

# MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE GODDESS FORTUNA

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My talk today has two epigraphs. The first comes from Daniel Kahneman's new book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. It consists of a couple of equations:

success = talent + luck

great success = a little more talent + a lot of luck

The other is from that wise man, or wiseacre, Larry King, "Those who have succeeded at anything and don't mention luck are kidding themselves." Hence my title.

What path leads to a career teaching and writing about medieval literature? Mine was tortuous and perhaps even devious. In 1958 I applied to Yale after five years at a New England boarding school and because the acceptance rate that year was 46%, I got in. I chose Yale for the flimsiest of reasons. My two older brothers had attended MIT and Harvard, and since my father had gone to Yale (class of '31), I thought he would be disappointed if his remaining son did not attend his alma mater. In fact nothing could have been further from the truth. So far as I could tell my father remembered little of his years at Yale, including his major. But in fact this decision was my first stroke of luck: Yale turned out to be exactly the right place for me. I had always had literary interests, perhaps because my mother owned a bookstore, and in those years the English Department at Yale was universally acknowledged to be the best in the country. It was loaded not only with eminent senior faculty but – thanks to the GI Bill – young, eager, and very smart junior faculty unencumbered with the humanist piety that is so effective in killing an interest in literature. I'm sure you know what I mean by humanist piety: "Oh Shakespeare, you are so very, very great, and we are so very, very small – except for our love of you, of course, which makes us very special people." At any rate, after spending a year and a half rowing on the crew, drinking too much, and generally behaving foolishly, I had my second stroke of luck: I got married. This forced me to get a bit more serious, and I discovered that Yale had classrooms, libraries and that superb faculty. They taught me that literature was not a dilettante affectation but something to which energetic and unpretentious people could commit their lives. The result has been that I have spent my working life in the company of writers and thinkers whom I have found always – well, almost always – interesting and instructive.

After receiving my BA in 1962 with a major in English, I then accepted a fellowship offered by the Carnegie Foundation designed – believe it or not – to lure people into academia and particularly the humanities. During that year I taught one section of English 15, the basic English course, and took one graduate course, Prof. W. K. Wimsatt's formidable *History of Literary Criticism*. I now discovered that I

actually liked to do things that were hard: for some reason I had what Yeats called “a fascination for the difficult.” I then received a one-year Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, which required me to attend graduate school at a university other than where I had been an undergraduate. Here was the third stroke of luck: I wanted to be a modernist so I chose Stanford. Stanford turned out to be exactly the wrong place for me, but enrolling there had an unintended benefit. In those days all PhD candidates were required to take a year of Anglo-Saxon. After a term of language study, the course turned to the poetry, especially *Beowulf*. I found the poetry fascinating, but the professor – a learned and very kind man – was a philologist to his fingertips, a true “word man.” Every time an interpretation would crawl out on the table, he would impatiently brush it away. “Look,” he would say, “is this word from a German or a Scandinavian root? Is it a genitive or a dative?” Rather than being discouraged by these dismissals, I saw an opportunity: here was an uncultivated field. If, I thought, someone so resolutely uninterested in literature, and so evidently incapable of interpretation, could be a full professor at a prestigious university then obviously I should specialize in medieval literature. And all the more so since all I knew about it was that it was supposed to be difficult. Armed with this shamelessly careerist plan, I returned to Yale in 1964 to complete my degree. In those days graduate school took four years or else, two years of classes – one of which I had already completed at Stanford – and two years to write a dissertation. So I asked the senior medievalist at Yale, Talbot Donaldson, if it were possible at this relatively late stage of my education to switch fields and become a medievalist, despite the fact that except for Anglo-Saxon, I had never taken a course in medieval anything. Professor Donaldson looked at me with the genial disdain for which he was famous, and asked: “Can you tie your tie?” But, I remonstrated, what about all those things I was supposed to know? All those languages, all that paleography, all that history? The reply was: “Just know a little bit about everything – you’ll learn the rest when you need it.” This was in fact excellent advice, and graduate students still need to realize that they are not supposed to know everything before they even begin their careers. But they are certainly supposed to know more than I did. Since Donaldson’s mission was to rescue medieval literature from exactly the kind of medievalist from whom I had just escaped, he declined to teach me the disciplinary tools of the trade – despite the fact that his own philology was impeccable, his historicism detailed and sophisticated, his paleography superb, and his textual criticism magisterial.

