# Courtly Love, Courtly Lust



*And so they came to a forest, where the birds were cheerful and chattered so loudly after their own fashion that they could be heard afar off. Beautiful flowers gave off sweet scents, the sky was clear and glorious, and there were many tall trees richly covered in foliage. The young man looked at the lovely maid, for whom he felt deep love, and said: 'My love, if you so desire, then we can dismount and gather flowers. It is so beautiful here. Let us play the game of love.' 'What are you saying?' she answered. 'Ill-mannered lout, am I to lie in the grass like a slut who earns money with her body? Truly, then I would know no shame. You would not have spoken thus if you did not have an uncivilised character!'*

This is a scene from the Middle Dutch tale *Beatrijs*, the story of a nun who falls in love and leaves the nunnery to lead a worldly life with the young man she loves. On their travels, her lover becomes so inspired by the beauty of Beatrijs and the nature surrounding her that he can no longer conceal his desire. Beatrijs reacts to his proposition with horror. '*Keep such words to yourself from now on and listen to the song of the birds...,*' she says. To her mind, his offer is indecent and uncivilised.

Why is that so? The young man has to hear the reason from Beatrijs herself. Such an act would reduce her to the level of a slut, she says, and furthermore the proposition is evidence of the young man's '*dorpers aert*', of his uncivilised nature.

## Courtliness

Beatrijs would certainly not have been alone in making such a judgement, as the behaviour exhibited by her admirer would have been viewed as reprehensible by many of her contemporaries, as conduct that belonged to a dim and distant past. A break had been made with that past at the end of the twelfth century, with the rise of *courtly culture* in aristocratic circles. This culture had distanced itself from the civilisation, or rather the *lack* of civilisation, of the dark, early Middle Ages. That era was seen as uncourtly, because of its all-pervading aggression, its lack of restraint and immediate fulfilling of desires. The

origins of this courtly culture are still mysterious – did it originate in the south of France, at the court of the German emperor, in Arab lands, or in different places at the same time? – but the huge influence it exerted on medieval culture is undeniable.

The aim of courtly culture and courtliness was to avoid hurting one's fellow human beings. The means of achieving this goal were good breeding, self-control and courtesy. It was more than merely etiquette, for example good table manners, because courtly culture also had a strong aesthetic dimension. Inner and outer beauty were seen as one. The complete individual had to show himself to be elegant and well styled. In his manners, the courtly person aimed for such a degree of refinement that it could be viewed as an art form. This striving for beauty is to be seen in all kinds of aristocratic activities, such as hunting and the culture of feasts and festivals, within which the ceremonial aspect was incorporated in an artistic, very deliberate manner. However, it was in literature above all that courtly culture was to find its most prominent and sophisticated expression. This so-called courtly literature, which still today is viewed as the highpoint of medieval writing, became very popular throughout Western Europe from the end of the twelfth century.

Courtly literature written in French became the role model that inspired other linguistic areas. One of the earliest forms of courtly writing had its origins in Provence, in ingeniously constructed love poetry, written in verse by poets who were known as 'troubadours' and 'trouvères'. Their small-scale lyric poetry often featured a lover who was pining away for a woman, but whose love remained unrequited. The poet Chrétien de Troyes, who sang the praises of love in romances that ran to thousands of lines, was to have an equally significant influence. In works such as *Erec et Enide*, *Lancelot* and *Yvain* he created an idyllic world, peopled with commanding characters such as Lancelot, Gawain and

The first kiss of Lancelot and Guinevere, as shown in a miniature. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Ms.fr. 118, f.219v.

The Garden of Love in a miniature from the *Roman de la Rose*. British Library, London. MS. Harley 4425, f.12.

Yvain. At this court of King Arthur, courtliness reigned supreme and knights and ladies loved one another dearly. This love was the driving force behind the action in Chrétien's romances. In his love for his lady the knight found the inspiration to do great deeds in the battle against the unmannerly world beyond the court.

