

# Love and 'Fin Amors'

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Love is a word we use for widely different activities: sexual desire, friendship, turning to God; we even 'love' books or games. The differences can be marked by adjectives (love is 'carnal' or 'spiritual'), but the recurrence of the same noun implies, one supposes, that something remains the same, or similar, in every case. But it is not easy to define this common factor or similarity, and we are more likely to be irritated by the ambiguity of 'love' than to try to see how it arises—to take, I mean, this ambiguity as a clue for exploring our own nature. On reflection, however, we might agree that the imprecision of the term comes from its meaning, if anything, too much, not too little; from its referring to something at the centre of existence and involved, inextricably, with all that we do. We might, of course, try to limit the meaning of the word to one particular context, to sexual relations; but although 'love' in modern English does chiefly refer to sex, such a limitation would be somewhat artificial. The idea behind the wider, inclusive use of the term arises quite naturally, and it is an integral part of our culture, as a glance at any Latin dictionary will show. Already in classical Latin *amor* had a wide, trans-sexual sense; which Christian theology and meditation was quick to appropriate in its turn, and then enormously to extend—enough to recall a single great phrase from St Augustine, *pondus meum, amor meus*: 'my weight is my love; thereby I am borne, whithersoever I am borne'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed the *Confessions* make it evident that, from one point of view, Augustine's search for God was nothing but a profound exploration of his own capacity for loving; and this experience of his left an indelible mark on the word *amor* and its derivatives.

From the Scholastics the term got a finer precision, while at the same time its width of reference was clarified by a better understanding of the technique of analogy. Thus St Thomas could identify *amor* with the 'natural appetite' which inclines every being, according to its place in the scale of things, to an exactly appropriate perfection.<sup>2</sup> *Amor* expressed the dynamic factor in the cosmos, analogically realized on all the levels of existence; a dynamism which derived from, and variously

<sup>1</sup>*Confessions*, XIII, c. 9.

<sup>2</sup>*Summa theol.* 1a. 60, 1.

represented, that primal subsistent love which is simply identical with God. And obviously, from this point of view, sexual love is only one of love's possible realizations. And so it was for the only man of the Middle Ages who was able to achieve, on a really large scale, an imaginative 'correlative' to the highest abstract thought of that time. In Dante's *Comedy* love, without losing contact with the emotions, gains an entirely trans-sexual and universal reference. 'Neither the Creator, my son, nor any creature . . . was ever without love, *mai fu senza amore*', declares Virgil half-way up the Mount of Purgatory; and the lesson is recalled and confirmed in the deepest and most deeply felt passages of the *Paradiso*.

But there was only one Dante, and no other poem of the Middle Ages can be compared with the *Divine Comedy* as an exploration of trans-sexual love. Generally speaking, the writers and poets in the vernaculars—French, Provençal and Italian—which sprang up in the wake of Latin gave to the terms derived from *amor* a more restricted and to us more familiar sense. By love (their most usual theme) they normally meant sexual love, and generally that refined form of it which the troubadours called *fin amors*. The concept of *fin amors*, as Maurice Valency says in his well-informed and perceptive study of the Provençal and early Italian love-lyric, was 'the basis of the troubadour love song, and of all the lyric and narrative forms which came under its influence'<sup>3</sup>; which is as much as to say a very large part of the lay literature of Europe from Chrétien de Troyes to Petrarch. Naturally there were wide varieties of tone and emphasis; there was the unpredictable Dantean development; and there was plenty of incidental lewdness and carnality—things not encouraged by the code of strict *fin amors*, so that, from this point of view, much of the *Decameron* contrasts with Boccaccio's own attachments to the troubadour tradition—; and yet, all through, the troubadour theme persisted: sublimated sexual desire, expressed in a cult and service of the desired object, the woman, as in some sense the male lover's superior.

Gaston Paris called it *amour courtois*, and since this name has been generally adopted it may as well be retained. Yet it is a little misleading, for this form of love had nothing essentially to do with courts whether feudal or royal. It was of course historically connected with feudal courts, for it arose among the southern French nobility at the end of the eleventh century. But this circumstance, though it affected the

<sup>3</sup>*In Praise of Love: An Introduction to the Love-Poetry of the Renaissance*; The Macmillan Company, New York (Paperback Edition); 12s.

