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THE THEME OF ROMANTIC LOVE IN THE COMEDIES

OF SHAKESPEARE

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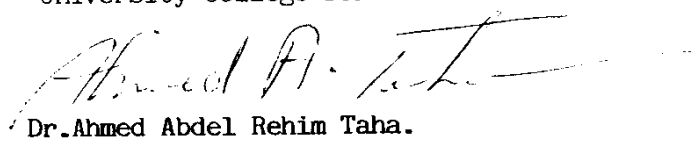


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# **INTRODUCTION**

## INTRODUCTION

### ORIGIN OF THE THEME OF ROMANTIC LOVE

As in all the works of Shakespeare, his comedies have more than one aspect. It seems to me, after having read his comedies, that one of Shakespeare's interests is romantic love. In other words, it is love at first sight, a kind of infatuation more than deep, genuine love. This kind of love reflects the temperament of the age. The Elizabethan period is an age of ballads and lyrics written in honour of the beloved. Shakespeare follows the same theme in his comedies.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that romantic love has its origin in the Elizabethan age, on the contrary, it dates back to earlier periods. The theme of romantic love, as treated by Shakespeare, is a continuation and development of an early conception of love, namely, that of courtly love, as well as a reflection of his own age.

It is interesting to note here that the term 'courtly love' is modern, but the concept is not. Although 'amor cortes' occurred rarely in medieval literature, it had its medieval equivalents which occurred frequently: 'fin amors' in Provençal, 'fin amore' in Italian, 'amour courtois' in



modern French and 'holne minne' in German<sup>1</sup>.

Generally speaking, courtly love was the expression of the ideals, attitudes, values, and beliefs of an aristocratic class which had its own pattern of behaviour<sup>2</sup>.

"The essence of courtly love is the courtliness it nourishes. It does not exist apart from an aristocratic milieu or a courtly audience."<sup>3</sup>

The courtly code of conduct, 'courtoisie', of which romantic love was an essential part, evolved in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century by the southern French troubadours, and once established in European literature, its influence was widespread and profound.

The courtly love convention made its first appearance in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century in Provence in order to satisfy the needs of a relatively new class, the knights. Young men from noble families, but without lands of their own, went into the service of more powerful men to make their fortunes. Such knights needed an ideal code, namely, that of courtly love, in order to counterbalance the violence and instability of their lives. It was a period of increa-

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1) Joan.M.Ferrante and George D.Economou, eds., "Introduction" to In Pursuit of Perfection; Courtly Love in Medieval Literature [Port Washington: National University Publications, 1975], p.4.

2. Ibid., p.4

3. Ibid , p.4.

sing culture, ladies patronized arts, and their castles were centres of refinement and culture. Consequently, the code of courtly love found literary expression in all forms of literature, for example, the lyrics and romances<sup>1</sup>.

In the courtly love conception, the relationship between lover and lady nearly approximated to that of lord and vassal in the medieval feudal contract. The poet often addressed his adored lady as 'my lord'. To the lady of the castle, the knight and squire might have felt themselves feudally inferior. The adulterous basis of such love was understandable in the light of medieval marriage conventions. Marriage was usually a business contract, or what is termed 'marriage of convenience' involving power, and authority but little sentiment. No woman had freedom either to choose her husband, or to prevent the annulment of marriage<sup>2</sup>.

" Women's betrothal and marriage were commonly arranged to serve dynastic or similarly practical ends ..... love had no necessary place in these unions, the propagation of many, preferably male, heirs being their chief function"<sup>3</sup>

The teaching of the church upon the relationship between husband and wife was ambiguous as far as passion-

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1) Ferrante and Economou, eds., p.4

2) "Courtly Love", Encyclopedia Britannica, 1971, Vol., VI p. 664.

3) D.D.R.Owen, Noble Lovers [London: Phaidon Press, Ltd., 1975], p.10.

ate love was concerned, it did not encourage the growth of romantic devotion<sup>1</sup>.

The Roman poet Ovid wrote Ars Amoris wherein he treated the theme of love. The lover made exaggerated obeisance to the god Amor, and to the lady's slightest whims in order to achieve the gratification of his desires. The Ovidian lover was the slave of passion, he was pale, trembled, swooned, unable to sleep or eat, and was known to die of love. Ovid's attitude towards love was to mock and ridicule such lovers. What Ovid satirized in Ars Amoris was strongly recommended by the courtly tradition of the Middle Ages. Medieval love poetry could be interpreted as 'Ovid misunderstood'. Although his book provided some of the material for the ideal of courtly love, it could not have accounted for the wholly serious, and idealistic outlook of its first medieval exponents.<sup>2</sup>

Some critics claim that courtly love originated in Arabic mystical philosophy. It was likely that the literature of Moslim Spain had a direct influence upon southern French troubadours. A treatise, "The Tawq Alhamamaw, written by Ibn Hazm, contained most of the ideas which recurred in all medieval treatments of courtly love from the

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1) Owen, p.10.

