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978-1-107-65943-8 - The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition

C. S. Lewis

Excerpt

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I

Courtly Love



‘When in the world I lived I was the world’s commander.’

SHAKESPEARE.

I

The allegorical love poetry of the Middle Ages is apt to repel the modern reader both by its form and by its matter. The form, which is that of a struggle between personified abstractions, can hardly be expected to appeal to an age which holds that ‘art means what it says’ or even that art is meaningless – for it is essential to this form that the literal narrative and the *significacio* should be separable. As for the matter, what have we to do with these medieval lovers – ‘servants’ or ‘prisoners’ they called themselves – who seem to be always weeping and always on their knees before ladies of inflexible cruelty? The popular erotic literature of our own day tends rather to sheikhs and ‘Salvage Men’ and marriage by capture, while that which is in favour with our intellectuals recommends either frank animalism or the free companionship of the sexes. In every way, if we have not outgrown, we have at least grown away from, the *Romance of the Rose*. The study of this whole tradition may seem, at first sight, to be but one more example of that itch for ‘revival’, that refusal to leave any corpse ungalvanized, which is among the more distressing accidents of scholarship. But such a view would be superficial.

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Humanity does not pass through phases as a train passes through stations: being alive, it has the privilege of always moving yet never leaving anything behind. Whatever we have been, in some sort we are still. Neither the form nor the sentiment of this old poetry has passed away without leaving indelible traces on our minds. We shall understand our present, and perhaps even our future, the better if we can succeed, by an effort of the historical imagination, in reconstructing that long-lost state of mind for which the allegorical love poem was a natural mode of expression. But we shall not be able to do so unless we begin by carrying our attention back to a period long before that poetry was born. In this and the following chapter, I shall trace in turn the rise both of the sentiment called 'Courtly Love' and of the allegorical method. The discussion will seem, no doubt, to carry us far from our main subject: but it cannot be avoided.

Every one has heard of courtly love, and every one knows that it appears quite suddenly at the end of the eleventh century in Languedoc. The characteristics of the Troubadour poetry have been repeatedly described.¹ With the form, which is lyrical, and the style, which is sophisticated and often 'aureate' or deliberately enigmatic, we need not concern ourselves. 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. The lover is always abject. Obedience to his lady's lightest wish,

¹ See Fauriel, *Histoire de la Poésie provençale*, 1846; E. Gorra, *Origini etc. della Poesia Amorosa di Provenza (Rendiconti del Istituto Lombardo, &c.* 11. xliii. 14, xlv. 3), 1910-12; Jeanroy, *La Poésie lyrique des Troubadours*, 1934.

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however whimsical, and silent acquiescence in her rebukes, however unjust, are the only virtues he dares to claim. There is a service of love closely modelled on the service which a feudal vassal owes to his lord. The lover is the lady's 'man'. He addresses her as *midons*, which etymologically represents not 'my lady' but 'my lord'.² The whole attitude has been rightly described as 'a feudalisation of love'.³ This solemn amatory ritual is felt to be part and parcel of the courtly life. It is possible only to those who are, in the old sense of the word, polite. It thus becomes, from one point of view the flower, from another the seed, of all those noble usages which distinguish the gentle from the vilein: only the courteous can love, but it is love that makes them courteous. Yet this love, though neither playful nor licentious in its expression, is always what the nineteenth century called 'dishonourable' love. The poet normally addresses another man's wife, and the situation is so carelessly accepted that he seldom concerns himself much with her husband: his real enemy is the rival.⁴ But if he is ethically careless, he is no light-hearted gallant: his love is represented as a despairing and tragical emotion – or almost despairing, for he is saved from complete wanhope by his faith in the God of Love who never betrays his faithful worshippers and who can subjugate the cruellest beauties.⁵

The characteristics of this sentiment, and its systematic coherence throughout the love poetry of the Troubadours as a whole, are so striking that they easily lead to a fatal

² Jeanroy, *op. cit.*, tom. i, p. 91 n.

³ Wechssler, *Das Kulturproblem des Minnesangs*, 1909, Bd. I, p. 177.

⁴ Jeanroy, *op. cit.*, tom. ii, pp. 109–13. ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

