

A DETAILED SUMMARY  
OF  
C. S. LEWIS,  
*THE ALLEGORY OF LOVE* (1936)

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Chapter I: COURTLY LOVE

[pp. 1–43]

**I.1 The origin of courtly love**, in late 11th-century southern France, is one of the very few recorded cases of a great change in human sentiment. The change consisted in a “feudalisation of love” [3] and it provided the erotic tradition of Western Europe with some features which later came to be regarded as timeless or “natural”. One of them is the belief that a man’s passion for a woman is a “noble and ennobling” thing, a power which makes for better men and a better world. Initially, this passion was thought to be restricted to “courtly” circles and to be unknown to the populace: hence the label “courtly love”. Before the time of the Provençal troubadours, there are no indications that erotic love was ever considered a sublime or elevated matter. “In ancient literature love seldom rises above the levels of merry sensuality or domestic comfort, except to be treated as a tragic madness” [4]. In Plato, love for a human individual (usually a man’s love for a younger man) was only the lowest rung of a ladder leading up to divine love. The Roman

poet Ovid's *Art of Love* "presupposes an audience to whom love is one of the minor peccadilloes of life, and the joke consists in treating it seriously" [6]. When the troubadours in their songs praised the very conduct that was mocked by Ovid, they sometimes actually pretended to be imitating him. The question is not so much whether they misunderstood him as how to explain the change in estimation.

Nothing we know about the centuries of Europe's Christianisation suggests premonitions or early stages of this great change in sentiment. The Church had no special reverence for women or sexual passion; nor is it possible to discover an unambiguous causal relationship with the cult of the Holy Virgin. Any supposedly typical Germanic traits gaining prominence in Western culture after the fall of Rome also fail to provide an explanation. At any rate, Western Europe had for centuries been both Christian and Germanic when courtly love first appeared. "The deepest of worldly emotions in this period is the love of man for man, the mutual love of warriors who die together fighting against odds, and the affection between vassal and lord" [9]; these emotions were "more passionate and less ideal" than modern patriotism and largely a matter of personal loyalty. "The centre of gravity is elsewhere – in the hopes and fears of religion, or in the clean and happy fidelities of the feudal hall" [10]. These "male affections", merging with the new sentiment when it appeared (i.e. "feudalising" it) may have helped to make it acceptable.

Several "sources" and hence "**causes**" or "**explanations**" of the emergence of courtly love have been suggested:

- \* Celtic, Arab and Byzantine influences (but even if they can be actually identified, none provides a sufficient explanation)
- \* Ovid (but he appears to have been better known in northern France than in the south)

\* the presence of many landless knights in Provence meant that there were many courts, i.e. centres of leisure and luxury with a surplus of men (but Provence was not unique in this respect).

In fact, no explanation can be given for the new sentiment. There *are* explanations, however, for the **four marks** of the peculiar form which it first took:

\* The valuing of *Humility* had already existed in the ethos of feudalism.

\* The same goes for *Courtesy*.

\* *Adultery* came into the picture because of

– the accepted no-nonsense approach to marriage: marriage without love led to love without marriage.

– the Church’s teachings on marriage: passionate love between the sexes was an animal thing; the sexual urge was at best innocent. The main theological objection to sexual passion concerned the suspension of intellectual activity (*ligamentum rationis*). In the romantic view of later centuries, there was a positive side to “passion”; about that side “Thomas Aquinas has nothing to say – as he has nothing to say about the steam-engine. He had not heard of it” [17].

\* The *Religion of Love* did not necessarily involve a serious approach; nor did a serious approach to love imply an orthodox Christian approach. *Frauendienst* (“woman-service”) stood in one or more of **various relations to the established religion**:

– as an *extension* of religion (resulting, in the finest cases, in “a noble fusion of sexual and religious experience”, as in Dante [21])

– as an *escape* from religion (in the form of Ovidian parodies such as the *Concilium in Monte Romarici* [19-21])

– as a *rival* religion (when a truant from the established religion can take courtly love seriously enough to find a religious, if temporary, fulfilment in it).

The rise of the troubadours and their poetry was not, of course, a case of new matter finding a new form, nor indeed of a new form finding new matter.

**I.2** CHRÉTIEN DE TROYES (†1195) was a poet who could follow any fashion without squandering his talent. He was already a poet before he became one of the first in northern France both to use Arthurian legend and to write a serious poem in which love was the central theme. His poem *Erec and Enide* is still wholly un-courtly; but his *Lancelot* shows that he had read (and translated) Ovid and lived at the court of Champagne. Lancelot rescues Queen Guinevere from the land of Gorre, and “the irreligion of the religion of love could hardly go further” than in his devotion to her; yet Chrétien represents him as a pious man, conscientious in observing conventional religious duties and devotions [29]. Lancelot’s inner life is described at much greater length than was usual in this period, and it is worth noting that “Chrétien can hardly turn to the inner world without at the same time turning to allegory. ... **Allegory**, besides being many other things, is **the subjectivism of an objective age**” [30] (> “Allegory had been born and perfected for the very purpose to which Chrétien put it” [113]). Debates are described as taking place between e.g. Love and Reason or between *Largesse* and *Pitié*. Later ages were to describe the inner life without allegory; earlier ages ignored the subject. The figure of Love is usually developed in terms of “love-religion”; in such cases, to allegorize is almost to mythologize and to deify. Chrétien does not always know where to stop when the device has done its job.

**I.3** ANDREAS CAPELLANUS wrote his theoretical treatise on the new kind of love, *De arte honeste amandi*, probably in the early 13th century. It mostly consists of “ideal dialogues, adapted for the use of lovers in various social positions” [33]. Love is regarded as the basis for all that is good in the world; what is meant is the love which induces the lady to free acceptance of the lover, not through sweeping sensuality but rather as responding to a carefully cultivated love that is “a ‘kind of chastity’ in virtue of its severe standard of fidelity to a single object” [34]. If the lady is not of a higher social rank, or if she does not succumb of her own free will, then love will fail to exert its ennobling effect. **If love isn’t free, then it isn’t love.** It is thus precisely in this, its defining and most serious aspect, that Love is incompatible with Marriage. The teaching offered by Andreas gets a religious colouring where he makes a comparison between love which isn’t heart-felt with good works which do not come from good intentions. He also compares the rewards of Love with the eternal life. Yet he rejects any suggestions that Love involve a low regard for the Church. He seems to take a “right wing” position in the courtly world, opposing a “left wing” that drew radical conclusions from the (actually) unbridgeable gap between the Church’s view of love and the courtly view. Andreas concludes with the remark that while it is useful to know the courtly theory of love, its practice is a different matter. Love is indeed **the basis of all that is good in the world** – but no man in his right mind will have a high regard for the world. “Love is, *in saeculo*, as God is, in eternity. ... But of course there is for Andreas, in a cool hour, no doubt as to which of the two worlds is the real one” [42]. A fusion of *Frauendienst* and the official religion was not achieved yet. Anyone taking the former really seriously was bound to neglect the latter. The fake religiosity of the courtly

code was the clearest confirmation of the gap between that code and the true religion. There was no real competition. Andreas is only one of many older writers on love who testify to this situation through an explicit “**palinode**”, the recantation that concludes their work. In fact Ovidius himself had written a *Remedium Amoris*. “We hear the bell clang; and the children, suddenly hushed and grave, and a little frightened, troop back to their master” [43].

## Chapter II: ALLEGORY

[44–111]

**II.1 Allegory** is a latent characteristic of all human language: “It is of the very nature of thought and language to represent what is immaterial in picturable terms.” During the Middle Ages this phenomenon took a definite and widely appreciated form as the Allegorical Poem, in which the audience is assumed to be familiar with the immaterial things under discussion. Dante, a master of allegory, warned for the danger of misunderstanding “accidents” (affections, states of mind) that “speak as if they were substances and men” [47]. There is, or should be, **no mystery about the *significacio*** (meaning) of an allegory. Properly handled and properly understood, an allegory deals only with accidents, while the personifications are strictly tools of *expression*. Symbolism, in contrast, is not a mode of expression but a mode of thought – a way to think about matters which we cannot think about in other ways at all and which the audience is not supposed to be already familiar with.

**II.2** The literary history of Allegory begins with the personifications in classical Latin literature. Well before the Christian era, the ancient Romans already ceased to distinguish between abstractions and spiritual beings. On the other hand, many terms in their language functioned more or less the way our word “Nature” may still do for us; partly as a result from this, Latin poetry after Vergil could develop a tendency toward allegory. “**The twilight of the gods is the mid-morning of the personifications**” [52]. In the *Thebaid* of Statius (late 1st century CE) “one can almost see the faded gods of mythology being shouldered aside between those potent abstractions *Pietas* and *Natura* [54]; “the *Thebaid*’s gods are only abstractions and its abstractions ... are almost gods” [56].

