

LESSONS FROM THE LOCKER-ROOM ON COURTLY LOVE:

This is the fourth time that I have been honored by an invitation to speak at this fall conference of Notre Dame's Center for Ethics and Culture, and I find that the higher-than-usual levels of apprehension and self-consciousness I have previously experienced while preparing papers on theological topics for delivery here have not abated despite the repetition, and the invariably amiable company. I have decided that this probably has something to do with my rather fragile Protestant identity. I owe at least part of this fragility, I suspect, to having been the only Protestant on my high school basketball team. One story from those days, not without pertinence to our topic, may help you to get a sense of where I am going in this paper and how it reflects a part

of my early theological formation that did *not* come from my Baptist church.

We were comfortably ahead at halftime in a basketball game with our rivals from Pembroke, the boyhood home, incidentally, of Fr Richard John Neuhaus. A couple of the guys, as was sometimes their wont, decided to tease me a little for my religious oddity by reciting a partisan poem. In the accents of our tribe, if you will forgive their colloquial indelicacy, it goes like this:

Beware the Protestant minister:
his false reason, false creed, and false faith;
the foundation stones of *his* temple
are the balls of Henry the Eighth.

This, just as we were called back out onto the court. Now the truth is that the poem struck me as so funny that I couldn't stop laughing until the Pembroke forward I was supposed to be guarding scored on me three times straight. We barely won, and when our coach afterward on the bus demanded to know what "in the [explicative, explicative] had happened" to me, one of the guys

confessed to the hijinks in detail, upon which the coach roared, “Alright you guys – from now on there’ll be no blankety-blank theological discussion in my locker room!” Only years later did I learn that the poem was, of course, a witticism of the Irish poet Brendan Behan. I found out more immediately, however, that my buddies, who did not know that either, had learned the poem – maybe you guessed it – in C.Y.O. So I joined our local C.Y.O. almost immediately to see what other fun stuff I could learn from and about Catholics.

I have come to think that history, like poetry, offers up such wisdom as it has to teach unpredictably, and often in a fashion flagrantly obverse to any possible intentions in the mind of the original players or authors. I do not know, for example, what David Solomon was thinking about when he assigned me, for a conference on Christian marriage, the topic of courtly love. Maybe I don’t want to know. As it happens, what I will try to show is that courtly love in the Middle Ages was pretty much always just a literary convention of sorts, and hence a vehicle ripe not only for

political satire, but, in that the very rules of this party game depended on an undergirding high value for the normative *regula* of Christian marriage, it was a potent device for teaching the value of those very principles by means of the ironic fancifulness of extravagant contraries. Even the jokes of this genre, I want to say (and there are many), depend on unquestioned security in the assumption that fruitful Christian marriage was the glue upon which social stability and cohesion depended, perhaps most especially at the courtly level.

I. Courtly Love as a Social Construct

You wouldn't know this, of course, from the fantasies of Victorian medievalists or the remnants of their tribe in the academy today. The soft pornographic realism of the Pre-Raphaelite painters, for example: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Beata Beatrix" (1863), Sir Edward Burne-Jones' "The Love Song" (1877), or, in the second generation, Sir Frank Dicksee's "End of the Quest" and "Chivalry," along with John Collier's "Tannhauser in the

Venusburg” (1894) are all examples of a modernist taste for aesthetic reconstruction of the ethical legacy of medieval culture. Attractive as they are, these depictions bear no more correspondence to their ostensible prototypes in historical fact than in their plausibility of costume, or, in many cases, lack of costume.¹

I do not mean to suggest that blithe falsifications of history and contradictions of plain sense are entirely without value. A complete incapacity for irony, coupled with an appalling ignorance of the actual anthropology out of which a text is written, will sometimes lead to an interpretation much more entertaining than the text itself. One academic whose place in the history of medieval literary study has been more assured by this dubious sort of fantasia than by his better work is the nineteenth-century French medievalist, Gaston Paris. In an inventive essay on Chrétien de Troyes’ *Le conte de la charrette* (1883) he introduced the term *amour courtois* to describe the illicit, secret, demeaning, and ultimately disastrous love of Lancelot and Queen Guinevere.² In

this relationship, which Paris tellingly described as “a kind of idolatry,” Lancelot’s first article of faith is in the goddess-like superiority of his mistress; the great knight grovels before her most trivial requests for feats by which he may hope to prove his undying ardor. Now the frank objective of this most famous “courtly lover” is adulterous liaison with the queen of his own liege lord Arthur; yet for Paris, Lancelot’s amorous ambition signaled a new and inspirationally modern moment in the history of medieval literature and provided the model by which, accordingly, all other medieval narratives about love should henceforth be understood.

