Shaping idealisms : studies in Middle English romances and the literature of the Medieval Revival

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CONCLUSION

This collection of essays is an attempt to contribute to one or two chapters of the history of a literary genre, that of romance. Its limitation, in philological terms, is that the essays are, strictly speaking, preliminaries to interpretation. The aspect that they concentrate on is how idealisms are shaped, or, in Chrétien de Troyes' terms, how with source-material of diverse origins ("matière") a structure is built ("conjointure") by which a specific or unique significance ("sen") is expressed (cf. the opening lines of his *Erec et Enide* and *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*). It has seemed to me that an analysis of how specific 'conjointures' in particular texts create a unique 'sen' for each text should precede studies of intertextuality, historicism and interpretation, in order to prevent assumptions not based on what is factually to be found in the texts. My structuralist-cum-narratological approach to the texts, which were seen as 'autonomous' for the occasion, has been intended to limit – or, occasionally, to open up – the interpretation to a demonstrably objective preliminary reading. The specific observations should be verifiable, in Karl Popper's terms, and could then lead to empirical general hypotheses about historical patterns. Occasional falsifications (Popper) are to be found, as in essays nos. 3, 4, 8 and, more obviously, those on nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts, nos. 11-15.

Idealistic texts have preconceived ideals for their point of departure, in contrast to comic and tragic narratives, which are character-based. Especially in the romances the ideal is nominally embodied in the protagonist as 'persona' (Carl Jung's term), who is either learning or already showing it. But the nature of the ideal is only fully revealed by the action of the story. The characters are flat, in the sense of embodying single aspects of the ideal, whether *in bono* or *in malo*. Their interaction demonstrates the complexity of the ideal, as I argue in essay no. 4. In the two essays on Tennyson, nos. 11 and 15, I conclude that *Idylls of the King* is closer to medieval romance in that respect than other Romantic or Victorian romance-narratives, which commonly show more interest in individual psychology. In Tennyson's poems the collectivity of the characters is more prominent.

Since ideals have only authority, but no real power, they are enforced by ritual and ceremony. Like the rituals and ceremonies of religions and brotherhoods, they simultaneously assert, test and explore the ideals upheld by the community of the initiated. As I argue in essay no. 4, they are the tests by which the authority of the ideal is gained by participating unquestioningly. Essay no. 2 shows that this role of rituals is the key to understanding the text, especially the elements that are inconsistent with the story. It also shows that the emphasis on ceremony, even in the common details of ordinary life, turns the narrative of the two young lovers, Floris and Blauncheflour, into a story of public life and civilization. The essay on Layamon's *Brut* (no. 5) concludes that formality and ceremony, as shown in the repetitions and in the structure, have been used to manipulate the ostensible chronicle into propaganda for an ideal of national

identity. Essay no. 10 concludes that rituals are part of what distinguishes romances of royalty from romances of chivalry. The two Tennyson essays (nos. 11 and 15), finally, suggest that the unquestioning participation in the rituals and ceremonies mentioned above is precisely the reason why King Arthur's ideals could not be sustained.

In essay no. 4 I have also argued that the Fairy King in *Sir Orfeo* is not, effectively, a figure of death or evil, but functions as an 'other', whose rituals and ceremonies are different from Orfeo's. Opponents in romances are commonly presented as evil in the sense of 'other' in the scheme of the hegemonic culture. This point has been elaborated on in detail in essay no. 6, where the otherness of rituals and ceremonies is a key notion, making them travesties of the ideal. The conclusion is that confrontation with 'other' customs revitalizes the ideals that were the point of departure. This point also underlies the essays nos. 12 and 13, where the contrasts with 'others' are particularly explicit.

Another assumption that has been verified in the majority of these essays is the importance of structure in general as the carrier or delimitation of the signification in romances. In essay no. 3 I have concluded that the structure of the tale undermines the logic of the hegemony-ideal of Courtly Love that dominates the story of Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*, to suggest an alternative reading intended by the narrator. In the essay on Layamon (no. 5) I conclude that the overall structure of the Arthurian section of his *Brut*, as well as the structure of the repeated visits to the lakes, with their similar symbolisms, and the repeated contrasts between separatist Scotland and loyal Cornwall suggest a nationalistic layer of signification in the chronicle. In essay no. 7 the conclusion is that the *Roman van Walewein* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* have a circular structure in common, which clashes with the linearity of the highest courtly ideals. The structure suggests such a clash of the courtly ideals with cyclic reality, which then leads to a signified need to reconsider the ideals for practical adoption by the peripheral nobility and the urban middle class. Essay no. 10 concludes that kingship-romances often show a structure of concentric circles referring to different countries to link an idealized beginning with the regained ideal at the end, and to link undesirable situations with correction of them within the circumscribed ideal. This structure also shows that the central experience is the turning-point, by which the core of the idealism is signified. The essay on the absent narrator in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (no. 15), in its turn, argues that the structure of the whole – together with the carefully structured imagery – suggests the significations in the absence of an omniscient narrator.

