Traditions of Courtly Love and the Canterbury Tales

Senior Project

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Rachel Wald

Courtly love is a classic literary genre that once reigned as the most popular and most practiced form of literature. Some would argue that love has always had its place in literature throughout all periods. This may be true; however, anyone who has ever read a courtly love tale would recognize immediately that the behaviors of the characters in love are rather peculiar, and that the experience of love, with all of its desire and heartache, is taken to the utmost extreme beyond that of what we would consider "ordinary" or everyday love. Love, in the courtly manner, is an art to be practiced. It is passionate, yet extremely disciplined, and its power is elevated to the point of worship. Chaucer was greatly influenced by the courtly romances of his predecessors and uses many of the standards and conventions of courtly love in various stories in the *Canterbury Tales*. In this paper, I will provide a brief history of courtly love, study what constitutes a love tale as courtly, and then discuss the influence that the courtly love tradition had on Chaucer and how this influence is reflected in specific pieces of the *Canterbury Tales*.

In order to discuss courtly love, a distinction must first be made between the ideas of love in general and the highly ritualized practice of courtly love. Courtly love is practiced only between a man and a woman of noble status, most often a knight or squire and a lady with an aristocratic background. The man and the woman are not husband and wife, for courtly love is presented as ideal and above the realm of intercourse, and such relationships did not exist in "real life" medieval marriages (Schwartz par 5). Marriages had nothing to do with love. They were most often arranged, and wives were little more than pieces of property to their husbands. Ordinary love, on the other hand, occurs in the common society of the medieval world and is not even considered love as we understand

it but more so as lechery. In a common love tale, also known as a "fabliaux," the characters are closely bound to the earth and are therefore inclined to react to love in its natural state, that is, lust. All love begins as lust; however, the courtly art of loving begins by elevating love out of the state of lust to a supra-sensual state of service. This is in no way a natural skill. The knight or squire achieves this through "suffering" for his lady. It is after he has suffered to transcend his lusty desires that he begins to "serve," or woo, his lady with elegant language and courageous deeds.

Chaucer uses both common and courtly love in the *Canterbury Tales*. His pilgrims represent nearly every level of the social scale and range anywhere from a knight to a miller to a parson to a pardoner. Therefore, their status will determine what kind of tale they will tell.

The Knight, being of the highest rank, tells a tale that is, by no surprise, the courtliest of all the tales. The characters are not only of noble status but represent the best and most ideal of their type. Each character is glorified to perfection, and the descriptions are elevated to the utmost extreme. When referring to each character, Chaucer makes is clear that never was there anyone nobler, more courageous, or more beautiful than this particular character. When describing Theseus, for example, he says that "gretter was ther noon under the sonne" (863). Emotions are also presented in the most extreme conditions. For example, when Arcite is lamenting his separation from his love, it is made clear that never has there been anyone who has suffered the pains of love more. There is not middle ground for the ranking of any person, the intensity of any emotion, or the extravagance of any structure. It is even said of the battlefield that Theseus constructs "That swich a noble theatre as it was / I dar wel seyen in this world ther nas" (1885-86).

This tale is in every sense a courtly love tale, and its characters fully embody the standards and conventions of courtly lovers.

Immediately following this courtly tale, Chaucer has his Miller tell a fabliaux tale as a direct criticism of courtly traditions. His tale has elements of courtly love similar to that of the *Franklin* and *Merchant's Tales* in that a young squire enters into an affair with another man's wife. However, this is the only connection that it has to courtly love. It is a common love tale that is lusty and vulgar; however, it is what we would expect from the Miller, and although his characters are immoral, they have more depth and personality than those in the *Knight's Tale*.

When researching the history of courtly love, it is difficult to place an exact date on its emergence. It is clear that the supra-sensual love that is a part of courtliness is in no way present in classical antiquity. C.S. Lewis states:

> "In ancient literature, love seldom rises above the levels of merry sensuality or domestic comfort, except to be treated as a tragic madness which plunges otherwise sane people (usually women) into crime and disgrace. Such is the love of Medea, of Phaedra, of Dido; and such the love from which maidens pray that the gods may protect them" (4).

To the ancient Greeks, love was not an emotion powerful enough to hold its own throughout an entire epic. Not as powerful as, for example, the wrath of Achilles. However, somewhere along the timeline of literature, we encounter a burgeoning expression of love, and we find it around the eleventh century with the French poets. They were the first to express love in such a passionate yet refined fashion. It is in this

poetry that we find similarities in the form and theme of the love poetry that would flourish during the next century.

