi-Strauss’ general ideas, I would argue that to imagine that we are distinct from the Middle Ages, “pre-modern” as many call the period, is to sever ourselves completely from a historical past which haunts and informs the present.

With this in mind, my paper examines two historically disparate authors, one medieval and one modern: St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Oscar Wilde. Although they seem complete opposites in many respects, I find an interesting parallel in Bernards Sermons on the Song of Songs and Wilde’s Salome. Kissing is a key metaphor throughout both texts. St. Bernard writes that before one can kiss “the kiss of his [God or Christ’s] mouth,” one must metaphorically, first kiss the wounds of Christ’s feet and hands. I argue that the ascension of the three kisses—from foot, to hand, to mouth—is not one that results in escaping wounds, but in fact culminates in a kiss with wound itself. For Bernard, the mouth is not a woundless site, but rather Wound. Wilde’s Salome strangely perverts and parallels this when Salome kisses the decapitated (and therein lies the perversion) Iokanaan. Bringing these two texts together in their own kind of decadent kiss reveals that both St. Bernard’s mystical kiss and Salome’s actual kiss are concerned with tasting, or more radically, eating wounds.