

1992

## Book Reviews

Criticism Editors

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

---

### Recommended Citation

Editors, Criticism (1992) "Book Reviews," *Criticism*: Vol. 34: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol34/iss1/7>

*Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in the Canterbury Tales* by Laura Kendrick. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988. Pp. 215. \$28.00.

In the late sixties and early seventies critics of medieval literature in American Universities were aligned "for" and "against" the powerful school of criticism associated with two prominent professors at two prestigious eastern universities, D. W. Robertson, Jr. at Princeton and Robert Kaske at Cornell. Robertsonian, patristic or allegorical critics, as they were variously called—or "historical" critics as they termed themselves—were concerned to recapture the way literature was read by "the medieval reader," and determined that secular medieval writing was to be read on the model of such patristic exegesis of the Bible as St. Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*. That is, secular medieval literature was to be read for Christian moral edification, and was to be interpreted to uphold Church doctrine. It was to be read for "sentence" rather than entertainment or "solas." In fact, to read for human consolation, entertainment, or laughter was seen as reading carnally rather than for charity, a form of cupidity and perversion which was unthinkable before the corruption of the modern Romantic period, and therefore not historically correct. Interestingly, for a country whose system of public schools and education is grounded in part on the Protestant American founding fathers' fear of the Roman Catholic Church as "other," the appeal of patristic criticism has much to do with its concern to keep the middle ages a nostalgically pure and different "other" for twentieth-century readers. By the eighties, of course, the imperative for critics of medieval literature to choose sides has disappeared. Patristic criticism lives on, though often in muted strains, perhaps because of its elitist and conservative reinforcement of the role of the critic as sacred priest to the hidden mysteries of literary texts and older cultures, accessible only by the most rigorous scholarship in Latin Biblical exegesis. But even its most severe detractors, who deplore its basic assumptions about literature and criticism, its notion of history, and its lack of sensitivity to literary textuality will admit its important contribution lay in directing attention away from an exclusive focus on the literary text "itself," and towards the intertextuality of medieval literature, history, and especially art.

The title of the first chapter of *Chaucerian Play*, "Reading for Sentence versus Reading for Solas, a Broadening Example," places this work in the tradition of those critics, among others, who opposed the restrictive reading prescribed by patristic critics by deploring patristic insensitivity to the play of language and texts, and defending the use of medieval literature as entertainment and consolation. In this chapter, Kendrick establishes an engaging conversational and confessional tone, using her own experience as reader and teacher of undergraduates to present a problem raised by Chaucerian texts: how to establish the legitimacy and limits of readings of sexual puns. She focuses on her own and other critics' discomfort with the (patristic) idea that the phrase "God's pryvetee" in Chaucer's Miller's Tale should refer only to "secret intentions" or human "private parts," because extending the reference to God's private parts would be dismissed as simply blasphemous by medieval readers. As she traces her process of gaining support for the suspicion that "God's pryvetee" could also be a subversively burlesque allusion to

God's sex or his sex life, she rejects the patristic notion of a uniform medieval reader, and proposes instead two kinds of medieval and modern readers, based on individual intention, regardless of social status: "gentils," whose interpretations are directed by virtue, and "churls," whose interpretations are directed by vice. And she finds support for the notion that "churlish" medieval readers could see references to God's private parts (thereby freeing "churlish" modern readers to do so as well) in the works of Leo Steinberg and M. M. Bakhtin on medieval life and art. Steinberg's study of the sexuality of Christ in art revealed that God the Son's private parts were in fact "newly on display in the late fourteenth century, to both doctrinal and 'solacious' intents," while Bakhtin emphasized those Carnivalesque aspects of medieval life when "deliberately churlish, infantile, goliardic acts of interpretive parody or burlesque performance" took place.

