

The Discourse of Courtly Love in Medieval Verse Narratives

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Contributor: Albrecht Classen

This entry explores the vast field of courtly love poetry, romance, and other related genres, tracing the development of this topic across medieval Europe and discussing some of the major contributors. The focus rests on the element of discourse because so many different poets have made their voices heard and debated from many different perspectives the meaning, impact, and consequence of courtly love on the individual in ethical, social, moral, religious, economic, and even political terms. Courtly love is to be understood as a literary discourse on the mostly esoteric pursuit of love as a way of life for members of the high medieval aristocracy, finding vivid expression in poetry, short verse narratives, and romances.

courtly love literature

troubadours

trouvères

Minnesänger

Chrétien de Troyes

Marie de France

Hartmann von Aue

Wolfram von Eschenbach

Gottfried von Strassburg

Il dolce stil nuovo

One of the most important aspects of medieval society, at least since the high Middle Ages, was the early foundation and subsequent development of the discourse of love, a highly complex, often contradictory, multivocal, and exploratory literary phenomenon. Marriage was, of course, critically important in legal and moral terms, as the Church argued consistently, and most families of all social classes were keen on marrying off their children honorably and having legitimate heirs. But the rise of courtly culture in the Provence, southern France, in the early twelfth century, primarily promoted by the so-called *troubadour* poets (the female counterparts were the *troubairitz*), was essentially predicated on the pursuit of a love relationship outside of the bonds of marriage. There are many possible reasons for the emergence of this phenomenon, but we can be certain that there was a new sense of playfulness within courtly society that had discovered the enormous impact of emotions and hence the role of eroticism in interhuman relations. Love was, as poets consistently argued, a critical tool to motivate the people involved to improve their character, to impress the beloved, and to stand out as a person of elevated character. We can thus define courtly love as a narrative, musical, performative, and ritualistic medium within secular aristocratic society to explore the relationship between the genders in erotic terms and to make the male character a wooer who does not necessarily achieve his desires but is strongly encouraged to grow into an honorable and attractive individual, a mature member of the courtly world. The danger of rejection itself emerges hence as the motivational engine for the poet/singer/character to intensify his efforts and to explore the meaning of the erotic for himself and society at large. At times, female poets argued along the same lines, although they normally insisted more on the ideals of loyalty and personal commitment (for a concise overview, see ^[1] ^[2]). Early *troubadour* poetry, such as by Count William IX (Guillaume le Neuf), however, still tended somewhat to play deftly with sexual allusions and

commodified women by means of the horse metaphor, for instance. The same applied to contemporary love poetry in Latin, which often implied that men were supposed to have control over women and use them to their advantage (see the *Carmina Burana*, discussed below). In many ways, the practice or performance of courtly love served significantly to promote a range of fundamental concepts, such as communication, compromise, commitment, and compassion.

Older scholarship had tried hard to correlate the topic of courtly love with the emergence of feudalism and vassality (Erich Köhler), as if the admired lady was simply a metonym of the feudal lord under whom the young knight had to submit. This social-economic theory proved to be highly attractive for quite some time, but it has ultimately failed to be accepted by recent researchers ^{[3][4]}, especially because it profoundly ignores the emotional dimensions that became dominant factors in courtly culture. Many other aspects have been considered concerning the emergence of courtly love, including increased religiosity, the worship of the Virgin Mary, intercultural contacts with the Islamic world (Arabic poetry in the Iberian Peninsula or in the Holy Land), or the rediscovery of ancient folk culture (see Marie de France). The impact of classical Latin poetry on secular society must also not be ignored. But, the most important external issues were the improved climatic, economic, and political conditions, which facilitated the emergence of a more leisure-oriented courtly society and hence the “rediscovery” of women as objects of desire ^[5]. This “rediscovery” went hand in hand with the revival of classical learning and poetry, especially by Ovid and other Roman poets. Clerics and secular aristocrats were hence deeply involved in tandem or in competition with each other in recreating the ancient discourse on love for their own erotic and ethical concerns. As much as this poetry, soon popular across medieval Europe, seemed to be nothing but a playful mode of literary expression, it actually represented a central concern for elite society at large. In the late Middle Ages, a growing number of urban poets imitated those types of songs or developed them further, which were commonly collected in large volumes.

The term “courtly love” was used only once in a poem by the *troubadour* poet Peire d’Alvernhe, who talked about it in one of his poems, using the expression “cortez amors.” The more common term was the Provençal “fin’amor” (“fine love”), whereas the contemporary German poets talked about “minne,” all of which cannot be simply translated into “love.” Instead, courtly love involved a highly complex system of wooing for love, the development of a specific character, making the male lover worthy for his courtly lady, and involving the practice of musical performance, dance, and writing poetry. We could thus state that courtly love brought about the transformation of traditional knighthood into chivalry as a social institution. Gaston Paris was the first to label this phenomenon “courtly love” in an article he published in 1883, and research has invested much energy and resources into the further exploration of this topic ever since. Both the historical phenomenon itself and the rich history of research have already been discussed in countless monographs, articles, and entries in encyclopedias (*Lexikon des Mittelalters*, *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, *Handbook of Medieval Culture*, *Wikipedia*, etc.). The goal here does not consist of uncovering new aspects or a better explanation for the rise of this almost revolutionary culture or to develop an exhaustive bibliography of the relevant academic literature. Instead, the purpose is to summarize the major features of courtly love, to highlight the major literary genres used then, and to explore the various issues addressed. Considering the vast number of courtly love poets and love poems from across Europe, we cannot expect to achieve comprehensive and exhaustive coverage of this topic. Here, I will prioritize medieval German literature, but I extend my reflections to as many other literary traditions as possible.

In many ways, the classical ideals of ethical and moral *mores* were first adapted by the German imperial bishops in the tenth and eleventh centuries and then copied by French courtiers, who in turn deeply influenced their contemporaries in the Holy Roman Empire, Italy, the Iberian Peninsula, Flanders, and also England. In many ways, we could thus identify “courtly love” not simply as the experience of erotic attraction but as an entirely new lifestyle and culture [6][7]. Historians have also pointed out that due to the various Crusades (from 1096 to 1291), a growing number of knights were absent from Europe, either dying during their military campaigns or simply staying behind in the Latin Kingdoms in the Holy Land, where they assumed administrative, military, or political positions. This thus led to the rise of a whole generation of mighty aristocratic ladies who were then wooed by other men, which could have brought about the development of courtly love as a discourse [8]. Concomitantly, many theologians and philosophers during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries debated the fundamental question of human sinfulness pertaining to sexuality and highly problematized it in their treatises (Peter Abelard, Peter Lombard, Huggucio of Paris, Peter Damian, Anselm of Bec, Robert of Arbrissel, and Bernard of Clairvaux), which, ironically, brought these topics into the center of public discourse, directly spilling over to the secular aristocratic courts.

The Church had struggled hard since the eleventh century to implement the Gregorian Reform, which enforced celibacy for the clergy but gravely problematized people's basic need to practice sexuality. In short, while the high medieval theologians aimed directly at suppressing the element of the erotic, members of the ruling class (aristocrats) discovered the great attractiveness of the theme of love for a noble lady [8]. It remains unclear, however, to what extent the religious perspective became a catalyst for the secular–erotic culture or vice versa [9][10][11][12][13]. For instance, we should not forget the highly erotic nature of the *Song of Songs* in the Old Testament, and hence the corresponding reflections on those poems by medieval intellectuals and poets.

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