

# PRISM

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## Peril in Rationality

by  
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As he approached the isle of the Sirens, Ulysses had the ears of his crew stopped with beeswax and himself lashed tightly to the mast of his ship. He knew that if he did not take this strategic precaution, he would be overcome by the Sirens' enticements and prevented from reaching his goal. He knew, in other words, that simply to trust his own rationality and strength of will was to court disaster. Ulysses foiled the Sirens' intentions by superior strategic cunning that compensated for his mortal weakness.

A fully rational person would not have to resort to such a device. Still, Ulysses was able to achieve by indirect means, by what can be called a "second-order strategy," what he was unable to achieve directly. The difficulty that Ulysses faced—being disposed to irrational behavior and knowing it—has been the basis of a vigorous interdisciplinary debate over the last decade and more. This debate on the nature and limits of rationality has shown that there are traps and pitfalls along the way to untainted rationality. It shows that in some contexts the very pursuit of rationality may be misguided: that there is peril in rationality itself. In this essay I shall discuss some of the strategies that reveal this peril.

Ulysses succeeds by formulating and implementing a strategy that will prevent failure of rationality at a primary level of decision. He binds himself in such a way that one of the original options for action becomes

unavailable, thus preventing an irrational choice from being made. In many contexts, the only way we achieve consistently rational choice is by devising such Ulysses-like second-order strategies.

Ulysses' strategy imposes constraints on the capacity to act; it does not involve changing either beliefs or values. A choice, however, is determined not only by the options available, but also by beliefs and preferences. These, too, may be targets of second-order strategies. One may manipulate both beliefs and preferences in such a way as to assure that a certain choice, or a certain type of choice, is avoided. Though such strategies in important ways differ from the Ulysses paradigm, they also are strategies in which one binds oneself. I shall discuss two such strategies in connection with a particularly notorious and paradoxical failure of rationality.

This paradoxical failure is associated with the Prisoner's Dilemma. It is illustrated by a situation in which two prisoners who have yet to stand trial are separately confronted by a prosecuting attorney. The attorney lets the prisoners know that the evidence against each is such that the serious crime they are suspected of having committed cannot successfully be prosecuted in court. There is enough evidence, however, to convict each on a lesser charge. The attorney, therefore, takes each

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# Through the Prism

A pleasant feature of the academic life is the way we start fresh each September—a crop of new faces in the classroom and at the Faculty House, a revamped course syllabus, a still-healthy balance in the departmental budgets.

This fall the sense of beginnings seems especially strong. The university welcomes a new Provost and undertakes the development of a five-year plan. The centennial celebration looms on the horizon, prompting us to prepare for our second century. The Scandinavian Cultural Center opens its doors. The faculty formally tackles a review of the general university requirements. I begin a second three-year term as Dean for the Division of Humanities. And the time has come to shift divisional priorities.

Three years ago, the division decided to launch two initiatives—a film series and a biannual publication. Our publication *Prism*, of which this is Volume III, number 1, has proven an attractive forum for humanities faculty to share their research interests and creative talents with colleagues and alumni. Fine nurturing on the part of editorial board members and contributors, and the considerable talents of graphic designer Paul Porter, have given *Prism* a successful format and direction.

Likewise, the Humanities Film Series has more than fulfilled our expectations of an enriched campus environment. An article in this issue by Tom Campbell, who chairs the film series committee, highlights both the intentions behind the series and its thematic unfolding.

*Prism* and the Humanities Film Series will, of course, continue to draw faculty attention and enthusiasm. But in the months ahead we will consider new avenues for lifting up and articulating the value of humanities study and scholarship. One likely focus is the undergraduate major.

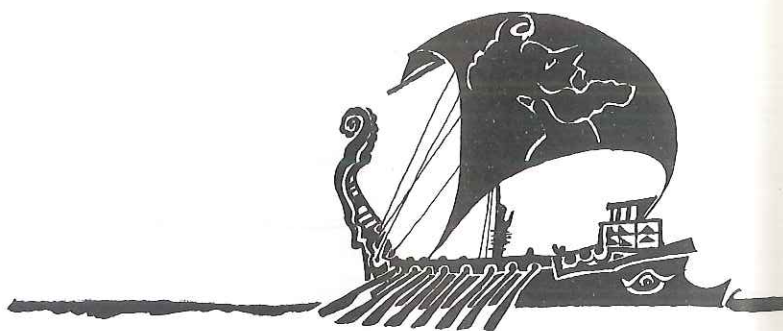
We will want to examine alumni career paths, internship and graduate school opportunities, and the shape of the upper-division curriculum. While we affirm the value of humanities coursework for *all* students and strive to deliver an innovative and effective general education curriculum, we must also direct special energies toward those who elect to major in a humanities discipline and from whom, among other things, our future faculty colleagues will come. ■

Happy new year!

Janet E. Rasmussen  
Dean

*Peril*  
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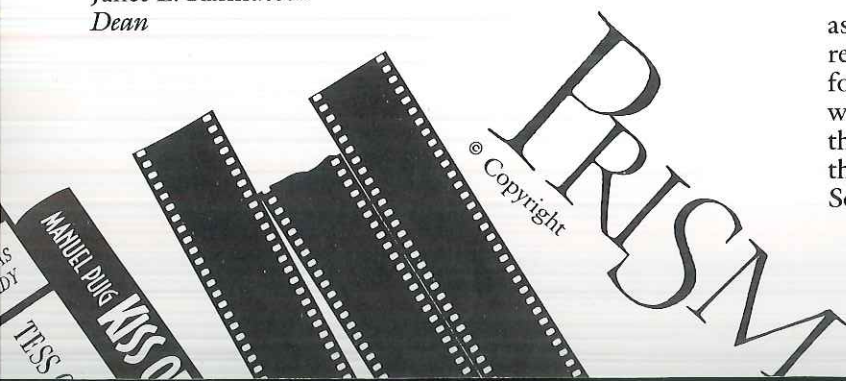
prisoner aside and offers him a 'deal.' The promise to each is that if he will turn state's evidence against the other, he essentially will be let off, whereas the other prisoner will be convicted and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Each of the prisoners, therefore, is in a position either to cooperate with the other prisoner, that is, refuse to volunteer incriminating information, or to double-cross him. The 'payoffs' for each of them are that if they cooperate with one another they are convicted on a minor charge and each receives one year in jail. If each of them double-crosses the other, then both are convicted of the serious crime and each receives nine years in jail. If one of the prisoners double-crosses while the other cooperates, then the double-crosser gets off with a suspended sentence, while the cooperating 'sucker' is prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law and receives ten years in jail.



