Literature, Language and Cultural Studies
ISSN Print: 3079-5095
ISSN Online: 3079-5109
https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9161

Gentleman's Love In England During The Renaissance

Zixuan Zhong
Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou 311121, China
Email: 2024111007002@stu.hznu.edu.cn

How to cite this paper: Zhong, Z. X. (2026). Gentleman's Love In England During The Renaissance. Literature, Language and Cultural Studies, 5(1), 78-88. ISSN Print: 3079-5095; ISSN Online: 3079-5109.
https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9161
Published: 2026-04-27

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Erytis Publishing Limited.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Abstract

The concept of "gentleman's love" in Renaissance England is rooted in the tradition of medieval courtly love. Though it evolved over time, at its core it continued to imply a set of value standards balancing reason and affection. Edmund Spenser's epic poem The Faerie Queene, written with a clear didactic purpose, articulates the moral ideals of gentlemanly culture, particularly in Book VI, The Legend of Sir Calidore, or of Courtesy, which centers on the affectional practice of gentleman's love. This paper analyzes Calidore's pursuit of the shepherdess Pastorella, arguing that while his love retains two central dimensions of courtly love—the idealization of women and the emphasis on courtesy—it simultaneously departs from its aristocratic context and moves toward a more rational and affectional balanced, secular model of love. Through the character of Calidore, Spenser rewrites the courtly love tradition within an English moral and cultural framework.

Keywords

The Faerie Queene; gentleman; love

1. Introduction

The question of how love should be practiced has long been central to the ethical formation of the gentleman in Western literary tradition. From the medieval period onward, love was not merely a private affection but a codified mode of conduct, governed by conventions that shaped both emotional expression and social identity. Within the framework of courtly love, the gentleman's devotion was directed toward an idealized lady and articulated through highly stylized forms of courtesy. Yet such a system, grounded in hierarchy and symbolic performance, presupposed a stable social order in which both lover and beloved shared a common set of values. As this order gradually gave way to new social realities in the Renaissance, the adequacy of courtly love as an ethical model came into question. The practice of love increasingly demanded not only adherence to inherited forms, but also a capacity for judgment, adaptation, and moral self-regulation in diverse contexts.

In Book VI of *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) uses the figure of Sir Calidore to represent the social expectations placed upon the ideal gentleman in Renaissance England." Sir Calidore is generally thought to represent Sir Philip Sidney… and to Spenser, Sidney was the perfect knight of the Renaissance—soldier, lover, poet, musician, scholar, and courtier (Mason, 1982: 56-9)." As a model gentleman of the Elizabethan Court (1558-1603), Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) embodied the multifaceted and comprehensive identity of the English gentleman. By shaping Calidore after the historical figure of Sidney, Spenser elevates the allegory beyond mere literary aesthetics and invests it with explicit instructive purpose. This paper argues that through Calidore's pursuit of love, Spenser attempts to unify reason and affection within the practice of gentleman's love, thereby offering a model of moral behavior for others to emulate.

The definition of gentleman's love encompasses loyalty to God, responsibility to society, and, more specifically, care for others. This paper focuses on the latter—namely, the gentleman's practice of romantic love in heterosexual relationships. Such love is both a reflection of personal virtue and a means of constructing one's cultural identity as a gentleman. It is worth noting that as early as the time of Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400), gentleman's love was often centered on loyalty and praise directed toward the queen. In this tradition, the female figure, typically idealized as a sovereign, embodied emotional, political, and moral significance. By Spenser's time, this form of love still bore the strong imprint of courtly love. It was especially evident in the idealization of women and the emphasis on elaborate courtesy in the pursuit of love. However, the balance between reason and affection within this tradition had begun to subtly shift. *The Faerie Queene* was composed at the very intersection of this cultural inheritance and a broader social transformation. Calidore's love for the shepherdess Pastorella in Book VI stands as a powerful example of this transition.