Since then, as they say in the Bronx, a lot of folks have bought the bridge. It would be extraneous to our purposes here to provide a list³ but two figures probably merit notice. The first I have in mind is Dennis de Rougemont, whose *Love in the Western World* (1939; rev. 1972) begins with a close analysis of *Tristan und Isolde* and, following Gaston Paris, talks about the great

nobility of a courtly lover who subjects himself repeatedly to intense sexual torment while remaining stoically resigned to his unconsummated desire. De Rougement finds the origin of this ‘higher’ form of love in the heretic practices of the Cathars, among whom, putatively, tormented eros was allegedly intrinsic to a kind of Gnostic mysticism. Now, despite that de Rougement was a well-respected writer on a number of topics, and that the *National Review* lists his volume as one of the “100 Best Non-Fiction Books of the Century,” this particular idea is utter rubbish. (While Mozarab verse with non-Christian ideas about sex clearly influenced the Provençal poets, few if any of them were Cathari heretics, and such Arabic influence as can be demonstrated was in any case more formal and metrical than topical).

It may be helpful to recall that such Provençal poems, whose manner and subject matter were what Marcabru was first to call “fin amors,” were almost invariably performed aloud by the poet himself in court, before an assembled regal company. Cultured medieval people were on all the evidence more sensitive to

political allegory than we are; a poet would certainly need to be thoughtful about the risk of offence to his courtly audience if he were seen to commend a kind of pseudo-nobility they viewed not only as inherently foolish, but even as treasonable to figures in authority such as themselves.

That there were artificial conventions for a genteel sort of amorous poetry, as there were in Ovidian Rome, is certain. But, as Robert Briffault in his book on *The Troubadours* has put it, the “stylized passion” of such poetry should not in any literalistic fashion prompt us now to attach to it a greater suspicion of realism than we would to the “stage-love tunelessly bestowed by an Italian tenor upon a prima donna graced with a lengthy career and Junonic presence.”⁴ As a point of comparison Briffault instances Bernard de Ventadorn, who “celebrates in lascivious terms the personal charm” of Eleanor of Aquitaine “at a time when she was well into her late fifties.” This, in an age without silicon and Botox. To put it in Briffault’s words again, “the pedantic rules of courtly love

were poetical fictions, and were in large measure consciously and admittedly such” (92).

No less a scholar of Christian literary history than C.S. Lewis, at least when he wrote his first major monograph, had not yet understood these conventions. Inspired to study medieval literature by Victorian poets such as William Morris, and finding the fantasy world of such poetry as “The Well at the World’s End” too beautiful, as he touchingly put it, not to be true, he thought of courtly love as a kind of proto-protestant revolt in the name of love against, in his view, the distressingly pragmatic view of the medieval Catholic Church regarding the conjugal act.⁵

Accordingly, his *The Allegory of Love* (1936), initially attractive to many readers with like romantic tastes, has come to be regarded by most contemporary critical readers as not only fanciful but a bit embarrassing. Even his friend and colleague Gervase Matthews, in a magisterial book on *The Court of Richard II* (1968), with its pertinent chapters on literature, chivalry, and marriage, does not once mention *The Allegory of Love*.

II. Scholarly Corrective and Lessons Learned

The first literary critic to more or less definitively scotch the romantic idealism surrounding *amour courtois* was D.W.

Robertson, Jr. He was self-consciously correcting Lewis as well as de Rougement and Gaston Paris, though he politely mentions only the latter, by then safely dead. Another irony: by his own confession, Robertson was at most an agnostic where Christianity was concerned, yet his command of Christian biblical exegesis from the fathers through the fourteenth century had few peers in his time.⁶ Robertson's point was that whether in the Ovidian satire called *The Art of Courtly Love* presented to the court of Marie de Champagne by her Mass-priest, Andreas,⁷ or in burlesque allegories such as *Le Roman de la Rose* and, from his point of view, the elegant *faiblesse* of Chrétien's *Lancelot*, "What is being satirized... is not 'courtly love' at all, but idolatrous passion."

Robertson's observation was that such a pseudo-religious elevation of carnal misdirection is not a peculiarly medieval phenomenon,

but appears, only to be denigrated, also in the Old Testament and Roman classical literature. In other medieval literature, the ribald indelicacies of *Le lai du Lecheur*, for example, are offered in the same high courtly style: the ironic contrast between high medium and low message affords a good part of the humor.⁸ Robertson does not try to cast his medievals as Puritans; he allows in fact that “no one expected medieval noblemen to observe strict chastity.” “But it is one thing,” he says, “to engage in occasional dalliance and quite another to abandon oneself completely to idolatrous passion” (14). The so-called “doctrine of courtly love,” Robertson suggests, would be utterly inappropriate to a genuinely noble lover.

John F. Benton, an historian, names each of Paris, Lewis, de Rougement, as well as others specifically in his own renunciation of the myth. Benton’s critique has the added advantage for our purposes that his analysis contextualizes the discussion in terms of both the laws and the practices associated with actual medieval marriage. These provisions were indeed, as Lewis observed, highly practical rather than romantic. The first of these,

notwithstanding the canonical principle *consensus facit nuptias*, was that “a legal marriage began with a financial contract between two families.”⁹ As Benton summarizes it:

... the influence of family alliances, property rights, desire for legitimate offspring, social status, and the prospect of companionship all worked to make marriage attractive to the participants. (21)

He adds, “we cannot know how much our medieval ancestors looked forward to what we would call a satisfying personal relationship – surely much less than do modern Americans.” Love was something to be developed under the mutual obligations of obedience (cf. Eph. 5:23ff.); our own concern for “chemistry” and “fatal attraction” had no comparable primacy. The “participants” in a marriage included all the extended families and communities, and numerous medieval texts, from *Urbain le Courtois* to St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Contra Gentiles*, suggest that in marriage physical beauty is less to be sought than the highest order of friendship: in fact, Aquinas uses the term *amicitia* along with *amor* to avoid any possible confusion with “the love of

concupiscence,”¹⁰ or, as we might more accurately call it “falling in lust.”