The two prisoners face a dilemma. Each realizes that, whatever the other prisoner chooses, he is better off if he double-crosses. Each has a 'sure thing' strategy, a 'best response' to whatever the opponent does. It seems inescapable that the only *rational* choice for each of them is to double-cross. Yet, if both act rationally and choose their 'sure thing' strategies, each will spend nine years in jail, whereas if they cooperate they spend only one year in jail. When looked at collectively, the dilemma is even more acute. Together the prisoners spend a total of eighteen years in jail when they act rationally and only two if they cooperate with one another.

There is, therefore, obvious reason for saying that each prisoner *ought* to cooperate. This 'ought' is not a moral ought, not one derived from a moral principle or a rule; it rests simply on the interests and the preferences of the prisoners. The dilemma, however, is that such cooperation violates the most powerful and most basic principle of individual rationality, the 'sure thing' principle.

One reason the Prisoner's Dilemma has been discussed as extensively as it has is that it is anything but a mere theoretical curiosity. Common and important business situations, for example, are of this sort. When a manager must decide whether to engage in full or limited production, a decision that can lead to what Garret Hardin called "the tragedy of the commons," the situation often is a Prisoner's Dilemma. So is the situation in which the manager decides whether





to install anti-pollution devices in the absence of strictly enforced environmental laws: though it would be better if every plant installed such devices, a single manager acting unilaterally would simply become the sucker. Important political situations are Prisoner's Dilemmas, the most disturbing of which is where decisions are made concerning nuclear weapons production. What has fueled the arms build-up and driven us to the brink of nuclear destruction is in part the irresistible logic of the Prisoner's Dilemma both in Moscow and Washington. At the philosophical level, the question whether to be moral, if interpreted as a matter of individual choice, is a Prisoner's Dilemma. Recent discussion has made it clear that this fact has profound implications for our understanding of morality.

I cannot discuss in detail the many attempts at solving the Prisoner's Dilemma. What I shall do is in a couple of broad strokes sketch the general outcome of the discussions as I see it. Of the attempted solutions to the dilemma as such, only one is at all plausible: the so-called 'symmetry argument,' which says that the only available outcomes are those where the players make the same choice, in which case clearly they will choose to cooperate. In a purely formal sense, this solution succeeds. As practical advice in a real decision situation, however, it carries little weight.

The difficulty turns on whether opponents can be relied on to be motivated by considerations of symmetry to make choices that leave them completely vulnerable to the dominant double-cross strategies of other players. Bare structural symmetry seems a meager basis for taking potentially devastating risks. Other major proposals do not offer solutions to the theoretical dilemma as such, but make recommendations that would eliminate it or prevent it from arising. These proposals are important, since preventing the Prisoner's Dilemma from arising, given the failure of the symmetry argument as a practical solution, is the best we can hope to achieve.

One strategy for eliminating the Prisoner's Dilemma is not only to allow the players to communicate with one another and arrive at promises and agreements, but also to create mechanisms for the enforcement of agreements made. Such a strategy is one that by its very nature must be social or collective. It is, therefore, not a solution to the problem as a problem of *individual* rationality. As a collective strategy, however, it is familiar. It is the contract-theorist's account of political society. Hobbes, for example, can be understood to confront the general Prisoner's-Dilemma problem by asserting that only in a commonwealth in which a sovereign is granted the power to enforce agreements made can the problem be eliminated. He asserts that we must bind ourselves at a collective, social level. To confer on the sovereign the power of the sword and the right to wield it wherever we fail to keep agreements is clearly a collective version of Ulysses' strategy.

A second approach to the Prisoner's Dilemma is to contend that the prisoners ought to choose non-egoistically. Each prisoner, that is, ought to have such sympathy and concern for the opponent that the opponent's interests carry as much weight as does his own. If this were so, they clearly would always choose the cooperative strategy. One of the many difficulties with this approach is that if it is to have *practical* significance, it must include an account of how such sympathy and disinterestedness is to be brought about. It is not enough merely to point to the practical effects of disinterestedness. To assume that pointing to these effects is enough is to commit the fallacy of taking functional analysis to provide full explanation of a trait's existence. It does not follow from the fact that a trait has a useful function that it exists because it has that function. Even more obviously, to show that a trait *would have* desirable consequences *if* it existed is not to show that it actually exists or will come to exist. For the prisoners to choose non-egoistically, sufficient causal conditions must be in place for their becoming moral. They need to *be* moral, they must evaluate their option as only genuinely moral persons would, and their being shown that being moral would have good consequences is not a sufficient cause for making them so.

To point this out is by one stroke to eliminate as realistic practical solutions nearly all recent recommendations. These include the suggestions by luminaries such as Amartya Sen, John Watkins, and David Gauthier. All of them recommend that the chooser *be* a certain sort of person, either a Moralist or Ultra-Moralist, as does Watkins, or a Constrained Maximizer, as does Gauthier, but without indicating how one is to become either a Moralist or a Constrained Maximizer. Gauthier, for example, seems to assume that a rational person can *choose* to be whatever sort of person he or she wishes to be in light of the anticipated consequences of being that sort of person. He seems to take it to be part of being responsible for oneself. If he does assume this, then he assumes what Aristotle, as well as Descartes and Pascal, rejected. If Aristotle, Descartes, and Pascal—and Homer—are right, then what is needed is the formulation of effective strategies by which one may become moral. Recommendations that suggest we pull ourselves up by our bootstraps will be of little help.

There are, of course, individual strategies by which one may become moral. There are two general types of these: one directed at beliefs, another directed at feelings. The one directed at beliefs has a convenient historical paradigm, Pascal's strategy for coming to believe in God. The strategy directed at feelings also has a historical paradigm: that advocated by Descartes in *The Passions of the Soul*. Both strategies, as applied to the Prisoner's Dilemma, would change one from being an unprincipled, non-empathetic egoist to being genuinely moral. The strategies are calculated to change one in such a way that one would *prefer* the cooperative strategy, even with all of its attendant risk.

