



Curtis as a Surname

by Thomas Curtis: 1997

Some Notes on Curtis as a Surname

Next he came **Courtesy**, much praised by all;
For she had neither folly nor conceit
She was not overnice or overbold,
But reasonable and wise, no insolence
E'er hindered her fair words and fairer deeds.
None misbespoken ever was by her;
She held no rancor against anyone.
A clear brunette was she, with shining face.
No Lady of more pleasant grace I know;
Her form seemed that of empress or of queen.

Holding her in the dance a young knight came,
Worthy and fair of speech, upon all men
Conferring honor. Fair and fine was he,
Well skilled in feats of arms, well loved by her.

from the Romance of the Rose,
lines 326-341.

Curtis is a form of the old French word for **courteous**. It became a surname in England after the Norman conquest.

For more than 300 years after the Norman conquest, Kings of England had lands in France. Henry II possessed Normandy, Anjou, and Aquitaine -- more than half of France. Not until the final stages of the Hundred Years' War did English kings cease to be sovereigns in France. During this 300 years there was continual movement of people between England and France. Much French blood took root in England.

There was, as well, the enormous force of medieval French culture. The glory of Old French poetry was such that from the twelfth century on it became the purveyor of

poetic material and forms for all of Europe. The courts of medieval France set the fashion for the courts of all of Europe; and it was in France that *courtoisie*, the manners of the courts, developed.

In Courtoisie in Anglo-Norman Literature, C.B. West writes:

- [*Courtoisie*] as it is used in Old French may be, as in the modern language, the equivalent of "*politesse recherchée*." Both *courtoisie* and *courtois*, however, have a much richer connotation in mediæval than in modern French, as it appears from the terms with which they are found connected in the older language. The far-reaching associations of *courtoisie* and of the words related to it appear in a number of examples collected from various old French texts. *Courtois*, for example, appears frequently in conjunction with the adjectives *fidele* and *loyal*, while again in many texts *courtoisie* is almost equivalent to sympathetic insight, and is associated with *bonte* and *pitie*. It is a common accompaniment of *largesse* or liberality, especially the kind of liberality that seeks to glorify the man who shows it, and which results in part from the exuberant vitality, or *joie*, characteristic of the *courtois* man or woman. All these qualities are to be seasoned with *mesure*, which implies a sense of proportion and of the fitness of all things. Finally, and most important of all, *courtoisie* cannot reach its full development without love, and conversely, if a man is to love worthily, he must have the qualities already enumerated as being those of the *courtois* character.

An interesting aspect of *courtoisie* is *amour courtois*. In "Courtly Love": Problem of Terminology, John C. Moore writes:

- In 1883 Gaston Paris [a French scholar] published an article in which he used the term *amour courtois* to describe the kind of love between Lancelot and Guinevere in Chretien de Troyes' *Conte de la Charette*. *Amour courtois* was soon translated into "courtly love" and in the next half century innumerable books were written about, or referred to, courtly love. Courtly love was described in these works as an invention of the eleventh or twelfth centuries. It was a special form of love in which the courtly lover idealized his beloved lady and spoke to her or about her in the exalted language usually reserved for a deity...

Paris gave us the term and he was the first to provide a definition. He described the love between Guinevere and Lancelot in the *Conte de la Charette* and then listed four distinctive traits of that love: (1) It is illegitimate and furtive, (2) the lover is inferior and insecure, (3) the lover must earn the lady's affection by undergoing many tests of his valor, prowess, and devotion, and (4) the love is an art and a science, subject to many rules and regulations -- like courtesy in general.

The term was not, however, to have a single or simple meaning. Moore continues:

- Scholars have commonly exercised themselves in defining courtly love, and having framed their definitions, in explaining where courtly love comes from. Some say it was adulterous, others not. Some say it was spiritual and pure, others say it was sensual and erotic. Some say it was freely given, others say it was the result of fate or uncontrollable passion. As for its origins, some say the idea came from Ovid, some say it came from orthodox Christianity, some say it came from the Arabs...

For the past twenty years or so, however, some scholars have taken different approaches. To some degree, the change has been simply to de-emphasize the term and its definition. In his Praise of Love, Maurice Valency spoke of "courtly love" as a "spectrum of attitudes" and showed in that volume the variety of love-themes to be found in twelfth and thirteenth-century poetry.

Courtoisie was thoroughly French in its inspiration, and in England its influence varied according to the strength of the French influence. C.B. West writes:

- [The Anglo-Norman writers] ... move at ease among the conventions of *courtoisie*, but beneath their interest in *courtois* ideas and phraseology is a strong and almost prosaic sense of the realities of ordinary life...

The markedly utilitarian attitude displayed by Anglo-Norman writers, whether it be in relation to the things of this world or of the next, does not conduce to an understanding of the *courtois* point of view, but finds its expression rather in the moralizing and didactic works that form the bulk of Anglo-Norman literature.

In Old French, *court-* was represented by *cort-* and *curt-*. In the fourteenth century it became *court-*. In modern French it is *cour-*. The Romanic suffixes *-ese*, *-es*, and *-eis* represented the Latin suffix *-ensis*. This, in the old French, *courteous* was represented by *cortese*, *cortes*, *corteis*, or by *curtese*, *curtes*, *curteis*. *Corteis* and *curteis* seem to be the most common forms encountered; but in those days, when orthographic forms were not fixed, no doubt forms other than these presented here appeared as well.

