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C. S. Lewis: *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* [\[PDF\]](#)

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C. S. Lewis's first important professional work was his 1936 book, *The Allegory of Love*. Published by Oxford University Press, it secured Lewis's standing in his profession and soon became enormously influential in setting the terms of subsequent scholarly discussion about the nature of Courtly Love and the role allegory played in its codification and depiction. In it Lewis sketches a literary history about how developing attitudes about gender relations intersected with an indirect mode of expression in which—as all definitions of allegory suggest—one thing is made to stand for another. Though *The Allegory of Love* has been the target of much adverse criticism and subsequent critics have done much to disprove some of its premises, it still offers its reader insightful and valuable analyses of specific medieval poems. It still adequately defends its thesis that the today lesser known works of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, like the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius, played an essential role in constructing Western European literary attitudes about love—though those works ostensibly have little to do with that emotion.

The weaknesses of Lewis's book are real. Briefly, he assumes that the so-called "Courtly Love", where a knight offers complete, humble service to his Lady, was a social as well as a literary phenomenon. Though he mentions it only in passing (on pp. 12-14 of the Oxford University Press edition)—a fact his critics miss—he suggests that "real life" generated the literature of Courtly Love: castles had few ladies, a lord's wife married for purely dynastic reasons, and there always were many unmarried young knights about—thus occasioning a disparity of social standing between the lady and the knight

and channeling sexual emotions in an adulterous direction. There is little evidence that such circumstances ever gave rise to relationships in real life that generated love relationships exhibiting the characteristics of Courtly Love. Moreover, Lewis's insistence on the adulterous nature of Courtly Love is based on only a small sampling of texts. Plenty of medieval romances depict love between unmarried people or people married to each other. Lancelot and Guenevere, Tristan and Isolde are the exceptions rather than the rule.

That said, Lewis's book is still compelling, not only because of its literary insights but also because it gives us much access into Lewis's attitudes about the Middle Ages—ones that energized his own imaginative works. He values the past on its own terms, seeing medieval attitudes in later writers from the Early Modern Period and envisioning an orderly, hierarchically structured medieval ideology. There is good evidence of at least one of these attitudes in a largely overlooked sentence in the Preface to *The Allegory of Love*: “Above all the friend to whom I have dedicated the book [Owen Barfield] has taught me not to patronize the past, and has trained me to see the present as itself a period” (p. ii).

Even today, when postmodern critical theory has rightly instructed us in how the ideology of an age constructs its literature, we have something to learn from this statement. We often prioritize the concerns and critical approaches mediated to us by our own ideology as somehow true, while we criticize those of the past. To take a past age like the medieval period on its own terms necessitates a critical humility by which we learn that our own terms are open to analysis as well.

At the outset of *The Allegory of Love* Lewis presents his famous definition of Courtly Love. After mentioning the love poetry of the Provençal troubadours, he observes, “The sentiment, of course, is love, but love of a highly specialized sort, whose characteristics may be enumerated as Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love” (p. 2). “Humility” refers to the self-effacing service a knight offers his Lady. “Courtesy” was a more complex term for the Middle Ages than it is today, where it primarily means good manners.

To be courteous, then, one had the manners of the court, where refinements not offered by peasant society were the norm. The courtesy of Courtly Love, in other words, involved societal distinctions as well as good manners. We have already mentioned the problematic “Adultery”. Courtly Love, maintains Lewis, involved the knight offering a quasi-religious worship to his Lady, and texts can use religious language or religious parody to describe the dynamics of a Courtly Love relationship. Here Lewis bases his argument primarily on one text, Chrétien’s *Lancelot, or The Knight of the Cart*, where the hero genuflects before entering Guenevere’s bed; passages like this are rarer than Lewis admits.

For Lewis this kind of love had no historical or literary precedent. As he writes, “Compared with this revolution the Renaissance is a mere ripple on the surface of literature” (p. 4). And later he bolsters this assertion by claiming, “Real changes in human sentiment are very rare—there are perhaps three or four on record—but I believe that they occur, and that this is one of them” (p. 11). The “Renaissance” of the sixteenth century is here minimized and a different “revolution”, one that took place in the Middle Ages, is substituted for it. For Lewis, the medieval trumps the Renaissance. Whether or not this insight is valid is beside the point. The relative importance of the sixteenth-century Renaissance and the twelfth-century shift in gender ideology depends on how one defines the two and what criteria one uses to measure influence.

