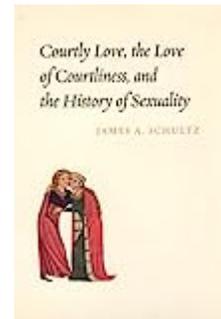




James A. Schultz. *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. xxii + 242 pp. \$39.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-74089-8.



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The History of Sexuality Meets Courtly Love in Germany

James A. Schultz observes in the introduction to this stimulating, valuable study that scholars who study the history of sexuality have all but ignored courtly love when they have turned to the Middle Ages, while the enormous literature on courtly love seldom refers to recent work on the history of sexuality. His goal is nothing less than to bridge this gap with a close reading of the courtly literature produced around 1200 in the German-speaking world. On balance, I believe that he has succeeded admirably in doing just that in less than two-hundred pages of insightful, frequently amusing discussion.

The primary material consists of narrative poems and love songs composed in German for courtly audiences in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, with occasional references to later works, in order to show how later authors handled questions of courtly love. The main text is preceded by a catalog of ninety-five names that identify the works from which they are taken, or the edition in the case of the singers of courtly love who preceded Walther von der Vogelweide. The list is intended to

help readers who are unfamiliar with the specific texts to identify the works in which they occur. I noted in passing that the lovers Sigune and Schianatulander, later cited as an example of love service prolonged too long (p. 134), are not listed. Since the characters cited in the catalog of names are not included in the otherwise useful index (pp. 237-242), only a close reading of the entire text would reveal whether or not there are other such omissions.

After a brief introduction in which Schultz explains his intention to provide a careful reading of courtly literature with as few preconceptions as possible, he divides his text into four parts of three chapters each. For each section, he uses Aristotle's "causes" as headings: *causa materialis*, *causa efficiens*, *causa formalis*, and *causa finalis*. He glosses these headings as follows: what sorts of bodies are involved? What gets them going? How do they manage it? What do they get out of it?

"Don't blame me. Blame Wolfram"—with these words, Schultz opens his discussion of Parzival's penis in chapter 1. He has an important point to make: when Parzival's mother and her companions note that the new-

born Parzival has a penis, it is only to establish that he is a boy baby. The observation is not otherwise remarkable, and modern attempts to invest it with erotic meaning are not supported by textual evidence. The larger point is that bodies were not sexualized in the courtly literature composed around 1200, but rather they were made attractive as courtly bodies, bodies that were radiant and marked by strikingly similar physical characteristics, especially red lips and luminescent eyes, for both men and women. He does not argue that male and female bodies are not gendered (they are), but that the gender differences are not crucial in defining what makes courtly bodies attractive. “The Aphrodisiac Body on Display,” the topic of chapter 3, is above all an image of perfection that impinges on potential lovers or courtly audiences from the outside by entering through their eyes, or through their ears when individuals or audiences hear tell of great beauty.

In part 2, Schultz argues that love in courtly literature is not the result of heterosexual desire and that heterosexuality and desire are not relevant categories. Instead, the nobility and courtliness of the person being observed provoke courtly love in the observer. He notes that heterosexuality is in fact a rather recent term historically. Medieval authors praised or condemned sexual practices on entirely different grounds, typically ranking chastity highest, with procreation next. While gender arrangements were certainly normative, they were normative because they were considered the proper way to create children, not because society adhered to an ideal of “heterosexuality.” This provocative argument also seems attentive to medieval thought patterns. “A certain notion of desire has come to function as a universal solvent in critical writing” (p. 63)—thus begins chapter 5. Here, Schultz claims that universalized desire has become a concept so devoid of specific meaning as to elide important differences. Medieval theologians attributed love to sinful concupiscence, while medieval physicians understood love in terms of the healthful pleasure that it could bring. Courtly lovers, however, were inspired to love by neither of these internally motivated factors: instead, the sight or even the reputation of a courtly individual causes them to fall in love. Chapter 6 (“Aristophilia”) is devoted to working out this state of affairs in greater detail. Courtly love, according to Schultz, is nothing less than the love of courtliness, the love of courtly qualities, of courtly clothes, and of courtly behavior. The “tailor scenes” in the *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1205), as they have sometimes been derogatorily called, where the preparation of fine clothing in advance of great courtly festivals

is described in more detail than most modern readers can tolerate, are not cited, but they offer further corroboration of his point about courtly clothing.

Schultz makes interesting comments about the special friendship between Gawein and Iwein in the *Iwein* (ca. 1200) of Hartmann von Aue. They kiss each other enthusiastically when they meet after a long separation (line 7494), and some commentators have latched on to this example of male-male love. Schultz would not have us make much of the episode, given his view that heterosexuality, and of course homosexuality, are not medieval categories. Courtly couples are normally men and women, to be sure, but Schultz argues that this point is not salient: “Calling courtly love a sort of aristophilia is a way of acknowledging the extent to which material and efficient causes of courtly love so manifestly downplay the importance of sex while highlighting over and over again the efficacy of nobility and courtliness” (p. 98).

