

To what extent does
wendy cope, embody
or defy the 'courtly
love' essay



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The 'courtly love' tradition dates back to the seventeenth century, and is an idealistic idea based on the circumstance of a knight and his lady, a lover and a beloved. In this essay I will explore this tradition and how it is used in past and present literature. The tradition of 'courtly love' is one of an idealistic nature, with a classic knight, and his beloved lady. The lady would generally be of a higher social status than the man, and we can see this in poems by Chaucer and Shakespeare, who refer to their ladies as "Madame" and "Mistress".

In an instance such as 'courtly love', the lover's love is generally unrequited, or his lady is unattainable. The fact that she is of a higher social status can be the cause of this. An anonymous poet describes how even though only sees his lady "passing by", and she does not notice him, he will still "love her till he dies". He also describes how he "touched her not, alas!" This also shows how she is out of his reach. In this, rejection is also something the poet Ben Jonson talks of. When he sent his beloved a flower wreath, she "sent it back" to him.

The men, who fall in love with these unattainable women, are romantic and place their ladies upon a pedestal. He becomes a slave to her and to his love, and in these intricate poems, they speak the highest praise of them. We see in a poem by Lord Byron, that he compares his lady to "water", a substance clear and pure, and "sea" and "ocean". Ladies are given divine metaphorical qualities and are subsequently referred to and praised as goddesses. The passionate lovers are romantic in their poems. They long for their chosen lady and they do not want to have to wait to have their love returned.

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Shakespeare describes this as “ in delay there lies no plenty”, and “ present mirth hath present laughter”. He feels no pleasure in prolonging his feelings. A final common aspect of courtly love poetry, is pleading, and how requests and pleas for love are shown. Shakespeare desires his lady to “ come kiss” him “ sweet and twenty”, longing for her many kisses. An anonymous poet also describes how as long as he “ request[s]” her love, she will “ deny it”. These are all typical aspects of the courtly love tradition and how poets express them.

The poem, “ To his coy mistress”, by Andrew Marvell, is a love poem, which shows many aspects of the ‘ courtly love’, tradition. However, Marvell’s poem was intended to be humorous and to make us laugh, considering this, we can assume he is not addressing a particular woman in his poem, maybe even an imaginary one, in this itself he defies the ‘ courtly love’ tradition, as his feelings are not truly heartfelt. Considering this, Marvell still uses many aspects of the ‘ courtly love’, tradition in his poem.

The first line, “ had we but world enough time”, from the very beginning of the poem, we see the idea of “ carpe diem”, typical of ‘ courtly love’, showing the urgency of his love and how he wished they had more time. This also shows the aspect of how this love may never be, because of the lack of time the lovers have, they do not have enough time to love. He also describes how he hears “ time’s winged chariot hurrying near”. He feels his time is running out as he becomes older every minute, and he is very aware that they do not have forever. He urges her to seize the day and enjoy and indulge herself in their love, while they can.

While they are “ youthful”, he feels they should “ sport” and have their love, while they “ may”. He seems to very much perceive time as their enemy. Marvell also refers to their possibly imaginary relationship hypothetically, frequently using words and expressions such as, “ we would” and “ you should”. We can also see examples of him describing his love for this woman, describing how his “ vegetable love would grow”. He uses a ridiculous metaphor here, to create humour, but although whimsical, it also describes vividly that his love would “ grow” stronger and flourish.

He talks of his love for her, and then continues to describe her beauty and characteristics, as is typical in a traditional ‘ courtly love’ poem. As he praises her his praises become more extravagant. He expresses how “ an hundred years should go to praise”, her “ eyes”, and then proceeds to praise her “ breast”, and “ thirty thousand to the rest”. He we see how he has used the number of years it would take to describe her beauty and charms, to flatterer her. We can also notice how he considers her of a higher social status than himself, when he says “ lady you deserve this state”.

We are aware of his perception of his stateliness, because she is beautiful and, typically in these circumstances, of a higher social status, he considers his self quite below her. The poem, “ Message”, is a much more modern poem, written by a woman called Wendy Cope. This poem is about a woman, who is waiting for a phone call, from a man. Despite the fact that this is a modern poem, it still vaguely adopts and defies some aspects of the ‘ courtly love’, tradition. It is clear that she embodies the idea of “ carpe diem” from the tradition.

