

# To what extent are nicholas and absolon courtly lovers? essay sample

[Life](#), [Love](#)



Nicholas and Absolon both execute elements of the courtly love tradition, though the elements they express differ from each other and from the ideal courtly lover. Both Nicholas and Absolon attempt to use the language of the courtly lover to win Alison. When Nicholas attempts to seduce Alison into sleeping with him, he declares “ For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille.” At first glance this may appear to be the elevated language of courtly love, with Nicholas revealing to Alison that he loves her so much that if she were to reject him, he would die. Upon closer inspection, however, we notice that his term of affection for Alison is “ lemman” which was often used in medieval times in a sexual context. Furthermore, the word “ spille” can mean to die, though its cruder meaning (and the meaning more fitting with Nicholas’ physical treatment of Alison in this section) is to ejaculate. Here, the overall impression that Nicholas gives is that he uses the language of courtly love to cloak his dishonourable intentions.

Absolon uses the language of courtly love in a different way. He utilises more romantic terms of endearment than Nicholas, such as “ hony-comb”, “ faire brid” and “ sweete cinamome” and at the same time, unknowingly, uses highly unromantic imagery to describe himself. He tells Alison “ for youre love I swete”, creating a very unappealing image of himself sweating for her love. He then proceeds to use many more unappealing images. He declares “ I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete”, likening himself to a helpless lamb, an emasculating concept, and that he “ may nat ete na moore than a maide”, this time likening himself to a woman. Absolon’s misuse of the language of courtly love makes him all the more ridiculous, and his affected manner means that the reader has little sympathy for him.

Perhaps a lot of Nicholas' success in wooing Alison is that he woos secretly, as a traditional courtly lover would. Discretion is paramount, as Alison warns Nicholas that their lovemaking must be "privee" else if John found out he would kill her. Nicholas, in order to ensure that their lovemaking is secret, formulates an elaborate plan. This highlights his intellect and his cunning, and also reminds the reader of the description of Nicholas at the beginning of the tale, in which he is revealed to know much of "deerne love" and "solas" - he is experienced in the ways of secret love. Absolon does little to secretly woo Alison. When Absolon sings and plays his guitar beneath Alison's window, he does not take care to do it at a time when John is away. Moreover, John is awoken by Absolon's singing before Alison. The fact that John, a jealous husband, does not consider Absolon to be any threat to him is revealing of how others perceive Absolon. He is viewed as ineffectual and harmless.

Absolon and Nicholas both use music in their wooing of Alison. Nicholas uses his "sautrie" to make "a-nightes melodie". The next references to melody are when Alison has promised Nicholas that she will sleep with him - Nicholas "playethe faste, and maketh melodie" - and when Nicholas and Alison enjoy the "revel and the melodie" of their lovemaking. In this case, Nicholas' music-making is symbolic of his skill and cunning as a lover. In contrast, Absolon plays music on a "smal rubible" and sings with a "loud quible". The fact that Absolon's instrument is described as "smal" makes it seem unimpressive in comparison to Nicholas' "gay sautrie". His loud, high-

pitched voice is effeminate, the ridiculousness of which is highlighted by the comic rhyme of “ rubible” and “ quinible”.

It is now important to note that Alison is not a woman worthy of the attention of a courtly lover. She is not pure and fair like Emelye in ‘ The Knight’s Tale’ who decorates herself with flowers, an image of innocence and nature. Alison is dark, has a “ likerous ye”, is aware of her natural beauty and artificially accentuates it by plucking her eyebrows, and decorates herself with provocative clothing. A maiden desired by a courtly lover is of high rank and status, but Alison is only good enough “ For any lord to leggen in his bedde, | Or yet for any good yeman to wedde.” What this reveals about Alison is that in order to be seduced she does not need a man who follows all of the conventions of a courtly lover. Nicholas is shrewd enough to realise this, and he is rewarded in her bed. Absolon, however, enjoys playing the role of a courtly lover, with all of its affectations and conventions, and gets nowhere.

Traditionally, a courtly lover would expect to be rejected by his lady, until he had endured hardship and proved his love. Alison, in keeping with this tradition, rejects both Nicholas and Absolon. However, three lines after Alison demands that Nicholas remove his hands from her, she promises “ That she wol been at his comandement”. It seems that the reason Alison initially rejects Nicholas is to create another element of comedy, when she accepts him with indecorous speed. Alison’s rejection of Absolon is violent, with her threatening to throw a stone at him. Making threats of violence is not a ladylike way to behave, and this further emphasises the fact that Alison is not worthy to be loved by a courtly lover.

In conclusion, Nicholas adopts some elements of the courtly love tradition, but only to mask his crude motives. Absolon adopts more of the tradition's elements, but comes across as ridiculous and affected. He can not see that in order to win Alison he does not have to be a courtly lover, for love is not what she is interested in. She and Nicholas are both concerned with satisfying their animal appetites, and this is why Nicholas' wooing of Alison is successful.