Chivalry: Legend or Realistically Relevant Code?

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The word “chivalry” evokes pictures of a knight clad tête à pied in full plate mail armor, astride a mammoth destrier steed (also clad in heavy plate armor), carrying both a massive lance with which to gore those opposing him and a glimmering long sword to hack his enemies into submission. Full of the esprit de noblesse, he is a model of courage in the face of danger—this courage drives him to accomplish daring feats of heroism in the face of innumerable odds and grave peril, “for chivalry abideth not so agreeably in no place as in noblesse of courage” (Keen 10). He rides alone or in company, in search of a noble quest or the hand of a fair maiden. He is polite and benevolent in victory and deferential in defeat. He is a “knight errant,” portrait of the chivalric ideal. Historically, of course, it is a relatively simple thing, with a certain amount of research and interpretation, to reach the conclusion of Maurice Keen in *Chivalry* when he said that “Chivalry is a word that came to denote the code and culture of a martial estate which regarded war as its hereditary profession” (239). The historian has at his hands a variety of tools to work with, such as manuscripts, artifacts, and even novels. The world of literature is also replete with descriptions of stereotypical “knights in shining armor.” From the Arthurian legends of France and England to “The Knight’s Tale” by Geoffrey Chaucer (himself a squire, the rank below a knight, in the Hundred Years War), there is a strong tradition extolling the virtues of these “chivalric” men. These tales of gallantry tell the discerning reader something about the social world of the times but are incapable of showing much more than an ideal to which people once aspired. The marked lack of narrative contrast in the literature leaves the reader with a decreased awareness of both the characters’ feelings and any larger sense of what is transpiring in the
world in general. Using both the historical model and the writer’s perspective can provide a more comprehensive view of chivalry, and help understand the concept as fully as possible, including to what extent it ever touched people’s lives in the real world.

Historians generally recognize the age of chivalry as occurring at the end of the medieval period, stretching from about 1100 AD to 1500 AD, and as a logical next step from feudalism (given the culture of Europe) (Keen 238). The chivalric codes varied subtly from region to region but contained a number of immutable characteristics, the most important being loyalty to one’s liege (necessary because of the aforementioned feudal system dominating Europe in the Middle Ages), courage, and honor. What made chivalry distinct from feudalism were at least two other, equally important distinctions: the inclusion of courtly love in the chevalier’s ideal and the fact that, given the socioeconomic structure of the time, none but nobles could aspire to knighthood (Keen 146).

Love was seen by medieval scholars as “a human passion which, rightly regulated, sharpens and refines the ambitions of martial men” (Keen 14). Courtly love, though fairly obscured from the eyes of the historian due to the fact that chroniclers of the day dealt mainly with feats during wartime, was never quite what it was supposed to be in the day-to-day life of members of the nobility: “Men beat their wives and foully berated ladies in public gatherings” (Painter 147). Though in “courtly love” there existed a standard giving women nominally more rights than they’d ever had, it is dubious whether or not this standard ever played a significant role in elevating women to much more than objects which, though theoretically to be revered, were actually afforded nothing more than wartime exemption from rape. Also, in an age where “marriage politics” were so important to the aristocratic class for both economic and territorial considerations, there could not have been the freedom to choose one’s partner as dictated by courtly love: “in the grimmer worlds of war and politics. . . play had to be laid aside and. . . marriages were so often arranged not on the basis of love (as in romance) but of dynastic
considerations” (Keen 117). Nowhere can the effects of marriage politics be seen so clearly as in the marriage between Phillipe de Hardi, Duke of Burgundy, and Margaret de Male, Countess of Flanders and Artois. This marriage provided a foundation for what were to become known as the “Dukes of the West” and aided France immensely in the Hundred Years War, helping to unify a country which at the time was little more than a loose confederation of Barons, Dukes, and Counts who grudgingly supported the King but fought between themselves more than with England (Neillands 162). The king of England at the time, Edward III, also dabbled in dynastic expansion through the marriage of his vassals: “As Edward was already supporting the other claimant [to the French province of Brittany]. . . . his strategy here was devious and somewhat unchivalrous” (Neillands 117).

