By "HISTORICAL CRITICISM" I understand that kind of literary analysis which seeks to reconstruct the intellectual attitudes and the cultural ideals of a period in order to reach a fuller understanding of its literature. In actual practice not much criticism of this kind has been written. Although the literary historian sometimes ventures into the realm of historical criticism, he is usually preoccupied with purely literary rather than with intellectual traditions. He seeks to establish texts, to date them, to attribute them to the proper authors, and to determine literary sources and influences. The historian of ideas frequently centers his attention on a single thought pattern so that his materials apply to literature either in a very general way or only to isolated passages. And in recent years the literary critic has tended to avoid historical materials altogether, reacting against the accumulation of historical information which sheds no immediate light on the texts he wishes to study. The historical critic, or at least the kind of historical critic I wish to speak of today, has a healthy respect for the work of the literary historian, which is a necessary basis for his own work. Unlike the historian of ideas, who centers on
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single topics, he attempts to form a workable conception of the intellectual background of a period as a whole, so that the various ideas he has to deal with may be considered in perspective. Meanwhile, he shares the respect of the literary critic for the artistic integrity of the works with which he has to deal, but he looks with some misapprehension on the tendency of the literary critic to regard older literature in the light of modern aesthetic systems, economic philosophies, or psychological theories. He feels that such systems, whatever their value may be, do not exist before they are formulated. In this paper I wish to discuss certain aspects of medieval intellectual history and literary theory and to show that a knowledge of these things contributes to a better understanding of medieval texts. Since this discussion must be presented in a relatively short time, I may be excused for a certain amount of oversimplification.

First of all, medieval literature was produced in a world dominated intellectually by the church. Too frequently, modern historians have tended to deplore this fact rather than to make a sincere effort to understand it. Neither the church nor the doctrine it sought to teach was exactly like anything existing in the world today, for the rigorous Augustinian Christianity of the Middle Ages has been softened and sentimentalized in almost all modern churches. Whatever it may mean to the historian, the dominance of the church in the Middle Ages considerably simplifies the task of the historical critic. Although the period witnessed an enormous theological development, especially after the middle of the twelfth century, certain doctrines remained constant, the common heritage of every civilized individual for more than a thousand years of European history. The most important of these constants is the doctrine of charity. Some knowledge of this doctrine is essential to an understanding either of medieval history in general or of medieval literature in particular. Since the word “charity” has lost most of its old content today, some explanation of it here may be helpful. Charity, briefly, is the New Law which Christ brought so that mankind might be saved. Under the Old Law, which Piers Plowman tears in half to the astonishment of literary historians, salvation was not possible. The New Law does not replace the Old Law, but simply vivifies it, and all of the Old Law is implicit in the New. It may be stated very simply, but like most simple statements it is not easy to understand. Love God and thy neighbor. For most of us, including myself, the love of God is a very difficult concept, and I shall not attempt to explain it except to say that, very roughly, the medieval love of God is the equivalent of a modern faith in the perfectibility of mankind. God, as St. John says, is charity. Love of one’s neighbor does not imply love of man for his own sake, but love of man for the sake of God, for his nobility in reason. Man should be loved for his humanity, and this humanity consists of that part of him which distinguishes him from the beasts, his reason. To be human and lovable in the Middle Ages was to be reasonable, for reason is the Image of God in man. It is vain to seek “humanism” of any other kind
in medieval literature, except in that written by avowed heretics. To love a man for physical, romantic, or sentimental reasons is to indulge in the opposite of charity.

The opposite of charity is cupidity, the love of one's self or of any other creature—man, woman, child, or inanimate object—for the sake of the creature rather than for the sake of God. Just as charity is the source of all the virtues, cupidity is the source of all the vices and is responsible for the discontents of civilization. The two loves, both of which inflame, and both of which make one humble, are accompanied by two fears. Charity, like wisdom, begins with the fear of the Lord; and the fear of earthly misfortune leads to cupidity and ultimately to despair and damnation. These two loves and their accompanying fears are the criteria by means of which all human actions, individual or social, are to be evaluated. To use a common figure, charity builds the city of Jerusalem, and cupidity builds the city of Babylon. Man is a pilgrim or exile in a Babylonian world who should journey toward the eternal peace of Jerusalem. The world and the things in it are given to him to be used for the purposes of this journey or voyage; they are not to be enjoyed in themselves. Jerusalem was thought of as existing within the human heart, in the church or in society, and in the after life, and the pilgrimage of the spirit had to be made, as Will learns in *Piers Plowman*, first within one's self. It is frequently said that medieval man kept his eyes directed toward the after life, but this is an exaggeration. He did engage, or

propose to engage, on an eternal quest for Jerusalem, but this quest was individual and social as well as other worldly. It is as if in the modern world we were able to discuss the goal of personal effort, of social effort, and of religious effort in a single terminology, and to come to an agreement about the general meaning of that terminology.

