The Allegory and Romance in the Middle English Poetry

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We should look upon the Norman Conquest as bringing about the early merging of two great literary tradition,[1] the Teutonic tradition which early England shared with other northern nations and the Romance tradition with its main source in France.[2] For these two traditional literary forms as Allegory and Romance are mainly represented in *The Vision of Piers Plowman* of Langland and *The Canterbury Tales* of Chaucer. Then the primary intention of this paper is to treat comparatively the two traditional literary qualities as Allegory and Romance in the works of Langland and of Chaucer in the Middle English poetry.

I

The Middle English period begins in 1066 with the Norman Conquest and ends in 1485 with the death of Richard III at the battle of Bosworth Field. This period saw the introduction of feudalism, the conflict between Church and State, the Magna Carta of 1215, the rise of Parliament, the Peasants Revolt of 1381, the Hundred Years War, the Black Death, and the disastrous Wars of the Roses. All of these events played some part in the shaping of the literature[3] of these years, but the most important event in determining the direction of English literature was the success of William the Conqueror in establishing a Norman-French society on English soil.

During these years, by the Law of Englishry[4] the English language became a secondary language still spoken by the majority of the people, but a majority that was an uncultivated one. The language and the literature of polite society was French. But, while French lan-

guage and literature seemed to have driven out the native tongue and the vernacular literature, in fact, the two helped to produce both a language and literature that was superior to the Old English when once English re-emrged as the national language.

The Norman Conquest resulted in a long period of confusion and silence. But "this confusion brought forth a stronger English race, and the silence prepared for a greater national literature,"[5] for the Normans were 'north men,' only more romantic, imaginative, and poetic. They added the versatility necessary to a richer language and literature. As the result, the literature of France had so much influenced on the English literature, as P. R. Lieder said that,

> The temper of English literature was also profoundly affected by the long supremacy of French. The poetry of Anglo-Saxon England has both vigor and elevation, but lacks most of the lighter graces. It is concerned with the serious, the grimmer aspects of life—with battle and storm and sudden death, the cold gray ocean and the wild moorland. There is not in the whole of it a single love-story. There is no wit or humor or delicate play of fancy. All these elements in which our modern literature is so rich are part of what we have learned from the French.[6]

From the French literature, the English writers derived a large body of new material as well as new models of style, genre, and expression. The most important was the romance of chivalrous and courtly love. The matter of these romances is sometimes from the stories of classical antiquity, as in the romances on which are founded Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Another important type was the allegory, which most often took the form of a dream-vision in which, as in the *Romance of the Rose* and Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, the poet was transported to a lovely garden where he met such abstract personages as Idleness, Fair-Welcome, Mirth, and Wicked-Tongue. This form served in the *Vision of Piers Plowman* as the vehicle of trenchant social satire.

The literary forms of Romance and Allegory[7] had been developed in the French literature of the thirteen century, and were ready for immediate adoption by the writers of the fourteenth century who discovered that English also was capable of literary use. Chaucer was steeped in the literature of France, and many well have written French verse in his youthful days. Both Chaucer and Gower learned their art and the forms of their verses from French sources, though Chaucer drew inspiration also from the great writers of Italy

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5) A. C. Hall and L. B. Hurley, *Outlines of English Literature* (Boston: Heath, 1930), p. 6.
6) P. R. Lieder, and others, *British Poetry and Prose* (Rev. ed.; 2 vols.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938), Vol. 1, p. 56.
7) Saint's legend and moral tale, the fable of beasts who talk like men, the short realistic tale of sordid realities.

and from the poetry of ancient Rome. But the tradition of the Old English alliterative unrhymed verse had lingered on, and *The Vision of Piers Plowman* is written in a measure similar to *Beowulf*.

