

THE 'ROMAN DE LA ROSE'  
AND THE POEMS OF MS COTTON NERO Ax, 4

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CERTAIN resemblances between passages in the poems of Cotton Nero A x, 4 and the *Roman de la Rose* are widely recognised. C.G. Osgood, for instance, in his edition of *Pearl*,<sup>1</sup> pointed out several passages which, he suggested, may have been influenced by the French poem and Sir Israel Gollancz has pointed to its possible influence in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. I do not so much want to add to this list of possible connections as to attempt an assessment of what the poet or poets of the MS made of ideas which can be explained more easily by reference to the *Roman*. There is one indisputable piece of evidence that the *Roman* was known to the author of one of these poems. In *Purity* the poet mentions both the work and one of its authors by name (1057ff.):<sup>2</sup>

*For Clopyngnel in þe compas of his clene Rose,  
þer he expounex a speche, to hym þat spede wolde,  
Of a lady to be loved...*

He then briefly summarises a passage in which Amis (not Raison as Mr. Menner states<sup>3</sup>) advises the lover how he can get what he wants from his lady. The passage in the *Roman*, which is possibly, as Mr. Menner says, cynical, is used in *Purity* as a parable of how we should observe Christ's will in everything. But what is most interesting in the passage is the use of the adjective 'clene' to describe a poem which not only seems to be pervaded by an air of cynicism, but is generally regarded as having as its main object praise of the delights of sexual intercourse and which ends with a detailed description of the sexual act itself.

Differences over the interpretation of the *Roman* caused a celebrated controversy among the Gawain-poet's contemporaries or near contemporaries just over a century after Jean de Meun's part of the poem had been written. On one side Christine de Pisan, supported by the formidable Jean Gerson, said that it was 'dangerous reading and full of erroneous

<sup>1</sup> See 11.269f., 906, 962, also introduction pp. xiii-xvii.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations are from the edition of R.J. Menner, Yale Studies in English, O.U.P. 1920.

<sup>3</sup> Ed. cit. note to 11.1057-66.

and blameworthy propositions'.<sup>4</sup> Various replies were made to this, one of them by Gontier Col, the French King's secretary who defended the poem, calling Jean de Meun: 'vray catholique, solemnel maistre, et docteur en sainte theologie, philosophe tres parfont, excellent, sachant tout ce qui a entendement humain est scible, duquel la gloire et renomme vit et vivra es ages advenir...'<sup>5</sup> It seems therefore that while its popularity, adequately indicated by the fact that well over 200 MSS of the poem are still in existence, was unquestionable, its interpretation was not. One of Christine de Pisan's objections was that it was bawdy, a criticism anticipated in part by its author,<sup>6</sup> and most modern readers I think would agree with her. But is it possible to interpret it differently and was the poet of *Purity* when he called it the 'clene Rose' advocating a different reading? I think there are some indications that he was and that the ideas behind such an interpretation are important in other poems of the MS besides *Purity*.

The words 'clene' and 'clannes' seem to be popular in this group of poems, and they are usually used carefully with the meanings 'pure' and 'purity' respectively or more particularly 'chaste' and 'chastity'. *Purity* itself is, of course, entirely devoted to a definition of 'clannes' and *Pearl* has the theme of purity running through it;<sup>7</sup> it appears in the translation of the beatitudes in *Patience*<sup>8</sup> and 'clannes' is singled out as one of Gawain's prime virtues in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.<sup>9</sup> In this latter poem of course a principal theme is the preservation of the hero's purity. There seems little doubt then that the idea of purity is a very important one in these poems, and I want to suggest now how this idea may be connected with the *Roman de la Rose*.

There is another passage in *Purity* which ought to be mentioned in this connection. Expanding verse 20 of the 18th chapter of Genesis the poet represents God as condemning the vices of Sodom and Gomorrah. After God's condemnation the poet introduces a lyrical passage on the pleasures of true love, *doole alperswetest* (699), a passage which shows the poet at his best (702/8):

*When two true togeder had tyzed hemselven,*

<sup>4</sup> See *Histoire Litteraire Française* (by Benedictines of Saint-Maur and Members of the Institut), Vol. 23, p. 52. (Paris, 1856).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> 6928f. References to the *Roman de la Rose* are to the edition of E.V. Langlois, (S.A.T.F.), (Paris 1914).