In Chapter Two, "The Spirit versus the Flesh in Art and Interpretation," Kendrick takes on the long line of censorship of Chaucerian play by critics uncomfortable with the mixture of sacred and profane in late medieval art, who satisfy their need to keep the two separate by focusing on the *serious* Chaucer, "an historical realist and sage dogmatist" who created "fables containing moral truths of Christian, doctrinal lessons for the reader to discover and apply to his own life." Kendrick accepts this *serious* Chaucer, but argues that an exclusive focus on it comes at a double expense. First, it ignores Chaucer's possible pleasure in playing with language and literature "as a game of signification with no moral application or higher purpose than 'solas.'" And secondly, it ignores one pleasure of Christian exegesis, and in fact all artistic interpretation, according to Kendrick's reading of Freud: namely, the way it controls the threateningly immoral by creating a secondary text, which both disallows and legitimizes the original threatening carnal images by preserving them in a transformed and sublimated state. For Kendrick the important function of "unserious" or facetious mimesis and interpretation of medieval goliardic and jongleuresque play is desublimation of authoritative texts: discovery and exaggeration of forbidden desires covertly expressed. Such play "*unmasked the euphemisms, removed the verbal loincloths of exegesis, and exposed the revitalizing energy of infantile, egocentric desire.*"

In Chapter Three, "Power and Play: Consolations of Fiction I," Kendrick presents the pleasure of the fictional play of Chaucer and Boccaccio in terms of Freud and Piaget, as the consolation of all abreactive play: the temporary satisfaction for the powerless of the desire for mastery and control. She focuses on Chaucer's Clerk's and Man of Law's Tales as examples of pathetic abreactive fictions, frequently involving a "child" figure killed or punished by a "father" or "bad mother" figure, to show the way these fictions' covert satisfaction of desires ultimately support the status quo. The purpose of these fictions for Kendrick "is to work through anxieties by repeatedly replaying fearful situations . . . thus gradually leading the reader to accommodate himself to a difficult reality such as a sudden reversal of fortunes or a death . . . in short to lead the reader to accept his own inability to control his life"; an acceptance "made possible by the compensating illusions of power that the passive reader or listener, like the passive or immobilized hero, achieves through identification with the competent controlling narrator and other powerful figures."

In the subsequent chapters of this book, Kendrick focuses on the way more rebellious egotistical desires such as aggression against authority are satisfied through Chaucer's comic fictions, in part by being masked or accommodated to public morality by censorious metacommentaries, controlling artistic frames, and laughing denials. Chapter Four, "Dangerous Desires and Play: The Consolations of Fiction II," develops the idea that medieval fabliaux allowed the simultaneous enjoyment and denial of forbidden erotic and aggressive desires expressed through the Oedipal triangle in which "childish" understanding triumphs over "adult" meaning, as exemplified by sons cuckolding fathers or wives cuckolding husbands. Chapter Five, "Breaking Verbal Taboos: The Consolations of Fiction III," works out the way fabliaux of extended euphemism subvert power and authority by exposing and mocking the superficiality and hypocrisy of both the courtly language codes and the patriarchal fathers represented by the Church, noble society, parents, and guardians who think they can control the desires of their "children," and all subordinates, by censoring language. And Chapter Six, "'Straw for Your Gentillesse': Symbolic Rebellion in the *Canterbury Tales*," focuses on the satisfaction derived through the ability to subvert all repressive authority—through the relatively controlled and safe, albeit temporary, construction of fictions, as opposed to the need for suppression in the non-fictional world. Ultimately, Kendrick does not stop at the notion that Chaucer's fictions could offer medieval and modern audiences potential therapeutic play. Rather, she insists on intention, stating that Chaucer, seeing the instability of late-fourteenth-century English society as a "problem," came up with "his solution" of constructing playful fictions "with an equilibrating therapeutic intention."

