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Love and Devotion

Chivalry and Sexuality

HAVE YOU EVER WANTED TO FALL IN LOVE? Have you ever felt guilty about sex? Then there's a good chance that you have been raised in a culture descended from medieval Christian Europe.

We live in a society in which people expect marriages to be based on love. Hardly anyone thinks an arranged marriage is a good idea. We learn as children to begin the process of choosing a mate in an elaborate agenda of dating and self-examination. We learn to distinguish between infatuation, liking, loving, falling in love, being in love, and numerous other expressions. We have more phrases for love than Eskimos have for snow.

Our society makes a religion of romantic love. Romance is the daily bread of popular magazines, novels, television, and films. Popular music consists almost entirely of love songs. A movie without a love story is a formula for empty theaters.

People expect a lot from romance. They expect it to heal all wounds, mount all obstacles, save all marriages. Our society places pretty heavy demands on the emotional involvement of two people in love.

We call it love, but we mean some very specific, and some very extraordinary,

ideas, most of which developed in the codes of chivalry in the European Middle Ages. We mean romantic love. If we were to lay out its principles, which we never do, they would look something like the following. Love is entirely involuntary. It just happens, usually when we are least prepared, as if by magic. It can be triggered by a first glance, the sound of a voice, a smell. When it occurs, it transforms us, as if we swallowed a magic potion. It is chemical. We are never the same. Love is the communication of two hearts. It is immediate and intense, but vulnerable to the conventions and deceptions of the world. The world is against it, continually placing obstacles in the way. True love can be recognized by its ability to overcome these obstacles. The deepest loves prove themselves in the continual struggle against obstacles. Often the obstacles are so great that the lovers die. Love is too perfect for an imperfect world. True love ends in death.

We have all known people (ourselves excluded, of course) who have acted according to these principles: people who have preferred the passion, the struggle, and the obstacles; people who seemed always to choose the wrong person and persist in the struggle almost for its own sake; people who prefer the quest to the attainment of love; people who prefer the magic to the reality.

When we wonder about the high rate of divorce in our society, we might ask about the high expectations for marriage based on romantic love. Romantic love may be a pretty fleeting emotional base for an institution as serious and permanent as marriage. Do we desire incompatible ends when we ask for both deeply personal emotional experience and long-term institutional stability too? Can the kind of love we have learned serve our institutions as well as ourselves?

In order to answer some of these questions, we will explore the origins of our idea of romantic love. Where did the idea of romantic love come from? How did it develop? Perhaps the first question is this: What, after all, was the idea of romantic love doing in Christian Europe?

THE ARABS AND GREEK PHILOSOPHY

How was it that Christian culture, uneasy with sex and often hostile to women, developed the idea of romantic love that still seduces us? A classic, still compelling answer to that question was provided fifty years ago by Denis de Rougemont in *Love in the Western World*. He argued that the roots of romantic love were in Greek philosophical idealism channeled into Islamic mysticism, especially the tradition called Sufism, as learned and adapted by Christian heretics in southern France at the beginning of the twelfth century. Now, what does all of that mean?

Long after Christians lost touch with Greek culture, the Arabs retained an interest in and knowledge of the Greek classics. They were familiar with the tradition of idealism that had been cultivated by Plato and the Platonists. Some found the ideas of Platonic idealism particularly useful in understanding and spreading the new Islamic religion.

For Plato, the world was an illusion, a shadow play formed by a source of light too bright for human eyes. We exist, Plato said, as if in a cave, taking the flickering shadows in our cave as the ultimate reality, unaware that the real world begins outside. We spend all of our time absorbed in the reflections of things, and we never realize it.

Islamic thinkers found this Platonic idealism a rich source of ideas to suggest the power of God and the nature of the religious experience. Islam was, more than anything else, an extreme, uncompromising monotheism. "There is no god but God," the Muslim says over and over again. "God will bar Paradise to anyone who associates anything with God," the Koran says (V:72). Christian ideas of Jesus as the son of God, of the trinity, and of saints were thought by many Muslims to smack of pagan polytheism. Muslim tradition opposed pictures of God out of concern that the ignorant would worship the image rather than the reality of God. Platonic philosophy provided metaphors for this radical monotheism, especially among the cultivated upper class.

In extreme form it led to a philosophy called gnosticism. The Gnostics were religious mystics. They accepted Plato's sense of philosophic wisdom as illumination, *gnosis*. They believed that the soul could be liberated from the darkness and falsehood of the material body by an act of illumination. The world, they believed, was like Plato's cave. Truth lay behind the appearances and in the enlightened soul.

Sects like the Gnostics existed throughout the Mediterranean and Byzantine world, especially in the third to sixth centuries A.D., influencing the development of Christianity and Islam. Persian Manichaeism was a similar movement that affected those religions.

THE LOVE OF THE MUSLIM SUFI

The Muslims most influenced by gnosticism, more influential than numerous, were called Sufis. As did other religious mystics, they sought an intimate personal experience of God. This was a desire necessarily full of difficulty. Extreme monotheism emphasized the distance between God and human beings, making it seem more difficult for humans to understand or communicate with God. But the feeling of extreme separation from God also led some sensitive souls to strive even harder for contact with God.

One of the earliest of these Sufis was a woman named Rabi'a (d. 801) of Basra. We have only fragments of her poetry, but there are a number of stories told about her that capture the Sufi idea of love. According to one story, she once ran through the streets carrying a torch in one hand and a jug of water in the other. When asked why, she said she was going to burn the gardens of paradise and douse the flames of hell so that no one again would worship God out of fear of hell or desire for paradise, but only for the love of God himself. Another story was told that when a number of devout Muslims asked for her hand in marriage, she declined,

saying "the contract of marriage is for those who have a worldly existence. But in my case, I have ceased to exist in this world. I exist only in God and am altogether His. I live in the shadow of His command. The marriage contract must be asked for from Him, not from me."

This sense of extreme closeness to God got some devout Sufis in deep trouble with orthodox authorities. Some orthodox Muslims held that it was not even possible for the believer to "love" God because finite creatures can love only other finite creatures, and God is infinite.

But Sufis were mystics: they sought to lose themselves in God. Bayazid Bistami (d. 874) explained this experience in the following way: "I gazed upon God with the eye of truth and said to Him: 'Who is this?' He said: 'This is neither I nor other than I. There is no god but I.' Then He changed me out of my identity into His Selfhood. I communed with Him with the tongue of His Grace. And he said: 'I am thine through thee; there is no god but Thou.'"¹

This kind of dramatic reversal of Islamic creed sprung from sincere religious piety, to be sure. But it was heresy nonetheless. Not only did it deify man instead of God, but it led to personal emotional excesses and a disregard for the *shari'ah*, or sacred law of the Muslim community.

