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Courtly Love in *The Allegory*

Abstract

Recounts Lewis's views on Courtly Love as expressed in *The Allegory of Love*.

Additional Keywords

Courtly love in C.S. Lewis; Lewis, C.S. *The Allegory of Love*

Courtly Love in *The Allegory*

Lawrence W. Cobb

My Father and I never understood each other. Or maybe he understood me all too well. Once, I remember, he caught me reading a book called *All Men are Enemies*, and his remarks were scathing. It was pretty mild stuff by today's standards, but not by his. His tongue could raise blisters as well as a razor strap. I was glad he hadn't caught me with *The Well of Loneliness*.

The lady at the rental library never criticized her reader's tastes, but in my case she felt duty-bound to encourage any slight tendency toward wholesomeness. When I took out *Green Mansions*, she said it was a beautiful book. I read it and disagreed violently. The lovely, birdlike Rima, barbecued alive in the top of a tree -- that was beauty? Then so was a knife-stab in the heart. I was inconsolable for days.

I found out what she meant years later, when C.S. Lewis crossed my path.

Have you not seen in our days
Of any whose story, song, or art
Delights us, our sincerest praise
Means, when all's said, 'You break my heart'?

And that was the merest ripple on the surface of the river of peace that began to circulate when I dug into Lewis and found discord harmoniously resolved in my life, conflict after conflict reconciled. I considered the man my spiritual father -- I still do. How do I love him? Let me count the ways!

Once I ventured to praise him to my father. He cut me off. He had read Lewis too, and failed to find him all-wise. But Dad mellowed with the years. He learned to poke fun at himself: "Everything I really enjoy is either illegal, immoral, or fattening." Even in those days I would not have dared to bring up *The Allegory of Love*. His highest praise of the doctrine of Courtly Love would have been -- I can hear him now -- "At least it's not fattening."

And he would have been right. I see that now. Courtly love was a pattern of adultery and seduction; it was never a pathway into real happiness. It did for a while raise woman -- at any rate representative women -- to the place the feminists claim for them, that of ascendancy over men -- that of queen and arbiter of destiny. And I think that any man who has ever been in love will hardly begrudge that.

Whether it is natural and rightful place is another matter. Lewis thought not. In *The Four Loves* he champions the headship of the man, though he is careful to say that our headship is no substantial thing, but is only a role we are called upon to play. Our crowns are neither of them any badge of honor; one is of tinsel and the other of thorns. The tinsel crown we disport ourselves with pretty freely; the thorny one we shirk. And if woman assumes it, it is because we have forced it upon her.

But, bad as things are, they could be worse -- and they were worse before Courtly Love came into the picture. Here is a typical love story of those days.

"Erec sees Enide in her father's house, and falls in love with her. There are no passages of love between them: no humility on his part, no cruelty on hers. Indeed it is not clear that they converse at all. When he comes to the house, the maiden, at her father's command, leads his horse to stable and grooms it with her own hands. Later, when they are seated, the father and the guest talk of her in her presence as if she was a child or an animal. Erec asks her in marriage, and the father consents. It does not seem to occur to the lover that the lady's will could be a relevant factor in this arrangement. We are given to understand that she is pleased, but only a passive role is expected of her, or indeed allowed to her... We are back in a world where women are merely the mute objects of gift or barter, not only in the eyes of their fathers, but even in the eyes of their lovers... [This is] the story of wifely patience triumphing over the ordeals imposed by the irresponsible cruelty of a husband -- and, as such, it cannot possibly reconcile itself with even the most moderate ideal of courtesy. But Erec does not confine his discourtesy within the limits of the ordeal. Just as he had allowed Enide to groom his horse for him before their marriage, so, in their journeying, he lets her watch and hold the horse all night, while he himself sleeps at ease beneath the cloak which she has taken from her own back to cover him."

Courtly Love changed all that. "It appears," says Lewis, "quite suddenly at the end of the eleventh century in Languedoc... The new thing itself, I do not pretend to explain. Real changes in human sentiment are very rare -- there are perhaps three or four on record -- but I believe that they occur, and that this is one of them." (Ibid, pp. 2,11.)

