Winter 12-15-1993

"Courtesy" in Charles Williams' *The Greater Trumps*

Charles Beach

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol19/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to: http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm
"Courtesy" in Charles Williams' The Greater Trumps

Abstract
Describes the tradition of courtesy in medieval court and monastic communities. Refers to these traditions and Williams's writings to define courtesy as he saw it. Notes the different levels of courtesy as defined by Williams.

Additional Keywords
Courtesy (medieval tradition) in The Greater Trumps; Williams, Charles. The Greater Trumps
Courteous it is to give;  
high courtesy, to take;  
but nobly, nobly shall he live  
whom Love at last shall make  
of his own revelation free. (“Percivale’s Song” 346)

Much has been said about Charles Williams’ view on love, especially his theology of romantic love, but these discussions have focused primarily on Dantean or biblical influences as they appear in Williams’ novels, poems, and essays. However, one additional influence has been overlooked: the courtesy tradition. “Courtesy” permeates Williams’ views on relationships between God and man, between neighbors, and between lovers. Perhaps there has been little critical discussion of “courtesy” in Williams’ writings because he does not consistently use the term when he portrays courteous speech or actions. Or perhaps the omission has occurred because, as Jonathan Nicholls notes, the term sometimes remains vague and imprecise even in its medieval and Renaissance origins (7). Also, the meaning of “courtesy” in a particular written context often depends on the author’s “intended significance” of the word, and, according to W. O. Evans, an understanding of this intention requires a study of the background from which the author worked (145). But once we arrive at a working definition of courtesy, we can examine Williams’ use of the idea in a representative novel, The Greater Trumps.

Although courtesy has been diluted through common usage to mean politeness and well-mannered behavior, for his purposes Williams relies primarily on two separate but related medieval settings, the secular court and the monastery. Both sources of the courtesy tradition blend together to shape Williams views on love (whether divine, neighborly, or romantic) and his views on human relationships.

Although Evans identifies the medieval association of “cortaysye” with both chivalry and courtly love (146 - 51), Williams has not restricted his use of the term to these contexts. Had he done so, courtesy would have been merely a by-product of the romantic experience. Certainly, Williams indicates that courtesy should accompany romantic love, as seen in a poem he wrote to his beloved wife Michal:

Nor I the less salute you that no face  
Hath sent these heartbeats quicker, that no hand  
Hath e’er touched mine save in due courtesy.  
(Silver Stair 6)

Instead of relying on the courtly love tradition, Williams draws on the wider application of “courtesy” to the whole of life as described in “courtesy books” that, as John E. Mason suggests, in the later Middle Ages identified the proper conduct, education, and social role of the courtiers. In this definition, “courtesy” could be described “as a code of ethics, esthetics, or peculiar information for any class conscious group...” (Mason, 4). D.R.M. Wilkinson traces courtesy literature to its roots in early Greek philosophy, especially in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Focusing on its practical nature, Wilkinson defines the literature as “sets of rules or of maxims for the moral and/or social improvement of specific individuals or classes” put into writing, forming a kind of synthesis of “philosophy and theology...and the practical instruction given in a school” (Wilkinson 1-2).

The writings commonly called “courtesy books” originated in Italy during the late medieval period and quickly spread throughout Europe. At first, such courtesy books as Machiavelli’s The Prince and Erasmus’ Instruction of a Christian Prince were directed at rulers and their children, the future rulers. Baldesar Castiglione’s The Book of the Courtier expanded the intended audience of courtesy literature by focusing not on the ruler but rather on the other members of the court. Castiglione’s work prompted many sixteenth-and seventeenth-century imitators, such as Sir Thomas Elyot’s Boke Named the Governeour, which sought to educate young gentlemen and ladies on proper behavior (Thompson 137-38). But instruction on manners and social obligations was not limited to the aristocratic classes: guidebooks such as the anonymous fifteenth-century A Generall Rule to Teach Every Man to Serve a Lorde or Master instructed servants on the proper order of courses for each meal, the expected role each servant was to play within the household, and the improper actions - “fightyng, oreble chydyng, makyng of debates, drawyng of knyves and stelynges, affrayes and such other” (15) - which would draw punishment. In any case, Frank Whigham believes that, whether applied to a ruler, his courtiers, or other servants, courtesy was always “a systematic activity, a daily ritual” (4).

