

Lynne Huffer

*Mad
for
Foucault*

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Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory  
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Mad for Foucault

GENDER AND CULTURE



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For Tamara

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Preface

WHY WE NEED MADNESS

To shake off philosophy necessarily implies a . . . casual abandon. . . . It's to counter [philosophy] with a kind of surprised and joyful foolishness, a sort of incomprehensible burst of laughter which, in the end, comprehends or, in any case, breaks. Yes . . . it breaks more than it comprehends.

—Michel Foucault, 1975

The flashes and sparklings, the statements that tore themselves away from words, even Foucault's laughter was a statement.

—Gilles Deleuze, 1990

This intensive way of reading, in contact with what's outside the book, as a flow meeting other flows, one machine among others, as a series of experiments for each reader in the midst of events that have nothing to do with books, as tearing the book into pieces, getting it to interact with other things, absolutely anything . . . is reading with love.

—Gilles Deleuze, 1973

This book is a story about reading Michel Foucault, with love. When I started this project, I had been studying and teaching Foucault for a number of years, but had never committed myself to writing about him. This half-hearted commitment was due, in part, to my intense ambivalence about his work. Like many feminists, I admired Foucault's brilliance, but felt uneasy about his seeming indifference to feminist concerns. Then, in September 2006, I spent a month in the Foucault archives in Normandy. That experience of what Deleuze calls a "contact with what's outside the book" not only shifted much of what I thought I knew about Foucault but also transformed my hot-and-cold feelings. Suddenly I burned with passion. My archival encounter was nothing less than an experience of rupture: I was, like Deleuze's book, torn to pieces. Returning home to Atlanta, I gathered the pieces and found the shape of a different Foucault, a different feminism, and a different queer theory than what I had known.

Finding a different Foucault "outside the book" brought me, paradoxically, back to a book: Foucault's first major work,¹ *History of Madness*, published in French in 1961 but only fully translated into English in

2006.² In unpublished remarks I discovered in the archives, Foucault insists, again and again, on *Madness's* importance to his oeuvre. Like most feminists with an interest in queer theory, I had not paid much attention to *Madness*, focusing instead on the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* (1976) for an understanding of sex and sexuality in Foucault.³

Rediscovering *Madness* now, almost two decades after the emergence of queer theory, I insist on *Madness's* importance for our present, post-queer age. This is not to erect *Madness* as a monument to Foucault, but rather to bear witness to its capacity to move us. Both the archival material and *History of Madness* tell a story of transformation grounded in a specifically Foucauldian eros. This singular, life-affirming eros offers us resources for an ethics of living in the biopolitical world of the twenty-first century.

My own singularly strange, intensive encounter with *Madness* is strikingly similar to what Foucault describes as the explosive contact that occurs between a book and a reader. In his marvelous, self-ironizing preface to the 1972 French revised edition of *Madness*, Foucault describes his book as an object-event. The voice of the preface is a humble one: The event is “minuscule,” “almost imperceptible among so many others,” “an object that fits into the hand” (*M* xxxvii). As humble object, the book must take care to avoid speaking with the weight or solemnity of a “text.” Rather, it should have the *désinvolture*—the lightness, the attitude of disengagement or abandon—to present itself as discourse, releasing itself from literary and philosophical traditions alike. Rejecting the *belles lettres* book as text—the already coded, received, and ordered canonical tradition of books solidly implanted in libraries, fields of criticism, and pedagogical systems—Foucault chooses instead the book as discourse—the object-event that, like a weapon, ruptures tradition with the force of an opening in history.

Paradoxically, it is precisely in its lightness—in its refusal to be weighed down by a tradition of *explications de texte*, which would confer on it some official status—that the book as discourse and as object-event carries the explosive force of a dramatic, even violent unsettling. It functions, Foucault writes, as “both battle and weapon, strategy and shock, struggle and trophy or wound, conjuncture and vestige, strange meeting and repeatable scene” (*M*xxxviii). For Foucault, the book is a confluence of forces—causes and effects, contexts and consequences, acts and their traces, the sharp thrust of the present and the percussive repetitions of a past remembered. It is also, ultimately, a small explo-

sion, one of many object-events destined to disappear: “I think of my books as mines, explosives. . . . The book should disappear by its own effect.”⁴ If the book has a voice, it is only the repeated one that, with true humility, performs again the work’s disappearance in the Nietzschean cry of the mad philosopher: “I am dynamite.”

