

Essay on the courtly love tradition

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The medieval world conceived of itself and its universe as “ a great chain of being” which was bound together by “ love, also called caritas or charity.” This was a spiritualized sense of love, and was distinguished from amor - “ the love of things of this world.” When human romantic love was presented in literature it appeared in medieval romances, which came to exemplify ‘ courtly love’ - a term not used until the 19th century.

The origins of the word ‘ romance’ are interesting. It referred to works written in ‘ romanz’ or French - the language which had developed in France from Latin, the language spoken by the Romans. ‘ Real’ literature was still written in Latin, so ‘ romance’ originally meant literature written in French. However, it came to mean something more precise because of the type of literature favoured in the French and French-speaking English medieval courts - stories of knights and their adventures and their love for their ladies. Eleanor of Aquitaine became Queen of England and she helped spread the popularity of these knightly romances, as did her daughter, Marie, Countess of Champagne.

Courtly love “ reflects one of the most far-reaching revolutions in social sensibility in Western culture” and depended on the man expressing his love as a form of worship for an ideal woman, which resulted in love being presented as “ ennobling and refining” so that the experience of being in love revealed the “ fine and elevated in human nature.” The lover in the courtly love tradition was expected to worship his lover from afar, perform deeds of service for her sake and obey her commands with total loyalty and unbending perseverance. The imagery of courtly love was borrowed from religion and feudalism: the woman was above her male lover - he was her

vassal, her servant – and, in terms of religion, she was worshipped in elevated language often expressed in offerings of poems. The woman occupied a superior position in relation to her knightly lover. In response to his devotion it was accepted that the woman would be “ remote and haughty, imperious and difficult to please.” She expected to be served loyally, and unswervingly, with little hope for any response from her. In the classic courtly love scenario the woman was married, so the relation had to be conducted in great “ secrecy and danger.” The lady’s honor had to be preserved at all costs, so that she was not socially embarrassed. Physical consummation of the love was unnecessary – what mattered more was years of devotion and service to the lady, and her adoration and exaltation by her secret lover. Indeed, the religious connotations of courtly love actually served to discourage adultery, but obviously in any triangular relationship involving a married couple the potential, the possibility of adultery is ever-present. It is perhaps symptomatic that two of the most famous, most celebrated and written about relationships in medieval romance involved Tristan and Isolt, and Lancelot and Guinevere – relationships which were openly adulterous with disastrous effects.

Social historians are agreed that no immediate changes to women’s roles in society can be attributed to the courtly love tradition. However, if we take a longer view, it is possible to argue that courtly love had two long-lasting effects. Firstly, it gave European literature “ a refined and elevated language” for writing about love. Secondly, it gave women central importance in the human activity of courtship and love.