This opposition between the two loves, or the two cities, is fundamental to an understanding of medieval Christianity throughout the thousand years of its history. Naturally, the specific elaborations and applications of this doctrine varied with the course of time, so that the historical critic finds it necessary to consider a given literary work in the light of contemporary theological developments. Thus, for example, the poem known as "The Debate of the Body and the Soul" was written as a part of a concerted effort to popularize the sacrament of Penance, which began with the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. A few books will establish a frame of reference for the most significant aspects of this development. Generally, for the earlier Middle Ages, the most useful works in which widely accepted doctrinal elaborations of charity may be found are the *De doctrina Christiana* of St. Augustine, his *Civitas Dei*, and the *De clericorum institutione* of Rabanus Maurus. In addition, the *De consolatione* of Boethius contains what was throughout the entire course of the Middle Ages the most popular philosophical elaboration of Augustinian doctrine. This work has recently been called "the last purified legacy of the ancient world," but the ancient aspects
of the book are merely formal. It is, rather, a section of the preface to the medieval world. Most of this preface was written not by Boethius, but by St. Augustine. For the later Middle Ages the most fundamental work is the *Sententiae* of Peter Lombard, which was for some four hundred years the standard textbook of theological study. The *De sacramentis* and the *Didascalicon* of Hugh of St. Victor contain many ideas which are highly significant to an understanding of both theological and literary developments. After the middle of the thirteenth century it is necessary to follow three distinct types of theology: Dominican, Franciscan, and secular. Both the Dominicans and the Franciscans collected and wrote poetry, each order developing its own literary traditions. And the seculars inspired some of the most famous writers of the later Middle Ages, such as Jean de Meun, Chaucer, and the author of *Piers Plowman*. For Dominican attitudes nothing can replace the *Summa* of St. Thomas Aquinas, although this work should not be used as a guidebook to medieval theology generally. Franciscan attitudes are accessible in the works of St. Bonaventura, which are available in a magnificent modern edition. The secular theologians, who should be of special interest to students of English, are poorly represented in modern editions. William of St. Amour, the founder of the late secular tradition, has received little attention from modern scholars, but the *quodlibets* of one of his successors, Godefroid de Fontaines, are now available in an excellent edition published at Louvain. Meanwhile, the thirteenth century wit-
"nine" are signs of the Trinity; "seven" is the number of life on earth or of the church; "eight" indicates the Resurrection or Christ. Many of the things mentioned in the Bible were thought of as signs of other things. Thus, a lion, not the word "lion," is a sign either of Christ or of Satan. As in this instance, such signs frequently embrace two opposites. A sign, as opposed to a verbal figure, might have tropological, allegorical, or analogical values—sometimes one of these, sometimes two, and sometimes all three. In other words, a principle stated in signs or implied by a sign might apply to the individual, to society or the church, and to the after life. This procedure is not quite so "mystical" as it sounds. All that is meant by it ultimately is that a given precept or principle may apply equally well within man, within society, or within Heaven or Hell. A good example is afforded by "Jerusalem." Verbally, it means "City of Peace." But since Jerusalem is an actual city as well as a word, it is also a sign. As a sign it indicates the highest kind of human satisfaction, whether in the individual, in society, or in Heaven. The values of a given sign might be numerous. In the first place, a sign may have four levels of meaning. If we include the opposites, there are eight. And some signs might have several basic meanings, so that they imply several sets of eight somewhat different values. Theoretically an object may have as many meanings as it has characteristics in common with other objects in the universe, but practically the better known signs are limited by the contexts in which they appear in Scripture. For purposes of clarity, I shall speak of verbal symbols as "figures" and of physical symbols as "signs." The importance attached to this kind of analysis in the Middle Ages is attested by the fact that the *trivium* was devoted to the analysis of figures and the *quadrivium* to the analysis of signs. Medieval encyclopedias, the *De universo* of Rabanus Maurus, for example, are largely devoted to the exegetical meanings of figures and signs. And in the twelfth century, a number of exegetical dictionaries were published, giving the most common values for figures and signs in the Bible. One of these was written by a poet, Alanus de Insulis.

