Abstract

In this paper, selected conventions of courtly love that are found within Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* are compared and contrasted. The conventions discussed concern the courtly characteristics and attributes of lovers, the deification of a beloved, an intellectual outlook versus emotional view of love, the confession of love, the notion of love at first sight, and the importance of adultery in literature. In examining certain notions of courtly love through these two Shakespearean works, it is intriguing to note how closely Shakespeare followed traditional literary conventions and to what extent he modified these conventions.

Comparatively Speaking: Notions of Love in English Literature

By Tera Burgess

In the twelfth-century, a code of manners that eventually became a literary tradition influenced the literature of Europe. This phenomenon is known as "courtly love," a term first applied by the French scholar Gaston Paris in 1883.[1] This new doctrine of love spread abroad, influencing the literature of many other countries such as Germany, Italy, and England.[2] These themes of courtly love were incorporated by many significant authors, including William Shakespeare. To determine how influential aspects of courtly love were throughout Shakespeare's works, a brief history and definition of courtly love will be offered. Next, a limited number of the elements of courtly love will be examined. Two examples of Shakespearean romances that include conventions of courtly love are found in the courtships of Ferdinand and Miranda in *The Tempest* and Valentine and Sylvia in *The Two Gentlemen Of Verona.* Both plays rely on courtly love, yet deviations are present. Notions of courtly love that are found in these two plays include courtly characteristics and attributes of lovers and the deification of one's beloved. Some aspects of courtly love that are modified by Shakespeare focus on an intellectual outlook rather than emotional view of love, the confession of love, the notion of love at first sight, and the importance of adultery in literature.

To understand the importance of courtly love in Shakespeare's works, it is necessary to examine the development of courtly love. Although the origins of courtly love are subject to controversy, it is generally accepted that the rhetoric of courtly love originated in eleventh-century Spanish-Islamic literature and spread to southern France where troubadours composed songs of *fine amour,* or fine love. In these songs, love was praised in an idealistic, extravagant language. Conventions of courtly love were also admired by Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122–1204) and her daughter, Marie of Champagne (1145–1198). Due to the patronage of these noble ladies, troubadour poetry and music were introduced into the aristocratic courts of France and England, where lyrical romantic poetry was celebrated. As the style of courtly love developed, literature was also affected. The works of thirteenth-century

English author Geoffrey Chaucer (1342–1400) and the love poetry of fourteenth-century Italian poet Francis Petrarch (1304–1374) illustrate the importance of courtly love as a historical literary convention. Chaucer followed the style of courtly love in works such as *Troilus and Criseyde,* while Petrarch is credited with developing conventions of love that are similar to certain aspects of courtly love in that "the loved one [was portrayed] as a fascinating combination of earthly and divine qualities; a characteristic stance for the lover; and a repertory of devices that could be endlessly imitated."[3] In *Courtship in Shakespeare,* William G. Meader explained the lasting importance of courtly love: "To say that courtly love, or *fine amor,* had its beginnings in the twelfth-century and died out, under ridicule, to be replaced by the romanticism of the sixteenth, is to avoid recognizing the permanent aspects of both manifestations. . . . 'Courtly love' aided in the growth of romantic love, which has always existed, but did not become articulate before the midst of the Middle Ages, and then became intensely so."[4]

Definitions of courtly love are also a fundamental key to understanding Shakespeare's use of the conventions of courtly love. Around 1185, Andreas Capellanus, chaplain to Marie of Champagne, wrote *The Art of Courtly Love,* which codified conventions of courtly love. Capellanus offers the first definition of courtly love, in which he describes love as "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 and by common desire to carry out all of love's precepts in the other's embrace."[5] Modern scholars have also sought to describe courtly love. According to Alexander J. Denomy, the object of courtly love is "the lover's progress and growth in natural goodness, merit, and worth,"[6] and Meader has further explained that courtly love "became a game, and [that] the rules were merely a codified statement of the interactions expected of the participants."[7]