II

William Langland, the author of *The Vision of Piers Plowwan*, was a very different poet in comparison with that Geoffrey Chaucer was writing his poetry and reading it aloud to a group of fine ladies and gentlemen at the royal court. They looked out upon the same pageant of human life, but in temper and spirit they are far apart. The grim moralist and stern satirist who wrote *The Vision of Piers Plowman* was not the sort of person who is invited to read at the royal courts. Langland, as the humanitarian poet of his age,[8] deeply felt the to social evils he saw around him and preached reform with almost fanatical earnestness. His poems give a most sombre picture of the misery of the poorer classes, the iniquity of the rich, and the corruption of the Church. He shows us the nobles and clergy living in luxury while the miserable peasantry are ground down and oppressed by all sorts of exactions.

The greatest of all the social protest poems is *The Vision of Piers Plowman*. This lengthy poem (10054 lines) is a mixture of the appealing and the puzzling and is a blend of satire, social protest, and religious allegory. The manuscripts of the poem has come down to us in three distinct versions as A-Text, B-Text, and C-Text. Version A, written soon after 1362, consists of a prologue and twelve "passus" or cantos, and contains nearly 26000 lines. Version B, written about 1377, contains the material of Version A with many revisions and additions, and adds ten new passus. It is nearly three times as long as A. Version C, written between 1393 and 1398, is a revision of Version B, but a revision which does not add materially to the number of verses. As J. C. Stumpf said that "the poem is allegorical in its structure and makes extensive use of the Dream Vision,"[9] it consists of a series of allegorical dream-visions which constitute a comprehensive criticism and appraisal of human life—the life of the individual and of society as a whole. The world of fourteenth century England, the "fair field full of fold,"[10] as the dreamer sees it is seriously out of joint. At the court, in the Church, among merchants and laborers, the ruling motive is selfish greed; and this lust for gain is the root of manifold corruptions. Many of the evils are the same which in the kindlier pages of Chaucer are the occasion for good-natured laughter.

The poem opens with the poet, dressed as a hermit, falling asleep on a May morning

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8)   Sefton Delmer, *Survey of English Literature* (Toronto: Forum House, 1968), p. 26.
9)   John C. Stumpf, *Anglo Saxon and Middle English Literature* (Toronto: Forum House, 1969), p. 74.
10)   W. Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, line 17.

on the Malvern Hills. He awakens in a wilderness of unknown location and sees a tower on a high hill in the east, beneath it a deep dale with a dungeon, and in betwen a fair field full of people, whom he describes as "Working and wandering as the world asks" as

> In a summer season when soft was the sun,
> I shaped me into shrouds as if I a shepherd were,
> In habit like a hermit, unholy of works,
> Went wide in this world, wonders to hear.
> But on a May morning, on Malvern Hills,
> There befell me a ferly, of fairy it seemed.
> I was weary of wandering, and went me to rest
> Under a broad bank by a brook's side;
> And as I lay and leaned and looked in the waters,
> I slumbered into a sleeping, it sounded so merry.
> Then did I meet a marvelous dream,
> That I was in a wilderness, wist I never where;
> As I beheld into the east, on high to the sun,
> I saw a tower on a toft, trily made;
> A deep dale beneath, a dungeon therein,
> With deep ditches and dark and dreadful of sight.
> A fair field full of fold found I therebetween,
> Of all manner of men, the mean and the rich,
> Working and wandering as the world asks.[11]

Some of these are realistic,[12] some are allegorical, and he describes them all, beginning first with a plowman. A lady approaches and is identified as Holy Church; she identifies the tower as the Tower of Truth, the dungeon as Hell, and the place in between as the world. The setting then of this vision is the three-fold vision of the human condition, the world located between Heaven and Hell, between God and Satan, and man working and wandering unaware of the reality of either. The speaker, in keeping with the quest-motif indicated when he told us that he had set forth "wyde in this worlde" to hear wonders, states the central theme when he asks Holy Church

> . . . . but tell me this same,
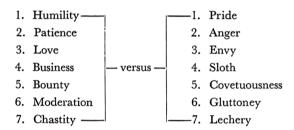> How I may save my soule.

Her answer is that when all treasures are judged, Truth is best and that Truth means to

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11)   M. H. Abrams, and others, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (Rev. ed.; 2 vols.; New York: Norton, 1968), vol. 1, p. 275.