**II.3** How to explain this dual development? Firstly, this “twilight of the gods” is how mythology and monotheism live together for a while as a necessary stage of every pagan religion [57]. “**God**” drives out “**the gods**”, which makes it attractive to represent the gods as aspects of God, or as personifications of God’s various properties. Secondly, the great age of personifications dawned as the Good came to be conceived as being in perpetual strife with Evil. One major scene of this struggle was the inner life of every man and more particularly of *good* men. For the ancient Greeks, a good man need not have ever been tempted to evil. In later antiquity, moral action and excellence were more and more conceived as success in resisting temptation. “The new state of mind can be studied almost equally well in Seneca, in St. Paul, in Epictetus, in Marcus Aurelius, and in Tertullian” [60]. This **awareness of inner conflict** (*bellum intestinum, psychomache*) tended to promote a more general interest in the inner life of man.

**II.4** PRUDENTIUS (late 4th century) was, as the author of the *Psychomachia*, the first allegorical poet. His precursors in that capacity were Seneca, Apuleius, Tertullian and Augustine. Their work shows how closely related were the notions of temptation, introspection, inner conflict and the allegorical (or initially metaphorical) technique. But the *Psychomache* is not a good poem. “While it is true that the *bellum intestinum* is the root of all allegory, it is no less true that only the crudest allegory will represent it by a pitched battle” [68]. A better image is that of a *journey*. This is why Seneca may remind us of Bunyan and why Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* is a better book than his *Holy War*.

The “twilight of the gods” – the “steady decline of mythology into allegory” [73] – can be traced in the works of Claudian, Sidonius Apollinaris and Ennodius, and in MARTIANUS CAPELLA’s bizarre *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* (early 5th century). The latter became a textbook in the Middle Ages and set “precedent for endlessness and formlessness in literary work”; but its peculiar brand of strangeness sometimes allows the reader “to breathe the air of wonderland”. In these writers we find that allegory enabled the seemingly dead gods to survive as “purely literary” ornaments. As such, they gradually opened up **a new world for poets**: “the marvellous-known-to-be-fiction” [82]. The traditionally available worlds had been “the probable” and “the marvellous-taken-as-fact”. This new world did not become fully accepted and accessible until the Renaissance (>VII.2). A striking work in this connection is an epithalamium (wedding song) by Ennodius, a Christian bishop living around 500 CE. Not a believer in the ancient gods and goddesses, he nevertheless describes how Venus, the goddess of love, answers a complaint from Cupid about the proliferation of virginity on Earth, telling him to be patient. If people

ignore us, she says, their inattention will only increase our power over them. Ennodius would not have used (and thus preserved) the figure of Venus if she had not become a purely ornamental literary device; but she was offering him opportunities which he would otherwise have missed. In this way, Venus and the other gods “saved ... as in a temporary tomb, for the day when they could wake again in the beauty of acknowledged myth and thus provide Europe with its ‘third world’ of romantic longing” [82]. “For poetry to spread its wings fully, there must be, besides the believed religion, **a marvellous that knows itself as myth**. For this to come about, the old marvellous ... must be stored up somewhere. ... Such a sleeping-place was provided for the gods by allegory ... for gods, like other creatures, must die to live.” [83].

**II.5** During the **Dark Ages** (6th-11th century) very little large-scale allegorical poetry was on offer. The demand for allegory did continue, though, as did the supply: many allegorical excursions and digressions are found in sermons and treatises of the period, “the vivid interest in the inner world, stimulated by the horrors and hopes of Christian eschatology, remained”, and “the Virtues and Vices [became] as real as the angels and the fiends” [86]. Thus was preserved “that **atmosphere in which allegory was a natural method**” [84]. Allegorical elements could acquire a new dignity even in a non-allegorical context, witness the figure of Philosophia in Boethius (early 6th century). Fulgentius (same period) explained Vergil’s entire *Aeneid* as an allegorical poem on the life of man, thus creating a reputation for the *Aeneid* as a model for allegorical writing.

**II.6** The real pioneers of medieval allegorical poetry were not the troubadours, but the much lesser known poets from the

early-12th-century SCHOOL OF CHARTRES. They were “Platonic, as Platonism was understood in those days”. For them, Nature was not opposed to Grace but, rather, an instrument of Grace in opposing the Unnatural. In these pre-Aristotelian days of medieval philosophy, God’s immanence was stressed more than His transcendence.

The figure of Natura became an important personification among these poets. In addition to her, Noys, Physis and Urania are evoked by BERNARDUS SYLVESTRIS in his poem about the creation of the world and man, *De Mundi Universitate sive Megacosmus et Microcosmus*. Natura needs no assistance while she creates the World; but for the creation of Man she needs Physis with her daughters Theorica and Practica, and also Urania, who supplies the divine element. The result is Man as a Microcosmos, “an image of the mighty world” [96], a harmonious, balanced creature. Bernard was obviously able “to respond to ... the sublime suggestions of Plato’s most sublime and suggestive work; above all, his mind is whole and balanced” [98]. Remarkably, these poets have a view of man which does not involve a contrast between the courtly and the religious way of life. “Goodness does not mean asceticism, knighthood does not mean adultery”. Thus ALANUS AB INSULIS in his *Anticlaudianus* proclaims a courtly and secular “virtue” in the vein of Castiglione, but he does so “with no slightest sense of rebellion or defiance” [104]. In his *De planctu naturae* (“Nature’s complaint”), Nature laments the unnatural vices of humanity; thus Nature herself cuts a good figure and so does natural love along with her. “The earthly Cupid, after being for ages contrasted with the celestial Cupid, suddenly finds himself in contrast with an infernal Cupid” [106]. The author’s delight in his subject merges with the equal delight he has in his own over-decorated style, which he may himself have considered

the best thing in his work. In JOHANNES DE ALTAVILLA's *Archithrenus* ("Arch-mourner"), Natura again appears to great advantage; also, this work is "an early example of the allegory in the form of a journey – that is, in its best form" [110].

The school of Chartres did not achieve a sustainable fusion of the courtly and the religious way; but what they did achieve was a prestige for the courtly way which was never to vanish completely. Formally, their work, though often unreadable for later ages, in its own time constituted an inspiring example of how much more could be done with allegory than merely expressing inner conflicts.

## Chapter III: *THE ROMANCE OF THE ROSE* [112–156]

**III.1** The allegorical method had from the outset been a suitable instrument of **psychological realism** (analysis of emotions), especially when dealing with love. This was how Chrétien was using the method as soon as he took up the fashionable theme of his day: courtly love. Psychological realism, for its part, had from the outset nurtured the allegorizing tendency. Allegorical method and courtly love thus merged in Chrétien's work. At the same time, he "wished to satisfy the taste for marvellous adventure" [113], the wish for Arthurian lore, i.e. the "matter of Britain". His solution was to alternate passages for the one sort of audience with passages for the other. Likely enough each was bored while the other was entertained.

**III.2** Marvellous adventure and psychological realism were indeed soon to take separate ways. Since allegorical figures are “abstract” while knights and horses and lances are “concrete”, modern readers may forget that the adventure stories were fantasy and the allegory of love was a realistic genre. Neither the poet nor the audience believed they had seen or could ever meet Arthur or Lancelot or the Grail or the Land of Gorre. In an allegorical narrative, everyone might be expected to be familiar with the things represented. A further and perhaps unprecedented step was taken when GUILLAUME DE LORRIS made a psychological development into a story’s main theme. He did so in the unfinished first part of the *Roman de la Rose* (c. 1236).

Psychological conceptions and insights of the period are now as **obsolete** as the allegorical form. This may result in the modern reader getting the impression of a mysteriousness that is not really there, or which the author never intended. To avoid this, we need to learn about some **forms and connotations** that were obvious for a 13th-century audience. Thus it may seem odd for the male and female protagonists of a love story to get dissolved into factors (i.e. into personified affections). The hero as such is hardly portrayed, and the heroine remains invisible. Personifications of “third parties” (friends, relatives, competitors for the lady’s love) usually take the form of personified persons, and the result may be awkward. The “machinery” of the *Roman* – the successive scenes of action: riverside landscape, walled garden, rose-lot surrounded by a hedge within the garden – represents a succession of life stages or of social circles; but “of course, its classical and erotic models only partially account for it. Deeper than these lies the world-wide dream of the happy garden” [119-20].