Some Sufis were able to avoid public scandal, but others eagerly threw themselves into controversy. One of the most famous Sufis, al-Hallaj (d. 922), wandered throughout the Islamic world telling the common people to open themselves to the love of God. The immediacy of God's love, al-Hallaj taught, was infinitely preferable to rituals and formal obedience to the *shari'ah*. Even prayer, al-Hallaj wrote, "is Unbelief Once one knows." When he began to attract followers in high places at Baghdad, the seat of the Abbasid caliphate, he was imprisoned as a heretic and brutally executed in 922.

MASKING LOVE OF GOD

In order to avoid the fate of al-Hallaj and other Sufi martyrs, Sufi poets adopted various strategies to disguise their deep feelings of longing and love for God. They pretended to address their declarations of love to other people, rather than to God. They used conventional names for lovers or actual names of friends, in order to disguise their love affairs with God. They spoke of the intoxication of wine when they meant union with God. In many different ways they masked the source of their passion. As de Rougemont explained it:

Arab mystics all insist that the *secret* of divine Love must be kept. They constantly complain of prying persons who want to find out about the mysteries, but not to take part in them with a whole-hearted faith. To somebody's hasty question: "What is Sufism?" al-Hallaj replies: "Do not turn

on Us: see our finger which has already been stained with the blood of lovers."²

According to de Rougemont, the poetry of the Sufi mystics attracted Christian heretics in southern France, called Cathars, who had been raised on Sufism, gnosticism, and Manichaeism. It appealed to a number of Cathar (or Albigensian) beliefs: that the spirit was incorruptible, but the body corrupt; that marriage was a worldly compromise that true love disdained; and that the purest love was utter and abject devotion. These beliefs, according to de Rougemont, account for the linking of love and death in the Arab and European traditions. "Whoever does not die of his love," the poet Ibn al Faridh wrote, "is unable to live by it."³

LOVING MASKS OF GOD

If the world of appearances is a mask of God, one can worship God by loving the appearances as certainly as one can by attempting to transcend them. In a classical account of the loves, ideas, and mythologies of appearances, called *The Masks of God*, Joseph Campbell takes issue with de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World*. The courtly love poems of the European troubadours and minstrels were not products of gnostic denial, according to Campbell. They were, rather, affirmations of life, experience, sensuality, and nature. Campbell writes that while

according to the Gnostic view, . . . nature is corrupt and the lure of the senses [is] to be repudiated, in the poetry of the troubadours . . . nature in its noblest moment—the realization of love—is an end and glory in itself; and the senses, ennobled and refined by courtesy and art, temperance, loyalty and courage, are the guides to this realization.⁴

While the religious mystic attempted to lose the self in the divinity, romantic love was an assertion of personal choice, Campbell argues. While the mystics celebrated a communal, indiscriminate love feast (*agape*) in which they "loved" all mankind, the troubadours sang the personal love (*amor*) of the individual's eye and heart. Campbell gives an example from one of the great troubadours, Guiraut de Borneilh (c. 1138–1200):

So, through the eyes love attains the heart:
For the eyes are the scouts of the heart,
And the eyes go reconnoitering
For what it would please the heart to possess.
And when they are in full accord
And firm, all three, in the one resolve,

*At that time, perfect love is born
From what the eyes have made welcome to the heart.⁵*

This too had already been developed in Arabic culture. It was called *adab*.

ADAB AND THE DOVE'S NECKLACE

"The senses, ennobled and refined by courtesy and art"—Campbell's description of troubadour love can stand as a definition of Arabic *adab*. Marshall Hodgson, the historian of Islam, called *adab* "the worldly culture of the polite classes."

While the Muslim courtier, administrator, or intelligent landowner paid due honor to the aspirations of the professional Muslims, most of their efforts were devoted to living out a very different pattern from what the latter approved. Their etiquette, their conversation and fine arts and literature, their ways of using poetry and music and even religion, and their whole social pattern of position and privilege, with its economic and political institutions and its politics, formed a distinct set of genteel standards, prevailing among Muslims and non-Muslims of wealth and position. These standards, this *adab*, spread from one end of the Islamic domains to the other; fashions would most commonly be created in Baghdad, the most important seat of government, and would be eagerly adopted everywhere else.⁶

In the Abbasid court at Baghdad, in the courts of Egypt, North Africa, and Spain, the culture of *adab* provided new "genteel standards" for life and love. These cities and courts throughout Islam provided a leisure class that had the time and inclination to develop romantic love.

One of the great exponents of, and commentators on, this culture of *adab* was Ibn Hazm (994–1064), Spanish scholar and vizier (financial chief and head of the government) to the caliphs in Valencia and his native Córdoba. His greatest work was a massive study of comparative religion that examined the contradictions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam from a simple monotheistic, commonsensical perspective. His most popular work, however, is a study of "love and lovers" called *The Dove's Necklace*, which shows us the roots of European courtly love. He reveals to us a world in which "falling in love" has become a fine, but popular, art.

Love has certain signs which the intelligent man quickly detects and the shrewd man readily recognizes. Of these the first is the brooding gaze: the eye is the wide gateway of the soul, the scrutinizer of its secrets, conveying its most private thoughts and giving expression to its deepest-hid feelings. You will see the lover gazing at the beloved unblinkingly; his eyes follow the loved one's every moment, withdrawing as he withdraws, inclining as he inclines, just as the chameleon's stare shifts with the shifting of the sun. . . .

Love for a thing renders you blind and deaf. If the lover could so contrive

that in the place where he happens to be there should be no talk of anything but his beloved, he would never leave that spot for any other in the whole world. . . . Weeping is a well-known sign of love, except that men differ very greatly from one another in this particular. Some are ready weepers; their tear-ducts are always overflowing, and their eyes respond immediately to their emotions, the tears rolling down at a moment's notice. Others are dry-eyed and barren of tears; to this category I myself belong. . . . I indeed marvel profoundly at all those who pretend to fall in love at first sight; I cannot easily prevail upon myself to believe their claims, and prefer to consider such love as merely a kind of lust. . . .