This paper therefore focuses on the following question: How does Spenser, through the romantic relationship between Calidore and Pastorella, rewrite the ethical framework of courtly love into a more secular form of gentleman's love? Rather than rejecting the tradition of courtly romance, he reconfigures it with values that are more grounded in everyday moral experience. This transformation not only reflects the social descent of love as an ideal but also, more broadly, reveals a cultural redefinition of the gentleman's identity in Renaissance England. To address this question, the paper examines how gentleman's love is enacted through a series of practical adjustments in conduct, with particular attention to the interplay between reason and affection. The first part of the argument examines the shift in the object of gentleman's love. It moves from loyalty and constancy directed toward the queen to a form of affection directed toward a particular, ordinary woman. In this process, the relationship becomes more unstable and complicated. The second part then offers a specific discussion of the gradual secularization of courtesy as a

normative code. It first explores how rational judgment governs the expression of courtesy, enabling the gentleman to respond appropriately to differing social contexts. It then considers how affection is disciplined and moderated, so that emotional attachment does not disrupt social harmony but contributes to it. Through these dimensions, Calidore's pursuit of Pastorella emerges as a process in which inherited codes of courtly love are tested, modified, and ultimately rearticulated within a more flexible ethical framework.

2. The Affectional Shift in Gentleman's Love

Early English gentlemanly culture was deeply rooted in the tradition of courtly love[See Philip Mason, The English Gentleman (London: William Morrow, 1982) 56. Castiglione was known in England from 1561, and his work The Book of the Courtier had a huge impact on British society and culture.]. As early as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, gentilesse—meaning noble conduct or refined breeding—was identified as the core of gentlemanly virtue, and "an important part of gentilesse is behavior to women" (Mason, 1982:27). In Chaucer's view, the way a man treats women was central to the measure of his refinement. This perspective was heavily influenced by French and Italian courtly traditions, in which love was regulated by decorum, idealization, and ritual, becoming a key marker of social distinction. Women were often idealized as pure, noble, and inviolable symbols—serving as both objects of romantic aspiration and proofs of a knight's political loyalty and cultural refinement. This hierarchical and idealized structure of love formed the cultural foundation upon which Spenser built his own literary representation.

"The essence of the cult was that its devotee vowed himself to the service, to the praise, to the adoration, of a high-born lady(Mason, 1982:28)." The woman in courtly love is usually a symbol of nobility, inaccessibility, and purity, and the man expresses admiration in the name of service.This idealized shaping of almost religious faith in general is symbolized ultimately in Elizabethan Court. Queen Elizabeth(1533-1603) serves as the perfect object of courtly love, and the gentleman must maintain a delicate balance between reason and affection; Sidney's relationship with her expresses both courtly loyalty and an idealized admiration for noble women. In Spenser's writing, the gentleman's love shifts its affection from sublime fantasies of queenly women to interactions with worldly women.

In "The Legend of S.Calidore, or of Covrtesie", the sixth book of *The Faerie Queene*, Calidore's storyline can be summarized as follows: Calidore is ordered by the Queen to hunt down the "Blattant Beast", and on the way he meets Pastorella, a shepherdess, for whom he develops genuine affection, and after a long and difficult journey, he wins her heart and finally takes the beast into custody. As a shepherdess of unknown origin, Pastorella stands in stark contrast to the typical object of admiration in courtly love traditions.

> And soothly sure she was full fayre offace,
> And perfectly well shapt in every lim,
> Which she did more augment wich modest grace,
> And comely carriage of her count'nance trim,
> That all the rest like lesser lamps did dim :
> Who her admiring as some heavenly wight,
> Did for their soveraine goddesse her esteeme,
> And caroling her name both day and night,
> The fayrest Pastorella her by name did hight.(Spenser,2013,661)

