

The Courts of Love

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland ends with Alice in a court of justice, with the King and Queen and a variety of birds and beasts, as well as the whole pack of cards.

Alice



Frontispiece: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. John Tenniel (1865).

“ The Queen of Hearts, she made some tarts,
 All on a summer day:
 The Knave of Hearts, he stole those tarts,
 And took them quite away! ”

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter 11.

The Courts of Love

The Court of Poitiers was a key place where Eleanor and her daughter Marie de Champagne encouraged the ideas of troubadours, chivalry, and courtly love.

Eleanor



Medieval mirror case, French courtly scenes. Paris (14th century).

The ‘courts of love’ were apparently a palace amusement invented in the courts of Aquitaine for the amusement of the assembled courtiers. The concept of a jury convened to deliberate on cases of romantic disputes presented to them for resolution is believed to be the original inspiration for the English jury system.

The court scene itself based on the characters in a pack of cards, in which the knave of hearts (= knight of love) reads a poem and all the cards making up the court fly up in mock disarray at the flurry of accusations by the king.

“Alice had never been in a court of justice before, but she had read about them in books, and she was quite pleased to find that she knew the name of nearly everything there. ‘That’s the judge’, she said to herself, ‘because of his great wig.’

The judge, by the way, was the King; and, as he wore his crown over the wig, he did not look at all comfortable, and it was certainly not becoming.

...

The twelve jurors were all writing very busily on slates. ‘What are they doing?’ Alice whispered to the Gryphon. ‘They can’t have anything to put down yet, before the trial’s begun.’

‘They’re putting down their names,’ the Gryphon whispered in reply, ‘for fear they should forget them before the end of the trial.’

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter 11.

“Eleanor’s court was a trend-setter in the mediaeval world, known for its sophistication and luxury. Heavily influenced by the Spanish courts of the Moors, it gave patronage to poets and encouraged the art of the troubadours, some of whom were believed to be in love with the beautiful Eleanor. For the court’s amusement, she made up mock trials, ‘the courts of love’ in which 12 court ladies sat on an elevated platform and judged the knights, who read poems of homage to women and acted out proper courting techniques. This was the origin of the 12-member juries of the English court system.”

Women in World History website, accessed December 7, 2011

“During Chrétien [de Troyes]’s life the province of Champagne was ruled by Marie de Champagne, the daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine. Marie had spent most of her earlier years in her mother’s castle at Poitiers, where she was exposed to the romantic poetry of the court bards.”

Guardians of the Holy Grail, by Mark Pinkham, 2004, p. 17

“Henry II implemented a version of this concept in the Assize of Clarendon (1166), which began the transformation of English law from trial by ordeal or trial by battle to an evidentiary model, in which evidence and inspection was made by laymen. This change led to various assizes, such as the assize of novel *disseisin* (recent dispossession) and of *mort d’ancestor* (death of an ancestor), in which twelve ‘sword-girt’ knights were summoned to adjudicate the case. This innovation did much to resolve the civil disruptions of the struggle for the royal succession at the time.”

Assize of Clarendon, Wikipedia, December 7, 2011.