Know now—may God exalt you!—that love exercises an effective authority, a decisive sovereignty over the soul; its commands cannot be opposed; its ordinances may not be flouted; its rule is not to be transgressed; it demands unwavering obedience, and against its dominion there is no appeal. Love untwists the firmest plaits and looses the tightest strands; it dissolves that which is most solid, undoes that which is most firm; it penetrates the deepest recesses of the heart, and makes lawful things most strictly forbidden.⁷

Many of the elements that later became the subject of troubadour poetry are present in Arab *adab*: the importance of eye and heart that Campbell alludes to, the authority of love and submission to it, irrational behavior, and love at first sight. One of the differences, you might have noticed from the above, is that the Arab cultivation of love was not gender-specific. It focused men's eyes on young boys as well as on girls. This was especially true of the sophisticated cities of Spain. (Córdoba was the largest city in Western Europe in the ninth and tenth centuries.) This was a world where kings, like al-Mutamid, the eleventh-century king of Seville, wrote love poems to their male subjects: "I made him my slave, but the coyness of his glance has made me his prisoner. . . ."⁸

TROUBADOURS AND LADIES

Islam was a man's world, even though it had roots in the matriarchal clans of Medina. *Adab* was an urban, an urbane, style. Occitania (today's southern half of France) was a rural world in which women were able to inherit property and hold fiefs of land; at the beginning of the tenth century women held the counties of Auvergne, Beziers, Carcassonne, Limousin, Montpellier, Nîmes, Périgord, and Toulouse. Often women were the effective rulers of a lord's vassals, serfs, and tenants when the lord was away, as in the period of the Crusades.

The Crusades not only acquainted Europeans with a more sophisticated urban culture (some of which had already been discovered in the settlers from Spain), they also frequently put returning knights in a position of questionable utility, dependent on a woman.

The poetry of courtly love began in Occitania in the early twelfth century, in

the years immediately following the first Crusade. The first troubadour was Guilhem de Poitou, who began to write in 1102, just after returning from the Crusade. Although himself the seventh count of Poitiers and the ninth duke of Aquitaine, he sounded a note of subservience to women that struck a chord among his listeners and reached a crescendo in following years.

Ibn Hazm had written a chapter called "The Submissiveness the Lover Owes His Lady," but this became one of the main themes in the poetry of Guilhem. "No man has ever had the cunning to imagine what it is like," Guilhem wrote of obedience to a lady. "Such joy cannot find its like." He imagined homage to a lady as a source of mystic joy.⁹

One historian has a simple explanation for this dramatic role reversal:

Most of the troubadours who followed Guilhem IX were men of modest or even humble origins. Many of them . . . depended for their living on the generosity of wealthy patrons. They were court poets, responsible for entertaining the large crowds that frequented the homes of Occitania's elite.

The model for their lady—the object of their eternal, abject passions—was the wife of their employer. . . . The wife of the *senhor* was rich and powerful. If her husband was away on military escapades or on Crusade, she was his replacement; even when he was at home it was often she who made cultural decisions.¹⁰

The lady of the manor was both means and inspiration for knights aspiring to court. Service to the lady was both method and metaphor for the knight's elevation.

*Good lady, I ask you for nothing
but to take me for your servant,
for I will serve you as my lord,
whatever wages come my way.¹¹*

This is an odd combination of the economic and emotional, practical and flirtatious, to the modern ear. For one thing, the medieval world made fewer distinctions between such categories. For another, the identity of the "lady" was deliberately ambiguous. The troubadour's song was a performance at court that might tantalize many lords and ladies with its secrets and suggestions. Indeed, like any successful art form, the songs of the troubadours could be exploited to suggest many meanings. The feudal hierarchy could be reinforced with the singer's homage to his lord's lady; the order could be dramatically challenged with the suggestion of less than a "pure love" between lordly lady and lowly knight. Lyrics might suggest adultery or worship of the Virgin Mary, a specific or general love that was real or imagined. "There never was a man so pleasing in a chamber and so savage and excellent in armor," Peire Vidal sang. "Each day I am a better man and purer, for I serve the noblest lady in the world," Arnaut Daniel wrote, more typically.¹²

IN THE SERVICE OF WOMAN

In the twelfth century the courtly love tradition of the troubadours traveled north into France and Germany, and it became a guide to behavior for many young knights.

We are lucky to have the autobiography of one of these romantic knights, a minor noble who was born in Austria about 1200. His name was Ulrich von Lichtenstein, and he called his autobiography, appropriately enough, *In the Service of Woman*.

At an early age Ulrich learned that the greatest honor and happiness for a knight lay in the service of a beautiful and noble woman. He seems to have realized, at least subconsciously, that true love had to be full of obstacles and frustrations in order to be spiritually ennobling. So at the age of twelve Ulrich chose as the love of his life a princess. She was a perfect choice: far above him socially, she was also older than Ulrich and already married. Ulrich managed to become a page in her court so that he could see her and touch the same things that she touched. Sometimes he was even able to steal away to his room with the very water that she had just washed her hands in, and he would secretly drink it.

By the age of seventeen Ulrich had become a knight and took to the countryside to joust in tournaments wearing the lady's colors. Finally after a number of victories, Ulrich gained the courage to ask his niece to call on the lady and tell her that he wanted to be a distant, respectful admirer. The princess would have none of it. She told Ulrich's niece that she was repulsed by Ulrich's mere presence, that he was low class and ugly—especially with that harelip of his. On hearing her reply Ulrich was overjoyed that she had noticed him. He went to have his harelip removed, recuperated for six weeks, and wrote a song to the princess. When the lady heard of this she finally consented to let Ulrich attend a riding party she was having, suggesting even that he might exchange a word with her if the opportunity arose: Ulrich had his chance. He was next to her horse as she was about to dismount, but he was so tongue-tied that he couldn't say a word. The princess thought him such a boor that she pulled out a lock of his hair as she got off her horse.

Ulrich returned to the field for the next three years. Finally the lady allowed him to joust in her name, but she wouldn't part with as much as a ribbon for him to carry. He sent her passionate letters and songs that he had composed. She answered with insults and derision. In one letter the princess derided Ulrich for implying that he had lost a finger while fighting for her when he had actually only wounded it slightly. Ulrich responded by having a friend hack off the finger and send it to the lady in a green velvet case. The princess was evidently so impressed with the power that she had over Ulrich that she sent back a message that she would look at it every day—a message that Ulrich received as he had the others, "on his knees, with bowed head and folded hands."

More determined than ever to win his lady's love, Ulrich devised a plan for a spectacular series of jousts, in which he challenged all comers on a five-week trip. He broke eight lances a day in the service of his princess. After such a showing, the princess sent word that Ulrich might at last visit her, but that he was to come disguised as a leper and sit with the other lepers who would be there begging. The princess passed him, said nothing, and let him sleep that night out in the rain. The following day she sent a message to Ulrich that he could climb a rope to her bedroom window. There she told him that she would grant no favors until he waded across the lake; then she dropped the rope so that he fell into the stinking moat.