There is much to be unpacked in this constellation that brings together book as object-event, discourse, repetition, and explosive disappearance. In the pages of this book, I will unpack these concepts and use them to guide my thinking on Foucault, queer theory, and the ethics of sex. Taking seriously the status of Foucault’s writings as object-events, I focus primarily on *Madness* as one of the great unread texts of queer theory. My major aim is to read *Madness*, retrospectively, in light of its absence from the only academic field that takes as its primary focus the study of sexuality. I read this absence against the backdrop of the more widely read Foucauldian works that ground queer theory, especially *Sexuality One*. I also include in my considerations the last two published volumes of *History of Sexuality*, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*—both published in French in 1984—as well as some of the published and unpublished materials that have come to light in the years since Foucault’s death in 1984, including interviews, public lectures, radio debates, roundtables, political pamphlets, and transcriptions of his courses at the Collège de France. In engaging *Madness* and these other more peripheral writings and interviews, I hope to productively unravel some of the blind spots and dogmas of contemporary queer theory.

Foucault’s description of the book as an object-event serves to situate my reading of him within a larger conceptualization of historical writing that Foucault called eventialization (*événementialisation*). For Foucault, the concept of the *event* crystallized history as discontinuity and rupture, rather than as a progressive narrative based on the logic of cause and effect. In his reflections on *Madness*, Foucault’s teacher, Georges Canguilhem, reminds us that Foucault defined eventialization as “the bringing to light of ‘ruptures of evidence.’”⁵ This notion of eventialization as an approach to writing history reinforces the text-discourse distinction mentioned above, where the traditional view of human history as a seamless past waiting to be read functions like the falsely solidified text of the belles lettres tradition. Eventialization—the disruptive bringing to light of that which is plain or clear to sight or understanding—functions, like discourse, as the illuminating but fragmenting force through which the discontinuous multiplicity of history

becomes an object of sight and, paradoxically, in that moment of visibility disappears from view. In this sense, the book as object-event takes its place within a larger conceptualization of history as eventialization.

“Foucault,” Deleuze writes, “is haunted by the double and its essential otherness.”⁶ Eventialization links history with philosophy through the concept of the double, and doubling brings out the political dimension of the book as object-event. As just one moment in a repetitive “bringing to light of ‘ruptures of evidence,’” the book as event “takes its place in an incessant game of repetitions” (*M* xxxvii). These doublings, in turn, form part of what Foucault will always refer to as games of truth. As an event inevitably caught in a movement of repetition, fragmentation, copying, reflection, and simulation, the book disappears in this other sense, into the infinite proliferation of its doubles as truth. What remains of the book are these truth-effects in the world. The book as discourse—as the repeated rupture of truth-effects—occurs with the force of dynamite. That force is felt in the world, in “the series of events to which [the book] belongs” (*M* xxxviii)—its readers, its commentators, the multiple interlocutors who constitute its various discursive contexts. In this way, the book’s truth-effects ripple through the world like rings on water, as the light-bringing rupture of an expansive doubling.

These concepts of event and doubling, gleaned from the 1972 preface, have opened a passage, belatedly and retrospectively, into my reinterpretation of *History of Madness* in the context of queer theory. Foucault’s picture of the explosive doubling of the book-event points to the complexity of a book’s reception and its impact in the world. The “doubling” of a book-event occurs in very specific ways, including translation, commentary, interpretation, retranslation, and reinterpretation. This is how a book both appears and “disappears . . . into the series of events to which it belongs” (*M* xxxviii). In the case of *History of Madness*, its status as a nonevent in queer theory is, at least in part, a consequence of the story of its nontranslation into English. Let me briefly recount that history.

The first English translation of the book occurred in 1965, four years after its first appearance in French. Originally published in 1961 as *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique*, the book was soon reissued in a truncated inexpensive French paperback version for “train station waiting rooms,”⁷ as Foucault put it. Although pleased with a popular edition of *Madness*, Foucault was disappointed that this abridged version became the standard edition of the book. Not only was the French public likely to read an incomplete book but, with the exception

of the Italian version, all the foreign language translations of *Madness* were based on this shortened popular edition. This explains the severely abridged English translation by Richard Howard, entitled *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, that was published in 1965. At 230 pages, the book was about one-third the length of Foucault's original version. *Madness and Civilization* was widely distributed to an American audience that had, for the most part, never heard Foucault's name before. And, although the book had a considerable impact on American readers, it was not subsequently engaged by queer theorists.⁸

Forty-five years after the book's initial publication in French, a complete English translation of *Madness* finally appeared in 2006. This unabridged translation by Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalifa includes both the 1961 and 1972 prefaces; a foreword by Ian Hacking; an introduction by Jean Khalifa; two appendixes from the 1972 French edition, "Madness, the Absence of an Oeuvre" and "My Body, This Paper, This Fire"; an additional appendix, "Reply to Derrida," from a 1972 Tokyo lecture; and four critical annexes with supporting historical documents and bibliographic material.⁹