Much of the Bible was thus thought of as having a "cortex," or level of surface meaning, covering a "nucleus" of truth. The task of the exegete was to strip the cortex away by interpreting the figures and signs, so that the nucleus might be revealed. No one looked upon the obscurity of the Bible as an evil; on the contrary, it was thought to be highly advantageous. First, the determination of the inner meaning required an exercise of the mind which tends to discourage both contempt for the text and laziness. Again, one arrived at the nucleus with something of the pleasure of a discovery. To paraphrase St. Augustine on this point, that which is acquired with difficulty is much more readily and pleasurably retained. Finally, if the great truths of the faith were expressed too openly, the result might be to cast pearls before swine, or to enable the foolish to repeat without understanding. This reasoning is similar to that used in the Bible to explain why Christ spoke to the multi-
tude in parables. These arguments in favor of obscurity, developed by St. Augustine and the early exegetes, are employed by Petrarch at the close of the Middle Ages to defend the obscurity of poetry.

The analogy between Scriptural techniques and poetic techniques was observed at a very early period. Scotus, for example, makes a direct comparison of the two. Christian thinkers were for the most part loth to part with their heritage of Classical literature, especially Latin literature. Since, however, it could not be enjoyed in itself, but was to be used for purposes of furthering charity, it was necessary to interpret it much in the same way that it was necessary to interpret the Old Testament. But in the interpretation of pagan literature only verbal techniques could be employed. Pagan authors might be capable of rhetoric and word play, but they could not be expected to understand the signs whose meanings are revealed only under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, pagan poetic narratives are not accounts of actual events. The Aeneid is not a history, but a lying fable. Beneath the lying cortex, however, diligent study may reveal a nucleus useful to the faith. The words “cortex” and “nucleus,” together with a variety of synonyms for them, became popular literary terms as well as exegetical terms in the course of the Middle Ages. St. Augustine speaks of a poetic “tectorium”; Theodolph of Orleans uses the word “tegmen”; Alanus de Insulis uses “integumentum,” “involucrum,” and “pallium” as well as “cortex”; and Chaucer uses the words “fruyt” and “chaf” for “nucleus” and “cortex.” A medieval Christian poem was like a pagan poem in that the external narrative was a lie. The poet combined things not found combined in nature so as to form an artificial “pictura.” In the twelfth century, Alanus calls the process of combination “conjunctura,” and Chrétien de Troyes speaks of his Erec as a “molt bele conjointure.” But a medieval Christian poem differs from a pagan poem in that the author might employ signs as they are used in the Bible as well as figures. Thus, any of the multitude of Scriptural signs may appear in a medieval poem, and since these signs are things, the new poetic combination of them may not resemble verbally any passage in Scripture. For example, a Christian poem may contain a description of a garden based on signs taken from both Genesis and the Canticum and dressed up to suit the literary tastes of the poet’s own audience. The result is a pictura which is fundamentally Biblical, but which does not resemble any Biblical scene and does not contain any Biblical phrases. There are gardens of this kind in Old English literature, in the romances, in the Roman de la Rose, in Chaucer, in Piers Plowman, and in a great many other places, but it is impossible to detect their existence except by the methods of historical criticism.

In the schools of the twelfth century any text, Biblical or profane, was read in three ways. First one read for the “littera,” or the grammatical and syntactical construction. Next one proceeded to the “sensus,” or obvious meaning. Finally, one sought to determine the “sententia,” or doctrinal content. This last step
were the end toward which all interpretation was directed, the first two steps being preliminary. The *littera* of the *Aeneid*, for example, would involve the kind of comments one still finds in textbooks for use in schools. The *sensus* would be the bare narrative without interpretation, and the *sententia* would consist of the kind of observations made in the twelfth century commentary by Bernard Silvestris. Marie de France seems to be aware of these three elements in the prologue to her *Lais*, and at the beginning of the *Roman de la charrette* Chrétien de Troyes says that his patroness gave him the matter and sense, or *sensus*, of the story; he has added nothing but his own labor and "antancion," or *sententia*. Chaucer makes several references to "sentence," as he calls it, and Thomas Usk begins his *Testament of Love* with an observation to the effect that it is difficult to get one's "sentence" across to a dull audience. Most modern discussions of medieval literature have been concerned only with the *littera* and *sensus*. This is a restriction which would have been most unsatisfactory to the medieval reader.

