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Robert Boeing

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C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce* and the Medieval Dream Vision

**Abstract**
Discusses the genre of the medieval dream vision, with summaries of some of the best known (and their precursors). Analyzes *The Great Divorce* as “a Medieval Dream Vision in which [Lewis] redirects the concerns of the entire genre.”

**Additional Keywords**
Lewis, C.S. The Great Divorce; Medieval dream vision—Relation to The Great Divorce; Medieval dream vision—Sources
As a medievalist, C.S. Lewis, of course, knew that the Dream Vision was one of the most important genres of the Middle Ages; after all, a chapter of his The Allegory of Love is devoted to the most famous medieval Dream Vision, The Romance of the Rose, and references to other Dream Visions are scattered throughout his critical writing. Works like the Old French Romance of the Rose and the Middle English Dream Visions by Chaucer (The Book of the Duchess, The House of Fame, The Parliament of Fowls, and The Legend of Good Women) and John Lydgate (Reason and Sensuality) attest both to the long popularity of the genre (c. AD 1200–1450) and to its versatility: religious, amorous, elegaic, satiric, and moral are the concerns of one or the other of these poems. As a medievalist, Lewis also knew that creativity is a product of the reworking of source material as well as ex nihilo originality; his famous article, “What Chaucer Really Did to Il Filostrato” and his use of Milton’s Paradise Lost for Perelandra, the works of H.G. Wells for Out of the Silent Planet, and the novels of Charles Williams for That Hideous Strength are critical and creative proof of it. The Great Divorce is as much a creative response to source material as his science fiction, for despite the modern landscape with which it begins, it is a medieval Dream Vision in which he redirects the concerns of this entire genre.

The medieval Dream Vision has three precursors: Cicero’s Dream of Scipio, the biblical Apocalypse, and Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy. In Cicero’s work, part of his Republic, the statesman Scipio Africanus the younger, on a visit to Numidia, falls asleep after a long talk with the Numidian King Massinissa and encounters his ancestor, Africanus the elder, in a dream. He is transported to the heavens, looks down upon the earth from the great height, and sees some things valuable for his understanding of reality. Macrobius wrote a commentary on the work, and it is in this form that it was transmitted to the Middle Ages. Chaucer, referring to this commentary in three of his Dream Visions, seems particularly interested in Macrobius’ classifications of dreams into various types. The Apocalypse, of course the most familiar early Dream Vision, needs little introduction, except for the fact that commentaries written about it were almost as influential in the Middle Ages as the work itself; those of Bede and Beata of Libana are noteworthy. The Consolation of Philosophy recounts a vision Boethius, philosopher and statesman under Theodoric in the 6th century, has in prison while awaiting execution for treason; Lady Philosophy appears to him to argue that true wisdom lies not in the unstable world of earthly success. Boethius was transmitted to the Middle Ages in numerous translations, including those into English of King Alfred (9th century) and Chaucer (c. 1380). Somewhat out of our time period, but still interesting attestation to Boethius’ popularity, is the translation made in the late 16th century by Queen Elizabeth I. Briefly put, the plot of the early Dream Vision is this: a first-person narrator falls asleep and meets a guide who reveals some kind of wisdom to him which will either comfort him or give him needed knowledge.

The Romance of the Rose, begun in 1237 by Guillaume de Lorris and completed forty or so years later by Jean de Meun, was by far the most influential of medieval Dream Visions–so much so, that it should be considered the fourth of the genre’s primary sources. In it, a young dreamer finds himself outside a garden in the month of May; on its outside wall are paintings of unpleasant allegorical figures–Hate, Jealousy, and the like. Once a beautiful young woman named Idleness lets him in through the wicker gate, however, he finds not only the most pleasant of spring-time surroundings–birds singing and flowers blooming–but also the corresponding pleasant allegorical figures walking about: Youth, Beauty, and, of course, the God of Love. The Dreamer wanders about the garden seeing its wonders until he arrives at a rosebush where he simultaneously sees a beautiful young blossom and is pierced by the God of Love’s arrows. The Romance of the Rose, as Lewis points out, is an allegory of the changing psychological states of a lover, and the rest of the poem is devoted to the Dreamer’s attempt to pluck the blossom. Guillaume left his poem unfinished, and Jean, in finishing it, turns the pleasant surroundings of the beginning into a curious satire on the oddities of medieval life and philosophy. But it is Guillaume’s beginning that bequeathed both the allegorical method and, more importantly, the springtime setting to the later medieval Dream Visions.

