

A Veiled Language: The Classical Origins of Renaissance Allegory

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Abstract. As a literary mode of expression and interpretation, allegory has been a matter of much controversy in modern studies of literature. Since the main emphasis has often been on a theory of allegory without an account of its historical origin and development, this has led to some serious misconception. This paper approaches allegory in a historical context and thus shows its rise and development from antiquity to the Renaissance, when it attained its literary and artistic maturity.

As a literary mode of expression and interpretation, allegory has been a matter of much controversy in modern studies of literature.⁽¹⁾ Since the main emphasis has often been on a theory of allegory without an account of its historical origin and development, this has, I believe, led to some serious misconception. The purpose of this study is to approach allegory in a historical context and thus to study its rise and development from antiquity to the Renaissance, when it attained its literary and artistic maturity. Because the Renaissance sensibility for allegory was nourished by classical and post-classical examples and theories, and because this sensibility began to lose its vigor after the sixteenth century - perhaps with the exception of Milton - the use of allegory from the Renaissance to our own times yet remains to be studied separately.

Before turning to antiquity, it may be helpful as an introduction to the subject to quote from Milton's *Il Penseroso*:

And if aught else great bards beside
In sage and solemn tunes have sung,

⁽¹⁾ See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), especially 89-91. Also see Edwin Honig, *Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), and Angus J.S. Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1964).

Of journeys, and of trophies hung,
 Of forests, and enchantments drear,
 Where more is meant than meets the ear.

(lines 116-20)

Milton was certainly right in his search for meanings deeper than could be understood literally in the works of “great bards,” for he was himself in that literary tradition that not only used a veiled language for themes and images but also assumed that deeper meanings were hidden under this veiled language. This was the language of allegory, and its literary tradition went back to antiquity. For instance, when Spenser in the sixteenth century called allegory a “darke conceit,”⁽²⁾ he was in fact reiterating the traditional classical view that allegory was, as Demetrius around the first century B.C. had asserted, “a sort of darkness and night.”⁽³⁾ In fact, this suggestion of obscurity or concealment by means of the allegorical veil is inherent in the etymology of the word allegory itself. Allegory, which is adapted from the Latin *allegoria*, derives from the Greek *allegoria*, which means “veiled language”⁽⁴⁾ and literally signifies “speaking otherwise than one seems to speak” for *allegoria* is the compound of *allos* (other) and *agoria* (speaking). Hence, from antiquity to the Renaissance, allegory as a mode of expression meant the concealment of various levels of meaning under the literal surface of words and images, while as a mode of interpretation it signified the discovery of these hidden meanings. In this respect, what Spenser’s contemporary Sir John Harington wrote about the levels of meaning in poetry sums up this traditional concept of allegory:

The men of greatest learning and highest wit in the auncient times, did of purpose conceale these deepe mysteries of learning, and as it were couer them with the vaile of fables and verse for sundrie causes; one cause was, that they might not be rashly abused by profane wits, in whom science is corrupted, like good wine in a bad vessell:... another, and a principall cause of all, is to be able with one kinde of meate and one dish (as I may so call it) to feed diuers tastes. For the weaker capacities will feed themselves with the pleasantnes of the historie and sweetnes of the verse, some that haue stronger stomackes will as it were rake a further taste of the Morall sence, a third sort more high conceited than they, will digest the Allegorie: so as indeed it hath bene thought by men of verie good judgement, such manner of Poeticall writing was an excellent way to preserue all kinde of learning.⁽⁵⁾

Concerning the same subject, Harington again pointed out that:

first of all for the literall sence (as it were the vtmost barke or ryne) they (poets) set downe in manner of an historie, the acts and notabale exploits of some persons worthy of memorie;

⁽²⁾ See his letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, included in his *Poetical works*, eds. J.C. Smith and Ernest de Selincourt, Oxford Standard Authors edn (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), 407-408. Hereafter reference is to this edition.

⁽³⁾ D.A. Russell and M. Winterbottom, eds., *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 192.

⁽⁴⁾ Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. *allegoria*.

