

The Courtly Love Tradition



- Courtly love is a philosophy of devotion and a code of behaviour that emerged among the French aristocracy in the eleventh century, and became popular during the Middle Ages in Europe and England (*Romeo and Juliet* was written by William Shakespeare in the sixteenth century, 1594-96).
- The code of courtly love centred around a tormented male lover who worshipped an idealized lady. Love struck at first sight, this form of love was thought to carry with it distinct physical symptoms and intense emotional turmoil. Shakespeare expertly captures the ecstasy and the excitement of young love, along with the anguish and pain felt by the lovers (*Romeo and Juliet*) when it all goes wrong.
- Lovers whose desires were left unrequited (not returned or reciprocated) were thought to suffer from sleeplessness, loss of appetite, sudden changes in mood, and a paleness of complexion. These lovers were also believed to experience feelings of helplessness, bewilderment and depression, often expressed by sighing or moaning. **Example:** “Bid a sick man in sadness make his will./Ah, word ill urged to one that is so ill:/In sadness, cousin, I do love a woman.” (I.i.196-198)
- Romeo shows many of the symptoms associated with the torment of unfulfilled courtly love in the early scenes of the play, all associated with his love for Rosaline.

- The flowery language in which Romeo speaks of his love for Rosaline emphasizes the hollowness of these declarations. It seems as though Romeo is merely in love with the abstract idea of love.

Example: “Love is smoke made with the fume of sighs;/Being purg’d, a fire sparkling in lovers’ eyes;/Being vexed, a sea nourish’d with lovers’ tears.” (I.i.184-186)
- When Romeo meets Juliet, he expresses his love in different terms. The language of the initial exchanges between the future lovers shows a purity and a passion that is arguably not evident in Romeo’s earlier expressions of his love for Rosaline.
- The dialogue of their first meeting expresses a sincere devotion and harmony between the two lovers. To explore the uncertainty and infatuation associated with new love, Shakespeare employs a great deal of imagery to express the initial pangs of desire as well as the hesitation involved in sharing these feelings with the object of one’s affection. Most notably and masterfully used when the star-crossed lovers first meet at the Capulet’s feast, an extended religious metaphor involving lips and hands is passed back and forth between Romeo and Juliet in their introductory conversation.

Example: Romeo to Juliet: “If I profane with my unworhiest hand/This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this,/My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand/To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.” (I.v.92-95)

Juliet to Romeo: “Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,/Which mannerly devotion shows in this,/For saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch, And palm to palm is holy palmers’ kiss.” (I.v.96-99)
- As the play progresses, the conventional and seemingly artificial language becomes less evident as the lovers mature and learn to express genuine feelings for one another.

Example: “Come, death, and welcome! Juliet wills it so. How is’t, my soul? Let’s talk, it is not day.” (III.v.24-25)