Adultery, especially that form of adultery in which a knight or vassal seduced the wife of his lord, was regarded in medieval law as a form of treason on a level with regicide.¹¹ The punishments accorded in the few known cases were severe.¹² In light of these harsh historical realities, a ‘Lancelot’ story such as *Le Chevalier de la Charette* will seem quite a different tale than Gaston Paris imagined. As Benton puts it, “Chrétien has in fact gone out of his way to describe behavior he could be sure his courtly audience would condemn.... The knight who rides in a shameful cart is no casual lover but one who betrays his lord.” “If we find Lancelot a sympathetic figure because he was guided by love rather than reason,” he concludes, “it is because modern attitudes differ from medieval ones in ways Chrétien could not foresee.”¹³ For both Benton and Robertson then, what Paris and others missed entirely was contextual irony.

One form of irony Chrétien uses in *Lancelot* is antiphrasis, one of the examples of which, in the words of a medieval manual on the subject, is “to praise a lecher for his chastity.” Tonally, Chrétien’s mode is *astysmos*, or mild sarcasm—a mode familiar to medieval readers of Ovid. To be scrupulous, not only modern English readers, according to W.T.H. Jackson, but medieval German authors often “failed to perceive the ironical overtones in French literature,”¹⁴ so perhaps the subtleties of the conventions themselves have more than a little to do with our modern propensity to find charming what more probably the French authors were mocking. Dante’s fifth canto of the *Inferno*, in which Paolo and Francesca are found among the damned for reading the *Lancelot* story as a prompt to adulterous amour indicates clearly enough that literalistic romanticizing was even then a possibility, but also that a sophisticated medieval reader found such a failure of interpretation eternally culpable. By comparison, it now seems pretty clear that most modern interpretations since the late nineteenth century have been telling us far more about modern

sensibilities than medieval ones. What we learn about our own culture, if more evidence were needed, is not only that we tend to have a tin ear for irony. We learn also that, in our departure from earlier views of marriage, which saw it as a sacred bond not merely spiritually but socially, we have come to view as entertaining, even admirable and ennobling, behavior that medieval men and women were most likely to find risible, socially destructive, or both. In their setting, humorous and satiric literary “send-up” becomes a means of cautionary wisdom, a bas-relief framework for reflecting on the actual values to be extolled. For us it can become indistinguishable from soap-opera, and almost as mindless.

III. Chrétien de Troyes

Our subject can be more representatively explored, I think, by reflecting on courtly custom and literary expression in the courts of three monarchs, one each from the twelfth, fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. The *locus classicus* is France in the twelfth century. In the eminent case of Chrétien, whose work included

translations of Ovid and a contribution to the Christian allegory of the *Metamorphoses*, the *Ovide moralisé*, the first romance in his famous collection, *Erec and Enide*, explores qualities which a worthy marriage engenders. This poem clearly celebrates marriage as a unifying social force. Notably lacking in the devices of “love-service” or “fin-amors,” our poem begins with a contract for marriage between Erec and Enide’s father. She is attractive to him, but there are no verbal protestations of love or amorous passion. By contrast, their immoderately extended honeymoon is characterized by concupiscent self-indulgence on Erec’s part: he treats his wife more like a paramour or mistress (“De li fist s’amie et sa drue” l. 2435), the word ‘drue’ here having ignoble connotations. Her embarrassment at the negative social consequences of his initially idolatrous pre-occupation precipitates a quest which severely tests the marital bond, proving it to be one in which both parties will mature as the plot unfolds; Enide is repeatedly demonstrative of her absolute fidelity, and Erec is finally won to reciprocate her fealty, not to mention her prudence,

with his love and trust. This, as Jackson has observed, is in startling contrast to the weak marriage of Arthur and Guenevere, and the false chivalry of Lancelot. He notes in particular that

The concluding “Joie de la Cort” episode makes very clear the difference between the servile bondage of a knight to a lady’s whim and the free association of lovers in a purposeful life. (57)

The poem *Erec and Enide* is thus not at all a celebration of *amour courtois* but, as its concluding eschatological overtones suggest, by it we are to increase our appreciation for the way in which the medieval Christian ideal of marriage reveals its sacramental value in forming a model for rightly ordered desire at several levels, ultimately expressive of and participating in God’s redemptive love for the world. “My lord is in every way the son of a king,” Enide tells her confused alter-ego, “yet he took me when I was poor and naked” (6254-5). The great coronation banquet is on Christmas Day, and after Mass a thousand knights serve the bread, a thousand wine, all dressed in white, and we have a distinct sense that the ending of the poem is itself an *epithalamion*. This poem

sets the standard, I suggest, by which what follows in Chrétien's other 'romances' may be judged.