Lewis’s main literary evidence for this revolutionary change in gender relations comes from the twelfth-century French poet, Chrétien de Troyes. Lewis describes how, in his earliest romance, *Erec and Enide*, which most scholars date to the late 1160s or early 1170s, the hero, Erec, barter for the hand in marriage of Enide with her father, without consulting her and while she looks on in silence. But in the later *Lancelot, or The Knight of the Cart* (late 1170s), Guenevere is very much in control of the relationship, which has developed Lewis’s four characteristics of Courtly Love, all of which were absent in the earlier romance.

More important is the nascent role Lewis assigns in Chrétien’s

Lancelot to allegory. As Lewis writes,

[Chrétien] was one of the first explorers of the human heart, and is therefore rightly to be numbered among the fathers of the novel of sentiment. But these psychological passages have usually one characteristic which throws special light on the subject of the book. Chrétien can hardly turn to the inner world without, at the same time, turning to allegory. . . . When Lancelot [for instance] hesitates before mounting the cart, Chrétien represents his indecision as a debate between *Reason* which forbids, and *Love* which urges him on. (pp. 29-30)

The episode to which Lewis is alluding is as follows: On a quest to rescue Guenevere, who has been kidnapped, Lancelot, in armor but without a horse, is told by a dwarf driving a cart that if he climbs into the cart this would further him on his quest, though he realizes that it is shameful for a knight to ride in a cart. Lancelot hesitates two steps and gets in. After this he rescues Guenevere, who refuses to give him fair welcome because the hesitation is an offense against Courtly Love. Lewis's point is that Chrétien represents the moment of indecision as an allegorical debate between two personifications of abstractions—Reason, who deems the ride in the cart shameful, and Love, who wins but only after the faulted hesitation. Lewis sees this inner debate and others like them in the romances of Chrétien as significant for two reasons. They mark the beginnings of the long Western European tradition of representing characters' psychology, and they herald a fruitful merger of a subject and a genre hitherto kept separate—love and allegory.

Before analyzing *The Romance of the Rose*, Chaucer, Gower, Thomas Usk, and Spenser in terms of this merger, Lewis takes some steps backwards to chart the beginnings in late antiquity of the genre of personification allegory. For Lewis the late Latin poet Statius, who wrote an epic about the mythological figure Theseus, the *Thebiad*, is a seminal writer. In Statius, the Olympian gods lose the personalities given them in earlier

epics like those of Homer and Virgil and tend towards personifications of abstract qualities. Mars, for instance, does not favor one side or another in war, for he just stirs up battle in general; similarly Bacchus moves from being a character to representing drunkenness in general. But at the same time, Statius's personifications begin to accrue personality. As Lewis comments, speaking about Statius's personifications of Piety and Nature, ". . . one can almost see the faded gods of mythology being shouldered aside between those potent abstractions Pietas and Natura. . ." (p. 54).

The tendency to depersonalize the old Olympian deities and personalize abstractions is traceable in other writers and in late Roman culture in general. But the seminal text that bequeathed personification allegory to the subsequent Middle Ages is Prudentius's *Psychomachia* ("Battle for the Soul"). Prudentius was a Spaniard and a contemporary of St. Augustine. Lewis does not ascribe much literary worth to his poem, only profound influence. Prudentius, a Christian, depicts the moral struggles that burden one's inner life as a battle between the virtues and the vices, who are presented as combatants in pairs of opposites. Thus Patience, like all the combatants in full armor, endures the blows of Anger until frustrated Anger kills herself in a fit of self-destructive rage. Both act wholly in accord with the abstract qualities they represent. Depending on an individual's reaction, this might appear either clever or embarrassingly silly, but it and the other conflicts depicted in Prudentius's poem are elaborate attempts to represent human psychology by personification allegory. The *Psychomachia* paves the way for not only Lancelot's inner debate about entering the cart, but also for a whole medieval tradition of representing the workings of the human mind by allegorizing them.

The most consistent of such medieval allegories and the most popular, judging by the large number of surviving manuscripts, is the composite poem begun by Guillaume de Lorris in the early thirteenth century and finished by Jean de Meun a generation or so later, *The Romance of the Rose*. Lewis's explanation of how Guillaume's portion works is masterful—one of those critical analyses that no one had

developed before but, once done, seem so obvious that they dominate subsequent debate. Lewis's thesis is that the personifications that the first-person narrator encounters in the poem represent "real life" events of a mostly psychological nature.