*Chaucerian Play* deserves to be read for its ambitious and energetic continuation of a patristic emphasis on the intertextuality of medieval literature, history and art. It should also be read for its correction of the neglect of play in medieval literature by both patristic and historical realist critics (those who read Chaucer's works as historical accounts of "real" people, and his language as transparent). The most interesting and exciting moments in this work are those that correct patristic neglect of attention to literary textuality, using Freudian theory to expose the paradoxical impossibilities of attempts to control desire through censorship, and to reveal the uncontrollable nature of sexual puns. As the book corrects the neglect of play by these critics, it also demonstrates that far from being neatly separable, seriousness and play, "doctrine" and "solas" are necessarily intertwined. These accomplishments make the main weakness of the book all the more frustrating. For while for the most part the author seems to express a complex understanding of fiction as serious play, some of her accomplishments are undercut by an equally persistent tendency to present her argument for the seriousness of play in ways that seem to oversimplify other theoretical issues. The result is in the sense that while the author shows an awareness of the nature of play, she has not thoroughly understood the complexity of her topic. Thus, the whole argument of chapter seven, "Deauthorizing the Text: Setting up the Game of the *Canterbury Tales*," suggests a complex notion of authorship that should go hand in hand with an awareness of the complex relationship between author, text and society. For there Kendrick argues that to read Chaucer's works as an historical account is to ignore the ways Chaucer "deauthorizes" the text,

that is, the ways he disclaims responsibility for its subversive, aggressive, erotic aspects, and disarms the threatening aspects of the text, by assuming a mask that points to the status of the text as a fiction set off from the real world. But while Kendrick shows a sophisticated awareness of the process of deauthorization of Chaucer's texts, she also makes statements about the relationship of Chaucer to his texts that slip into a different kind of authorization which is unexplained and of which she seems unaware. Pronouncements, for example, that Chaucer "saw" fourteenth century instability as a "problem" and presented the *Canterbury Tales* as a "solution"—or that "Chaucer wrote the *Canterbury Tales* to renew the productive forces of English society"—raise serious questions about what Kendrick's vision of the relationship between author, text, and society might be and on what it is based. They appear to endorse an all too mechanistic view of the relationship between art and society that belies the more complex awareness displayed in such carefully qualified statements about the relationship between Chaucer's intention or purpose and his work as: "Chaucer's intention *seems* to have been to organize the tales so that there is repeated subversion of gentle tales by churlish ones" or "I believe that Chaucer constructed this playful debate between reason and desire with a therapeutic, equilibrating intention" (emphasis mine), as well as in her acknowledgement that "it is extremely risky to speculate about the personal motivations of Chaucer's fictions or the private purposes they may have served." As a result, the fact that her acknowledgement is relegated to a footnote seems symptomatic of the way Kendrick's lack of awareness of her own implication into the question of authority can undercut her credibility.

Perhaps the fact that Kendrick continues to refer to all readers as "he" is another indication that her work is simply more conservative than unaware or incomplete. But Kendrick's discussion of Chaucer's Knight's Tale provides a different illustration of the way her authority and credibility can get called into question. She classifies the Knight's Tale as one of the pathetic abreactive fictions that, according to her theory of Chaucer's intent and purpose, will ultimately lead the reader through an experience that reinforces the status quo. In presenting the Tale in this way, however, Kendrick's discussion ignores the many recent readings emphasizing the "dark" side of that tale as one that far from upholding the status quo, in fact supports the impossibility of maintaining order. To ignore rather than argue with these readings, not only can render her own reading of the Knight's tale less persuasive, but can cast doubt on the thoroughness of her other readings. Despite this sense that the theoretical implications of her topic could be more thoroughly worked through, however, Kendrick's book provides thoughtful and stimulating reading.

University of Florida

Barrie Ruth Straus

*Victorians and Mystery: Crises of Representation* by W. David Shaw. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990. Pp. x + 370. \$36.95.

*The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* by Thomas Richards. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990. Pp. viii + 306. \$35.00 (cloth); \$12.95 (paper).

In recent years, literary and cultural critics have made determined efforts to link their work to social history, largely by means of expansive theories of representation. In nineteenth-century studies, as elsewhere, new archaeologies of knowledge have enabled critics of various stripes to conceive problems of the literary imagination in broad socio-symbolic terms. In these two books—one by a distinguished scholar of Victorian poetry, who now adopts “rhetorical analysis, historical scholarship, and the methods of contemporary deconstruction and hermeneutics” in studying Victorian literary culture as a whole; the other by a younger scholar who focuses the methods of postmodern cultural analysis on Victorian commodification—we might expect further contributions to an interdisciplinary history of culture. Unfortunately, each book in its own way returns us to the old divide between literary and non-literary spheres. Instead of indicating what common ground might possibly lie between Victorian mysteries and Victorian commodities, these two works seem to be talking about completely unrelated worlds.