Chivalry was restricted to the upper class for a mundane reason—finances. The chivalrous knight was expected, in addition to maintaining an expensive suit of armor (which only escalated in price as technology improved from the chain mail common in the 1100’s to the fluted plate mail of the 1400’s), to maintain an absolute minimum of one horse (one quality charger could cost a man up to a year’s income from his lands):

[The knight] needed a good horse, and remounts, and someone to help him look after them and to bring them to an engagement. Most knights had in the first instance to find their own equipment: to be a cavalryman began to imply substantial means or substantial patronage. . . . New tactics and improved technology at each step strengthened the aristocratic bias of recruitment into knighthood, and sharpened in its ranks the awareness of a common bond, called chivalry. (Keen 26-27)

As the code of chivalry progressed, an obligation to ostentatious displays of grandeur and massive feasts became an important aspect. The demands of largesse could even break a knight, and especially in the latter part of the 1500’s, when nobles were competing with the burgeoning upper middle class, extravagance could prove ruinous to the lesser noble: “Both food and clothes
had become richer, more varied, and far more expensive” (Painter 12). Chivalry and knighthood by definition, then, were exclusively the domain of the upper class, and as the overwhelming majority of the populace lacked the most basic criteria (a horse and armor) needed to become “chevaliers,” the code became a way of expanding the prosperity of those already prosperous and keeping those not moneyed socially immobile. Thus, by definition, the ideal chivalrous knight was secure in his status so long as the only class with enough capital to purchase and maintain armor and several good steeds was the noble class. It is primarily for this reason that chivalry ended around the 1500’s, for it was at that time that towns (and the revenue they brought) made an entrance on Europe’s map, and merchants and town burghers became wealthy enough to reach economic parity with the nobles, breaking up the aristocratic monopoly at the top of society.

Perhaps the most telling test of chivalry is whether or not the “heads” of states at the time, the kings, followed the code of chivalry. Secular chivalry exempted kings from one of the more important parts of the chivalric code, the oath of allegiance. When religion made its entrance to the world of knighthood in 1096 AD with the First Crusade, a precedent was set for church-sanctioned knightly expeditions. This meant that kings no longer occupied the top rung of the medieval ladder; God was above them. It behooved kings to continue chivalric practices since the notion of fealty benefited them the most. In fact, the kings of the time gave only token respect to chivalry, abandoning all pretensions in the first years of the fifteenth century. The slaughter of noble French prisoners at Agincourt in 1415 by Henry V, king of England during the Hundred Years War, was the death knell of chivalry. The advent of an effective distance weapon (the longbow) in that war destroyed the dominance of knightly cavalry, which necessarily did away with the code knights had followed as they became less important both militarily and economically (Neillands 221).

Blaming Henry or any king for consciously destroying an ideal which wasn’t realistically practical even when it was technically feasible is pure folly,
however. Although using such a “rational actor” model to lay the blame at the feet of one man is certainly neat, it ignores the fact that in order for a king (Henry, in this case) to have felt capable of committing such an atrocious act without fear of massive repercussions, a precedent condoning this type of unchivalric behavior must have been set sometime before Agincourt. Henry must have had assistance (he did not slit the throats of hundreds of French nobles himself). In fact, there was a precedent for acting in an unchivalrous manner, set earlier in the Hundred Years War by English lords and foreign marauders. After the first (of many) treaties of peace signed between the French and English, which left significant portions of France in English hands, a curious and previously unseen thing happened—instead of disbanding entirely, portions of the great armies which had been released on French soil continued to operate under the leadership of minor nobles. These nobles, lacking the resources of greater lords and impoverished by the vast sums of money required to live the type of life demanded by the chivalric code, formed mercenary bands called “Free Companies” (Neillands 162) and traveled the land looting, fighting, pillaging, raping, and living generally unchivalric lives:

Aujourd’hui toutes les guerres sont contre les povres gens laboureurs, contre les biens et meubles qu’ils ont. Pourquoi je ne l’appelle pas guerre mais très bien me semble pillerie et roberie... qui ne scet partout bouter les feus, rober les eglises, occuper leur droit et emprisonner les prestres...
(Fallows, 70)

These mercenary troops were comprised of many nationalities and varied in composition from the famed “White Company,” which consisted of some 3000 English longbowmen and men-at-arms, to German and Swiss bands. Free Companies of this sort wielded so much power that, for a time, they defied even King Charles V of France: “when the royal army attacked a mercenary force... the royalists were swiftly defeated and many of [the King’s] knights were captured and held for ransom” (Neillands 162). Capturing
French lords and swelling the coffers of England, Germany, and any other nation participating in this looting of French resources provided a useful service to the kings of the nations represented (especially England), so this style of fighting was not reproached. One such company even captured the Guines (a major French castle), selling it to the English for a great sum (Neillands 116). The overall effect of these mercenary bands was that chivalry was undermined in a number of ways, first and foremost by setting a trend of unchivalric military practices that led to the extreme measures initiated on the battlefield of Agincourt and eventually spread to all aspects of warfare. King Henry V and other kings like him were not responsible for disrespecting and ignoring chivalric codes; it was the bands of profit-hungry lords who (ironically) needed capital to support the opulent style of life demanded by chivalry who set the example followed by regents of later eras. The sphere that initially spawned the idea of chivalry-war also contributed mightily to its downfall, technologically, strategically, and economically.