In many contexts, applying Pascal's strategy or something very like it is unproblematic. It clearly is within



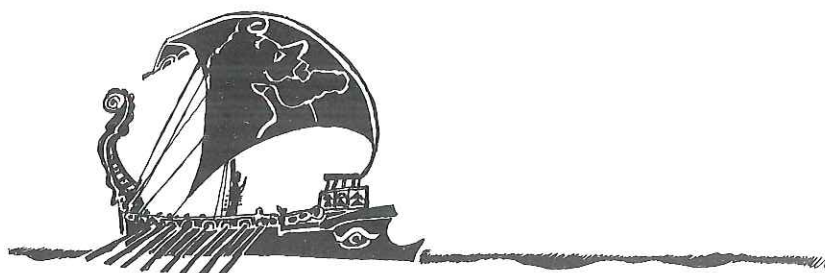
our ability, for example, to seek out and discover convincing, even conclusive, reasons for adopting new beliefs and for altering beliefs we already hold. If this were not true, the enterprise of higher education would be in serious difficulty. In other contexts, however, as in Pascal's own, the right sort of belief can only be *induced*, it cannot be brought about directly. One cannot simply decide to believe what it would be strategically advantageous to believe—for that reason. Pretending or faking will not do, and *strategic* reasons for believing are logically of the wrong sort to persuade one of the truth of what it is desirable to believe. This, of course, is the central problem of Pascal's Wager.

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The general situation in which Pascal's strategy would be applied is one in which there are no convincing, logically relevant reasons for believing a given proposition to be true, but there are good reasons for *making* oneself believe it true. Examples would be such as believing that God actually exists, that certain acts are contrary to God's will, that certain acts are demanded by a universal moral law, that certain acts and ways of living are inherently evil, and so on. The reason for making oneself believe any of these propositions true is that if one genuinely believes it, one will then act in a way such as to bring about a desired outcome. In Pascal's case, the desired outcome is the state of grace or eternal bliss. Since it is not within one's power to believe that God exists simply by willing it—the will, as it were, is powerless to bring about the belief directly—one must resort to indirect strategies. Pascal's indirect strategy for coming to believe in God is to 'go through the motions,' so to speak, to act and live *as if* one believes in God with the expectation that this eventually will bring about genuine belief. It is to engage in a course of actions which is expected causally to bring about the desired belief as a by-product of those intentional actions.

There are several difficulties with Pascal's strategy, but one is particularly interesting. It is that when belief in God has been achieved in this way, one cannot at the same time realize that this belief is the result of a mere decision to believe. If Pascal's project is to succeed, the decision to believe, together with the strategic maneuvers necessary to bring it about, must be obliterated from the believer's mind. In other words, a decision to believe must be accompanied by a decision to forget. *Deliberately* to forget something, of course, is extraordinarily difficult. The deliberation and the trying to forget can only serve to make one remember all the more clearly. Furthermore, it seems that the only way such a project could succeed is by bringing about the virtual elimination of one's critical faculty. One may then ask whether this, on any account of rational choice, is not too high a price to pay.

Here, then, the rational strategist clearly is in peril. The strategies required to alter belief in these cases are such that the cost of implementing them would typically be unacceptable. Further, the end state of holding new beliefs would be achieved only by dramatically altering who and what one is as a person, and, at least in one sense, altering it for the worse. It is not even clear if it is appropriate to



think of the later self as the same self. Jon Elster, in fact, contends that a lack of continuity in the self is a condition for success in this case, that the strategy "will be successful only if the earlier deceiving self can stage the scene so that it will be killed off by the later and deceived self." (Ulysses and the Sirens, 176). If there is reason for genuine doubt about whether the chooser remains the same self, one may then wonder whether the entire foundation for individual rational choice has not collapsed. As a strategy of individual rationality, therefore, Pascal's presents serious difficulties.

Descartes' strategy is directed at desires and emotions. It is a strategy for manipulating emotions by pitting passion against passion. It also involves inducing the necessary countervailing passion. That is, if one anticipates that under certain circumstances emotions will be generated that are strong enough to overwhelm one's fundamental wants and intentions, the way to counter this is by bringing it about that an even more powerful emotion will be generated that will counter the effect of the potentially overwhelming one. This, in effect, is a strategy to alter one's preferences. It is a strategy that in some cases would require the alteration of preferences on a scale such as substantially to change one's personality and character.

Again, a potentially fatal difficulty with this strategy is the cost of its implementation, especially as a strategy of individual rationality. A further difficulty is the one that also arose in connection with Pascal's strategy: the problem of self-identity. Character modification by means of changes in emotional dispositions alters the very basis on which a chooser evaluates options. Such change implies that the initial basis for evaluation no longer exists; this raises the question whether the strategy, as a strategy of individual choice, is even coherent.

What I most want to emphasize about the strategies of Pascal and Descartes is that the required change typically would have to be brought about indirectly. One can neither believe a proposition to be true nor become a better person simply by willing it. Both strategies, therefore, involve self-manipulation. But this raises the question whether strategies of manipulation are not both more effective and much less costly when implemented at a social level than at the level of individual choice. Clearly not all character-change or personality development need or should



be a matter of social strategies—there must be room for taking responsibility for oneself—but there seems to be good reason to believe that at least a very large part of it should be social and collective.

The difficulty the Prisoner's Dilemma presents to individual rationality, I suggest, makes it evident that the most promising approach to many common decision situations is not the individualistic approach. To roll up one's spiritual sleeves, and in a tough-minded, resolute, and rugged-individualist's manner to set out to conquer these Sirens is an approach that offers little hope of success. One is more likely, when taking this course, to find oneself in the worst of worlds, a world Homer described as "piled high with the mouldering skeletons of men, whose withered skin still hangs on their bones" (*Odyssey*, XII). The promising approaches are collective or social strategies. The Hobbesean strategy, the collective version of the Ulysses strategy, is one that in fact has been adopted to some degree by all advanced political states. We have bound ourselves by means of legal institutions and strictly enforced criminal laws, and the continuing issues are only those of deciding precisely what the laws shall be and how far the authority of the state shall extend. I do not suggest that the only reasons for creating a society or a political state is so as to solve problems like the Prisoner's Dilemma, but I do suggest that this is a very powerful reason. It is powerful because the Prisoner's Dilemma is pervasive in both individual and social decision-making.

A moral system, together with supporting institutions for the practice of religion and the education and upbringing of children, is in part a collective social strategy for dealing with Prisoner's Dilemmas. It is a collective version of both the Pascal strategy and the Descartes strategy,

which takes the decision whether to be moral out of the hands of the individual altogether, and in that way thus eliminates the dilemma. A moral system deals with the dilemma, that is, not by imposing physical constraints upon unruly passions, but by character-modification, by *shaping the development* of personality. It seeks to shape the development of the person in such a way that he or she will do what is best, such as acting cooperatively, "as naturally as water seeking its downhill course" (Elster 52).