These remarks indicate that poetry during the Middle Ages was thought of as being allegorical. If we take "allegoria" in the medieval sense, saying one thing to mean another, this observation is very just. Medieval Christian poetry, and by Christian poetry I mean all serious poetry written by Christian authors, even that usually called "secular," is always allegorical when the message of charity or some corollary of it is not evident on the surface. As John of Salisbury asserts, reflecting a very common attitude, nothing is worth reading unless it promotes charity. The poet wished to make his message vivid and memorable, and at the same time he did not want to cast pearls before swine, so that his normal office was to construct obscure and puzzling combinations of events, frequently involving tantalizing surface inconsistencies, in order to stimulate his audience to intellectual effort.

The *sententia* or *nucleus* of a poem arises from the figures and signs it contains. It is thus obviously impossible to interpret medieval poems without determining first what the figures and signs in it mean. In this enterprise, the use of surface associations and of one's own knowledge of Scripture is helpful, but not sufficient. A few of the signs still survive as secondary meanings of words. One of the values for "sleep," for example, was sexual embrace, and this notion still clings to the word in certain contexts. Again, the modern phrase "at the eleventh hour," meaning "at the last minute," stems from the medieval interpretation of the Parable of the Vineyard. But relics of this kind are rare. No one today, I think, would be inclined offhand to associate a worm with Christ or to guess that frost and ice are signs of Satan or of the adversities he uses for purposes of temptation. To determine what a sign means we must consult exegetical works of various kinds. In this connection, there were some works, such as the commentaries of Augustine, Bede, Gregory, and Rabanus, which remained standard reference works throughout the Middle Ages. In the twelfth century the *Glossa ordinaria* offered a con-
venient short cut to conventional interpretations, although these are often so abbreviated that it is necessary to look at the original commentaries as well. The exegetical writings of Peter Lombard and Hugh of St. Victor were especially influential. Later on, much of the exegetical work was done by friars, but fraternal commentaries should be used only in the study of literature influenced by the fraternal orders. The commentaries of St. Thomas are occasionally applicable to situations in Piers Plowman, but this is true only because St. Thomas frequently reflects earlier traditions. The controversy between the friars and the seculars was very violent in the fourteenth century, and the friars were accused of interpreting the Bible to suit their own special interests.

Some specific applications of the principles we have outlined will indicate their usefulness. What has been said above, incidentally, constitutes only the barest outline, and it will be impossible to do more than to illustrate very briefly here. For the medieval interpretation of pagan poetry we may consult either the commentary on the Aeneid by Bernard Silvestris or the Old French Ovide moralisé, both of which have been edited in modern times. Scholars have been too ready to dismiss these commentaries with a contemptuous shrug. But these works and others like them show the principles of medieval poetic theory in operation and are good indications of the kind of interpretation a medieval poet might expect his own work to be subjected to. The better educated poets, moreover, did not hesitate to employ allegorical devices or figures from these commentaries in their poems, and they sometimes made their own reinterpretations of them. When Chaucer, for example, mentions Dido, we should not think of the Aeneid as we understand it, but as Chaucer must have understood it. But it is also clear that Chaucer’s use of the story of Ceyx and Alcyone in The Book of the Duchess does not depend on the interpretation of that story given in the Ovide moralisé. Some of the Ovidian characters achieved fairly widespread conventional interpretations, as students of medieval art are aware. But others were subject to widespread fluctuations in meaning. In general, it is fortunate for the critic that Scriptural figures and signs are more common in poetry than are figures from the classics.