In the twelfth century, the courtly love tale flourishes in popularity, and we begin to see more works produced in the courtly fashion. It is during this century that two classic courtly figures are born: Tristan and Lancelot. They become the ideal courtly lovers and set the codes of conduct for later characters such as Arcite and Palamon in the *Knight's Tale*. It is suggested that "the gloom of the lover and the death-imagery of the courtly love lyric are entirely attributed to the influence of the Tristan legend" (O'Donoghue 6), and that what C.S. Lewis calls the "theory of adultery" is derived from Lancelot's sexual desires for Guinevere. As I have mentioned before, marriage is not an element of courtly love, but in his book *The Allegory of Love*, C.S. Lewis says that adultery is. He states that "a wife is not superior. As the wife of another, above all as the wife of a great lord, she may be queen of beauty and love . . . but as your own wife, for whom you have bargained with her father, she sinks at once from a lady to a mere woman" (36-37). Even though some have argued that coveting a man's wife is not included in the courtly love tradition, Chaucer nonetheless picks up this idea in the *Merchant's Tale* and the *Franklin's Tale* in which the young squires, Damian and Aurelius, covet another man's wife with one of them committing adultery.

It is also in the twelfth century that we encounter the first of two books that had an enormous influence on Chaucer when writing the *Canterbury Tales*. The first book, *De Arte HonesteAmandi* by Andreas Capellanus, gives instructions on how to love like a courtier. It is in this book that we are presented with a precise definition of love. He states, "Love is a certain inborn suffering derived from the sight of and excessive

meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex, which causes each one to wish above all things the embraces of the other . . ." (Capellanus 40). Love begins with the instinct for sexual desire; however, the "excessive meditation" upon the beauty of the lady inspires the lover to rise out of the state of carnal lust to an elevated realm of innocent passion that desires only "the embraces" of his lady. The book is essentially a love handbook that sets the guidelines on how to love, what the effect of love is, what persons are fit for love, and how love may come to an end. It even presents tricky love situations where the characters in love do not know what to do. Like an ancient "Dear Abby" column, the Countess of Champagne receives word of these problems and gives advice on how the situation ought to be solved. One such situation is that of a lady who, after giving up all hope that her lover would return from an expedition, seeks a new lover. She argues her position by saying, "If a woman who is left a widow by the death of her lover may seek a new love after two years have elapsed, this should be much more permissible for a woman who is left a widow while her lover is still alive . . ." (Capellanus 49). Chaucer uses this time span of two years over and over again in the *Franklin's Tale*. Arveragus, is sent away on duty for two years, the lusty squire, Aurelius, has loved Dorigen for two years, he prays to the gods that the waters remain above the rocks for two years, and suffers from love-sickness for two years. Truly the situation presented by Capellanus resembles that of Dorigen's, for it is after two years of her husband being away that she considers an affair.

In addition to presenting the guidelines on how to love properly, Capellanus also lays out the general characteristics of courtly love that have become the standard conventions within most, if not all, courtly romances. The first and most important of these characteristics is that the lady is always presented as superior. She appears

untouchable as if she were a goddess. In the *Knight's Tale,* Palamon, after first seeing Emily, refers to her as a goddess when he says, "I noot wher she be womman or goddesse, / But Venus is it soothly, as I gesse" (1101-02). This is not to say, however, that the lady has authority and power over her lover, but simply that she is of noble status, chaste, and often unattainable. In fact, the women presented in courtly love romances are merely objects upon which a young squire may practice his chivalry. The lady is a prize, and to win her favor is a chivalric quest on the part of the young lover that involves putting on flamboyant displays of courage and enduring the agonizing symptoms of love-sickness. Once the young lover decides to take on this quest, the woman is ultimately powerless against him. She may wish to remain chaste and therefore reject his advances, but he is very persistent, and even though it may take many years of suffering for his lady, he will ultimately win her. We see the way in which women are viewed merely as objects in the *Knight's Tale*. Arcite and Palamon suffer for Emily's love for about five or six years. Emily is desperate to remain chaste, but she is powerless against the knights' advances. It is ultimately up to Theseus to decide what he will do with her, and, as we see, he uses her as trophy in order that he may hold a grand and extravagant tournament which is done, essentially, for his own entertainment.

The Wife of Bath strongly opposes the anti-feminist, courtly view of women. In her prologue, she argues that God did not demand virginity. She openly says that it is alright to enjoy sex and to do it often. She admits that "In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument / As frely as my Makere hath it sent. / Myn housbonde shal it have bothe eve and / morwe, / whn that hym list come forth and paye his / dette" (152-56). She then goes on to tell a tale that defies the conventions of courtly love in a number of different ways.