There are serious difficulties as well, of course, with collective social strategies. One must ask how the rules are to be arrived at and how they are to be inculcated. Must there be an elite which understands what is truly for the best and, by exercising the power of the sovereign, imposes this understanding upon a naive and uncomprehending citizenry? Are optimal collective strategies even politically feasible in a world which has become accustomed to individual liberty to the extent that we have? Collective strategies, certainly, come with a price that we all wish to be spared: the imposition of general rules, the containment of liberty, the impairment of spontaneity, and the shrinking of variety, novelty, color, and surprise in our lives. This price is real, and it sets a real limit to what it is rational to do collectively.

Still, one must also wonder whether the extent of our emphasis upon individuality is for the best. One must wonder, when we wave the banner of individual liberty—as we so often do—and when we press our 'rights' to individual freedom, whether we are not like prisoners in a Prisoner's Dilemma insisting upon the pursuit of unfettered individual rationality. If this is true, the task we must fully face up to is the collective one of determining what a conception of virtue, in the sense of true excellence in individual persons, can be in the global community of the twenty-first century. But beyond this, equally imperative is that we recognize the need to devise effective social strategies by which persons possessed of such excellence can come to be. ■





# Guises of Wisdom

by Roberta Brown

6

She was in southeastern France, at the dawn of the seventeenth century. While riding in the meadow near the mill on the estate of Bourbilly where she had lived with her husband, the figure of a man appeared at the foot of a hill, just beyond the mill.

He was wearing a black cossock, surplice, and a headcovering. As she beheld this vision, a certainty came over her that this would be the man with whom she would share her innermost conscience.

Behind Jeanne de Chantal's vision was a real person. Eldest son of a modest but aspiring noble family in Savoy, Francois de Sales had studied in Paris under the Jesuits at the stylish College de Clermont. There he had become an amiable bookworm, who secretly yearned to become a priest. The hardy mountain boy had nevertheless moved on to Padua, where he received a doctorate in law, which would have enabled him to assume high positions in the government of Savoy. But, a year later—and much to his father's anguish—the handsome baron could be found shorn of his lovely curls, wearing a surplice, and trudging the desolate mountain roads of Calvinist Chablais, converting souls with missionary zeal. Inspired by Jeanne de Chantal, he would eventually help her to found the Visitation Order, and during most of his life, their relationship would help give meaning to his struggle as the popular but exiled Bishop of Geneva.

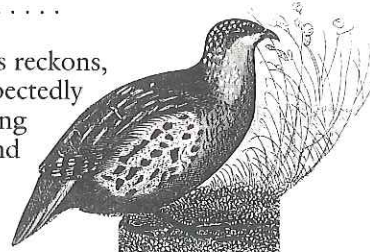
Jeanne de Chantal's first years appeared no less secular. She was the mother of four, a sparkling, sociable baroness during her husband's brief furloughs home from battle, manager of their extensive Burgundian estate, nurse and cook for an increasing crowd of poor. But the death of her husband in a freak hunting accident put an end to this noble life. At thirty-one, she had become the dependent and servant of a repugnant father-in-law. Under the roar of his insults and demands, she would manage to educate her own as well as his many children, to serve as doctor and herbalist for the crowds of destitute peasants, including lepers, who came to the attic of his crumbling chateau, and through good fortune, to establish an enduring friendship with Francois de Sales. Later in life, she recognized that these seven years with her father-in-law had provided a genuine novitiate to the spiritual life which she and de Sales were gradually forging.

Taken as a whole, their vast correspondence and more limited but widely read publications assume a unique significance when interpreted within the context of the ancient Sophia or Wisdom tradition. Known most readily in the West through the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament, the expressions of this tradition are many and often reflect the following: 1) a lively appreciation for the depths of experience hidden in the everyday life of a moralized cosmos, and the resulting use of parable in which plants and animals serve as symbols; 2) the inclusive graciousness and goodness of the Creator; 3) perceptions of Wisdom (a feminine deity who recognizes all Israelites and eventually all persons to be her children) in some early Christological contexts as the Praxis of Jesus, calling upon social underdogs, the religiously deficient.

The spirituality of de Sales and de Chantal weaves together veiled strands of this tradition with elements of neo-Platonic humanism, championing the freedom and dignity of the ensnared human will. One of the myriad parables in de Sales' writings recalls, for example, the well-known observations of partridges who steal and hatch the eggs of others. "But, what appears almost incredible," de Sales relates,

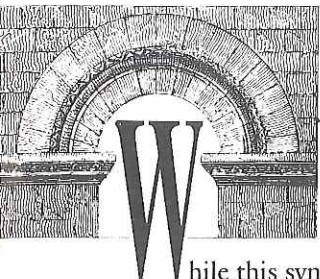
is that the young partridge nourished under the wings of a strange bird on which it has no natural claims, abandons its pretended mother on hearing the cries of its real parent, and by an astonishing effect of the connection established by nature between a mother and her young ones, resumes its place among her brood . . .

"It is in this way," de Sales reckons, "that a spark which unexpectedly glitters in a heap of expiring embers, excites the will and reanimates its love for the first and sovereign principle of all things" (*Treatise on the Love of God*, 46-47).



Seeking the smoldering glow in all persons, no matter what their profession, de Sales insists in a passage no less shocking to the brittle and piously elite reader of his epoch, that "it is an error, or rather a heresy, to try to banish the devout life from the regiment of soldiers, the shop of the mechanic, the court of princes, or the home of married folk" (*Introduction to the Devout Life*, 40). Devotion begins for these people with the proper exercise of virtue. With wounding sarcasm, he goes on to challenge the heroic virtues of fortitude, magnanimity, and great generosity. A forerunner of Molière in this matter, he classifies corporal mortifications inflicted by fasting or the hair shirt along with the sins of sensuality and materialism. Those seemingly distinguished roads to God's pleasure are, he insists, merely obstacles to the true, less easily practiced virtues of meekness, modesty, humility, and temperance.