The **characters** can be divided into three groups:

1. *“Neutral” characteristics* which may appear in the lover and in the lady. The god and goddess of love are not here a royal couple as convention would have it. The goddess Venus is the *mother* of the god Cupid, who appears much earlier than she and is accompanied by his mistress Beauty. This anomaly might go back to philosophical conceptions. Venus being a planet, Guillaume would have considered her “a real source of ‘influence’ ... a real force in nature” [121] and hence, perhaps, as unsuitable for treatment as a mere “accident”; she was as a “substance” as well (< II.1). For him, Venus is the sexual appetite; her son is the more refined sentiment. In addition, there are characters representing public life at the court: Deduit (“pleasure”, “delight”), Oiseuse (“idleness”), Joy, Largesse, Courtesy etc.
2. *Characteristics of the hero*: the lady Reason is staunchly opposed to the hero’s whole love affair. He flouts her advice.
3. *Characteristics of the heroine*: Bialacoil (“fair welcome”, Courtesy’s son), Franchise, Pity, Fear, Shame, Danger. This last name appears to signify “the lady’s ‘snub’ launched from the height of her ladyhood” [124]; the word derives from *dominarius*, “lordliness” in the sense of haughtiness (>Appendix II).

Allegory “is **simile seen from the other end**”: the idea is not to suggest that “Life is like a Pilgrimage” but, rather, “this Pilgrimage is like Life”. Yet an image with a known meaning is not an image which you may as well forget since it has served its purpose. The point of allegory is not to discover meanings: the meanings are assumed to be well known. Image and meaning are not related as means and purpose, but are both to be kept before the mind so that the two can be appreciated as each other’s “imaginative interpretation” [125]. Only after this

habit is acquired (which isn't very difficult) will it be possible to tell good allegories from bad.

### **III.3** What is Guillaume de Lorris saying on the **psychology of love**, and how does he say it?

- (1) For an aspiring courtly lover, the first requirement is to become a partaker in courtly life. Certain characteristics are not conducive to that end. They are the characters depicted on the outside of the wall around the garden of Delight: Hatred, Covetise, Envy, Poverty, Age, Sadness, Vilanye, and *Papelardie* (a sheerly negative, joyless prudery that masquerades as piety). Evidently, courtly life is a combination of very different sorts of characteristics; it is not a purely ethical or purely social or purely economical ideal.
- (2) Idleness is the doorkeeper and Pleasure is the lord of the garden. Several of the inhabitants can be seen as exact opposites of the figures on the outside of the wall: Joy, Largesse, Courtesy, Hope, Sweet Thought. In this company, Love may be expected to flourish without delay.
- (3) After some wanderings in the garden the hero – or “dreamer” – falls in love. He looks into a “fountain” – the well of love in which Narcissus drowned for love of his own reflection. In the bottom there are “two crystal stones, in which the whole garden can be seen reflected” [128]. One thing he sees there is a garden of roses, and among them is the rosebud which he sets out to pluck. That is: he looks into the Lady's eyes and sets out to gain her love. It is a unique piece of realism about the magic of eyes. As he puts his hand forward to pluck the Rose, Cupid shoots five arrows and the dreamer surrenders, becoming a vassal of Love.

- (4) To be initiated into love means to take to heart much instruction on the conduct it requires. Cupid's long monologue addressed to the lover is one of those passages which, while the author apparently reckoned it among his best, have most conspicuously "dated".
- (5) Going into action means meeting Bialacoil. So far, so good. Bialacoil takes the lover into the rose garden while Danger, Malabouche ("badmouth", "wicked tongue"), Shame (Reason's daughter), Jealousy and her servant Fear are slumbering. The lover becomes too bold, Danger leaps up to throw him out and scolds Bialacoil to flight [131].
- (6) The failure offers an opportunity for Reason to dissuade the lover from further advances. He won't listen, and consults with Friend on the next attempt.
- (7) This new attempt involves a more cautious approach. Much now depends on the lady. She decides for some renewed contact, expecting that she will need, and be able, to keep things in control. After good words from Franchise and Pity, Danger is now less prickly and allows a free hand to Bialacoil. The lover may enter the rose garden again, but must not pluck nor even kiss the rose, for the sake of Chastity. Then follows a surprise attack from Venus, who with her torch moves Bialacoil to allow the kiss.
- (8) "After this all is in confusion" [133]. Jealousy and Malabouche call Bialacoil to account. Shame answers on Bialacoil's behalf and promises to keep a better eye on him. Yet Jealousy transforms the rose garden into a moated castle, there to imprison Bialacoil with an old woman as his keeper and Fear, Shame, Danger and Malabouche standing sentinel at the four gates.

Guillaume's original French strikes the note of "a boy-like blending (or so it seems) of innocence and sensuousness"

[135]. Had the work been finished, we might have seen Reason rather than Love emerge victorious.

**III.4** The “**second part**” or “**completion**” of the *Roman*, written by JEAN DE MEUN some forty years later, is more than four times the length of the unfinished work by Guillaume de Lorris. The actual continuation of the love story takes up less than 10 percent of “this huge, dishevelled, violent poem of eighteen thousand lines” [137], and to the analysis of emotions nothing is added at all. The allegorical nature of the personages is often neglected. Jean de Meun was not an allegorist, nor a psychologist of love, nor a poet in the sense that he could make poems (though he was capable of poetry). His main concern seems to have been with the many long **digressions**. The tendency toward large, vastly variegated projects is a characteristic of medieval art in general. If successful, it could result in things like Dante’s *Commedia* or Salisbury Cathedral. If not, as was more usual, things like Jean de Meun’s work resulted: a coherent *poiēma* [137] was beyond his capacities. Nevertheless “the scattered poetry ... survives the ruin of the poem” [142].

**III.5** The poem’s many incidental **merits** may be summed up as follows.

- \* A lot of skilfully *popularized science*, history and philosophy. Jean’s treatment of the problem of freedom, based on Boethius, is “easier going” than its model but hardly less cogent and accurate. The poetic form does not detract from “a firm rationalistic bias ... in all his scientific passages: he writes to refute vulgar errors” such as the superstition of Habundia and her night riders [143].
- \* *Satire*, mainly aimed at women and churchmen. These passages tend to be long, perhaps partly because it was a large

subject and an easy one. As regards women the satire may represent a clumsy attempt to treat the new ideal of love in a Christian way. Sensing that there was something not quite right about *Frauendienst*, the author sometimes falls into the opposite extreme.

- \* *Palinode*, i.e. passages of direct denunciation of the courtly ideal of love. This critique is put in the mouth of Reason; but Jean de Meun goes beyond his models by representing Reason as a rival mistress.
- \* *Naturalistic theory of sex*. Sex is regarded as a legitimate, God-given phenomenon which humans treat wrongly by making it into a relation of authority, or by squeamishness about calling sexual organs by their names – “a criticism of courtly love far more damaging than the bludgeon work of ... explicitly satirical passages” [149].
- \* *Panegyrics of Natura and her priest Genius*. These passages are almost “vitalistic” and easily pass into expressions of the author’s delight in natural beauty. “This sweeps aside both his traditional love-lore and his traditional condemnation of it” [150].
- \* *Mystical ideas* about the garden of Love and Delight: the garden as a mere shadow or imitation of the real, good, incorruptible, eternal garden. Among the things depicted on the outside of its encircling wall we now find not only sins and devils, but “earth and the stars, and in fact the whole material universe”. Human desire for the garden of Delight is explained from that garden’s likeness to the eternal garden. Jean de Meun is at his poetic best, and is least like other poets, “when he touches on the idea of eternity” [152-3]. He made an awkward move by putting these mystical ideas into the mouth of Genius, the universal god or patron of “generation”, i.e. procreation (>V.1 and Appendix I). Indeed, this last

attempt by the author to deal with courtly love in some respectable way cannot be seen as his final verdict. Unifying, overarching or fundamental ideas were not his line: that is the fatal artistic difference between him and Dante. However, “if he lacks the bones of good poetry, he has all its flesh”. Jean de Meun’s *Roman* “had, for his immediate followers the practical utility of a general store, and for us he retains some of its chaotic attraction” [155-6].

## Chapter IV: CHAUCER

[157–197]

**IV.1** The *Roman de la Rose* is one of the most “successful” books of all time in terms not only of readers but of **literary offspring**. However, “few, if any, attempted to do over again what Guillaume de Lorris had done – that is, to represent an action or story of love in a thoroughgoing allegory” (i.e. “radical allegory” [166]). What was imitated were selected elements, and “each new child has his individual traits as well as his family likeness” [157]. Confining ourselves for the rest of this study to the English branch, we may note, for example, that WILLIAM LANGLAND’S *Piers Plowman* (c. 1362) does not deal with love but is nevertheless the greatest allegory of the 14th century. It is a moral poem and thus fundamentally conventional. The allegorical form, too, had by this time become conventional. What is all the more remarkable, and exceptional, is “the kind, and the degree, of [Langland’s] poetic imagination” – a kind of “intellectual imagination”, the “power of rendering imaginable what before was only intelligible” [160].