12)   H. J. C. Grierson and J. C. Smith, *A Critical History of English Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 37.

love the Lord more than one loves oneself. A long series of exemplar, interwoven with Biblical exemplar, follows to reveal what is meant by love of oneself and the dreamer concludes that one must be guided in this matter by Conscience and Reason.

A second vision follows, set in the same place, in which the speaker hears a sermon by Reason reminding the people that natural phenoma are often judgements of God on evildoers. Repentence follows in the form of the repentence of the Seven Deadly Sins. As the way, the speaker vindicates the way to God through the Seven Virtues versus the Seven Deadly Sins as follows,[13]

1. Humility		1. Pride
2. Patience		2. Anger
3. Love		3. Envy
4. Business	— versus —	4. Sloth
5. Bounty		5. Covetuousness
6. Moderation		6. Gluttoney
7. Chastity		7. Lechery

All then set out to seek Truth, but no one knows the way. It is at this point that Piers Plowman steps forward and offers to lead them; he knows the dwelling place because Conscience and kin Wit had revealed it to him. The pilgrims think that it is an actual location, but Piers points out that her dwelling is within man. The journey there involves a progression beginning in meekness, advancing through conscience, and culminating in the love of God before all things. Piers agrees to guid them as soon as he has completed ploughing his own half-acre and a test of the pilgrim's sincerity occurs as he sets all of them to hard work. The following passages are concerned with social commentary on the diet of the poor, strikes for higher wages, and the discontent that is engendered by brief prosperity.

Then Truth, or God the Father sends Piers a pardon intended for certain classes of people; it states that they who have done good shall go to the eternal life while they that have done evil will go to the everlasting fire. A priest disputes the validity of the pardon and a fierce dispute follows that awakens the dreamer and ends the section of Piers Plowman. Above all, in the latter passus of Version B the figure of Piers is merged with that of Christ, as the great exemplar of human nature which is also divine.

The remainder of the manuscript consists of three sections dealing respectively with the life of Do-Well, Do-Bet(better), and Do-Beste. These also are personified in the form of allegory[14] and teach the virtues for the way to Heaven.

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13) J. C. Stumpf, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
14) C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 158.

In the style of *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, it is the unrhymed, alliterative measure of *Beowulf*, the tradition of which survived the Norman Conquest and was revived by many English poets of the fourteenth century, at the very time when Chaucer and Gower were establishing the more regular rhgymed verse of their French and Italian models. The results like this are shown in some comparison of the former with the latter as follows,

> 1. *Beówulf the bóld, ere his béd he sóught*
>   *Súmmoned his spírit; Not sécond to Gréndel*
>   *In combat I count me and courage of wâr*
>   *Then he sought his béd, The bolster recéive*
>   *The héad of hérs, In the háll about him,*
>   *Strétched in sléep his sáilormen láy.*[15]

> 2. In a *somer sésson. whan sóft was the sónne,*
>   I *shópe me in shróudes. as I a shépe wére,*
>   In *hábite as an héremite. unhóly of wórkes,*
>   Went *wýde in this wórld. wondres to hére.*[16]

As above, the Old English poetry and Middle English poetry make both clear the main characters of the alliterative verse of two periods. Each is divided into half-lines by a caesure, indicated in the text by a dot(.). Certain of the accented syllables in each line are alliterated—usually two in the first half-line and one(the first) in the second. There are generally, but not always, four accented syllables per line, two in each half-line; sometimes all four are alliterated.[17] Then *The Vision of Piers Plowman* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are products of a literary movement sometimes called "the alliterative revival."[18] This term is somewhat misleading, since the word "revival" simplies the bringing back to life of something that has died. Actually, alliterative verse had never died out in England; it had continued to exist, more or less underground, during the Norman period. The second half of the fourteenth century witnessed a magnificent resurgence of alliterative poetry in England.

As we have noted, *The Vision of Piers Plowman* has the form of a dream vision, a common medieval type in which the author presents his story under the guise of having dreamed it. Most dream visions concern romantic love; it also concerns love, but in this instance the love is theological. The dream vision generally involves allegory, not only because one expects from a dream the unrealistic, the fanciful, but also because men have always suspected that dreams relate the truth in a disguised form—that they are natural allegories.