I wrote my dissertation under the direction of one of the younger men whom I had found so inspiring: Tom Greene. Of the dissertation I am tempted to quote – or actually misquote – Wittgenstein: “Whereof one should not speak one must be silent.” I used my dissertation as schoolwork, as a way to learn at least some of the things I needed to know. So there were a couple of chapters on Old French poems, a chapter on twelfth-century intellectual history, a chapter on the Arthurian legend, and so on. My generous readers passed the dissertation while admitting that as a co-

herent argument it was pretty feeble, and I have never published a word of it. In fact, many years later when I was teaching at Johns Hopkins a junior colleague asked if he could read a chapter. “Sure,” I said, took the dissertation down from the bookshelf, tore out the chapter he wanted, gave it to him and then deposited the remainder in the waste basket. Nonetheless, despite its all too obvious flaws, the dissertation was a good start, at least according to what I now thought of as the Donaldson Rule: “Learn it when you need it.” Now came stroke of luck number four: I was offered an Assistant Professorship at the University of Toronto beginning in the fall of 1967. This job offer allowed me to turn down an identical offer from Yale. Although I did not know it at the time, this turned out to be a great career move, both because of what happened at Toronto and because – as I realized when Yale again offered me a job 27 years later in 1994 – if you turn them down then they really want you.

My situation at the University of Toronto was odd, and to explain it I must provide a sketchy account of the history of literary criticism at the time, one that I hope would not disappoint Professor Wimsatt. In the 1950s and 60s the Yale English Department was the home, both theoretically and in practice, of what was known as the New Criticism. This was an interpretive program that avoided questions of historical context as a matter of principle and focused instead on “close reading,” in which the literary text was treated as a self-sufficient verbal artifact. Moreover, while it insisted that interpretation was the critic’s job of work, New Criticism decried what one of its founders, Cleanth Brooks, called “the heresy of paraphrase.”<sup>1</sup> A poem was not simply a versified statement, a communication that needed to be decoded, but an experience, and one that could hold in tension oppositions and even contradictions that a discursive prose account, lacking the resources of poetic language, would either misrepresent or resolve. Although dominant at Yale, however, New Criticism was still an outlier in literary studies, and especially in the tradition-bound field of Medieval Studies, as my experience at Stanford had already suggested. The most prominent paradigm for literary work was still the version of historicism that had developed in the nineteenth century. Basing itself on the cause-and-effect model of the natural sciences, this traditional historicism understood the goal of literary study as being not to interpret but to explain, and – most important – to explain a literary work genetically. The first question historicism invariably asked of a prominent element in the text was genetic: where did it come from? This procedure was most explicitly at work in the ubiquitous source study that characterized this phase of scholarship: if the source of an item in the text was known then its meaning would be revealed. Consequently, the author’s biography, the intellectual and religious interests of the time, the literary models at hand, and the expectations of the audience – all this information and more provided the literary historian with explanatory materials with which to account for the text.

The basic problem with this kind of historicism was that by so definitively allowing the lines of explanatory force to run vertically, as it were, from the text back into

the past that was to account for it, it devalued the possibility of lateral explanation in terms of function within the text itself. Moreover, since it necessarily regarded all information as at least potentially relevant, and since its method would not allow it to designate the literary text as a special kind of document among other kinds, this historicism was left with no principle of discrimination by which to judge relevance. As the Czech linguist Roman Jakobson once put it, literary historians were like “police who are supposed to arrest a certain person, arrest everybody and carry off everything they find in the house and all the people who pass by chance in the street.”<sup>2</sup> The result of applying this indiscriminately assembled mix of causes to the text was to reduce it to a comparably disparate collection of effects. As a unified locus of meaning the literary work was effectively undone, and with it went the civilizing mission that literary culture had always been thought to fulfill.