The point about *epithalamium* as a genre was not, of course, incidental for the medieval view of marriage, or for the particular performance of this poem in the court of Marie de Champagne. Marie was also the recipient and dedicee of a rather elegant poetic commentary on Psalm 44 (Vg; 45 KJV) called, for the first word of the original Latin text, *Eructavit*. Many of you're here will recall that the Psalm is itself already such a marriage poem, and commentaries from Augustine forward identified it allegorically with the "sacred marriage feast of the Bridegroom and the Bride, the King and his people." For Augustine it connects also with conversion, metamorphosis, transformation, as he puts it, "from the old to the new man... from an adulterer to a man of chastity."¹⁵ For Augustine pre-eminently "the Church is the Bride, Christ the Bridegroom." "There are commonly spoken by balladists," he adds, "certain verses to Bridegrooms and Brides, called *epithalamia*" (supra Ps. 45:3), and he notes that this psalm rejoices

in such a poet's task, one whose "tongue is become the pen of a ready writer" (145.5, 6).

Now it is typical of late medieval Catholic doctrine that symbolic images applied to the Church *generaliter* may apply with special focus to Mary, *specialiter*, as *figura* for the Church, the Bride of Christ. In early Gallican liturgies her feast included celebration of her role as Queen of Heaven's King, and thus featured Ps. 44.¹⁶ These echoes are likewise present in the Countess of Champagne's Commentary, in which the traditional lectionary placement of Ps. 44 on Christmas morning Mass ("Le jour de Noel au matins") is reiterated, but with the interesting touch that the epithalamion is sung by king David, who appears in the opening lines as a penitent outcast, dressed in sackcloth and ashes outside the nuptial chamber of the Bridegroom. This aspect of the poetic framework is not, of course, in the biblical text of Ps 44, but calls to mind David's repentance following his adultery with Bathsheba and possibly another repentance recorded in 1 Chronicles 21. David is here cast as the poet's own double, a

medieval *jongleur* or balladeer, singing and further pleading that he might be admitted to the cosmic marriage feast, so that he can sing his epithalamion directly to the eternal Bride and Groom and their assembled noble guests. The Court of Heaven is portrayed in the *Eructavit* as an elegant feudal court, and it is said that the “*joie de la cort*” is a celebration which attends the King’s crowning of his son and receiving into the royal family his wife. In such a context the “Joy of the Court” could not but be associated in the minds of Marie’s court with the “joy of the court” at the conclusion of *Erec and Enide*.

The beautifully composed *Eructavit* is largely celebratory anagogy, but on occasion also includes explicit practical Christian teaching at the moral level. For example, it includes a stern injunction against any devaluation of human marriage on the part of either party, suggesting among other things that even the “custom of the world” has it that if a woman deserts the love of her husband for another, either through willed sin or a careless

mistake, though she should come to a full repentance the husband has “no obligation to take her back and she would in fact be better off in the grave.”¹⁷ Nor should we imagine that such doctrinal reminders might be taken amiss by the thoughtfully pious Marie de Champagne. Among her chaplains, her personal confessor was Adam de Perseigne, a learned Cistercian and librarian. As it happens, Adam, at one time confessor also to England’s King Richard I (Coeur de Leon) was the author of the *Eructavit*, and it was this very same poet-priest who Marie called to her deathbed. Partly on account of the exemplary Christian fidelity associated with her court, Adam’s Commentary on Ps. 44 circulated widely as a text of spiritual instruction, in Anglo-Norman England as well as on the continent. Later, *La chronique de Gislebert de Mons* noted of the next generation of this royal family that Baldwin of Hainault, husband to the daughter of Henry and Marie de Champagne, was a praiseworthy exemplar of male fidelity, saying: “it is rarely found in any man that he should cleave so much to one woman and be content with her alone.”¹⁸ None of this makes Marie

de Champagne's court sound like much of a paradise for the modernist imaginations of would-be 'courtly lovers'. Further, it certainly casts the gravest of doubt upon the proposition that Chrétien de Troyes was an ardent proponent of 'courtly love' so called.

IV. The "Marriage Group" of *The Canterbury Tales*

About the same period as that in which academics and artists took so much pleasure in the apparent discovery of "courtly love," it became fashionable in literary criticism to refer to some of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as a "marriage group." In fact, however, almost every tale deals in some way with marriage, from The Knight's Tale to the Parson's, and several in such a way as explicitly to ironize in much less subtle ways than Chrétien the literary conventions (or affectations) associated with courtly love. The Knight's Tale sets off its Boethius-quoting protagonist Theseus against a pair of comically jejeune and ineffectual knights. They, in turn, act out in wonderfully humorous hyperbole all of the

pains attributed to frustrated courtly love (for a woman they have yet even to meet), offering a paradigm exposé of the social calamities occasioned by the pursuit of disordered affections – especially among persons whose responsibilities, as we would say, included governance. This tale is followed by two tales which burlesque such disorder at another level by stripping off the fine clothes and upper class manners – in low and vulgar humor nevertheless satirizing essentially the same sort of amorous intemperance. That most profoundly “learned” burlesque of marriage, the Prologue and Tale of the Wife of Bath, specifically permits the garrulous Alison to misquote and misrepresent central church teachings on the “full gret sacrament” as she calls it, making an hilarious but utter hash of canonical texts from Scripture through Jerome and Augustine. This sets up her own tale, a Breton lai in which a Guenevere-led court is blithely willing to pass over a maiden’s rape in exchange for a ‘politically correct’ answer in a courtly parlor game: what women universally most desire, the rapist must acknowledge, is total mastery over men.