Shaw’s book studies the pervasiveness of Victorian “mystery,” but with little attempt to account for mystery’s social referents. Instead, Shaw gives us, essentially, a formal anatomy of irresolution or obscurity in Victorian texts, outlining the various intellectual contours of such mystification and their accompanying rhetorical devices. His central claim is that Victorian representations of mystery tried not to dispel mystery, but to “reveal” it. This is an important idea, one that Shaw demonstrates convincingly in a wide range of novelists, poets, and prose writers. But his close attention to tropological patterns prevents him from correlating the features of mystery with the larger terrain of Victorian society.

It is not that Shaw’s ambitions are small, but rather that they are imperfectly realized. The idiosyncratic nature of Shaw’s approach generates considerable mystery of its own, which only deepens the book’s absence of cultural perspective. Shaw proposes a number of complex and by no means adequately justified methodological filters. His introduction asserts that there are three types of Victorian mystery: mysteries of the unconscious; mysteries of identity; and mysteries of shared knowledge. It also asserts that there are three questions provoked by these mysteries, which are, respectively: questions about free will; about whether self-making is limited by the given; and about the grounds for belief. These types and questions branch into other cultural schemata: the first type is complicated by three Victorian philosophical traditions (realist, idealist, and antinomist); the second by competing Victorian theories of historiography and of character; the third by crises of faith and knowledge, which generate three divergent epistemological methods: heroic, skeptical, and reductive. All three basic types are affected by what Shaw calls the three “stages of Victorianism” (essentialist, agnostic, and self-making), which produce the different tonal registers in which each type of

mystery is revealed. Moreover, they are all fissured by a number of different "types of contradiction," a concept borrowed from Foucault. Further, mysteries "also arise from a conflict between different levels of a concept's history or explanation." Yet again, they arise from "different functions" in explanatory models. Wheels within wheels within wheels. Not to make it any easier on us, Shaw then explains that, "at the risk of oversimplifying," his individual chapters are dedicated to fourteen kinds of Victorian mystery. He does not say whether these are the only fourteen kinds, or exactly what representative status or structure they have, and his typology is vague enough to leave one wondering exactly what principles were used to isolate them. In addition, each of these kinds of mystery is associated specifically with "a form of silence, a model of knowledge, a use of language, and a crisis of representation." All of this over-complication fails to conceal a conceptual void at the center of the book: never are we told exactly what Shaw means by "mystery" itself, or how the central notion of mystery unites these problems in ethical thought, psychology, epistemology, etc.

The confusion quickly dissipates, in a sense, for the complex paradigms of the introduction do not really carry over into the fourteen separate studies themselves. In these chapters, each focused on single texts by two or three major authors, we get closely-focused readings rather than generalizations that might advance the overall claims of the book. These readings are often pivoted on elaborate paradoxes and convolutions, which make for interestingly-nuanced interpretations, but not for large spaces of clarity. Sometimes, clarity is further compromised by Shaw's tendency to resort to byzantine but homely reasoning: the solution to problems of freedom and determinism, for example, is said to be a strategy that Shaw calls "self-choosing," which can at times appear as the choice *not* to choose self-choice. Often, where we expect conclusions, tangential arguments are spliced in—a promising discussion of *Great Expectations* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* ends in a distracting three-paragraph parenthesis on *Emma*. As if in compensation for all of this obscurity, the book's tone strains toward large crescendoes, producing several unfortunate, overwrought passages (like the final paragraphs on *Villette*, 70–71, or many of the remarks on *Middlemarch*), as well as some melodramatic stagings of epistemological debates (we hear that Newman "leaps heroically across the gap" that had daunted Hopkins, or that he uses "intellectual karate" in contrast to Arnold's "mental judo or aikido").