The Romance of the Rose is a dream vision, a genre that becomes enormously popular in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. In it the young narrator falls asleep and wakes into a dream in a lovely springtime landscape. The birds sing and the flowers bloom, and in the distance he sees a walled garden. He approaches and discerns that the wall's outside has various allegorical personifications depicted on it—Old Age, Poverty, Hypocrisy, and the like. It is the Garden of Love, and these figures facing outwards are the qualities that disqualify one from being a lover. The Dreamer presents himself at the garden's gate, is admitted by Idleness, and joins a dance presided over by the God of Love involving dancers like Youth and Beauty. The garden's inhabitants are, of course, the qualities one requires to be a lover. But Lewis insists we do more than notice the obvious. For him an unstated story with a discernible plot dictates Guillaume's marshalling of these personifications. The entry into the garden is, in the unstated "real" story, the arrival of a young man at court. The dance is his tutelage in the customs and courtesies of court life. When he wanders away from the dance and encounters a lovely well in which he sees his own reflection and at the bottom of which are two crystal stones, this is an allegory of his first gazing in his Lady's eyes. He spots a lovely rosebud in a protected rose bed, and immediately the God of Love, who has been stalking him, impales him with five arrows. I will not elaborate the allegorical connections in detail, but all this sequence comprises an allegory of falling in love.

But for Lewis the Lady's allegorized psychology is more interesting than the lover's. As he goes to pluck the rose, he is met in succession by characters named Fair Welcome and Danger (the last term meaning "Stand-offishness"). There are other personifications that get drawn into the mix, but their presence amounts to an elaboration of the first two and the lover's reactions to them. The Lady is indecisive about whether

to welcome the young man as her lover, and the personifications represent the shifts in her psychological moods. Lewis does a good job of sketching a “real” yet hidden series of events that could give rise to the allegorical story. What Lewis insists on is that there is a real story, with characters motivated not so much by events but by feelings and inner motives. Allegory becomes a very viable way of representing the psychology of love to an age that had not invented the psychological novel, nor produced a Henry James. Allegory provided medieval poets interested in love with a means of developing stories where what happens in the lovers’ minds is more important than what happens in the “real” world around them. Jousts and battles and things like that can still have a role to play in the allegories of love, but one’s feelings and conflicted motives comprise their true subject.

Having established the allegorical treatment of Courtly Love as a long-standing tradition in Western Europe, Lewis turns to his book’s main topic—how that tradition plays itself out in England in the roughly two hundred years between the ends of the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries. Chaucer for Lewis stands at the forefront of the English tradition of love allegory. Though he translated *The Romance of the Rose*, or at least parts of it, Chaucer never attempted to write a full-scale allegory. Instead, he resorts to only occasional allegorizing; where he most appropriates the tradition of *The Romance of the Rose* is by employing the “Springtime Garden of Love” setting for *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, and the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*. Lewis analyzes Chaucer’s debt to the tradition of Courtly Love allegory in the first two of these poems. He adopts the springtime setting with great skill, but the allegory becomes a decorative motif rather than the central mechanism of the plot.

It is in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, however, that we find the psychology of Courtly Love that had been developed so sensitively by the allegory of *The Romance of the Rose*, but it surfaces here as a “real life” story, with Troilus as the lover smitten by Cupid and Criseyde as the Lady who oscillates

between fair welcome and stand-offishness. For Lewis, Chaucer thus makes the breakthrough that enabled later writers to develop complex and multi-dimensional treatments of love, and the allegorical method has taught him how to do so. Lewis substantiates this point with sensitive analyses of Chaucer's treatment of Criseyde, Troilus, and their go-between, Pandarus.