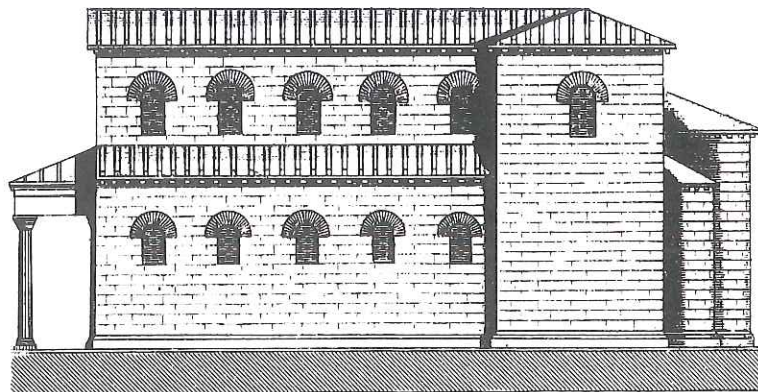


While this synthesis of the Wisdom tradition with neo-Platonism thus allowed for unusual intimacy between the divinity and traditionally less likely candidates for a spiritual life, it also offered a path for Christ-like perfection to the few. A model for this second orientation can be found in the mature life of Jeanne de Chantal. Liberated finally from the day-to-day care of children and her father-in-law, she undertook the task of founding the Visitation Order, designed for women who were either burdened with secular roles or who simply wished to avoid the more vogueish asceticism of closed orders such as the Carmelite. As Visitation monasteries proliferated throughout France and Savoy, interminable journeys and deft political negotiations, rather than prayer, became the unwelcome center of her life. De Chantal nevertheless blissfully resigned herself to this mission. On numerous occasions, she speaks of having sacrificed her own will to that of Jesus. Writing to de Sales, she laments with typical, paradoxical mirth that she had severed from her flesh, as if by a razor, all but its most interior, essentially human place: "How deeply the steel has cut into my flesh! How gladly one can leave every other thing, but to strip off the skin, the flesh and bone right down to the marrow, which, as I see it, is what we have done — this is a great thing" (*Correspondance*, 116). She had reached *la fine pointe*, the innermost chamber of the soul, where the human will, she believed, becomes shaped by the divine. In her own unique way, she understood herself to be among the many who throughout history had served as messengers for the graciousness of Jesus, a Father who was beautifully severe only with those who sacrificed their own will in order to carry out His.

The purpose of this willing sacrifice of the Visitation Order can at least partly be understood within the sophiology tradition. According to Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a contemporary Old Testament scholar,

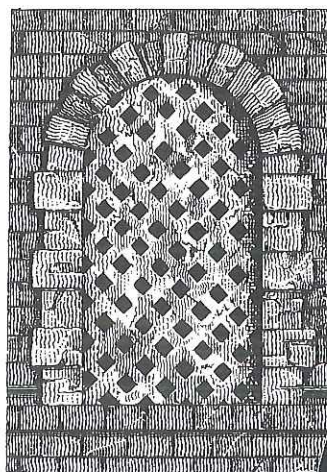
Jesus probably understood himself as the prophet and child of Sophia. . . . With other prophets and apostles, he stood in the succession of her messengers, in every generation to proclaim the gracious goodness and justice of God to the people of Israel. (in *Women's Spirituality*, 265.)

Interestingly, the Visitation Order was so named to celebrate and perpetuate the spirit of Christ who was present when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, visited her cousin Elizabeth. For de Chantal, this Biblical moment had become a parable: in the spirit of Mary, her religious community sought to provide a shelter on earth for the



spiritual presence of the Son. While they performed charitable visits to the sick, their underlying intent was more contemplative. Significantly, the Visitation was the only officially recognized community of religious women independent of a particular male Order. Her form of spirituality had found its concrete realization.

The life of de Sales had also become burdensome. A widely acclaimed preacher, bishop and diplomat, he died one evening in a gardener's cottage, wayworn from his endless missions. With his death, Jeanne de Chantal had lost her most intimate friend, one who also had followed the dictates of *la fine pointe*, who, in his own way, had shared adherence to a unifying, divine will. In need of a new spiritual director, Jeanne turned to their close friend, Vincent de Paul. Ironically, the tradition of de Chantal and de Sales had a greater influence upon him, and remains in the more overt form of charity for which he is still known today. Lost to the public, however, was the core of her spirituality: its singular expression of the Wisdom or Sophiology tradition and the respect it had brought to women, uniting in one image the seemingly mundane role of motherhood with that of spiritual perfection and leadership outside of the home. ■





# Getting Beyond the Subtitles: The Humanities Film Series

Thomas Campbell

8

A couple of weeks ago in one of my composition classes, in the process of analyzing the audience profiles that seemed to exist for various magazines, commercials, radio, and television shows, we turned up an article in which a producer for NPR's drive-time news and features program "All Things Considered" characterized the make-up of his audience. It struck us as a pretty shrewd piece of rhetorical thinking: "ATC presumes its audience is made up of people who willingly try bizarre items on foreign menus, who write irate but sensible letters to the editor, who won't avoid a movie because it has subtitles, and who have at least skimmed John Galt's final speech in *Atlas Shrugged*." We translated those specifics into a more general target group of literate, engaged, curious, even adventurous folks, equally at home in *The New Yorker* and *MAD* magazines.

As I'd hoped, this classroom exercise led us into a telling discussion of foreign films, or more precisely, the business of avoiding a foreign film "because it has subtitles." I must say I had no idea how pervasive the resistance to subtitled foreign films was among my students. It's hard work, too demanding, they said. You have to read the film and read the words all at the same time, too relentless, they said. And if the white text appears on a white background, too frustrating. You can't just sit back and enjoy the movie without missing things, and besides, you spill too much popcorn. Well, I suppose all of these reactions are more or less valid. It is a more complicated experience, something more than a visual and aural massage; it *does* demand greater intellectual participation, forcing you to perform a greater number of mental and sensory operations. But once they'd had a chance to grumble about the obstacles in viewing such films, we surveyed the pluses. What does happen when you get beyond the hurdle of the subtitles? You gain a wider perspective on the world by getting beyond the eyes and ears of American film directors; you register what it feels like to be adrift in a sea of foreign sounds, not bathed in the comforting clarity of English but de-familialized, having to respond to the cadences, the music, the emotional power, or to the occasional word or phrase you are able to pick out from the German, Chinese, or Russian dialogue. So we agreed, finally, that despite what some persisted in calling an "effort," the viewing of foreign language films, Western and non-Western alike, should clearly have a place in a liberal arts education, in any education that claims to expand and nourish multi-cultural sensitivity, encourage imaginative participation, or increase intellectual and aesthetic awareness.

The Humanities Film Series, now in its third year of existence, began modestly enough as the expression of a desire to provide more film experiences from that catalog of pluses, to offer a wider, more international range of cinema than is normally available in Tacoma's theatres or through ASPLU feature-film presentations, and, I suppose, to create and educate an audience by challenging the notion that films with subtitles are not worth the effort.