⁽⁵⁾ John Harington, “A Brief Apologia of Poetrie,” in his translation of Aristo’s *Orlando Furioso* (London: 1591), sig. 4v.

then in the same fiction, as a second ryme and somewhat more fine, as it were nearer to the pith and marrow, they place the Morall sence, profitable for the actiue life of man, approuing vertuous actions and condemning the contrarie. Manie times also vnder the selfsame words they comprehend some true vnderstanding of naturall philosophie, or sometimes of poltike gouerment, and then of diuinitie: and these same sences that comprehend so excellent knowledge we call the Allegorie, which Plutarch defineth to be when one thing is told, and by that another is understood.⁽⁶⁾

These same levels of meaning in poetry were also attributed to mythology. Indeed, when Boccaccio addressed his *Genealogia Deorum* to Hugh the Inclyte (Hugh IV), king of Cyprus and Jerusalem (1324-56), he emphasized the levels of hidden meanings in mythology by referring to the myth of Perseus:

It must be understood that through these stories is conveyed not only one meaning but rather what may be called polysemy, that is, manifold meaning. The first meaning, which is called literal, is given in the bark of the story while the other meanings, which are allegorical, are expressed through the implications of the bark. Let us give an example so that what I mean may be understood more easily. According to the story, Perseus, Jove's son, killed Gorgon and was raised to heaven as the victor. When this story is read according to the letter, the historical meaning is manifest. If a moral meaning is to be deduced from the literal level, the victory of the prudent mind over vice and the attainment of virtue are demonstrated. Furthermore, if we wish to understand the story allegorically, is indicated the rise of the pious mind to heaven after having spurned the pleasures of the world. Besides one may point out anagogically that by this story is also expressed the rise of Christ, as the only conqueror of the world, to the Father. However, many as they are, all these meanings can certainly be regarded as allegorical even though various names have been given to them.⁽⁷⁾ (Translation is mine).

In his interpretation of mythology Boccaccio was of course displaying the same attitude shown by his predecessors. Like some Church Fathers and Christian apologists in late antiquity, he favored a Christian anagoge of pagan mythology. Before Christianity, Cicero had also suggested three levels of meaning in his *De Natura Deorum* for the interpretation of myths. For him, the stories of the gods could be understood either historically or physically or morally. In other words, they were either legends about the mortals, who had been great benefactors of mankind and therefore immortalized, or a fictional account of the elements which constituted the universe; or a covert expression of moral and philosophical precepts.⁽⁸⁾

Although it is hard to assert definitely when the word allegory came to be used as a

⁽⁶⁾ Harington, "Apologia," sig. 4r.

⁽⁷⁾ See Boccaccio, *Peri Genealogias Deorum Libri Quindecim, cum Annotationibus Iacobi Micylli* (Basileae: apud Io. Hervagium, 1532), 4.

⁽⁸⁾ See Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, ed. & trans. H. Rackham (London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), 179 ff. (II.xiii ff.)

literary or exegetical term,⁽⁹⁾ the rise of allegory as a mode of interpretation rather than of expression can be traced back to the sixth century B.C.⁽¹⁰⁾ When the rhapsode and philosopher Xenophanes of Colophon claimed on moral grounds that both Homer and Hesiod had "attributed to the gods all the reproaches and disgraces of men - theft, adultery, deceit,"⁽¹¹⁾ some of the contemporary rhapsodes began to assert apologetically that the poetry of Homer and Hesiod contained hidden meanings under the veil of the stories about the gods. In fact, rhapsodes were wandering poets or "improvisators," as the late fifth century sophist Alcidas was to call them,⁽¹²⁾ and competed with each other, usually at a festival, by reciting or improvising from Homer.⁽¹³⁾ In their improvisations they made digressions to attempt an elucidation or interpretation of obscure words and passages. Naturally they sometimes made interpolations, more of which were to be made later by the Hellenistic Homerians.⁽¹⁴⁾ Therefore, with Xenophanes' moral criticism the rhapsodic interpretations of Homer and Hesiod turned into a defense. This is especially clear in the works of Theagenes of Rhegium and Pherecydes of Syros, who were Xenophanes' contemporaries, and who were the leading defenders and referred to deeper meanings in Homer's poetry. For instance, as regards the Battle of the Gods in the *Iliad* (Book XX), Pherecydes of Syros suggested that the gods were the "cosmic forces."⁽¹⁵⁾ To Theagenes of Rhegium is also attributed a similar interpretation with the addition that the gods represented certain human faculties: Athena was practical wisdom, and prudence (phronesis), Ares folly (aphrosune), Aphrodite desire (epethumia), and Hermes reason (logos).⁽¹⁶⁾

With the rise of the Sophistic movement in the fifth century B.C., the rhapsodic tradition of allegorical exegesis, which was mostly oral, lost its significance considerably. As some progress was made in the production of books, texts were now available and began to be used by Sophists.⁽¹⁷⁾ Despite the fact that there were rhapsodes still active in the fifth century, and even in Plato's own time,⁽¹⁸⁾ their allegorical interpretation of poetry was overshadowed by the textual analysis which Sophists made of epic and lyrical poetry from a linguistic point of view. The emphasis in these linguistic studies was mainly on "correctness of diction and ... the correct pronunciation

⁽⁹⁾ See Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship: From the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 16-56.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Pfeiffer has explained that the allegorical awareness can be traced back to Homer whose description of the prayers (Il., IX, 502 ff.) "is a genuine allegory," and whose poetry has an "allegorical element", 5.