What further diffuses the book's general focus is its cavalier approach to prior critical work. Shaw makes virtually no attempt to reconcile his commentary on individual writers with the various critical traditions on these writers. Perhaps in embarrassment, the book's back-matter includes a list of "works consulted." These could not have been consulted very strenuously, though, since there are a great many oversights and repetitions that should have been avoided. For example, in Shaw's discussion of "equivalences" in *Great Expectations*, which argues that differences in the novel are often reduced to identities, there is no mention of the issue of psychological "doubles" that has been such a characteristic preoccupation of criticism on this novel. If Shaw had read more feminist criticism, he might not have been so sure of calling Tess "a moral idiot who would allow herself to be raped by Alec," nor would he have spoken breezily about Maggie Tulliver's having

discovered, at the end of *The Mill on the Floss*, "the true nature of self-sacrifice." If he had read D. A. Miller, he would have had to argue more polemically that "Trollope's reserve saves the familiar social world from overfamiliarity by placing imaginative obstacles before an inquisitive interpreter."

All this said, Shaw's book is not without redeeming features. Shaw is a canny, often an ingenious reader, and the book is full of critical insight. Though one must set aside hope for synthesis, the local discussions are very well-informed, and offer scintillating new perspectives on particular texts. Especially impressive is the discussion linking Carlyle to the Brontës in terms of questions about the unconscious. There are some excellent passages on Trollope's "double irony," on competing frames of reference in *On Liberty*, on paradox and self-contradiction in Carlyle, on two contradictory linguistic moments in Hopkins, on "double hypothesizing" in Newman, and on various tropes of evasion in Rossetti. Throughout, Shaw is better at rhetorical analysis than anything else, and his studies of various linguistic devices that impede resolution are consistently impressive. He has a remarkable, refreshing eye for technical devices in fiction, and for their relationship to thematic patterns—though what sometimes follows is an odd loss of scale in his interpretations. Things tend to go wrong mostly when Shaw generalizes from particulars to his larger claims, which often seem mechanical or facile. When faced with a problem or an ambiguity, too, his instinct is to subdivide it—usually into triads—but never to reconstitute or account for it. The impression the book leaves is of an original and extremely knowledgeable mind somewhat lost in a project that has grown too large.

Thomas Richards's book has none of Shaw's problems of opacity. If anything, his ideas are as solid and as repetitively promoted as the commodities he writes about. But if Shaw fails to give mystery a social life, Richards makes the purely economic logic of the commodity into "the key to all mythologies" (he makes the mock-grandiose allusion himself). In fact, the book's central claim is that "all social life under capitalism has been organized around economic representation," and that, more specifically, "the model for the final unification of all representation under capitalism was provided by the trade exhibitions and consolidated by the spectacles of late-Victorian advertising." Richards's book is ultimately much more stimulating and useful than Shaw's, but it mirrors *Victorians and Mystery* in its narrow methodological perspective.

Part of the problem here is that Richards is an enthusiast. He writes with vigorous faith in his theoretical models, and the book's sense of conviction, as well as its spirited tone, are impressive. But the models he has chosen—postmodern theorists of commodification like Jean Baudrillard or Guy Debord—offer him some extreme, totalizing accounts of the power of the commodity that he simply reads back into Victorian culture. What we get, on a theoretical level at least, is a set of hyperbolic speculations that are not grounded contextually. Richards's enthusiasm carries him into several kinds of overstatement. Most centrally, he argues that—over the course of the nineteenth century—the logic of capitalism and, through it, the logic of the commodity came to control all forms of representation. "For a brief and dazzling moment during the summer of 1851," he writes, "England had a center." This center was the Great Exhibition of Things: "What the first Exhibi-

