

**CORTOIS AND VILAIN: A STUDY
OF THE DISTINCTIONS MADE
BETWEEN THEM BY THE FRENCH
AND PROVENCAL POETS OF THE
12TH, 13TH AND 14TH CENTURIES**

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BY

STANLEY LEMAN GALPIN

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TABLE OF CONTENTS.

	PAGE.
I. Introduction,	5
II. Historical,	13
III. The <i>cortois</i> has polished manners; the <i>vilain</i> , rude manners,	16
IV. The <i>cortois</i> is gentle in speech; the <i>vilain</i> , rough,	22
V. The <i>cortois</i> has <i>mesure</i> ; the <i>vilain</i> lacks <i>mesure</i> ,	28
VI. The <i>cortois</i> is humble; the <i>vilain</i> , proud,	31
VII. The <i>cortois</i> is considerate; the <i>vilain</i> , not considerate,	33
VIII. The <i>cortois</i> is helpful; the <i>vilain</i> , not helpful,	40
IX. The <i>cortois</i> is good; the <i>vilain</i> , bad,	41
X. The <i>cortois</i> is generous; the <i>vilain</i> , stingy,	48
XI. The <i>cortois</i> is richly dressed; the <i>vilain</i> , poorly dressed,	52
XII. The <i>cortois</i> is courageous; the <i>vilain</i> , cowardly,	54
XIII. The <i>cortois</i> is versed in the art of courtly love; the <i>vilain</i> , ignorant of the art of courtly love,	58
XIV. The <i>cortois</i> may or may not indulge in guilty love; the <i>vilain</i> indulges in guilty love,	67
XV. The <i>cortois</i> is merry; the <i>vilain</i> , gloomy,	73
XVI. The <i>cortois</i> is beautiful; the <i>vilain</i> , ugly,	74
XVII. The <i>cortois</i> is intelligent; the <i>vilain</i> , stupid,	78
XVIII. The <i>cortois</i> is religious; the <i>vilain</i> , not religious,	82
XIX. (a) Miscellaneous attributes of the <i>cortois</i> ,	85
XIX. (b) Miscellaneous attributes of the <i>vilain</i> ,	87
XX. The <i>cortois</i> is loved; the <i>vilain</i> , not loved,	88
XXI. Conclusions,	95
Bibliography,	97
Index,	101





CORTOIS and VILAIN

I.

INTRODUCTION.¹

In southern France, as is well known, there developed in the Middle Ages a refined aristocratic society such as for a time was not to be found elsewhere, and which has had a permanent influence upon the manners and modes of thought of all Europe. Long immunity from wars had brought to this region a season of prosperity during which the arts of peace were cultivated. Brilliant festivals had taken the place of warlike preparations, and songs of sentiment were heard instead of songs of battle.² An important result of this radical change of activity and interest from the things of war to those of peace was the social emancipation of woman, due also in large measure to the influence of the cult of the Virgin Mary. Leaving the inferior position which she had long occupied, and accorded a degree of personal freedom hitherto unknown to

¹A portion of the expense of printing this thesis has been borne by the Modern Language Club of Yale University from funds placed at its disposal by the generosity of Mr. George E. Dimock of Elizabeth, New Jersey, a graduate of Yale in the Class of 1874.

²Ferdinand Wolf in Stengel's *Ausgaben und Abhandlungen* LXXXVII, Marburg 1890, pp. 35-6.

her, and which has remained hers to the present time, owing to the lasting influence of mediæval Provençal culture, she stepped at once into the chief place in the new society. For a long period she was the centre of literary interest as the object of chivalric love, with which the poets of the twelfth century were mainly occupied, and which offered a welcome means of escape from a domestic life which must have been anything but ideal, in view of the fact that marriages under the feudal system were contracted for political purposes exclusively. Under the influence of the new social conditions a *commerce de courtoisie*, as Langlois has expressed it,¹ sprang up between the sexes.

A similar transformation took place in the aristocratic society of northern France after Louis VI had succeeded in overcoming the turbulent nobles and bringing his domain into a state of tranquility. This transformation was fostered by contact with the much more advanced civilization of Provence, a contact which was brought about by the Crusades, by the *trouvères*, who imitated the love-songs of the *troubadours*, and by the marriage of Louis VII with Eleanor of Poitou in 1137.²

The institution of the system of courtly love in the aristocratic society of France is of interest to us here chiefly because it emphasized the differences already existing under the feudal system between the condition of the noble and that of the peasant, and suggested to the poets comparisons between the two not already suggested by the feudal system. As was natural, these comparisons centered about the question of courtly love, and so the noble is represented to us as endowed with all the graces which should be found in a successful lover, while the *vilain*, or peasant, is pictured as lacking these graces and endowed with their opposites. The image of the *vilain* thus drawn is, of course, a greatly exaggerated one.³

Derived respectively from the Latin **cortensis* and **villanus*, the two terms *cortois* and *vilain* denoted originally in the vernacular two classes socially distinct. The *cortois* was the noble, inhabiting his château and there holding his court, or constituting one of the members of the court of a noble more powerful than himself. The term is thus used by Geffrei Gaimar in vv. 3617-20 of *Lestorie des*

¹*Origines et Sources du Roman de la Rose*, p. 3.

²*Ibid.*, p. 4.

³See Gaston Paris in *Romania* xxiv, page 143.

Engles, where the expression *li curtais* is evidently equivalent to *cil de la curt*:

Et quant iloc tant en parloient
 Cil de la curt i repairoient:
 Et li curtais ke la veaient
 De sa belte mult bien disaient.

The term is also thus used by Wace, *Brut*, vv. 10008-19, with reference to those who frequented King Arthur's court:

N'estoit pas tenus por cortois
 Escos, ne Bertons, ne François,
 Normant, Angevin, ne Flamenc,
 Ne Borgignon, ne Loherenc,
 De qui que il tenist son feu
 Des ocidant dusqu 'à Mont Geu,
 Qui à la cort le roi n'alast,
 Et qui od lui n'i sojornast,
 Et qui n'avoient vestéure
 Et contenance et arméure,
 A la guise que cil estoient
 Qui en la cort Artur servoient.

In *Jaufre*, Appel, *Prov. Chrest.*, St. 3, vv. 56-58, we read that Brunissens' castle is inhabited by *cortois* young men. In vv. 1951-3 of the *Roman de Thèbes*, the word *cortois* is used of courtiers, members of a court:

Li chevalier et li borgeis
 Et li vilain et li cortois
 De traïson le rei blastengent.¹

In vv. 263-6 of the lai of *Guingamor* the word *cortois* is used in the same sense:

Cil de la vile, li borjois,
 Et li vilain et li cortois
 Le convoiérent austresi
 O grant dolor et o grant cri.

The *vilain*, on the other hand, was the peasant who cultivated the *villae* (agricultural districts) and inhabited the villages which grew up among them. Cf. Du Cange, *Glossarium*: *Villani dicti sunt a*

¹Cf. the passage from the *Roman de Robert le Diable* quoted by Du Cange in his *Glossarium* under **corthesanus*.