We may begin at the beginning, as it were, with a selection from Old English poetry. There has been a general tendency to think of this poetry as being at its best romantic after an exotic Germanic fashion and at its worst crude, barbaric, naïve, and incoherent. After reading a conventional history of the literature of ancient England one emerges with visions of rather stupid, but nevertheless heroic, Wagnerian figures looming on cold misty headlands or making their way through gloomy fens inhabited by old Germanic monsters. The flashes of obvious Christianity in this poetry are conventionally described as the work of monkish revisers or pious interpolators armed with what are called “sops.” Recently the conception of the Old English poet has been gradually undergoing a change, and many scholars concede that the Beowulf poet was
a well-educated man with fundamentally pious intentions. We might say as much, I think, for the author of *The Wanderer*, whose poem I wish to examine very briefly. Conventionally, although there have been voices to the contrary, the poem is regarded as a mixture of pagan and Christian elements arranged incoherently in the form of a dialogue which no one knows quite how to punctuate. The most recent history of Old English literature informs us that the obviously Christian ending has nothing to do with the body of the poem. Let us look for a moment at the opening lines, which I quote for purposes of clarity in Gordon's translation: "Often the solitary man prays for favor, for the mercy of the Lord, though, sad at heart, he must needs stir with his hands for a weary while the icy sea across the watery ways, must journey the paths of exile; settled in truth is fate!" On the surface we have a picture of a man sorrowfully rowing across icy seas with his hands, traveling in exile in a fashion said to be usual among the Germanic tribes. The speaker comments that fate is inexorable, an idea which is said to reflect the doctrines of Germanic paganism. However, the picture of the exile suggests at once one of the commonest of all Christian figures, the exile in the world who wanders in search of Christ, his Lord, in Jerusalem. And if we look in either Augustine, Gregory, or Bede, or even in Boethius, we find that the sea is a very common sign for the world in which the pilgrim makes his journey. The word "fate" represents Old English "wyrd," which is the term used in Old English to translate "Fortuna," the Boethian personification of the inexorable instability of the world. What the opening lines say, therefore, is that the pilgrim or exile in the world faces difficulties as he prays to God for mercy and confronts the trials of Fortune.

The poet tells us that the opening observation is made by a dweller on earth who is "mindful of hardships, of cruel slaughters, of the fall of kinsmen." Again, we think of the hardships of the old Germanic life, of battles and bloody wounds. On the surface, that is exactly what the poet was thinking of, but the wayfaring Christian is also a warfaring Christian, as students of Milton are uncomfortably aware. The battle of the Christian exile, concerning which St. Augustine wrote a book, is a battle against cupidity in himself and against heresy and the temptations of Fortune in the world. In a larger sense, it is the battle against Satan. And there are many who fall, a fact which disturbs the speaker in our poem. He is described later, for there is only one speaker, as a wise man who sits apart in thought. The poem itself constitutes the advice of this wise contemplative to his wayfaring and warfaring fellow Christians. Modestly, the poet does not offer this advice himself, but attributes it to someone else, a man who makes vivid reference to Scripture and to the observations of another wise man, Solomon.

The speaker continues by referring to his own troubles. He bewails them, he says, alone "at the dawn of each day." Why the dawn? Are troubles most oppressive at dawn, or was it at the dawn that the ancient
Germanic peoples communed with their pagan gods of consolation? If we consult Gregory, we find that the dawn is a sign of the light of God's justice. In other words, the wise man considers his troubles alone in the light of Divine Providence, as Boethius learns to do in the De consolatione. He does not complain to his fellow men about them. Surely this must be a reference to some sort of pagan Stoicism. But let us hear Bede on this point. The Apostle James, he says (lac. 5:3),

prohibits us from complaining to our fellows in adversity and shows what is to be done instead. If you happen to be deprived of anything in sorrow, or if other men injure you by force, or if you are wounded, or burdened by a family affliction, or if for any other reason you are made sorrowful, do not in that time complain to your neighbor and murmur against God's justice, but rather hasten to the Church and with bended knee pray to God that he may send you the gift of consolation, lest the sorrows of this world, which bring death [to the spirit], absorb you. Christianity itself was not without its genuinely heroic virtues. The wise man continues, saying "Nor can the weary mood resist fate, nor does the fierce thought avail anything." The "weary mood" and the "fierce thought" are the twin evils of despair and overconfidence, which, as St. Augustine explains in one of his sermons, kill the souls of men. Our speaker describes his own exile, which began, as he says, with the burial of his "gold-friend." The meaning of this burial would have been clear, I believe, to the medieval audience, for as St. Paul says (Rom. 6:3–6), baptism is a participation in the burial of Christ. And the exile of the