tion heralded so inimitably was the complete transformation of collective and private life into a space for the spectacular exhibition of commodities. The shape of things to come had come." Sweet as it sounds, this argument overlooks—at the very least—post-Kantian traditions of aesthetic or ethical thought that might have paralleled Richards's claims about the autonomy of the commodity, while expanding our sense of the origins and consequences of post-romantic thinking about the material realm. Symptomatically, while Richards speaks of artists borrowing advertising forms, he ignores what advertising took from artists. Richards also argues that the beginnings of the commodity's domination of representation can be precisely dated—that is, at the Great Exhibition. But while the Exhibition no doubt had a tremendous impact on the Victorian imagination, the commodity-effects it assembled can hardly be isolated in this one event, nor can they be endowed with such claims as these: "Until the Exhibition the commodity had not for a moment occupied center stage in English public life; during and after the Exhibition the commodity became and remained the still center of the turning earth, the focal point of all gazing and the end point of all pilgrimages." Regularly, too, Richards falls into a pattern of bogus narrativizing that gives his own account some of the epic qualities of spectacle that he critiques in the world of advertising. "During the Great Exhibition," he tells us, "the commodity embodied all of culture; during the Jubilee it embodied all of the cosmos." Or: "Though at different times and under different circumstances the industry attempted to recover something of the charisma the Great Exhibition had temporarily conferred on commodities, it was not until the 1880's that commodities were again able to achieve a monopoly of signification in the public sphere." Finally, by collapsing all of Victorian advertising into the form of spectacle (a notion that does not seem all that apt for Richards's own discussions of patent medicines or the selling of imperialism), Richards misses a chance to explore advertising's various other methods.

Throughout the book, Richards makes unprovable and ultimately unhelpful claims about the extent of the commodity's control of representation. In his conclusion, as if in a moment of buyer's regret for his own consumption of theoretical models, he warns against assuming any totalizing account of commodification like Debord's—but only by compulsively and confusingly jumping from one model of totalization to another: "it is worth remembering, with Michel Foucault, that in actual fact 'our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance.'" To be fair, Richards does attempt to qualify his most sweeping claims elsewhere in the book by warning that there were "certain limits" to the extent of the commodity's saturation of Victorian culture. But his account of these vague limits is confusing because it takes refuge in impressionistic temporal panoramas, which allow him to preserve his more extravagant claims by confining them to discrete "moments": "For a series of fleeting moments capitalist representation saturated social space with a world of self-referential signs. At its height, however, that saturation never lasted for more than a few weeks."

Though its general claims may be unreliable, Richards's book is nevertheless far more satisfying when taken as a selective history of Victorian advertising. And on these terms, his work is immensely informative. Read as a history of advertising, and as a theory of how advertising *tries* to command so-

cial space, the book is, quite simply, one of the more important and original contributions to Victorian cultural history in recent years. Besides skillfully uncovering a wealth of material on Victorian advertising—and the spectacles it sometimes founded itself upon—Richards is keenly analytical. His book is organized with a great deal of careful thought, and his choice of topics itself is exciting and imaginative. Though his claims about the Great Exhibition may be inflated, his analysis of the new perspective on commodities it offered is insightful. He is especially good on the way the Exhibition created the sense of surplus it was supposed to be evidence for. He is refreshing on the impact of the Jubilee festivities of 1887, and the way that these exploited and were exploited by advertising. He furnishes a wonderful analysis of the qualities of Victorian kitsch. He supplies a brilliant supplement to recent studies of British imperialism by showing the ways in which advertising sold imperial ideology, and vice versa. He has astute things to say about the symbiotic relation between patent medicine quacks and the professional mainstream. He is somewhat less good on the role of female sexuality in late-century advertising, partly because he focuses too exclusively on a single literary character—Joyce's Gerty MacDowell—and partly because he invokes unsteady generalizations about gender. Richards claims that advertising created "a specifically female consuming subject," but this notion seems to be at odds with much of the evidence of the rest of the book, and it fails to explain how images of "seaside girls" were directed at men. Perhaps the best part of the book is its analysis of the various semiotic elements of spectacle that lent themselves to advertising uses, transforming earlier capitalist ideology in the process. One could go on at length enumerating the wealth of local detail Richards has assembled. I should not fail to mention that the book's reproductions of Victorian advertisements are well done.

Whatever its flaws, Richards's book will be greatly valued by Victorianists. He has explored one crucial way for cultural studies to make inroads into nineteenth-century scholarship, and he has accumulated a range of historical and literary conjunctions that will offer continuing inspiration to others. Though his analysis may overstate the case for the cultural reach of advertising, he comes much closer than Shaw, certainly, to an interdisciplinary grasp of the Victorian social text.

University of Michigan

John Kucich

*The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison* by Terri Otten. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989. Pp. vii + 101. \$8.95 (paper).

