Platonic Models of Love, Honor, and Responsibility in Spanish Courtly Love Literature

Lauren Forsythe

Davidson College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/chr

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/chr/vol2/iss1/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Bucknell Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Humanities Review by an authorized administrator of Bucknell Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dadmin@bucknell.edu.
Platonic Models of Love, Honor, and Responsibility in Spanish Courtly Love Literature

Lauren Forsythe, Davidson College

The sentimental novel of fifteenth-century Spain detailed the era’s ideal of courtly love. A noble typically fell in love with a queen or other married woman of higher standing, desiring an impossible relationship. He was to ask of his beloved only one thing: the acceptance of his lifelong service to her. The consent to his service represents the highest level of consummation a courtly lover could hope for; any level of physical or emotional intimacy between members of different social classes was highly dishonorable to the beloved’s reputation. Thus, the responsibility a lover held to serve his beloved extended to an accountability for her honor; her reputation was his burden, and the ideal lover was obligated to protect his beloved in the public eye.

This responsibility traces back to the classical world and can be viewed with particular interest through Plato’s discourse, the Symposium. The shadows of classical responsibility and honor in love relationships transform through Spanish courtly love literature from strictly following the traditional code to completely inverting the typical gender roles of the time. During the revival of the classical world in fifteenth-century Spain, Diego de San Pedro’s Prison of Love (1492) and Fernando de Rojas’ The Spanish Bawd (1499) demonstrate how courtly love literature takes its cues from Plato’s classical text to move from the masculine responsibility of courtly love in the former text, to a feminine possibility of honor and power in the latter.

The platonic service and honor between lover and beloved are best originally accessed through Pausanius’ speech when he
claims,

When the lover realizes that he is justified in doing anything for a loved one who grants him favors, and when the young man understands that he is justified in performing any service for a lover who can make him wise and virtuous . . . then, and only then . . . is it ever honorable for a young man to accept a lover.¹

The lover holds a responsibility to behave honorably towards his beloved by serving him. Only by combining “service” and “kindness,” then, can a love relationship come honorably to fruition. The responsibility to perform this service is the culmination of the desire to keep the relationship honorable as well as to demonstrate its decency to the public before further physical consummation occurs.

Proceeding from this classical model, then, service becomes the defining factor of courtly love through which the male can typically demonstrate his desire for his beloved publicly, without doing dishonor to her. It therefore typically becomes the male’s responsibility to preserve his beloved’s honor at all times by serving her properly. In this sense, Lillian von der Walde Moheno describes the complex, servile nature of courtly love: that one must view “...the concept of love as a phenomenon based on volition and free will. Thus, service is provided willingly, with no obligation attached to it.”² Her honor signifies the public and private perceptions of the beloved’s social propriety, intentions, and especially her virginity; it is a generally feminine concept.

Diego de San Pedro’s Prison of Love demonstrates the essential principles of courtly love service. The noble Leriano has loved princess Laureola from afar for years. After sending a mediator to speak with her, the two exchange letters in which Laureola eventually accepts Leriano’s service. When both characters finally come face to face, a jealous suitor accuses them of an illicit relationship; Laureola is imprisoned and Leriano exiled. The only proof of relationship between the two is the letters Leriano has from his beloved. He lets himself die, but before he does, he takes the time to responsibly destroy this compromising evidence in a novel way.

Leriano’s service to Laureola is ideal, following the code of courtly love to the extreme. In his letter to her he writes, “And if, because I have dared to write to you, you think I deserve to die, command my death, for I shall count it far better to die for your
sake than to live without hope of your goodwill.”3 He later offers his service in greater degree by taking full responsibility for her imprisonment. He writes: “if I should die in the endeavour, you will be freed from your imprisonment and I released from all my miseries, so that one death shall be the cause of setting free two people.”4 No sacrifice is too great for the sake of Leriano’s beloved; his service to her and his desire for her freedom ultimately culminate in his own death.

James A. Flightner reminds us how this code comes to life in courtly love literature: “Leriano’s task as a courtly lover has been clear: he will love faithfully, perform whatever deeds are necessary to demonstrate his love, and die as a testimony to the sincerity and nobility of his love if his affections are not returned.”5 The context of this idea of unwavering service can be traced back to Plato’s original ideas in the Symposium: through what Pausanius calls “virtuous service,” the lover can demonstrate and proclaim his love in an honorable way, reflecting the responsibility he has taken upon himself to uphold his beloved’s honor.