forms and expression of courtly love, did not make it an intrinsically feudal phenomenon; indeed it would be nearer the truth to call it essentially anti-feudal. Mr Valency sees it as a 'symptom of the decline of feudalism'; for whereas, he says, 'in the material world (the social and juridical system of the time) a vassal paid homage to his lord—the source presumably of all his good—in the world of love his homage was paid to his lady, the source of all his joy'. That this homage, since it was normally paid to another man's wife, involved potentially the additional treason of adultery, means of course that to some extent at least courtly love must have operated as an anti-Christian, as well as an anti-social, factor in medieval society. I shall return to this point presently; but first we may note the curious reversal (however limited in its effects) of the established social order implied in the fact that courtly love put the human male on his knees before the female; for certainly in that society authority was normally vested in the male—it was a patriarchal world. It is true that some of the troubadours were the social inferiors of the women they worshipped; but some were not and social inferiority had nothing essentially to do with that worship. It is true that most of these ladies were well-born, but to say this is only to state the fact that twelfth century courtly love was in the main an upper-class occupation. Its chief patrons and propagators were great ladies like Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter, Marie of Champagne. But there was no intrinsic reason why the cult of love should not spread into the middle class, as later in fact it did; though without ever losing traces of its aristocratic origins.

The problem of the literary source or sources of courtly love has been debated for a century now, but no solution has found general acceptance. Was it Ovid? Or the Arabs? Or Latin Neoplatonism? Or Manichaeism? Or Christian mysticism? Each suggestion has had its defenders, and clearly none is, to say the least, wholly satisfactory. Personally, I agree with H. I. Marrou<sup>4</sup> that, interesting as the question of sources may be, it is more important to understand the nature of the phenomenon itself; and, as Marrou points out, the only way to do this is to 'replacer ses manifestations dans le milieu culturel où il s'est développé'. As a fact in literary history courtly love emerges in the lyric poetry written south of the Loire at the end of the eleventh and throughout the twelfth century; and it was drawn out into a system and a code of conduct in the *De Amore* of Andreas Capellanus (who was chaplain to Marie of Champagne) probably in the 1180s. Whatever

<sup>4</sup>'Au dossier de l'amour courtois', *Revue du moyen âge latin*, 3, 1947, p. 85.

'sources', therefore, lie outside this French milieu, and are of an earlier date than about 1070, can only have operated indirectly through that milieu and can only have 'caught on' because the milieu was somehow disposed to receive their influence and to react in the way that it did. So it is to this medieval French milieu, within of course its wider European setting, that the student of courtly love should direct his attention in the first place; only so will he be in a position to make useful comparisons with literature born in other cultures, such as the world of Islam. This is the method recently adopted by a German scholar, Felix Schlösser, in a very remarkable study of the love-doctrine of Andreas in relation to the Christian world out of which it emerged and from which it seems so strangely detached: *Andreas Capellanus. Seine Minnelehre und das christliche Weltbild um 1200* (H. Bouvier u. Co., Bonn, 1960). This admirable book is probably the best we have on the doctrine involved in courtly love, as distinct from its expressions in poetry. It is both very learned (it runs to nearly 400 closely printed pages) and very sane. It provides far and away the clearest and fullest available analysis of the *De Amore*, and it does so precisely in order to elucidate what is surely the most interesting topic which that curious treatise raises for a modern reader: the relation of courtly love to its Christian background. Schlösser's treatment is at once delicate and thorough. He is fully alive to both the interest and the obscurities of his theme, for he has the great merit—not so common among learned men—of taking both human love and Christianity seriously. He knows the Catholic theology—contemporary as well as medieval—of sex and marriage, and therefore is able to see that the question of courtly love is in a real sense *contemporary*. What I mean by this I must try to indicate, briefly, before concluding; but whatever I say will be no more than a sort of footnote to Schlösser.

If the relations of courtly love to the Christian background is an enigmatic one, this is not because we do not know what that love signified as a way of life, but rather because we know quite well what it signified—at least in those upper-class circles for whom the *De Amore* was written. The tone and allusions of Andreas's book clearly reflect a little social world; that of his patron the Countess of Champagne, who was daughter to Louis VII of France. Andreas, clearly, is the spokesman of a sophisticated 'set'; and he tells us with the utmost lucidity what *amor* meant for it. His very studied manner is an odd blend of gravity and impudence; and the gravity (which predominates) seems to come from a real conviction of the truth and importance of his doctrine, the

impudence from an underlying awareness that this was out of harmony with, not to say directly opposed to, Christian morality. So the question arises of itself: how did such a book come to be written (and written, I repeat, not by a solitary eccentric but from within a socially very eminent and influential circle) in a world so thoroughly penetrated by Catholic belief and practice as twelfth century France? This is obviously too big a question for one article (Schlösser's highly intelligent attempt to answer it runs to 250 pages) but I must try at least to make its terms a little clearer by outlining briefly the gist, as I understand it, of the *De Amore*. That done, we may be in a position to draw one or two provisional conclusions.