At the heart of this brief book about Toni Morrison's work is a predictable irony that the author, Terri Otten, seems to be unaware of. Otten's overall view is that Morrison's novels are constructed of "unrelenting realism" in symbiotic relationship with "the transcendent authority of mythic truth." The realism is, of course, Toni Morrison's unflinching representation of African-American experience in an oppressive, racist society, offered without apology, from a black woman's point of view. The myth is the biblical story of

the fall and its various themes: the pursuit of self-discovery, the loss of innocence as a rite of passage, the meaning of good and evil, the enigmatic nature of garden and serpent, and the paradox of self-knowledge.

The main purpose of the book is to track the fall paradigm from novel to novel; Otten pursues it with diligence and insistence. His scholarship is informed. He is clearly well-acquainted with the slowly increasing critical literature dealing with Morrison's work and the several interviews she has granted over the last few years, though he seems unaware of Morrison's Tanner Lecture on Human Values (University of Michigan, October 7, 1988), published in the *Modern Quarterly Review*, in the Winter of 1989, which would have made a telling addition to this study, principally because Morrison deals with all her novels quite differently from Otten.

The book is organized chronologically, a chapter for each novel, starting with Morrison's first, *The Bluest Eye* (1981) and ending with her latest, *Beloved* (1987). An introductory chapter sets up the mythic premise that guides the chronological analysis. From the very beginning, Otten insists on his thesis, discovering mythic motifs under every stone and leaf of narrative form and incident. There is room here for only one example, his treatment of *The Bluest Eye*. The opening of this novel signifies, according to Otten, the theme of failed innocence. The words that start the narrative, "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941," clue the reader to "the consequences of an unredeemed fall, the dry fertility that comes regardless of the ritual sacrifice of Pecola's baby." The narrative rhythm of the novel, the time cycle it follows from autumn to autumn, also underscores the paradigm. In the seasonal phases of the single year the story covers, the child Claudia, the story's narrator, moves through the various stages of "initiation from childhood innocence to experience," even as the child Pecola moves from despair at being raped by her father to insanity as she quests after the paradise of the blond-haired, blue-eyed middle-class symbolized by the Dick and Jane headnotes to each section.

In the succeeding novels, Otten continues to find a sign of mythic fall in every narrative detail and character dilemma, though in an act of faithfulness to the particularities of the African-American experience represented in Morrison's works, he observes that some of the motifs are turned inside out: the Edenic gardens, represented in the Dick and Jane primers; the elite worlds that attract Jadine in *Tar Baby*; Macon Dead's belief, in the *Song of Solomon*, that urban materialism is the well-spring of good life, all are false paradises; the serpent who invades the garden, Son in *Tar Baby*, Pilate and Guitar in *Song of Solomon*, are avenues not to evil but good. Innocence is the great sin, and the fall is primarily fortunate.

In pursuing the fall paradigm, in straightforward and reversed form, Otten is doing what any good scholar does, keep before the readers' eyes the given premise that informs the study. The fact that he abstracts the myth by tying it, with careful attention, to the historical and social concerns that Morrison dramatizes in her works makes this study a fairly useful guide to the substance of plot and dilemma in them.

The problem is not with the procedure adopted toward his given, but with the given itself. His insistence on the transcendental authority of the fall paradigm, on its imperial sway over every detail and incident reduces the pri-

macy of all the specific cultural and historical indicators that are at work in the growing-up and adult experiences of African-Americans that Morrison zeroes in on. This flaw is especially disastrous, it seems to me, in the analyses of *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. Both these novels focalize with particular force the significance of history in the individual and collective lives of African-Americans and, I should say, of all Americans. History is the powerful factor, the ghost in the lives of all the characters in them, either because it is a forgotten thing, an obsessional recall, an idealized myth, or a past contained in the present that together enable us to find our way into the future.

Otten proposes the mythic paradigm not only as a means to a better reading of Morrison but as the reason to grant her a place in the pantheon of major novelists, contending that "the fall theme raises her works to a more universal level." His argument is directed at those who regard Morrison as an interesting writer limited by her ethnic concentrations and social polemics, notwithstanding the good reviews she regularly receives and the Pulitzer award for *Beloved*.