Chaucer translated the first section of The Romance of the Rose into Middle English, but his more original works also reflect its influence. In The Legend of Good Women, for instance, the narrator–as in all of his Dream Visions, a fictive version of Chaucer himself–leaves his books for a walk in the countryside in May to see his favorite flower, the daisy. He later falls asleep and finds himself in the springtime garden of the God of Love, who appears to him and berates him for writing so many stories condemning women. But the god is accompanied by Queen Alcesta, the woman who was turned into a daisy by the gods for her goodness and who suggests to the God of Love that Chaucer do penance by writing a series of stories about good women. In The Parliament of Fowls, Chaucer the Dreamer finds himself in the garden of Love not in May but on St. Valentine’s Day—because of the pre-reform calendar and the procession of the equinoxes and the relatively warm climate of 14th century England, the very beginning of Spring. He there witnesses the gathering of the various birds to choose their mates according to the customs of courtly love. Chaucer departs somewhat from these love-related concerns in his earliest Dream Vision, The Book of the Duchess. There the Dreamer finds himself in the springtime garden not to learn about love, but to participate in an elegy for its loss: he comes
across a Black Knight who is mourning the death of his Lady—an allegory, of course, for the death of Blanche the wife of Chaucer’s patron. John of Gaunt. Chaucer's fourth Dream Vision, The House of Fame is, however, a more radical change of pace, for there the genre is satirized: the narrator dreams not in Spring but in December, the garden is transformed into a desert island, and the courtly God of Love is transformed into the fickle, madcap Goddess of Fame. The Dreamer, moreover, does not simply awake in the place of his vision but must be carried there by an eagle who complains to him about how very heavy he is to carry.

Finally, John Lydgate, writing two generations after Chaucer, returns to a more orthodox medieval Dream Vision, for the springtime garden is back along with the God of Love. The Dreamer awakes in the pleasant countryside, encounters the Goddess of Nature and then the Lady Venus, who rewards a kindness by telling him the way to the garden of Pleasure, and finally the Lady Diana, who warns him of the dangers awaiting him there. Not heeding the warning, he arrives and finds out that it is the very garden of The Romance of the Rose. There the God of Pleasure suggests he play chess with a beautiful maiden, and the poem ends a fragment with a long description of the chess pieces. We know, however, that Lydgate planned the moral point that such pleasant sensuality must be forsaken in favor of the stable, godly reason.

The works I have summarized do not, of course, exhaust the vast genre of the medieval Dream Vision; there are countless others, especially in Old French and Italian, but they represent the central tradition as Lewis knew it. We may summarize the plot of a typical medieval Dream Vision as follows: a first-person narrator falls asleep and finds himself in a springtime garden where he meets a guide who points out the garden's wonders and reveals, often through allegory, some kind of wisdom, usually somehow associated with love. The similarities to and differences from the plot of The Great Divorce should be apparent: there is a first-person narrator, already asleep finds himself in the nasty, twilight city which is Hell. He takes a bus ride through space to a springtime, garden-like landscape, the outskirts of Heaven. There he witnesses confrontations between his ghostlike fellow travelers and the Bright People who try to convince them to stay—incidents with evident allegorical interpretations. He also meets a guide who points out not so much the physical wonders of the garden, but the moral, and through this confrontation, the Dreamer learns, before he wakes up, wisdom about heavenly, not earthly love. There is danger, of course, in such a summary, because if one generalizes, it is easy to emphasize similarities between works at the expense of important differences. The Old English poem, Andreas, for example, has long suffered at the hands of critics, because a scholar once constructed a misleading summary of it that made it appear to be an inept imitation of Beowulf. But a similar criticism, I feel, does not obtain here for two reasons: first, the similarities are not just on the general level of plot summary but descend to the most specific, concrete details, and second, the differences between The Great Divorce and medieval Dream Visions—are in the case of Chaucer’s House of Fame—are reactions to the genre.

Many of the nature descriptions in The Great Divorce, for instance, have analogues in medieval Dream Visions. We hear the birdsong encountered in most visions (see RR 700 ff; PF 190-1) throughout The Great Divorce (see, for instance, pp. 26, 28, and 128). Similarly, the first flower that the narrator Lewis, like Chaucer in The Legend of Good Women, encounters in his garden is the daisy (compare GD, p. 28 with LGW, F-text, 115 ff.). The river next to which so many events in The Great Divorce take place is an even more important borrowing than these, because we can trace Lewis’ actual syntax back to his sources:

It was as smooth as Thames but flowed swiftly like a mountain stream: pale green where trees overhung it but so clear that I could count the pebbles at the bottom. (p. 37)

This is not only acute nature writing but also an allusion to a frequent detail in the Dream Visions; at the beginning of The Romance of the Rose, for instance, the Dreamer finds himself next to such a river:

Toward a river I gan me dress,  
That I heard run fast by . . .  
For from a hill that stood near,  
Came down the stream full stift and bold.  
Clear was the water, and as cold  
As any well is, sooth to say  
And somedell less it was than Seine,  
But it was straignter and well away . . .  
And with that water, that ran so clear,  
My face I wash. Then saw I well  
The bottom paved evydell  
With gravel full of stones sheen.  