**IV.2** GEOFFREY CHAUCER's reputation in his own (14th) century and the next was that of a "great translator" of French poetry, and as "a master of noble sentiment and a source of poetic diction" [161-2]. This "courtly" Chaucer is historically far more important, and important in a different way, than the Chaucer of the *Canterbury Tales*. The *Tales* remained comparatively "sterile" [163], and such literary influence as they had was on prose rather than on poetry. Even granted that they are his best work, it would be wrong to assume that the same humour and irony permeated all the rest. In his other writings the humour, if present, usually works only if taken as a side-effect. "Even if the first Chaucerians were all dunces, it would not be safe to neglect their testimony. ... If **they all took Chaucer's love poetry *au grand sérieux***, it is overwhelmingly probably that Chaucer himself did the same" [163].

Chaucer's early work is "as heavy as the prose of instruction, and as empty as an Elizabethan song, while yet it neither sings nor instructs", but it gradually developed "to a style which has since become almost the norm of English poetry". His mature work must not be seen in the light of later indiscreet imitations, where (like Milton's in the 18th century) it is "partially vulgarized, and hardened into a mannerism" [164].

"In Chaucer we find the same subject matter [as in the *Roman's* radical allegory], that of chivalrous love; but the treatment is never truly allegorical. **Traces of the allegorical poem survive**" [167]:

\* His *Complaint unto Pity* and *Complaint to His Lady* "illustrate the use of personification at its lowest level" [167].

\* *The Book of the Duchess* is a "dream" story about courtly love, but not an allegory. The dream was perhaps a French literary device which Chaucer simply liked to use; but his "dream psychology" is first-class. It is in his psychology of

love, however, that he “shows at once his own genius and his faithful discipleship to the *Rose* tradition” [168]. The poem is an elegy, and precisely because it is a true and a good one “the black background of death is always disappearing behind [the] iridescent shapes of satisfied love” [169].

\* *The Complaint of Mars* gives a sort of palinode (lines 218-44) in the form of a comparison “between Divine and earthly love, apparently to the advantage of the former” [170].

\* *Balade to Rosamonde* contains an odd example of metaphor as the lover is said to wallow in his love as a pike in gelatine: “As serious poetry it is bathos: as jest it is flat” [171]. It is impossible to be sure how it was intended by the author; perhaps there was no problem here for his contemporaries.

\* *The Parliament of Fowls* (a debate about love between a variety of birds) is especially likely to be misunderstood if read as a product of “the ‘mocking’ Chaucer”: “The courtly sentiment is, from the outset, an escape, a truancy, alike from vulgar common sense and from the ten commandments” [172]; “the comic figures in a medieval love poem are ... a libation to the god of lewd laughter precisely because he is not the god whom we are chiefly serving” [173]. The *Parliament* is an allegory but not a “radical” one, since “its *significacio*, if extracted, would prove to be a state and not a story” [174]. Lines 193-294 are a free imitation of a passage from Boccaccio’s *Teseide*, and Chaucer’s “omissions and alterations are all in the medieval direction”: Thus in describing the garden “while he [makes it] more spiritual, with heavenly music and a dateless present, he makes it more earthly too by the mention of his inaudible breeze; he deepens the poetry every way” [176]. He never writes, as Boccaccio seems to do, from an idea that “all this stuff about gardens and gods of

love is ‘only poetry’”; Chaucer’s “profound and cheerful sobriety” contrasts with later “renaissance frivolity” [176].

*Troilus and Criseyde* is the high point of Chaucer’s love poetry. Here “we have the courtly conceptions of love, which Chaucer learned from the French allegory, put into action in poetry which is not allegorical at all” [167]. Like the *Rose* it is a story; but it is not an allegory (nor a dream story). In the 12th century, Chrétien de Troyes needed allegory to write about love but did not succeed in combining it with story. In the 13th century, Guillaume de Lorris needed allegory but achieved the combination. In the 14th, Chaucer wrote a story about love without needing allegory: “**Allegory has taught him how to dispense with allegory**” [178]. While to some it may seem a comparatively “modern” work, a better label would be “permanent”: *Troilus* was a great achievement and as such speaks “a more universal language” than its literary forebears. Its model in Boccaccio (*Il Filostrato*) has, again, been refashioned in consistently “medieval” directions. This becomes especially clear if we compare the “moral” drawn by Boccaccio with Chaucer’s. While Boccaccio warns against the vanity and fickleness of all young women, Chaucer, “never more truly medieval and universal, writes his ‘palinode’ and recalls the ‘yonge, fresshe folkes’ of his audience from human to Divine love: recalls them ‘home’, as he significantly says”. He borrows passages from *Filostrato* so as to bring “the personified ‘accidents’ of the *Roman* out of allegory and sets them moving in a concrete story” [179].

The **personages** in the concrete story are not to be mistaken for the rather one-dimensional personified accidents: Criseyde is not the *Roman*’s Bialacoil, and Pandarus is not Friend.

*Criseyde*’s treachery after her blissful time with Troilus can be explained from her ruling passion, emphasized through-

out by Chaucer. It is a passion for safety, a “Fear ... of everything that can be feared” [185]. She is “a tragic figure in the strictest Aristotelian sense, for she is neither very good nor execrably wicked” [189].

*Pandarus*, her uncle and her contact with Troilus, is not a merely comic, sentimental and/or cynical character. His urge to expound the commandments of Love is real and serious, and “it is not what Pandarus says that is comic, on Chaucer’s view: it is the importunity, the prolixity, the laughable union of garrulity and solemnity, with which he says it” [193]. He is worldly-wise and shrewd, but his “avuncular or parental” banter did not exclude a sentimental veneration for Love, nor indeed some Christian doubts about it.

*Troilus*, like the allegorical and anonymous “I” or “dreamer” of the *Roman de la Rose*, is not so much the protagonist as, rather, a kind of frame for the story. He is an ideal figure in the vein of Lancelot, the embodiment of a single contemporary ideal. “His humility, his easy tears, and his unabashed self-pity in adversity will not be admired in our own age” [195]. His final misery is set out at merciless length: it “goes almost beyond the bounds of art” in the name of psychological realism.

Overall, as in *The Book of the Duchess*, it is the picture of happiness rather than of its loss which has the most enduring effect. *Troilus* III, in particular, contains “a lesson worth learning, how Chaucer can so triumphantly celebrate the flesh without becoming either delirious like Rossetti or pornographic like Ovid. The secret lies, I think, in its *concreteness*. ... With Chaucer we are rooted in the purifying complexities of the real world” [196]. Thus *Troilus* came to represent “the crowning achievement of **the old Provençal sentiment in its purity**”. The love of Troilus and Criseyde still remains extra-marital.

Meanwhile, Chaucer “and the graver of his predecessors” played an important part in reconciling the “conflict between Carbonek and Camelot”, bringing “the old romance of adultery to the very frontiers of the modern ... romance of marriage” [197].

## Chapter V: GOWER. THOMAS USK [198–231]

**V.1** JOHN GOWER (c. 1330-1408) is commonly seen as a fashionable poet in the shadow of Chaucer. His *Confessio Amantis*, indeed, at first sight only offers the usual mix of profit and delight of the type made popular by the *Roman de la Rose*, supplemented by a great many self-contained stories. Yet this work had some unique merits.

First, Gower made a largely successful attempt to achieve *unity* in the usual diversity. His love poem takes the form of a pseudo-religious “confession”. This provides his ideas on courtly love with a strong framework – an exposition of six of the seven deadly sins. Similar attempts to put courtly and Christian morality on a par had been possible since Andreas Capellanus (< I.3). It was easy to fit a great many stories into such a frame: there was an old homiletic tradition that would not only draw a moral from every single story, but also attach a story to every moral. The idea of a confession seems to have been Gower’s invention. The degree of unity thus achieved was fairly unique for a medieval writer; “the beauty of the architectonics is constant” [201].

Second, Gower is the “first considerable master of the **plain style** in [English] poetry”. At the same time he is almost

unique for his time in being “perfectly well bred”. “He can be dull: he can never be strident, affected, or ridiculous”. His plainness never tends toward vulgarity. He sometimes rises to great poetic heights, some of which may be not art but accident. There are indications, however, of conscious artistry in some of Gower’s seemingly simple phrases (such as his famous line *the beaute faye upon her face*). At times he shows mastery of other styles too. But “not all that is unconscious in art is therefore accidental”: “If seemingly plain statements rise to poetry, where the subject is imaginary, this shows at least that the writer ... was thinking not of himself but of his tale; and such vision is a poetical, as well as a moral, excellence” [203-4]”.