⁽¹¹⁾ Russell and Winterbottom, *Ancient Literary Criticism*, 4.

⁽¹²⁾ See Pfeiffer, *History*, 50.

⁽¹³⁾ For instance, cf. the rhapsode Ion, who tells Socrates about his competition at the festival of Aesculapius at Epidaurus; see *Ion*, 530A ff. in Benjamin Jowett, trans., *The Dialogues of Plato*, 4th ed., 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), I. Hereafter, reference to this edition, cited as *The Dialogues*. As regards the competitive performances of rhapsodes, also cf. Pfeiffer, *History*, 8.

⁽¹⁴⁾ See Pfeiffer, *History*, 5, 87 ff.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Pfeiffer, *History*, 10. As regards the contributions of Theagenes of Rhegium and Pherecydes of Syros to the rise of allegory, see J. Tate, "The Beginnings of Greek Allegory," *The Classical Review*, 41 (1927), 214-15, and also his "On the History of Allegorism," *The Classical Quarterly*, 28, (1934), 104-105.

⁽¹⁶⁾ See Pfeiffer, *History*, 10.

⁽¹⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, 24 ff.

⁽¹⁸⁾ For instance, the rhapsode Ion of Ephesus appears as the interlocutor in Plato's *Ion*.

of the right form of the right word."⁽¹⁹⁾ Although this linguistic concern with the textual analysis was influential on the development of rhetoric, it was not literary in that it did not emphasize the suggestiveness of poetry. Within the framework of this general Sophistic approach to poetry were some exceptions; for instance, the Sophist Antisthenes, who was a pupil of Gorgias and a member of the Socratic circle,⁽²⁰⁾ interpreted Homer from a moral point of view and "was the first to make the distinction between 'seeming' and 'truth' in the Homeric poems."⁽²¹⁾ Another contemporary in the rhapsodic tradition was the philosopher Metrodorus of Lampsacus. He is mentioned by Plato's rhapsode Ion together with other allegorists and is said to have been not so accomplished as Ion himself was in the interpretation of Homer.⁽²²⁾ However, like Pherecydes of Syros, who had interpreted the Homeric gods in physical terms (physice) Metrodorus extended a similar interpretation to the Homeric heroes. For him Agamemnon signified the ether, Achilles the sun, and Hector the moon.⁽²³⁾

Besides the general indifference of Sophists to hidden meanings in poetry, Plato's distrust of the uses of poetry itself in attaining the truth led to a further setback for the rhapsodic tradition of allegorical interpretation. When the philosophers Xenophanes and Heraclitus had earlier rejected Homer and Hesiod on moral grounds,⁽²⁴⁾ they had started a "quarrel between philosophy and poetry,"⁽²⁵⁾ which was now resumed by Plato on a higher level and was finally settled in favor of philosophy. Thus what seemed originally to be a moral conflict between philosophy and poetry was restated in Plato as a fundamental opposition of dialectic and inspiration or of reason and imagination. Although this opposition is recurrently stated throughout Plato's dialogues,⁽²⁶⁾ it is in his *Ion* and *Republic* that we have the most explicit and comprehensive treatment of it. Indeed, when the rhapsode Ion, whose main literary interest has been the interpretation of Homer,⁽²⁷⁾ boasts that "I do speak better and have more to say about Homer than any other man,"⁽²⁸⁾ his interlocutor Socrates replies by pointing out that "the gift which you possess of speaking excellently about Homer is not an art, but... an inspiration; is a divinity moving you."⁽²⁹⁾ Furthermore, Socrates argues, owing to the lack of "art" and the absence of reason, Ion's interpretation of Homer is not based on Knowledge, either.⁽³⁰⁾ The same is also true of poets themselves since they "compose their beautiful poems not

⁽¹⁹⁾ Pfeiffer, *History*, 16.

⁽²⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁽²¹⁾ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁽²²⁾ See *Ion*, 530C-D.

⁽²³⁾ See Pfeiffer, *History*, 35.

⁽²⁴⁾ Cf. Heraclitus' words: "Homer ought to be excluded from the contests and scourged with rods," quoted by E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard D. Trask (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), 204.

⁽²⁵⁾ Plato, *The Republic* in *The Dialogues*, II, 607B.