The early placement of this river in both works as well as the references to Thames/Seine, the clear water, and the stones on the bottom in the same sequence is good evidence that Lewis had his copy of the Romance open when he was composing The Great Divorce. Compare the river the Dreamer encounters in Lydgate's Reason and Sensuality:

First I will touch and declare  
All the manner and not spare  
Of the River environ,  
Which that is descended down,  
Ever flowing, as I took heed,  
The lusty, fresh, green meed.  
The water was so chrystal clean.  
And as gold the gravel sheen . . .  

Both of these medieval rivers descend from the mountains; perhaps this suggested to Lewis the waterfall which looms so large in his sixth chapter (pp. 48-52).

Not only are many details of nature description in The Great Divorce echoes of those found in medieval Dream Visions, but the descriptions of the people are as well. Lewis describes the Bright People descending from the mountains:

Because they were bright I saw them while they were still very distant, and at first I did not know that they were people at all . . . Some were naked, some robed. But the naked ones did not
The brightness of the people inhabiting gardens in medieval Dream Visions is one of the most repeated details. In the Romance of the Rose, for instance, the Dreamer’s first impression of the people he finds once he is allowed into the garden is that they are bright:

Sir Mirth I found, . . .
And with him in that lusty place
So fair folk and so fresh had he
That when I saw, I wondered me
From whence such folk might come,
So fair they were, all and some;
For they were alike, as to my sight,
To angels that been fethered bright. (733, 736-42)

Similarly, in The Legend of Good Women, the God of Love’s face shines brightly (F-Text, 232); and in The Parliament of Fowls Chaucer, before he falls asleep, reads in Macrobius that Heaven is full of bright souls (77). In Lydgate’s Reason and Sensuality Dame Nature, the Dreamer’s first guide, has a face so bright that it illuminates the landscape (212 ff.)—as do the Faces of Minerva, Juno, and Venus who appear to him later (1001 ff.).

The agelessness of Lewis’s Bright People is not as frequent a detail in medieval Dream Visions, but it is in at least one, Lydgate’s Reason and Sensuality:

For she [Dame Nature] seemed, by her visage
To be but young and tender of age.
For in the face of this queen
There was no spot nor frownce seen.
For this is no nay, as it is couth,
Though she seemed flowering in youth
Through freshness of her visage,
She was full far y-run in age,
That no man could not might anon
Number her years every one . . . (329-38)

Compare this description with that of the special Bright Person who becomes Lewis’ own guide, George Macdonald:

On one of the rocks sat a very tall man, almost a giant, with a flowing beard. I had not yet looked one of the Solid People in the face. Now, when I did so, I discovered that one sees them with a kind of double vision. Here was an enthroned and shining god, whose ageless spirit weighed upon mine like a burden of solid gold: and yet, at the very same moment, here was an old weather-beaten man, one who might have been a shepherd—such a man as tourists think simple because he is honest and neighbors think “deep” for the same reason. His eyes had the far-seeing look of one who has lived long in open, solitary places; and somehow I divined the net-work of wrinkles which must have surrounded them before re-birth had washed him in immortality. (pp. 64-5)

The youthful appearance which on closer inspection reveals great age is the same for both guides; the only difference is that Dame Nature’s wrinkles cannot be divined. The other Bright Person whom Lewis describes at length, Sarah Smith, also has her analogue in the medieval Dream Vision:

First came bright Spirits, not the Spirits of men, who danced and scattered flowers—soundlessly falling, lightly drifting flowers. . . . Then, on the left and right, at each side of the forest avenue, came youthful shapes, boys upon one hand, and girls upon the other. If I could remember their singing and write down the notes, no man who read that score would ever grow sick or old. Between them went musicians: and after these a lady in whose honour all this was being done. . . . And only partly do I remember the unbearable beauty of her face. (pp. 106-7)

Lewis’ reaction to Sarah Smith is similar to Chaucer’s reaction to Queen Alceste in The Legend of Good Women:

A fret of gold she had next [to] her hair,
And upon that a white crown she bare
With flowers small, and I shall not lie;
For all the world, right as a daisy
Y-crowned is with white leaves light,
So were the flowers of her crown white . . .
And by the hand [the God of Love] held this noble queen,
Crowned with white and clothed all in green,
So womanly, so benign, and so meek,
That in this world, though that men would seek,
Half her beauty should men not find
In creature that formed is by kind [i.e., nature].
And therefore may I say, as thinketh me,
This song in praising of this lady free. (215-20; 241-8)

What follows is the ballade of praise Chaucer the Dreamer sings out loud in honor of Queen Alceste. Although not as close as those between George Macdonald and Lydgate’s Dame Nature, the parallels here are nevertheless striking. Both passages start with flowers, run through a series of superlatives and end with song. And, as we find out shortly about both women, they are characterized by their meekness and goodness.