My attempts to describe symbolism in the romances, in essay no. 4 and in the Introduction to this collection (no. 1), has seen the need to distinguish symbolism from the other idealistic mode in the Middle Ages, the allegory. In the medieval period the two are much more fundamentally distinct from one another than in more modern times, is my conclusion there. For the details, see the Introduction under 'Symbolism'.

To justify the inclusion of *Pearl* (essay no. 8) and *The Land of Cokaygne* (essay no. 9) in this collection, my reason is not only that they both 'shape idealism', but also that the distinction between allegory and symbolism plays a part in their analysis. My conclusion in essay no. 9 is that *The Land of Cokaygne* achieves its parody of the ideal monastic life by means of symbolism 'creating extra dimensions of narrative space' only in a sense, because it is a parodic inversion of the extra dimensions. Typical for symbolism, in this text as well, remains the essential limitation of significances by means of 'différances' (Derrida) created by the language of the text. In the case of *Pearl* (essay no. 8), where the ideals are shaped by allegorical means, I have concluded that the problem between the dreamer and the maiden is due to the fact that the dreamer cannot grasp the allegorical visions, but sees them as symbolic. The landscape-settings can be seen as symbolic or allegorical; they show, in fact, a development from the former to the latter which the dreamer is not capable of following, in spite of the maiden's doctrinaire instruction. C.S.Lewis' 'other world' in *Perelandra* (essay no. 13) shows a similar mixture of allegorical and symbolic ways of viewing, but the narrative is unmistakeably allegorical. In essay no. 13 I come to the conclusion that Lewis' world of Perelandra is distinctly allegorical and that Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is of the romance-type symbolism. The comparison between the two only proves that details, in this case the throwing of the source of evil into the infernal fire, can be effective in both modes, a point I have also made in essay no. 4. In "Een academische romance: David Lodge, *Small World*" (no. 14), about a book that styles itself a romance and is, in fact, a parody of the quest for the Holy Grail, I have noticed by way of conclusion that it negates the idealism inherent in romances as an illusion by means of a critical metatext. This negation of form by means of content makes *Small World* primarily a parody of post-structuralism, not of romance.

Concerning the role of the ladies in medieval romances, I have extended their narratological functions as 'desired object' and 'adviser' or 'instructor' with a symbolic dimension: that of the, actual or future, queens speaking for the land and its needs and desires. The notion has been most extensively verified in essay no. 10, where the conclusion was that in royalty-romances the King embodies nationhood and the Queen (or queen-to-be) embodies the land as territory or population. In the romances of chivalry, however, the queen's or ladies' function is more prominently that of complementing the knight-protagonist, enabling him spiritually or materially to act as the aristocratic hegemony-culture requires. The latter type of romance is more specific about the virtues of chivalry, the former about society's justified desires and expectations. In *Floris and Blauncheflour* (essay no. 2) I have found the function of the ladies that of 'desired object' in the case of Blauncheflour, and 'adviser' in the case of Floris' mother and Clarice. They inspire their over-pragmatic husbands (-to-be) to more civilized behaviour, in accordance with the contemporary hegemony-culture. All three show that achieved love is the way to social integration. In essay no. 3 on

Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale* I have come to the conclusion that the narrative is given a rather curious twist. Apart from the structural effect leading to a biased narration mentioned earlier, the story pretends to be an example of the hegemonic ideals of the Courtly-Love convention as presented in Boccaccio's original 'demande d'amour' in *Il Filocolo*, which is not contradicted by Chaucer, but nevertheless presented in a manner that appears critical of the original idea(l). In essay no. 6 the role of the ladies has appeared to me to confirm mainly the symbolic function of infusing the male pride and pragmatism of the knights and kings with civilization and socially desirable virtuous action. In the essays on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts (nos. 10-15), I have not dealt with the symbolism of the ladies' roles, but I would suggest in retrospect that it is not materially different from that of the medieval romances.