The *De Amore* is not one of the world's great books, yet literature offers few topics of greater interest to the student of human behaviour than the theory of love outlined in it. For there are not many fundamentally different ways in which men can try to organize and direct their sexual life, and it would seem that courtly love, as described by Andreas (who calls it, however, simply 'love', *amor*) is one of them. Love, then, is presented by Andreas under two aspects: (a) as a principle in nature, (b) as a code of human conduct in harmony with nature. As (a) love, *amor*, is sex-attraction, taken quite generally but with special reference to the attraction of the human male to the female (and not, or nothing like so much, *vice versa*: the *De Amore* is predominantly a man's book). This attraction is personified as a god, the *deus amoris* (or alternatively as 'Venus', but Andreas prefers the male designation) who is represented as, in a very real sense, the power that rules this world—including the human world inasmuch as this is a part of nature. In so far, then, as men become aware of this power and freely submit to it *in a way becoming to human nature*, love becomes (b) the mainspring of an ethical discipline aimed at making the male lover worthy of the love which a particular woman has aroused in him. The woman, on her side, must first have freely accepted his love; an acceptance which, it is made clear, should be based on an intelligent estimate of both his capacity and hers for the fairly exacting relationship that will now ensue. True, this relationship will be more or less exacting according as the love is 'pure', *amor purus*, or 'mixed', *amor mixtus*. The former, which never terminates in carnal union, is the more perfect as being more enduring, less damaging to one's neighbour (the woman's husband, or the man's wife, or both) and less offensive to God. The latter, which is permitted to end in coition—after passing through carefully graded preliminary stages—is less perfect. But both pure and mixed

love are equally love *quoad substantiam*, and both must therefore obey the rules of the game, rules that follow from the quasi-technical sense that 'love' has in the system. These include secrecy, a strict mutual fidelity (this is what Andreas means when he says that love promotes *castitas*, though he is honest enough to add *quasi*) and a real measure of self-control—in the case of 'pure' love a very considerable measure. But the moral requirements are more stressed on the man's side; and here Andreas deploys a crowd of manly virtues: the lover must be truthful, generous, temperate, forgiving, kindly, brave, loyal and courteous; more surprising, he must be a good Catholic (heresy is placed first among the things that 'bring love to an end'), respectful to priests, a frequent attender at church services. Above all, the lover must be 'wise', a *sapiens amator*; the term includes all the qualities just enumerated, for he is *sapiens* who knows how to measure his life by the right standard: and this only love will teach him. It is, in its way, a high ideal.

The place of the woman is worth a little more attention. Andreas, it should be clear by now, sees 'love' as a moral discipline (even if, from the Christian point of view, the morality is fundamentally invalid) and in this discipline the woman retains the initiative: the moral progress of her lover is largely her responsibility—a responsibility she owes, not primarily to him, but to the love itself to which both he and she are subject. She can only allow herself to be the object of his physical desires in so far as she actively imposes the moral ideal which they should constantly subserve; for she is represented as somehow intimately knowing in advance (Andreas never explains how) the perfection that is the term of the love-service. One might say that while the man's task is to love, the woman's is to embody the *idea* of love. Thus she stands closer to the 'god of love' than her lover does. She is more 'divine', at least in her function. To borrow a term from Christianity—of which courtly love was certainly in some respects an imitation, though how far consciously so it is impossible to say—the woman functions as a sort of 'sacrament'. Yet one must not exaggerate her superiority *vis à vis* the male, as some writers on courtly love have done. In the troubadour lyric, to be sure, the male is always looking up to the lady in a sort of worship; but a careful reading of Andreas's prose brings out the fundamental pattern of thought which those lyrics partly obscure. The real 'divinity' is *amor* itself, the unique principle of moral perfection, the only 'fons de bontat'. The woman is merely love's instrument; it is her business to serve love; and this, in the first

place, by not hiding her light *sub modio*<sup>5</sup>—a characteristic example of Andreas's use of Scripture!

That love is the source of all moral worth is a first principle with Andreas; he takes it for granted and expects that his readers do so too, And this love is certainly not God nor the love of God. It is sexual attraction—sublimated indeed to a greater or less degree, but having always as its concrete object the body and soul of a human being, and as its 'ideal' object a growth in natural virtue. It entailed an ethical discipline, but one wholly measured by ends attainable in this world. The *De Amore* looks to nothing after death; in this sense it is a far more secular work than one of its chief pagan sources, the *De Amicitia* of Cicero. And then too there is the particular clash with Catholic morality represented by or implied in what Andreas says about marriage—and says, incidentally, with a more than usually explicit reference to the opinions current in the aristocratic world for which he wrote. He does not, of course, attack marriage as an institution; he does not even explicitly defend adultery; he simply makes a perfectly clean separation of marriage from 'love': 'it is perfectly clear', he says, 'that between husband and wife there is no place for love.' In his system marriage is simply an irrelevance, or is only relevant as part of the background against which, and partly in opposition to which, the courtly lovers, the servants of *amor*, pursue their private ends. And why has marriage nothing to do with love? Because love is simply not the same kind of thing as the attitude that a man should have towards his wife and *vice versa*. In marriage everything is governed by strict mutual obligation; but in the sphere of love everything proceeds as a free gift. Again, in marriage sexual passion is strictly limited by the primary end of the institution, the begetting of children; which is not the case in the sphere of 'love'. Any pleasure (*solatium*) that married people take in one another, without reference to prospective parenthood, *crimine carere non potest*, says Andreas, stressing with some polemical complacency the traditional theologians' overriding concern to keep concupiscence out of marriage—a concern which at that time was still on the whole not yet balanced by any positive evaluation of sexual relations in marriage as an intrinsic factor in the human and personal interrelation of the married pair.<sup>6</sup> Marriage-theology was still dominated