There is no denying the importance of this translation-event; for the first time, English speakers have access to the pivotal arguments that established the groundwork for Foucault's thinking during the remaining twenty-three years of his life. It is not yet clear, however, whether or not this new translation—still poorly marketed in the U.S.—will have any impact on American queer theory and the study of sexuality or on the American reception of Foucault's thought more generally. Whatever that impact might be, it is Ian Hacking's astute comments in the foreword that I follow. Describing the difference between the original and its translation, he writes: "Doublings: I suggest that you hold in your hands two distinct books. . . . Despite the words being the same, so much has happened that the meaning is different" (*M* xii). This book focuses on how that difference in meaning emerges, post-queer theory, in my own doubling return to sexuality in *Madness*.

Queer theorists should care deeply about *History of Madness*. The impact of Foucault's thought on queer theory is undeniable, and yet, because *Madness* has only recently been fully translated into English, queer theory's uptake of this work has been truncated and therefore distorted. This is especially significant given that *History of Madness* is not only Foucault's first major book but also the one Foucault himself favored over all the others. Additionally, although there is great dis-

agreement among Foucauldians about the continuity of Foucault's ideas over the course of his life, *Madness* clearly lays the foundations for certain constants in Foucault's thinking. These include, most importantly, Foucault's sustained critique of moral and political exclusion and his lifelong challenge to the despotic power of philosophical reason: to "shake off philosophy," as he puts it in this book's first epigraph. Finally, as Didier Eribon notes in *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (2003), *Madness's* dissection of the structures of madness and unreason in the Age of Reason constitutes an analysis of sexuality a full fifteen years before the publication of the first of three volumes explicitly dedicated to that subject. Not only is *Madness* an earlier consideration of sexuality, but, historically, analytically, and stylistically, it gives a thicker, experiential texture to its subject than *Sexuality One*. Significantly, Foucault's "archeology" (M 80) of a vast field of unreason uncovers an array of figures of sexual alterity, including not only homosexuals, but hysterics, onanists, libertines, prostitutes, debauchers, nymphomaniacs, and other sexual "abnormals." *Madness* therefore directly engages the question of sexuality as an experience by incorporating it within the frame of madness. By contrast, Foucault's purely discursive definition of sexuality in *Sexuality One* drains it of any possible experiential meanings. To read Foucault on sexuality without reading *History of Madness* is to miss a crucial dimension of sexuality in Foucault.

Finally, and more specifically, if we ignore *Madness*, we miss Foucault's early, radical thinking about ethics. And a queer ethics is something that we, queer theorists and activists, desperately need to help us shape our increasingly confusing intellectual and political positions. When we don't read *Madness*, we miss an important story about sexuality that links the apotheosis of reason and the objectifying gaze of science with what Foucault called bourgeois structures of moral exclusion. We also miss the grounding of Foucault's devastating critique of psychoanalysis in that structure which links reason and science to moral exclusion. And, finally, we miss a crucial element—namely, experience—in Foucault's thinking about morality and ethics, one that both deepens and complicates Foucault's later work on ethics in *Sexuality Two* and *Three*. These three dimensions of ethics in *Madness* can be linked to the more explicitly ethical and political language of Foucault's later work, in what Michel Feher calls Foucault's interest in "the potential for moral innovation and a politics of resistance."¹⁰

Mad for Foucault reads *History of Madness* belatedly, through the lens of a queer theoretical project that missed it the first time around. This

queer reading of *Madness* builds on the work begun by Eribon, but moves in a slightly different direction. Eribon's attention to homosexuality's exclusion in the world of unreason and his emphasis on Foucault's critique of psychoanalysis in *Madness* clearly make the case for a more sustained engagement with the book, especially in a queer context. My analysis of *Madness* begins where Eribon ends, by looking more closely at the critique of psychoanalysis and asking, more specifically, about the question of ethics as it relates to sexual experience. Providing an alternative to the psychoanalytic language that purportedly allows the madness of sexuality to "speak," *Madness* offers an alternative ethical language of eros for engaging the difference of sexual unreason.