⁽²⁶⁾ In addition to *Ion* and *The Republic*, also see *Meno* in *The Dialogues*, I, 99C-D, *Apology* in *The Dialogues*, I, 22A-C, and *Phaedrus* in *The Dialogues*, III, 245A.

⁽²⁷⁾ See *Ion*, in *The Dialogues*, I, 22A-C.

⁽²⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, 533C.

⁽²⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, 533D.

⁽³⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, 532C, 536C.

by art, but because they are inspired and possessed."⁽³¹⁾ Socrates stresses this point again and again when he further explains to Ion that "the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and reason is no longer in him: no man, while he retains that faculty, has the oracular gift of poetry."⁽³²⁾

It is obvious that for Plato poetry proceeds only from divine inspiration and has no relevance to the principles of rational thinking; the composition of poetry is not based upon an "art" of dialectic reasoning. Hence, in view of the absence of dialectic principles poetry cannot lead us to true knowledge. Unlike philosophy, which uses dialectic to discover the truth, poetry is "something (alogon), 'not reasonable' or even 'contrary to reason'.⁽³³⁾ Therefore, it cannot be subjected to a rational and dialectic analysis. This conflict between philosophy and poetry is further emphasized when Plato asserts in the light of his theory of ideas that poetry is also mimetic in that it describes the realm of objects, which is itself a reflection of the true world of ideas.⁽³⁴⁾ Since the poet as an imitator depicts in his poetry an appearance of the truth, his depiction becomes a mere copy of the copy of the truth. Consequently, "all these poetical individuals, beginning with Homer, are only imitators, who copy images of virtue and the other themes of their poetry, but have no contact with the truth."⁽³⁵⁾ Owing, Plato continues to argue, to this ignorance of the truth poetry has a harmful effect upon "the understanding of (its) hearers, unless as an antidote they possess the knowledge of the true nature of the originals."⁽³⁶⁾ However, people are easily influenced by poetry and tend to regard what it expresses as the truth.⁽³⁷⁾ In fact, since the main concern of poets is to achieve popularity, they exert this influence by appealing not to the rational principle in the soul but rather to "the lacrymose and fitful temper, which is easily imitated."⁽³⁸⁾

Thus, by awakening and nourishing the sensible part of the soul, poets "impair the rational part."⁽³⁹⁾ This is for Plato the most dangerous effect of poetry, especially upon the young. Whether may be intended an allegorical meaning in those stories of the gods and heroes, in which ungodly and unvirtuous actions are described, the fact is that, according to Plato, a young person, who becomes familiar with such stories, "cannot judge what is allegorical and what is literal; anything that he receives into his mind at that age is likely to become indelible and unalterable."⁽⁴⁰⁾ With this further objection, Plato's criticism of poetry and its interpretation receives a pedagogical and, hence, moral twist, which of course recalls Xenophanes and Heraclitus.

⁽³¹⁾ *Ibid.*, 533E-534A.

⁽³²⁾ *Ibid.*, 534B-D.

⁽³³⁾ Pfeiffer, *History*, 58.

⁽³⁴⁾ See *The Republic in The Dialogues*, II, especially 595A-605C.

⁽³⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, 600E.

⁽³⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, 595B.

⁽³⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, 598C.

⁽³⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, 605A.

⁽³⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, 605B.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, 378D-E.

Consequently, both in view of its lack of dialectic reasoning and because it appeals to the senses and thus impairs reason, poetry is inferior to philosophy and ought to be censured. Furthermore, since interpretations of poetry such as rhapsodes and Sophists have done are arbitrary and usually mutually contradictory owing to the absence of dialectic reasoning, any attempt to look for hidden meanings in poetry is futile and useless.⁽⁴¹⁾