Finally, after all of this, the princess said that she would grant Ulrich her love if he went on a Crusade in her name. When she learned that he was making preparations to go, she called it off and offered her love. After almost fifteen years Ulrich had proved himself to the princess.

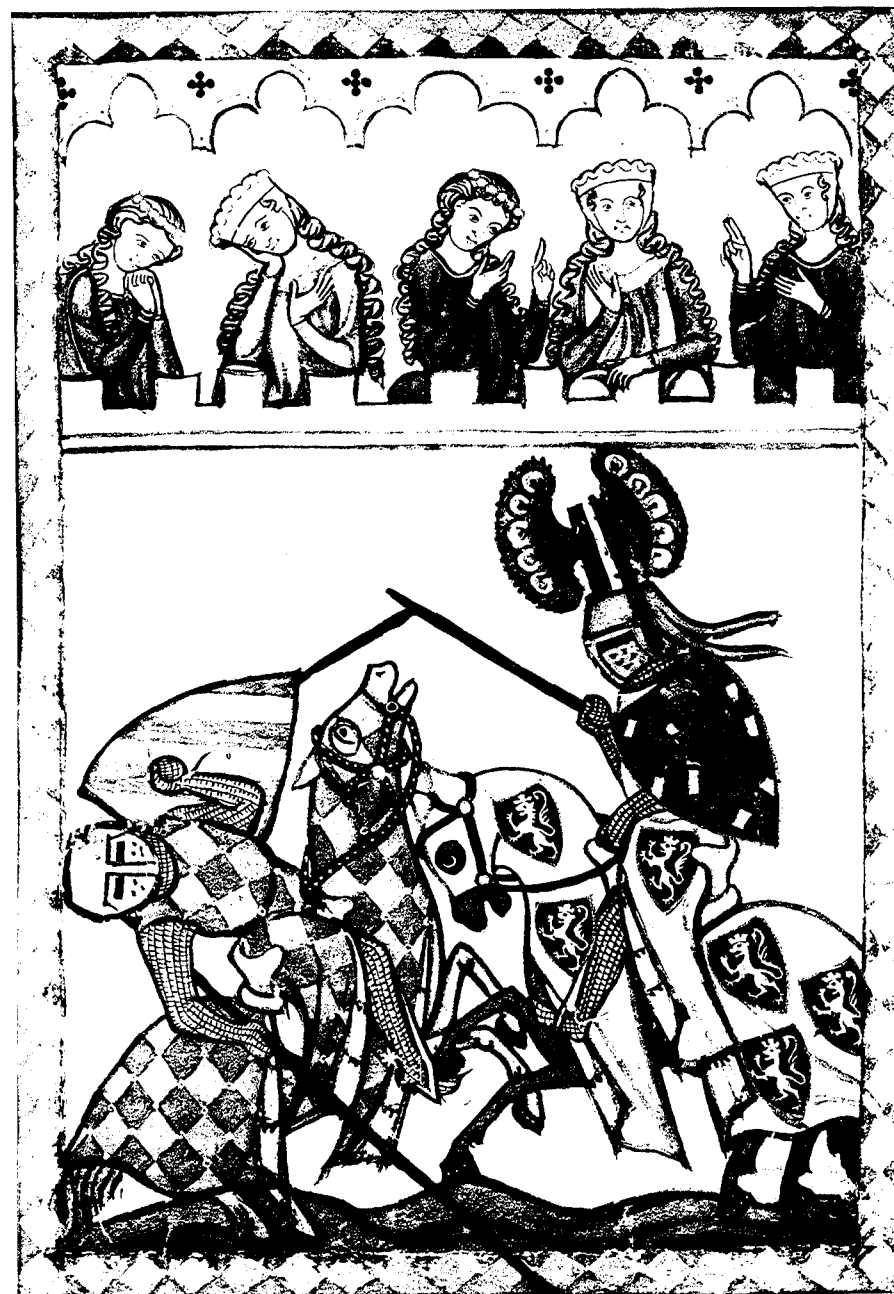
What was the love that she offered? Ulrich doesn't say, but it probably consisted of kisses, an embrace, and possibly even a certain amount of fondling. Possibly more, but probably not. That was not the point. Ulrich had not spent fifteen years for sex. In fact, Ulrich had not spent fifteen years to win. The quest is what kept him going. His real reward was in the suffering and yearning. Within two years Ulrich was after another perfect lady.

Oh yes. We forgot one thing. Ulrich mentions that in the middle of his spectacular five-week joust, he stopped off for three days to visit the wife and kids. He was married? He was married. He speaks of his wife with a certain amount of affection. She was evidently quite good at managing the estate and bringing up the children. But what were these mundane talents next to the raptures of serving the ideal woman? Love was certainly not a part of the "details of crops, and cattle, fleas and fireplaces, serfs and swamp drainage." In fact, Ulrich might expect that his wife would be proud of him if she knew what he was up to. The love of the princess should make Ulrich so much more noble and esteemed in his wife's eyes.¹³

COURTLY LOVE

The behavior of Ulrich von Lichtenstein reflected in exaggerated form a new idea of love in the West. Historians have called it "courtly love" because it developed in the courts of Europe, where noble ladies and knights of "quality" came together. For the first time since the Greeks a man could idealize a woman, but only if he minimized her sexuality. The evidence is overwhelming that these spiritual affairs would ideally never be consummated.

It is difficult for us to understand how these mature lords and ladies could torture themselves with passionate oaths, feats of endurance, fainting spells when they



This painting from about the year 1300 contains all the elements of love and chivalry: horses, knights, and admiring ladies. (Universitätsbibliothek, Heidelberg)

heard their lover's name or voice, in short the whole repertoire of romance, and then refrain from actually consummating that love. Why did they insist on an ideal of "pure love" that allowed even naked embraces but drew the line at intercourse, which they called "false love"? No doubt the Christian antipathy for sex was part of the problem. Earlier Christian monks had practiced a similar type of *agape*, Christianity had always taught that there was a world of difference between love and lust. The tendency of these Christian men to think of their ladies as replicas of the Virgin Mother also made sex inappropriate, if not outright incestuous.

But these lords and ladies were also making a statement about their "class" or good breeding. They were saying (as did Sigmund Freud almost a thousand years later) that civilized people repress their animal lust. They were distinguishing themselves from the crude peasants and soldiers around them who knew only fornication and whoring and raping. They were cultivating their emotions and their sensitivity, and priding themselves on their self-control. They were privileged (as members of the upper class) to know that human beings were capable of loyalty and love and enjoying beauty without behaving like animals. They were telling each other that they were refined, that they had "class."