Part of Gower’s success as a story-teller is that he is better at evoking **action and movement** than people and things. “Ships and the sea, indeed, are always good in Gower” [207]. However, “story-telling is a function which brings out the defects as well as the qualities of the plain style” [208]. The tales may contain his best work, but they do not generally rise above the rest. The best tales seem to result from finding (Fr. *trouver*) rather than making (Gr. *poiein*). Gower’s talent was for bringing out such beauty as stories have of themselves rather than for improving stories which have none.

The most characteristic feature of his tales is not a strictly narrative quality: they are “**romantic**” in the 19th-century sense of the word. Gower “excels in strange adventure, in the remote and the mysterious” and “like all romantics ... builds a bridge between the conscious and the unconscious mind” [210].

“As a **didactic poet** in general Gower does not stand very high”, least of all when compared with Jean de Meun. All the instruction offered had already been conveyed more effectively

by others. “As a **moralist and religious poet**, on the other hand, [he] is often excellent” [211], not only because of a happy mix of stern, tender and satiric qualities but, more importantly, due to “a stern, and passionate, and highly imaginative impulse” [213] that far exceeded Chaucer’s. Hence such phrases as *The new schame of sennes old* (“the new shame of old sins”).

As a **psychologist of love** Gower usually writes in a realistic rather than an allegorical mode. Like Chaucer in *Troilus* (< IV.2), he presents “directly, in terms of tolerably realistic fiction”, what Guillaume de Lorris had taught him. Gower is “too good a moralist to have any delusions about himself ... We have the picture of a very ordinary kind of human heart ... It is only in his love that the Lover is transfigured” [215-217].

Nevertheless, as an **allegorist** he made yet another original contribution to medieval love poetry in addition to the device of a confession. He found a unique variant form of the inevitable palinode – inevitable because Gower is “not enough of a philosopher to achieve, like Dante, or even to attempt, like Alanus, any reconciliation between the claims of his two worlds” [218]. The story is simple. The poet meets Venus, who hands him over “to the priest Genius to confess himself as regards the code of love”. The poet’s life story is a monotonous series of failures. In the end, Venus points out that he is now too old for love. Gower has found “in his own experience ... how Life itself manages the necessary palinode; and then manages his in the same way. It is Old Age which (with Reason on its side) draws the sting of love, and his poem describes the process of this disappointing mercy” [218]. Both reader and writer are thus spared the awkwardness of a straightforward palinode, and the poem’s very monotony comes to make sense in retrospect.

This dénouement his handled exquisitely well. “We have here one of those rare passages in which medieval allegory rises to **myth** ... shot through with meanings which the author may never have been aware of”. The “death of love” comes to remind us of “death in many other senses ... but not of death as evil; rather of death as new life, with a clarity which this conception rarely attains in profane writings” [220-1]. Finally, a long and unsuccessful coda reminds us that Gower, though sometimes rising to great poetry, was not a great poet.

**V.2** THOMAS USK (†1388) deserves mention as a pioneer of *Kunstprosa* (“artistic prose”) even though he was not a particularly talented one. *The Testament of Love*, written in prison toward the end of his life and clearly inspired by Chaucer’s translation of Boethius, takes the form of a dialogue between the author and a female personification of Love. The object of love, Margarite, is now a woman, now a “pearl”, now (in addition) a certain type of “blisse”; also, she is “now Venus from the courts of Love, now Divine Love”. It isn’t that she is seemingly one thing while actually being another, nor does the book “seemingly” deal with earthly love but “actually” with the heavenly sort: “the very essence of the art [i.e. of allegory] is to talk about both” [225]. Gower’s literary level is immeasurably below that of Dante or even Alanus; yet he “falls into line with them in his attempt at integration: he is **not content with that water-tight division of human desires** which satisfied Andreas” [227]. And some of his ideas are of more than historical interest. On earthly love he has some fine things to say when pointing out the mystery of love between two human persons, or when dealing with the paradox of the knightly ideal (“Lyons in the felde and lambes in chambre”). His prose style is horribly affected, but “the really surprising thing about him

is the extent to which he remains vigorous even in his fetters” [229]. The *Testament*’s historical importance is that it shows “what lesser men than Chaucer and Gower were making of the love tradition in Chaucer’s and Gower’s day” [230-1].

## Chapter VI: ALLEGORY AS THE DOMINANT FORM [232–296]

**VI.1** During the 15th and well into the 16th century, allegory was the **dominant form** in literature. Dominant forms often have the following drawbacks: (a) stereotyped monotony, often “unnoticed by contemporaries but cruelly apparent to posterity”; (b) waste of literary energies when writers take to a form which does not suit their talents; (c) a danger of inspiring literary ambition in “those who ought not to have written at all”. – On the other hand “often, though not always, we can ... find that a tradition which seemed most strictly bound to the past is big with **the promise, or the threat of the future**” [233]. As a result, in any given field we may sometimes find that a great innovator lived earlier than some great traditionalist. Hence the literary historian is sometimes justified in taking liberties with the chronology of his account.

**VI.2** Chaucer and Gower were perfectly able to describe the inner life without allegory. This did not prevent allegory from being dominant. Yet some further cases of “**literal psycho-realism**” deserves notice.

(1) KING JAMES I of Scotland in his poem *The Kingis Quair* (1423) seems to have deliberately opted for literalness

rather than allegory. His picture of Love is more realistic and complete than Chaucer's; it does not focus on painful aspects; the essential freedom of true love is emphasized as much as the lover's servitude. Love is here less exalted and more cheerful – and “as love-longing becomes more cheerful it also becomes more moral.” Here “**the poetry of marriage at last emerges** from the traditional poetry of adultery; and the literal narrative of a contemporary wooing emerges from romance and allegory” [237].

(2) The earlier parts of THOMAS HOCCLEVE's *Regement of Princes* (1412) are not about love but describe the sleepless night of a man in pecuniary trouble. The **focus on a psychological state** as distinct from its objective circumstances is likely indebted to the tradition of allegorical love poetry. *Sleep's* great enemy is *Thought* personified. For the rest, much of the writing is literal. The result is both powerful and convincing.

**VI.3** JOHN LYDGATE (c. 1390-c. 1450) as a poet of love joined the allegorical tradition but never got beyond the young Chaucer. His **allegories** serve as a rather unsuitable framework for the stanzaic speeches and dialogues – which were what he was really good at; nor had he much talent for narration in couplets. Some passages, but not many, are “on the main line of development that runs from Chaucer to Spenser, and beyond him to Milton, to Pope, and to the Romantics” [239]. His conception of **love** is in the “modern” vein of *The Kingis Quair*. In his *Temple of Glas*, “the unhappily married, and those who have been forced into the cloister as children, complain piteously to Venus.” This is new and remarkable, since “in the original tradition ... the breach of vows ... was so far taken for granted that married people and clerks, or even nuns

... were the typical lovers” [241]. Vows have come to be in higher regard, and this makes for “increased pathos” [242]. Lydgate seems to see the answer to such complaints in the possibility of married love. But this remains uncertain; perhaps the author was himself uncertain.

**VI.4** A handful of anonymous love poems has acquired relative fame by having been ascribed to Chaucer (the “CHAUCERIANA”):

*The Cuckoo and the Nightingale*, a bird debate about youthful love in springtime, has “neither the merits nor the defects of the high style” [244].

*La Belle Dame sans Merci*, a translation from the French, is an “admirable exercise in poetical style”. It is not allegory; the main thing is a long dialogue between a lover and his mistress. The subtleties of the original, lost in translation, convey a premodern interweaving of “sentimental and intellectual games”. While the author may not have quite mastered the original, he has a perfect command of English and of “really stanzaic writing” so that “an essentially second-rate theme [is] redeemed by sheer good writing” [245-6].

*The Flower and the Leaf* presents a mild-tempered **fusion of courtly and homiletic allegory**. In a “courtly” variety of the afterlife, rewards and punishments are allotted “on a purely moral basis” while “the morality is that of modern life”. Love is rewarded, but so is virginity; idleness is punished, but so is adultery. Punishment consists in exposure to sun and rain. In the end, the Vices (the “Flower” company of Flora) are hospitably entertained by the Virtues (the “Leaf” company of Diana). Essentially, this is “a little psychomachia of Virtue and Vice. It is in fact a hybrid – a moral allegory wearing the dress of the Rose tradition”. The author presents herself as a woman,

and “if she does not look very deep, at least she looks with her own eyes: she allegorizes ... not as any convention, homiletic or erotic would have it appear”, and with “a great deal of good sense and humour” [249]. Likely enough she was less concerned with her own place in the literary tradition that provided some of her ideas than with the chance to make some sensible points in an agreeable manner.

