

## THE FIGURE OF CHRIST IN THE ANCRENE WISSE : ON LOVE

It has long been recognized that the twelfth-century Ancrene Wisse is a significant milestone in the development of English prose as a literary form. What has not been sufficiently recognized is that the achievement of its unknown author is not limited to simple rhetorical expertise. He was obviously trained in the use of rhetoric and the structure and style of the Ancrene Wisse are carefully calculated; but he was not, as R.A. Waldron suggests, "obsessed with the desire for clarity of exposition." 1 He was writing a sermon, certainly, but a sermon for a very limited female audience and, as the principal aim of any preacher must be to persuade fully, 2 he realized that emotional appeal would have to be at least as important as rational argument if he were to succeed in his attempt to formulate a viable Ancrene Wisse. It is the purpose of the present article to examine Book VII of the Ancrene Wisse with a view to showing how this emotional appeal is linked to a poetic mode of expression used mainly in connection with the figure of Christ.

The subject of this book is love and, as Shepherd notes, "the love of God is treated essentially as a passionate attachment to the person of Christ." 3 This, to my mind, indicates a deep understanding of the psychology of women on the part of the author especially since, as Rosemary Woolf has shown, the stress upon a "personal and emotional relationship between God and man" was new in the twelfth century. 4 He seems to have realized that, while emphasizing the necessity for holy maidenhood and for the most intense contempt for and control of fleshly lusts and desires, he would have to provide a safe outlet for these very lusts and desires to prevent their becoming pent-up frustrations. Certainly, an abstract and intangible concept like "the blisse of heouene riche" would not suffice for a feminine audience which, as Shepherd puts it, "might be literate, but which was certainly unlearned, averagely sentimental and intellectually unsophisticated." 5 He therefore creates at the centre of his book on love an almost tangible and, at times, a quite sensual portrait of Christ, not as the Son of God, but as the most perfect lover any woman could desire.

What are the means he uses to achieve this? In the first place, the structure of this book throws the figure of Christ into prominence. There is an introduction which deals in a fairly dry, unimaginative way with such customary subjects as purity of heart and the necessity for love in all that we do. St. Augustine is

quoted; there is an Augustinian flavour about much of the discussion, and what little imagery there is seems to be taken directly from the Bible. The conclusion is similarly restrained and scholarly: after the conceit of the Greek fire has been worked out, arguments and phrases from the introduction are repeated; purity of heart is again touched on; love is declared to be the epitome of all laws and rules; and its power over even God Himself is demonstrated by the manipulation of scriptural texts in the accepted manner of sermon-writers. 6 Finally, there is a summary conclusion of the whole Inner Rule, recalling phrases used at the very beginning of the Ancrene Wisse. The introduction and conclusion together, however, comprise only about 110 lines; this leaves a section of over 300 lines which is devoted almost entirely to what Shepherd calls the "Memoria Jesu Christi" and, of these, more than 80 are spoken by Christ Himself in the first person.

At the beginning of this section (p.29,11.22ff)7, the author advances reasons why God is to be loved but, instead of proceeding with a formal, schematic analysis, he launches almost immediately into a series of images, metaphors and exempla which portray Christ first as a courtly and then as an erotic lover, and which form the backbone of the poetic mode of the discussion.

The courtly element is most striking in the parallel which is drawn between Christ's display of love on the Cross and the conception of chivalry in the Arthurian romances, wherein a knight, by means of heroic conduct, would save the lady whom he loved from treacherous capture, thereby hoping to win her love. Christ, the knight in this case, is described both here and later (p.21, 11.18-24 and p.25, 11.4-9) in terms which, as Shepherd notes, closely resemble those used of an ideal lover by Andreas Capellanus in The Art of Courtly Love; 8 the reference to His "cnihtschipe" enhances the aura of romantic chivalry which surrounds Him, and the mention of jousting in former times (p.22, 1.9) sets the whole allegory back in the idealized, fairy-tale past of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthurian England.