Christian in the world begins with baptism, "the first raft after shipwreck." Having outlined his own search for Christ, the speaker cites the authority of the experienced man on the dangers and sorrows of the way. The pilgrim will avoid cupidity and the desire for gold. He will think of his one fleeting union with Christ at baptism and dream of embracing his Lord again when he finds him a King in Heaven as He was once a King on earth. But such visions do not last long, and the wayfarer must return again to the sterile ways of the world. There he finds little consolation in his fellow-pilgrims, for they, too, are subject to Fortune. The succeeding admonitions in the poem are orthodox enough. We are cautioned to be patient, for the Day of Doom will come, when the world and all its evils will disappear. Tokens of Doomsday are all about us in the ruins of once proud kingdoms. The Kings of the earth and all their trappings are ephemeral. Another token of Doom is the Flood, wherein the giants perished from the Earth. These giants, like some other giants in Old English literature, are only superficially, if at all, relics of Germanic superstition. In the commentaries the giants in the earth are simply those who become monsters by destroying the Image of God within themselves by cupidity. They were destroyed in the Flood, but, as Bede assures us, they arose again afterward. One of these later giants was Grendel, in whose lair was found a sword used in the battle of giants and men before the Flood. The poem moves toward a close with a brilliant rhetorical expression of the lesson of Ecclesiastes. The world,
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with its cold northern storms of temptation, its darkness of sin, and its transient human inhabitants, is vain. The poet has already suggested the fate of those who embrace it. These are the observations of the wise man, who concludes: "Well is it for him who seeks mercy, comfort from the Father in Heaven, where for us all security stands." This is the nucleus of the poem, the lesson implicit under the cortex from the very beginning. The poet has commended the proper love, the love for the gold-friend Christ, and condemned as foolish the improper love of the world.

The traditional pattern of thought in this poem is the very essence of medieval literary expression. Our wandering pilgrim walks in all the varied costumes of the Middle Ages. Sometimes he achieves the company of his Lord, at least in spirit, as Ivain does in Chrétien’s romance. At other times he runs with comic hilarity in the wrong direction, as does Aucassin. In *Piers Plowman* he travels in the guise of the human will seeking Truth in the confused field of the fourteenth-century church. And he is the prototype of these pilgrims to Canterbury who are actually pilgrims to Jerusalem, except for the Pardoner, as the “povre person” suggests when he speaks to them.

Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrimage
That highte Jerusalem celestial.

In his ballade called “Truth” Chaucer advises us all to be pilgrims like the wanderer in the old poem. The problems which the wise man discusses in *The Wanderer* are the problems of every “poor wayfaring stranger” who must “travel through this world of woe.” Nothing could be more mistaken than the usual notion that Old English literature exists in a kind of peculiar Germanic isolation from the rest of medieval literature. On the contrary, it is in Old English poetry that the grand themes and the poetic techniques of medieval literature are first established in a vernacular. For further evidence in support of this assertion, I refer you to a forthcoming study of this poetry by Professor Bernard F. Huppé, an excellent historical critic.

For a second illustration, I wish to consider a poem written in a lighter vein, the Middle English “Owl and the Nightingale.” We shall have time to consider only a few of the key figures and signs in the poem. Neither the Owl nor the Nightingale is a Scriptural sign, but the two birds do have some meaning in literary traditions. An owl’s cry was heard by Dido in the *Aeneid*, foretelling the evil fate of her love. As John of Salisbury puts it, making the time of the cry a little more crucial than Vergil makes it, “Bubonem Dido, dum miseretur Eneae, sensit inf austum.” He also finds the owl to be a figure of foresight. Moreover, the owl was sacred to Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, and the wisdom of the owl is still proverbial. The nightingale, on the other hand, is frequently, although not always, associated with the wrong love. Thus, in Chrétien’s *Cligés* it is the song of a nightingale which entices Fénice to her adulterous “déluit” in the garden constructed by Jehan. Another nightingale brings Iseut to meet Tristan under their
pine tree. Again, the moralization of Chrétien's Philomena in the *Ovide moralisé* speaks of

Philomena, qui signifie
Amour decevable et faille.