Classical models of service in Pausanius’ discourse are followed by explorations of honorable and dishonorable attitudes a lover can hold toward his beloved. “Now you may want to know who counts as vile in this context. I’ll tell you: it is the common, vulgar lover, who loves the body rather than the soul,” he claims, condemning superficial love of beauty over the profound love of one’s soul and spirit.6 Plato uses Pausanius to illustrate his ideal of the beloved’s physical beauty as a means to love the soul and spirit, thereby elevating the lover to a higher sphere of existence. Elaborating on the classical text, Andreas Capellanus’ twelfth-century work, The Art of Courtly Love, explains the spirituality of love beginning with the body: “For when a man sees some woman fit for love and shaped according to his taste, he begins at once to lust after her in his heart; then the more he thinks about her the more he burns with love, until he comes to a fuller meditation.”7 Echoing the discourses in the Symposium, Capellanus supports the courtly lover’s honorable desire for a relationship connecting the souls, without the expectation of a physical consummation. Leriano demonstrates this in a letter to Laureola when he states, “Your beauty drew my affection, affection led to desire, desire to anguish, and anguish to audacity.”8 He focuses on upholding his beloved’s honor through the spiritual love of one’s soul, not one’s body, a question that de Rojas parodies in The Spanish Bawd.
If San Pedro illustrates Plato’s models of service, responsibility, and honor, then de Rojas’ provides us with a counter example. In this Pre-Renaissance anti-model of courtly love, the lover, Calisto, immediately pursues his beloved, Melibea, at a purely physical level. At first she resists, but Calisto soon forces physical consummation upon her, destroying her honor by devastating her reputation. Calisto dies suddenly and accidentally, leaving Melibea publicly shamed: he has taken her virginity with no offer of marriage to restore her feminine honor. De Rojas ends the play with Melibea’s suicide.

Subverting both Plato’s discourse and Leriano’s exemplary courtship, Calisto does not take on the responsibility of service to his beloved, as he clearly violates society’s physical boundaries of chastity. Instead, Calisto aggressively destroys Melibea’s honor in order to use her body as a means to his own satisfaction:

What do you mean, mistress? Why can there be no peace for my passion? So that I may suffer again? So that the game will begin again? Forgive me, my lady, for my shameless hands, for they never thought they would be able to touch your clothing because of their baseness and little worth; now they delight in reaching your gracious body and your beautiful and delicate flesh.9

However, no transgression goes unpunished; soon enough, this “vulgar lover” suffers an untimely and certainly dishonorable death. This is the way in which de Rojas chooses to condemn Calisto, warning his readers in the text’s prologue, “All of you who love, take this example.”10 While San Pedro posits Leriano as the exemplary lover, de Rojas establishes Calisto as the anti-lover, a negative exemplary counterpart, who, as Peter Earle notes, “. . . has several [weaknesses]: he is impatient and overbearing toward his servants; he leads an idle and disordered life and is generally egotistical. His worship of Melibea, furthermore, is far more voluptuous than reverent.”11 As Plato supports an elevation of the lover through the respect and love of the soul that can be achieved by means of service and responsibility, so de Rojas parodies that anti-lover, the lover of the body as an end, rather than a means to a spiritual love. He ultimately takes his cue from Plato in condemning Calisto and his love as invalid and worthless, demonstrated in Calisto’s meaningless and reversed exemplary death.

In courtly love, then, exemplary death is typically
masculine, whereas honor remains a feminine concept. But where does male responsibility for honor end and female control over it begin? Could the female take responsibility for herself, and die in place of the male? In the *Symposium* there are suggestions of a feminine version of responsibility through death, brought to light by Phaedrus’ speech on the nature of love. He states, “no one will die for you but a lover, and a lover will do this even if she’s a woman.”¹² Courtly love exists on the foundation that the male lover should die for the sake of the female beloved’s honor. Phaedrus’ comment that women are capable of this same kind of sacrificial death, however, is less common for both classical models of love as well as for the typical Spanish courtly love. His story of Alcestis, a Greek woman who chooses to die so that her husband can continue to live, is a direct parallel to de Rojas’ powerful female character Melibea in *The Spanish Bawd*. Both Alcestis and Melibea portray powerful female roles in periods of literature in which such power and control is rare and looked down upon. They represent women faced with cowardly, irresponsible men; in response, they take control over their own fates and choose their deaths accordingly.

The ultimate step in following the traditional, self-elevating path of courtly love is the dramatic, sacrificial death of the male in a final effort to preserve the honor of his female beloved. Borrowing from the Platonic model, San Pedro constructs Leriano as the ideal courtly lover through an exemplary death:

> When he thought of tearing [the letters] up, it seemed to him that it would be an insult to Laureola to allow such precious words to be thrown away. When he thought of entrusting them to one of his servants, he feared that they might be read, whereby she who had sent them might be endangered. So, taking the surest way amidst these doubts, he called for a cup of water, tore the letters into pieces, and dropped them into the water, and when he had done this he ordered them to sit him up in bed, and when he was sitting, he drank them in the water, and rested content.¹³

Accordingly, Leriano dies while taking responsibility for his beloved’s honor. By choosing to die consuming the letters, he physically destroys the material evidence that would undoubtably compromise Laureola’s reputation and honor in the public eye, therefore making a powerful statement of service to his beloved in his death.