First of all, her tale involves a knight who perverts the chivalric code of love by raping a young girl. This shatters our image of a knight and is clearly a direct response to the *Knight's Tale* and how she considers courtly love to be an artificial code of conduct. Secondly, she places the knight under the control of women throughout the entire tale. This is not the same as a knight being in the service of the lady with whom he is enamored, but the actual governing power that the Wife of Bath insists that every woman should have over her husband. Lastly, she argues that courtesy and gentleness are not attributes granted to someone simply by being born into nobility. She states:

> And he that wole han pris of his gentrye,
> For he was boren of a gentil hous
> And hadde his eldres noble and vertuous
> And nel hymselven do no gentil dedis
> Ne folwen his gentil auncestre that deed is,
> He nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl,
> For vileyns synful dedes make a cherl (1152-58).

In this passage, she is referring to the un-courtly behavior of the knight. Just because he was the offspring of two noble people does not mean he is of noble character. Perhaps she tells this tale to warn women against those men who have a great amount of power and wealth but are wicked on the inside. By title, he may be a knight, but his deeds make him a churl.

The Wife of Bath's anti-courtly ideas echo those of Jean de Meun in his continuation of *Le Roman de la Rose*. In his part of the poem, he departs from the extravagant, supra-sensual courtly ideas of Guillaume and focuses instead on the natural,

lusty state of love. The arguments that he makes against the courtly love traditions served as the inspiration for Chaucer in creating the Wife of Bath. Meun writes, ". . . Nature has implanted delight in man because she wants the workman to take pleasure in his task . . ." (Meun 203). The "task" here, of course, is intercourse for the sake of reproduction. The Wife of Bath echoes this argument much more explicitly when she talks about sex organs and why God created them. Later in his poem, Meun advises women on how to manipulate their husbands into getting what they want. He says:

> And if your eyes weep in front of them it will be a very great advantage for you . . Kneel down before them with joined hands and, right on the spot, moisten your eyes with hot tears that run down your face so that they can easily see them falling; it is a very pitiable sight to see. Tears are not despicable, especially to men of pity (Meun 204).

The Wife of Bath would weep in front of her husbands so that they would give her whatever she desired. What she desires most, as she says in her tale, is to have sovereignty, and it is her sovereignty that sets her apart from the fragile and meek women of courtly romances. To some critics, it was Meun's satiric continuation of *Le Roman de La Rose* in 1280 that ultimately caused the courtly love tradition to gradually disappear.

A second important characteristic of courtly love is that the characters are pawns of divine forces and victims of chance. None of the characters in courtly romances, such as those in the *Knight's Tale* for example, are fully developed. The lover becomes so wrapped up in following a strict code of conduct and therefore "loses individuality because of the conventional nature of all his reactions" (Holman 246). If we consider Arcite and Palamon, for example, we see that they are flat characters with no personality.

In fact, they seem quite dense and confused most of the time. They continually beseech the divine aid of the gods to help them in their pursuits. In most cases, the god of Love, Cupid, and his mother, Venus, play integral roles in the actions of the lover and his beloved. Once the lovers have been smitten by the lady, they surrender to the power of Cupid. In the *Knight's Tale*, Theseus is aware of this power. He says, "The god of love, a benedicite! / How myghty and how greet a lord is he! . . . For he kan maken, at his owene gyse, / Of everich herte as that hym list divyse (1785-86, 1789-90). Sometimes, the role of a god can seem out of place and ridiculous. In the *Merchant's Tale*, for example, Pluto is an intrusive and disruptive force, for he comes out of nowhere to restore January's sight thereby dramatically affecting the plot. If the characters are not being affected by divine forces, they fall either into good fortune or bad fortune "by aventure" or "destynee." The pattern of fortune and destiny is more important than the actual characters in action, for the heroes are not acting, but being acted upon.

A third and final element in courtly love is the setting. May seems to be the month of choice for the action in a courtly romance. In *Le Roman de la Rose*, the young lover is wandering on a May morning. In the *Franklin's Tale*, it is during the month of May that Aurelius confesses his love for Dorigen, and, in *The Knight's Tale*, it is in May when Palamon and Arcite first see Emily and fall in love with her. May is described as "lusty" in part four of *The Knight's Tale* on the day that the festival began and "Made every wight to been in swich pleasaunce / That al that Monday justen they and daunce" (2485-86). It is during the spring of the year that the flowers begin to bloom, the earth is vibrant with color, and everything reemerges to life. With the energy of new life all around him, a young knight is most in tune with nature and his natural bodily desires as well as the

desires as well as the presence of the opposite sex. The lively and vibrant stirrings associated with the month of May and the sexual connotations that accompany it are directly contrasted by the cold and lethargic connotations that are associated with the name January in the *Merchant's Tale*. January is an old man, and with his youthful vitality diminished, he is no longer able to endure the long and grueling practice of courtly romance to woo his maiden, whose name happens to be May, but, instead, he is lustful and vulgar in his sexual appetites.