*The Assembly of Ladies*, perhaps by the same author, has an allegorical scheme that is wholly dispensable. While the story is set at the allegorical court of Lady Loyalty, the author clearly hopes to achieve a novelistic type of realism on “the stir and bustle of an actual court”. It is as if a 15th-century Jane Austen has wasted “powers akin to genius” on a form that did not suit them [249-50].

## VI.5 Another few works of the Chauceriana type:

WILLIAM DUNBAR (c. 1500) was a versatile and highly accomplished professional poet whose works chiefly and successfully aimed at giving pleasure. *The Golden Targe* (1508) is a royal wedding song describing Reason’s defeat by Beauty. It might almost be called “radical allegory” if there had been more action to it. Dunbar adapted the allegorical form, like everything, “to purposes of **pure decoration** ... For this also is one of the things that happen to a dominant form” [252].

In *The Garland of Laurel* by JOHN SKELTON (1460-1529), allegory has been reduced to even less than mere decoration. It is “a blank wall on which tapestries of various kinds may be hung”.

WILLIAM NEVILL’s *Castell of Pleasure* (1518) “illustrates **the unhappy operation of a dominant form in making mediocrity vocal**” and provides the history of allegory with its nadir. Allegory seems to be used as the easiest way to suggest a

weighty subject. The hero is in search of a wife and his inner struggle concerns, not the “rarified and arduous sentiment” that was the stuff of earlier allegories of love, but the dilemma – “irredeemably commonplace and yet by no means universally valid” – whether to choose a rich or a pretty neighbouring heiress [254-5]. This vulgar realism mocks the forms invented for the very different realism of the *Roman de la Rose*. The personages are secretive without discernible reason beyond literary convention. An *omnia vanitas* passage at the end seems a merely mechanical echo from the traditional palinode. Commenting on the young suitor’s humility toward the lady, the author notes that the roles will surely be reversed once they get married; indeed the historically interesting thing about Nevill is that he goes farther than Lydgate, King James and Hawes in celebrating “a perfectly respectable love, ending in marriage” [255]. His “eye for natural appearances” suggests he might have been a better poet had he “lived in an age of descriptive poetry” [256].

*The Court of Love* seems, by content, to date from before the 15th century, when marriage was not yet taken seriously as a vehicle for love; but “its style and metre are not those of any known period in our literature” while “the language of the poem” suggests a much later period [256-7]. Most likely it is a 16th-century pastiche. In fact, the obvious “Renaissance” improvements in metrical and stylistic technique either left “the sentiment of erotic allegory” largely unchanged “in its structure or formula” or signals a decline in that sentiment – from “the inner voice, the brooding solemnity, the ardour and compassion” of Lydgate and Hawes to the “satisfied insensibility” of many Elizabethans [258].

**VI.6** Courtly allegory was not just dying or fossilizing during the 15th century; it was also producing something new. The “homiletic” or moral archetype of allegory (< II.4) had never been abandoned (< II.5) and saw a rich development at the same time as its “erotic” offspring; now it was employed as a weapon against courtly ideals. Themes and characters from erotic allegory were adapted partly for this purpose, and as both Virtue and Venus had to be set in action, larger scenes than a mere garden of battlefield became necessary. The obvious course was to use the current type of travel and adventure stories as a model, but to use settings less geographically specific than “Britain or France or even Alexander’s East”. The result was “a free allegorical treatment of life in general”, a **hybrid form of courtly and homiletic allegory**, liberating the mind once again (< II.4) “for free excursions into the merely imaginable: a **‘world of fine fabling’** becomes accessible and we are in sight of *The Faerie Queene*” [260].

A late case of “the homiletic type in its purity” was *The Assembly of Gods*, a “*psychomachia* with trimmings”, displaying “most of the typical vices of second-rate medieval literature” [260-1] but also featuring some lively scenes and characters. Less purely homiletic is *The Court of Sapience*, “a modest little encyclopedia in verse” set in the allegorical framework of a meeting with Sapientia (Wisdom). Her account of man’s Redemption is “good, arguably great poetry” [262] and, interestingly, “Our Lord is imagined as a knight who takes Mercy for His lady” [263].

“Courtly” and “homiletic” elements got definitely blended in two translations by LYDGATE from French works:

1. *The Pilgrimage of Man* was originally written in French as *Pelerinage de la vie humaine* (early 14th century) with purely homiletic intent. Its French author, Guillaume Deguile-

ville, an orthodox monastic, preferred joyless direct statement and exhortation to poetic suggestion. A “courtly” element is present only in some formal aspects. Aiming to give a counterblast to the profane allegory of the *Roman de la Rose*, the author shows he has learned from his adversary. The figure of Natura, so far from being revered, is one of the enemies, appearing at her first entry as “a mere bustling and scolding old woman”; as such she is very much alive. The author’s “respect for the spiritual order” appears to be “of that species ... which bases itself on contempt for the natural” [267]. As a story his allegory is a monstrosity, barring a few nice inventions. The pilgrimage does not begin until halfway through the (very long) poem. The aim is to get inside “Religion”, here denoting the monastic life; but when this is achieved, there follows the anticlimax of a bitter criticism of that life. “The poet is so fierce and gloomy a man that we should look in vain in his work for any presentation either of the beauty of holiness or of the pleasures of sin ... the only relief he allows us is his grim humour” [270]. His image of Evil is almost modern in its bleakness; Hell is “something almost omnipotent yet wholly mean” [271]. For all its unpleasantness, the poem served to bring **“more of our experience” into the realm of allegory**, helping to make it “a world in which we can go to seek adventures.” Thus Grace Dieu rescues the pilgrim from a rock in the sea, taking him on board her ship *Religion* that bears him to a Cistercian “castle”. “We are not confined endlessly to the garden” [271].

2. *Les échecs amoureux / Reason and Sensuality* presents a much more pleasant and skilful example of “fused allegory” [272]. “The lover, like the Christian, becomes a traveller, and Love’s garden, like the Celestial City, comes at the end of his story instead of the beginning” [274]. “Nature in all her bright-

ness” tells the poet to go and “see the world” and take the road of Reason, from east to west, rather than that of sense, from west to east (each ending where it begins) [272]. Mercury offers him the choice between Juno, Minerva and Venus, and like Paris the poet chooses Venus. She tells him to head for the garden of her sons Cupid and Deduit. In a forest he meets Diana. Her warnings were probably intended by the author to denote a recommendation of the conventual life; as poetry, they convey “the eternal appeal of virginity, retirement and contemplation”. However, the hero spurns her forest as “too contemplative”; he will follow Nature’s command and “see the world” [276]. “As this poet’s Diana is something more than chastity, so his hero is more than an abstract lover” [274]. **“The allegory ... is here beginning to forget its origins in the pulpit and the courts of Love,** and to feel its way towards the treatment of ‘general nature’” [277].

STEPHEN HAWES (1474-1523) in *The Pastime of Pleasure* attempted to combine “allegory on the large scale and chivalrous romance”. Under the pretence or supposal that he was reviving an old genre, he was actually a pioneer of Spenser’s art. He wrongly assumed that the purpose of Allegory “is to hide the subject”; but “he loves darkness and strangeness, ‘fatal fictions’, as he says, and ‘cloudy figures’ for their own sake; he is a dreamer and a mutterer, dazed by the unruly content of his own imagination ... Hence the prolixity and frequent *longueurs* of his narrative, but hence also the memorable pictures, whether homely or fantastic ... he describes nothing that he has not seen, whether with the inner or the outer eye” [280-281]. The poem is **an allegory “of life as a whole”** [282] with love as one theme among others. Love, to Hawes, is not so much a specific passion for a specific woman as, rather, a “cloudy ecstasy” [283] – even though its unambiguous aim appears to

be marriage. Another theme is death. The story continues in the first person after the hero's death, and this provides an opportunity for this poet to come into his own: "even from the outset – perhaps because his imagination is so earnest and his conscious skill so weak – the good passages have had this peculiar quality, that they seem to come from nowhere, to be a disembodied voice" [284]. After this, a succession of allegorical figures appears – Remembrance, Dame Fame, Time, Eternity – who might have made for a surprising and profound conclusion if Hawes had been a better poet. In his other allegory, *The Example of Virtue*, he seems to be almost unconsciously achieving a remarkable mix of earthly and heavenly love: in fact this "sort of unification or ambiguity" [286] appears to be already quite natural by this time, around 1500.