This sense of courtesy - the ritualistic, proper manners and conduct of an individual according to the position he or she occupies within the social hierarchy - was important to Williams. He links courtesy to the details of daily existence, defining it as a simple act such as when “meeting a lady, instinctively rais(ing) one’s hat” (Windows 50) or as
simply saying or doing something so someone else "might not feel displeasure or be enraged" (Henry VII 80). At various times in his correspondence with Lois Lang-Sims, Williams suggests that in her actions she demonstrates "high courtesy" (Letters to Lalage 57), that she resembles a royal figure whose "courtesy" may "stretch a hand of pardon" (46), and that she is "in all things courteous..." (51). In turn, Lang-Sims describes the ritualistic way Williams acted during their meetings: how he "courteously dismissed" her (32); how he seemed, as he exited a building, to move through the doors "as if they were the curtains of the royal chamber to be swept ceremoniously aside for our exit and entrance" (34-35); and how he kissed her hand at parting "with a combination of ritual solemnity, old-fashioned courtesy, and whimsical playfulness that no one but he could have produced..." (35).

Even though Williams established a hierarchy of courtesy, he never reduced courtesy to a list of things to do and things not to do. In his later years, when he accumulated a number of followers - the informal, generally unorganized group he called the "Companions of the Co-Inherence" - Williams drafted the "Promulgation of the Company," a brief, seven-part list of guidelines intended to form the basis of the members' interaction with each other, and, more importantly, their interaction with Williams. The promulgation is a statement of common purpose, a "concern [with] the practice of the apprehension of the co-inherence both as a natural and a supernatural principle." As such, the promulgation serves as the company's courtesy book, not by emphasizing specific rules but by urging the companions to contemplate the spiritual relationships within the Trinity and between God and the Church, as well as related spiritual matters. It also emphasizes human relationships, especially in "methods of exchange" (Letters to Lalage 30), though Williams never prescribes the specific ways in which each member must act. The guiding principle of the members' interrelationships is the heart of the theory of co-inherence itself: "Bear ye one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:2).

In recalling Williams' actions, Lang-Sims comments on the emotional and spiritual overtones of the courtesy rituals. She suggests that the ritualistic behavior, with its emotional symbolism, confused her at first into thinking Williams loved her (Letters to Lalage, 32). It is easy to understand her confusion since Williams states that "love is always courtesy" (42), whether the love is directed toward God, a neighbor, or a lover. He does not establish a simple equation (love = courtesy), but rather produces something similar to C.S. Lewis' suggestion that "only the courteous can love, but it is love that makes them courteous" (2). Thus, there is an inherent connection between the two terms in that courtesy may be defined as the attitude and actions that develop out of love.

Note that courtesy does not require or necessarily involve the passion or illumination that accompanies love, especially romantic love. Courtesy is an act of the will that may not engage the emotions of the individual because the will cannot, "by itself, create emotions" (Image 150). But courtesy has at its center a deeper, transcendent love that reveals its presence in the individual through the routine actions of everyday life. In Williams' thought, the transcendent love is divine: "God is Love, the gentle breeze/touching the hot cheeks of the weary world" (Three Plays 74). In Williams' play The Chaste Wanton, when the Duchess asks the Bishop about romantic love, he replies with a definition that echoes Williams' descriptions of courteous actions:

A duteous carriage and a simple heart, a ministering patience, a sedate control, a temperate bearing and a frugal mind caring for others more than for itself, a gentle living by a spiritual rule, a flying from temptation, a complete passionless evacuation of the will. (Three Plays, 74)

Although the Duchess remains somewhat skeptical about romantic love, she recognizes in those external actions the presence of divine love: "This is the kingdom of heaven that comes within!" (74).

According to Nicholls, a strong connection exists between biblical teaching and medieval courtesy, especially as concerns "social behavior..." (21). Evans suggests that, in its English usage, courtesy came to include the details and principles of the Christian life (156-57). Early medieval monastic orders anticipated later secular courtesy writings with documents such as the Benedictine Rule that set guidelines for the monks' individual daily actions and their obligations to the community as a whole (Nicholls 23-24). These monastic rules were at first brief "outlines," but during the Middle Ages they came to include details about every function of daily life - a historical progression of general-to-specific Nicholls believes carried over into the secular court and its development of courtesy books beginning in the twelfth century (25).