These definitions become important when they are applied to Shakespeare's use of courtly love conventions concerning the attitudes and characteristics displayed by his characters. In describing the necessity of exhibiting courtly or noble behavior, Denomy explains, "Only those are considered worthy of love who are excellent of character and who do noble deeds. It is excellence of character that gives men the privilege and title of nobility. Only those who have proven themselves of excellent character by the nobility of their deeds may be found worthy to love or be loved."[8]

By possessing an impeccable character nobility is attained, which allows one to become worthy of love. Shakespeare's emphasis on this aspect of courtly love is clearly seen in both *The Tempest* and *The Two Gentlemen Of Verona.* In *The Tempest,* Ferdinand is a prince who desires to woo the beautiful Miranda, daughter to Prospero. As a prince Ferdinand is worthy of Miranda, if worth is to be measured by rank alone and not by the standards of courtly love. However, high rank alone does not constitute the nobility of character necessary for a courtly lover. Ferdinand's virtues exemplify the required excellence of character. This virtuous behavior is found in his respectful treatment of Miranda and his use of delicate speech as he meditates upon his love for her, as seen in this passage:

This my mean task
Would be as heavy to me as odious, but
The mistress which I serve quickens what's dead
And makes my labors pleasures. O she is
Ten times more gentle than her father's crabbed, . . .
My sweet mistress
Weeps when she sees me work, and says such baseness
Had never like executor. I forget,
But these sweet thoughts do even refresh my labors,
Most busy lest, when I do it (3.2.4).[9]

For Ferdinand, thoughts of his beloved Miranda diminish the difficulty of manual labor, and he is refreshed by the mere thought of her.

In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona,* Valentine also possesses courtly traits that are similar to those of Ferdinand. Valentine is virtuous, courageous, loyal, generous, forgiving, and well-spoken. In the course of the play, Valentine faces the immediate prospect of banishment from the city and his love. Like Ferdinand, Valentine eloquently declares his love for Sylvia. In this passage, Valentine proclaims that he would rather embrace death than be banished from Sylvia:[10]

To die is to be banished from myself;
And Sylvia is myself. Banished from her
Is self from self: a deadly banishment!
Unless I look upon Sylvia in the night,
There is no music in the nightingale;
Unless I look upon Sylvia in the day,
There is no day for me to look upon.
She is my essence, and I leave to be
If I be not by her fair influence
Foster'd, illumn'd, cherish'd, kept alive.
I fly not death, to fly his deadly doom (2.4.172–188).

Valentine's love for Sylvia is declared in the passionate style of the courtly lover. He describes Sylvia as his "essence," which illuminates him and gives him life.

Shakespeare maintained another common motif found in the style of courtly love: deification of the beloved. Courtly lovers would describe their beloved in adoring and often lavish terms. "Many late sixteenth-century dramatic characters deify their beloved. Their speech might be extravagant. . . . Other characters . . . believe that he worships his beloved. The identification of the adored woman with a goddess is frequent, and she becomes the object of various forms of religious ritual."[11] In *The Tempest,* Ferdinand and Miranda liken each other to deities:

Miranda: I might call him
A thing divine, for nothing natural
I ever saw so noble. . . .
Ferdinand: Most sure the goddess
On whom these airs attend! Vouchsafe my prayer
May know if you remain upon this island,

And that you will some good instruction give
How I may bear me here! My prime request-
Which I do last pronounce is- O you wonder!
If you be maid or no (1.2.488–499)?

Likewise, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona,* Valentine is so smitten by his Sylvia that he exalts her to the status of a saint, and a deity and finally describes her as a creature more beautiful than all other creatures upon the earth. Valentine's description of her beauty is lavish as he converses with his friend, Proteus. Proteus, however, views Sylvia's beauty more realistically. Valentine attempts to convince Proteus of Sylvia's perfection in this dialogue:

Proteus: Enough; I read your fortune in your eye,
Was this the idol that you worship so?
Valentine: Even she; and is she not a heavenly saint?
Proteus: No, but she is an earthly paragon.
Valentine: Call her divine.
Proteus: I will not flatter her. . .
Valentine: Then speak the truth by her; if not divine,
Yet let her be a principality,
Sovereign to all the creatures on the earth
(2.4.142–153).