Yet, it must be stressed that although Plato rejected poetry and condemned the rhapsodic and Sophistic search for hidden meanings in it, this was not an objection to allegory as a mode of expression. On the contrary, he regarded allegorical expression as the only suitable mode through which an idea, whether complex or blasphemous, could be conveyed cryptically for the understanding of those who had experience and knowledge to grasp it. For instance, as he suggested with a Socratic irony, “the doings of Cronus, and the sufferings which in turn his son inflicted upon him, even if they were true, ought certainly not to be lightly told to young and thoughtless persons; if possible, they had better be buried in silence. But, if there is an absolute necessity for their mention, a chosen few might hear them in a mystery, and they should sacrifice not a common (Eleusinian) pig, but some huge and unprocurable victim, so that the number of the hearers may be very few indeed.”⁽⁴²⁾ In fact, what is thus ironically stated *vis-à-vis* the initiation of “a chosen few” from the Eleusinian mob into the mysteries of the gods underlies Plato’s own approach to philosophy and his use of myths and parables in the dialogues.⁽⁴³⁾ Although he followed Heraclitus in his contempt of popular initiation rites, he regarded philosophy as a kind of mystical initiation into the mysteries of the Beyond for those only who had been versed in the art of dialectic.⁽⁴⁴⁾ As his followers, especially the late classical Neoplatonists, maintained, the ordinary people, who were easily ruled by their emotions and profane pleasures, were unable to appreciate the beauty of wisdom and understand the truth of philosophical mysteries. Therefore, they went on to argue, plain speech had to be left out in favor of a cryptic expression, which would enable the philosopher to couch his maxims in myths and parables. While the chosen few understood these maxims, the ordinary people would be content with the fiction of myths and parables themselves. In this respect, the Neoplatonists regarded Plato’s invention of myths and his use of parables as a deliberate practice to veil the mysteries of his philosophy. Similarly, they followed this Platonic example, and thus with them allegory as a mode of both expression and interpretation attained a more complex and sophisticated significance. They went further than Plato by adopting the myths of the

⁽⁴¹⁾ Cf. Pfeiffer, *History*, 58. Contrary to Plato’s dialectic criticism of poetry, Aristotle in his *Poetics* approached poetry from aesthetical points of view and was hardly concerned with the use of allegory in it.

⁽⁴²⁾ *The Republic* in *The Dialogues*, II, 378A.

⁽⁴³⁾ As examples of Plato’s use of myths and parables, see *Symposium* in *The Dialogues*, I, 202D- 203C, *The Republic* in *The Dialogues*, II, 514A-517C, and *Phaedrus* in *The Dialogues*, III, 246A-254E. Despite some allegorical elements in Homer it may be argued that, by using myths and parables of his own invention as the extended metaphors for his philosophical ideas, Plato was the first to use allegory deliberately as a mode of expression.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ See Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 2 ff.

gods, usually from Homer and Hesiod, into their own philosophy and imposed new meanings upon them. For instance, Porphyry interpreted Homer's Cave of Nymphs in *The Odyssey* (XIII. 102-12) "as an allegory of the universe."⁽⁴⁵⁾

In their search for hidden meanings in Homer and other poets to support their philosophical doctrines, the Neoplatonists may have followed the Stoics. In fact, it was the Stoics in the Hellenistic age who resumed the traditional exegesis of Homer and Hesiod and revived allegory as a mode of interpretation. Contrary to Plato, they considered ancient poetry the arcane of all knowledge. They maintained that "as the logos (reason) is the fundamental principle of everything, it must manifest itself in poetry also, though hidden behind the veil of mythical and legendary tales and pure fiction."⁽⁴⁶⁾ Therefore, in interpreting ancient poetry, the primary purpose of the Stoics was to find examples for the illustration of their own philosophical ideas. Yet, with the Stoic Crates in the early second century B.C., this exploratory attitude was reversed: philosophy began to be used for the exposition of hidden meanings in poetry. For Crates, the shield of Agamemnon, which consisted of ten parts (II.XI, 32-40), signified the ten circles of the sky.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Similarly, one can also refer to the Stoic Chrysippus, who was a contemporary of Crates, and whose exegetical attitude was not different from that of the other Stoics. He interpreted the Three Graces as the allegory of "the offering, accepting, and returning of benefits."⁽⁴⁸⁾ Thus, through the Stoics and the Neoplatonists, allegory became a sort of common denominator in the reconciliation of poetry and philosophy, and the ancient quarrel initiated by Plato was settled.

With the rise of Christianity and its introduction into the Greco-Roman world, allegory attained a universal popularity among both Christian apologists and pagan authors. It now became the most powerful weapon in what one may call the quarrel of paganism and Christianity in the early centuries A.D. In addition to the fact that the traditional cults of the pagan gods were still being practiced during this period, the very existence of the classical schools of philosophy had a significant impact on the rise of this conflict. There was a revival of interest in the interpretation of ancient poetry and philosophy; thus emerged a kind of neopaganism as a reaction to Christianity.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Among the pagans serious attempts were made to reconcile various mythologies, which for them embodied universal truths. Various mythographical writings pervaded by Neoplatonic ideas appeared. The most important of these writings were Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*, Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, and Fulgentius' *Mythologia*. Furthermore, the Neoplatonists themselves began to interpret the Platonic texts and ancient poetry in an attempt both to transform Plato's philosophy into a kind of mystery religion and also to

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Pfeiffer, *History*, 226.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, 240. Crates extended a similar interpretation also to Achilles' shield (II, XVIII, 83- 608). On this point also see *Ibid.*

⁽⁴⁸⁾ Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 28.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ See F.J.E. Raby, *A History of Secular Latin Poetry in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), I: 4-14, also see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), 300 ff.

refute, thereby, the Christian doctrine. The best poetic expression of this was Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, in which one finds a mixture of Platonism and elements of mystery religions. The Neoplatonists regarded Plato as divine and argued that such Christian mysteries as the creation of the universe or the salvation of the soul had already been revealed in his works and in those of ancient poets. In order to prove their arguments they made extensive use of allegory.