The New Critical response to this failure was to dispense with history altogether. It was a libertarian creed that wanted to free literature from the dead hand of historicist orthodoxy. Its most direct theoretical polemic was a double attack upon intentionalism and affectivism, an attack motivated by a desire to assert the independence of the literary work from a confining historicity. The historical moment of neither the author (purportedly controlling the text in the form of a stated intention) nor reader (articulated as a specific affect) was to be allowed to supervene upon the transhistorical object that is the poem. And the literary text was exempted from the demands of representational accuracy expected of other modes of discourse. Poetic language was granted a special status, and literary discourse was to be understood contextually, as a self-referential, autotelic system, rather than in terms of its correspondence to an external world that it had never sought to represent. A literary work was never true to life, only to itself; literature was not derived from experience but from other literature. Correlatively, New Criticism insisted that literature is unconstrained by ideological commitments. The true critical attitude was a Kantian disinterestedness that subordinated the gratifications of certainty to the severer demands of skepticism. Literature was not rhetorical – promoting a message – but dramatic; it did not advocate but questioned; and above all, it revealed the complexity of human life.

Finally, and with a certain incongruity, the New Critical attack upon historicism shared with Romantic idealism a commitment to literature’s cultural role. For all its celebration of the poem as a value in and of itself, New Criticism was opposed as much to a hedonistic aestheticism as to a narrow pragmatism. It never abandoned the claim that literature offers modern men and women, living within the disenchanting world created by science, a local enclave of value that could resist the tyranny of factualism. Hence New Criticism always insisted that the task of the reader was neither to explain nor to appreciate but to understand, and to articulate that understanding in the form of readings, interpretations that converted the poem into a language that made explicit the moral vision the work mutely but eloquently bodied forth. Establishing interpretation as not merely the privileged but the only legitimate form of

literary study, New Criticism insisted that the function of poetry is to lead us beyond history to the permanent human truths that legitimize not merely literary study but culture itself. Here the New Critics relied – whether they knew it or not – upon the philosophical hermeneutics developed by nineteenth-century German philosophers like Schleiermacher and Dilthey. These thinkers had argued that full knowledge of the cultural objects of another period is enabled by a common *humanitas* that undergirds both past and present. Perhaps the literary scholar best capable of fulfilling this program was Erich Auerbach, a refugee from Nazi Germany who taught at Yale from 1950 until his untimely death in 1957. Auerbach summed up the philosophical assumptions that underwrote New Critical humanism – an assumption, I want to stress, that the New Critics themselves never explicitly acknowledged – as follows:

The entire development of human history, as made by men, is potentially contained in the human mind, and may therefore . . . be understood by men. Th[is] re-evocation [entails] an understanding of every historical stage as an integral whole, of its genius (its *Geist*, as the German romantics would have said), a genius pervading all human activities and expressions of the period concerned.

So it was not simply literature that one interpreted, but literature as an expression of the human spirit, the universal *Geist* that every cultural object expressed.

Armed – or perhaps burdened – with this mission, I arrived at Victoria College in the University of Toronto. The University of Toronto contained, and still contains, not one but two institutions devoted to the study of the Middle Ages: the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies and the Medieval Centre. What I quickly discovered was that the one thing I knew how to do – turn out subtle readings of poems – was as of little interest to my learned medievalist colleagues at Toronto as it had been to my professor of Anglo-Saxon at Stanford. Here Latin culture was superior to the vernacular, history and especially intellectual and religious history reigned supreme, and questions about methodology were not to be asked. Insofar as one could specify the kind of literary interpretation practiced at Toronto – a difficult task, since to discuss such “merely theoretical” matters was at best indecorous, at worst a sign of fashionable pretentiousness – it was the same untheorized historicism that had always served literary studies, and especially Medieval Studies, as its default position. Not surprisingly, my learned colleagues regarded me with a puzzled and slightly impatient tolerance. I realized that if I were to succeed here I could not retreat into my cozy New Critical enclave. I had to show my colleagues that I too could do the sorts of things that medievalists are supposed to do. So I followed the Donaldson Rule and learned things as I needed them. I published articles on the relevance of theology to medieval poetry, on manuscripts, and even a very long article on Chaucer’s *Parson’s Tale*. This is a text that few read and none enjoy, and it wasn’t clear which was more tedious, the *Tale* or my article. When I sent an offprint of this fairly massive and densely footnoted article to Prof. Donaldson he wrote back that it seemed “very learned.” I didn’t want to know the tone in which this comment was made. Yet he need not have worried: I

had never abandoned my commitment to New Criticism – to the complex artfulness of the literary text, to the subtleties of textual interpretation, and to literature as an expression of human values.