The statement that they were making was evidently so new that they suffered unendurable frustration to make it. They adapted to the frustration by savoring the tension and the agony. The more they repressed their natural instincts, the more "civilized" they felt. "They put on finer clothing, started to use handkerchiefs, and began to bathe more often; they practiced genteel discourse and sophisticated argumentation."¹⁴ Sexual repression became part of a whole new style of life: a life of manners.

In contrast to the Greeks, they could afford to let women into their polite, sophisticated, elite company at a level higher than that of paid help. But only a few women could join them, and even these could participate in the game only if they remained perched on pedestals. Men could treat them as living, breathing, thinking human beings, but it was still necessary to idealize them so that both could remain a privileged minority.

Further, despite the new romanticized view of the woman (maybe because of it), wives were just as excluded as they had always been. Noble, uplifting love, genuine romantic love, could not be felt for someone who swept the floor any more than it could be felt by someone whose life was preoccupied with such trivia. The lords and one of their special ladies, Marie, the countess of Champagne, issued the following declaration in 1174:

We declare and we hold as firmly established that love cannot exert its power between two people who are married to each other. For lovers give each other everything freely, under no compulsion of necessity, but married people are in duty bound to give in to each other's desires and deny themselves to each other in nothing.¹⁵

THE COURT OF LOVE

This proclamation was one of many that were made by the "courts of love" that these lords and ladies established in order to settle lovers' quarrels—and to decide for themselves the specifics of the new morality. Some of these trials are summarized by Andreas Capellanus, one of the most famous "judges" of love, in France, in the twelfth century.

One typical case was brought to the court by a knight whose lady found another lover but promised the knight, her first love, that she would return to him if she ever lost her new lover. Accepting this standby role, the knight was asking the court of love to declare that she had lost her lover because she had just married the man.

The queen of France judged this case. She decided in favor of the knight. It was obvious, she said, that the lady had lost her lover when she married him, since it was impossible for love to continue in marriage. The lady, according to the queen, should now love the knight as she had promised.

No court, of course, had the power to legislate feelings; certainly not this voluntary, aristocratic "people's court." But by hearing so many cases, the noble ladies and gentlemen were able to devise rules of behavior that made love more polite than the open warfare that Ovid preached, and the crude brutality that most men practiced.

No one did more to formulate these rules than Andreas Capellanus. Andreas not only summarized the numerous cases that came before the court, but he used these decisions to write a manual of polite, courtly love. He called his influential book *A Treatise on Love and Its Remedy*, a title that indicated his debt to Sappho and the Greek romantic idea of love as a sickness. Andreas, however, did not think that he was advocating a "romantic" idea of love. The word was not even used in his day. He considered himself to be a modern twelfth-century Ovid—merely updating the Roman's *Art of Love*. He called himself Andreas the Lover and, like Ovid, considered himself an expert on all aspects of love.

But Andreas only used the same word as Ovid. The similarity ended there. The "aspects" of love that Andreas taught concerned the loyalty of the lovers, courteous behavior, the spiritual benefits of "pure love," the importance of gentleness, the subservience of the man to his lover, and the duties of courtship. There is none of Ovid's preoccupation with the techniques of seduction. Andreas is not talking about sex. In fact, he clearly advises against consummating the relationship.

Ovid made fun of infatuation and silly emotional behavior, but urged his readers to imitate such sickness in order to get the woman in bed. Andreas valued the passionate emotional attachment that Ovid mocked. Sincerity and honesty were too important to Andreas to dream of trickery, deceit, or pretense. Love, for Andreas, was too noble an emotion, too worthy a pursuit, to be put on like a mask. In short, the Roman had been after sexual gratification; the Christian wanted to refine lives and cleanse souls. They both called it love, but Andreas never seemed to realize that they were not talking the same language.

COURTING AND CAVORTING

Courtly love was not an absolute disaster for Western men and women. It taught men for the first time to concern themselves with the feelings of at least some women. Among Andreas's thirty-one basic rules of courtly love we find such new ideas as the following:

That which a lover takes against the will of his beloved has no relish. . . .

A true lover considers nothing good except what he thinks will please his beloved.¹⁶

In comparison with Ovid's idea of love as sexual conquest, there is a lot to admire here: concern for human feelings, emotional empathy for others, an honest presentation of the self, a distaste for using other people or treating them as sexual objects.

On the other hand, romantic love was an idealized love. The lovers never permitted themselves to really know each other. They fell in love with ideals, not living, breathing human beings. They created myths to feed their passion; these exaggerated images of each other could be maintained only at a distance. They could not allow themselves to come close enough to see the warts or stay long enough to learn the longings and fears of real people. And so they gloried in everything that kept them apart. They chose impossible love objects, demanded impossible loyalties, and preoccupied themselves in the quest. They cut themselves off from other people by convincing themselves there was only one ideal. But more importantly they cut themselves off from the realities of their relationship and the needs of their own bodies. They could work up a degree of feeling, an emotional intensity, that no other people had known—but that passion was based on repression. They could yearn so deeply only because they could not have what they yearned for. The game of passion could be played only under rules of "civilized" politeness, which were repressive enough to insure that their passions would not be abated. In search of the exaltation of the spirit, they renounced the demands of the flesh.

THE TRIUMPH OF ROMANCE

The romantic idea of courtly love spread rapidly throughout the royal courts of Europe after the twelfth century. All of the young gentlemen of the fashionable set learned to view women as objects of honor and esteem. Romances (or romantic stories) were invented of ideal love affairs between knights and ladies. According to one, King Arthur's loyal knight Lancelot falls hopelessly in love with the king's

bride, Guinevere. His love for Guinevere so overwhelms him that he is unable to refuse any of the lady's foolish or demeaning requests: he shows his obedience by falling off his horse for her, and spends all of his energy distinguishing his illicit love, arranging secret meetings, rescuing her from everything, overcoming one obstacle after another.

In another famous romance, a young knight, Tristan, is instructed to bring the lady Iseult to be the bride of his king. Iseult, however, falls madly in love with Tristan when she drinks a love potion by mistake. The rest of the romance describes the feverish attempts of the couple to get together to consummate a love that can end only in death. The romance of Romeo and Juliet, of course, reaches the same conclusion: true love is the complete sacrifice of the self; its passion and ecstasy are too much for this world; its perfection is death.