<sup>7</sup> e.g. 767, 972f., 682, 289 etc.

<sup>8</sup> 23, 32 (ed. Bateson).

<sup>9</sup> 653 (ed. Tolkien and Gordon).

*Bytwene a male and his make such merpe schulde co(m)e,  
 Wel nyze pure paradys mozt preve no better,  
 Ellez pay mozt honestly ayper oper welde;  
 At a stylle stollen steven, unstered wyth syzt,  
 Luf-lowe hem bytwene lasched so hote,  
 pat alle þe meschefeȝ on mold mozt hit not sleke.*

On the whole this is not the attitude that we might expect from a 14th century religious homilist. The medieval church tended to look on sexual love (*amor concupiscentia*) at best as an unfortunate necessity and at worst as something positively evil, and yet here we have a vigorous defence of it in the most enthusiastic terms by a man whose theme is purity. Not only this but the words are represented as being spoken by God himself.

There is certainly no biblical authority for this speech, but there are some remarkable resemblances between this and certain passages in the *Roman*. The distinction between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' sexual intercourse is the theme of several speeches. The most notable is the speech made by Genius at the end of the poem reading out the edict of Nature, who is described as 'vicar and constable to the eternal emperor, who sits in the sovereign tower of the noble city of the universe over which He made Nature, who distributes all gifts there as his minister'.<sup>10</sup> The edict is a lengthy injunction to preserve the species and includes a passage against indulging in sexual intercourse without the express intention of having children.<sup>11</sup> This speech of Genius seems to be the poet's concluding statement of his position and its summary is therefore of great interest (19885-19896):

*Pensez de mener bone vie  
 Aut chascuns embracier s'amie  
 E son ami chascune embrace,  
 E baise e festeie e soulace,  
 Se leianment vous entramez  
 Ja n'en deureiz estre blamez.  
 E quant assez aureiz joe  
 Si con je vous ai ci loe,  
 Pensez de vous bien confessier  
 Pour bien faire e pour mal laissier,  
 E reclamez le deu celestre  
 Que Nature reclame a maistre . . .*

This it is true can be, and usually is, taken as meant cynically. It could

<sup>10</sup> 19507-19512.

<sup>11</sup> 19629-19654.

be that here Jean de Meun is simply advocating that one should enjoy oneself uninhibitedly until one is old and then repent. But neither the emphasis on the purpose of love in producing children earlier in the speech, nor the emphasis here on loyalty to one's loved-one points to a cynical doctrine of promiscuity. Rather Jean de Meun seems to be expressing the joys of legitimate sexuality, that is, he seems to be adopting the attitude we found in *Purity*. Jean de Meun would seem to be advocating the art of love; the *gai saber*, as a preliminary to choosing one's mate and begetting children. In a sense, then, he is reconciling the *gai saber* (which tended to encourage adultery)<sup>12</sup> with the orthodox Christian attitude towards sex as a means to an end;<sup>13</sup> and as such might he not be regarded as 'vray catholique... docteur en sainte theologie'? But what is especially interesting is that the question of the relationship between the Courtly Code and Christian morality is at the very heart of the problem which Gawain has the face in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. And Gawain's solution is exactly the same as Jean de Meun's, namely, that the art of love is greatly to be respected, but that it is itself subservient to Christian morality. Gawain is most careful of his 'costes... *Of bewte and debonerte and blype semblaunt* (1272-3), of his courtesy '*lest crapayn he were* (1773), that is, he was careful not to offend against the rules of the *gai saber*.<sup>14</sup> But he was even more concerned for his *meschef*, *zif he schulde make symme* (1774). He makes it quite clear that in his interpretation it is marriage not adultery that he favours both in rejecting the lady's suggestion that he should accept her as his 'lemman' (i.e. recognised Courtly lover, 1782) and even more tellingly when, the lady having told him she would choose him above all other knights as her lover (1270-75), he replies that she has already made her choice in choosing a husband (1276). It is true of course that the *Roman* leaves the whole question open as to whether this 'loyal' love and the begetting of children should take place within marriage. But surely that is not an unjustified inference, for how can such loyalty and parenthood be more suitably provided for? and this notwithstanding the harsh things that are said about marriage in the poem from time to time. It is possible too that the *Roman* may be connected to *Sir Gawain* in another, more detailed, way.