The 12 years I spent in Toronto – from 1967 to 1979 – were filled with changes and challenges, both in the world and in my life. I got divorced and remarried to Annabel Patterson, and we ended up with a collection of five wonderful children. And like many at that time, I caught politics. I became deeply involved with the New Democratic Party, Canada’s version of the British Labour Party, as an organizer and campaign manager. For the first time I understood the values of democratic socialism and the debilitating effect its absence has had on the political life of the United States. I was also living in the working class district where I was active politically, an area that one of my more staid colleagues referred to as “the kind of neighborhood where most academics would not choose to live.” For a child of privilege this political experience was a huge eye-opener. For the first time I began to understand just how privileged I had been. As an academic I had felt that I was a member of the intellectual proletariat, which I now realized was a shamefully self-serving idea. I also began to understand what “proletariat” might really mean, and how hard it was for many people to eke out a living even in a country with the excellent social welfare system of Canada (remember universal health care? – it was in fact introduced into Canada by the New Democratic Party). I also learned how intelligent, well-informed and interesting so-called “working people” could be. This experience helped, I hope, to dissolve some of the unacknowledged and unrecognized class snobbery with which my upbringing had encrusted me.

But it sharpened my scholarly dilemma: how was I to connect my political commitments with my scholarship? I had come to believe – and still do believe – the Marxist maxim that ideas derive from the material conditions of life rather than floating above them. I believe that cultural production is not apart from but a part of material production and of larger social processes. My mantra was (and is) Marx’s famous statement in *A Critique of Political Economy*: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.”<sup>3</sup> When I applied this adage to the kind of literary history practiced at Toronto, I began to see how uninterested it was in the material conditions of life. Here history was simply intellectual or literary history: politics and economics – indeed, social life itself – were simply erased. In this practice what distinguished the Middle Ages was its consistency – indeed, its identity – with the values espoused by its theologians and philosophers. In fact this Middle Ages fit that old cliché about “the Age of Faith” with a vengeance. Here was the corporatist, collectivist, unself-conscious Middle Ages as described by one of the dominant medieval literary historians of the time: “[T]he medieval world was innocent of our profound concern for tension. . . . We project dynamic polarities on history as class struggles, balances of power, or as conflicts between economic realities and traditional ideals.... But the medieval world with its quiet hierarchies knew nothing of these things.”<sup>4</sup>

The more social and economic history I read the more I realized that this version of the Middle Ages was simply wrong. On the contrary, the Middle Ages was as complex as any other cultural period and just as filled with conflict, especially between the various economic strata of society. So I had to expand my notion of what constituted history to include the material conditions of life and especially the economic conditions. I also realized that if you don't have an explicit politics then one will certainly have you. At this point my trajectory was heading toward Marxist criticism, and I did read a lot of it and learned a lot from it. But Marxist criticism was too blunt a tool for an incorrigible New Critic like me, and I realized that my formalist back-sliding required me to define an alternative historicism. Here came stroke of luck number five: in 1979 I was offered a job at Johns Hopkins. The Hopkins English Department was very small, very intense, and very productive. It was a place where ideas mattered as they hadn't at Toronto and where I developed close friendships that generated the kind of intellectual exchange academic departments are supposed to foster and so rarely, at least in my experience, actually do. I want to mention just two of my colleagues from those years who were particularly influential, Jerry McGann and Stanley Fish – both of whom, oddly enough, had Yale PhDs.

