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Playing or Healing: Perspectives on the Game of Love

Is love a game or a sickness? A sordid tale or a vainglorious recount? How does the experience change the way characters view love? In this essay, I will be answering these questions by assessing the values of the characters in three works that we read for class: *The Art of Courtly Love* by Andreas Capellanus, *The Knight of the Cart* by Chrétien de Troyes, and *The Shepherdess* by Christine de Pizan. Several recurrent values in these three texts include the ideal of love, gender roles, mercy, chivalry, and dedication. These values show us what the characters hold dear to their hearts in how they share their experiences with their audience.

The ideal of love is portrayed in *The Art of Courtly Love* as an obtainable and self-bettering goal. Capellanus notes this on page 2: “O what a wonderful thing is love, which makes a man shine with so man virtues and teaches everyone, no matter who he is, so many good traits of character.” Whether it is realistic or not, the ideal of love is the main topic of this work of rhetoric, and as Capellanus continues to describe the process of courtship and love, the reader finds that the ways of the heart and of the tongue have altered little since the thirteenth century. So how does one find themselves to be in love? This question is explored in *The Shepherdess* and played out in *The Knight of the Cart*; the characters in these texts act out their romantic impulses and embody within their characters strong values that bring the text to life. With the ideal of love as the driving force for these stories, values that aid or inhibit the stories from showing the characters’ true nature appear.

Before values may be attributed to characters within these stories, an essential topic of gender roles must first be addressed. Throughout *The Art of Courtly Love*, the author advises and roleplays through the position of a man. The female view on courtly love is seldom involved in any of the encouraging advances; only the male perception of her reaction to these advances is clearly noted. Capellanus consistently uses phrases like “Now let a man of the middle class [do this] (36)” and “If a man of the middle class seeks the love of [this type of woman] (53)” to display his philosophies on love. *The Knight of the Cart* carries a similar theme of male narration and “knight in shining armor” type of glorification as seen on pages 1 through 3 of the PDF. Kay says about the queen, “Hand her over to me now... There is nothing to fear. I shall bring her back perfectly safe and happy.” Kay demonstrates his willingness to rescue the castle’s people from the enemy by using the queen as ransom. From the beginning, this act of chivalry places a standard throughout the story of how women are seen and treated: as a prize to be patronized and obtained.

The Shepherdess demonstrates a different view of a love story: it addresses it from a female’s perspective. The voice of the narrator changes how we view the actors in the story. Pizan prologues her story with “I beg all those who will see my little writings, that they may overlook the defects of my learning in view of my person and take everything with a good end in mind and a pure intention... (45).” She continues on the next page with “I, of little wisdom... (46).” Pizan characterizes a submissive tone of voice that women use. The different voices of these two characters - one male, one female - sets the stage for the values each story will portray.

Status is one of the first values that each story characterizes. Within *The Shepherdess*, we find women in positions of labor and servitude. While they are still objectified, they are woven into the story as much less promiscuous than the women in *The Knight of the Cart*. Women are

viewed like the sheep they herd: Pizan's description of her role as a shepherdess encompasses the way men in the story might describe their role in Pizan's life. "I was an expert in the profession of shepherding; to take care of the lambs in the huts, to put hay into the manger... (47)." Pizan continues to describe her tasks as a shepherdess in-depth. She is describing her status as a shepherdess, objectifying the sheep she cares for because she loves them. Unconsciously, she is also painting a picture of how the noble knight in her love story viewed her.

How the knights view women in need of salvation changes little between *The Shepherdess* and *The Knight of the Cart*. While the main plot of the latter is a story of salvation and gallantry, we can dig deeper into the story to see how the characters portray their values of status. For Sir Gawain, the honor of rescuing the queen was far greater than the shame of riding in a cart (lines 304-463). Between lines 1443 and 1607, the knights converse about dueling locations to settle matters of love. For the characters of these knights, their value in the ability to rescue women contributes to a large part of their perceived status.

While maintaining a sense of hierarchy and status, the knights in *The Knight of the Cart* also exemplify "honorable values" like mercy and kindness, as stated in rule XVIII of *The Art of Courtly Love*, "Good character alone makes any man worthy of love (185)." Knights in the former work show compassion on their enemies by quoting the love that God shows them: "'For God's sake and my own, have mercy on me, I beg you.' 'As God loves me,' he replied, 'I have always shown mercy to anyone who shamed me if he seeks mercy from me in the name of God.' (lines 873-950)." The knights were put into situations of peril because of the status that they sought to achieve, and in this circumstance, weaned themselves out of them by pleading for human decency and calling on a shared belief in God. However, we must ask a

question: is this true compassion that they show genuine, or is it an act from a premonition of a “good character” that the knights believe they must reach to obtain a certain status?

The characterization of qualities such as mercy and kindness leads us to ask this question in both *The Knight of the Cart* and *The Shepherdess*. Pizan’s description of her lover Paris in *The Shepherdess* shows us these qualities in him: “He was handsome, friendly and gentle, pleasant to everyone... he was courtly and pleasing, skillful and considerate (55).” These characteristics of Paris as Pizan describes him make him out to be of high moral status.

However, the previous question arises again, but in a different form, when Pizan’s friend asks:

“But even if he surpasses all others, what good is it to you who will always remain a shepherdess? The more valor there is in him, the less he will love you... It would be better... to love someone on a lower level rather than aiming so high that one will eventually be despised (54).”