This evidence is admittedly scattered and unsatisfactory, but it points to a contrast between foresight, or wisdom, and the love of the world. In the poem itself, the Nightingale is said to dwell in a flowery hedge amidst tall grass. The Owl, on the other hand, occupies an old stock covered with ivy. The Nightingale associates itself with flowers and with springtime, but the Owl compares the Nightingale's dwelling unfavorably with its own. The ivy does not fade in either summer or winter, but the Nightingale's flowers and grass are transitory. The general features of these descriptions are, unlike the Owl and the Nightingale themselves, familiar Scriptural signs. In Isaiah 40:6–8, the transitory flower of the grass is contrasted with the Word of God. St. Jerome compares this flower with the beauty of a girl who attracts many followers, but who soon fades. It is the flower of the flesh, the flower of that greatest of all modern fictional women who said "We are flowers all." St. Jerome classes the admirers of this *flos fenī* with those who bear the earthly image rather than the Image of God. In St. Augustine's commentary on the first Psalm, the flower of the grass is contrasted with the evergreen leaf of God's Word on the Tree of Life. This contrast is repeated by Bede, in his commentary on the Catholic Epistles, where the evergreen tree of the just, in this

instance a palm, is shown to be superior to the flower of cupidity, which withers in the sunshine of God's justice. Both the fading flower and the evergreen leaf appear in other parts of Scripture and in the work of other commentators. The old stock where the Owl resides thus appears to be an aspect of the Tree of Life, which may represent Christ, or the church, or the just. And the flowery hedge of the Nightingale is the fading glory of the flesh which the Nightingale encourages with his summery songs. At one point in his argument, the Nightingale says that he sings by the bower

959  þar lauerd liggeþ & lauciþ.

He evidently means that he encourages legitimate wedded love. For the Owl replies that the Nightingale does not always further such love.

1045  þu seist þu witest manne bures,
þer leues heþ & faire flourès,
þær two iloue in one bedde
liggeþ bi-clop & wel bi-hedde.
Enes þu sunga, ic wod wel ware,
bí one bure, & woldest lere
þe lefði to an uuel luue. . . .

Here the bower of wedded love is appropriately characterized by the presence of both leaves and flowers, for it is there that the glory of the flesh is made harmonious with the Word of God. The debate in the poem is a cleverly disguised and humorous contest between the wisdom of the Owl and the fleshly love of the Nightingale. And there can be no doubt as to
where the poet’s sympathies lie. The Owl is confident that Master Nicholas, who will judge the debate, although he once affected nightingales and other “wighte gente & smale,” is now “a-coled.” The wintry sorrow associated with the Owl is the sorrow of the wanderer who finds the world a dark and frosty dwelling unworthy of confidence and enjoyment for its own sake.

An excellent example of poetic *aenigma* is afforded by the fourteenth-century poem called “The Maid of the Moor.” The interpretation offered here was developed in collaboration with Professor Huppé, who also shares responsibility for the approach as a whole. The poem is short enough to quote in its entirety.

Maiden in the mor lay,
    In the mor lay,
Seuenyst fulle, seuenist fulle,
Maiden in the mor lay,
    In the mor lay,
Seuenistes fulle ant a day.

Welle was hire mete;
    Wat was hire mete?
    þe primerole ant the,—
    þe primerole ant the,—
Welle was hire mete;
    Wat was hire mete?—
    The primerole ant the violet.

Welle was hire dryng
    Wat was hire dryng?
The chelde water of þe welle spring.

Welle was hire bour;
    Wat was hire bour?
    þe rede rose an te lilie flour.
existence of *sententia* in its technical sense in the prologue to the Tale of Melibee. We should not be unjustified, therefore, in seeking this “sentence” in his works. Parenthetically, I believe that a failure to look beneath the surface of Chaucer’s works has caused us to miss a great deal of the humor they contain. Chaucer’s surface fun-making is obvious enough, but the spectacle of the pilgrim who leaves the true way in pursuit of some ephemeral satisfaction only to fall heels over head in the mire is one of the chief sources of medieval comedy. For the fall of man can be comic as well as pathetic or tragic. Be that as it may, let us consider briefly the key figure in the prologue to “The Legend of Good Women,” the daisy. The daisy is not a Scriptural sign, but it has certain affiliations with some of the signs we found in “The Owl and the Nightingale.” It is a flower

Fulfyld of vertu and of alle honour
And ever ylike fayr and fresh of hewe
As wel in wynter as in somer newe.