Her tale is much more entertaining, you may remember, than my bare synopsis can reflect, but it concludes with an ugly hag's personal entrapment of the rapist knight by blinding him with magical charms, then deluding him into believing that by accepting her shape-shifting capacity to be any woman he wants her to be, he can live out the fantasies he has really been pursuing all along.

Other disordered marriages – the tyranny of an irresponsible husband which fails to break the *feodas* of his forbearing wife (Clerk's Tale), a burlesque of the foolishness of excessive concupiscence in The Nun's Priest's Tale, and of the impotent carnality and mockery of sacramental marriage by the old knight Januarie in The Merchant's Tale, all deconstruct the conventions of "courtly love," literary or otherwise, as sheer folly. The Franklin's Tale shows how, in fact, women most of all would be made victims by a culture of such notions of secret amour and "honorable" dalliance, even as the men in their lives became shabby parodies of true chivalry.¹⁹ Conversely, the Tale of Melibee, with its exemplary reification of the virtues of the *mulier*

fortis of Proverbs 31 and the *amicitia maxima* that Augustine and Aquinas especially found among the goods of accountable marriage, suggests worthy marriage as a means of living wisdom. Finally, it must be said, the Second Nun's Tale shows us spiritual marriage as a good complete in itself, even though the sexuality of such a marriage be sublimated, and the Parson in his sermon gathers up the embedded scriptural commentary in most of these tales to recapitulate the essentials of Christian teaching on the subject.

Marriage is thus indeed a central theme of *The Canterbury Tales*, though it is developed in such a way that the reader can appreciate its evident social and spiritual goods all the better for having observed the poor facsimiles that try to pass as something more attractive. Chaucer writes about the social and communal goods of well ordered marriage elsewhere, in his political allegory *The Parliament of Foules*, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and in his lyrics, notably when he is admonishing the carnally self-indulgent Richard II, among whose early preoccupations were behaviors not

dissimilar to the early indulgences of Chrétien's Erec. Here, in a plea for Richard to be constant in his covenant to rule his people in justice, Chaucer bids him to "cherish" his people, to

Dred God, do law, love trouthe and worthinesse

And wed thy folk again to stedfastnesse.

The idea that the obligations of a king in *feodas* with his people was itself a kind of marriage, with duties incumbent upon the regent of a sort consistent with those enjoined by St. Paul in Ephesians 5, is as deep in the political philosophy of medieval Christendom as the *mysterion* or *sacramentum* of marriage is in Scripture figural, as the *Eructavit* declares, for the coming parousia, the eschatological union of Bridegroom and Bride in the kingdom of God. This is why Chretien's contemporary, Hugh of St. Victor, likewise elaborates on Augustine's *De bono conjugali* to say that the intended office "proposed marriage in a compact (*feodas*) of love, that in it might be the sacrament of that society which exists in the spirit between God and the soul."²⁰ *Feodas*, like *sacramentum*, has here the full connotation of a covenant, or

pactum; without this character it could not be a sacrament. This is how one is to understand the canon, namely as a “compact of mutual agreement” (2.11.4); it is a mutual verbal consent or compact which makes the marriage (in 2.11.5) rather than sexual union.²¹ In this way, what medievals called the “faith of the betrothal” is, properly speaking, the beginning of marriage. Breach of that betrothal pledge, as, for example, by Angelo’s perfidy in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, is in itself adultery.

Conversely, to fulfill one’s betrothal vow even in unpropitious or inadvertent circumstances is to act in troth, or fidelity. Hugh of St. Victor’s words, summarily then, speak for medieval Christianity: “marriage, according as it is *worthy*, is a sacrament of that society which exists in spirit between God and the soul” (Hugh, 2.11.3).

Accordingly, its ceremony is as communal a celebration as pertains to the other sacraments; like each of them it bears witness of a pledge to a higher Troth. Erec and Enide’s eventual coronation, in this light, is at once a declaration of the realized sacramental worthiness of their marriage and a consecration in *feodas* of their

regency in all that signifies for the community at large. The eschatological overtones, in Chrétien's final verses, are not an incidental allegorical flourish, but a reminder of the eternal archetype or exemplar by which Ps. 44 and Ephesians 5 ground the meaning of marriage in the mystery of human redemption itself.

