

Courtly Love

n.



An idealized and often illicit form of love celebrated in the literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in which a knight or courtier devotes himself to a noblewoman who is usually married and feigns indifference to preserve her reputation.

The Twelve Chief Rules in Love

From *The Art of Courtly Love* by Andreas Capellanus

1. Thou shalt avoid avarice like the deadly pestilence and shalt embrace its opposite.
2. Thou shalt keep thyself chaste for the sake of her whom thou lovest.
3. Thou shalt not knowingly strive to break up a correct love affair that someone else is engaged in.
4. Thou shalt not choose for thy love anyone whom a natural sense of shame forbids thee to marry.
5. Be mindful completely to avoid falsehood.
6. Thou shalt not have many who know of thy love affair.
7. Being obedient in all things to the commands of ladies, thou shalt ever strive to ally thyself to the service of Love.
8. In giving and receiving love's solaces let modesty be ever present.
9. Thou shalt speak no evil.
10. Thou shalt not be a revealer of love affairs.
11. Thou shalt be in all things polite and courteous.
12. In practising the solaces of love thou shalt not exceed the desires of thy lover.

What is Courtly Love?

Properly applied, the phrase *l'amour courtois* identified an extravagantly artificial and stylized relationship--a forbidden affair that was characterized by five main attributes. In essence, the relationship was:

- **Aristocratic.** As its name implies, *courtly* love was practiced by noble lords and ladies; its proper milieu was the royal palace or court.
- **Ritualistic.** Couples engaged in a courtly relationship conventionally exchanged gifts and tokens of their affair. The lady was wooed according to elaborate conventions of etiquette (cf. "*courtship*" and "*courtesy*") and was the constant recipient of songs, poems, bouquets, sweet favors, and ceremonial gestures. For all these gentle and painstaking attentions on the part of her lover, she need only return a short hint of approval, a mere shadow of affection. After all, she was the exalted *domina*--the commanding "mistress" of the affair; he was but her *servus*--a lowly but faithful servant.
- **Secret.** Courtly lovers were pledged to strict secrecy. In effect, the lovers composed a universe unto themselves--a special world with its own places (e.g., the secret rendezvous), rules, codes, and commandments.
- **Adulterous.** "Fine love"--almost by definition--was extramarital. Indeed one of its principle attractions was that it offered an escape from the dull routines and boring confinements of noble marriage (which was typically little more than a political or economic alliance for the purpose of producing royal offspring).
- **Literary.** Before it established itself as a popular real-life activity, courtly love first gained attention as a subject and theme in imaginative literature. Ardent knights, that is to say, and their passionately adored ladies were already popular figures in song and fable before they began spawning a host of real-life imitators in the palace halls and boudoirs of medieval Europe. (**Note:** Even the word "romance"--from Old French *romanz*--began life as the name for a narrative poem about chivalric heroes.)

The Art of Courtly Love

From *The Art of Courtly Love* by Andreas Capellanus

1. Marriage is no real excuse for not loving.
2. He who is not jealous cannot love.
3. No one can be bound by a double love.
4. It is well known that love is always increasing or decreasing.
5. That which a lover takes against the will of his beloved has no relish.
6. Boys do not love until they reach the age of maturity.
7. When one lover dies, a widowhood of two years is required of the survivor.
8. No one should be deprived of love without the very best of reasons.
9. No one can love unless he is propelled by the persuasion of love.
10. Love is always a stranger in the home of avarice.
11. It is not proper to love any woman whom one would be ashamed to seek to marry.
12. A true lover does not desire to embrace in love anyone except his beloved.
13. When made public love rarely endures.
14. The easy attainment of love makes it of little value: difficulty of attainment makes it prized.
15. Every lover regularly turns pale in the presence of his beloved.
16. When a lover suddenly catches sight of his beloved his heart palpitates.
17. A new love puts an old one to flight.
18. Good character alone makes any man worthy of love.
19. If love diminishes, it quickly fails and rarely revives.
20. A man in love is always apprehensive.
21. Real jealousy always increases the feeling of love.
22. Jealousy increases when one suspects his beloved.
23. He whom the thought of love vexes eats and sleeps very little.
24. Every act of a lover ends in the thought of his beloved.
25. A true lover considers nothing good except what he thinks will please his beloved.
26. Love can deny nothing to love.
27. A lover can never have enough of the solaces of his beloved.
28. A slight presumption causes a lover to suspect his beloved.
29. A man who is vexed by too much passion usually does not love.
30. A true lover is constantly and without intermission possessed by the thought of his beloved.
31. Nothing forbids one woman being loved by two men or one man by two women.

Courtly Love

Medieval ladies found glorification when a knight would select her to be his chosen one. For a knight, this could mean any lady, except his wife. According to the "rules" of courtly love, a knight had to promise to be ardent, secretive, and above all, courteous. No matter how long the love was unrequited, a knight had to be true.

Rules evolved—such as chosen women given a ring should wear it "on the little finger of their left hand, and always keep the stone hidden inside her hand." When writing letters, they refrained from using their proper names so their identities could never be revealed.

Church leaders were distraught with this new movement, fearing that knights would lose sight of their religious obligations. This stance was softened somewhat, when they learned that some of the best songs of courtly love were being written by monks and nuns.