Toward the end of his life, in his lectures, courses, and the second and third volumes of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault returned to his earlier interest in the problem of sexuality as a problem of experience. He did this, primarily, in his minute dissection of the technologies of the self that, in the Greco-Roman and early Christian worlds, constituted sexuality as an ethical experience whose condition of possibility was freedom. That project was his attempt to release sexuality as an ethical experience from its suturing to bourgeois categories of morality. In that context, *Madness* both explores how that suturing occurred and forges an opening toward alternative ethical perspectives for living in the present. Looking through the lens of Foucault's final work on an ethics of experience, we can thus return to ethics in *Madness* through the back door, as it were, by asking the question Foucault posed in 1984 not long before his death, "why [have] we made sexuality into a moral experience?"¹¹

There are many possible responses to that question, including: it was Christianity that turned the erotic relation into something to be judged according to a rigid system of moral norms. This is, in fact, what Foucault saw after writing the still unpublished fourth volume of *History of Sexuality*, *Confessions of the Flesh*, about the Christian period, the practices of confession, and the beginnings of the discursive proliferation of sexuality that culminated in the modern production of perversions. If Christianity was at least partially responsible for turning sexuality into a moral experience in the Western world, how do we get out from under it? Most Foucault readers, when faced with that question, turn to his work on the Greco-Roman world and the ethics of the self as self-fashioning. Foucault ultimately saw, the story goes, that one way to get out from under morality as we know it in the West was to return to the ancient world in order to unearth pre-Christian corporeal practices that

were not coded according to Christian moral conceptions of the body and desire. Only in this pre-Christian petri dish could an experiment occur where ethical self-fashioning in relation to others might take place in a context that Foucault calls freedom.

This familiar reading of a Foucauldian ethics of self-fashioning is a worthy one. But I propose reading Foucault from a different angle and under a different light. Specifically, in order to grapple with the difficult question of why we've made sexuality into a moral experience, we must also examine *History of Madness* and the great division between reason and unreason. If returning to the Greeks was Foucault's way of getting out from under Christian morality, returning to the moment of splitting in the Age of Reason was Foucault's way of getting out from under philosophy's despotic moralizing power. This is not to deny the suggestive value of Foucault's pre-Christian approach to ethics in *Sexuality Two* and *Three*. Rather, it is to offer a way of proceeding that takes seriously the secular, rationalist production of a normative ethics through which the erotic bonds of bodies are coded as moral experience. This approach to Foucault will tease out, in *Madness*, his ethical alternative to the philosophical production of moral norms by a sovereign secular reason. That ethical alternative to rationalist morality—something we might imagine as sexual experience released from its moral frame—is what I call Foucault's ethics of eros.

This ethics of eros is situated in a trajectory of thought that confronts the Cartesian mind-body dualism with an insistence on the role the body plays in intersubjective relations. As a site of pleasure but also of death, of erotic connection but also of pain, the body reactivates the tragic dimension of subjectivity, the fact of our life and our annihilation in the body's eventual death. In its premodern form, madness as unreason stood in for that bodily dimension of human experience: the cosmic, tragic presence of life and death—Eros and Thanatos—at the heart of all subjectivity. By the late eighteenth century, that tragic subjectivity had been masked by science in the capture of madness as mental illness.

Within that conception of modern subjectivity as a mask that hides our tragic corporeality, Foucault celebrates an erotic, desubjectivating subjectivity that embraces the body in its life and death. Paradoxically, however, to reclaim tragic eros is also to negate it as already captured by the gaze of scientific reason. As Foucault puts it in the 1961 preface: "Any perception that aims to apprehend [those insane words] in their wild state necessarily belongs to a world that has captured them already" (*M* xxxii). Thus the historical objectification by the Age of Reason of our bodily selves as a repudiated madness makes Foucault's reclamation of

eros not only tragic but also ironic, since it can only be grasped through the hindsight of its undoing.

Foucault's eros is not a redemptive cure for that which ails us; it does not provide us with an essential plenitude to which we can cling for solace in these modern, science-dominated, seemingly loveless times. Foucault's conception of history as a series of doublings refuses the comfort of a nostalgic return to the tragic subjectivity we have lost. Rather, in its ironic mode, historical doubling always includes a force of destruction, unhappiness, and pain. As the constitutive element of Foucault's ethics, eros is driven not only by the force of an intersubjective generosity but by a force of ironic undoing as well. Eros indeed contains its opposite, Thanatos, just as reason, for Foucault, is inhabited by its opposite, unreason. As the point of that division, Foucault's ethics of eros describes a force of both connection and dissolution: It is both tragic and ironic, lyrical and ludic, the site of utopian promise and aporetic cynicism. If erotic generosity makes us want to cling to its promise of transformative connection, the violent force of erotic irony reminds us that the thing we're clinging to is a stick of dynamite.