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Matthew 5. 15.

<sup>6</sup>This is a large and complex subject, however, and the reader is advised to consult the historians of marriage-theology, starting with the excellent articles in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, vol. ix.

by St Augustine in this respect. This saint had, it is true, numbered *fraterna societas* and *humanitatis solatium* among the complementary 'goods' of marriage; but the mutual love to which such expressions refer was thought of in a way that tended to set it spiritually apart from the sex-relation as such. The latter had its place in marriage of course, but one the moral status of which was not very clear. Its connection with justice was clear enough; far less so its connection with charity.

The two points in Andreas's argument, mentioned above, mark the essential difference for him between *amor* and *maritalis affectio*. Love is entirely excluded from marriage. And it is important to note (in order to understand the rise of courtly love) that this conclusion, which no doubt sounds shocking to us, would probably not have seemed unacceptable to an average twelfth century theologian who took the trouble to discover what Andreas and his patrons meant by love: a relationship based on sex but human and, in its effects, ennobling. But in that case had not the theologians perhaps run the risk of so undervaluing sex as to have only a rather one-sided ideal of Christian marriage to offer to the lay world? And isn't it plausible to take the rise of courtly love as in part a symptom of this state of affairs—of something one-sided and incomplete in the orthodox view of marriage current at the time? Something, it seems, was missing and the lack was beginning to be felt in dangerous ways. It cannot be doubted that courtly love represented a certain estrangement from the Christian tradition, a threatening unrest, in those affected by it. One must not exaggerate, of course. Andreas was a man who delighted in taking ideas to extremes: his sharp disassociation of love from marriage is not found, for example, in his great contemporary Chrétien de Troyes, except in one poem, the *Lancelot*, which, it is interesting to note, was very probably written at the direct instance of Marie of Champagne. Still, Andreas is a very important witness. And the break with Christian morality that his work represents becomes still clearer if we consider that he not only separates love from marriage but also evidently regards the former as a morally superior 'state' to the latter. He never actually says this, but it logically follows from his first principle that love is the only source of moral worth and nobility.

I have said that he looked to nothing beyond death: there is no Beatrice in the *De Amore*. Yet Dante was bred in the troubadour tradition and would be quite incomprehensible without it: a Christian mind, then, could assimilate much of its trend and temper. Nor is this really surprising; courtly love after all grew out of Christian soil.



Historically it was one manifestation among many of that general growth in intellectual, spiritual and emotional *refinement* which so evidently affected the western world, and especially France, throughout the twelfth century. It was the age of St Bernard and the Victorines, of Abelard and the school of Chartres. Viewed in that context courtly love becomes entirely explicable. To paraphrase a remark of Gilson's, it was the effort of a society 'polie et affinée par des siècles de christianisme' to elaborate a code of human love that would be neither mystical nor bestial but simply human.<sup>7</sup> The effort led to heresy, the code was not a Christian one; yet there were elements in it—particularly a new reverence for women—which one is reluctant to call pagan.

## A Theological Chronicle: Sin

CORNELIUS ERNST, O.P.

Philosophers have measured mountains,  
 Fathom'd the depths of seas, of states, and kings;  
 Walk'd with a staffe to heav'n, and traced fountains:  
 But there are two vast, spacious things,  
 The which to measure it doth more behove;  
 Yet few there are that sound them—Sinne and Love.  
 (Herbert, *The Agonie*)

I cannot remember ever having seen an article in BLACKFRIARS on sin—not sin and Mauriac or Graham Greene, or sin and homosexuality or sin and Jung: just sin. This may very well be due to my own pre-occupations; it is easy enough simply not to notice an article which doesn't seem to offer anything to one's immediate structure of interests. But even then, it may be, this inadvertence would not I feel be untypical. If the Catholic intelligentsia today is very conscious of having moved, and having to move still further, from a Catholicism almost wholly

<sup>7</sup>I take this from the appendix, 'St Bernard et l'amour courtois', in *La théologie mystique de Saint Bernard*, Paris, 1934.