GAVIN DOUGLAS, a contemporary of Hawes but a much better poet, also displays "the widened scope and the increasing imaginative liberty" of allegorical poetry. The content of his *King Hart* "represents the fusion of erotic and homiletic allegory to perfection. The real theme is that of youth and Age" and thus "has an obvious affinity with the *Confessio Amantis*" [287] (< V.1). There are passages of "good radical allegory"; and some images are so well done that even without their *signifacio* they come near to offering "the concrete experience of a universal" [289]. *The Palice of Honour* is an allegory on Fame; but the thing to note is that the work as a whole represents "the furthest point yet reached in the **liberation of fantasy from its allegorical justification**" [290]. The chief effect of the "wonderland" he describes is the "immediate appeal to the imagination" rather than the expression of any particular allegorical meaning: "The success of the poem depends on his poet's privilege of being awake and asleep at the same time, drawing on the dreaming mind for his material without for one moment

losing his power of selection of the matter-of-fact realism which compels our acceptance” [290-291].

In JOHN ROLLAND’s *Court of Venus* (1575) the allegory mainly serves as a pretext for “the realistic presentation, in some degree satiric, of the contemporary legal world”. The other interest might be called romance, fantasy or extravaganza, suggesting the same “**widening and deepening of the allegorical terrain**” as found in Douglas – “a tendency, still faint, but recognizable, to shift the interest from the personifications to the whole world in which such people and such adventures are plausible” [294]. Thus between the various allegorical encounters there are travel episodes that “cease to be mere connecting links. One of them extends itself to some eighty lines, and these lines breathe a spirit quite unknown to the old allegory” [295].

## Chapter VII: *THE FAERIE QUEENE* [297–360]

**VII.1** EDMUND SPENSER (1552-1599), as author of *The Faerie Queene* (1596), was obviously heir to the medieval tradition of allegorical love poetry. Far more conspicuous than this continuity, though, is the **novelty** of his work as inspired by Boiardo and Ariosto, the Italian masters of the romantic epic. Yet while following his Italian models he gave them a strong allegorical twist, a treatment that was closely related to his main intentions and effects. In Spenser’s poem (Books III and IV), courtly love finally gives way to the romantic conception of marriage – the respectable form which allegorical love poets had been intimating for centuries and which was to prevail for centuries to

come. For this reason *The Faerie Queene* provides the present study with a suitable **conclusion** in spite of its Italianate and innovative character.

The **romantic epic of Italy**, an outgrowth of the old “matter of France” (centring on Charlemagne and Roland), “is one of the great trophies of the European genius” [298] and it remained widely known and appreciated for several centuries. The genre constituted “the noble viaduct on which the love of chivalry and ‘fine fabling’ travelled straight across from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century” [298]. Its origin lies in the 15th century, “when ‘literary’ poets ...[took] up the extravagances of popular romance with a smile ... half of amusement and half of affection” [299]. BOIARDO (*Orlando innamorato*, 1494) is unmatched for its “speed, the pell-mell of episodes, the crazy carnival jollity”, yet unlike Malory he always “keeps his head”, allowing no loose ends in the interminable cycle of interlocked story. ARIOSTO (*Orlando furioso*, 1516/1532) surpassed him “as a delineator of character”, in his “command of pathos”, and as “a master of irony and of comic construction” [302]. Both are past masters of invention. Ariosto in particular excels in the art of alternation and transition, making the endless variety of figures, situations and adventures not just tolerable but irresistible. High seriousness is not Ariosto’s line, but “if brilliance and harmony and sheer technical supremacy are enough ... to constitute greatness”, then he must rank among the greatest poets of all time. TASSO’s *Gerusalemme liberata* (1580) is “an attempt, and a successful one, to recall the romantic epic to true epic gravity and unity of action, while retaining as much as possible of its variety, its love interests, and its romanticism ... Its mixture of realism and fantasy is the happiest imaginable” [303]. It came too late to have much of an impact on Spenser.

**VII.2** *The Faerie Queene* is the English branch of an Italian enterprise. Spenser follows Boiardo and Ariosto as Virgil followed Homer, boasting his debt rather than concealing it [305]. He is comparatively unfamiliar with Chaucer or with Malory's compilation of Arthurian legend; his Arthur goes unattended by any Arthurian lore except in a few digressions [309-10]. In noting the differences between Spenser and the Italians, we need to beware of "recommend[ing] one excellence by depreciating another" [306]. "Identity of *genre* admits diversity of imaginative quality ... They are least like when each is at his greatest". There is on each side a surface of "interlocked stories of chivalrous adventure in a world of marvels"; but while the Italians specialize in fun, speed, variety and marvels as "tall stories", Spenser does in "nightmare" and in marvels which "quite apart from his explicit allegory, are always gravely imaginative" [308]; his line is "Wonder" rather than "wonders" [307]. Just **below the surface of "marvelous adventure"** lies, on the Italian side, the world of daily life, and further down yet there are "faint yet quite decipherable traces of the original legend – the theme of the *chansons de geste* ... used to supply gravity when gravity is desired" [309]. Scratching the Spenserian surface, we find first **the world of popular imagination or mythology** (his audience immediately recognized the "Redcrosse Knight" as St. George), and then "**the primitive or instinctive mind, with all its terrors and ecstasies**" [312]. Spenser excels in expressing "feelings else blind and inarticulate" partly because of "his humble fidelity to the popular symbols which he found ready made to his hand", but even more because of "his profound sympathy with that which makes the symbols, with the fundamental tendencies of human imagination as such ... he is endlessly preoccupied with such ultimate antitheses as Light and Darkness or Life and Death ...

Night is hardly even mentioned by Spenser without aversion. ... And, answering to this, in his descriptions of morning we have a never failing rapture” [312-13]. What prevents him from any radical dualism is an awareness, expressed by delicate allegories, that “though the conflict seems ultimate yet one of the opposites really contains, and is not contained by, the other. Truth and falsehood are opposed; but truth is the norm not of truth only but of falsehood too”. Also, “his evils are all dead or dying things” while “forces of life and health and fecundity” are set against them [315]. To appreciate Spenser’s fundamental **joy of living**, the modern reader needs to acquire some of “the humility and seriousness of his poetry ... The whole shining company of Spenser’s vital shapes make up such a picture of ‘life’s golden tree’ that it is difficult not to fancy that our bodily, no less than our mental, health is refreshed by reading him” [316].

Spenser’s language is not particularly “poetical”, which would indeed be inconceivable in his literary circumstances – a “clownish period” in which “English poetry had reached its stylistic nadir” [318-29]. “His excessive alliteration is a disease of the period” [319]. It is not in this sense that he became a “**poets’ poet**” (as he has been called), but in the sense that many poets have loved to read him until the late 19th century. His greatness lies in his fusion of “renaissance” and “middle ages”, or “Italy” and “England” – in the fact that he made the Italian epic into a vehicle of medieval allegory.

**VII.3** The political allegory in *F.Q.* is here disregarded; this study is concerned with “the moral or philosophical allegory” [321]. This aspect has invited accusations of disingenuousness or at least clumsiness. Spenser is suspected of (*a*) being more Catholic than he would have liked to admit as a Protestant, and

(b) a discrepancy between “actual sensuality and theoretical austerity”. This might be answered as follows.

(a) Partly for historical reasons, allegorical representations as such have a “Catholic” air about them. Yet “the truth is not that allegory is Catholic, but that Catholicism is allegorical” [322]. “In the world of matter, Catholics and Protestants disagree as to the kind and degree of incarnation or embodiment which we can safely try to give to the spiritual; but in the world of imagination, where allegory exists, unlimited embodiment is equally approved by both.” No “embodiment” of one idea in another has ever been a bone of contention; and in fact no allegorist as such has ever proposed anything beyond that. “Only a bungler, like Deguileville, would introduce a monastery into his poem if he were really writing about monasticism” (< VI.1). When Spenser uses images like a convent or a nun he does so because of their contrast with the Protestant reality denoted.