One gets a picture of the troubadours and minnesingers, entranced by a shining new ideal of human love, broadcasting their vision to every corner of Western Europe, as America's founding fathers, centuries later, seeing a shining new ideal of human freedom, hammered out the document that enshrines it -- the Constitution. Of course in both cases the process was more definite than that, and in Lewis' book we can almost see it happening. In both cases there was an initiator and a framer who touched the match to the bonfire. As the Constitution was the product of the master mind, Thomas Jefferson, and a brilliant organizer, John Rutledge, who put it into writing, so Courtly Love was the product of a "master mistress" (as Shakespeare would say), Marie, Countess of Champagne, and her court poet, Chretien of Troyes -- the very same Chretien who gave us the story of the loutish Erec and the patient Enide. Now he gives us the story of the secret love of Lancelot and Guinevere.

What changed this style so suddenly? "We have to worm our way very cautiously into the minds of these old writers," Lewis warns us. Chretien "tells us in the opening lines of Lancelot that he wrote it at the com-

mand of the Countess of Champagne, and that she furnished him with both the story and the treatment. What does this mean? I am probably not the first reader who has seen in the fantastic labours which Lancelot undergoes at the bidding of the Queen, a symbol of the poet's own genius bent to tasks unworthy of it by the whim of a fashionable woman." (Ibid., pp. 31,24.)

How does a woman come to have authority over him? Lewis explains it this way:

We must picture a castle which is a little island of comparative leisure and luxury, and therefore at least of possible refinement, in a barbarous country-side. There are a great many men in it, and very few women -- the lady, and her damsels. Around these throng the whole male *meiny*, the inferior nobles, the landless knights, the squires, and the pages -- haughty creatures enough in relation to the peasantry beyond the walls, but feudally inferior to the lady as to her lord -- her 'men' as feudal language had it. Whatever 'courtesy' is in the place flows from her: all female charm from her and her damsels... The lady, by her social and feudal position, is already the arbitress of manners. (Ibid., pp. 12-13)

And apparently the livelihood of the male hangers-on is dependent on her good will.

Here is the story Chretien is assigned to tell by my lady of Champagne: Queen Guinevere has been kidnapped and is being held captive "in the mysterious land of Gorre, where those that are native can go both in and out but strangers can only go in." Lancelot immediately sets out to rescue her. He loses his horse in a battle almost at once. In this predicament he is met by a dwarf driving a tumbriel." (Ibid., pp. 26-27) At that time a tumbriel, or cart,

was a rare thing, and evil. There was only one in each town, and it was used to expose and carry to execution, thieves, murderers, traitors, and other criminals. Anyone who had been carried in a cart lost all reputation and legal right; he was dead in law, and could no more show himself in courts or towns. Anyone who met a cart crossed himself and said a prayer... Lancelot asked the dwarf for news of the queen; the dwarf answered that if the knight would mount the cart, he could presently hear of her. For a couple of steps Lancelot hesitated. Reason and Love dispute, for that time, within him. Reason loses; Love triumphs; he climbs in."

He is driven through the streets where the rabble cry out upon him and ask what he has done and whether he is to be flayed or hanged. He is brought to a castle where he is shown a bed that he must not lie in because he is a knight disgraced. He comes to the bridge that crosses into the land of Gorre -- the sword-bridge, made of a single blade of steel" as long as two lances, end to end -- and is warned that the high enterprise of crossing it is not for one so dishonoured as he. "Remember your ride on the cart," says the keeper of the bridge. Even his friends acknowledge that he will never rid of the disgrace.

When he has crossed the bridge,

wounded in hands, knees, and feet, he comes at last into the presence of the Queen, (*Allegory*, p. 27)

whom he has now liberated.

But she had heard of his hesitation. She threw him a cold look and would not speak to him. Lancelot, 'feeling very helpless' (how one's heart leaps at that phrase! how one recognizes the chilly glance, the silent mouth!), decided that his fault must be in having ridden in the cart at all. This, of course, is exactly what a man would think, and might even sometimes be right in thinking; one never quite knows which way the admirable feminine mind will spring. He was wrong; his fault lay only in his delay. Presently, after an alarm of death on both sides, she softened. He dared to ask how he had offended her. She answered: "You must remember that you were not at all in a hurry to get in that cart, you went two good steps before you did." Lancelot abased himself profoundly. "For God's sake, lady, take my amends, and tell me if you can forgive me." The queen said: "Willingly; I forgive you entirely."

No doubt this is an extreme example of courtly love. But no doubt also it is based on general human experience. The delay in action may, to a woman, mean more that the action itself... Oh perhaps the Provencals manipulated love too much, but undoubtedly they knew what they were manipulating!" ("Figure of Arthur," pp. 340-41.)