This monastic heritage remains evident in Williams' writings, especially through the influence of Lady Julian of Norwich, a fifteenth-century anchoress from whom Williams obtained much of his understanding of the spiritual side of courtesy.1 In her Showings, Julian describes sixteen revelations that she was granted by God - visions that revealed qualities of God's nature as shown through the suffering and Passion of Christ. She believes God sent her the visions out of "his courteous love" (191). Indeed, she perceives courtesy as the central divine characteristic: in the sixth revelation, Julian sees God as the master of a house who hosts a banquet to which he has invited his friends. She goes on to say,

Then I did not see him seated anywhere in his own house; but I saw him reign in his house as a king and fill it all full of joy and mirth, gladdening and consoling his dear friends with himself, very familiar and courteously... (203)
The picture of God is that of a medieval lord who always acts according to the principles of courtesy, a practice that involves giving himself to his friends, both formally according to pre-established social rules and informally according to his familial relationship with his companions. It is important to note that this divine courtesy does not depend on the individual's personal merits or on the individual's response to God: the divine courtesy is extended toward all of creation (245). But, according to Julian, courtesy is not limited to God the Father: it is the character of Christ's sacramental and motherly giving to the Church, especially in the Eucharist (298, 301), and it is the motivation behind the working of the Holy Spirit toward the Church (294). Courtesy is also present in the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity. In the fifty-fifth chapter of the Showings, Julian speaks of Christ's presentation of the Church to God the Father, who, in turn, "courteously" returns the gift to the Son - a transfer which "is joy to the Father and bliss to the Son and delight to the Holy Spirit..." (286). After observing this divine example, Julian stresses the believer's need to respond to God's courtesy in a similar manner:

For our courteous Lord wants us to be as familiar with him as heart may think or soul may desire; but let us beware that we do not accept this familiarity so carelessly as to forsake courtesy. For our Lord himself is supreme familiarity, and he is courteous as if he is familiar, for he is true courtesy. (331)

God alone is able to balance the formality of the courtesy rituals with the informality suggested by the word "familiarity." In doing so, he sets before his Church the model for personal conduct and relationships.

As a writer for whom the various elements of the Christian faith were of utmost importance, Williams sees in courtesy a means to communicate an individual's faith through his whole life. As a spiritual function, courtesy becomes a necessary vehicle for forgiveness and repentance (Divorce 46); it also becomes "chastity," the vibrant and living quality of purity that is "the reflection of the Divine Word" directed "towards men" (Forgiveness 25-26); and it becomes "our whole business towards our neighbors; it is indeed spiritual self-preservation..." (Forgiveness 70). In principle, courtesy is that love which a person directs toward his fellow humans in obedience to Christ's commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). Williams' interpretation of courtesy therefore remains faithful to its roots in Christian belief, as described by the Pearl Poet:

In courtesy we are members all
Of Jesus Christ, Saint Paul doth write:
As head, arm, leg, and navel small
To their body doth loyalty true unite,
So as limbs to their Master mystical
All Christians belong by right. (Tolkien, 93)

From the poet's presentation, it is clear that courtesy is the means by which the bond between the members of the Christian community - described using St. Paul's analogy of the human body in I Corinthians 12:12-27 - is maintained and strengthened. So when he describes an individual's conscious attempts to love another person and thus participate in the community, Williams is revealing the nature of that character's courtesy. Williams thus uses "courtesy" in the sense that, as Evans suggests, is the primary English meaning: "action intended to please or help others, or the spirit from which it springs" (143).

This kind of courtesy can be broken down into three levels or degrees. In his poem "Percivale's Song," Williams suggests that the first level of courtesy "is the heart...which wholly learns to give" in order to please" the one who is being loved. The second level begins when the now "wiser" person recognizes that he is loved in return and "comes in turn to take from the beloved." The highest of all courtesies, according to Williams, results not from the mechanics of "giving and taking" but rather from the individual's "revelation" that he has become "Love and only Love" - the individual thus being in-dwelt by divine love (345-46). This level is both difficult to achieve and difficult to maintain for human beings, but, according to Williams, it is the level at which God exists. At the first two stages love remains primarily an external concept: in the third it becomes the essence of one's being. Though even at this final stage "love must... be an act of the will" (Image 71), love may become so habitual as to cease to be a conscious act.

As a primary means of maintaining the Christian life, and like the other components of that life, courtesy involves the choice of obedience or disobedience: a person must decide whether to act in a courteous manner in each situation he faces. When a person chooses to love, he opens up to spiritual riches, while rejecting love could allow the individual to "enter [heaven] empty-handed" (Silver Stair 51). For Williams, the greatest evil is "the sin of indulging oneself in love instead of devoting oneself to the duty of love" (Religion and Love 21). Williams agrees with the orthodox Christian position on sin - that to refuse to do good is a sin in the same manner that doing evil is sinful ("Figure of Arthur" 85). And an inability to love often separates a person from his neighbors. For example, Williams argues that King Henry VII "was not alone, for he had his servants; but he had not given himself to any of them, and therefore he was alone" (Henry VII, 107).