The month of May is a time when nature is in full bloom; therefore, it is not surprising that most of the action of a courtly romance takes place in a garden. The garden, to Guillaume, symbolizes the life of the court and is "considered as the necessary sphere or field for love's operation" (Lewis 119). Nearly all of *Le Roman de la Rose* occurs in a garden, we see Emily wandering around in a garden in the *Knight's Tale*, the climactic scene in the *Merchant's Tal*e takes place in a garden, and it is in a garden that Aurelius approaches Dorigen in the *Franklin's Tale*.

Moving into the thirteenth century, we encounter the second influential work in setting the standards for courtly love: Guillaume de Lorris' *Le Roman de la Rose*. It is a highly allegorized love affair in which the protagonist suffers for his love, shows all of the symptoms of love-sickness, and carries out all of the love commandments given to him by the god of Love that become customary for the young knights in subsequent works. The *Rose* carried its influence all the way into the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and because of its immense influence, according to O'Donoghue, "courtly love ideas extended far wider than they otherwise might have done. If it had been left to

the late, religious troubadours . . . the influence of courtly love would have been dead by 1250" (9).

Chaucer was greatly influenced by Guillaume de Lorris, and, having already referred to *Le Roman de la Rose* a number of times, I will now explain in more detail some of its features and how it is related to the *Canterbury Tales*. Much of Chaucer's courtly love concepts in various tales are derived from the courtly ideas prevalent in the *Rose*. In the poem, a young man is wandering in a garden and looks into the well of Narcissus that causes him to fall in love with the first thing he sees. This idea of love at first sight has, no doubt, held its own throughout the centuries. It echoes the love potion in *Tristan* and is picked up nearly four centuries later when the mischievous Puck uses the love-in-idleness flower in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. When the young lover sees a rosebud, Cupid shoots an arrow that enters through his eye and penetrates his heart, and although he is able to remove the feathered shaft, the arrowhead remains fixed in his heart. Chaucer echoes this image of the arrow penetrating the heart in the *Franklin's Tale* and *Knight's Tale*. In the *Franklin's Tale*, Aurelius is suffering from love, and although he appears to be well on the outside, "a keen arrow stuck within his soul / A wound that's only surface-healed can be / A perilous thing, you know in surgery / Unless the arrowhead be taken out" (Trans. 435). Palamon was also stricken with love through the eye. He says, "I have been hurt this moment through the eye, / Into my heart" (Trans. 47). Both of these "wounded" lovers are now in the service of the god of Love and will begin to suffer for their lady. This suffering, diagnosed as "love-sickness," involves symptoms that include continuous sighing, turning pale, fever, and the inability to eat, drink or sleep (Schwartz par 7). To the modern reader, this behavior seems

somewhat ridiculous and certainly overly exaggerated. Even Theseus acknowledges this when he says, "Who may been a fool but if he love?' (1799). In the *Knight's Tale*, Arcite's anguish is so great from not being able to see his beloved that it physically changes him. Even Palamon is not able to recognize him. The only cure for this ailment is for the lady to return his love, yet he lives in constant fear that she will reject his advances.

While a young, enamored bachelor is on the verge of death for the love of his lady, the lady, in turn, often has no knowledge of her lover's desires, and if she does, she prays that he turn his attention on someone or something other than herself. In the *Knight's Tale*, for example, Emily prays to Diana that Arcite and Palamon turn their hearts elsewhere, for she wishes to remain chaste. She prays "that all hire hoote love and hir desir, / And al hir bisy torment, and hir fir / Be queynt, or turned in another place" (2319-21). Although his love may remain unrequited, a young knight will nevertheless continue to pursue his lady until, by some chance, he obtains her.

We have seen how the traditions of courtly love have had an enormous amount of influence on Chaucer. It is apparent in numerous tales that he was very educated and kept up with the literature of his time, as well as the literature of his past. He was a courtly love poet in every sense, and we see how skillfully he incorporated those popular courtly love traditions, as well as those that defied them, into his tales to produce literature that is still intriguing and entertaining for us today. Although the reign of the courtly love tradition reached its end soon after Chaucer had written the *Canterbury Tales*, it is because of his genius as a writer that some of its elements have survived the test of time and can still be seen in subsequent literature up to present day.

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