Although some of the most famous romantic relationships of the Middle Ages were of an adulterous nature – examples include the fatal love between Guinevere, consort of King Arthur, and his best knight, Lancelot, and the equally ill-fated love between Isolde, the wife of King Mark, and his nephew Tristan – adultery plays less of a role in courtly love than has sometimes been thought. Courtly love, like courtliness itself, is based upon conduct, upon the behaviour of lovers and admirers. '*Wie dat dienen wilt der minnen*', says *Die Rose*, a translation of the *Roman de la Rose*, the definitive medieval romance about love, '*hine mach hovaerde niet hebben binnen, mar moet sijn hovesch ende goedertiere, ende soete ende sachte van maniere, ende mede milde*'. ('He who wishes to serve Love must not be haughty, but courteous and noble, of a sweet and gentle nature.') Lovers strove for a restrained and gentle love, expressed in a kindly manner and so as not to hurt the beloved. Courtly love was love that adhered to courtly standards.

In the thirteenth century courtly literature began to make inroads in the Low Countries as well, initially in the many different adaptations of Old French stories. The tale of the love between Floris and Blancefloer is a fine example of this, as are the numerous Arthurian romances written in Middle Dutch in the

thirteenth century, featuring lovers such as Ferguut and Galiene, Lanceloet and Guinevere, and Torec and Miraude. But even original Middle Dutch works propagate the spirit of courtly culture, such as the *Roman van Walewein*, a romance of over 10,000 lines, in which the authors Penninc and Pieter Vostaert recount the chivalrous adventures of Walewein. Another fine tale is Segher Diengotgaf's *Trojeroman*, one of the most beautiful examples of courtly love literature from the Low Countries.

## Speech and silence

Segher Diengotgaf, by whom no other work is known, set this tale in the city of Troy, during a brief suspension of hostilities in the war between the Greeks and the Trojans. This respite from the turmoil of the fight fans the flames of love between the Trojan warriors and ladies. They retire to a charming pleasure-garden in order to converse with one another in a courtly manner. The mastery of *sueter sprake*, or the art of pleasant conversation, is the most important quality of the true courtly lover. This art requires that he may never use words that would hurt the other party. The language he chooses must be pleasant, but also veiled and humble, full of flattery. The courtly lover addresses his beloved as though she is his liege lady, constantly asking pardon for any indiscretions he might commit. He draws on all his verbal talents so as to avoid any chance that his interlocutor might take offence.

A wonderful example of this art of dialogue in the *Trojeroman* is the conversation between the self-possessed Helena and love-struck Polidamas. The alluring Helen, who has already been abducted by Paris, takes pleasure in the bashful bungling of Polidamas. For a long time, he takes refuge in all manner of bowing and scraping, before finally crying out in desperation: *'Hoert hier alle myn misdade! Ic myn u voer alle die leven!'* ('Hear now all my misdeeds! I love you above all living souls!') This unequivocal confession is ingeniously parried by Helen. Quasi innocently she asserts that Polidamas has declared his love out loud in his sleep, and therefore cannot be held at all responsible for his words. In surprise, he asks:

*'Was I asleep?' 'Yes, you were.'*
*'If you say I was, then it is so.*
*Did I say something wrong in my sleep?'*
*'Yes, you did! But you were not aware of it.*
*Therefore, I will not take it seriously.*
*At the end you said you loved me!*
*When I heard those improper words,*
*With which you went too far,*
*I realised you were asleep.'*

Crushed and humiliated by the most beautiful woman in the world, Polidamas realises he has lost, but still manages to express his passion indirectly. *'My lady,'* he says, *'if it be your wish... Often people say: what is in the heart lies in the mouth.'*

Many features of courtly behaviour can be seen in this dialogue: the courtesy, the submission, the coy, controlled language, and also the playfulness and seductiveness. Helen and Polidamas speak to one another as though they are playing

chess or dancing, first approaching, then withdrawing. This is not about the declaration of love in itself, but rather about the stylish manner in which the interlocutors manage to capture each other with words, then let each other slip away. And in this game of give and take lies the charm of the art of courtly dialogue.