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15) Translated by J. D. Spaeth.
16) Charles Muscatine, *The Age of Chaucer* (Toronto: Coles Pub., 1970), p. 80.
17) Ibid. (cf. Grieson, *op. cit.*, p. 6).
18) Ibid.

So *The Vision [f Piers Plowman* is "the greatest of English relgious allegory."[19]

III

While Langland's poetry takes the literary form as Allegory, Chaucer's poetry takes on it as Romance. The Romance, those stories in verse dealing with knightly deeds, was an aristocratic genre reflecting the tastes and ideals of the upper class. These stories gave expression to some of the most prized ideals of the nobility. The romance might be called the "escap"[20] literature of the time, for it dealt in exiled princes who regain their thrones after many misadventures, trials by combat, battles with pagans and dragons, tests of human courage and spiritual faith; they often contain a quest in which the supernatural and the natural mingle together and they abound in romantic gestures.

The English romance is derived from the French, but the English translators and adaptors made significant changes. The English romances concentrate more on the action and are more concerned with unusual plots and situations than they are with analyzing delicate sentiments or with detailing the finer points of courtly love.

The subject-matter of the romances provides a means of classification first expressed by a French poet, Jean Bodel, in the thirteenth century. He said that all romances deal with four "matters":[21]

1. The Matter of France: stories dealing with the deeds of King Charlemagne and his knights.
2. The Matter of Britain: stories of Arthur and his knights.
3. The Matter of Rome the Great: stories of the heroes of classical antiquity, whether Alexander or Julius Caesar and whether the seeting be Thebes, Rome, or Troy.
4. Many romances dealing specifically with English characters that do not belong to the Arthurian matter.

Chaucer's life is important to the literature that he produced in many ways. First of all, his entrance into the ranks of the aristocracy[22] introduced him to the literature of the continent, particularly French literature, and his own early writings clearly bear the imprint of this early literary exposure. Secondly, his many trips abroad introduced him to the literature of Italy. Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio became known to him through their writings, and the latter two he may even have met personally since they were still alive and

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19) M. H. Abrams, *op. cit.*, p. 273.
20) J. C. Stumpf, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
21) Ibid.,
22) In April, 1357, Chaucer was a page in the household of Elizabeth, the Countess of Ulster, wife of the King's (Edward III) son Lionel.

writing during his visits. Certainly, he used the material of these poets in his later writings. Finally, his position as a civil servant allowed him to come into intimate contact with his fellow Englishmen in all walks of life. It is the circumstance, combined with his own artistic observation and interest in people, that shaped that delightful gallery of pilgrims in the *Canterbury Tales*.

He is completely Continental in his literary affiliations. We find no trace in his writings of the Old English poetic tradition that was being revived in his own time in the works of the Alliterative Revival.[23] Indeed, he has only scorn for the Alliterative writers. His career has been divided, not altogether accurately into three periods: his French period (1359–72), his Italian period (1372–86), and the English period (1386–1400). During his first period he was indebted to French poets such as Deschamps and Machaut. He came under the spell of the dream allegory in the *Romand de la Rose*, and passages and echoes from it are scattered throughout his poetry, even in the most English period of all his works, the *Tales*. He owed a great deal to Ovid as well and to other classical writers. In the second phase of his career, he takes the material that he desired from the Italian writers and added this to the framework of the French conventions with which he was so familiar. From the period, come the plots for both *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight's Tale*, both of which he borrowed from Boccaccio. It is in his last period that he sets out on his own. His apprenticeship over, he writes the *Canterbury Tales* and proves to be the master of his craft and the greatest of the English poets of the Middle Ages.

The *Canterbury Tales* is based on the various romances as shown in the following literary views:[24]

1. Literary Parallels: Boccaccio's *December*, Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and oriental tales like the *Arabian Nights*.