In his portrayal of Pastorella, Spenser demonstrates the contradictions and tensions faced by the gentlemanly culture of Renaissance England in the internalization of the ideal of love. On the one hand, the image of Pastorella as a shepherdess with an ambiguous identity possesses nobility and purity, and carries an ideal projection of near-divinity: the poem praises her as a "soveraine goddesse", clearly perpetuating the idealization of courtly love. On the other hand, this idealized structure of love gradually began to move away from its reliance on "high-born" status, shifting instead toward personal virtue and natural moral character. In *The Faerie Queene*, Calidore's love for Pastorella occurs prior to the revelation of her noble lineage—a narrative choice that highlights how social rank is no longer the guarantor of romantic legitimacy. This is not an isolated case; Renaissance literature more broadly reveals a similar shift in emphasis. In Sidney's *Arcadia*, Philoclea is admired chiefly for her virtue and rationality rather than her aristocratic background. In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Rosalind retreats into the natural world of the forest, where love is explored outside the framework of social identity. Similarly, in Amoretti, Spenser praises the moral and personal qualities of the beloved rather than her lineage. Collectively, these works reflect a growing cultural tendency to downplay inherited status and instead emphasize inner character, thus enabling gentleman's love to evolve into a more grounded and socially engaged emotional practice. However, this does not imply that loyalty to the Queen is replaced or brought to an end. It is worth noting that the quest to hunt down the Blatant Beast and the encounter with the shepherdess are, to some extent, in tension with each other. The poem repeatedly highlights Calidore's hesitation and wavering:

> Her whyles Sir Calidore there vewed well,
> And markt her rare demeanure, which him seemed
> So farre the meane of shepheards to excell,
> As that he in his mind her worthy deemed,
> To be a Princes Paragone esteemed,
> He was unwares surprisd in subtile bands
> Of the blynd boy, ne thence could be redeemed

By any skill out of his cruell hands,
Caught like the bird, which gazing still on others stands. (Spenser,2013,661)

When Calidore meets the shepherdess Pastorella for the first time and falls in love, Spenser describes these sudden feelings as "subtile bands". The word "subtile" often carries connotations of imperceptibility, deception, or even an almost telepathic quality. It conveys not only the invisible and irresistible nature of affection itself but also suggests how desire can interfere with rational judgment. The term "band", typically associated with loyalty and vows, is here modified by "subtile", indicating a form of attachment that is gentle and covert—barely perceptible, yet gradually eroding the will. Love is metaphorically described here as a soft and invisible constraint, suggesting that it is an affectionate tie outside of the knightly task and national duty. More notably, the "bird" (Calidore), a symbol of loyalty, is caught while "looking away", suggesting that his attention has been diverted from his original mission, and that love is presented as a slight straying and dereliction of duty. Spenser does not reject love entirely here, but he does reveal, through rhetoric and imagery, that private love may interfere with the gentleman's focus on a higher purpose.This "subtile bands" reflects the tension between responsibility and affection, between mission and individual desire in the gentleman's identity. This form of deviation is also explicitly indicated and corrected at the end of the poem:

Tho gan Sir Calidore him to advize
Of his first quest, which he had long forlore,
Asham'd to thinke, how he that enterprize,
The which the Faery Queene had long afore
Bequeath'd to him, forslacked had so sore;
That much he feared, least reprochfull blame
With foule dishonour him mote blot therefore;
Besides the losse of so much loos and fame,
As through the world thereby should glorifie his name.(Spenser,2013,684)

The passage underscores that Calidore's earlier diversion from his appointed duty does not go unremarked within the narrative. His self-reproach, expressed in lines such as "Asham'd to thinke, how he that enterprize… forslacked had so sore," reveals a conscious recognition of the moral and social responsibility inherent in his knightly role (Spenser, 2013, 684). The potential loss of "loos and fame" and the threat of "foule dishonour" illustrate that the deviation toward personal or sentimental interests must ultimately be reconciled with overarching duties.

Calidore carries two distinct forms of love. On the one hand, as the "Knight of Courtesy," his loyalty to the Queen implies a politically and religiously idealized form of affection; on the other hand, his affection for Pastorella shifts toward a more

everyday, natural form of emotional practice. The juxtaposition of these two affections in the narrative suggests a transition within gentleman's love. The position of the Queen gradually gives way in Calidore's consciousness to that of an ordinary yet morally authentic woman. This shift marks Spenser's secular rewriting of the courtly love tradition and reflects the growing value placed on romantic affection within Renaissance gentlemanly culture. However, this secularization does not fully dismantle the traditional ideal. At the end of the narrative, Pastorella's noble birth is revealed, and she is restored to her aristocratic parents, allowing the love story to return to the framework of established social hierarchy. This resolution suggests a compromise between the secularization of gentleman's love and the realities of class structure, revealing that while Spenser grants affection greater individuality, he nonetheless preserves the deeper social logic of order and hierarchy.