Williams states that in the end "there is but one dichotomy:...those who acknowledge that they live from the life of others, including their 'enemies,' and those who do not" (Image 113). By turning away from others and toward themselves, such individuals endanger their standing in the City of God (Image 120) and may ultimately find themselves in hell. By this, Williams does not emphasize a physical location: rather, hell is the spiritual state that results when any person consistently and willfully chooses self-love over courtesy, whether in ordinary human relationships, in academic circles, or in the church. Hell is essentially "a place where one lives without learn-
ing,' where no courtesy or integrity could any more be found or clarified," as Lord Arglay discovers in Williams' short story "Et in Sempiternum Pereant" (155).

As we have seen, courtesy appears in Williams' thought as the proper means for demonstrating and preserving both the individual Christian life and the relationships within the Christian community. By examining a representative novel, we can have a clearer understanding of the ways in which Williams presents "courtesy" (or "discourtesy") in his characters.

In the novel The Greater Trumps, Sybil Coningsby acts with courtesy toward the other characters. She has reached Williams' third level of courtesy, in which there is no conscious awareness of the giving and taking involved in relationships, by learning to give up futile attempts to "enjoy" life and "love" others:

She had tried to enjoy, and she remembered vividly the moment when...it had struck her that there was no need for her to try or to enjoy: she had only to be still, and let that recognized Deity itself enjoy, as its omnipotent nature was. (125)

This sense of participation in the divine joy permeates all of Sybil's relationships, as she demonstrates throughout the novel, beginning in the first episode, when her niece Nancy asks her,

"Doesn't father ever annoy you, auntie?"...
"No, my dear," Miss Coningsby said.
"Don't we ever annoy you?" Nancy asked again.
"No, my dear," Miss Coningsby said.
"Doesn't anyone ever annoy you, aunt?" Ralph took up her chant.

"Hardly at all," Miss Coningsby said. "What extraordinary ideas you children have!
Why should anyone annoy me?" (8-9)

Sybil's courteous nature allows her to endure patiently her brother Lothair's habitual discontent; it also motivates her to go out into the storm to rescue him, an action that certainly saves his life. But she draws no attention to herself or to her own heroics. Rather, she frames the rescue as she had. But how it dogged him - that ghastly luck! How it haunted him! (11-12)

Unlike his sister Sybil, Lothair does not perceive the world as a place of courtesy and love. He sets himself and his desires ahead of the needs of others and resists their claims on him - thus taking the first steps toward hell. But once he realizes that Sybil rescued him from the storm, Lothair is able to admit his problem is not caused by other people, nor is it the fault of impersonal "luck": his problem is himself. He has been unwilling to give himself to others because he fears that, in taking such steps, "he always seemed having to be reciprocal than anybody else" (172). From the moment of this discovery, he begins to change, first recognizing that "one mustn't be selfish - especially on Christmas Day" (173). Shortly thereafter, he intervenes on Nancy's behalf and rescues her from Joanna's control, just before the old Gypsy was about to perform a magical sacrifice using the girl (213-14). In taking such action, Lothair learns to give of himself to those he loves - and moves into the first level of courtesy.

The characters who act without courtesy stand as sharp contrasts to the courteous. For instance, Henry Lee acts discourteously toward Nancy and her family by seeking to possess the Tarots even at the expense of Lothair's life. He does not consider how his actions will affect his relationship with Nancy; he is shocked when she discovers his spell-making and interrupts him. At that moment, the
illusion of courtesy in which he had clothed his actions is undone, and the two lovers "had been brought into knowledge of each other, and might speak clearly" (122). But his discourteous actions are countered by Sybil's courtesy toward Lothair and Nancy's willingness to return betrayal with cautious love. As a result, Lothair is rescued, and Henry is ultimately restored to Nancy, to her family and to the human community. But his restoration is achieved only by his acceptance of Nancy's forgiveness and love, and through his defeat as a schemer and magician - a defeat he ultimately confesses to Lothair (207-09). Though he believes he loves Nancy, Henry proves by his willingness to endanger her father's life that he does not yet truly love. With Nancy's help, he must begin again by learning first how to receive love, then learn how to give it.