Is all this too fantastic? Well, these days we are constantly being told that fantasizing does no harm. In the case of Courtly Love, it did. It almost overthrew the institution of marriage -- though not single-handedly, for that institution was already in trouble, for two reasons, as Lewis explains:

The first is, of course, the actual practice of feudal society. Marriages had nothing to do with love, and no 'nonsense' about marriage was tolerated. All matches were matches of interest, and, worse still, of an interest that was continually changing. When the alliance that had answered would answer no longer, the husband's object was to get rid of the lady as quickly as possible. Marriages were frequently dissolved. The same woman who was the lady and 'the dearest dread' of her vassals was often little better than a piece of property to her husband. He was master in his own house. So far from being a natural channel for the new kind of love, marriage was rather the drab background against which love stood out in all the contrast of its new tenderness and delicacy. The situation is indeed a simple one, and not peculiar to the Middle Ages. Any idealization of sexual love, in a society where marriage is purely utilitarian, must begin by being an idealization of adultery." (*Allegory*, p. 13.)

The second was that the Church, as usual, was warning people against the very sins they were least likely to commit. In this instance, it was warning married men against loving their wives. In view of the advice of Hebrew 13:4, it is difficult to see why, but "the views of medieval churchmen on the sexual act

within marriage (there is no question, of course, about the act outside marriage) are all limited by two complementary agreements. On the other hand, nobody ever asserted that the act was intrinsically sinful. On the other hand, all were agreed that some evil element was present in every concrete instance of this act since the Fall." (Ibid., p. 14.) We have the ludicrous situation of an act being intrinsically innocent, while the desire that leads to it is sinful.

Just how sinful it might be was warmly debated by the great doctors of the Church. Gregory differed from Hugh of St. Victor, and he in turn with Peter Lombard.

Albertus Magnus takes a much more genial view. He sweeps away the idea that the pleasure is evil or a result of the Fall; on the contrary, pleasure would have been greater if we had remained in Paradise. The real trouble about fallen man is not the strength of his pleasures but the weakness of his reason: unfallen man could have enjoyed any degree of pleasure without losing sight, for a moment, of the First Good." (Ibid., p. 15.)

But Albertus, like his pupil, Thomas Aquinas, seems to

take away with one hand what he holds out to us with each other....

The general impression left on the medieval mind by its official teachers was that all love -- at least all such passionate and exalted devotion as a courtly poet thought worthy of the name -- was more or less wicked. And this impression left on the nature of feudal marriage as I have already described it, produced in the poets a certain wilfulness, a readiness to emphasize rather than to conceal the antagonism between their amatory and their religious ideals. Thus if the Church tells them that the ardent lover even of his own wife is in mortal sin, they presently reply with the rule that true love that love is impossible in marriage." (Ibid., pp. 17-18.)

And so it goes on. With that sort of beginning, "we naturally look next," says Lewis,

for a professedly theoretical work on the... subject.... Such a work is ready for us in the *De Arte Honestae Amandi* of Andreas Capellanus (Andre the chaplain)... The *De Arte* takes the form of methodical instruction in the art of love-making given by the Chaplain to a certain Walter.... The occurrence of a given opinion in these imaginary dialogues does not tell us what Andreas thought; but it is tolerably good evidence that such an opinion was part of the body of floating ideas on the subject. (Ibid., p. 32-33)

Some of these opinions were very fine. "There is no good thing in the world, and no courtesy, which is not derived from love as from its fountain." (Ibid., p. 34) But the essence of Courtly love is this:

The love which is to be the source of all that is beautiful in life and manners must be the reward freely given by the lady, and only our superiors can reward. But a wife is not a superior. As the wife of another, above

all as the wife of a great lord, she may be queen of beauty and of love, the distributor of favours, the inspiration of all knightly virtues, and the bride of 'villany'; but as your own wife, for whom you have bargained with her father, she sinks at once from lady to mere woman. How can a woman, whose duty is to obey you, be the midone whose grace is the goal of all striving and whose displeasure is the restraining influence upon all uncourtly vices? (Ibid., pp. 36-37)

In a footnote, Lewis illustrates this point with a passage from *Amadis de Gaul*:

"O lady, with what services can I requite you, that by your consent our loves are now made known? Oriana answered, It is now, Sir, no longer time that you should proffer such courtesies, or that I should receive them. I am now to follow and observe your will with that obedience which wife owes to husband." (Ibid., p. 36.)