As demonstrated by these two examples, it is possible to determine that Shakespeare made use of the courtly love convention of deification.

Although Shakespeare incorporated many aspects of courtly love into his plays, he also deviated from traditional themes. Maurice Charney writes, "Shakespeare follows the conventions for falling in love that derive from Petrarch's love poems. . . . [He] is both a follower and a satirist of them. He draws on traditional Petrarchan postures and attitudes at the same time as he laughs at them, so that love in Shakespeare becomes complex and often contradictory."[12] One Shakespearean deviation is the way in which Shakespeare secures love on rational and intellectual principles rather than on passion alone. To a certain extent, earlier heroines were rational; however, their emotions eventually overcame their sense of rationality. As Meader writes, "the Creseyde of Chaucer could for a time govern herself by reason, but when she was forced to participate immediately in a situation, her reason fled and she was controlled by her emotion."[13] Unlike earlier depictions of love, Shakespeare's courtly characters do not give in to their passions. An example is found in *The Tempest.* Prospero, who intends for the lovers to marry, devises a plan designed to test Ferdinand's true character. Ferdinand is allowed to spend time with Miranda in order for Prospero to discover whether or not Ferdinand earnestly wishes for Miranda's happiness, or if he merely desires her for her beauty. As he is informing Ferdinand that he may court Miranda, Prospero strictly warns Ferdinand that it is best for him to not "give dalliance / too much reign." Ferdinand rises nobly to the occasion and promises him in the strongest terms that he will never take advantage of Miranda's virginity before marriage: "the white cold virgin snow upon my heart / abates the ardor of my liver" (4.1.96–101). Ferdinand does, indeed, keep

this promise. Although he and Miranda are very much in love with each other, they keep a tight reign on their emotions and do not give in to temptation. In the last scene of the play, Ferdinand and Miranda are alone together in Prospero's cell. Although they are secluded and could easily violate Prospero's stricture, they do not even indulge in a hidden embrace. Instead, when Prospero discovers them together, they are flirting intellectually as they play a game of chess:

Miranda: Sweet lord, you play me false.
Ferdinand: No my dearest love,
I would not for the world.
Miranda: Yes, for a score of kingdoms you should wrangle,
And I would call it fair play (5.1.190–95).

As this combination of romance and intellectual word play is not commonly found in earlier courtly love romances, it demonstrates that Shakespeare did not always adhere to traditional styles of courtly love.

Shakespeare further deviates from the courtly love tradition in that his characters often confess their love for each other openly. Meader explains: "There were four methods of letting the beloved know that the lover was ill with love: (1) a simple declaration, (2) a go-between, (3)presents, and (4) writings. . . . The first means, that of confessing his love to his beloved immediately, although often used by Shakespeare, would have been scorned by the true courtly love of earlier ages. Such a course would not be modest in either a man or a woman appearing as a character in Renaissance literature. But in the late sixteenth century the lovers in drama seem to have been more direct and . . . it is quite often the woman who makes the overture."[14]

Declarations of love were often initiated by women, as seen in *The Tempest.* Despite the fact that their mutual confessions of love occur at almost the same instant, Miranda bluntly asks Ferdinand if he loves her. She also accepts his proposal of marriage in a forthright fashion: "Hence bashful cunning! / And prompt me, plain and holy innocence. / I am your wife if you will marry me. / If not, I'll die your maid" (3.2.96–101). Although this initiation by the woman is courtly in the sense that the woman controls the situation, it differs in that she has exposed herself to his refusal. Women in earlier works of courtly love were careful to avoid the humiliation of being scorned.