(b) It is an error to think that he describes the “Bower of Bliss” (in Book II, on Temperance) with suppressed sensuality and sympathy and makes it too much like the Garden of Adonis. Spenser’s ruling contrast is, unmistakably, between the “natural” (genuine, naïve) and the “artificial” (spurious, sophisticated). Book VI (iv-v) features what was later called the “Noble Savage”; and “true courtesy dwells among shepherds who alone have never seen the Blatant Beast” [329]. “Nature” as praised by Spenser is not “the brutal, the unimproved, the inchoate” as imagined by Hobbes; instead, he “most commonly understands Nature as Aristotle did – the ‘nature’ of anything to be its unimpeded growth from within to perfection, neither checked by accident nor sophisticated by art”. “The good Venus” and “the bad Venus” are opposed as intense, purifying passion is opposed to cold pleasure: on this count Spenser is

“at the opposite pole from the Scholastic philosophers” [330] (< I.1). “The Bower of Bliss is not a picture of lawless, that is, unwedded, love, as opposed to lawful love. It is a picture, one of the most powerful ever painted, of the whole sexual nature in disease” [332]. What it chiefly depicts is voyeurism. Yet “Acrasia ... does not represent sexual vice in particular, but vicious pleasure in general” [333]. “The Bower is connected with sex at all only through the medium of Pleasure” [339].

*The Faerie Queene* is **unfinished**: almost half of the originally planned twelve Books of twelve Cantos each, with a few dozen stanzas to each Canto, was never written or has not survived. The stanza (eight iambic pentameters concluded by a hexameter; rhyme scheme ababbcbcc) was invented by Spenser and is since known as the “Spenserian stanza”. Each Book deals with one Virtue and features a personification of that virtue as its hero. Each Book contains (1) an allegorical centre of one or two Cantos giving an explicit and strictly allegorical statement of the theme; (2) “romance of types”: a sequence of vaguely allegorical adventures illustrating or reflecting the Book’s theme, with characters who are types rather than personifications; (3) episodes of more or less runaway non-allegorical fantasy. The history of Arthur and Gloriana was to be the connecting theme running through the whole work. Its climax was perhaps scheduled for a final Book standing to the whole poem as each allegorical centre stands to its Book. The poem’s “centre, the seat of its highest life, is missing” [337]. If Spenser wrote more than has survived, it may have perished in 1598 when Spenser, as an English government official in Ireland, had to flee from Irish rebels who set his castle on fire. Six finished Books were published in Spenser’s lifetime, and two “Cantos of Mutabilitie” followed posthumously. In view of this

incomplete condition, readers must heed the fact “Spenser’s whole method is such that we have a very dim perception of his characters until we meet them or their archetypes at the great allegorical centres of each book”. Any meaning which isn’t fairly obvious had therefore better be disregarded than approached as material for persevering guesswork. Arthur and Gloriana themselves, though possibly the chief “meaning”-bearers, resist full interpretation. Possibly, Gloriana was scheduled to be “Platonized into something very like the Form of the Good, or even the glory of God” [336].

Book I: **Holiness** (*Knight of the Red Crosse*, also “St. George”, *F.Q.* I.x.61). Holiness restores the soul to her lost paradisaical nature. A leading role is played by Truth (Una) opposing “forces of illusion and deception such as Archimago and Duessa ... Intellectual error, however, is inextricably mixed with moral instability” [334]. Among the secondary adventures are those of Satyrane, a type of the “child of nature”.

Book II: **Temperance** (*Sir Guyon*). As the dominant contrast in Book I was between Light and Darkness, here it is between Life and Death, or Health and Sickness. The core episode is “the description, and siege, of the House of Alma – the human soul ruling the healthy body”. False friends of Sir Guyon are Acrasia (with her Bower of Bliss, II.xii) and Mammon – personifications of natural but perverted desires.

Book III: **Chastity** (*Britomartis*) and IV, **Friendship** (*Cambel and Telamond*). These two Books together display the final stage in the development of courtly love into married love. Britomart’s chastity “turns out to mean not virginity but virtuous love: and friends are found to be merely ‘another sort of lovers’ in the Temple of Venus.” At the beginning of IV.ix, “Spenser explicitly classifies ‘three kinds of love’” recogniza-

ble as Storge, Eros and Philia [338-9]. The Garden of Adonis (III.vi) finds its real contrast not in the Bower of Bliss but in Malecasta's *Castle Ioyeous* (III.i), a worldly place full of temptations to lechery and adultery, and in the House of Busirane (III.xi-xii), representing the misery that results from it. Malecasta and Busirane between them represent courtly love, the tradition which here, after centuries of idealizing and criticizing treatment, is finally identified as an enemy and chased away. Britomart is "the triumphant union of romantic passion with Christian monogamy" [345]. "The only thing Spenser does not know is that Britomart is the daughter of Busirane – that his ideal of married love grew out of courtly love" [341]. Amoret (III.vi) personifies love at its purest, carefully reared by Venus and some personified virtues. At the moment of Scudamour's "pluck[ing] Amoret from her place among the modest virtues", he experiences a surge of old courtly hesitations – a "sense of 'Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear'" – which "is a beautiful gift made by the humilities of medieval love poetry to Spenser at the very moment of his victory over the medieval tradition" [343-4].

Many plausible interpretations can be given of the figures and intrigues connected with Amoret. Actually, the amount of meaning is too great for a comprehensive and definitive interpretation in prose:

The more concrete and vital the poetry is, the more hopelessly complicated it will become in analysis: but the imagination receives it as a simple – in both senses of the word. Oddly as it may sound, I conceive that it is the chief duty of the interpreter to begin analyses and to leave them unfinished. ... Their only use is to awaken, first of all, the reader's conscious knowledge of life and books in so far as it is relevant, and then to

stir those less conscious elements in him which alone can fully respond to the poem. [345]

Book V: **Justice** (*Artegall*). This is the least successful and least attractive Book. The disappointment is partly explained by the difference between its conceptions of justice and ours. To be sure, *Artegall* is clearly not intended to be perfect. At one point it is suggested that Justice needs to be restrained by “Equity or ‘clemence’” (Mercy). The Canto on *Mercillo* (V.ix) which could have developed this point is wasted on “flattery and historical allegory” [349]. It is the only case of Spenser bungling what should have been the “core” Canto and thus paralyzing its whole Book.

Book VI: **Courtesy** (*Sir Calidore*). In Spenser, this virtue has “very little connexion with court”. The essential thing is naturalness. Courtesy is “the poetry of conduct”, “a combination of humility and charity, in so far as these are social, not theological, virtues”, and “in its perfect form, comes by nature” [350]. The Book’s centre is a long pastoral episode. The Blatant Beast has “ravaged all the world except the shepherds” [350]. There is comparatively little allegory in this Book, which may have been intentional.

The fragment commonly known as Book VII, on the legend of **Constancy**, consists of only two Cantos which appear to be the core cantos. Mutability seeks recognition as sovereign of the universe and pleads her case. The reply is given by “great dame *Nature*” (VII.vii.5 and 13), a figure that comes straight from the tradition of Claudian (< II.3), Bernardus and Alanus (< II.6), and Jean de Meun (< III.5); Spenser himself refers to Chaucer and Alanus (VII.vii.9). “The practice of using mythological forms to hint theological truths was well established and lasted as late as ... [Milton’s] *Comus* ... poetry that is religious without being devotional” [355-6]. Nature’s brief reply

to Mutability in the final two stanzas is “a magnificent instance of Spenser’s last-moment withdrawal from dualism”: “Change is but the mode in which Permanence expresses itself ... Reality (like Adonis) ‘is eterne in mutabilitie’ (*F.Q.* III.vi.47)” [356]. – In these cantos “all the powers of the poet are more happily united than ever before ... Spenser seems to have soared above all the usual infirmities of his style” [357].

*The Faerie Queene* “is an image of the *natura naturans*, not of the *natura naturata*. The things we read about in it are not like life, but the experience of reading it is like living ... a sensation akin to that which Hegelians are said to get from Hegel – a feeling that we have before us not so much an image as a sublime instance of the universal process ... We feel that his poetry has really tapped sources not easily accessible to discursive thought. He makes imaginable inner realities so vast and simple that they ordinarily escape us as the largely printed names of continents escape us on the map – too big for our notice, too visible for sight. Milton has well selected wisdom as his peculiar excellence – wisdom of that kind which rarely penetrates into literature because it exists most often in inarticulate people. It is this that has kept children and poets true to him for three centuries, while the intellectuals (on whom the office of criticism naturally devolves) have been baffled even to irritation by a spell which they could not explain. To our own troubled and inquiring age this wisdom will perhaps show its most welcome aspect in the complete integration, the harmony, of Spenser’s mind. ... To read him is to grow in mental health” [358-9].

In the history of literature, Spenser was “the great mediator between the Middle Ages and the modern poets, the man who saved us from the catastrophe of too thorough a renaissance. ...

What the romantics learned from him was something different from allegory; but perhaps he could not have taught it unless he had been an allegorist. In the history of sentiment he is the greatest among the founders of that romantic conception of marriage which is the basis of all our love literature from Shakespeare to Meredith ... the peculiar flower of a peculiar civilization, important whether for good or ill and well worth our understanding” [360].

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