3. The Practice of Courtesy in Gentleman's Love

Love and courtesy are at the heart of a gentleman's culture. "There is no good thing in the world and no courtesy which is not derived from love as from its fountain…. only the courteous can love but it is their love that makes them courteous.(Mason, 1982:29)" Love is the source of all goodness, and courtesy is not an empty social act, but stems from an inner love above all. Love and courtesy are not derived from each other, but are intertwined and strengthened in practice. Love inspires courtesy, and courtesy constrains love.Tracing back to the Italian courtly tradition, courtesy had a performative and utilitarian aspect, with the fundamental purpose of gaining upper-class approval; it also functioned as a means of charm within heterosexual relationships. But Spenser revisits the cultural function and moral connotations of courtesy, linking it to concrete secular love.Wiseman's analysis of this issue is particularly meaningful:

> Yet rather than depict courtesy as a set of practical skills by which an ambitious man might rise in the esteem of the aristocracy, book 6 reveals that courtesy is a form of judgment in which good decision making holds a central role. This radical form of courtesy, distinct from its antecedents in the Continental courtesy literature, entails for Spenser a kind of perfected discernment: an ability to see, judge, and act properly in a given situation, without hope of reward. (Wiseman, 2016:630)

First, "judgment" serves as the initial act of situational awareness, requiring the gentleman to be perceptive of both the circumstances of others and his own position; "good decision" follows as the capacity to make appropriate choices based on that judgment; and "perfected discernment" reflects a moral quality that harmonizes reason and affection. This framework signals a shift from courtly performative virtue to a more rational and action-oriented agency—one that is also characterized

by selflessness and the absence of expected reward. In Spenser's depiction, Calidore's affection for Pastorella exemplifies gentlemanly virtue precisely because it is not driven by passion, but rooted in discernment and self-discipline. In Calidore's quest for Pastorella, his mode of interaction undergoes a notable transformation: he shifts from initially presenting himself in a refined and courtly manner to relinquishing his aristocratic appearance and adopting a more rustic and pastoral mode of being.

> But she that never had acquainted beene
> With such queint usage, fit for Queenes and Kings,
> Ne ever had such knightly service seene,
> But being bred under base shepheards wings,
> Had ever learn'd to love the lowly things,
> Did litle whit regard his courteous guize,
> But cared more for Colins carolings
> Then all that he could doe, or ever devize:
> His layes, his loves, his lookes she did them all despize.
> Which Calidore perceiving, thought it best
> To chaunge the manner of his loftie looke;
> And doffing his bright armes, himselfe addrest
> In shepheards weed, and in his hand he tooke,
> In stead of steelehead speare, a shepheards hooke, (Spenser,2013,665)

This transformation is not merely a change of outward appearance, but a concrete enactment of "good decision" grounded in prior judgment. Calidore first recognizes that courtly courtesy like"queint usage" and "knightly service" fails to function within Pastorella's experiential world. Her value system is not structured by aristocratic codes, but by an affective attachment to "lowly things", like "Colins carolings." At this point, Calidore comes to realize that Pastorella exists outside the shared social and cultural framework to which he himself adheres. Rather than ranking courtly etiquette above rural life, he acknowledged their differences. Calidore's response, therefore, marks a decisive shift from the display of courtesy to its adaptation. By "doffing his bright armes" and assuming "shepheards weed," he redefines it into a context-sensitive practice. Courtesy here is no longer a fixed set of aristocratic signs, but a flexible ethical disposition guided by discernment. The gentleman does not insist on being recognized according to his own status, but adjusts himself according to the other's capacity for recognition.