## The game of love

But was such a restrained form of love actually customary in the Middle Ages? Does medieval literature also contain examples of the opposite kind of love, uncourtly love, or courtly lust? This is a subject that has not been much studied as yet – perhaps because researchers of courtly culture are sometimes more

Walewein on a miniature. Universiteitsbibliotheek, Leiden. Ltk.195, f.120v-121r (detail).

chaste than the subject they are researching. Whatever the case, not all medieval writers remained silent on the erotic aspects of love. And so in the many lines of Middle Dutch epic poetry, we encounter certain formulations that are highly ambiguous. In the thirteenth-century Arthurian romance *Ferguut*, for example, in which the eponymous hero, after a lonely journey full of hardships, frees two young ladies from the oppressive tyranny of a family of giants. Ferguut then stays for four months in a castle with the two ladies. '*Si hadden bliscap ende spel*', writes the poet. They enjoyed themselves greatly, says one translation, but '*bliscap ende spel*' can also have a more erotic charge. The months of pleasure and play shared by Ferguut and the ladies may very well have been of a sexual nature.

Walewein plays this same enjoyable game in a short story in the *Lancelot-compilatie*, a manuscript containing ten very varied Arthurian romances. In order to discover what women really think, he has himself transformed into a gnome-sized knight, in the hope of winning the confidence of ladies. As a gnome, he is able to challenge the lady Ydeine to a game of chess, with her body as the stake. He wins, and that night the little Walewein shares a bed with

Ydeine, and *'dat soete spel eert dagen begonde vierwerf wel'* – 'He played the sweet game fully four times before dawn arrived!'

In the story named after this hero, the *Roman van Walewein*, Walewein is described as a knight who wishes to win more than Polidamas had achieved in the *Trojeroman*. He is not satisfied with conversations *about* love; he actually consummates that love. This time it is the desirable Ysabele whom Walewein is able to embrace after a series of adventures. The two of them ignite in intense love and lust for each other, and the poet clearly takes great pleasure in describing this. In an almost teasing fashion, he refuses to divulge precisely what the two lovers get up to, but his message needs little clarification.

*The great joy, the great pleasure*
*The great love, the delight*
*That they experienced in each other's company*
*I shall not describe for you,*
*For I am not able to express it.*
*And whether the two of them*
*Also played the game of love,*
*I am not well able to tell you.*
*Walewein and the damsel*
*Were intimate secretly and without regret:*
*Their desires were fulfilled completely.*

Woodcut from *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*, showing a man spying on a couple making out. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

The poet does not leave it at this either, because later in the romance, the love-making of Walewein and Ysabele assumes the character of a peepshow, when another knight, also full of desire for the beautiful lady, takes advantage of a hole in the wall and is witness to *'die feeste die te drivene plach mijn here Walewein die fiere jeghen die maget goedertiere'* – 'the pleasure which the proud Sir Walewein was having with the gentle maiden'. Perhaps it was the pleasure taken by his thirteenth-century predecessor Walewein that Beatrijs' admirer had in mind when he suggested to her that they gather flowers together.

Reynaert teaches Cuwaert the creed. Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, Hanover. IV369, p.151.

## Uncourtly lust

Or had he perhaps heard a Flemish version of the tale of the Chatelaine of Vergi? This is the story of a clandestine affair between a knight and the Chatelaine of Vergi. This knight also inspires the affections of the Duchess of Burgundy, which he rejects. The vindictive Duchess then goes to her husband and accuses the knight of having made unwanted advances to her. In order to convince the Duke of his innocence, the knight takes his liege lord to the place where he meets his beloved Chatelaine at night. When the Duke has seen the two lovers together, he realises that the knight has told the truth. Oddly, however, after having confirmed this, he remains where he is.

*The duke stands and pleasures himself*
*With great enjoyment the whole night.*
*And the whole night, until dawn arrived*
*The lovers were lying together, without sleeping,*
*With such delight, with such playfulness*
*That I ought to keep it secret.*

This is a peculiar scene. What exactly is the duke doing? In these lines, the poet appears to be saying that the duke is masturbating as he enjoys watching the lovemaking of the knight and the chatelaine. Such an explicit reference to this act is very rare within the entire medieval narrative canon, both in the Low Countries and in other regions. But there has to be a first time for everything. The Flemish *Vergi* poet appears to have earned the honour of having put in writing one of the first references to masturbation in the Dutch language.