In the 1970s and 80s literary studies was overwhelmed, indeed colonized, by “theory,” most of it issuing from Paris, and Johns Hopkins – along with Yale – was one of the primary ports of entry for French theory. In working my way through this at times deliberately enigmatic and at times even frivolous material I was finally able to define a kind of historicism that would allow me to be both a formalist New Critic and a materialist literary historian. It was the reputedly alarming enterprise known as deconstruction that I found most helpful. Deconstruction's central premise is that reality is not simply given to us, as something natural, but is in fact constructed by us. Its task is then to take this construction apart – to de-construct it – so that we can understand how it works and the values that support it. For deconstruction both thought and practice are organized according to a set of binary oppositions: God and history, essence and existence, thought and language, the individual and society, male and female, white and black, straight and gay, and so on. Deconstruction could then unmask the suppressions and elisions – the ideological pressures – that make possible these polarities. Its characteristic strategy was to show that the privileged element in each binary creates its opposite by projecting onto it all of those characteristics that it does not want to acknowledge as part of itself. For instance, man is rational and therefore woman must be emotional; man is culture and therefore woman must be nature; straight is normal and therefore gay must be deviant. And so on, for these binaries are not simply oppositions but are actually hierarchies freighted with value.

Particularly relevant to literary criticism was the way deconstruction dismantled the binary of reality and the representation of reality. We intuitively think of reality as simply there and that the validity of any representation can be judged by comparing it to the reality it represents. But deconstruction reminded us that in fact reality is only

available by means of representation: we can never know the thing itself but only a version of the thing. As Wallace Stevens put it, “things seen are things as seen.”<sup>5</sup> Or as Magritte’s famous painting of a pipe reminds us, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe.” What this meant for both history and criticism was not that interpretation was impossible but that there was, in fact, nothing else. This was a point that the bad boy of Western philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche, had already made in typically extravagant but nonetheless useful terms. As he said, “Against that positivism which stops before phenomena, saying ‘there are only facts,’ I should say: no, it is precisely facts that do not exist, only interpretations.” And again: “All things are subject to interpretation, but whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function not of truth but of power.”<sup>6</sup> Coming at this issue from the tradition of American pragmatism, my colleague Stanley Fish developed much the same argument.

In any case, deconstruction took this insight to its appropriate conclusion. It both raised New Criticism’s delicate techniques of verbal analysis to further levels of subtlety and applied them to texts that had previously been thought to reside entirely outside the borders of literature – borders that were now revealed to have been an illusion in the first place. New Criticism had argued that a work was literature not by convention but because it possessed an essential literariness. For deconstruction, by contrast, all texts – whether they be poems, chronicles, charters or theological treatises – required the same kind of interpretive attention as literature. I now realized, at last, that literary and historical texts didn’t need to be seen as opposed but as complementary, and that together they allowed us to reconstruct medieval culture more fully than either could do alone. And I finally understood that literature was not simply the result of external historical forces but was itself an historical agent. Literature was itself engaged in the process by which medieval culture made itself. It was, in short, always and inevitably ideological, not because it promoted a specific politics but because it embodied the values by which medieval people constructed and made sense of their world. I now realized that what I was really after was the social meaning of literary texts. I wanted to understand how medieval literature both constructed and was constructed by the complex and often contentious world that was the Middle Ages.

These lucubrations saw the light of day in my first book, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature*, published by the University of Wisconsin Press in 1987. A notorious slow-starter, I had at last, at the age of 47, really started. At the same time, thanks to Stanley Fish, I moved from Johns Hopkins to the wonderfully exciting if slightly nutty three-ring circus that was the “new” English Department at Duke. For many years I had been working on a “big book,” the book on Chaucer that all scholars of medieval English literature think they need to write. I had discovered way back in graduate school, without knowing what to do with it, that the binary that I was most interested in was that of the self and its social roles. Human beings fill many social roles, as parents, spouses, workers, friends, and so on. We be-