On a more practical level I have come to the following conclusions, following from the above. These conclusions deal with more detailed assumptions about preliminary readings. In essays nos. 2 and 4 I have introduced the starting-point that, in order to see what a particular antagonist 'stands for', one has to analyse the antagonists given to him specifically, as 'other'. What makes the opponents different from the protagonist and from each other provides the specifications by contrast. And in essays nos. 4 and 10 I have concluded that the 'virtues' of the romance-heroes, whether knights or kings, should be defined as what society expects or desires from them, rather than in terms of religion or ethos. A rather more 'psychological' aspect, namely that the scene-settings reflect symbolically the perception of the protagonist at a given point in the story, which then lead to characteristic action or self-expression, I have verified in essays nos. 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13 and 15.

Concerning the game of chess or chessboard in "*Floris and Blauncheflour*" and "The *Roman van Walewein* Laced with Castles" (essays nos. 2 and 6) I have concluded, also in "Best of Gawain" (no. 7), that the symbolic function goes back specifically to the ancient Persian symbolism of 'the death of the king' (shah-mat: the king is dead) , therefore suggesting succession to kingship or lordship.

I have found occasion to claim specific propagandist nationalism only for Layamon, in his structuring of the Arthurian section of the *Brut* and in occasional imagery (essay no. 5), and also for Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, in his 'Blut und Boden' imagery, although I have found the *Idylls* generally more imperialistic; possibly a typical British blend (essay no. 11). In "The absent narrator in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*" (essay no. 15) I have noticed that his emphasis on social usefulness fits the imperialistic attitude, and that his showing a 'non-assertive art' in his presentation is linked to the problem of individuals struggling with the ideal – rather than embody them –, which was a particular concern for the imperialist Britain of his day.

In "A Key to *The Land of Cokaygne*" (essay no. 9) I have shown that ideals can also be shaped by means of parody of the ideal. *Cokaygne* is an extreme case, I

have concluded, in that it not only uses, but quite replaces the spiritual ideal by earthly vignettes. The fact that it is parody, rather than satire, is made apparent by linguistic signals or 'différances' in the text that require an audience well-versed in the details of monastic life. Parody is also found in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, but on a much smaller scale. In essay no. 12 I have argued that his evil characters are all of them not just 'other' , nor even travesties, but actual perversions of the good. Tolkien's parody is much more philosophical than generic. David Lodge's *Small World* is an example of parody in the generic way (essay no. 14). The story of academic conferences is parodied as a Grail-quest. And its romance-genre (subtitle: "An academic romance") becomes itself a parody of post-structuralism by its metatext.

As a final structural point I have claimed, in essays nos. 2, 4 and 10 that the psycho-analytical models of Sigmund Freud ('ego', 'super-ego', 'id', 'libido') and Carl Jung ('persona', 'animus', 'anima', 'shadow') – not their work on mental disorder! – are more appropriate for preliminary structural analysis of medieval romances than intertextual characterization of the heroes of romance. This is because romance-characters are single-characteristic types, whose interaction, not whose character, shows the complexity of the ideals they embody.

The general point about the authors of the romances being themselves non-aristocratic, and therefore outsiders in the court-culture, I have only raised specifically in essay no. 7, but I have also brought it up in the Introduction (no. 1), because the realization that this fact is likely to have created biased views of courtly idealism is an important preliminary consideration. It explains in an objective way why so many romances are so critical of the purely aristocratic courtly ideals and tend to deal with ideals from a much wider social perspective. The problem is as old as Chrétien de Troyes.

The fact that J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis have been accused of otherworldliness is a different matter, cf. essay no. 13. They were accused of nostalgia for a universally-valid moral order, which in the twentieth-century days of social commitment was seen as escapism. Perhaps the two World Wars had caused audiences to be sceptical about cults of heroism. My argument has been that, as medievalists, with a religious background, they may have found an individual epic-tragic heroism a still possible and desirable alternative to contemporary factions and -isms. Nostalgic, certainly, but so were many of the medieval romances, looking to the old well-established ideals in days of present turmoil.

In summary, what underlies all these various and varied essays is not a theory but a claim that a factual analysis of narrative structure and narratological functions of characters and settings directs and limits the symbolic dimensions, and therefore the interpretation, of the medieval romance-type narratives and their modern successors. That is what 'shaping idealisms' has meant to me.