The behavior of Henry's great-aunt Joanna indicates a greater degree of discourtesy. In her madness she identifies herself with the goddess Isis, who, according to ancient legend, roams about searching for her dead son, Osiris. Though Henry and the others see Joanna's speech as merely the ravings of an "old gypsy-woman," Sybil recognizes here an image pointing to Joanna's ultimate search for Christ. Like Henry and Aaron, Joanna misunderstands the mystical imagery in which she has immersed herself, and she uses the myth for her own selfish purposes. But there is a difference here: Joanna's efforts appear on the surface to involve a desire for power, but Sybil perceives that Joanna's real desire is to be restored to her firstborn, who died shortly after birth. Although she has used her knowledge to manipulate others, Joanna has the opportunity to repent, a possibility that is pictured in the novels' final pages, as she accepts Nancy in place of both her dead son and his temporary replacement, the dull automaton Stephen. She recognizes in Nancy the courtesy and vitality of Christ, qualities she first perceived in her own child (230). Joanna's submission to the love of Nancy shows a transformation from her earlier discourteous, in which she ordered Stephen to attack Lothair, who was trying to protect the Tarot figures (178), and she attempted to cut Nancy in order to satisfy her grief (198 - 99). This change in Joanna's response to Nancy suggests the possibility that the old woman, too, may begin moving toward the upward path of courtesy.

Henry's grandfather Aaron is first introduced as a solitary figure whose overriding passion is to penetrate the mystery of the Tarots (25), and this isolated lifestyle is the first suggestion that Aaron lacks courtesy. In his desire to manipulate events in his favor, he first extends to the Coningsbys his counterfeit hospitality, then convinces Henry to make the attempt on Lothair's life (87-88). Ultimately, Aaron's lack of courtesy contributes to his spiritual paralysis during the climactic events of the novel. Instead of participating in the revelation of the mystery of the Tarots, he can only stand "stupified" (182), become filled with "horror" (186), and watch the others act (187). While his self-absorption and potential damnation has not progressed to the full extent of Lawrence Wentworth's in Williams' Descent into Hell, Aaron has consistently chosen self over community because he misunderstood the mystery of the Tarots, thinking it involved power when it instead involved love. As a result, he remains outside the blessing of the Tarots when they come alive in glory: despite his lifetime study of the mystery, he can only watch the dancing Tarot figures as from a distance and be "ashamed" (228).

Thus, in The Greater Trumps, Williams has presented characters who, by the end of the novel, stand at each of the levels of courtesy: Lothair begins to give of himself to those he loves; Nancy learns to give and receive love even when she has a legitimate reason to reject love; and Sybil remains in a state of continuous love. In addition, three characters have acted discourteously in order to fulfill their individual goals, even though they endanger their social communal relationships in the process. As a presentation of the differing levels of courtesy and discourtesy, The Greater Trumps serves as a descriptive, rather than a prescriptive, "courtesy book." However, this development of courtesy and discourtesy through the actions of characters is not limited to The Greater Trumps. Throughout his fiction and poetry, Williams portrays other characters who either practice courtesy in their daily lives or choose to reject their responsibilities to other members of the community. It remains the critic's task to reevaluate Williams' other writings in light of his use of the courtesy tradition.

Notes
1. In The Passion of Christ (1939) and The New Christian Year (1941), the two anthologies of religious writings he compiles, Williams cites from Julian's Showings 93 thirty-one times. The only writers or writings Williams cites more often are John Donne, St. Augustine, William Law, Blaise Pascal, The Paradise of the Fathers, and Søren Kierkegaard.

Works Cited
been sealed off from the war-scarred chaos of the world
of the Orsinate goes far beyond that of an unusually op­
ically, come into being among the ruins.
Yet there are weak points in the defenses of this closed
festival Tide depicts the situation in even more arche­
yclic terms. The city of Araboth, which has for long years
child of one of the Orsina sisters, and whose unique psy­
presumes, some of the characters from
and dreams of joining his "sisters" in the world Outside—
chic talent finally unsettles the hierarchy of Araboth.
Retribution does indeed come, and possibilities are
re-defined (even Zalophus' dream comes true), but not
before Hand's superbly controlled writing has led the
reader on an unforgettable roller-coaster ride of varied
emotions and sensations. As the book ends, the remnants
of military-technological civilization are still desperately
holding on to survival, still trying to maintain power
through war. A sequel in evidently planned, in which, one
will