Where is all this going to end? Well,

Andreas has a surprise for the modern reader at the beginning of the last book. Having written two books on the art of love, he suddenly breaks off and begins anew: 'You must read all this, my dear Walter, not as though you sought thence to embrace the life of lovers, but that being refreshed by its doctrine and having all learned how to provoke the minds of women to Love, you may yet abstain from such provocation, and thus merit a greater reward.' All that has gone before, we are given to understand, has been written in order that Walter.... may see, and know, and yet abstain. 'No man through any good deeds can please God so long as he serves in the service of Love... and the rest of the book is a palinode.

What are we to make of this volte-face? That the Chaplain's love-lore is pure joking, or that his religion is rank hypocrisy? Neither... He meant what he said when he told us that love was the source of everything in saeculo bonum, and it is our fault if we are apt to forget the limitation -- in saeculo... He means the really good things, in a human sense, as contrasted with the really bad things: courage and courtesy and generosity, as against baseness. But, rising like a sheer cliff above and behind this humane or secular scale of values, he has another which is not to be reconciled with it, another by whose standards there is very little to choose between the 'worldly' good and the 'worldly' bad. (Ibid. p. 41, 42)

[On this] we can have no better comment than the words of the lady, [in another conversation] 'Leaving the religious side of the question out for a moment' -- and then she turns to the real point.... The whole world of courtesy exists only by 'leaving the religious side of the question out for a moment'....

The authors are all going to repent when the book is over. The Chaplain's palinode does not stand alone. In the last stanzas of the book of Trolus, in the harsher recantation that closes the life and work of Chaucer as a whole, in the noble close of Malory, it is the same. We hear the bell clang; and the children, suddenly hushed and grave, and a little frightened,

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double of the Blackbury River; the fact that there are two Rosies in the story, and that Pierce manages to get them confused; etc.

The narrative is open-ended, so that a sequel is possible -- almost probable, since we have only gone through three of the twelve astrological houses that serve as the novel's symbolic framework. Whether it will stand on its own or be extended in the future, this many-faceted, delicately woven tale should fascinate anyone who is asking the ultimate questions about meaning and mythopoeia.



A TOLKIEN INDEX

A *Working Concordance*, the first volume of Dr. Paul Nolan Hyde's comprehensive index of the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, was first made available at the 18th Mythopoeic Conference and is now being offered to the general membership of the Mythopoeic Society and other interested parties. It is a compilation of names, places, things, and language elements together with volume and page numbers of (almost) every occurrence. Volumes indexed include *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, *The Book of Lost Tales* (I & II), *The Lays of Beleriand*, *The Shaping of Middle-earth*, *The Road Goes Ever On*, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, *The Monsters and the Critics*, and Tolkien's "Guide to the Names in the Lord of the Rings" included in Jared Lobdell's *A Tolkien Compass*. The index also includes a complete listing of the Old and Middle English words used by J.R.R. Tolkien including the lengthy passages of Old English given in *The Shaping of Middle-earth*. It is soft-back, spiral bound, 163 pages, double column format.

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Apologizes to Benjamin Urrutia. The review "Our Bodies, Our Elves", in *Mythlore* 50 was written by him.

From Under Mountains, from page 13

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troop back to their master." (Ibid., p. 44.)

So the mad, gallant, foolhardy experiment is over. But Western civilization will never be the same. Woman will never again be seen as merely a piece of property or an object of barter. She is a human being -- a person -- whatever she may do or fail to do. And if she cares to stand on her dignity, she is a lady, with all a lady's prerogatives. As Lewis puts it,

To leap up on errands, to go through heat or cold, at the bidding of one's lady, or even of any lady, would seem but honorable and natural to a gentleman of the thirteenth or even of the seventeenth century; and most of us have gone shopping in the twentieth with ladies who show no sign of regarding the tradition as a dead letter." (Ibid., p. 7)

A lady, any lady, retains something of her ancient authority -- just how much no man can be quite sure. It is hers to have and to hold. She can forfeit her title to honor only by conduct unbecoming a lady, of which, to be sure, no wise woman would ever be guilty. Courtly love is Western man's heritage; it still flows in his bloodstream. "Neither the form nor the sentiment of this old poetry," says Lewis, "has passed away without leaving indelible traces on our minds." (Ibid., p. 1.)

NOTES

1. C.S. Lewis, *Poems* (London: Geoffrey Bles, Ltd., 1964), p. 133.
2. C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936; Galaxy Books (paper), 1958), pp. 25-26.
3. Charles Williams, "The Figure of Arthur," in *Tales-in-sin through Logres* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (paper), 1974), p. 240.

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