The third section describes the three main ways in which courtly love is managed by those affected by it. Single sufferers are the singers of courtly love who direct their pleas at normally unobtainable women, women who can respond to these pleas only at great peril to their good names. The result is a dynamic of love service, suffering, reflecting about the relationship, and above all singing about it. Even the relatively rare songs describing actual encounters, such as the dawn songs, make it clear that there is a great deal at stake in keeping up courtly appearances. The ultimate success of the average suffering singer is not the achievement of the goal that he so forcefully proclaims to be seeking, but rather his public recognition as a courtly lover. Schultz’s discussion is persuasive and falls into line with the arguments of recent scholarship.

Chapter 8 takes up the issue of chivalric couples in the narratives, those who meet, fall in love, and generally marry at some point. As Schultz says: “these lovers do not sing, they act” (p. 119). Their first encounters almost always take place in the context of courtly festivals and the knights eventually win the hands of the chosen ladies through their prowess in combat. In many cases, it all works out swimmingly and the couples are happily united in marriage. In others, the women are considerably more demanding before finally yielding. Indeed, some are so demanding that their lovers are killed in battle before they can be rewarded. But much is at stake for the women, because once they yield to courtly love and get married, they lose their position of dominance. In marriage, men regain the upper hand that is generally

theirs in medieval society, and women are no longer in a position to make strong demands, unless their husband's opinions fall into line with their own.

Chapter 9 focuses on secret lovers, who are often associated with the dawn songs and meet in spite of the approbation that this could bring them at the court, most famously Tristan and Isold. These lovers are willing to take risks. The most notable feature of their stories is the length to which they are willing to go to preserve their reputations, and here Schultz includes even Tristan and Isold. Their love is not allowed in the courtly world, but it is celebrated in that same world as a literary fiction that praises lovers willing to risk all that is most highly valued. This is not a new insight, but it is appropriate both for the argument Schultz is making and for our understanding of these texts in general.

The last three chapters bring us finally to the question of what courtly love does for those who participate in it. In chapter 10 Schultz discusses degrees of intimacy associated with courtly love, ranging from the unrequited love of the suffering singer, to the love service carried out by a knight against a future reward, the mutual affection that often arises between two lovers in the verse narratives, and the physical intimacy associated with the consummation of love. In the last case, instances occur where the newly minted husband simply asserts his prerogative and takes it primarily as a sign of his dominance. The most extreme case occurs when Siegfried has to help Gunther overcome Brunhild on his wedding night. Siegfried even comments on how inappropriate it would be for a woman to conquer a great hero. Frequently, however, courtly love also shows the man and woman both deriving pleasure from their encounters in bed, yet it is expressed by the language of kissing, embracing, and feeling close to each other, not by any mention of genital sex. The pleasure that ideal courtly lovers feel from making love is very similar to the joy and high spirits that accompany courtly festivals and spectacle. This important point, I believe, has not been sufficiently recognized in previous scholarship.

Next Schultz turns to the question of what courtly love might provide for the participants in it. Here he cites extensively from the literature on courtly love and courtly culture. What courtly love provides is distinction for the lovers. The love that sets them apart is in fact the love of courtliness itself. This condition has different meanings for men and women. In one particularly apt turn of phrase, Schultz notes that "men hope to increase their renown by loving properly, women must take care

not to lose their good names through loving unwisely" (p. 168). But by his serving and her denying, both men and women acquire distinction.

"Masculine Anxiety and the Consolations of Fiction" is the topic of the final chapter. Schultz asks a difficult question about the relationship between the courtly love developed in literary texts and the world in which these texts were composed and performed. He claims not to have any special historical expertise that would enable him to answer this question, one that has generated an enormous body of scholarship in modern times. He speculates, though, about the discontent felt by males subject to religious pressure to be monogamous in marriage, restraints imposed on unregulated feuds by territorial princes, and the refinement of social behavior associated with courtly culture. This disciplining of males is reflected in the exemplary lives of courtly literature, but so is the tenuousness of the disciplining reflected in the outbreaks of inappropriate fighting, in the uncourtly behavior of knights who attempt to force their way onto ladies who do not want them, and in frequent acts of boorish behavior at court. Courtly literature is predominately produced by males for males, and it is not implausible that men who felt the anxieties of a changing world of nobility found much to admire and to think about in the literature of courtly love, not because it accurately reflected the actual practices of their society, but because it created models that helped them imagine what life could be like.

Both of the target audiences identified by Schultz in his introduction, scholars of the history of sexuality and scholars of Middle High German courtly literature, can learn much from this study. It is written in an appealingly witty and unpretentious style and it is carefully documented. Many of the nearly 350 endnotes (pp. 189-213) incorporate discussions of previous scholarship, a decision that undoubtedly contributes to the readability of the text. The bibliography of almost three-hundred items (pp. 215-233) and a generally helpful index round out the scholarly apparatus. The textual evidence mustered by Schultz is generally convincing, not because he offers a host of new readings, but because he avoids skewing the meaning of key passages to correspond with some general idea of what the passage ought to mean. He repeatedly shows how previous commentators have stretched seemingly obvious interpretations and conclusions to fit preconceived constructs.

It is important, finally, to note that Schultz does not claim that the courtly love he describes is characteristic

of other times and other places. Indeed, he frequently comments on differences introduced into Arthurian materials by German authors as compared with their French sources. By implication, courtly love in France likely differed in important respects. Comparative study of the lyrics certainly will suggest the same. But this is not his topic. He has succeeded admirably, in my view, in identifying the key elements of courtly love as depicted in the fictional world of the major literary texts composed in German from around 1180 to 1220.

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