But Otten's critical reasoning for establishing her place among the stars is questionable and ironic. The notion of universality as the standard of excellence has lost its lustre, and the idea that the myth of the fall, fortunate or not, is a universal theme betrays a culpable cultural innocence. That myth is surely found throughout much of history and in many places, but that it has a global transcendent authority is hard to sustain.

What Otten has done is to establish the kind of theme in Morrison that fits the esthetic tastes and acceptable views of dominant European culture. In arguing for her place in the canon of greatness, he has transformed Morrison into another exemplar of the presumed universality of white-skinned European myth. The transformation is ironic, but not magical for it is predictable where abstraction, often concomitant with mythic identification, is still the preferred sign of greatness over the dense texture of narrative, and what comes to the same thing, where the grand narrative of redemption, the fortunate fall, is preferred to the grand narrative of liberation.

Morrison's fictional accounts of African-Americans are more likely narrative instances of that global story of liberation. The way she captures the story of their lives, of their culture, the dynamics of their individual and collective experiences, and in the process, uncovers the often paradoxical force of history in the struggle for liberation, is, in my view, the chief sign of Morrison's status as a major novelist.

And in this regard, Morrison herself is so far our best instructor. In her Tanner lecture her analyses of her own works are always grounded in African-American culture and history, and the explanation of how she came to select the precise words that make up the opening sentence of each novel never strays far from that grounding.

"Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941." The attraction of that first sentence of *The Bluest Eye* for Morrison is its threefold complicity. The first phrase is an idiom of black culture, primarily used by black women when engaged in gossip that reveals two things, a secret to be kept inside the gossiping circle and a secret that has been kept from the circle by the outside world. It attracted Morrison because the duality of its meaning establishes the political and cultural ambience of the novel, particularly if one

considers, as she advises, "the political climate in which the writing took place, 1965-69," that is, the duplicities and withheld information of the Viet Nam War and the social upheaval then gripping the lives of blacks (the Detroit rebellion, for example, occurred in 1967).

But it was also attractive because it snatches the reader into the conspiracy of keeping the secret and discovering the secret withheld. That doubleheaded secret is a secret of long history, the violence of racism that deforms a community's sense of itself and its sense of beauty. But it is also a secret of immediate history, that of Pecola's rape and pregnancy, rife with importance for Claudia, the story teller, who at the same moment is discovering her adolescent self and her relationship to the white world; for her part of nature withers in tune with Pecola's still-born pregnancy. But the moment is also the grim specter of war which is about to engulf the United States. So nature skips a beat for black tragedy and the impending massacre of war. But of course it doesn't. History is human and either manages or is managed by humans. Seen in the context of the history of racism and of the second World War, the blue-eyed world of Jane and Dick, the beauty of the Shirley Temple doll in the story resonate with historical significance.

Morrison explains all of her novels with specific cultural registers and history in mind. Grand mythic abstractions centered in biblical lore do not seem to interest her. For her *Moby Dick* is not about a whiteness that symbolizes the inscrutability of power or the power of inscrutability, but the terror of a history that hides from its makers and victims the tragedy of a society stratified on the economics, the politics, and the ideology (both biblical and pseudo-scientific) of slavery and color discrimination.

History, then, is the heart of Morrison's own interpretative procedure. To avoid it is deadly. But to become obsessed with history, to lose one's place in community by looking backward and never anywhere else, not even to oneself, as Morrison so brilliantly demonstrates in *Beloved*, is equally disastrous. That is the meaning of Paul D.'s words to Sethe (and not Beloved): "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow."

Morrison presents the reader, in *Beloved*, a community empowered to exorcise the hallucinations and myths of history. That is her particular underground version of struggle, her recasting of the grand narrative of liberation.

Her greatness rests in the way she captures the idiom of black culture, in the way she warns against enslavement to the past but also shows a critically viewed past as potentially liberating. Against this position the abstractness of Euro-centered mythic interpretation appears as an historical obsession that demobilizes both critical insight and esthetic judgement.

Otten's book is worth reading. It is most useful, however, if the reader frees its details from their subjugation to its mythic premise.