In typical courtly love, and occasionally in the classical
world, this paradigm of masculine death for the feminine honor transforms the male into an exemplary instrument – Leriano is the ideal instructor in courtly love because he follows the model to every detail; he lives, breathes, and dies serving his beloved. San Pedro fashions him as an instructor through the way in which he embodies exemplary love in an honorable, courtly manner and holds entirely to the classic gender roles assigned in medieval Spain. Conversely, one of the key instructors in matters of love in the Symposium completely and importantly disrupts our understanding of those gender-driven models: Diotima, a wise female, is “the one who taught [Socrates] in the art of love.”

Diotima’s presence in the Symposium, otherwise notably devoid of women, is demonstrative of the possibility of female self-awareness and knowledge in love relationships. She becomes a wise teacher-figure who knows more than the male figures do and must therefore impart her knowledge to them, teaching Socrates that “love must desire immortality” and that lovers are ready “even to die for the sake of glory . . . for they are all in love with immortality.” This knowledge over male philosophers holds heavy implications for the gender roles later driven by ancient Greek literature; the power that such extreme knowledge imparts to her gives Diotima an ability to choose to share this wisdom with men.

If the Symposium suggests a feminine legacy and hints at a powerful, honorable female death, The Spanish Bawd brings them to life in Melibea’s exemplary suicide. Due to Calisto’s inability to restore Melibea’s honor by marriage, she transforms to take control over her own fate by making a powerful statement in her death. Her honor destroyed by a disrespectful, irresponsible lover, Melibea has one choice to make: continue to live in her town, permanently shamed and dishonored, or take her own life, defying tradition, public opinion, and general boundaries of patriarchal responsibility: she chooses to die on her own terms, challenging the customary gender roles of courtly love. She laments, “I was the cause for all of this […] I am the reason for why the earth no longer delights of the most noble body that was ever created in this city. And since you will be shocked by the sound of my unusual offenses, I want to clarify them for you.”

The groundwork Plato lays for women in the Symposium through Phaedrus is demonstrated clearly through Melibea’s death: the idea that women, too, can die for the sake of love. De Rojas, however, uses Diotima’s wisdom to push exemplary death
one step further: Melibea’s suicide embodies how women, in addition to men, can also die for the sake of their own reputation and, ultimately, for their honor. After all, as Arlene Saxonhouse notes in her examination of the Symposium: “It is the female Diotima holds as the model for all mankind.”

De Rojas invokes Socrates’ dialogue of immortality through love to construct Melibea as a direct didactic parallel to Diotima. As the wise instructress guides Socrates through the meaning of love and its connections to mortality, Melibea explores that very partnership, making a statement in her death. What men cannot and do not know, Diotima teaches and Melibea lives out, actively. Diotima instructs and Melibea acts out. She acknowledges her own ability to break out of the expectations of her gender and chooses to die publicly expressing a new, reformed version of responsibility to herself and to her feminine honor. She reflects on this after Calisto’s death:

Because of that sad fall some of the most inmost parts of his brain were strewn all over the stones of the walls. The fates cut his threads, they cut them without allowing him confession, they cut short my hope, they cut short my glory, and they cut short my companion. So, what cruelty would it be, my father, that he could die having fallen from a wall, and that I should live and suffer?

Ultimately, Melibea dies as Diotima teaches: in a manner that will create for her a legacy of power and honor.

From Diego de San Pedro’s *Prison of Love* to Fernando de Rojas’ *The Spanish Bawd*, and from their firm roots in classical love literature, it becomes clear that someone must take responsibility for the female beloved’s honor; the burden cannot be protected on its own. As illustrated by Leriano, this burden falls onto the shoulders of the male courtly lover, who fulfills this classic model described so clearly in Pausanius’ discourse. As de Rojas sets up his anti-model of courtly love, however, he sets up the male lover to fall short in carrying out his responsibilities for the honor of his beloved. When Calisto breaks the stereotype in failing to protect Melibea’s reputation, he not only breaks the courtly love formula, but causes Melibea to do the same by taking responsibility for herself. Drawing from the Platonic “vulgar lover,” de Rojas succeeds in formulating a new model of feminine responsibility. Not only does Melibea teach through her death, but she becomes a responsible example of a powerful female leaving a legacy behind
her. Like Diotima in her teaching, Melibea needs no male to brave the path before her; she does this on her own, following the classical hints of the feminine possibility of a female legacy, which Plato established so long ago.

ENDNOTES

4. Ibid, 40.
10. Ibid, prologue.
12. Plato, 10.
13. De San Pedro, 81-82.
15. Ibid, 54, 55-56.
WORKS CITED