There are also miscellaneous similarities between The Great Divorce and medieval Dream Visions that are not as easy to classify as the descriptions of nature and people. The size of Hell, for instance, changing from “light years” (p. 20) to “smaller than one atom” (p. 122), has a possible analogue in Chaucer’s Parliament of Fowls where the narrator reads in Macrobius that the earth “was so little” compared to Heaven (64: compare 58-9). Once he falls asleep, Chaucer in this same poem discovers that the garden he has entered never experiences night but always “clear day” (209-10)—a detail Lewis appropriates for Heaven and inverts for Hell. And when he awakes from the Vision that is the Parliament, Chaucer finds himself back among his books (605), as does Lewis, who turns this bookish awakening somewhat more violent than the
analogue in Chaucer by casting it during an air raid and having the books topple down upon him (p. 128). Even the game of chess which Lewis views near the end of his Dream Vision (p. 126) has analogues in both The Book of the Duchess (619 ff.) and Reason and Sensuality (579 ff.).

Beyond these similarities of detail there is also an overriding similarity of them. The Great Divorce, of course, is a book about moral choice: each of the Ghosts is presented by his attendant Bright Person with the choice of staying in Heaven or returning to Hell. As George Macdonald puts it,

Ye saw the choices a bit more clearly than ye could see them on earth: the lens was clearer. (p. 127)

Narrators of medieval Dream Visions are similarly faced with choices. Chaucer, for instance, in The Parliament of Fowls is faced with the decision of whether or not to enter the garden. He sees written above its gate words that cast his decision into moral terms:

Through me men go into that blissful place
Of heart's healing and deadly wound's cure;
Through me men go unto the well of grace . . . (127-9)

On the other side is written:

Through me men go . . .
Unto the mortal strokes of the spear . . . (131-5)

These words describe just as well the choice facing the Ghosts in The Great Divorce. Chaucer, however, cannot decide. No wit had I, for error, for to choose
To enter or flee, or me to save or loose. (146-7)

This, of course, is an adequate description of many of the Ghosts in The Great Divorce. With a comic touch inappropriate to Lewis and his theological concerns, Chaucer has to be shoved in by his guide. More serious is the choice facing the Dreamer Lydgate in Reason and Sensuality. As Dame Nature warns him:

There be full many ways new,
Wonderful and right diverse,
Both good and also perverse,
Of which, if I shall not fain,
In especial there be twain.
And thou must choose . . . [One] is the way of Reason
Which causeth man, this is no nay,
For to go the right way
Which hath his [bejginning in the East.
But the other of the West
Is, who can behold and see,
The way of Sensuality. . . . (610-5; 672-8)

The moral point of the poem is that the Dreamer chooses the wrong way by entering the garden and experiencing its sensual delights. Lewis, significantly, reverses this, for his garden, of course, leads towards the East, the daybreak: it is the right way.

Choice, in the conceptual world of The Great Divorce, is also judgement: one's choice determines one's entry to Heaven or Hell. Occasionally medieval Dream Visions contain judge-
of the genre. I think it is an accurate statement to make as well about The Great Divorce and the medieval Dream Vision.

Notes


2 See, for instance, C. S. Lewis, The Discarded Image (London: Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp. 23-8; 35; 54; 60-9; 85; 101; 193; and 198. See also C. S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), p. 63.

3 For a Modern English translation see Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, The Romance of the Rose, trans. Harry W. Robbins (New York: Dutton, 1962). The translation I follow, however, is the Middle English one usually ascribed, at least in part, to Geoffrey Chaucer; see F. N. Robinson, ed., The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), pp. 584-ff. This is the translation that would have been familiar to Lewis.

4 For Chaucer's Dream Visions, see Robinson, op. cit.


7 See my article, "Lewis's Time Machine and his Trip to the Moon," Mythlore 21 (1980), pp. 9-9 for an analysis of Lewis' debt to H. G. Wells for both Out of the Silent Planet and his fragmentary The Dark Tower.


14 For the importance of The Romance of the Rose for the garden imagery in Lewis' science fiction see Mary Ellen Pitts, "The Motif of the Garden in the Novels of J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and C. S. Lewis," Mythlore 30 (1982), pp. 3-6.


17 I have modernized my quotations from the Dream Visions.

18 Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost, p. 39.

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