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History

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Courtly Love: the Literary and Societal Meaning

> I have never been convinced that there was any such thing as what is usually called courtly love during the middle ages. (Ed. F.X Newman 1)

> Everyone has heard of courtly love, and everyone knows that it appears quite suddenly at the end of the eleventh century in Languedac. (C.S. Lewis 2)

The tremendous gulf separating these two statements indicates the question that begs resolution is not so much: what are the characteristics of courtly love and how is this convention relative to actual living experiences? But rather, did this convention exist at all, either in literature or life?

The term in its original, *amour courtois*, is generally considered a coinage of Gaston Paris. Appearing in his 1883 analysis of Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot*, the thesis is a general and original exposition of *Amour courtois* as a particular form of love tied to a literary convention.

Courtly love was expressed initially by early 12th century Provençal troubadours--their collective works, incidentally, amounting to the first extensive use of Western vernacular in lyric poetry. Troubadourian love, C.S Lewis convincingly informs us in his, *The Allegory of Love*, demonstrates a relationship between lover and adored lady that is closely modelled upon the feudal relationship between lord and vassal, and so placing the

lady in a position of superiority. This is, furthermore, a love analogous to a religious passion and, as we shall see, will be later described in overt religious diction. Like religion, it is seen as an exalting force which ennobles through adversity: the love is generally unconsummated. This common though far from compulsory characteristic stems from its illicit nature, being either pre-marital or extra-marital. These characteristics of troubadourian lyric poetry provide the essential qualities of courtly love, and is perhaps the only aspect not contested. Its primogenitors have been variously listed as Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, Cluniac devotion, Neo-Platonism, Manichean dualism and Arabic poetry to name only a few.[1] But it is not so much the nativity of courtly love that concerns us, as its subsequent life.

Clearly, courtly love, as briefly defined above, existed beyond question and at the very least in the 12th century troubadourian love lyric; but was this a fashionable literary form which flashed briefly like a firework only to fade into the dark night of the antiquated? It is notable that Gaston Paris inferred the qualities of courtly love from the troubadourian contemporary Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot* (c.1177-81), and this in itself is a clear indication that the general tenet of troubadourian lyric poetry was already extending itself generically: strictly speaking, *Lancelot* is a romance rather than a lyric poem.

Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot*, as mentioned above, saw courtly

1See for example: Cohen; C.S. Lewis; F.X. Newman.

love's first move into the Romance genre, but this was only the first of several transmutations. The next, and perhaps most important--at least in respect of English poets who have carried the torch of courtly love with more fortitude and ardour than most others--was manifested in the first section of *Roman de la Rose* (c.1230) by Guillaume de Lorris.[2] *Roman de la Rose* expounds the whole art of courtly love in the form of an *allegorical* dream. The allegorical figures which inhabit this dream world, including such notables as Joy, Sweet Looks and Beauty, Pride and Generosity, mostly embody various qualities of the lady encountered by the lover-narrator. The story recounts his attempts to reach the well-protected rose which represents her love. The court is represented by a walled garden belonging to the god of love: upon the outside face of this wall are depicted the unpleasant realities of the external world:

> . . . I saw a large and roomy garden, entirely enclosed by a high crenelated wall, sculptured outside and laid out with many fine inscriptions. I willingly admired the images and paintings . . . In the middle I saw hatred . . . a woman crazy with rage. . . . Beside her . . . her name was Felony . . . another image named Villainy . . . she seemed a creature of evil.(Lorris 32-34)

It is noteworthy that these personifications of the negative

2We shall perhaps follow C.S. Lewis' lead and judge the second section of Roman de la Rose, composed by Jean de Meun, as a piece in fundamental opposition to the meaning and intention of the first and so exclude it from this history.

qualities of life suffer from a serious gender bias.[3] We might see in this, since they are aspects of life outside the court, the difference between courtly ladies and worldly wenches. Naturally then, once inside the garden, the rosebud--namely the lady and her love--and numerous other female personifications are each described in positive terms.

Two of the most admired troubadour love poets were Guirault de Borneil (1165-1212), recognised in his own time as “maestre dels trobadors”; and Arnout Daniel (1180-1200); and it is with Daniel that we find a concrete and irrefutable indication of the continued influence of troubadourian courtly love, for both Dante and Petrarch acknowledged their admiration of his work.

Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca 1304-74), Italian poet and humanist, is of particular importance for he was to become the most popular Italian poet of the English Renaissance. Expelled from Florence, it was in Avignon--the earlier stomping ground of the troubadours--that Petrarch first saw the lady who inspired his love poetry. Referring to her as Laura, her true identity is unknown.