Over the years, the films presented have grouped themselves in several thematic clusters. There have been a number of films that addressed in one way or another the business of war, asking difficult questions about the nature of political commitment and the strength of moral values in times of conflict. Nikita Mikhalkov's *A Slave of Love*, set in 1917 in the southern Crimea, is partly an affectionate, almost wistfully Chekhovian love letter to pre-Revolutionary Russia, but the portrait of a small film crew hurrying to finish a frivolous melodramatic silent picture, oblivious of the Bolshevik revolution about to engulf them, emerges as a clear-eyed critique of their decadent insularity. In the troupe's prima donna he creates a delicious study of a self-absorbed movie queen of staggering political naivete who is nevertheless transformed by events into a bemused but genuinely committed political player. In *The Soldier of Orange* Dutch director Paul Verhoeven examines the way a different sort of conflict, the Nazi invasion of the Netherlands, alters the lives of an entire generation of privileged university students, propelling some to heroics, others to treacheries. And Luis Puenzo responds to Argentina's "dirty war" in *The Official Story*, tracing the struggle of conscience undergone by a comfortable bourgeois woman forced to come to terms with the horrible reality of the *desaparecidos* when it affects her own seemingly benign desire to adopt a child.

The declaration of 1988 as Sweden Year produced a series celebrating Scandinavian film, and we presented a week-long festival built around the theme of "The Child in Swedish Cinema," a cinematic smorgasbord whose rich offerings ranged from Ingmar Bergman's magical childhood reminiscence of life in a tragi-comic theatre family, *Fanny and Alexander*, to a six-year old's questioning of love, religion, and alcoholism in Allan Edwall's *Ake and his World*, to the popular, award-winning coming of age film by Lasse Hallstrom, *My Life as a Dog* (1985). These films sent all of us away with a greater appreciation and understanding of what it means to be a child, of what forces act to shape a child's sensibilities. We were made to confront stereotypes of innocence, entertain possibilities of childhood sexuality, evil, and guilt, consider the array of vulnerabilities and strengths, wonders and frights that emerge from a child's view of the world.

The films presented this year, though all drawn from literary texts, were chosen because they address the problematics of gender: they raise issues about the limitations and opportunities accompanying gender; question definitions of hero and heroine, sexuality and sexual deviance; criticize institutionally or traditionally legitimized gender-based treatment of men and women. We started with a packed audience at the Brazilian director Hector Babenco's



*Kiss of the Spiderwoman* and will weave our way through the great Indian director Satyajit Ray's *Home and the World*; the classic black and white film by Spaniard Raphael Gil of the Cervantes masterpiece, *Don Quixote*; the Oscar-winning story of the futile struggle against entrenched Victorian patriarchy and moral rigidity in Roman Polanski's *Tess*; the contemporary Greek's view of Euripide's final tragedy in Michael Cacoyannis's *Iphigenia*; and finally arrive at the recent Chinese film from Xie Fei and U Lan, *Girl from Hunan Village*, an acute look at the tradition of arranged marriages.

For two years the Humanities Film Series also put together an Interim festival of Asian films. We showcased the work of old masters (Kurosawa's Shakespearean epic, *Ran*) and introduced new talents (Wayne Wang's witty portrait of San Francisco's Chinese community, *Dim Sum*), while providing first looks at films from Hong Kong (*Ab Ying*), Taiwan (*Jade Love*), Japan (*Tampopo*), and from the first collaboration between Japan and China (*The Go-Masters*). During the 1990 Interim, however, we will be breaking the pattern in order to organize a week-long series of films supporting the Interim theme, "Strategies for Peace," a rubric under which we can run films as diverse as Richard Attenborough's reverential *Ghandi* and Stanley Kubrick's frighteningly funny *Dr. Strangelove*.

We expect future years to bring new ideas, new ways to incorporate foreign and classic films into the academic life of the university and the cultural life of the campus. For example, we are playing with the idea of producing a series featuring banned films or films based on censored texts—the possibilities are endless and endlessly seductive. The hope, of course, is that the series evolves in to something bigger and better each year, something that will enliven and integrate the PLU community and its activities—and, of course, something that will encourage folks to get beyond those subtitles. ■

## Recent Humanities Publications

Charles Bergman

### *Wild Echoes: Encounters with the Most Endangered Animals in North America.*

McGraw-Hill, 1989.

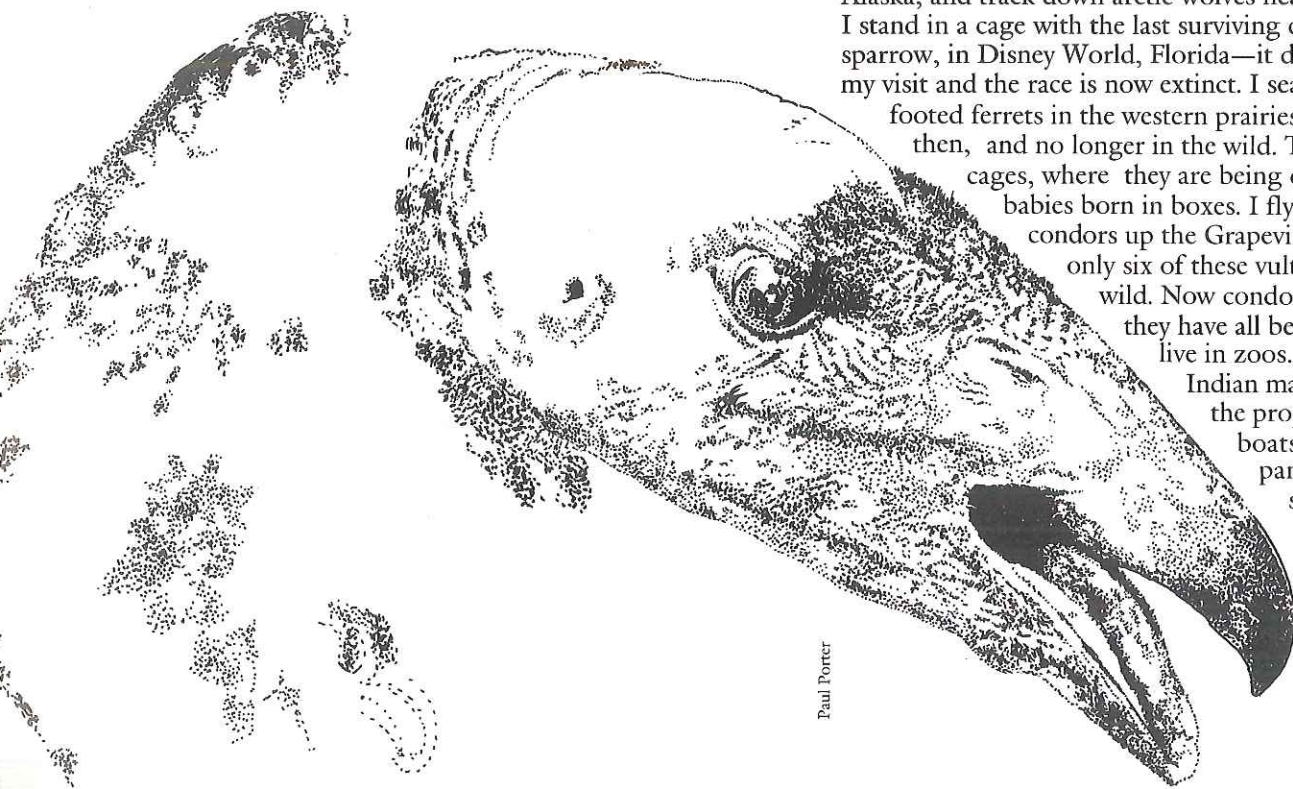
I have a fantasy: I imagine myself sitting in my living room, on my sofa. Outside my house—outside our house—the animals are gathering. Lost animals, endangered animals. Murmuring in wild echoes.

