

3190: Love and Friendship in Medieval Literature

Good Morning students;

This week, we are looking at the concept of love and friendship in Medieval literature. Perhaps the most famous work on this topic is a text called, “Spiritual Friendship” by Aelred of Rievaulx. Our forum discussions and quiz will be on this topic.

I also understand that many of you are struggling with workloads this term, given the lockdown and extenuating circumstances related to that. I totally understand what you are going through. As I have been giving numerous extensions to students on the essay, do not worry too much if your essay is late this week, just try your best to get it uploaded by the end of this week (the upload link is next to the essay/project instructions on the Rebus course page).

A Note on Medieval Love

The modern concept, by and large, of love is that it is a kind of “emotion” or “feeling.” This is very far from the medieval concept of love and friendship!

On a purely human level, love is not a “feeling” at all: it is an act of the will, like all acts of virtue. We don’t consider someone “brave” because they “feel” brave, but because they perform brave acts. Similarly, we do not consider someone “generous” because they claim to feel generous, but because of the generous acts that they perform. Much less, then, was love considered to be a “feeling” any more than courage or generosity.

But in what does the act of love consist? The medieval writers are almost unanimous in their answer: love is the consistent will for the good of another person, regardless of how such loving actions may make us feel. A parent does not always “feel” like feeding and caring for a child, but they do it anyway, motivated by a desire for the good of their offspring.

This is not to say that the medieval person always got love right. Anyone reading Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales will clearly get the picture that medieval life was as messy as our own modern life: people cheated on their spouses, many relationships were motivated out of selfish sexual desire, there were thieves, brigands, and usurpers just as there are today.

Reading:

Read sections 38 - 47 of Aelred’s Spiritual Friendships. What are Alered’s three kinds of friendship and what do they consist in?

Also, try and read as many excerpts of the rest of the text as you can to get a flavour for the text and the thinking in it.

Questions for Research/thinking:

1. Who was Aelred, and where is Rievaulx? (Do a Google street view search, and you will see the remains of the monastery he loved in. This monastery was destroyed by King Henry VIII at the end of the medieval period).
2. What is the difference between the carnal (flesh), worldly, and spiritual friendship according to Aelred?
3. Do you agree or disagree with Aelred's characterization of friendship and love? Why, or why not? And Is Alered's vision of friendship possible in today's world?
4. Try and find an example of medieval love poetry **and read the following (excellent) blog post and medieval love poem by Clerk of Oxford, attached in the lesson materials.**