The romantic story has become one of the most popular types of literature in the modern Western world since the twelfth century. Many of the same old stories have been revived or updated. But even when the names and situations are changed, the same romantic themes have survived intact. Modern romances still describe "ideal" loves that must overcome impossible obstacles. Lovers are still supposed to be attracted "at first sight," as if they had just swallowed a magical potion. They still are expected to surrender all reason to the "irresistible force" of their love. The fullness of their love is still measured by the extent to which they sacrifice themselves. The most "perfect" loves are still thought to involve passions so intense that they lead the lovers irreversibly to their deaths.

We have all been raised on the same ideas of romance that developed around the twelfth century. We idealize our lovers. We look for the "one and only," expecting some day we will suddenly without warning meet the one person who is best for us. We are sure that we will know when we are in love because we will have "that special feeling" whenever we are near the "special someone." Besides the sweaty palms and quickened heartbeat and other symptoms of love sickness that Sappho described, we are trained to hope that bells will ring and psychedelic lights will flash when we kiss or consummate the love. Love is still for us a world of magic and mystery. And we want to keep it that way. We prefer to romanticize the experience and idealize the beloved, rather than analyze or realistically evaluate either. The fantasies of love still excite us more than the realities of human relationships.

What about sex, someone might ask. If we have kept the "romance" of courtly love, haven't we at least made that romance more sexual than it was in the twelfth century? The answer is probably yes and no.

We still live in a predominantly Christian culture. That means that men still tend to see women as either seductive, corrupting, but exciting Eves or pure, sexless Virgin Mothers, and they feel guilty about loving the first type and childlike in their love of the second type. It is true that Christian men over the last thousand years have concentrated more on Mary than on Eve. They have elevated the status

of women—almost to the point where they view them as equals. But because sex was such an evil to Christians, they have usually elevated women by making them less sexual. We have seen that in the early stages of courtly love the knight or poet could most easily idealize the particular woman who was sexually unattainable or “pure.” This tendency continued during the European Renaissance (fourteenth to sixteenth centuries). Poets like Dante and Petrarch wrote endless lines to women they loved obsessively, but from afar. Both made their love-ideals, Dante’s Beatrice and Petrarch’s Laura, the all-encompassing focus of their lives. Dante’s love for Beatrice became the model for educated Europeans (including Petrarch) for hundreds of years. The poet never spoke to her, nor did he want to. Rather, he was uplifted by the depth of feeling that her presence gave him. Since he probably had never experienced comparable feelings, he thought of Beatrice as a source of spiritual guidance to the love of God. His feelings for Beatrice (which he called love) were considerably greater than anything he felt for his wife or any of his mistresses. Similarly, Petrarch permitted Laura to enrich his soul with her mere image. He never hoped for anything more from his ideal; Laura had eleven children by her husband, and Petrarch had at least two sons by his mistress.

In other societies these lives may have been strange models for people to follow, but in Christian Europe they made some sense. Another Italian of the Renaissance, Castiglione, summarized the new Platonic view of love in a book called *The Courtier*, written around 1500. The lady was loved, according to Castiglione, for her moral virtue as well as her beauty—both of which led the lover to contemplate the divine. Love of the ideal woman was a force that tamed the wild souls of men. “Pure love” could “civilize” men only because it forced them to repress their sexual needs.

In one sense, all that has happened in the last few hundred years is that the ideas of a few upper-class poets in the fourteenth century have become the ideas of almost everyone in the twentieth century. The great American middle class has accepted the earlier aristocratic idea that women are worthy of men’s protection and love. Americans no longer feel so close to barbarism that they must repress every physical desire, but women are still expected to be less sexual than men, less experienced and aggressive. Men no longer expect the beauty of a woman to lead their minds to understand the beauty of human nature or knowledge of God, but they still see women as spiritual healers, pacifiers, or peacemakers. The romantic idea of love, then, even in some of its antisexual, spiritual forms, is still a part of us.

While any cultural idea of love, besides the romantic one we have inherited, might harmonize with our sexual needs—as our bodies tell us that we can “love” anyone—our romantic culture insists that there is only one love for each of us. Our bodies are satisfied by sensual gratification, but our romantic culture finds the deepest ecstasy in passion that cannot be satisfied, or in the love of the most idealized, abstract sort. The conflict between the Romans and Christians rages even now, but in each one of us.

A MEDIEVAL INDIAN ALTERNATIVE: MYSTICAL EROTICISM

Sometimes the best way to understand our own traditions is to study those of a different culture. It is difficult, for instance, for us to see Christian sexual morality as unusual because it has shaped our culture to such a great extent.

There have been alternatives, however. One of the most remarkable was the Indian ecstatic religion of the Middle Ages. Here the erotic played a central role, not as temptation to be shunned but as a source of salvation. Most medieval temple sculpture was erotic.¹⁷ The temples at Khajuraho and Orissa are full of sexual imagery: sensuous nudes and embracing couples. The temple architecture itself suggests fertility and reproduction. The temple sculptures, like the popular story *Gita Govinda* of the twelfth century, tell of the loves of the god Krishna. He is shown scandalizing young women, dancing deliriously, and bathing with scores of admirers. Krishna’s erotic appeal is a testament to his charisma. He is “divine in proportion to his superiority as a great lover.”

Worshippers were encouraged to commit excesses during festivals as the surest way to achieve . . . ecstasy, the purging climax of the orgiastic feast, the surmounting of duality.¹⁸

Among the most popular forms of medieval Hindu worship were the *bhakti* cults, which originated in devotion to Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*. *Bhakti* cults underline the difference between Indian and European devotion. While the Christian church discouraged spiritual love that might easily lead to “carnal love,” the Indian *bhakti* sects encouraged rituals of ecstasy and sensual love precisely because they obliterated moral distinctions. The ecstatic union with the divine Krishna, Vishnu, or Shiva enabled the worshiper to transcend the limitations of self and confining definitions of good and evil.

Thus, Indian ecstatic religion sought sexual expression as a path to spiritual fulfillment. It is interesting that the word *bhakti* meant sex as well as worship, while we use the word “devotion” to mean worship and love. Hindu eroticism had nothing to do with the private expression of romantic love. In fact, it was the opposite. While romantic love depended on the development of the individual personality and the cultivation of individual feelings, *bhakti* depended on the loss of self in the sexual act.

Bhakti cults differed from the European courtly love tradition in one other important respect. They were not expressions of upper-class control. They were popular expressions of religious feeling. In essence they were directed against the dominating *brahman* and *kshatriya* castes because they challenged the importance of caste distinctions altogether. The ecstatic communion with the deity that they



Krishna playing his flute for a group of admiring women. (Werner Forman Archive)

preached was open to all, regardless of caste. They appealed even to women and untouchables, as well as to farmers and artisans.