It's a strange feeling, knowing the animals are near, even as we think we've distanced ourselves from them. They give me the sense that there's more to life than I have known before—the sense that these animals know things we don't know.

This book is my attempt to understand, in both social and personal terms, the meanings of the phenomenon of endangered species. The premise is that animals are only partly biological creatures. They are also symbols in which we can read who we are. Drawing upon literature and art, modern philosophers and ancient naturalists, explorers and biologists, I try to understand what animals mean to humans, and the significance of their loss in this age of mass extinction, which we have caused.

The book does not treat endangered species only as large and global issues. They are, finally, profoundly personal in their implications. In a landscape increasingly defined by absence, where animals come to us out of a growing void, I get close to some of the rarest animals on the continent, trying to rediscover and feel their presence. I am helicoptered to a wolf den in the remote mountains of Alaska, and track down arctic wolves near the North Pole. I stand in a cage with the last surviving dusky seaside sparrow, in Disney World, Florida—it died shortly after my visit and the race is now extinct. I search for black-footed ferrets in the western prairies—extremely rare then, and no longer in the wild. They now live in cages, where they are being captive bred, their babies born in boxes. I fly with California condors up the Grapevine when there were only six of these vultures left in the wild. Now condors too are gone: they have all been captured and live in zoos. I follow West Indian manatees scarred by the propellers of motor boats. Tree a Florida panther deep in a swamp. Look

*Continued on page 10*



Paul Porter



for right whales in the North Atlantic. Splash through a Louisiana swamp after ivory-billed woodpeckers, one of the most mythic of our native birds.

Woven into these narratives is the argument that our current attempts to save endangered species are, in any larger sense, doomed to failure, sad rearguard battles. They can't solve the problems, because they stem from the same mentality, the same posture toward nature, that caused the problems in the first place, and can be summarized in our arrogant concept of stewardship. I try to rethink why so many endangered species defeat our best efforts on their behalf, and what these creatures' lives say about us. I argue that endangered species represent a paradox: though they are the result of our long obsession with power over nature, they embody the limits of that power. They are a mirror, not of our stunning triumphs over nature but of our failures. In the context of these broken creatures, which are ironically more a part of culture than of nature, my intent throughout the book is to try to re-create animals, by learning to reimagine them and our world. ■

Stewart D. Govig

## ***Strong at the Broken Places: Persons With Disabilities and the Church.***

Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989.

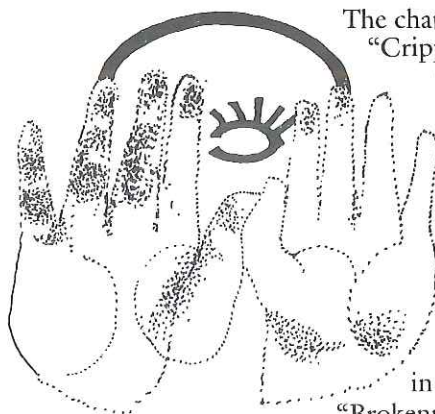
*Strong at the Broken Places* appeals for a religious education to confront fear, ignorance, and misinformation about persons with disabilities. Most of us will accept without question the fearsome "psycho-killer" stereotype sought by the cops on TV; yet the overwhelming majority of those with mental disorders are the victims of violence and not its perpetrators. Mental retardation is *not* the companion of speech impediments, either. And cerebral palsy is not contagious.

Taken by themselves, most disabilities are not the real problem; difficulties arise from the way an impairment is perceived. A person should not be seen as "confined to a wheelchair" but simply as using one to get around. It is the "less than whole" prejudice, consigning one to pity and social disadvantage, that constitutes a handicap. Loss of bodily function, such as leg amputation, may require a temporary use of the wheelchair. This is an impairment. (Should the person involved be a professional airplane pilot, he or she would also be disabled since, for the time being, it would affect normal employment opportunities.)

Literary resources amplify the significance of "broken places." In Mark Medoff's play *Children of a Lesser God*, Sarah, born deaf, refuses to voice words since she is terrified at being labeled "retarded." A childhood illness left Laura, in Tennessee William's *The Glass Menagerie*, with a shorter leg locked in a brace. Turning the "less than" image against herself, she retreats to an inner world, fragile of mind like a delicate piece in her glass collection.

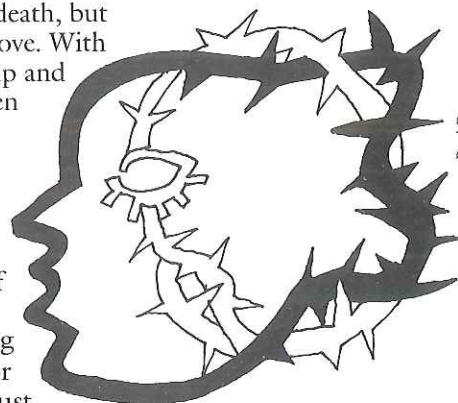
*Cyrano de Bergerac*, Edmond Rostrand's comedy, explores a different response to the stigma of a physical mark. Instead of heading for the plastic surgeon's office, Cyrano *boasts* of his huge nose and swaggers about in hilarious flashes of wit and ability.