V. Henry VIII and the Making of Modern Fantasy

I come back, now, to a very different court, that of Henry VIII, not to recount the unsavory details of his six wives, five violated betrothals, or his many other dalliances, nor yet to show what his insistence on sexual freedom was to cost in the lives of his own worthy courtiers, among them a most noble bishop and truly extraordinary chancellor. All these and many more are well known, not least, alas, because modern cinema has made a lovable playboy out of this monster of the concupiscent appetites. I return to him because none of his legendary yet quite authentically documented exploits would be much remembered if he had not at the same time been a kind of renaissance paragon: a genuine

scholar, bibliophile, accomplished musician, theologically literate layman, and, not least, the founder of English Protestantism – largely on grounds (as I am sure Eamon Duffy no less than Brendan Behan and my locker-room teammates would each in their fashion agree) of justifying personal sexual indulgence, slanderous intrigue and judicial murder in a fashion which definitively out-burlesques the “courtly love” of medieval ironists. It has been shown that the pursuit of the literary and social conventions associated with ‘courtly love’, including reading romances aloud in the company of ladies, persisted through the time of the court of Richard II down to the Tudor court, and with a good deal of elaboration in the artifice of polite social game.²³ At the same time, there is abundant evidence that these courtly social fictions were becoming more vulnerable to factual enactment. Henry’s courtly theatrics, as literalizing as his reconstructions of British history, effectively strip the earlier French literary conventions of their irony, play out polite and public flirtations as

private fantasy, then legislatively normalize the consequences.

Thus Henry: if not ‘the onlie begetter’ of modernity in these matters, certainly deserves a lot of credit.

Henry’s royal library was rich in theological writings. But it listed also sixteen medieval romances, including three versions each of *Lancelot* and *Lancelot du Lac*—more copies, it would appear, than for any other work. He had also Boccaccio’s *Decamerone* and *De claris mulieribus* both in the original and French translation, Guillaume de Lorris’ *Roman de la Rose* and a lot of Ovid (see note 23 below). This suggests a certain preoccupation. Yet in his own work he fancied himself a theologian. For his book refuting Luther, ironically ghost written in part by Thomas More and titled *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* (1521) – marriage therefore included – he won from Pope Leo X the now even more ironic title of “Defender of the Faith.” Having perhaps acquired in his own mind personal grounds to entertain doubts about the doctrine of papal infallibility, he then went on

effectively to abolish the papacy as far as England was concerned, declaring himself the head of the Church as well as head of State. Mercifully, even a Protestant may be permitted to think, this particular usurped Crown is unlikely to survive Henry's next successor: Prince Charles, a pale simulacrum both of his predecessor's virility and his intelligence, is reported to be most anxious, post Lambeth, to give up at last the sorry pretence.

There are other things about Henry that my teammates did not know, and which might have discomfited their Baptist sidekick yet more deeply. I refer not to the sexual scandals which, in their grotesque proportions, have come indeed to characterize some of the televangelists; at that age, I knew of only one such betrayal, not more. In fact, on that implicit score, at the time I felt our tradition to be in pretty high ground. The fault I have in mind is rather Henry VIII's life-long "zeal in the outward practices of religion,"²⁴ and in particular his edition of what he called his *Sacra Biblia* (1535), essentially a Vulgate New Testament with selected parts of the Old Testament, omitting notably for his purposes more than

half of the latter. In this he is a prototype for much modernist biblical interpretation. The omissions include all of the Chronicles of Israel's kings, the books of the Prophets, Job and the Song of Songs, that other *epithalamion* inseparable in Christian imagination from the *sacramentum* of marriage and calling us especially to the spiritual marriage of Divine Bridegroom and Sanctified Bride, Christ and the Church. Henry's preface to this work (which survives in only four copies) is, for all its show of piety, not less licentious than any other aspect of his life. Here what he says to his readers – presumably a favored few:

You know well how our Lord God, whose words or scriptures we are discussing, ordered that when a king sat on the throne of his kingdom, he should write for himself the law of God, and, having it with him, should read it every day of his life, so that he should thus learn to fear the Lord his God, and guard his words.²⁵

We may note that Henry's accurate though blasphemous evocation of Deuteronomy 17:18-19 is as learned a gesture as his deletion of Nathan's condemnation of David's adultery or Elijah's

denunciation of Ahab. He had heard enough about these passages already from the likes of Bishop John Fisher and Lord Chancellor Thomas More, both of whom he had executed (June 22 and July 5, respectively) within the month of his “personal” Bible’s private publication, perhaps even as he was writing down these deceitful words in his preface. A month later he was himself (finally) excommunicated.

One’s mind moves to analogues, of course, not many of which make a Christian who takes the authority of Scripture seriously very comfortable; Thomas Jefferson’s Bible, for example, bowdlerized to suit Enlightenment and deistic sympathies,²⁶ the pseudo-academic revisionist antics of the Jesus Seminar, not to mention the pitiable, scripture-abusing marriage self-help books one now finds in Christian bookstores. Nor is any of us exempt from less spectacular versions of these various temptations – at least not any of us who have tacitly accepted the ground rules of Henry’s “temple.” Where it comes to marriage in a putatively Christian society in general, however, the effects of

our selective denials of Scripture and canonical teaching of the Church, however fashionable and entertainingly presented, have cost us far too much. On the court and off the court, we have too often laughed at all the wrong places. In court and out of it we have shrugged off all the most destructive of social consequences.