The contemporary Christian apologists, on the other hand, approached pagan writings with discretion. In their defense and teaching of the Christian doctrine they were in some dilemma as regards the use of pagan philosophy and literature.⁽⁵⁰⁾ To some apologists, pagan writings and mythology were full of trivialities, immoralities and ignorance, and had to be completely condemned. Thus, to Tertullian (ca. 150 - ca. 220), who was one of the most influential apologists, pagan authors were liars and immoral counterfeiters.⁽⁵¹⁾ Yet, some apologists argued that, once understood allegorically, pagan literature and philosophy contained vestiges of the Christian truth and had therefore to be interpreted accordingly. In fact, it was this compromising attitude that became prevalent among the Church Fathers like Gregory the Great, St. Jerome, St. Ambrose, and St. Augustine, and that was influential on the process of adopting pagan learning into the context of Christianity. Moreover, most of those Christians, who favored the study of pagan authors for the illustration of the Christian doctrine, had themselves studied pagan literature and philosophy in their youth before being converted into Christianity. For example, in his letter to the Roman rhetor Magnus, St. Jerome, who had had a pagan's education in his youth, emphasized the need to study pagan authors.⁽⁵²⁾ Similarly, St. Augustine delineated similarities between Platonism and Christianity and extolled Platonic philosophy as the best for Christians to learn.⁽⁵³⁾ Again, the second century apologist Justin went out of his way to remark that "they who lived before Christ reasonably, and still do, are Christians."⁽⁵⁴⁾ He considered Socrates one of the pre-Christian saints and referred to him as St. Socrates. Furthermore, the Church Fathers and apologists maintained that pagan poets and philosophers from Orpheus onwards had either derived their ideas from the Old Testament, especially from Moses, or been inspired by the Prophets themselves.

It was originally from the Alexandrian Philo Judaeus in the first century that this patristic attitude to adopt pagan learning into Christianity had its inspiration. By collating the doctrines in the Old Testament with the philosophical ideas in the works of

⁽⁵⁰⁾ Cf. M.L.W. Laistner, *Thought and Letters in Western Europe, A.D. 500 to 900* (London: Methuen, 1957), 45, who points out a similar dilemma in the education of Christian boys: "At every turn the Christian boy or youth was familiarized with pagan mythology, and with aspects of pagan literature and thought which the leaders of the church were bound to disapprove. Thus there existed a dilemma from which there was no escape for those who were willing to seek a compromise."

⁽⁵¹⁾ See D.C. Allen, *Mysteriously Meant: The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1970), 7.

⁽⁵²⁾ See Laistner, *Thought and Letters*, 48.

⁽⁵³⁾ See Allen, *Mysteriously Meant*, 17.

⁽⁵⁴⁾ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 4.

ancient authors, Philo Judaeus had pointed out various similarities and made most use of allegory in his exegeses. His interpretations of the Old Testament, especially, became examples to the Church Fathers in their exegesis of the Bible. Origen (ca. 185-ca. 255), who was much indebted to him, asserted that the Bible embodied three levels of meaning, which were the somatic, the psychic and the pneumatic, and which corresponded to the three parts of man: the body, the soul and the spirit.⁽⁵⁵⁾ In suggesting such a correspondence, Origen may have been the first among the patristic exegetes of the Bible, and his influence was undoubtedly great upon the patristic tradition of allegorical interpretation through the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.