The stammering Moses and St. Paul's complaint of a "thorn in the flesh" alert us to those with disabilities in the Bible. Jesus notes the "maimed, lame, and blind" (Luke 14:13). Lepers abound in both Testaments. While healings are also common occurrences, chronic impairments persist as a mysterious "given." The Apostle hears the Lord declare, "My grace is sufficient . . . my power is made perfect in weakness" (II Cor. 12:9). Well-being, then, is something wider than the possession of good health.



The chapters of Part One—"Crippled," "Marked," "Pitied," and "Avoided"—emphasize the brokenness surrounding the prejudice of those who let impairment, disability, and handicap obscure the person. But as Rosalynn Carter writes in her Foreword, "Brokenness is not the last word."

The chapters of Part Two—"Fellowship," "Encouragement," "Ministry," and "Promise"—point out bands of strength. Moses went on to lead the Exodus, and Paul wrote his immortal letters. For each of them the ultimate evil was not illness and death, but separation from God's love. With specific acts of fellowship and encouragement in a given parish, temple, or congregation, ministry becomes not only a service to those with disabilities and their families: it is also acts of mercy with them. We should expect something from such neighbors. For most, healing or cure must wait upon the promise of a faithful God to redeem our bodily "treasures in earthen vessels" (II Cor. 4:7).



Paul Porter

An appendix cites examples of positive actions recently undertaken by the World Council of Churches and other communions. A list of appropriate agencies involving activities associated with human disability, such as the National Organization on Disability, invites readers to continue their education and to join in the transformation. ■



Sharon L. Jansen

*"Politics, Protest, and a New Piers  
Plowman Fragment: The Voice of the  
Past in Tudor England."*

The Review of English Studies, NS 40 (1989), 91-100.

At some point soon after Mary's accession to the English throne in 1553, and most likely spurred on by the Queen's ill-fated marriage in 1554, an unnamed collector began to compile the wild assortment of political prophecies now labelled blandly and anonymously as British Library MS Sloane 2578. Despite its label, this hodgepodge of prophecy, protest, and propaganda is anything but bland—it is a spicy, often violent, revelation of its collector's sympathies, hopes, and fears. Through its pages, this unnamed yet not really anonymous collector of prophecies identifies his position quite clearly. He opposes Mary ("a woman wittles in Cadwalidres seete shul raigne to do owte the heate of the sone and love paynted colors to make hir selfe bright," fol. 18<sup>v</sup>) and her Spanish marriage ("the vile matrimony & folly," fol. 22<sup>v</sup> and "a carnal copulacion," fol. 65<sup>r</sup>), and proclaims his faith that somehow Edward VI will rise up from the dead and restore England to the true—Protestant—faith.

Only a very few items from this manuscript have been printed, most likely because at first glance so few of them seem at all worth printing. But among the dozens of unread, unstudied, and unpublished items is at least one small piece worth noting: a hitherto unremarked fragment from *Piers Plowman*, the great English visionary poem of the fourteenth century.

As interesting as this new fragment is for scholars of *Piers Plowman*, the particular shape and use of the extract are far more intriguing, for the resourceful sixteenth-century "composer" of the Sloane prophecy has carefully mined his original for lines he considered to be especially meaningful for his own day. From these extracted lines, originally widely separated in the *Piers* text, he has carefully shaped a unique and timely political statement.

My essay examines, in some detail, this use of a fourteenth-century reformist text as anti-government protest by a sixteenth-century compiler, suggesting not only *how* the prophecy worked, but *why* it was so effective. The unknown but not unknowable composer of this unique prophecy is not only to be appreciated for his genuinely personal reaction to the turbulent years of Mary's reign, or for his contributions to the long history of the text and tradition of *Piers Plowman*. More remarkably, he is important for his conviction that the voice of the past does speak with timeless imperatives to the crises of the present. ■

Janet E. Rasmussen

*"I met him at Normanna Hall": Ethnic  
Cohesion and Marital Patterns among  
Scandinavian Immigrant Women.*

Norwegian-American Studies 32 (1989), 71-92.

Oral history interviews with Scandinavian women provide the source material for this study of immigrant courtship during the early part of the twentieth century. In choosing a spouse, immigrant women evidenced a high degree of ethnic loyalty. Fully 89 percent married endogamously, that is, within the ethnic group. Most met their husbands either through friends and relatives or through a Scandinavian organization (churches, clubs, lodges). Yet ethnic loyalty coexisted with adaptation to the American environment; changing dynamics and expectations characterized marriages in the Scandinavian ethnic community.

Since women were in short supply in the Pacific Northwest, Scandinavian bachelors paid ardent attention to the female newcomers; some even engaged in long-distance recruitment of potential brides. For their part, the single women possessed considerable freedom of choice as to whom and when they would marry. They typically spent a number of years employed as domestic servants in American households, and exhibited both economic independence and a sturdy self-reliance.

Modes of courtship and wedding celebrations changed in response to the rhythms and resources of urban immigrant life. Courting became a more public activity than had been true in rural Scandinavia, while increased female autonomy added its own flavor to courtship patterns. Stylized wedding rituals were replaced by simple ceremonies.

Oral history interviews help us better to understand the relationship between endogamy and cultural maintenance. The experiences of these seventy-two informants suggest that Scandinavian women had begun to adapt to American ways even as they entered into unions with predominately first-generation men of the same national origin. ■



# CContributors

**Charles Bergman's** articles on natural history have appeared in *Audubon*, *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian*, and other magazines; he is Associate Professor of English.

**Roberta Brown** specializes in the literature and thought of Renaissance and seventeenth-century France; she is Associate Professor of French.

**Thomas Campbell's** field is English literature of the eighteenth century, especially letters, diaries, and journals. Tom, an inveterate movie goer, is Associate Professor of English.

**Stewart Govig** is Professor of Religion; his field is religious education. He has published and lectured on mental illness and handicaps.

**Sharon Jansen** is a specialist in medieval literature, particularly political prophecies; she is Associate Professor of English.

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**Janet Rasmussen** is Professor of Norwegian and Dean of the Division of Humanities. She is authoring a Scandinavian oral history project, and has special research interests in women's studies.

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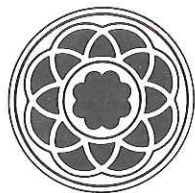
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