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misunderstanding. We are tempted to treat 'courtly love' as a mere episode in literary history – an episode that we have finished with as we have finished with the peculiarities of Skaldic verse or Euphuistic prose. In fact, however, an unmistakable continuity connects the Provençal love song with the love poetry of the later Middle Ages, and thence, through Petrarch and many others, with that of the present day. If the thing at first escapes our notice, this is because we are so familiar with the erotic tradition of modern Europe that we mistake it for something natural and universal and therefore do not inquire into its origins. It seems to us natural that love should be the commonest theme of serious imaginative literature: but a glance at classical antiquity or at the Dark Ages at once shows us that what we took for 'nature' is really a special state of affairs, which will probably have an end, and which certainly had a beginning in eleventh-century Provence. It seems – or it seemed to us till lately – a natural thing that love (under certain conditions) should be regarded as a noble and ennobling passion: it is only if we imagine ourselves trying to explain this doctrine to Aristotle, Virgil, St. Paul, or the author of *Beowulf*, that we become aware how far from natural it is. Even our code of etiquette, with its rule that women always have precedence, is a legacy from courtly love, and is felt to be far from natural in modern Japan or India. Many of the features of this sentiment, as it was known to the Troubadours, have indeed disappeared; but this must not blind us to the fact that the most momentous and the most revolutionary elements in it have made the background of European literature for eight hundred years. French poets, in the eleventh century, discovered or invented, or were the first to express, that

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romantic species of passion which English poets were still writing about in the nineteenth. They effected a change which has left no corner of our ethics, our imagination, or our daily life untouched, and they erected impassable barriers between us and the classical past or the Oriental present. Compared with this revolution the Renaissance is a mere ripple on the surface of literature.

There can be no mistake about the novelty of romantic love: our only difficulty is to imagine in all its bareness the mental world that existed before its coming – to wipe out of our minds, for a moment, nearly all that makes the food both of modern sentimentality and modern cynicism. We must conceive a world emptied of that ideal of ‘happiness’ – a happiness grounded on successful romantic love – which still supplies the motive of our popular fiction. In ancient literature love seldom rises above the levels of merry sensuality or domestic comfort, except to be treated as a tragic madness, an ἄτη which plunges otherwise sane people (usually women) into crime and disgrace. Such is the love of Medea, of Phaedra, of Dido; and such the love from which maidens pray that the gods may protect them.⁶ At the other end of the scale we find the comfort and utility of a good wife acknowledged: Odysseus loves Penelope as he loves the rest of his home and possessions, and Aristotle rather grudgingly admits that the conjugal relation may now and then rise to the same level as the virtuous friendship between good men.⁷ But this has plainly very little to do with ‘love’ in the modern or medieval sense; and if we turn to ancient

⁶ Euripides, *Medea*, 630; *Hippolytus*, 529.

⁷ Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1162 A. εἴη δ' αὖν καὶ δι' ἀρετῆν.

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love-poetry proper, we shall be even more disappointed. We shall find the poets loud in their praises of love, no doubt,

τίς δὲ βίος, τί δὲ τερπνὸν ἄτερ χρυσῆς Ἀφροδίτης;

‘What is life without love, tra-la-la?’ as the later song has it. But this is no more to be taken seriously than the countless panegyrics both ancient and modern on the all-consoling virtues of the bottle. If Catullus and Propertius vary the strain with cries of rage and misery, this is not so much because they are romantics as because they are exhibitionists. In their anger or their suffering they care not who knows the pass to which love has brought them. They are in the grip of the ἄτη. They do not expect their obsession to be regarded as a noble sorrow – they have no ‘silks and fine array’.

Plato will not be reckoned an exception by those who have read him with care. In the *Symposium*, no doubt, we find the conception of a ladder whereby the soul may ascend from human love to divine. But this is a ladder in the strictest sense; you reach the higher rungs by leaving the lower ones behind. The original object of human love – who, incidentally, is not a woman – has simply fallen out of sight before the soul arrives at the spiritual object. The very first step upwards would have made a courtly lover blush, since it consists in passing on from the worship of the beloved’s beauty to that of the same beauty in others. Those who call themselves Platonists at the Renaissance may imagine a love which reaches the divine without abandoning the human and becomes spiritual while remaining also carnal; but they do not find this in Plato. If they read

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it into him, this is because they are living, like ourselves, in the tradition which began in the eleventh century.

Perhaps the most characteristic of the ancient writers on love, and certainly the most influential in the Middle Ages, is Ovid. In the piping times of the early empire – when Julia was still unbanished and the dark figure of Tiberius had not yet crossed the stage – Ovid sat down to compose for the amusement of a society which well understood him an ironically didactic poem on the art of seduction. The very design of his *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 – in writing a treatise, with rules and examples *en règle* for the nice conduct of illicit loves. It is funny, as the ritual solemnity of old gentlemen over their wine is funny. Food, drink, and sex are the oldest jokes in the world; and one familiar form of the joke is to be very serious about them. From this attitude the whole tone of the *Ars Amatoria* flows. In the first place Ovid naturally introduces the god Amor with an affectation of religious awe – just as he would have introduced Bacchus if he had written an ironic *Art of Getting Drunk*. Love thus becomes a great and jealous god, his service an arduous *militia*: offend him who dares, Ovid is his trembling captive. In the second place, being thus mockingly serious about the appetite, he is of necessity mockingly serious about the woman. The real objects of Ovid's 'love', no doubt, he would have ordered out of the room before the serious conversation about books, or politics, or family affairs began. The moralist may treat them seriously, but the man of the world (such as Ovid) certainly does not. But inside the convention of the poem they are the 'demnition charmers', the mistresses of his fancy and