lieve that these roles are separate from our true self, that selfhood or subjectivity that stands apart from all roles, that thing we believe to be “our true self,” as it were. But deconstruction made me think that actually our social identities determine and perhaps even create that intuitively felt “real” self. In terms of my work on Chaucer, I had always believed that each of the 24 Canterbury tales cannot be understood apart from the teller, but I now began to explore the importance of social rather than psychological identity in understanding the tales. For instance, the first Tale is told by a knight and both structure and content are shaped by what I came to define – by reference to historical texts such as chronicles, records of the courts of chivalry, and heraldry – as a chivalric ideology. The second tale, told by a miller, is a riposte to the Knight’s Tale: it is a lower class mockery of the chivalric worldview and a rebuke to the stereotype of the peasant espoused by the aristocracy. Everybody knows this. But a question that had never been asked was why this tale was told specifically by a miller rather than by a plowman, or a shoemaker, or a simple laborer. There is an answer to this question, but to find it required me to explore the shifts in economic power that occurred after the plague of 1348-50, the role of milling on the medieval manor, the status of millers in the village economy, and the use of the miller in the so-called Peasant’s Revolt of 1381 as a symbol expressing lower class demands for political and economic equality. The upshot was that what had originally been treated simply as a brilliantly comic tale turned out to carry a very specific social and even political meaning. And so on for a number of the other Tales.

This book – eventually entitled *Chaucer and the Subject of History* – was finished in 1989. Now came stroke of luck number six, and perhaps the best of them all. I had a contract to publish the book with Harvard University Press. Just as I was finishing the book I had a cycling accident in England so I was bed-ridden for two or three months. The manuscript was mailed to Harvard while I was still laid up, and within a few days I got a telephone call from the editor telling me the book was too long and would have to be cut by about 20%. I remonstrated that I had warned him this would be a long book and that he had said that since it was on a major author that would be okay. I also asked him if he had read it. Well, no, he hadn’t, but he still wanted it cut by 20%. I then called the director of the Wisconsin University Press, who had published my first book, a woman name Barbara Hanrahan. I asked her what she would do if I sent her this evidently too long manuscript. She replied, amazingly, that she would publish whatever I sent, regardless of length. So I told Harvard to forget it, and mailed her the manuscript, which was published in 1991. It was, moreover, published in paperback and thanks to a subvention from the NEH, obtained by Barbara, at a price that even a graduate student could afford. Nor is this the end of the story. A year later I was contacted by Phi Beta Kappa and told that the book had won the Christian Gauss prize which is awarded to the best book of literary criticism or scholarship of that year. This was a big deal, and when I called Barbara I was excited but also perplexed. “But,” I said, “I didn’t submit the book for the Gauss

Prize.” “Oh,” she replied, “I did.” I now feel that I should cross myself – despite being a heathen – whenever I mention Barbara Hanrahan’s name.

Well, if I dare say it, the rest is history. I moved to Yale in 1994 and retired in 2009, miraculously fulfilling both of Yale’s requirements that I be on the faculty for 15 years and that I retire before 70 so that I was eligible for the golden handshake given to those who retire early. (As many of you probably know, for us late-comers it’s actually tin.) Since coming to Yale I have written a couple of other books and edited some anthologies, but in truth my intellectual trajectory has not changed much. But there is a coda. Again, entirely serendipitously, three years ago I met the Director of Education for the Frick Collection on a Yale Alumni trip that was shared with the Metropolitan Museum, for whom she was then working. I have subsequently been working at the Frick, giving lectures and seminars on paintings, and on the theory of interpretation. I now realize that this ending has returned me to my beginning. I entered academia as someone trained to provide interpretations. Oddly enough, interpretation is not something museum curators are particularly interested in. Just as my Anglo-Saxon professor at Stanford wanted to know about Germanic versus Scandinavian roots, and let the meaning of the poem take care of itself, so too curators are more interested in provenance, influence and so on than in meaning. Once again I’ve stumbled upon an uncultivated field. But wait a minute: do I know anything about painting? Well, fortunately I have the Donaldson Rule to guide me: I learn it when I need it.

## Notes

- 1 Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942).
- 2 Cited by René Wellek, “The Fall of Literary History,” in Michel Cadot et al., eds., *Actes du VIe Congrès de l’Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée* (Stuttgart: Erich Bieber, 1975), p. 29.
- 3 Karl Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), in *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 389.
- 4 D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 51.
- 5 “Adagia” in *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 162.
- 6 Friedrich Nietzsche, Notebooks in Walter Kaufmann, trans., *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1954), p. 458