Moreover, as the lady involved here (the human soul) chooses to be disdainful and the knight dies in her defence, the author presents at some length (p.22 1.10-p.23, 1.4) an ingenious conceit in which the figure of Christ crucified is shown to resemble a knightly shield. Apart from reinforcing the imaginative theme of Christ as a lover-knight, this also has the effect of focussing attention on the essential fact of Christ's humanity - His body - and, by means

of emotive phrases like "leoue licome" and "the reade blod thet heowede hire se feire", of virtually transforming the practice of venerating and kissing the crucifix already recommended 9 into the embrace of two physical lovers. A similar effect is gained by the image of Christ's allowing His side to be pierced "to schawin hire his heorte, to schawin hire openliche hu inwardliche he luuede hire." (p.23, 11.4-8) The physical and the spiritual become practically inseparable at this point: the heart is the Sacred Heart of Christ, the visible symbol of God's love for sinful man and the object of pious devotion to this day; but it is also the heart of a lover - bared to his mistress and pulsating with love for her.

This subtle shift of emphasis from the ideal to the actual indicates how carefully the author has planned his poetic effects for it acts as a prelude to the complete abandonment of the imagery of courtly love in the following lines. From now on, Christ is no longer a valiant knight wooing a disdainful lady from the distance prescribed by courtliness and chivalry; in whatever role He is cast - the wronged but forgiving husband who throws His arms about the neck of His wayward spouse and, by His embraces, restores her virginity (p.23, 1.25-p.24,1.4), or the ravisher who is quite prepared to use force to have His way (p.25,1.3-p.26,1.8) - His love is immediate, physical, insistent. The author therefore uses words and images relating to light, heat and fire (p.26,1.9-p.27, 1.24); in the image of Christ on the Cross, suffering but triumphant, bowing down to embrace His beloved (p.27,11.3-5), he gives added emphasis to the element of physical love involved in the veneration of the crucifix; and, in his final, emotional exhortation:

Streche thi luue to Jesu Crist, thu hauest him iwunnen.  
 Rin him with ase mucche luue as thu hauest sum mon sum  
 chearre.  
 He is thin to don with al thet tu wilnest. (p.29,11.28-30),

he makes explicit the assumption that seems to underlie his whole treatment of the love of God in terms of the imagery of physical, human love - that is, that carnal love and spiritual love spring from a common source in the human soul. 10

In the course of this article, I have tried to show that, in his book on love, the author of the Ancrene Wisse appeals not so much to our rational intellect as to our emotions, and that he does so through an imaginative portrait of Christ which permeates the

discussion and gives it its essential unity. It is only by recognizing this poetic element in the Ancrene Wisse that we can do justice to the work of a man, who two centuries before Chaucer, showed himself to be not only a rhetorician but also an artist.

### Footnotes:

1. Waldron, R.A., "Enumeration in Ancrene Wisse", Notes and Queries, Vol. 16, No. 3, March, 1969, p.87.
2. Shepherd, G.(ed.), Ancrene Wisse Parts Six and Seven, Nelson, London, 1959, p.(lix) quotes this as one of the principles of sermon-writing as formulated by Alan of Lille.
3. Ibid. p.(li).
4. Woolf, R. "The Theme of Christ the Lover-knight in Medieval English Literature", Review of English Studies, N.S., Vol.XIII, 1962, p.1.
5. Shepherd, G., op. cit. p. (li).
6. Ibid. p. (lxii).
7. All line numbers, unless otherwise stated, are taken from Shepherd, G., op. cit.
8. Shepherd, G., op. cit. quotes from The Art of Courtly Love, Book I, Ch.(vi): "The teaching of some people is said to be that there are five means by which (love) may be acquired: a beautiful figure, excellence of character, extreme readiness of speech, great wealth, and the readiness with which one grants that which is sought."
9. Day, M.(ed.), The English Text of the Ancrene Riwe, Early English Text Society/Oxford University Press, London, 1952, p.60, 11.10-15.
10. Shepherd, G., op. cit., p.(lv) identifies this as one of the three general schemes of relationships between earthly and spiritual love which had been worked out by the twelfth century.

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