She urges her lover to “ pick up the phone”, before it is “ too late”. She feels there is “ no time to spare”. We can see how she desires love now and at the moment. However, the ‘ courtly love’ tradition very much shows the lover waiting almost forever for their beloved to reciprocate their feelings, and although does so at great suffering and despair, “ Message”, states that her “ love will turn to hate”, and that she may begin to “ look elsewhere”. There is an aspect of request for love in her poem, but it is quite dissimilar to that of a traditional ‘ courtly love’ poem.

A seventeenth century man would shower his lady with praise and beg her to consent to be his. However, Wendy Cope will not indulge this man with flattery, she simply desires him to “ pick up the phone”, and to get into contact with her. The aspect of extravagant flattery in ‘ courtly love’ poems, is completely absent from this “ Message”. The fact that she likes this man enough to want him to call her is the only evidence we have of her regard for him. She describes him only as a “ good, old fashioned” man, which is “ rare”, showing this is a quality she desires in man and is happy to have found him.

She is very practical and realistic about her feelings and is trying to rationalise her desire to receive a phone call from him. She does not express her feelings with the fluency or romanticism exhibited in the traditional love poems. She makes no mention of him being divine, and she perceives him as human, and an equal to herself, not of higher status. She places a time limit on herself, showing she is not completely captivated by him. In a traditional love poem, the lovers do not enjoy the pain of their unrequited feelings, and Wendy Cope also feels this.

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She describes how it is “ no fun being in this state”. We can also see examples of Wendy Cope’s techniques and ideas in the poem, “ Manifesto”. We can see in this poem she is writing for a completely different and “ new purpose”. In the title she tells us that this poem is a declaration and a promise. She firstly states that she “ will work”, to try to “ win” a man’s heart. In this she seems quite determined to make this man reciprocate her feelings, to the best of her ability, by writing poems. This completely reflects the idea of courtly love, where the initial purpose of a poem is to persuade.

However, in traditional love poems, pleading and persuasion generally appear in the form of flattery, and in this poem she does not attempt to flatter her lover. In comparison to the poem “ Message”, the purpose of this poem is completely different. In “ Message”, much time is spent meditating on the fact that she has not yet received a phone call from her lover and she sends a “ Message”, through “ thought waves” urging him to “ pick up the phone”. She simply dwells on her feelings and the state she is in, and makes no attempt to take any material action to try to attain her lover, as we can see when she says she will not “ dare ring” him again.

Where as in “ Manifesto”, she decides to use all her “ talent” and “ wit” to “ make the best” of the situation she finds herself in and write “ poems”. In “ Manifesto” we can see that Wendy Cope feels by writing “ poems”, she can show off that she is “ smart”, even though she does not consider herself a “ beauty”. This perhaps shows that she feels being “ smart” is of more value to her than “ beauty”, and she feels intelligence is a greater virtue in her plot to “ win” her lover. “ Message”, states that if he does not “ pick up the phone” her love will “ turn to hate”.

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Here we see she is not prepared to hold on forever, but in “ Manifesto”, we see she is willing to write “ another book” before she gives up on him. In both poems we can also see that quite a realistic and practical idea of love is portrayed through Wendy Cope’s poems. Although in both cases, she does not attempt to deny that she is in some sort of “ state”, in “ Manifesto” she describes herself as being “ pierced by a rusty allegoric dart”, almost describing her feelings as mythical and not real. The fact she describes the “ dart” as rusty shows her ideas of love and that she is aware it is an age-old condition to be in.

The fact she says she is “ pierced” by the dart, also tells us that she has been caught by something she may not have necessarily wanted, and something she can not easily get rid of. In conclusion, we can see that the tradition of ‘ courtly love’ is present in many love poems, and even in modern day poetry. Wendy Cope uses many ideas based on the ‘ courtly love’ idea, but also defies some of the traditions. The aspects can be made use of and exploited in order to establish the feelings of lovers in different circumstances.