Since the prevalent patristic attitude towards the pagan lore aimed at the adoption of it into the Christian arcana, the original conflict between paganism and Christianity waned away. In its place emerged a kind of pagan and Christian syncretism, which underlay the medieval allegorical understanding. Pagan motifs and themes were gradually Christianized, and mythological figures gained typological significance.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Like their predecessors, medieval exegetes and commentators reiterated the traditional theory of hidden meanings. John of Salisbury (ca. 1115-1180) stressed that "Philology be the companion of Mercury not in order that reverence shall be paid to false divinities; but under the veil of words truths lie hidden. Truths lie hidden veiled under the various forms of things, for common law forbids sacred things to the vulgar."⁽⁵⁷⁾

As can be further understood from the twelfth-century *Libellus or De Deorum Imaginibus Liber* by Albricus, and also from Boccaccio's *Genealogia Deorum*, classical myths and legends were regarded as vestiges of hidden truths. Virgil and Ovid, who were among the most popular Latin poets in the Middle Ages, were also believed to be full of mysteries. The best and most influential example in this respect was the fourteenth-century commentator Berchorius' interpretation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In the preface to his *Metamorphosis Ouidiana Moraliter ... Explanata*, Berchorius explained by referring to St. Paul (2 Tim.4:4) that, since the vulgar preferred tales to the naked truth, parables and verses had to be used to convey some moral meaning such as had been done in the Bible.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Similarly, "...poetate ... in principio fabulas finxerunt: quia per huiusmodi figmenta semper aliquam veritatem intelligere voluerunt."⁽⁵⁹⁾ Therefore, in Berchorius' view, the gods and their stories in the *Metamorphoses* had to be

⁽⁵⁵⁾ See Laistner, *Thought and Letters*, 65, also cf. Allen, *Mysteriously Meant*, 10-12.

⁽⁵⁶⁾ See Edwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Arts of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 69-70, also cf. Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*, trans. Barbara Sessions (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), 92, who refers to a "set of extracts from the *Metamorphoses* for use by nuns. As a crowning touch, the goddesses are represented as being nuns themselves. The gods are the clergy, and their marriages are the meetings of monks and nuns."

⁽⁵⁷⁾ Quoted and translated by Curtius, *European Literature*, 206.

⁽⁵⁸⁾ See Berchorius, *Metamorphosis Ouidiana Moraliter...Explanata*, ed. Thomas de Walleis (Paris, 1509), fol. 1r.

⁽⁵⁹⁾ Berchorius, *Metamorphosis*, fol. 1r: "In the beginnings poets devised stories, for through fictions of this kind they always wished to express some truth." (my translation).

interpreted "modis litteraliter; naturaliter; historialiter; & spiritualiter."⁽⁶⁰⁾

On the other hand, this allegorical attitude in interpretation also gave rise to a similar attitude in expression. Especially from the Middle Ages onwards, poets deliberately attempted to use a veiled language. Yet, they also hastened to instruct their readers in how to explore the hidden meanings in their poetry. In one of his letters, Dante pointed out that his *Divine Comedy* does not carry "one simple meaning, but it can be said to have many meanings for it is to be interpreted according to the letter, and also according to the sense. The first is called literal, the second allegorical or mystic ... And although these hidden meanings are called by various names, they can all in general be called allegorical, because they are other than literal or narrative."⁽⁶¹⁾ Obviously familiar with the traditional uses of allegory, Dante was, of course, expressing a common view about the concealment of various meanings in poetry. In fact, the fashionable use of the dream motif by Dante and other medieval poets enabled them to be enigmatic in expression and complex in imagery, and their medieval readers were expected to explore, according to their intellectual capacity, the meanings disguised in poetry. A poem like the *Romaunt of the Rose* would appear to the medieval mind as a corpus of poetic mysteries: the layout of the garden, the images carved on the outer walls, the figures in the garden, the rose, and the lover's progress towards the rose - all of them would strike the medieval reader as mysterious. Even Chaucer seems to manifest a similar poetic disposition in his early poetry with all its allegorical houses, temples, gardens, visions and astrological lore.

With the revival of Platonism through the Florentine Academy, which was first founded by Cosimo de' Medici in 1459, and also with the growing interest in humanistic studies, the use of allegory in both interpretation and expression throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries became more elaborate and sophisticated than it had been in the Middle Ages. Although the Renaissance commentators on ancient poetry and mythology essentially shared the patristic view that under the veil of myths and stories was concealed the moral of Christian doctrine, they were not so enthusiastic as the late classical Christian apologists and their followers to draw analogous lines between Biblical stories and pagan mythology. Since the purpose of Renaissance ethics was mainly the training of a noble mind through a secular understanding of virtue whether Christian or pagan in its nature, the Renaissance humanists used a strong pagan coating for secularism, and thus the pagan and the Christian were closely interwoven.⁽⁶²⁾ However, compared with the patristic and medieval attitude, the process of

⁽⁶⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, fol. 2r: i.e., "through the literal, physical, historical, and spiritual ways," (my translation).