As Christianity did in Europe, popular Hinduism of the Middle Ages replaced a classical formal tradition with a spiritual passion. Ovid's *Art of Love* and the *Kama*

Sutra were mechanical, passionless exercises for tired ruling classes. Both India and Europe turned to more emotionally intense religious experiences in the Middle Ages. Perhaps the classical ideals seemed sterile after the spread of salvation religions like Christianity, Buddhism, and revived Hinduism. The similarity between Christian and Hindu emotionalism may be a product of uncertain times, barbarian threats, and diseases that stalked the Eurasian continent. But the differences between Christian courtly love and *bhakti* cults were also profound. In India, sexual passion was an avenue to spiritual salvation. In Christian Europe sexual passion was at best a dead end, and at worst a road to hell.

POLYGAMY, SEXUALITY, AND STYLE: A JAPANESE ALTERNATIVE

At the same time that feudal Europe was developing a code of chivalry that romanticized love and almost desexualized marriage, the aristocracy of feudal Japan was evolving a code of polygamous sexuality without chivalry and almost without passion. We know about the sexual lives of Japanese aristocrats between 950 and 1050—the apex of the Heian period—through a series of remarkable novels and diaries, almost all of which were written by women. These first classics of Japanese literature, like *The Tale of Genji* and *The Pillow Book*, were written by women because Japanese men were still writing the “more important” but less-informative laws and theological studies in Chinese (just as Europeans still wrote in a Latin that was very different from the everyday spoken language).

When well-born Japanese in the Heian court spoke of “the world” they were referring to a love affair, and the novels that aristocratic women like Murasaki Shikibu or Sei Shonagon had time to compose in the spoken language were full of stories of “the world.”

In *The World of the Shining Prince* Ivan Morris distinguishes three types of sexual relationships between men and women of the Heian aristocracy. (Homosexuality among the court ladies was “probably quite common,” he writes, “as in any society where women were obliged to live in continuous and close proximity,” but male homosexuality among “warriors, priests and actors” probably became prevalent in later centuries.) The first type of heterosexual relationship was between the male aristocrat and his “principal wife.” She was often several years older than her boy-husband and frequently served more as a guardian than as a bride. She was always chosen for her social standing, usually to cement a political alliance between ruling families. Although the match must frequently have been loveless, her status was inviolate; it was strictly forbidden, for instance, for a prince to exalt a secondary wife to principal wife. Upon marriage the principal wife would normally continue to live with her family, visited by her husband at night, until he became the head of his own household on the death or retirement of his father. Then the principal wife would be installed with all of her servants and aides as

the head of the north wing of her husband's residence. An aristocratic woman (but never a peasant woman) might also become a secondary wife or official concubine. If she were officially recognized as such (much to the pleasure of her family), she might be moved into another wing of the official residence (leading to inevitable conflicts with the principal wife and other past and future secondary wives), or she might be set up in her own house. The arrangements were virtually limitless. The third and most frequent type of sexual relationship between men and women was the simple (or complex) affair—with a lady at court, another man's wife or concubine, but usually with a woman of a far lower class than the man. Ivan Morris writes of this kind of relationship:

Few cultured societies in history can have been as tolerant about sexual relations as was the world of *The Tale of Genji*. Whether or not a gentleman was married, it redounded to his prestige to have as many affairs as possible; and the palaces and great mansions were full of ladies who were only too ready to accommodate him if approached in the proper style. From reading the *Pillow Book* we can tell how extremely commonplace these casual affairs had



Lady Murasaki Shikibu (978–c.1025), author of *The Tale of Genji*. (Granger)

become in court circles, the man usually visiting the girl at night behind her screen of state and leaving her at the crack of dawn.¹⁹

That emphasis on “the proper style” is what distinguishes the sexuality of medieval Japan from that of ancient Rome, and reminds us of the medieval European's display of form—the aristocracy's mark of “class.” Perhaps because the sexuality of the Heian aristocracy was potentially more explosive than the repressed rituals of European chivalry, style was that much more important. Polygamous sexuality could be practiced without tearing the society apart (and destroying aristocratic dominance in the process) only if every attention were given to style. Listen, for instance, to what the lady of *The Pillow Book* expected from a good lover:

A good lover will behave as elegantly at dawn as at any other time. He drags himself out of bed with a look of dismay on his face. The lady urges him on: “Come, my friend, it's getting light. You don't want anyone to find you here.” He gives a deep sigh, as if to say that the night has not been nearly long enough and that it is agony to leave. Once up, he does not instantly pull on his trousers. Instead he comes close to the lady and whispers whatever was left unsaid during the night. Even when he is dressed, he still lingers, vaguely pretending to be fastening his sash.

Presently he raises the lattice, and the two lovers stand together by the side door while he tells her how he dreads the coming day, which will keep them apart; then he slips away. The lady watches him go, and this moment of parting will remain among her most charming memories.

Indeed, one's attachment to a man depends largely on the elegance of his leave-taking. When he jumps out of bed, scurries about the room, tightly fastens his trouser-sash, rolls up the sleeves of his Court cloak, over-robe, or hunting costume, stuffs his belongings into the breast of his robe and then briskly secures the outer sash—one really begins to hate him.²⁰

The stylistic elegance of the lover's departure was one of the principal themes of Heian literature. Perhaps no situation better expressed the mood of the Japanese word *aware* (a word that was used over a thousand times in *The Tale of Genji*), which meant the poignant or the stylishly, even artistically, sorrowful—a style of elegant resignation. The word also suggests the mood of “the lady in waiting” and even the underlying anguish and jealousy of a precariously polygamous existence for the women consorts and writers of the Japanese feudal age. The ladies of the court were trained in calligraphy, poetry, and music; they were dressed in elaborate, colorful silks, painted with white faces and black teeth, and rewarded by sexual attention that always had to be justified by its cultured style.

The rigid rituals of courtship and marriage were highly stylized. The gentleman interested in a lady writes her a thirty-one-syllable poem. The lady responds with a similar effort, which is examined meticulously by the gentleman for signs of good

breeding: the calligraphy and poetic skill are sure signs of her character. If he is pleased, he arranges for a "secret" night meeting (which the lady's parents or attendants pretend to ignore). The gentleman conventionally keeps the lady awake all night, comments on the rooster's crow with appropriate expressions of dismay, and drags himself away at dawn. On his arrival home he immediately composes his "next-morning" letter, which laments his long hours away from the lady and concludes with a love poem that usually includes an image of flowers covered with dew. Everything about the letter expresses the appropriate sentiment: the color of the paper, the type of incense, the style of calligraphy, even the choice of the messenger—who is regaled by the lady's family with abundant presents. If the lady is interested she gives an equally appropriate letter (following the "rule of taste") with the same imagery to the same messenger. The same series of events is followed on the following night.