2. The Plan: The English custom of make annual pilgrimages to the tomb of Thomas-a-Becket furnished Chaucer a comprehensive plot for his *Tales*. Thirty-two men and women made up the number of his pilgrims who had met by chance at the Tabard Inn to go to Canterbury. The host would enliven the going and coming, and so he proposes that each pilgrim shall tell two stories each way, the best story-teller to have a dinner at the cost of the others upon the return. The plan called for one hundred and twenty-eight stories; but only twenty-four were written, some of these remaining unfinished. The stories were arranged in a logical not in a chronological order.

3. Grouping of the Tales:
    a. Based on romances; *The Knightes Tale*, Italian romance from Boccaccio's *Teseide*; *Sir Thopas*, a burlesque on romances; *The Tale of the Wyf of Bathe*, Arthurian legend.

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23) J. C. Stumpf, *op. cit.*, p. 76.
24) Hall and Hurley, *op. cit.*, pp. 10–12.

      b. Based on medieval elements; *The Reves Tale*, *The Milleres Tale*, *The Shipmannes Tale*, *The Sommours Tale*, and others.

      c. Based on classical elements: *The Phisiciens Tale* of Appius and Virginia, *The Maunciples Tale*, and *The Clerkes Tale*.

4. The Prologue:

      a. Characters. Many classes of fourteenth century English society are brought together. The pilgrims are so graphically described, and with so much sympathy, that each one is distinguished by traits of character as well as by individuality of face and dress.

      b. Humor. Humorous language. The poet mildly satirizes the foibles and hypocrites of men.

      c. Nature. Spring is the poet's favorite season. From the beginning, he prefers to draw on nature in developing his finest thoughts and emotions, as follows,

> When the sweet showers of April follow March
> Piercing the dryness to the roots that parch,
> Bathing each vein in such a flow of power
> That a new strenght's engendered in the flower—
> When, with a gentle warmth, the west-wind's breath
> Awakes in every wood and barren heath
> The tender foliage, when the vernal sun
> Has half his course withing the Ram to run—
> When the small birds are making melodies,
> Sleeping all night(they say) with open eyes
> (For Nature so within their bosom rages)—
> Then people long to go on pilgrimages
> And palmers wander to the strangest stands
> For famous shrines, however far the lands.
> Especially from every shire's end
> Of England's length to Canterbury they wend,
> Seeking the martyr, holiest and blest
> Who helped them, healed their ills, and gave them rest.[25]

                                         —Modern version by L. U.

However, R. K. Root points out that "when we speak of Chaucer's love of nature, we must be careful not to confuse this with the love of nature which marks more modern poets. Nowhere in his works is there any suggestion that he cared for the wilder beauty of mountains and rocks and surging seas . . . What Chaucer, and the men of the Middle Ages in general, loved in nature was the peaceful and the gentle, the beneficent to human life."[26]

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25) Louis Untermeyer, *A Concise Treasury of Great Poems* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), p. 16.
26) W. B. Otis and M. H. Needleman, *An Outline History of English Literature* (Fourth ed.; 2 vols.; New York: Barns & Noble, 1958), vol. 1, p. 78.

d. Dramatic power. The plot, simple thought it is, is dramatic.

e. Story-telling ability. The dramatic ability which is found in all good stories.

f. Style. His words are simple and connotative, the words of common life. He mastered the technique of poetry; he introduced the heroic couplet into English, used eigth and ten-syllable line, and invented "rime royal"[27]

Chaucer had no great lyric gift, nor much invention in the narrower sense. But give him a skeleton of plot and elbow-room, and he can tell a story with nay going. As a teller of merry tales as romances in verse he has been equalled in our literature. His services to English metre and diction were immense. Then Grieson said that "Looking back over the years that lie between him and Layamon, we may truly say that he found English poetry *brick* and left it *marble*,[28] and Chaucer is generally considered "the Father of English poetry"[29] as John Dryden called.