⁽⁶¹⁾ Quoted by J.A. Stewart (trans. and introd.), *The Myths of Plato*, ed. G.R. Levy (London: Barnes and Noble, 1970), 42.

⁽⁶²⁾ Cf. Villari, who regards the Florentine Academy as the mediator between paganism and Christianity in the Renaissance: "Presently, however, the need is felt of discovering a foundation for life which shall be not revealed but rational, and which shall explain both pagan and Christian virtue, and remove the too visible contradiction between the two. Then begins more or less original work; it is begun by the Neoplatonists and by the Academy which they founded at Florence." Quoted by Charles Lemmi, *The Classic Deities in Bacon: A Study in Mythological Symbolism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Univ. Press. 1933), p. 15.

reconciliation in the Renaissance was reversed; now Christian themes and motifs were given pagan features,⁽⁶³⁾ and one can see many examples of this in Renaissance art and literature. In this respect, allegory became the backbone of Renaissance thought and imagination.

The exegetical elaborateness which pervaded contemporary commentaries and mythographical writings was the outstanding characteristic of allegorical awareness throughout the Renaissance. Polysemy or manifoldness of the concealed meaning beneath the veil of stories, reinforced by Platonic mysticism and enriched by the study of ancient Egyptian and Eastern, especially Cabbalistic and Mithraic, mysteries,⁽⁶⁴⁾ became an intellectual preoccupation, which caught up both the mythographer and the commentator on the one hand, and the artist and the poet on the other. Certainly, any learned Renaissance reader was well aware of the fact that, through the economy of one image or episode or character or theme, were expressed various meanings which ranged from the self of the poet or the artist and the daily politics of the time to a philosophical and moral doctrine. For instance, in his letter to Raleigh, Spenser explained that his main purpose in *The Faerie Queene* was “to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline: Which for that I conceiued should be most plausible and pleasing being coloured with an historical fiction.”⁽⁶⁵⁾ And the fiction he chose was that of Arthur whom he regarded as “the image of the braue knight, perfected in the twelue priuate morall vertues.”⁽⁶⁶⁾ Thus, to convey his meaning, he preferred to use allegory as a mode of expression despite his conviction that “this method will seeme displeasaunt, which had rather haue good discipline deliuered plainly in way of precepts, or sermoned at large, as they use, then thus clowdily enwrapped in Allegoricall deuises.”⁽⁶⁷⁾ Also, the anonymous E.K. pointed out that in his *Shepherdes Calender* Spenser “chose rather to vnfold great matter of argument couertly, then professing it”⁽⁶⁸⁾ plainly. A similar kind of view was as well expressed of Sidney’s *Arcadia*. For Fulke Greville the *Arcadia*, which was regarded as a political allegory in disguise,⁽⁶⁹⁾ depicted through its traverses “every posture in the minde, that any man being forced, in the straines of this life to pass through any straights, or latitudes of good, or ill fortune, might (as in a glasse) see how to set a good countenance upon all the discountenance of aduersitie, and a stay upon the exorbitant smiling of chance.”⁽⁷⁰⁾

Thus allegory, both in comprehension and in expression, attained its most elaborate form in the Renaissance. The long tradition of allegory from the Homeric rhapsodes onwards reached its climax in the learned, comprehensive and intricate commentaries,

⁽⁶³⁾ Cf. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 24-25 ff

⁽⁶⁴⁾ See Seznec, *Survival*, 100, 248-50, Allen, *Mysteriously Meant*, 107 ff., Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 207

⁽⁶⁵⁾ Smith and Selincourt, *Poetical Works*, 407.

⁽⁶⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, 407.

⁽⁶⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, 407.

⁽⁶⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, 418.

⁽⁶⁹⁾ See Greville's political interpretation of the *Arcadia* in his *Life of the Renowned Sir Philip Sidney* (London, 1652), 13 ff.

⁽⁷⁰⁾ Greville, *Life*, 18-19.

expositions, and literary writings of the Renaissance humanist, poet and artist. Yet, with the constant fluctuation in artistic sensibilities after the sixteenth century, allegory as a mode of comprehension lingered on although, as a mode of expression, it gradually lost its significance.

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أستاذ مشارك في اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها ،
جامعة فاتح ، اسطنبول ، تركيا

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ملخص البحث . إن المجاز كتعبير أدبي وكأداة تأويل كان ولا يزال مدار جدل في الدراسات الأدبية الحديثة. وبما أن التركيز جاءت هذه الدراسة لتضع المجاز في إطاره التاريخي ولبتين أصل نشأته وتطوره منذ القدم وحتى عصر النهضة حيث بلغ هذا اللون من التعبير أوج ذروته.