Sonnet XII provides a conspicuous example of the essential characteristics of the troubadourian lyric:

> I murmur: “She inspired the splendid thought
> Which points to heaven and teachers hoest eyes
> All wordly lures and winnings to despise.(Petrarch 12)

Here then we see the exalting nature of love which manifests

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[3]This is not a pattern which Lorris follows absolutely, though it is generally true.

itself in religious imagery. If we recall also that Laura was both married and a gentle-woman, and that their love was never consummated--her untimely death proved a serious setback!--than we can see clearly that though Petrarch has brought his distant love out of the court, in every other respect his sonnets conform to the basic conventions of courtly love. This indeed demonstrates the gradual development which we find with the courtly love convention. Petrarch has dropped the allegorical structure, but provides in its place two new features. The first of these, as already mentioned, is the abandonment of the court. The epigraph of Sonnet XIV indicates the second: "WHEREIN HE LIKENS HIMSELF TO A PILGRIM." Again there is the religious aspect, but now it is combined with the notion of the pilgrim's struggle and pain. The source of this pain is Laura, for the Petrarchan female is of a decidedly antithetical nature, who is both angelic and yet, by her haughtiness: shunning the affections of her lover, almost mean. "No drop from those dear eyes that never qualied,/But anger and contemptuous reprimand."(Petrarch 36) When we admit this heartless quality into the field of war imagery which also characterises the Petrarchan convention, then we see a transformation of women which demonstrates their opposition to the nature of man, whose perfection and holiness are insurmountable.

The codification of femininity achieved by Petrarch, combined with that allegorical expression of courtly love exhibited in *Roman de la Rose*, provided English poets with a subject and system that proved seductively irresistible for several

centuries to come. First amongst those was Chaucer (c.1345-1400)--and most particularly in “Troilus and Cressida.” Formed of seven detachable lyrics, one is actually a translation of Petrarch’s Sonnet XX. It was Chaucer also who composed the first English translation of *Roman de la Rose*. “Troilus and Cressida” is Chaucer’s adaptation of Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato*, recounting the tale of Troilo who falls in love with Criseida during the Trojan war.

> One the morwe, as soone as day bygan to clere
> This Troilus gan of his slep t’abrayde,
> And to Pandare, his owen brother deere,
> “For love of God,” ful pitously he sayde,
> “As go we sen the palais of Criseyde;
> For syn we yetb may have namore feste,
> So lat us sen hire paleys atte leeste.”(Chaucer 567)

In this single stanza we discover many of the characteristics of courtly love: there is the equating of love for woman with love for God; there is the court in which she lives--the palace; the subordinate position of the lover whose obsession for Cresida finds certain satisfaction in gazing upon her palace if he cannot gaze upon her person. As well as this, the illicit nature of courtly love is fulfilled for this romance is pre-marital. But is “Troilus and Cressida” an allegorical tale? This is certainly more problematical, though we might acquiesce to C.S Lewis in this respect, whose learned analysis in *The Allegory of Love* deems it so.

If there remains some doubt as to the allegorical fulfilment in Chaucer, then Spencer (c.1552-99) clearly demonstrates the Petrarchan and allegorical influence in the continuing

exploration of courtly love. In his “Amoretti” the Petrarchan female is particularly evident:

> Happy ye leaves when as those lilly hands,
> Which hold my life in their dead doing might,
> Shall handle you and hold in loves soft bands,
> Lyke captives trembling at the victors sight.

With perfect conceit--in the literary sense--there is something terrible about those dainty hands, for they hold the life of the lover in “dead doing might.” In this paradox then we see expressed the dichotomy of the Petrarchan female. The disdain we typically find in the Petrarchan female is, though not overtly expressed, clearly implied by the power she posses; and it is only by welcoming love, we see in line three, that her gentleness can take precedence. The *Amoretti* is also an interesting example of the conjunct of art and life, for Spencer made great use of this poetic creation as a weapon of wooing, which saw successful fruition in his 1594 marriage to Elizabeth Boyle. The marriage itself was, of course, celebrated in the verse of *Epithalamion*. But it is most particularly in *The Faerie Queene* that Spencer embarks upon a serious exploration of courtly love in its allegorical form; and it is particularly in the Bower of Bliss segment that this takes place.

