

Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility

C. Stephen Jaeger

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A cogent and engrossing social history of the evolving Medieval attitudes toward civic and erotic love, virtue and spiritual friendship, *Ennobling Love* draws upon a rich tradition of texts to exhume a historical sensibility. From an eighth century monk's unblushing tribute to the kin's body to the ardent definitions of love written by Abelard and Heloise, the author, a Professor of Germanics and Comparative Literature at the University of Washington, has shrewdly plotted a story in which we can almost hear our own age about to be born, where noble love loses its innocent identity.

The apex of gallantry is best illustrated by the origin (albeit historically unverified) of the Order of the Garter, still the highest honor an English king can confer. Edward III in the mid 1300s plucked up and donned a garter his mistress (or queen) had lost in their dancing; to his smirking courtiers he vowed to make them worship what they had scorned: "Honi soit qui mal y pense," (Shame be on whoever thinks evil of it). By his turning a potentially incriminating gesture of alleged sexual intimacy into tribute, and thus reversing shame by an ennobling gesture, cynics only damned themselves. This inviolable will of the king, and its show of a love that excluded lewd interpretation, ushered in courtly love. But its chivalric tribute to women, while creating a civilizing influence on the court itself, introduced a tension between sexuality and virtuous love that cleric and male friendships (not homosexual, the author stresses) had not. Hence, how to reconcile virtue and sex, how to legitimize passionate love yet call virtue the resisting of carnal temptation?

By the time Cordelia refuses her part in an enactment of love protestations to King Lear, her wounding "nothing" pierces the feudal armor of the charismatic king, denying an ennobling public love, in effect. It heralds a love turning inward, private. Though Jaeger does not overly emphasize this, so begins the modern era, with its tragic compromising passions among those with power.

To say that *Ennobling Love* sets the language of love back some nine centuries is to compliment its argument, how a vocabulary of valor and public gestures of esteem have indeed been lost. Though one would have wished his coda of love literature through the nineteenth century longer, with its extensive bibliography, appendix of translations and handsome illustrations, *Ennobling Love* is both a reader's pleasure and a scholar's treasure.

LEETA TAYLOR (July / August 1999)

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