

Chivalry and Courtly Love

Chivalry was a system of ethical ideals developed among the knights of medieval Europe. Arising out of the feudalism of the period, it combined military virtues with those of Christianity, as epitomized by the Arthurian legend in England.

The word *chivalry* comes from the French *chevalier*, meaning "horseman" or "knight." Chivalry was the code of conduct by which knights were supposedly guided. In addition to military prowess and valor and loyalty to God and the knight's feudal lord, it called for courtesy toward enemies and generosity toward the sick and oppressed, widows, and other disadvantaged people.

Also incorporated in the ideal was *courtly love* — romantic devotion for a sexually unattainable woman, usually another man's wife. Adoration for the Virgin Mary played a part in this concept.

Chivalric ideals influenced the founding of religious military orders during the period of the Crusades, among them the Templars and the Hospitalers. In the late Middle Ages, rulers formed secular orders of chivalry such as the English Order of the Garter (1349) and the Burgundian Order of the Golden Fleece (1429). By this time, however, chivalry had become largely a system of etiquette. Tournaments, in which knights had originally risked their lives in jousting combat before the ladies, became simply elaborate, stylized, and harmless entertainments. Moreover, the expense of this and other trappings of knighthood led many nobles who were eligible for knighthood (having served the customary apprenticeship of seven years as a page at a noble court and another seven as a squire, or attendant, to a knight) not to become knights at all. From chivalry, always larger in literature than in life, comes the modern concept of the gentleman.

Gayre, Robert. "Chivalry." *Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia*. 2007. Grolier Online. 9 Mar. 2007 <<http://gme.grolier.com/cgi-bin/article?assetid=0061550-0>>.

Courtly love is the code of romantic love that enjoyed a vogue among the aristocracies of Western Europe, particularly from the 12th to the 14th centuries. In its literary form, if not in life, it involved a vassal-lord relationship under which the knight was his lady's obedient servant, prepared to overcome any obstacle or undergo any suffering to win her favor. Courtly love was always conducted outside wedlock and of necessity in secret; between spouses it was held to be impossible. Although the unattainability of the beloved was sometimes central to the ideal, its customs served equally well to dignify adultery.

The convention is first encountered in the late 11th-century poetry of French Provençal troubadours, but its origins are far from clear. Ovid's *Art of Love* (c.1 B.C.) widely drawn upon by medieval minstrels, is one source. The Arabic *Ring of the Dove* (1022), by Ibn Hazm, which contains most of the ideas associated with courtly love, is probably another. Whatever the primary source of courtly love, a cross-fertilization of ideas and practices certainly occurred. The rise of the cult of Mary, for instance, coincided with it; the great respect given to her by the church was reflected in the admiration of the noblewoman prescribed by the secular code.

The ideals of courtly love were most clearly defined in the English and French royal courts presided over by Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter Marie de Champagne, under whose sponsorship some of the most famous books on the subject were written: Chrétien de Troyes's *Lancelot* and Guillaume de Lorris's *Le Roman de la Rose*. The convention influenced poets throughout Europe, notably Dante Alighieri and Petrarch in Italy and Geoffrey Chaucer in England, who in turn shaped the idea of courtly love to their own tastes and traditions. With the rise of the middle class, the ideals of courtly love were gradually merged into the institution of marriage, and through this reversal of the original values of courtly love, the concept has kept a stubborn, but altered, hold on the imaginations of most Westerners.

"Courtly Love." *Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia*. 2007. Grolier Online. 9 Mar. 2007 <<http://gme.grolier.com/cgi-bin/article?assetid=0073970-0>>.