<sup>12</sup> See C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> That such a reconciliation was needed is shown by the Church's condemnation of Andreas Capellanus's *De Amore* on the grounds that it argued a divorce between natural reason and faith, see A.J. Denomy, *The Heresy of Courtly Love* p. 43f. (New York, 1947).

<sup>14</sup> Mr. J.F. Kitley in a recent article (*Anglia* 79, 1961, pp. 7-16) suggests that the poet may even have followed Andreas Capellanus' instructions concerning the art of love in depicting the lady's attempts to ensnare Gawain.

In his note on the five Courtly virtues that are told on Gawain's pentangle Sir Israel Gollancz suggests<sup>15</sup> that the poet may be recalling the personified virtues attendant on the god of love in the *Roman*.<sup>16</sup> While each of the five virtues is common enough in Courtly literature they are a somewhat unusual combination. 'Franchise' and 'Courtesy' are commonly met with,<sup>17</sup> 'Pite' too appears quite commonly, though not often in this kind of list<sup>18</sup> and the same may be said of *Felazschip*. 'Clannes' is more exceptional though it appears in the didactic literature of *courtoisie*<sup>18</sup> and is found attributed to historic personages. On the whole Gawain's list is somewhat idiosyncratic, it leaves out several virtues more highly regarded in Courtly literature than some of those it includes, such as *prouesse*, loyalty, joy, humour. Nor do Gawain's five virtues all play a conspicuous part in the poem's story. *Pite* is not mentioned again for instance, nor is it exemplified, and *Felazschip* is only peripherally demonstrated, whereas loyalty and bravery (part of *prouesse*) are fundamental both to the story and Gawain's testing. Nor can it be that loyalty and *prouesse* are excluded because Gawain is said to fail in these, for he also fails in covetousness which offends against *Franchise*. It seems pertinent to ask then if any explanation can be given of the poet's choice of these particular virtues which his hero embodies more perfectly than any other. Now while Professor Gollancz was quite right to say that they appear in the 'baronie' of love in the *Roman*, that is if we include *Contrainte Astenance*, an equivocal virtue, as approximating to *Clannes*, they do so only among a company totalling twenty three personified virtues in all.

If, however, we turn to the earlier part of the poem, the part written by Guillaume de Lorris, we find a closer parallel and one that may have more significance. In Guillaume's part of the poem the lover, who is the hero, finds his way into a garden where he meets Desduiz (Mirth) and a company carolling. As he stands watching he is invited by Courtoisie to join in the dance. The lover then finds his way to a beautiful rose bush, but as he goes to take a rose (a symbol of the woman he desires) he is smitten by the arrows of love. The rose bush is surrounded by a thick hedge and

<sup>15</sup> Note to 1.651 of E.E.T.S. edition of Sir Gawain.

<sup>16</sup> 10451-10460.

<sup>17</sup> The Black Prince is accorded both by his poet the Chandos Herald (1.66) and if we may identify Chaucer's 'freedom' with Franchise, his knight possesses them both, see also Christine de Pisan's, *Livre des faits et bonnes meurs du Charles V*, chap. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Chaucer, *Ballade of Gentillesse*; *L'ordene de la Chevalerie*, 1.22; Raymond Lull's, *Order of Chivalry* E.E.T.S. 168, p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> *Ordene de la Chevalerie* 187-192; Raoul de Houdenc, *Li Romans des Eles* 455-6; Raymond Lull, op. cit. P. 43; Christine de Pisan, op. cit. Book 2 chap. 45.