The Spenserian stanza, in which was writ *The Faerie Queene*, is an entirely new invention[4] and should serve as an early indication of a new treatment of courtly love. Jon Rooks’

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[4]It consists of eight five-foot iambic lines followed by one of six feet and rhyming ababbcbcc.

analysis in *Loves Courtly Ethic in The Faerie Queene From Garden to Wilderness* serves as an adequate introduction to courtly love for the noviciate, though his attempt to reconcile the Bower of Bliss to a simple allegorical statement of courtly love dourly misses the point. "Acrasia and her minions are at odds with the works of art"(Rooks 9) demonstrates the essential misunderstanding. For the Rooks, the art within the Bower of Bliss is an idealised manifestation of pure non-sexual love, antithetical to the Queen of that realm, the erotic Acrasia. Spencer, however, focuses upon the counterfeit nature of art: art as imitation; and it is in the Bower of Bliss that art becomes an imitation *of* nature and serves rather to characterise the seductive and false nature of Acrasia herself. Rooks' error is understandable, for the Bower of Bliss resembles in many ways the walled garden in Guillaume de Lorris' *Roman de la Rose*. Yet the Bower of Bliss serves an entirely different purpose: it is not the court in which virtuous love is to be found, but a fraudulent copy of the court, where the queen of decadence replaces the queen of virtue.

> Upon a bed of Roses she was layd
> As faint through heat, or dight to pleasant sin,
> And was arayd, or rather disarayd,
> All in a vele of silke and silver thin,
> That hid no whit her alablaster skin,
> But rather shewd more white, if more might be:
> More subtle web Arachne can not spin,
> Nor the fine nets, which oft we woven see
> Of scorched deaw, do not in th'aire more lightly flee.
> (Spencer II xii)

In the *Epithalamion*, the Petrarchan female reclines in lilies and violets, symbolising purity and humility respectively. It is

not surprising then that Acrasia, the antithesis of the Petrarchan female, is composed, instead, lounging in a bed of roses. There is, in this image, an idea of nature perverted or perhaps possessed, a nature whose thorny pricks offer comfort rather than pain; whose rosy colours bring to mind rosy blood rather than rosy cheeks. Acrasia's comfort is surely equalled only by our own discomfort. And of course, bearing in mind the allegorical nature of *The Faerie Queene*, we must surely be cognisant of the tacit connection between rosary—rose bed and rosery—-the Roman Catholic beads used as a guide to prayer. We might thereby conclude that Acrasia slumbers in a bed that has been forged by Catholic prayer. As we see, Spenser inverts the garden of love, the court of love, and presents its worldly luxury as a symbol of the decadent "unspirituality" of the Catholic church. The corruption of courtly love is therefore a social commentary. Sir Guyon, the knight of Temperance, must resist the false temptation of the Bower of Bliss--Catholicism-- and proceed onwards in accordance with the virtues of Protestantism. Courtly love, in Spencer, demonstrates a new dimension to its allegorical nature: a symbol of Protestantism. The Bower of Bliss, to reiterate, rather than providing a parallel to the walled garden in *Roman de la Rose*, demonstrates with all its artfulness and hedonism, a corruption of that court. As we saw with Spencer, the concept of courtly love remains essentially intact, though its treatment, as we shall later explore more fully, demonstrates an historical context.

Moving forward now to our final reincarnation of courtly love,

as it appears in Samuel Richardson's eighteenth century *Clarissa*, where this process is made most apparent. *Clarissa*, of course, appears as an epistolary example of that newly developed genre: the novel. What makes this work particularly interesting, besides it being a primary and still perhaps greatest literary exploration of character, is the manner in which the Petrarchan female is clearly shown, despite her duality, to be entirely unrelated to Eve, the essential cause both of man's pain and his downfall, and also the importance of the morality lessons of courtly love. According to convention, Clarissa is beyond reach, angelic and superior both socially and morally to her would be lover, Lovelace. She is all good, beyond corruption, entirely innocent. Lovelace, as he pursues his mistress, demonstrates an abandonment for the polite respect that is intrinsic to courtly love. His obsession, rather than offering that ennobling quality, actually leads him ever downwards, until he finally kidnaps Clarissa, imprisons her in the disguised back room of a brothel and eventually rapes her. Richardson preserves the purity of Clarissa during the rape by rendering her unconscious. *Clarissa* then demonstrates a quantum leap: it is not the enticing beauty of Clarissa that leads to sin, as in the Garden of Eden, but, as is made patently evident in hundreds of lengthy and detailed pages, it is Lovelace who is entirely to blame.