A third-night repetition, with the addition of rice cakes left by the parents for the gentleman, could seal the relationship in marriage. This time the gentleman remains with his new wife in the morning behind her curtain of state. That evening a feast is held in which the groom meets the bride's family officially, the Shinto priest recites a simple ceremony, and the couple perform the three-times-three exchange of wine cups. The couple are officially married. The groom may visit his bride's house at any time, or even install her in his own home according to her status as principal or secondary wife.²¹

Aristocracies have behaved in similar ways throughout the world, and throughout history. They demonstrate their "class" or "good breeding" with elaborate rituals that differentiate their world from the ordinary. But the example of aristocratic Heian Japan a thousand years ago points to some of the differences between Eastern and Christian culture. The Japanese developed rituals of courtship and seduction for the leisured few that were sexually satisfying and posed no threat to marriage. They were rituals that showed artistic refinement rather than sexual "purity" or chastity. They could be sexual because Japanese culture did not disparage sexuality. Rather it disparaged lack of "taste." The affair did not threaten marriage because the culture did not insist on monogamy. The new sexual interest could be carried on outside or inside the polygamous estate of the Japanese aristocrat. Perhaps the main difference, then, is that the Japanese aristocrat invented stylized sex rather than romantic love.

FOR FURTHER READING

Denis de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World* is dated but still worth reading. It offers little help on the Arab or Islamic background to European courtly love, however. The relevant parts of Joseph Campbell's *The Masks of God* are more helpful, though this is only one among many of his subjects. The best introduction to Islamic history and culture is Marshall G. S. Hodgson's *The Venture of Islam*. On the background to European courtly

love see Peter Dronke's *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric*. On the troubadours see Robert Briffault's still valuable *The Troubadours*, Frederick Goldin's anthology *Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouveres*, and Meg Bogin's *The Women Troubadours*. C. Steven Jaeger's *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals, 939–1210* is an erudite study focusing on Germany.

Morton Hunt's *The Natural History of Love* is a highly readable source of anecdote and example. On chivalry, Maurice Keens's *Chivalry* is a rich recent survey. Georges Duby's *The Chivalrous Society* offers a collection of his articles. Richard Barber's *The Knight and Chivalry* is still useful, as is Norbert Elias's *The Court Society*. Marina Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* is an engaging, exhaustive study of changing perceptions of Mary. Georges Duby has two valuable studies of medieval marriage. His *Medieval Marriage* is a short account of two models from twelfth-century France; *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest* shows how indissoluble marriage developed. David Herlihy's *Medieval Households* finds the roots of modern family life. Eileen Power's *Medieval Women* is a brief introduction. Margaret Wade Labarge's *Women in Medieval Life* is a charming, readable, well-illustrated introduction. *Women in the Middle Ages* by Frances and Joseph Gies is also readable and thorough. For a richly absorbing view of sexuality, marriage, and love among the peasantry, see Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* on the Cathars. On homosexuality see John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, covering the period up to the fourteenth century. There are also abundant primary sources that provide entree to this topic and period. Among the most accessible are *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult* and *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. Two of the great guides, Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* and Andreas Capellanus's *Art of Courtly Love*, also are quite accessible.

On India in this period we have relied on Richard Lannoy's marvelous *The Speaking Tree: A Study of Indian Culture and Society*. Histories of India and primary sources recommended in earlier chapters are also useful here. Additional approaches are taken up by Nirad C. Chaudhuri in *The Continent of Circe*, Arthur Koestler in *The Lotus and the Robot*, Alan Watts in *Nature, Man, and Woman*, and Max Weber in *The Religion of India*.

On Japan in the Heian period *The World of the Shining Prince* by Ivan Morris is a superb introduction. There also are excellent translations of Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* available, a recent one by E. Seidensticker and an older one by Arthur Waley. Morris and Waley each has also translated *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shonagon.

NOTES

1. Adapted from Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 404.
2. Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), p. 105.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), p. 176.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
6. Hodgson, *op. cit.*, p. 239.
7. Ibn Hazm, *Ali ibn Ahmad. The Ring of the Dove: A Treatise on the Art and Practice of*

- Arab Love*, trans. A. J. Arberry (New York: AMS Press, 1953). Excerpted in *Anthology of Islamic Literature: From the Rise of Islam to Modern Times*, ed. James Kritzeck (New York: New American Library, 1975), pp. 124–130 *passim*.
8. Quoted in John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 196.
 9. Cited in Meg Bogin, *The Women Troubadours* (New York: Norton, 1980), p. 38.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
 11. Bernart de Ventadorn, trans. in Bogin, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
 12. Bogin, *op. cit.*, pp. 52 and 9, respectively.
 13. The story of Ulrich von Lichtenstein is paraphrased from Morton Hunt, *The Natural History of Love* (New York: Knopf, 1959), pp. 132–139. Quotation marks indicate Mr. Hunt's words.
 14. Quoted in Hunt, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
 15. Quoted by Andreas in *Tractatus de Amore*, bk. 1, ch. 6, Seventh Dialogue; quoted in Hunt, *op. cit.*, pp. 143–144.
 16. Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, trans. John Jay Parry (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1957), pp. 42–43.
 17. Richard Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree: A Study of Indian Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 64.
 18. *Ibid.*
 19. Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964, 1969), p. 237.
 20. *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*, trans. and ed. Ivan Morris (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967, 1971), pp. 49–50.
 21. Morris, *op. cit.*, pp. 226–228.



Citizens and Subjects

City and State

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF CITIZENSHIP? How does it come from? What good is it? How do you lose it? questions that prompt this chapter.

We examine an argument, first enunciated by the great C Weber almost a hundred years ago, that citizenship was the product of the European city. It resulted, according to this view, from the rise of a rising middle class of merchants, craftspeople, and professionals who sought to control their own environment.

In order to explore this idea, we begin by looking at the purposes of comparison. We focus first on the Chinese cities of the period 700–1300 were the largest and most important. Did they offer citizenship? Did they have a middle class of merchants and professionals? Was there an urban class that was different from the rest of the country? Was there an interest in urban autonomy, self-government? If not, why not? If not, did the Chinese cities have any form of political participation? These are some of the questions that will be explored.

We then turn briefly to the second great world civilization, the Islamic world.