In this situation, the characteristics that Pizan sees in Paris - handsome, friendly, gentle, pleasant - prove to be “red flags” for her friend because these raise Paris’ status even higher than it is already. Paris is a knight of noble birth, and the good characteristics that he shows brings him to a higher level that Pizan’s friend thinks she may not be able to achieve. Even if she can capture the love of Paris, Pizan may never succeed in holding onto it because of her low status as a shepherdess.

In *The Knight of the Cart*, the knights seem to perform good deeds to reach a certain status. In *The Shepherdess*, the knight Paris is held in high esteem by Pizan because of the acts he does. From both of these stories, we see two different perspectives: the “performer’s” perspective (the male perspective) and the “onlooker’s” perspective (the female perspective.) These perspectives stem from rule XXV from *The Art of Courtly Love*: “A true lover considers

nothing good except what he thinks will please his beloved (185).” By analyzing the “good deeds” and acts that stem from virtuous characteristics from both of these sources, we’re able to see that apparently, “good deeds” do pay off in the doer’s favor. These characteristics work both ways: status and virtuosity are determined in part by good deeds performed, and a virtuous person’s status is elevated in the eyes of his peers and onlookers.

While virtuosity plays a part in the status of the knights from these stories, another aspect of the ideal of love is the characterization of chivalry. This virtue was expected at the time that these works were written. We can see this simply from the list of thirty-one rules from *The Art of Courtly Love* that guide a lover in how to act out his romances. The expectations of romance and courtly love were high, and these expectations played out in many aspects of the stories. For example, in *The Knight of the Cart*, we can find instances in which the story follows rules from *The Art of Courtly Love*. Rule V states “That which a lover takes against the will of his beloved has no relish (184).” This exemplifies the ideal of consent, which remains a virtue of basic human decency to this day. Between lines 1126 and 1289 of *The Knight of the Cart*, we see this virtue played out. Another virtue is characterized through rule III: “No one can be bound by a double love (184).” This is played out on page 9 of the PDF of *The Art of Courtly Love*: “His heart did not move out to her because all of his attention was focused elsewhere.” The virtue and characterization of chivalry, we find, is not bound by status or the ideal of love that a certain character might hold; instead, it is bound by the ideas and virtues of the time in which the stories take place and the decency, love, and dedication that the knights hold for their beloveds.

Beyond mercy and chivalry, which are both characteristics that were expected and revered in the time, the characterization of dedication springs out as a virtue that is held much more personal to the characters. For example, in *The Shepherdess*, Pizan takes her role of caring

for her sheep seriously: “Nothing mattered to me but the care of my sheep (47)” and “I grew up without a single day off from my work of being a shepherdess, which I liked.” These statements on the same page speak volumes about Pizan’s dedication to her occupation, and this dedication even caused her to scorn the love that other youth showed for each other: “...although I saw my friends having fun with their dear boyfriends in the fields, no one could move my heart to love him and to learn another way of life than the one I had learnt (47).” Pizan’s dedication to her sheep and her single way of life show us her potential for dedication to other areas of her life. However, I hesitate to pull her dedication to her job into an example of the way she could be dedicated in her love life. After all, Pizan’s main point on page 47 was to share with her audience her passion for her chosen career and her dedication to independence. This love story resonates with a certain audience of females, and rightly so, perhaps to teach them a lesson: those who are dedicated to their independence and life goals should not push aside their dreams for a fleeting love, as Pizan did. However, without Pizan’s affair of the heart, we would not be able to read between the lines of what she narrates to uncover the underlying and perhaps threatening meaning of her story.

Pizan’s ideal of love is a far cry from the ideal of love discussed in *The Art of Courtly Love*: “an obtainable and self-bettering goal” as I stated in my second paragraph. Pizan views love as something that would weigh her down and, as she states, “undoes all good intentions - whether weak or strong - with his [love’s] great power (47).” This goes back to my previous discussion about gender roles; the view from which we see the story of love changes our opinion about it. However, the audience of these works must keep in mind that Pizan was betrayed by her lover while in *The Knight of the Cart*, the male characters sought to be rewarded for their efforts by receiving the affections of women. Would the view that these characters hold about

their ideal of love change if their experiences about it were different? We see an example of this on page 26 of *The Knight of the Cart* when the king addressed the queen about Lancelot's dedication to her: "What? Lady, what has taken control of your heart? ... To be certain, you have done this man a grave injustice. Consider the service he [Lancelot] has done you (lines 3919-3996)." The queen responds to this with "Sir, to be honest, he wasted his time." This conversation shows the pride that Lancelot and even the king had taken in Lancelot's behavior to win the queen's admiration and that the queen held to disregard the male pursuit.

In *The Knight of the Cart*, the fixation on the ideals of love appears to be a game; a mysterious one with guidelines as outlined in *The Art of Courtly Love*. In *The Shepherdess*, however, we begin to see the sad results of this "game" on the heart if the game of love is played solely for the accumulation of status and praise. The knights in *The Knight of the Cart* receive praise for their advances while Pizan in *The Shepherdess* gets a broken heart and a "sickness (47)." The "rules of the game" as set out in *The Art of Courtly Love* describe the practical process of courtship and love, which have changed little since the thirteenth century when it was written, and after a full analysis of these texts, the audience can see that the ways of the heart and tongue have changed little.

Whether realistic or not, the ideal of love is portrayed by the values characterized in these three works. *The Art of Courtly Love* outlines guidelines for courtship; *The Knight of the Cart* addresses courtship and courtly love from a knight's perspective, and *The Shepherdess* shows a disenchanted female perspective on the "game" of love. The values of gender roles, status, mercy, chivalry, and dedication are all characterized by these three works to reveal the ideals of love that are held within each of them.

Sources

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