

Love seems a simple word, but what it signifies cannot be pinned down in any single definition. None the less love in its various guises is of perennial interest, and much can be learned about a culture by observing its attitudes towards love. Such observation often brings surprises. C.S. Lewis, writing about courtly love, has put it well. "It seems - or it seemed to us till lately - a natural thing that love (under certain conditions) should be regarded as a noble and ennobling passion: it is only if we imagine ourselves trying to explain this doctrine to Aristotle, Virgil, St. Paul, or the author of Beowulf, that we become aware how far from natural it is." (C.S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love, p. 3)

During the High Middle Ages there appeared a view of love that remained central in western literature and thought for centuries, and which is not yet quite dead. Romances remain popular, and some still believe in the principle of ladies first. One expression of this attitude towards love is found in the three books of Andreas Capellanus, composed around 1200, and often referred to as the De Arte Honestae Amandi. The whole work is fascinating, and reveals much about mediaeval attitudes on various topics. A few excerpts may suggest something of its flavour.

The book begins logically with a definition of what Andreas means by amor. It is an innate passion arising from the sight of and excessive thought about the form of the opposite sex, and which causes a person to desire above all else to enjoy another's embraces and to fulfill completely the commands of love according to mutual desire. This love, then, is clearly physical, but it is not unbridled or uninhibited lust. Here, as in religion, there are commands, praecepta, and they are strict. One regulation defines the persons who may rightly be loved.

There can be love only between persons of different sex: two of the same sex are completely unsuited for the mutual exchange of love or for carrying out its natural acts. Other limitations are set by age: a man after sixty or a woman after fifty can indeed have physical relations, but the pleasure cannot lead to love since natural heat, calor naturalis, begins to lose its force, there are numerous attacks of different ailments, and in any case the elderly have no real enjoyments in the world save food and drink. There are limitations in learly life too: a female before twelve and a male before fourteen cannot fight in the army of love. This is old Roman law and expression, but the chaplain asserts his own view that a male cannot be a true lover before eighteen. Until then he lacks real commitment and is unreliable in all respects - nulla in homine constantia viget, sed in omnibus variabilis reperitur. The fire of love, however, is kindled earlier in women.

Since love is aroused by the sight of the form of the opposite sex, it is prevented by blindness, for without sight the soul cannot be led to the necessary excessive thought, immoderata cogitatio, about another's form. Love that arose before the onset of blindness may however persist. Excessive desire is also disqualified, for those so afflicted are too easily distracted from one object to another, and are forgetful of and ungrateful to those formerly loved. This is like the love of shameless dogs, or even asses, and such men lack the reasoning power that distinguishes humans from animals.

A disqualification surprising to some modern readers is marriage. The point arises more than once, but is most clearly made by that expert judge in the courts of love, the Countess Marie of Champagne. Married people cannot love each other, for love must be freely offered, and in marriage there is an obligation for the parties to satisfy each

other: in marriage, too, there can be no true jealousy, while the accepted rule is that there is no love without jealousy. Elsewhere Andreas notes that a married couple may have affection, even excessive affection, but not love, because by definition love is a desire for stolen and secret embraces, while married persons cannot steal what they already possess.

Here we see one of the central problems of the cult of love in this society: it is not only outside of but also opposed to marriage. The church itself was divided on the issue of love and marriage, although of course marriage itself was a sacrament. One view, widely held, was expressed by Peter the Lombard, when he quoted an allegedly Pythagorean sentence: any man who is a passionate lover of his own wife is an adulterer. When such sentiments were influential it is perhaps not surprising that a counter-religion of courtly love appeared.

This love was indeed courtly: elegant, refined, not for the masses. One of the most revealing and least attractive passages in Andreas deals with the love of the peasant. Love, he says, can hardly arise among them, for they are simply led to sex by natural drives, impetus naturae, like horses or mules. For them continual toil with hoe or plow is enough, and if on rare occasions one of them is smitten by love's darts it would be inappropriate to train him in the arts of love. To do so might cause our fields to lie untilled. If however one of Andreas's audience should be attracted to a peasant woman he should not hesitate to use force to gain his ends, violento potiri amplexa. So much for women's rights, and human rights, on this view!