From simple troubadourian beginnings, courtly love both persisted and developed as a literary convention. From an original somewhat narrow statement of adoration, it found new dimensions and larger significance by the employment of

allegory. Though this was temporarily abandoned, Petrarch refined and enlarged the courtly lady, showing her ever more perfect and, as a result of her holiness, somewhat contemptuous of men. He also freed her from the confines of the court. Successive English poets readopted the allegory and combined it with the Petrarchan lady. Finally, the contempt which the lady had for so long demonstrated was shown to be entirely appropriate by Richardson, who illustrated the meanness of men when the licentious side is not tempered by the idealism inherent in courtly love.

We have seen then that not only was courtly love a literary convention during medieval times, but that it clearly persisted as a vital concept and demonstrated, by its continued presence, some vital importance which transcended historicity. We shall now attempt to explain what relationship there is between a literary convention and the actual life experience.

The setting of courtly love, whether it is an actual court or an allegorical representation, is almost always rich and features certain pomp and ceremony. This is to say that the delicacies of love are entirely for the high born. This of course stems from its trubadorian origins; and it is perhaps at this stage that the convention exhibited its closest resemblance to actual life.

> Bernart de Ventadour Arnaut de Mareuil, Bertran de Born, and Giraut de Borneil (second half of the twelfth century) were for the most part impoverished gentlemen, dependant upon feudal courts, who led wandering lives and carried their songs into far

> corners of France and beyond, into the Spanish kingdoms and into Italy. They sang of courtly love, of the love of the poor minstrel for the high born lady, of her beauty, of her scorn, and of the lovers' persistence. (Cohen 28)

Although it seems more than likely that such troubadours might sing of their own real life courtly experiences, this is far from certain, for such poets were, even by this early period, already aware of the conventions of courtly poetry, and is quiet possible that such lyrics express that convention rather than historical fact. But this is to suggest developments in art might occur without reference to their historical and social context, and this seems blatantly absurd. It has also been suggested that primogeniture might partly explain the birth of courtly love.[5] Since the frankish king Capet, who replaced the Caroligian reign, establishes hereditary monarchy in the tenth century, this seems quite a plausable theory. But to suggest that such a singular event might directly cause a new convention in literature smacks of over-simplification. Perhaps the *context* of primogeniture was *conducive* to courtly love, but this seems the most generous connection we might admit.

Besides this direct pertinence of courtly love literature to the 12th century courtly society, it gained additional power by seeming to incorporate the authority of classical literature--particularly that of Ovid, whose Ars Amatoria was misread by medieval scholars, who understood ironic humour as sober maxim.

[5]Class lecture.

Paris, in his landmark essay already mentioned, locates the court of Champagne as vital to the acceptance of courtly love as a moral guide. During the reign of Countess Marie, daughter of Eleanor of Aquataine--Queen of courtly love--her court poet Chrétien expressed courtly love in verse; but, it was her chaplain Andreas who, following what he understood to be Ovid's lead, codified courtly love in his *De arte honeste amandi*. This work removed any ambiguity which might exist within the already extant courtly literature, providing a clear guide divided into three separate books. Book one taught the nature of love and appropriate procedures; book two, how love might be maintained; book three, the rejection of love.

Moving beyond this place of nativity, it seems clear that the later relevance of courtly love was its ability to guide a leisured aristocracy--namely the readers of courtly love--in the delicacies of social interaction. Such literature suggested, by example, that courtesy, magnanimity and nobility, amongst others, were necessary components of life, and that the trials of love should prove a means of attaining these ideals. In later periods, with the decline in feudalism and the concomitant loss of aristocratic power, courtly love perhaps reinforced the elitist's sense of worth, for it was more convenient and certainly more aggrandising to believe such elevated behaviour--as described in courtly love literature--separated aristocracy from commoners, rather than the mere position of wealth. In this respect we might imagine courtly love as an elaborate dance with ceremonial importance, requiring knowledge and nurture that was

unique to the upper class. But “convenient” is perhaps deceptive, for it implies self deceit. Rather we should say courtly love confirmed their deepest convictions. We might say, further, that courtly love not only guided but actually effected a civilising influence upon the nobility: encouraging morality, gentleness, modesty, generosity, and all the other characteristics which are manifested in the lover’s worship of his lady. The Bower of Bliss, serving not only as a warning against Catholicism, served as a warning against lasciviousness, of allowing sensuality to supersede morality. This is described in positive terms in *Roman de la Rose*, where the crystalline waters of the fountain never overflow and so demonstrate a well controlled sexuality[6]. It is this controlled sexuality which differentiate courtly love from Platonic love, offering a vitality and pertinence--as well as titillation--which Plato lacked. The codification of morality, both implicitly in standard courtly texts and explicitly in *De arte honeste amandi*, is perhaps the key to explaining how a love so at odds with medieval conceptions came to be so widely accepted as reading matter. Certainly the contemporary view of medieval man presents him as the natural superior of woman, with sexuality only permissible within marriage. Indeed, certain medieval laws judged illicit love as a capital offence; and even sex within marriage was deemed a serious impediment to spiritual