2) C.S.Lewis, The Allegory of love; A Study in Medieval Tradition [New York: Oxford University Press, 1958], p.7.

troubadours onward. However, the 'Tawq' sought to discover spiritual significance in passionate relationships. Features of the doctrine of Ibn Hazm ring in European courtly love literature<sup>1</sup>.

"Some critics have found the origins of troubadour love-poetry in the literary influences coming from Ovid, from Moslim Spain or from the language of love used by Christian monks. Others have stressed the social and psychological causes: the influence of women in the court, the high ratio of men to women in the courts, the psychological immaturity of the troubadours, or the ambivalent state of all men, who see in women both the all powerful, life giving mother of their childhood and the small, weak dependent of their manhood"<sup>2</sup>.

The new cult of courtly love was not created from the void. In ancient Egypt, China, Greece, Scandinavia, Serbia, Russia, and in Medieval Spain there were love songs in which the woman was the dominant figure, and tended to be the active lover rather than the passive loved one<sup>3</sup>.

In Provence, in the southern part of France, courtly love first blossomed. Nevertheless, it was not confined to the south of France, it spread to the north of France, England, Germany, Spain, and Italy. During this transmis-

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1) *Encyclopedia Britannica*, p. 665.

2) John C. Moore, *Love in 12<sup>th</sup> Century France* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972]. p. 86.

3) Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin and The Rose of European Love Lyric Vol. I*, [London: Oxford University Press, 1968]. p. 8.

sion the concept of courtly love developed and was modified. One of its decisive influences was Eleanor of Aquitaine. Married first to Louis VII of France, and then to Henry II of England, she inspired some of the best poetry of Bernart de Ventadorn, one of the greatest and most admired of the troubadours. At her courts in France and England, she was a patroness of the new love poetry<sup>1</sup>.

The first known troubadour was Guillaume, 9<sup>th</sup> Duke of Aquitaine. It was thought that he invented the new courtly mode almost single-handed. He composed the first known troubadour love lyrics. The number of the troubadours increased before the century was out, love songs were being sung in noble courts not only in southern France, but in Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and England. The love of man for woman became a favourite theme in European literature<sup>2</sup>.

"In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, professional warriors in France began to temper their crude and brutal manners with courtoisie or courtesy, the refined elegance which was in time to become the ideal of the aristocratic courts of Europe"<sup>3</sup>

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1) *Encyclopedia Britannica.*, p. 665.

2) *Moore*, p. 85.

3) *Ibid.*, p. 85.

Marie de France, daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine and countess of Champagne, was the first woman writer of French literature. She wrote 'lais' which presented the elements of courtly love: the loyalty and devotion of true lovers, the suffering and long separations, the dangers of enemies, jealous husbands, or envious courtiers who cannot value properly true love. In her last lai 'Eliduc' Marie turned away from courtly love towards the only love which could resolve the conflicts of earthly loyalties : the love of God<sup>1</sup>.

The French northern writers adopted the troubadours' themes of love, and wove them into materials from the past stories of Greece, Rome, and of King Arthur's legends.

"The northern writers, like the troubadours, were fascinated by the early stages of love, the single minded absorption of the lover in the thought of the beloved, the mixed joy and sorrow of new love, the moral purification which turns the lover from any thought of indiscriminate lust."<sup>2</sup>

The greatest and most outstanding of the northern writers was Chrétien de Troyes. He was among the first in northern France to choose love as the central theme of a serious poem. It was Chrétien who first gave us the

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1) Ferrante and Economou, eds. , p. 10.

2) Moore, p. 91.

romance of Lancelot which dealt with Lancelot's pursuit of Queen Guenevere. He informed us in his prologue that Marie de France furnished him with the material of his story. He never finished it; some say that he disliked the adulterous theme; he had little sympathy with the oppressive marriages of convenience<sup>1</sup>.

" Chrétien praised mutual love between man and woman, freely given and faithfully preserved and his stories usually ended with his lovers happily married.<sup>2</sup>

Chrétien was among the first to welcome the Arthurian stories. He believed that Arthur's court was the home of true and noble love. He wrote Erec which is a story of married love. In his Cligés he gave his views on love. He also wrote the Grail story about Gawain, King Arthur's nephew, who was an incurable amorist whose love affairs interfered with his knightly duties.<sup>3</sup>

Andreas Capellanus wrote a Latin treatise on The Art of Loving. He modelled his work on that of Ovid, and he composed his work under the influence of the countess Marie de France. In the course of his treatise, Andreas defined and described the nature and conventions of courtly love, considered certain problems, and reported judgements on them rendered by various noble ladies. He

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1) Moore, p. 94.

2) Ibid., p. 94

3) Lewis, pp. 23-25.