When Lewis turns to the work of John Gower, Chaucer's contemporary and friend, he faces a different task than he did when commenting on the more famous poet. Lewis had to convince his readers that Chaucer's work leading to his great *Canterbury Tales* is worthy of attention by itself, not just in preparation for the famous masterpiece. But for Gower, Lewis needs to convince the reader that he is worthy to read at all. Gower has long been eclipsed by Chaucer, and relatively few, even today, read him. So Lewis must 'convert' us, as it were, show us that Gower has his merits. In doing so, Lewis gives us the proper tools for appreciating Gower. Gower's *Confessio Amantis* ("Confession of a Lover," a Latin title for an English poem) has, as Lewis claims, virtues, but we must learn where to look for them. There is little of the high rhetoric and low tavern speech we admire in Chaucer; instead there is a pleasant middle ground, something Lewis names "plain style" (p. 201). Though the plain style can be dull at times, it sometimes has a dignity and calm that are truly poetic. As Lewis comments, "It thus has a sweetness and freshness which we do not find in the 'polite' style at later periods" (p. 201). It is a style that sometimes sounds like song: "When something songful is to be said, Gower finds himself singing" (p. 202). Gower, moreover, gives his reader little in the way of visual detail, but Lewis is quick to tell us what he gives us instead—motion and action: "Gower does not dwell on shapes and colours; but this does not mean that he keeps his eyes shut. What he sees is movement, not groups and scenes, but actions and events" (p. 206).

Thus armed for a sympathetic reading of Gower, we are instructed by Lewis to take the poem's allegorical framework seriously. The *Confessio Amantis*, like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, is a long collection of tales set in a framework that

explains the circumstances of their telling. As everyone knows, Chaucer sends a group of characters on a pilgrimage to Canterbury telling each other tales along the way. This framework is realistic, but Gower's is purely allegorical, drawing on the conventions of *The Romance of the Rose*. In a typical springtime setting, Venus appears to the poem's narrator, a would-be lover, and commands him to confess his sins against love to her priest, the personification Genius, whom Gower appropriates from *The Romance of the Rose*. The sins against love are patterned after the Seven Deadly Sins, with priest and confessor sharing tales that illustrate them as the confession proceeds. Gower has often been read for the tales alone, especially those his poem shares with *The Canterbury Tales*, but Lewis argues that the work's virtue lies in its allegorical framework instead, suggesting that its end, where the now aged lover must renounce love, is poetry of the highest order.

Even less read than Gower is Thomas Usk, whose prose *Testament of Love* combined elements of *The Romance of the Rose* with Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, which Usk knew from Chaucer's translation. Lewis does not try to convert us to Usk with the enthusiasm he showed for Gower; he is even more aware of Usk's limitations than of Gower's. But he admires Usk's originality in using prose rather than poetry as his medium, suggesting that Usk is a pioneer in the development of artistic prose in the English language.

The literature of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries is the subject of Lewis's next-to-last chapter. He maintains that the allegorical love poem becomes the dominant form, similar to the novel in nineteenth-century literature. As such it attracts many mediocre authors as well as a few good ones. Lewis thus spends much of the chapter simply introducing minor works and authors. He is particularly good at this task, one he would later discharge admirably in the volume he contributed to the Oxford History of English Literature, *English Literature of the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*. He looks at Lydgate, Hawes, Dunbar, *The King's Quair*, *The Flower and the Leaf*, *The Assembly of the Ladies* (these last two likely by women authors), and other authors

and anonymous works where allegory and its attendants like the dream vision and the springtime garden are in evidence. Allegory is most often only a decorative touch, and moral allegory, like that in the tradition of Prudentius's *Psychomachia*, begins to play a more important role than it had in the previous century. Lewis guides the reader through the unfamiliar territory with comments of praise and blame—but mostly praise, for he is able to point out virtues even for pieces, like Deguivilles' *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man* and Neville's *Castle of Pleasure*, that mostly fail.

Lewis concludes *The Allegory of Love* with an analysis of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, written in the 1580s. He demonstrates that Spenser successfully merges the medieval love allegory with the fifteenth-century Italian epic associated with writers like Boiardo and Ariosto, characterized by intricate interlaced plots and fast-paced action. More importantly, Spenser grafts the conventions of medieval Courtly Love, which as we have seen he labels essentially adulterous, onto chaste married love instead. Lewis makes it clear that this is no mean accomplishment.

Though Lewis sometimes overplays his hand, *The Allegory of Love* is a major work of literary history. For long it became the dominant book about both Courtly Love and allegory, cited countless times by subsequent scholars—often in disagreement but more often in agreement. The book is, moreover, very well written—sprightly, engaging, erudite, invitational. We leave it not only having learned much but also having spent time with a critic who loves books and is unashamed to share his enthusiasms with us.

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