IV

As above, the writer has researched the two great literary traditions as the Allegory and Romance in Langland and Chaucer in the Middle English poetry. While in the poetry of Langland, whatever the specific interpretations of the poem as a whole or in parts may be, the central theme, based on the words of the speaker in the poem as religious allegory, seems to be man's search for the means of salvation and the understanding of the ways of God and man, Chaucer is neither a moralist like Gower nor a reformer like Langland, but merely a delightful narrative poet. He tells tales for their own sake, out of an artist's sheer love of story-telling as romance. Langland deals with many social questions which his contemporary, Chaucer, left untouched; for Chaucer prefers to view the world only from the standpoint of a humorist and artist. So, while the Allegory in Langland's poetry was based on the Anglo Saxon tradition, the Romance in Chaucer's poetry was based on the Norman tradition.

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27) A seven-line iambic pentameter stanza riming *ababbcc.*
28) Grierson and Smith, *op. cit.,* p. 34.
29) Bruce Nicoll, *Canterbury Tales* (Toronto: Coles Pub., 1971), p. 72.

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中世 英詩의 Allegory 와 Romance

姜 善 求

要 約

中世 英詩는 두가지 文學的 傳統을 가지고 있다. 그것은 verse 로 된 Allegory 와 Romance 인데, 이 두 形態가 바로 中世의 代表 詩人인 Langland 와 Chaucer 의 詩에 表現되어 있으므로 이 小論에서는 이들 두 詩人들의 詩에 나타난 Allegory 와 Romance 로서의 文學的 形式과 內容을 比較 分析하므로써 中世 英詩의 文學的 特性을 評價해 보았다.

中世 英詩에 있어서 Allegory 와 Romance 를 理解하기 위해선 우선 이들을 發生케한 歷史的 背景을 考察해야 한다. Norman Conquest(1066) 이후로 英文은 政治的 社會的으로 큰 변화를 가져 왔다. 特히 The Law of Englishry 로 말미암아 公用語로 佛語를 使用케 하므로써 Anglo Saxon 語는 賤民의 言語로 몰락하게 되었다. 이로써 Anglo Saxon 文學의 傳統은 끊어지고 佛蘭西의 Romance 文學의 傳統이 發生케 되었다. 그러나 Norman Conquest 이후 三世紀 동안 이러한 言語의 혼란과 변천의 시대를 거쳐서 同化力이 强한 被征服者인 Anglo Saxon 族은 도리어 征服者인 Normans 를 融合 同化하게 하므로써 佛蘭西에서 들어온 Romance 를 英國化하게 하는 한편, 古代 Anglo Saxon 英詩의 傳統을 계승해온 새로운 形式의 Allegory 文學을 形成케 된것이다.

이리하여 中世 英詩에는 被支配 階級인 Anglo Saxon 的인 民衆的, 宗敎的 文學으로서의 Allegory 와 支配 階級인 Normans 的인 貴族的 說話文學으로서의 Romance 의 두 潮流가 生기게 되었다.

이같은 두 文學的 特性은, 主로 Langland 의 *The Vision of Piers Plowman* 에서는 Allegory 로서, Chaueer 의 *The Canterbury Tales* 에서는 Romance 로서 적절히 表現되어 있다. Langland 의 詩가 形式的인 꿈을 빙자한 寓意的 頭韻詩로서 당시의 부패된 敎會와 社會相을 폭로하면서 惡德에 對한 美德을 personify 하여 宗敎的 道德性을 强調하고 있는 Allegory 라면, Chaucer 의 詩는 宗敎的 社會的인 道德性을 떠나서 순수한 藝術的인 humor 와 사랑의 이야기를 담은 Romance 이라고 볼수 있겠다. 또 한편 形式과 內容에 對한 表現의 技法에 있어서도 Langland 의 Allegory 가 보다 英國的(그것은 古代 Anglo Saxon Poetry 의 傳統을 계승 변모하여 왔기 때문에)이라면, Chaucer 의 Romance 는 佛蘭西的(英國的으로 同化는 되었지만)이라고 볼수 있다. 이와 같은 中世 英詩의 Allegory 와 Romance 의 두 文學的 傳統은 英詩 文學史上 가장 특이한 것이라고 본다.