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[6]This is not an obscure and self-serving reading, but one which the allegorical poem strongly suggests.

improvement. But if courtly love no longer described actual courtly practice, it did provide entertainment to an increasingly leisured class, whilst providing general behavioural guidance. If there still remains some doubt as to the possibility of moral guidance from works which feature illicit love as a central theme, then we should recall that the affairs of courtly love provide an opposition between carnality and spirituality--both in respect of the female--and it is the victory of the latter that provides both the moral as well as the sense of moral uplifting.

The developments which we discovered in the literary convention of courtly love are typical of their historical contexts. The use of allegory, particularly during the English Renaissance period, is concurrent with the emergence of centralised government passing bills of religious uniformity which fluctuate between uncertain Protestantism, with Henry VIII; outright Catholicism, with Mary I; and absolute Protestantism with Elizabeth. This was a period when diplomacy, particularly in religious matters, ensured long life. Allegory might therefore be seen as literary diplomacy, where a certain vagueness ensures a certain safety. At the same time, this is a period where woman increasing wield real political power, not only in England but elsewhere in Europe, and the continued interest in courtly love and the reiteration of the Petrarchan female are clear manifestations of this new situation.

Although we can see direct connections between the existence and development of courtly love and actual social realities, we

should not for a moment forget that this literary convention is the invention of male poets. It seems possible therefore that it is a poetic expression of male perceptions as much as it is an indicator of actuality. It might be argued that the male view of women is the issue of coupled philosophies:--Christianity and Platonism-- which place the physical realm subordinate to the spiritual and so suggest that physical love is unholy. Courtly love demonstrates a female who is no longer related to Eve, no longer reducing man to his carnal basis. The carnality of man, as we saw in the final incarnation of *Clarissa*, is in man himself. The superiority of the Petrarchan female, her disdain for her lover, is essentially a disdain for carnality. There is now something in the beauty of woman which does not conspire but inspires the poet. Eve, provided to be the delight of man though serving as the plight of man, has been abandoned in preference to an image more closely connected to the cult of the Virgin Mary. When we add to this the notion of possessiveness: the desire to possess beauty and yet being possessed by beauty, with the increased sensibilities the elitist class conferred upon itself, then we have the creation of the court: a place of richness, of sensibility, where the duality of woman is possessed and possessing. It is perhaps dangerous to suggest that all of this adds up to a literal empowerment of women, though this does indeed seem to be the case. And yet, no matter how much we look at social factors, the essential source of courtly love is the male mind. This is not to say that it lacked bearing on reality, but that it had everything to do with how

reality was *perceived*, and we might therefore say with absolute certainty that the male perception of women allowed for this empowerment. [7]

There can be little doubt that courtly love did exist and does exist. To deny the authenticity of courtly love is to suggest that literature, indeed art, has no direct attachment to real life: that art and life are like brother and sister, rather than husband and wife. This is clearly preposterous: the elements that make up literature are the elements that make up human thought: they are the actualisation of our way of thinking. Symbol and allegory, are not mere literary devices, but indicators of what it is to be we. We need not turn to scholarship to find the value of courtly love: we need turn only to the nearest tree trunk in the nearest park where KW + NM is carved in a heart, for here we have not only letters and symbol which are the ancestors of literature, but an example of an elavated love that has found carved out immortaility. Courtly love, as we have seen, existed as a complex and evolving literary convention, a catalogue of rules, and as a developing perception of women. And, since the thought of man becomes the deed of man, it seems quite likely that the whole arena of courtly love is demonstrative of the gradual empowerment of women; and, as we saw particularly evident in *Clarissa*, a

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[7]The reader might refer to such anti-courtly love literature as Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath" to see clear examples of the powerful authority available to medieval women.

movement away from male projectionism typified by the long accepted complicity of Eve, and towards a “not guilty” verdict. We can also say that, above all else, it was Plato who at least marked the sign of its beginning. Once the duality of body and spirit uttered its first two breaths, the essential characteristics of Courtly love were inevitable. Courtly love attempts to spiritualise the sexual drive, to demonstrate that, in a sense, the duality is a fraud: That the highest moments in poetry are the highest movement in human experience are the highest moments of courtly love.

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