Another deviation between Shakespeare and earlier medieval works concerns the notion of "love at first sight." "The ideal of love at first sight, which is presented so often in Elizabethan works, was not all-important during the twelfth-century."[15] In Shakespeare's plays "lovers seem always to fall instantaneously in love and to express themselves with wild excess."[16] As a romantic concept, the ideal of "love at first sight" developed later than the traditional aspects of courtly love and was a device that Shakespeare employed in *The Tempest.* Upon first glance, Ferdinand is enraptured with Miranda. Her beauty dazzles him, and he desires to wed her without knowing her identity as he cries, "O, if a virgin, / And your affection not gone forth, I'll make you / Queen of Naples" (1.2.526–528). Shakespeare further implements the notion of "love at first sight" through Miranda. She too is struck by

Ferdinand and falls instantaneously in love with him. She reciprocates his love by pleading with her father: "My affections / Are then most humble: I have no ambition to see a goodlier man." (ACT, SCENE, LINE NUMBER??) She yearns for Ferdinand, and longs to marry him although she has never looked upon a man other than her father.

Perhaps the most important aspect of courtly love from which Shakespeare deviated regards the subject of adultery. According to Capellanus, courtly love could not exist in marriage: "Marital affection and the true love of lovers are wholly different and arise from entirely different sources."[17] As seen throughout numerous courtly love romances such as *Lancelot,* adultery was an intrinsic part of the plot. Courtly love romances did not have to be physical; however, the woman in the story was usually married. In contrast, the literature of the sixteenth-century seldom discussed adultery. "The practice of adultery advocated by *fine amor* under [Capellanus's] first rule was not used in the drama of the sixteenth century. . . The adultery of men and women was seen with horror stricken eyes."[18] These changing perceptions toward adultery influenced the works of Shakespeare and ultimately contributed to his departure from this traditional aspect of courtly love: "The writers of the late sixteenth century made a relatively sharp distinction between courtly and romantic love. . . . A somewhat oversimplified definition of the distinction is that courtly love is sincere, but with its focus upon seduction; romantic love is sincere, but with its focus upon marriage."[19]

The shifting focus from adultery to marriage in sixteenth century literature is one of the most important deviations from the courtly love tradition. The emphasis on marriage throughout Shakespeare's plays reveals changing attitudes concerning courtship and marriage and demonstrates how the literature of the time underwent a transition.

In conclusion, notions of courtly love are found throughout the works of Shakespeare in popular plays such as *The Tempest* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona.* By comparing and contrasting the notions of courtly love found in these two plays, one sees that the rhetoric of courtly love influenced Shakespeare, while he also departed from established notions of courtly love that eventually aided in the development of romantic literature. Based on the examination of Shakespeare's use of courtly love convention, one may conclude that the art or game of courtly love was a highly developed style of writing. The modifications implemented by Shakespeare advanced the courtly love tradition, which may have been one of the keys to his success.

Notes

1. Alexander J. Denomy, *Courtly Love and Courtliness* (Toronto: Speculum XXVIII, 1953), 46.

2. Brian Wilkie, James Hurt, *Literature of the Western World* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 4 ed., 1997), 1313–1314.

3. Wilkie, Hurt, 1765.

4. William G. Meader, *Courtship in Shakespeare* (New York: Kings Crown Press,

1952), 1.

5. Meader, 1314–1315.

6. Denomy, 44.

7. Meader, 1, 2.

8. Alexander J. Denomy, *The De Amore of Andreas Capellanus and the Condemnation of 1277,* (*Medieval Studies* VIII, 1946), 116.

9. All references to Shakespeare's plays are from Wilbure L. Cross, Tucker Brooke, *The Yale Shakespeare* (U.S.: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1993).

10. Sylvan Barnet, *Signet Classics: Shakespeare* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), XXXI.

11. Meader, 98–99.

12. Maurice Charney, *Shakespeare on Love and Lust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 12

13. Meader, 27.

14. Meader, 128

15. Meader, 7.

16. Charney, 4.

17. Meader, 3

18. Meader, 202–203.

19. Meader, 87.

Tera Burgess is an undergraduate student at Southern Utah University.