

Medieval Legends of Romance and Anti-Romance.

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by Brian Griffith When the medieval Roman Church forced all married priests to divorce their wives in 1074, this banishment of women sent a message to which the popular mind recoiled. Where the church ruled sexual love a depravity to be repressed, the public turned with growing appetite to love minstrels and legends of heroic knights and ladies. The church still retained a monopolistic control over the written word and over all explicitly religious teaching, but popular oral culture escaped control. The secular singers and legend tellers generally avoided direct criticism of the church, for which they could be killed. Instead they simply expressed their own hopes and ideals, which happened to be utterly different. In the rounds of Arthurian legend culminating with Wolfram von Eschenbach's Parzival, the true heroes of the land were strong men and women, inspired to glorious deeds by their love for one another. Rather than portraying women as the sinful sex that men must control or rise above, these legends cast women as uplifters, initiators, and guides for all men of real heart. Sexual love and devotion were holy sacraments, more powerfully uplifting to the spirit than any priestly ritual. As Will Durant explains, "a conflict arose between the morals of noble ladies and the ethics of the church; and in the feudal world, the ladies and the poets won." An English story from the 1200s perhaps reveals the secret sentiments of many priests. Two birds, a thrush and a nightingale argue about love. The thrush condemns women as sinners. The nightingale claims to reply for the Virgin Mary: "Man's highest bliss in earthly states when a woman takes her mate and twines him in her arms. To slander ladies is a shame! In a more safely secular mode, the popular performer Walther von Vogelweide sang "German ladies, fair as God's angels; anyone who defames them lies in his teeth." How could the bishops respond to such challenges? Some church authorities tried to forbid street plays, secular festivals, love songs, and other forms of sinful popular culture. Others attempted a more positive approach, of attempting to co-opt, revise, or reinterpret secular expression, to make its message conform to church teachings. So around the year 1220, a Cistercian monk wrote a revised version of the Grail myth, *La Queste del Saint Graal*. In this account, the winner of the grail quest was not a married man like Parzival, inspired by his lady. He was the chaste knight Galahad, who won the grail due to his innocence from all corruption and his virtuous horror of women. Both Galahad and his equally chaste sister culminated their quest by renouncing the world entirely. As their will to live ceased, they shook off their mortal coils and ascended into heaven. Meanwhile, as popular devotion to women and mothers took form as the great cult of Mother Mary, the church promoted her worship as an expression of devotion to chastity. Here again was a positive spin on lay culture. While the clergy formally spurned all earthly females with one hand, its other hand pointed the parishioners toward a more worthy object for their devotion — the chaste and non-physical woman of their spiritual dreams in heaven. In the "counter-romance" of clerical poetry about Mary, chastity was actually marriage to the Virgin in heaven. The Virgin called all men to love her, and was offended if they spurned her for mortal females. In a French clerical story of the 1300's, the *Miracles de Notre Dame par Personnages*, a young man considers monastic vows, but then falls in love with a woman. The Virgin Mary appears and rebukes him in his bedroom: "How can this be, since I am who I am, that you are leaving me for another woman? It seems you're badly underrating my worth and my beauty. You must be drunk to give your whole heart and all your love to a woman of this earth? And to leave me, the lady of heaven?" From *Different Visions of Love: Partnership and Dominator Values in Christian History*, by Brian Griffith