This explosive force of ironic generosity repeats the description of the explosive force of the book-event in the 1972 preface. Reading this alternative ethics in Foucault brings together, then, Foucault's final question about sexual morality—Why have we made sexuality into a moral experience?—and his earlier reflections on sexuality and madness. Bringing them together allows us to reengage the question of a possible queer ethics in Foucault as an erotic response to secular philosophy's unquestioned reliance on reason. Approached in this way, thinking queerly becomes not just a way of responding, from within Christianity, to the murderous exclusions of religious morality. It becomes a way of rethinking the despotic rationalism of a secular order whose effects are equally murderous. The queer as an experience sits on the threshold that I am naming the erotic. Eros names a nonself-identical force that resists the exclusions of moral rationalism, but that also moves beyond the pure negativity of ethical rupture. Although never fully articulated here as a political theory, *Madness* offers the elements of an ethics that can speak to our queer political present.

A Postscript on Prefaces

And why, one might ask, do I begin with a preface, when in 1972 Foucault so adamantly denounces the form as "a declaration of tyranny"

(M xxxviii) that allows the author to impose her own image on the book's reception? "I am the author" (M xxxviii), the sovereign preface declares: "Look at my face" (M xxxviii) to see "my intention. . . . When I speak of the limits of my enterprise, I mean to set a boundary for your freedom" (M xxxviii).

Foucault is right, of course, when he writes these lines in the "non-preface" he supplies in 1972. But it's difficult to let go, to avoid imposing an intention on the book one has written. Foucault faces this difficulty when he is asked to write a new preface for the 1972 French revised edition of *Madness*. "I really ought to write a new preface for this book," Foucault begins. But he finds the idea to be "unattractive" (M xxxvii), even repugnant, as the original French *j'y répugne* (F 9) suggests. Nonetheless, Foucault cannot dispense with a new preface altogether, even if its only real purpose is to say, as it does: "Then remove the old one [*l'ancienne*]" (M xxxviii, F 10, translation modified). Alas, even the liberating act that would remove the declaration of tyranny leaves another, more despotic declaration to take its place.

No one is more aware of this irony than Foucault himself in the 1972 preface, a mere two-page affair whose conclusion splits and doubles the singularity of the narrative "I." Suddenly, at the end, two voices emerge to mock the entire enterprise:

When I was asked to write a new preface for this book . . . I could only answer: Then remove the old one. That will be the honest course.

...

"But you've just written a preface."

"At least it's short." (M xxxix/F 10; translation modified)

I love that split voice of 1972, just as I love the doubling of that split in the 2006 English translation, where we can read both the suppressed 1961 preface and the new 1972 version side by side. To me, the emergence of the two prefaces together in 2006 mirrors the doubled voice that emerged at the end of the 1972 preface. But it is a "distorting mirror [*trouble miroir*]" (M 354–355/F 374), as Foucault later puts it in *Madness*, one that destabilizes the certainty of the self-identical authorial subject's declaration of freedom from an ancien régime: "Then remove the old one [*l'ancienne*]" (M xxxix/F 10; translation modified).

As we will see later in my analysis, the ancien régime to be suppressed—the 1961 preface—is the overly poetic, "lyrical" voice of a young Foucault. That voice will dissolve into the ironic discourse of the

1970s. But even in the 1960s—and despite his later reservations about what he retrospectively saw in *Madness* as “a lingering Hegelianism”¹²—Foucault knew that irony was not a simple matter of dialectical reversal along the linear timeline of a story: “*Homo dialecticus*,” he wrote in 1964, “is already dying in us” (*M* 543). Today, in the marvelous 2006 English translation, there is no neat narrative sublation of the 1961 lyricism into the mastering irony of 1972. The two prefaces coexist in an aporetic relation that refuses to erase, in some happy resolution, the contradictory traces of their doubled construction.

I’ve written this preface, then, to signal a postmodern, aporetic irony at the heart of Foucault’s project. But if *aporia*—from the Greek *aporos*—suggests in its etymology that there will be “no passage” to something other, that is where Foucault has a different tale to tell than the familiar deconstructive story. The passage through the rupture of the ironic split may not be dialectical, but that doesn’t mean there’s no passage at all. Indeed, finding a passage—“giving the mad a language”¹³—is Foucault’s declared purpose in writing *Madness*. And finding a passage—a way through the thicket, a breach in the wall—describes this book’s purpose as well.

Acknowledgments

This book, unexpected, came from many places. It unfolded in ways I had never imagined, and even after the process of writing had ended I felt I was being pulled by a tide of others. There was something fierce in that pull. I want to acknowledge here some of those who gave the pull its energy, assisting the transformation of a gut feeling into a book: an object to be released, as Foucault would put it, into the series of events to which it belongs.

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