Calidore's change is actually establish a genuine mode of relation with the girl. In this sense, his action exemplifies "perfected discernment," where reason mediates affection without reducing it to instrumental desire:

So being clad, unto the felds he went
With the faire Pastorella every day,
And kept her sheepe with diligent attent,
Watching to drive the ravenous Wolfe away,
The whylest at pleasure she mote sport and play;
And every evening helping them to fold:
And otherwhiles for need, he did assay
In his strong hand their rugged teats to hold,
And out of them to presse the milke: love so much could. (Spenser,2013,665)

"Love so much as could", Spenser bluntly illustrates Calidore's gentleman's love in practice. Unlike traditional court culture, he no longer relies on rhetoric or symbolic rituals to woo women, choosing instead to immerse himself in the everyday and participate in the life of a shepherdess. From accompanying her to graze the sheep and chase away the wolves to milking the sheep himself, this seemingly mundane and even menial labour is precisely how he expresses his affection and virtue. This kind of love is detached from the hierarchical structure of courtly love, and tends more towards equality and mutual understanding. The tenderness with which he acts towards Pastorella stems from his genuine "consideration", his sense of restraint and his duty to serve. Significantly, these actions of Calidore occur when he is ignorant of the identity of the shepherdess, suggesting that Spenser wishes to emphasise the gentleman's ability to recognise, and practice friendliness without distinction in the unknown.

His perfected discernment manifests most clearly in his indiscriminate kindness: not only does he show respect and attentiveness toward Pastorella, but he also extends the same goodwill and restraint toward her fellow villagers and even his romantic rival. His benevolence is not determined by status, rank, or personal attachment, but emerges as a consistent, morally grounded practice of judgment. This gentle and inclusive mode of behavior constitutes a key distinction between gentleman's love and courtly love, the latter being far more tied to hierarchy, spectacle, and selective idealization.When confronted with another suitor for Pastorella—a rude young shepherd—Calidore neither responds to provocation with violence nor suppresses him by virtue of his social status, but consistently maintains rationality and restraint. This gentle attitude toward a rival not only avoids disrupting rural order but also elevates his moral standing and discernment of "non-action" in the eyes of the villagers:

And ever when him came in companie,
Where Calidore was present, he would loure,
And byte his lip, and even for gealousie

Was readie oft his owne hart to devoure,
Impatient of any paramoure:
Who on the other side did seeme so farre
From malicing, or grudging his good houre,
That all he could, he graced him with her,
Ne ever shewed signe of rancour or of jarre. (Spenser,2013,665)

Here, the contrast between Calidore and his rival Coridon is extremely striking. Coridon's jealousy is marked through bodily signs, such as "loure," "byte his lip," and "devoure", which externalize an inward disorder, whereas Calidore's demeanor remains controlled, measured, and socially attuned. This composure operates as a visible discipline of the passions, rendering Calidore's conduct legible to the rural community as a form of ethical mastery.

Love is no longer an abstract ideal of emotion but a series of concrete and restrained behavioral practices. These include thoughtfulness and respect when interacting with the beloved, restraint and reason in the face of rivals, and the maintenance of gentleness and moderation in public settings. It is these judgement across different circumstances that constitute the key to grounding gentleman's love. After Calidore integrates into the shepherd's world, he helps with herding and guarding the flock, and even steps forward when the village is in danger. Although these actions seem ordinary, they reveal his keen awareness of others' needs and his capacity for "timely judgment". More importantly, Calidore's kindness to help the villagers represent a stable and natural expression of character. It is precisely through this sensitivity, restraint, and respect toward all that Calidore gains widespread recognition of his character among the villagers. This recognition ultimately transforms into support for his relationship with Pastorella. This indicates that gentleman's love is not only embodied in intimate feelings between two people but is also a process within broader social interactions. Courtesy should not merely serve the social order, but should be a concrete way of practising love and virtue.

4. Conclusion

Spenser continues the core ethical dimensions of the idealization of women and the emphasis on courtesy, through his portrayal of Calidore's love journey in Book VI of *The Faerie Queene*, but at the same time provides a profoundly moral reshaping and a native English transcription of it. In contrast to the high-profile praise and ritualistic pursuits of medieval courtly literature, Calidore's love focuses more on the sincere expression of inner judgement and everyday practice. He demonstrates the virtues of a gentleman through gentle, restrained and considerate actions, making love a part of the construction of a gentleman's identity. This kind of "gentleman's love" is no longer a showy gesture or social skill, but a kind of moral choice embodied in actual life, reflecting Spenser's attempt to remove the ideal of

chivalry from the gorgeous shell and turn it into a more practical direction of ethical practice and individual cultivation. This not only enables courtly love to develop downward from its original aristocratic cultural roots, but also lays a spiritual foundation with local colours for the formation of English gentleman culture.