In the Middle English period (1150-1500), the following forms are encountered:

Cort + suffix:

cortes, corteis, corteys, corteous, cortois, cortois.

Curt + suffix:

curtais, curtaiss, curtus, curtaise, curtays, curtas, curtes, curteis, curteys, curtase, curtace, curtese, curtis, curtes, curtyse, curtuus, curteous, curtiuous.

Court + suffix:

courteis, courteys, courtes, courtois, courtoys, courtious, courteous, courtais, courtis.

It is interesting to note that the superlative was an inflected form in Middle English. In England the typical form from the fourteenth century is *court-*, after the French *court-*. *-Eous* was substituted for *-eis* in the sixteenth century. Thus, the modern form of the word is **courteous**.

Surnames came into use in England, gradually and from the upper classes down to the lower classes, from roughly the time of the Norman conquest, to 1400 or after. Most surnames appear to have been in regular use prior to 1400. In the sixteenth century surnames became mandatory.

Old England has no lack of medieval records, to be sure. There are a multitude of medieval surnames in taxation rolls, manorial documents, etc. Many thousands of names exist in original sources, large numbers of which are unpublished, or even unread. From such records there are many examples of individuals bearing the Curtis surname:

- Richard Curteis, 1166 Pipe Roll, Bedfordshire.
Robert le Curteis, 1168 Pipe Roll, Devonshire.
Ralph le Curtoys, 1230 Pipe Roll, Lincolnshire.
Henry Courteys, 1297 Minister's Accounts of the Earldom of Cornwall.
... and so on.

Surnames have been classified into four main groups: Sire names, or names of relationship; place-names, or names of location; trade-names, or name of occupation; and nicknames, or names of description. **Curtis** is classified as a Norman nickname. The fifteen most common Norman nicknames are: Russell (red-haired), Grant (tall), Barratt or Barrett (cunning), Curtis or Cortoys (courteous), Hardy (brave), Blunt or Blount or Blundell or Blunden (fair), Bassett or Bass (short), Noble, Lovell or Lovett (little wolf), Beal/e (handsome), Durrant or Durand (unyielding), Pettitt or Petty (small), Prince, Jolliffe or Jolly (gay), Corbett or Corbin (little crow). **Curtis** is the fourth most common of such names. Nicknames seem to have been among the earliest to become hereditary.

The names of Norman origin are of a very small number compared to the vast mass of English surnames. At that time at least three-fourths of the population were of the peasantry. C.M. Matthews writes:

- ... at least three fourths of our surnames come from the lower classes. They echo the lively voices in the market places of the growing towns and the rough talk of the servants and men-at-arms in the castles, rather than the courtly conversation of lords and ladies, although that is to be found too, but above all they relay to us the familiarities of village life in the country, where

the majority of our ancestors tilled the soil.

It is also true that in feudal England, every man had a lord, and if favor could be obtained by naming one's sons after his lord, so much the better.

The Classical Latin word for **court**, that is, *curia*, did not itself survive into the Romanic, its place being taken by *curt* or *court*, which came in from the Classical Latin *cors*, *cohors*. The Classical Latin equivalent for *curteis* is *cortensis* or *cohortensis*. As to the demise of *curia*, and the rise of *curt*, *cort*, "the actual history is involved in obscurity from the paucity of early data."

Curt in the Old French should be distinguished from *curt-* in the Classical Latin; the verb *curtare* meant to shorten, or to abbreviate; *curtus*, *-a*, *-um* meant shortened, mutilated, or defective. There was a Roman (or Sabine) gens name *Curtii*; and Jews, because they were circumcised, were sometimes called *curtii*. But all of this has no relation to **Curtis** as we know it.

The Classical Greek equivalent of *cohors* is *χορτος*, which means an enclosed space, or feeding place; a farmyard; or any feeding-ground or pasturage. *Cohors* can also be used to refer to a farmyard; but has in addition two other distinct usages: one referring to bodies of troops, as in **cohort**, the other referring to the retinue, or staff, of some official; a person's circle or entourage; or any group of person having some common tie.

Curtis was used in Medieval Latin to refer to:

1. The fence of a garden or farmyard.
2. A homestead; the fenced-in square containing the house and yard.
3. A garden or farmyard adjoining the house.
4. A manor.
5. An estate.
6. A landholder's homestead.
7. A holding - i.e., a landholder's homestead with the fields and pastures.
8. A village.
9. An urban site.
10. A churchyard.
11. A baronial residence.
12. The central manor of a Royal residence.
13. The King's palace, the Royal court, or the King's household.
14. The body of persons in attendance to the King; or the personnel at the King's court.
15. The King's treasury.
16. The King's authority.
17. A baronial *curia*.

18. A manorial law court.

A *curtisanus* was a holder of a *curtis*. A *curtarius* was a manorial servant. *Curtensis* meant tied to a manorial household, as a household servant.

Medieval Latin was the lingua franca of the clergy and indeed of all educated men in the Middle Ages; and practically all records were kept in Latin. The wide usage of **Curtis** as a descriptive term in Medieval Latin could have only served to promote its use as a surname.

Sources:

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