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the arbitresses of his fate. They rule him with a rod of iron, lead him a slave's life. As a result we find this sort of advice addressed to the 'prentice lover:

Go early ere th' appointed hour to meet
 The fair, and long await her in the street.
 Through shouldering crowds on all her errands
 run,
 Though graver business wait the while undone.
 If she commands your presence on her way
 Home from the ball to lackey her, obey!
 Or if from rural scenes she bids you, 'Come',
 Drive if you can, if not, then walk, to Rome,
 And let nor Dog-star heats nor drifted load
 Of whitening snows deter you from the road.
 Cowards, fly hence! Our general, Love, disdains
 Your lukewarm service in his long campaigns.⁸

No one who has caught the spirit of the author will misunderstand this. The conduct which Ovid recommends is felt to be shameful and absurd, and that is precisely why he recommends it – partly as a comic confession of the

⁸ *Ars Amatoria*, ii. 223:

Iussus adesse foro, iussa maturius hora
 Fac semper venias, nec nisi serus abi.
 Occurras aliquo, tibi dixerit; omnia differ,
 Curre, nec inceptum turba moretur iter.
 Nocte domum repetens epulis perfuncta redibit –
 Tunc quoque pro servo, si vocat illa, veni.
 Rure eris et dicet, Venias: Amor odit inertes!
 Si rota defuerit, tu pede carpe viam,
 Nec grave te tempus sitiensve Canicula tardet,
 Nec via per iactas candida facta nives.
 Militiae species Amor est: discedite segnes!
 Non sunt haec timidis signa tuenda viris.

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depths to which this ridiculous appetite may bring a man, and partly as a lesson in the art of fooling to the top of her bent the last baggage who has caught your fancy. The whole passage should be taken in conjunction with his other piece of advice – ‘Don’t visit her on her birthday: it costs too much.’⁹ But it will also be noticed – and this is a pretty instance of the vast change which occurred during the Middle Ages – that the very same conduct which Ovid ironically recommends could be recommended seriously by the courtly tradition. To leap up on errands, to go through heat or cold, at the bidding of one’s lady, or even of any lady, would seem but honourable and natural to a gentleman of the thirteenth or even of the seventeenth century; and most of us have gone shopping in the twentieth with ladies who showed no sign of regarding the tradition as a dead letter. The contrast inevitably raises in our minds a question as to how far the whole tone of medieval love poetry can be explained by the formula ‘Ovid misunderstood’; and though we see at once that this is no solution – for if it were granted, we should still have to ask why the Middle Ages misunderstood him so consistently – yet the thought is a good one to keep in mind as we proceed.¹⁰

The fall of the old civilization and the coming of Christianity did not result in any deepening or idealizing of the conception of love. The fact is important, because it refutes two theories which trace the great change in our sentiments respectively to the Germanic temperament and to the Christian religion – especially to the cult of the Blessed Virgin. The latter view touches on a real and very

⁹ *Ars Amatoria*, i. 403, et seq.; cf. 417 et seq. ¹⁰ See p. 53.

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complex relationship; but as its true nature will become apparent in what follows, I will here content myself with a brief and dogmatic statement. That Christianity in a very general sense, by its insistence on compassion and on the sanctity of the human body, had a tendency to soften or abash the more extreme brutalities and flippancies of the ancient world in all departments of human life, and therefore also in sexual matters, may be taken as obvious. But there is no evidence that the quasi-religious tone of medieval love poetry has been transferred from the worship of the Blessed Virgin: it is just as likely – it is even more likely – that the colouring of certain hymns to the Virgin has been borrowed from the love poetry.¹¹ Nor is it true in any unequivocal sense that the medieval church encouraged reverence for women at all: while it is a ludicrous error (as we shall presently see) to suppose that she regarded sexual passion, under any conditions or after any possible process of refinement, as a noble emotion. The other theory turns on a supposedly innate characteristic in the Germanic races, noted by Tacitus.¹² But what Tacitus describes is a primitive awe of women as uncanny and probably prophetic beings, which is as remote from our comprehension as the primitive reverence for lunacy or the primitive horror of twins; and because it is thus remote, we cannot judge how probably it might have developed into the medieval *Frauendienst*, the service of ladies. What is certain is that where a Germanic race reached its maturity untouched by the Latin spirit, as in Iceland, we

¹¹ See Jeanroy in the *Histoire de la langue et de la littérature française*, 1896, tom. i, p. 372 n.; also Wechssler, op. cit., Bd. I, cap. xviii.

¹² *Germania*, viii. 2.