While affirming the moral turn of Calidore's gentleman's love, it is also important to recognize that although this kind of love has emerged from the formalized rituals of the court, it still retains a core of aristocratic elegance. Even though its expression tends to be everyday and practical, it is also based on the aestheticized and spiritualized understanding of love, which is very different from the common people's view of women in England. The peasant's perspective on women is mostly based on the division of labour in the household, valuing its women's fidelity and how their labour maintains the economic structure of the small household. For Spenser, gentleman's love is the source of spiritual cultivation, and although Calidore puts on a shepherd's outfit and goes down to the fields to shepherd the sheep, he does not really integrate into the ethical logic of the peasants; his love is still a rhetorical affection constructed on virtue, elegance, and inner cultivation. Therefore, Spenser's "gentleman's love" is not a complete folklorization, but a gentle landing of aristocratic ideals, reflecting the efforts of the gentleman's culture during the English Renaissance to maintain spiritual aristocracy in the process of social downward mobility. After the Renaissance, the gentleman's culture in British society became more and more intense, and reached its peak in the Victorian period, and then declined in the subsequent process of adapting to social changes.

This tension between adaptation and preservation also reveals an internal limit within Spenser's ethical vision. Although Calidore's conduct demonstrates a heightened sensitivity to context and a disciplined balance between reason and affection, such a model remains dependent on the gentleman's capacity for self-regulation. The relationship between Calidore and Pastorella does not dissolve hierarchy; it temporarily suspends its visible markers while retaining its moral assumptions. Its emphasis on restraint, discernment, and situational adjustment ensures social harmony, yet it also confines ethical agency within the cultivated individual. In this light, Spenser's rewriting of courtly love can be understood as both progressive and conservative. It expands the scope of moral practice beyond courtly performance, while continuing to privilege an ideal of inward cultivation associated with elite identity. The enduring significance of this model lies in its ability to reconcile change with continuity, offering a vision of cultural transition in which new forms of conduct emerge without entirely displacing inherited values.

References

[1] Biester, James. "A Pleasant and Terrible Reverence: Maintenance of Majesty in Sidney's New Arcadia. (Philip Sidney)." Philological Quarterly, vol. 72, no. 4, University of Iowa, Sept. 1993, p. 419.

[2] Borris, Kenneth. "Spenser's Panthea and Lucian's: Elizabeth, Gloriana, and the Faerie

Queene's Protocols of Encomium." English Literary Renaissance, vol. 50, no. 3, 2020, pp. 359 – 390.

[3] Borris, Kenneth, and Meredith Donaldson Clark. "Hymnic Epic and the Faerie Queene's Original Printed Format: Canto-Canticles and Psalmic Arguments*." Renaissance Quarterly, vol. 64, no. 4, 2011, pp. 1148 – 1193.

[4] Brink, Jean R. "Materialist History of the Publication of Spenser's Faerie Queene." The Review of English Studies, vol. 54, no. 213, 1 Feb. 2003, pp. 1 – 26.

[5] Bryson, Anna. From Courtesy to Civility. New York: Clarendon Press Oxford, 2004.

[6] Hamilton, A. C. ed. Spenser: The Faerie Queene (Longman Annotated English Poets). New York: Routledge, 2013.

[7] Mason, Philip. The English Gentleman. London: William Morrow, 1982.

[8] Oram, William A. "Lyric Address and Spenser's Reinvention of the Proem." Studies in Philology, vol. 116, no. 2, 2019, pp. 253 – 279.

[9] Sokolov, Danila. "Mirabella's Crime and the Laws of Love in the Faerie Queene 6.7 – 8." Studies in Philology, vol. 115, no. 1, 2018, pp. 73 – 98.

[10] Wiseman, Rebecca L. "Courtesy, Cultivation, and the Ethics of Discernment in Book 6 of the Faerie Queene." Sixteenth Century Journal, vol. 47, no. 3, 1 Sept. 2016, pp. 629 – 648.