As a result, here we stand, in English-speaking culture, on the verge of social bankruptcy where marriage as an institution is concerned. Our tabloid-dulled imaginations have unconsciously accepted the glamorization of marriage's opposite—the tv shows and movies we watch and let our children watch addictively bear irrefutable witness against us as decisively as the contents of his library and the lewdness of his parlour games against him. Even at the level of our romanticizing of political leadership, we have only to recall Arthur Schlesinger's innovative adaptation of "Camelot" to the presidency of J.F. Kennedy, the tragedy of its eventual realities finally overcoming the supposed glamour of the Broadway musical starring Julie Andrews, Richard Burton, and Robert

Goulet. An ironic footnote: when I googled for information about the musical the heading under it was for a Washington, D.C. establishment called the “Camelot Show Bar,” the site for which cheerfully adduces critical reviews, calling it “Washington’s best strip club.” Burlesque in a variety of contexts has refashioned our cultural memory to a point where the notion of marriage as a sacrament has become, for many, of merely academic interest. Living like Henry the VIII, or Hugh Heffner, in and out of “The Bunny House” (if I may invoke the title of a recent PG-13 movie), has become a kind of archetypal fantasy that has eclipsed in our social discourse most of the vestigial spiritual capital by which marriage was seen by our Christian forebears as integral to our pursuit of our common good.

Conclusion

It turns out that in this essay I have actually argued two things, rather than one as promised. The first has been, I hope, a brief

demonstration that what some modern medievalists have called “courtly love” is effectively a social constriction of modernity, which is to say, it is an outgrowth of romantic idealism as a substitute for Christian ideals. The second is tacit, but ultimately more fundamental, that in the process of ‘romanticizing’ we have distorted and helped to undermine in medieval Christian values what was perhaps their signature advance over the crudities of northern barbarism, namely a cultivation of gentility and self-sacrificing love as the basis of Christian community. This, of course, is the noble ideal that marriage, if it is to be truly Christian, must always seek to realize, and understood in the writer’s own terms and not ours it is among the higher goods to which medieval literature would direct our attention.

Our condition nonetheless continues to be addressed by modern descendents of Nathan and Elijah, Chrétien and Chaucer. Wendell Berry is one such prophetic voice, perhaps most notably in his elegiac novel *Remembering* (1990), as well as in *Hannah Coulter* (2004) and volume of short stories *Fidelity*. But Baptist

though he is, his Christian memory extends to the older Catholic ideal of marriage as a *sacrament*, not merely a type, of that ordered love which is essential to social cohesion. In his essay, “Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community,” Berry shows that authentic marriage in some deep sense precedes amorous love, and is in fact its higher good and telos, essentially then a sacrament of community. In Christian reflection at least since St. Paul in Ephesians marriage has properly borne a true courtly graciousness, he suggests, a courtesy which intends the wellbeing of whole communities, their fullness of life, including “the care of the old, the care and education of children, family life, neighborly work, the handing down of memory [and] the care of the earth.”²⁷ Like his medieval precursors, Aquinas, Hugh, Chrétien and Chaucer, Berry observes a sad fact, namely that “the devolution of sexuality [by licentiousness] ... destroys its correspondence to other virtues” (134). Distinguishing between the goods of authentic community and the predation of “public art” and coercive advertising (158), he notes that the consequences of the “liberation” wrought by those I

have here dubbed Henry VIII's successors, whether in the mansions of the Hugh Hefners or the presidential manors of our modern western oligarchs, are devastating for the fate of even such common goods as community perdurability itself. As Berry argues it,

If you destroy the ideal of the "gentle man" and remove from men all expectation of courtesy and consideration toward women and children, you have prepared the way for an epidemic of rape and abuse. If you depreciate the sanctity and solemnity of marriage, not just as a bond between two people but as a bond between these two people and their forebears, their children and their neighbors, then you have prepared the way for an epidemic of divorce, child neglect, community ruin and loneliness. (124-5)

We tend not to like Berry's sort of jeremiad; it seems to fence us in. We tend to prefer that which titillates our appetites, holding before us the lure of sensual gratification, even vicarious sensual gratification. Our artists tend not any longer to associate, as did the medieval painters depicting Eden, beauty with fecundity. We prefer the airbrushed, siliconized and chemically enhanced avatars

of sex for sex's sake. But in the wake of our legitimated fantasies and constantly aroused appetites for individualistic gratification we have to deal with a whirlwind of consequences, a harvest of fatherlessness and motherlessness, among whose victims the very last pretenses of true gentility and courtliness have become a kind of sad archaism. We have done all this in order to make way for the crudest Darwinianism of conquest and carnal appetite in the sexual marketplace. Perhaps it is too late for our culture to change. But there may yet be time for thoughtful Christians to take stock, and to remember and seek to recover what it is we ourselves have lost, and how noble and fruitful were the ideals and heritage from which we came.

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NOTES

1. A good general work on the Pre-Raphaelites and Victorian medievalism is *Beyond Arthurian Romances: the Reach of Victorian Medievalism*, ed. Jennifer Palmgren and Lorretta M. Holloway (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); see also Marcus Waithe, *William Morris's Utopia of Strangers* (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2006).
2. *Amour courtois*, the French 19th-century academic term, is a neologism coined to name the fantasy. It is not a medieval term. It should be distinguished from the medieval term *fin amour*, first found in the 13th century Provençal poet Mascabré, which describes courtliness or, sometimes, genteel practices of courtship, a refinement of manners characterized by a preference for honor and characterized by virtues such as self-effacement, fidelity, and a willingness for delayed gratification.