Although the daisy is a flower of the grass, it is peculiar among such flowers in that it blooms in winter as well as in summer. Moreover, it has an affinity for the sun and is “afered of the nyght.” Chaucer says that he has nothing to do with the contest between the flower and the leaf, since he is concerned with something which antedates that conflict. Now the conflict between the flower and the leaf began with the Fall, for it was then that the glory of the flesh was first opposed to the Word of God. These hints should make the meaning of the daisy clear. Since it survives the winter, it shares the characteristics of both flower and leaf. That is, it is like those bower[s] referred to by the Owl, where there are both leaves and flowers. Moreover, it has an affinity for the sun, which is a sign of God’s justice. And the night which it fears is the night of sin, the night of the deed of darkness. Before the Fall the flower and the leaf were combined in the conjugal love of Adam and Eve, which was regarded during the Middle Ages as the type to be imitated by all good married couples. Thus, the daisy is an appropriate figure of conjugal love, a conclusion which is reinforced by the fact that it is identified with Alcestis, who in both literary exegesis and in medieval art represents conjugal fidelity. In Chaucer’s poem she wears the green robe of God’s Word, and her crown is made of pearl, a Scriptural sign of innocence or freedom from sin. This crown is decorated with those legitimate flowers of the flesh which bloom only under the sacrament of wedlock. Married love looks to God’s justice for its inspiration, is “afered” of sin, preserves the innocence of its participants, is harmonious with the Word of God, but fears neither the “heat o’ the sun” nor the “furious winter’s rages.” This interpretation of the daisy receives further confirmation in a ballade by Trebor, where it is said that Jupiter espoused the daisy in Engedi. The reference to Engedi in the Canticum is a reference to the marriage of Christ and the church, a marriage used in the Epistles as a symbol for true human marriage. Chaucer’s literary contemplation of the daisy
and its beauties is neither mere poetic decoration nor irrelevant historical allusion, but a graceful and forceful tribute to one of the highest kinds of human affection and one of the most humanly accessible forms of charity. On the whole, I think that it is safe to say that Chaucer is seldom given either to airy flights of fancy or to superfluous verbiage. The details of his poetry are deliberate and meaningful contributions to his "sentence."

To conclude, I think it is obvious that interpretations of this kind, if they are worth making at all, cannot be made without a great deal of historical research. Since the illustrations used here are necessarily brief and lack full documentation, I shall ask you to suspend judgment concerning them until the publication of more thorough studies. In this paper I have not illustrated the necessity for an awareness of specific theological attitudes, since it seemed to me that the discussion of theological complexities might be inappropriate at this time. When the method is applied, however, literary works which have heretofore seemed incoherent or meaningless become consistent, meaningful, and aesthetically attractive. Whether similar methods, employing different background materials, might be fruitful in other periods, I am not prepared to say. But I am convinced that if we can achieve some understanding of and respect for the cultural ideals of the Middle Ages, we shall find the literature of the period much more fruitful than we have usually thought it to be. The allegorical character of medieval poetry made possible an almost unbelievable richness and subtlety of expression. And the ideals which that poetry reflects, although they may not be so romantically attractive as those of pagan literature, ancient or modern, are, after all, the ideals upon which Western civilization was founded.

Pedagogically speaking, it is, I think, our duty to inculcate in our students an admiration for the ideals which have enabled men to achieve cultural satisfaction in the past. It is only on the basis of a knowledge of these ideals that new ideals may be firmly established. In the sophisticated glitter of the modern world we have tended to forget the wise humility taught in the twelfth century by Bernard of Chartres, who said, "We are as dwarves upon the shoulders of giants." Moreover, our judgments of value are dependent not only on our own experience, but also on the conception we are able to formulate of the experience of humanity. The better we are able to understand our own history, the wiser we ourselves will be. Literature, regarded historically, is an excellent guide to this larger experience. Regarded historically, in short, it can provide the food of wisdom as well as more transient aesthetic satisfactions. To think of reasons for denying this is simply to think of reasons for shirking our own responsibilities.