All of these scenes, which come from texts that medievalists view as true courtly literature, demonstrate that a chaste treatment of love and sex is not a matter of course in medieval literature. Underneath the restrained emotions there evidently slumbered uninhibited feelings of lust, which sometimes broke

through the courtly veneer. Some writers, such as the poet Willem in his *Van den vos Reynaerde*, went a long way towards depicting such feelings. This tale mentions a homosexual relationship between Cuwaert the hare and Reynaert the fox. The fox Reynaert is supposed to have promised the hare *'te leerne sinen crede ende soudene maken capelaen'* – 'to teach him the creed and to make him a chaplain' – indecent expressions that suggest Reynaert and Cuwaert masturbate and have sex with each other.

*Then he made him sit*
*Tightly between his legs.*
*Then they started*
*To practise reading together*
*And to sing the creed loudly.*

While this is about the bestial behaviour of animals, in *Florigout* it is people of flesh and blood who give free rein to their carnal desires. In his account of an impending rape, the anonymous poet of this chivalric romance reveals a hair-raising sense for detail. In the gloomy surroundings of a *'maras, dat zere dorwassen was met langen ende met grouven riede'* – 'marsh that was overgrown with tall and dense reeds' – a number of wicked Saracens throw a captured lady to the ground, after which there follows an exchange of words about which of them should be first to violate her body. *'Elc wilde dat siin ghezeke deerste ware, want si an die jonfrouwe dare vername datsoe maget ware'* – 'Each wanted his fluid to be the first, because they noticed the damsel was a virgin.' With these lines, particularly the strange word *'ghezeke'* (fluid), the writer of *Florigout*, along with the *Vergi* poet, joins the company of the great innovators of the sexual vocabulary of the Dutch language.

## Pure courtliness

Nearly all the highpoints of medieval literature appear to be shaped by the ideals of courtly culture and love. This kind of love was also a major theme in stories and poetry from the Low Countries. However, anyone expecting to encounter only love of a courtly and idealistic nature in the literature of the Middle Ages may be disappointed. Even in lofty chivalric romances, love, at the right time and under certain circumstances, is depicted in a way that is less chaste and aloof. Alongside the playful, but always restrained, conversations of Helen and Polidamas in the arbour of Troy, we encounter a sensual Walewein and Ysabele, a peeping duke, copulating animals, and even an actual rape. There were not only poets who used modest language when they wrote about love, but also writers who spiced up their lines with uncouth details and 'dirty' words.

True courtly love, with its characteristic servitude and courtesy, may perhaps be found in a more pure form in the art of later periods. Particularly in the nineteenth century, a time when the Middle Ages were rediscovered, this kind of love appealed to many people's imaginations. Impossible love and the suffering lover were popular subjects for tormented romantics, whilst the image of chaste love recurred in the very stylised, restrained scenes from the Middle Ages as depicted by the Pre-Raphaelites. However, love was not always portrayed in such a puritanical and innocent manner in medieval literature. Just as

William Holman Hunt, *The Lady of Shalott*. 1889-1892. Canvas. Manchester City Art Galleries.

in modern literature the many different guises of love all put in an appearance – from the medical romance with its idealised lover to the dark, less than exalted love that features, for example, in the work of writers of the post-World War II period – the literature of the Middle Ages offers a varied bouquet of love, from the blossoms of lovesickness to the thorns of lust. Evidently, there were audiences for both. ■

*Translated by Laura Watkinson*

## LIST OF TRANSLATIONS

*Roman van Walewein* (ed. [with an introd.] by David F. Johnson & Geert H.M. Claassens). Cambridge, 2000

*Five Interpolated Romances from the Lancelot Compilation* (ed. by David F. Johnson & Geert H.M. Claassens). Cambridge, 2004.