3. One might consult here the sources cited in *C.S. Lewis, Allegory of Love* (1936).
4. Robert Briffault, *The Troubadors*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), 91.
5. Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, ch. 1; cf. David Lyle Jeffrey, in Thomas Martin, ed., *Reading the Classics with C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 77-80.
6. Robertson, both in several articles and his *Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), was among the first American scholars to commend Henri de Lubac's *Exégèse Médiévale*, 4 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1954).
7. "The Concept of Courtly Love as an Impediment to the Understanding of Medieval Texts," pp. 1-18 in Francis

Xavier Newman, *The Meaning of Courtly Love* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1968).

8. Robertson, *Preface*, 204.
9. “Clio and Venus: An Historical View of Medieval Love,” pp. 19-42 in M.X. Newman, *The Meaning of Courtly Love*.
10. Aquinas, as Benton notes, couples the term *amicitia* with *amor* to avoid confusion with “the love of concupiscence.” Cf. F.J.E. Raby, “Amore and Amicitia,” *Speculum* 40 (1965), 599-610.
11. Benton, 27.
12. Benton, 40, n. 26.

13. Benton, 28.
14. “Faith Unfaithful: The German Reaction to Courtly Love,” pp. 55-76 in Newman, 55.
15. Ps. 44 Vg / 45 KJV; See Augustine, *On the Psalms*, 44.
16. See George Scheper, “Bride and Bridegroom” in David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).
17. Newman, 26, n. 24.
18. Ibid., 39, n. 17.
19. See, e.g., Alan T. Gaylord, “The Promises in the Franklin’s Tale,” *English Literary History* 31 (1964), 331-365.

20. Hugh of St. Victor, *On the Sacraments*, 2.11.3; translated Roy Deferrari (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1951), 325. Cf. St. Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, trans P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 32-33. Hugh was writing in retrospect on an evolution in the western European practice of marriage which, because of Christian doctrine, was underway but still not in his time complete. See here Glenn W. Olsen, ed. *Christian Marriage: a Historical Study* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001), especially his own essay, “Marriage in Barbarian Kingdom and Christian Court: Fifth through Eleventh Centuries,” 146-212.
21. Hugh, 2.11.4-5. It is noteworthy that Chrétien and Adam were writing during the papacy of Alexander III (1159-81), during which time, prompted by the writings of Peter Lombard and other masters at Paris, canonical reform and

a greater precision was being introduced in regard to marriage. To this point the definitive indication that marriage had taken place was evidence of sexual union (*commixto sexu*). All that preceded it was at most an espousal (*desponsatio*), and the relationship might be dissolved if either party perfected marriage carnally (*commixtione perficitur*) with a third person. Under the new reforms, betrothal (*sponsalia per verba de futuro*) was to become as much as possible public, and in a fashion similar to modern practices of formal “engagement” it indicated to the community a period of chaste commitment following the verbal commitment and prior to the even more public marriage vows (*sponsalia per verba de praesenti*). The desire to remove abusive forms of “secret marriage” was one motivation for these elaborations, and discussion of the potential of secret vows to create social disorder features largely in the documents. See here Michael Sheehan, *Marriage, Family and Law* in

Medieval Europe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); also James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Dorothea Kullman, “Hommes amoureux et femmes raisonnables: *Érec et Énide* et la doctrine ecclésiastique du mariage,” *Geschlechterrollen im mittelalterlichen Artusroman*, ed. Friedrich Wolfzettel (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1995).

23. See John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* (London: Methuen, 1961), 154-202; Henry’s instinct for reducing the fictional elements of history to the ‘facts’ is evident in his charge to Polydore Virgil, the Italian brought into produce a myth-free history of Britain, the *Historia Anglia* (London, 1555).

24. F.L. Cross, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953; 1990), 634.

25. See Arthur Freeman, "The Gospel According to Henry VIII: the Selectivity, Conservatism and Startlingly Personal Nature of a Bible Designed by Henry VIII," *The Times Literary Supplement*, Dec 12, 2007; also James P. Carley, *The Books of Henry VIII and His Wives* (London: British Library Publishing, 2005) and his more complete *The Libraries of Henry VIII* (London: British Library Board, 2000). Henry owned copies both of Bruno Astensis, *De sacramentis ecclesiae*, and Hugh of St Victor, *De sacramentis Christianae fidei*. Carley notes that Catherine of Aragorn, who Erasmus thought more learned even than Henry, in 1525 asked the Dutch humanist to write a book on Christian marriage for Princess Mary. This was published in 1526 as *Christiani matrimonies institutio* (Carley, lv). She then asked Thomas More to translate this book into English, a task he delegated to his childrens' tutor, Richard Hyrde; it was published in 1529 as *A very fruitful & pleasant boke called the instruction*

of a Christen woman (Carley, lvi). By this point Anne Boleyn had been openly installed in the court for a year, her adulterous liason with Henry having begun well before the divorce of Catherine, in 1523.

26. *The Jefferson Bible* (New York: Beacon Press, 2001).