before he can reach it he has to get the good offices of Bel Accueil, who is the child of Courtoisie, he is opposed however by Dangier (Prudery), Mal-Bouche (Tittle-tattle) and Honte (Shame). Raison comes forward (2998f) and advises the lover to give up his attempt to reach the rose, but her advice is unheeded. Instead he turns to a friend, Amis (3109), a personification of friendship, who counsels him to ask forgiveness of Dangier, and to plead his cause he receives help from two other virtues *Franchise* and *Pitie* (3249). Dangier gives way and the lover approaches the rose, which, however, Bel Accueil says Chastity forbids him to kiss. For, as she says:

*Car qui au baisier puet ataindre  
A pointe puet atant remaindre . . .*

Venus now comes on the scene and the lover is permitted his kiss by her intervention. Shame, Jealousy and Prudery are offended and Bel Accueil is put in prison for allowing the lover to go so far.

It will be noticed that the 'virtues' that assist the lover are in four of the five cases identical with four of Gawain's five, that is Amis (*Felazschip*), Franchise, Pitie and Courtoisie. Now Gawain's fifth virtue, *clannes*, can readily be related to Raison in the *Roman*, who is the fifth character in the French poem who offers to help the lover. For it is Raison's function later in the poem (that is, in Jean de Meun's part of the poem) to bring forward that extensive discussion of sexual problems which culminates in the idea of legitimate sexuality, an idea we have already seen expressed in *Purity*.<sup>20</sup> In the speech starting at line 5725 Raison explains her view of sex in reply to the lover's accusation that she is condemning love entirely. Part of the speech is worth quoting because it so clearly resembles the speeches in *Purity* and of Genius we have already discussed (5703-5720):

*Autre amour naturel i a,  
Que Nature es bestes cria,  
Par quei de leur faons chevissent  
E les alaitent e nourissent.  
De l' amour don je tieng ci conte,  
Se tu veaux que je te raconte  
Queus est li defenissemens,  
C'est natureus enclinemenz,  
De vouleir garder son semblable  
Par entencion couvenable,*

<sup>20</sup> For the relevant speeches of Raison see 4545f., 4589-4628, 5725;94.

*Seit par veie d'engendreure  
 Ou par cure de nourreture  
 A cete amour sont prest e prestes  
 Ansinc li ome con les bestes.  
 Cete amour, combien qu'el profite,  
 N'a los ne blasme ne merite;  
 N'en font n'a blasmer n'a loer  
 Nature les i fait voer.*

When the Gawain-poet included 'clannes' as one of Gawain's five virtues was he, then, thinking of the figure of Raison in the *Roman*? If he was might this not explain Gawain's attitude to the temptations and especially to the lady's offer in the third temptation to be his 'lemman' (1782), which he firmly rejects with:

*In sayth I welde rizt non  
 Ne non wil welde pe quile.*

Gawain in effect is drawing the line between what is legitimate and what illegitimate in courtly love. He has behaved perfectly in accordance with the demands of *Courtoisie* up till now, even to the point of accepting the lady's kisses, but he will not go beyond that point.

Perhaps we have here, in both *Purity* and *Sir Gawain* a deliberate attempt to counter the prevailing immorality of courtly love by distinguishing clearly the moral from the immoral in sexuality. The use of the *Roman* to support a moral view of sex would clearly be a shrewd blow for morality for it had come to be regarded as the chief authority on the art of Courtly Love.<sup>21</sup> Naturally the exact influence of the *Roman* must remain a matter for conjecture. Yet it seems to me useful, even when the results are inclusive, to ask ourselves what evidence there is for the kind of ideas which formed the material out of which the poet (or poets) made his poetry. In a literature as highly sophisticated and erudite as the Courtly literature of the Middle Ages such an enquiry is an essential condition of our understanding.

<sup>21</sup> Several MSS add the lines at the end of the *Roman*:

*Explicit li roman de la Rose  
 Ou l'art d'Amours est toute enclose.*