

Primary and Secondary Sources on Love and Marriage in Medieval Europe

Chivalry was a word used to describe the moral code of nobles in the Middle Ages. It included a knight's pledge of loyalty to his lord and his church, as well as the way he was instructed to treat women. Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine developed the idea of courtly love, which insisted that men treat women with the utmost honor and respect. This idea also included rules about the behavior of a man towards the woman he loved. However, most marriages in medieval Europe were based on the interests of the parents or the lord of the manor. Wedding ceremonies were usually performed in a church, and the bride was required to bow down before her new husband to show her willingness to obey him. Despite Eleanor's attempt to make women more respected, married women had few rights and were generally regarded as property of their husbands.

- Chivalry was a code of honor for knights. Courage, daring, and gallantry in battle were most important behaviors for knights. A knight's honor was more significant than his own life; a true knight would allow himself to be killed rather than dishonor himself by being a coward.
- The social code of chivalry required a knight to be faithful, religious, and obedient to God. With women, chivalrous knights were **respectful, gentle, polite**, and willing to sacrifice themselves for the honor and protection of their lady.
- "He looked at her without saying anything, too moved to speak, and grew pale. The lady saw this and apologized for the absence of her husband. The Castellan replied that he loved her and that if she did not have mercy on him nothing mattered to him. The lady reminded him that she was married and that he must ask her for nothing which would soil the honor of herself or her lord. He replied that nothing would keep him from **serving her all his life.**" (from *The Castellan of Coucy*, LMC, p. 121)
- He tells how, when he used to ride abroad with his friends as a young knight, they would **beg ladies for their love** and if this one did not accept they would try another,

deceiving the ladies with fair words...and swearing false oaths, “for in every place they would have their sport if they could.” (La Tour Landry, ADM, p. 68)

- **Eleanor of Aquitaine**, a queen of England during the 12th century, and her daughter, Marie, began to teach young men of the palace how to respect and honor women. They developed the concept of **courtly love**, the main idea of which was that women should be valued and treated well. Eleanor believed that men had the responsibility to follow rules in their behavior toward women, such as being obedient toward women and faithful to the one you love. She felt that, unfortunately, this type of love and respect was missing in most marriages.
- “A woman who loves may freely accept from her **lover** the following: a handkerchief, a fillet (ribbon) for the hair, a wreath of gold or silver, a breastpin, a mirror, a girdle, a purse, a tassel, a comb, sleeves, gloves, a ring, a compact, a picture, a washbasin, little dishes, trays, a flag as a souvenir...any little **gift** which may be useful for the care of the person or pleasing to look at or which may call the lover to her mind.” (the Countess of Champagne, LMC, p. 89)
- “If a woman receives a **ring** from her lover as a pledge of love, she ought to put it on her left hand and on her little finger, and she should always keep the stone hidden on the inside of her hand. This is because the left hand is usually kept freer from dishonesty and shameful contacts, and a man’s life and death are said to reside more in his little finger than in the others, and because all lovers are bound to keep their lover secret.” (Countess of Champagne, LMC, p. 89)
- Marriages were often arranged by parents or by the lord of a manor, who encouraged marriages so as to increase the number of workers on his manor. Wealthy **parents** wanted to arrange a marriage for their daughter with a wealthyman; consequently, grooms were usually older than brides. Men were commonly 25 to 35 years old at marriage; women were generally 14 to 18 years old.
- **Arranged marriages** were common among the rich. Children, especially daughters, were expected to obey their parents’ wishes....A family would seek a rich heiress to bring land and money into the family with her when she married their son. (MA, p. 20)
- In most cases, serfs could not marry without the lord’s permission. The lord generally approved of marriages between serfs on his own manor—the children

produced by the marriage would become workers on the manor and increase the lord's workforce. When serfs from different manors wanted to marry, they had to obtain permission from both lords.

- **Wedding ceremonies** usually were held in a church and consisted of several parts. First, there was a public and formal agreement by both families to the marriage. Then, there was an exchange of gifts. Next, the bride and groom expressed their willingness to enter the marriage, after which the bride knelt down at the feet of her husband, sometimes kissing his feet. This display of **obedience** symbolized giving him all she owns. After the ceremony, the bride and groom participated in a marriage mass conducted by the priest and received his blessing. For wealthy couples, the church ceremony was followed by an extravagant feast.
- Married women had very **few rights**. In the act of marriage, women lost the ability to appear in court, sue and be sued, make wills, conduct business, sign contracts, and participate in government. Once married, a woman was “under the rod” or “under the power” of her husband. (LMC, p. 78)
- Although kings, earls, barons, and knights had **mistresses** and illegitimate children abounded, adultery in women was a different matter. An erring wife was often disgraced and her lover mutilated or killed. (LMC, p. 90)
- The code of chivalry directed that men should, “do honor to ladies....Serve ladies and maidens if you would be honored by all...” yet, in practice, a lord might strike or beat his wife. (LMC, p. 93)