In literature, a more clear-cut picture of chivalry emerges. The “Knight’s Tale” portrays chivalry as an earthly code that is capable only of so much show, a means by which people can be nominally controlled, but ultimately ineffective in the larger world. The most powerful human player in the story is Theseus, Duke of Athens. He is widely held to represent chivalry, where “[nature in the form of the Greek gods’ effects is] tempered by chivalric authority (Theseus’ formidable will)” (Woods 288) and holds sway over the lives of the story’s two main characters, Palamon and Arcite, who themselves are bound by the code of chivalry, even going so far as to fall victims to the charms of Emelye, a fair maiden. This love, of course, is the ideal of courtly love, for the two men (cousins and blood brothers) are in prison and can hope only to love the woman from a distance, with no “real world” considerations to worry about. The bulk of the story is about how the two strive for their freedom and the hand of this maid they both love so dearly. From the beginning, however, examining the text leads one to believe that this story is not one exalting chivalry but ridiculing it.
First of all, the two have sworn allegiance to Theseus in exchange for their lives, yet Palamon is determined to break out of prison and, returning to his homeland, raise an army to make war on Theseus and claim the hand of Emelye for his own: “[Palamon] plans to return to Athens with an army of fellow Thebans to fight Theseus for the hand of Emelye” (Hallissy 61). In direct conflict with one of the most basic tenets of chivalry, loyalty, Palamon plots the overthrow of his liege. It is only an incredible set of coincidences which keeps him from carrying out this deed, and his great plans come to naught as he and Arcite (who was released years ago) are captured and must duel for Emelye’s hand.

This tournament-style duel would initially appear to support the power of chivalry in governing man, for the tourney was a popular aspect of medieval times, and one of the most basic components of a chivalric knight was his success at this type of tournament. Things do not go as planned, though. Theseus rules Arcite the winner of the tournament, but as the victor comes forward to “receive the prize,” he is struck a mortal blow by fortune. Thrown from his horse, he is fatally wounded: “What is this world? What askest men to have?/Now with his love, now in his colde grave/Allone, withouten any compaigne” (Whittock 71). Emelye goes to Palamon, the loser of the contest set up by chivalry, and the moral of the story (as it pertains to chivalry) is not that “the woes of disaster and the anguish of grief heal, and men come to see life whole again” (Whittock 74), but that chivalry is a farce—it can dictate to a limited extent how men act, but it is powerless when pitted against chance. Had it not been for chance, Palamon would have waged war upon his liege. Chivalry obviously meant nothing to this man, who is still described by Arcite as a worthy opponent and an excellent match for Emelye. In this case, the lamentations put forth by the newly-engaged couple over Arcite’s death, the most sorrowful out of the multitudes mourning the passing of such a heroic knight, call to mind the words of Gertrude in Shakespeare’s Hamlet, when she says “the lady doth protest too much, methinks” (Shakespeare, 193). Through the masterful wordplay of Chaucer, one begins to take a skeptical view of
chivalry, acknowledging the code as existing but with a questionable amount of influence over real life—a pointed change from the Arthurian literature written centuries earlier.

No such doubts are initially presented in the Arthurian legends. King Arthur, in versions of the myth written around 1100 AD, cleanses England of factions and rules the famed “Round Table” of 150 knights. All of the knights are held to the strictest vows of chivalry and are paragons of justice, mercy, and good. Eternally searching for wrongs to right, the reader is familiarized with knights like Lancelot, Mordred, Gawain, Galahad, Perceval, Kay, and many others. These knights all bear some chivalric significance, and studying them can give an accurate idea of the importance of chivalry at the time.

Lancelot is the ideal of a chivalrous warrior, unequaled in feats of arms, honorable and loyal to his liege. His infamous fault is the adulterous affair with Guinevere, which breaks both the limits of courtly love and the oath of fealty to his king, Arthur. He is forgiven, though, for he refuses to kill Arthur or to make war on him, retreating to France instead and by doing so acknowledging the oath he has pledged. As a human, Lancelot is not faultless, but he obeys the chivalric standards in the end. In him one sees perhaps the closest any man can hope to come to achieving the chivalric ideal, for all humans are flawed and can only hope to achieve so much. In Lancelot, the writers of Arthurian legend are tacitly agreeing that chivalry is a code to emulate, but that transgressions are inevitable, and even the best knight is not immune to sin (Knight 129-132).

Mordred is much more simple to analyze. He is the disloyal knight who brings war and destruction when he breaks his oath of fealty to Arthur and makes war on the good king. The consequences of Mordred’s actions are many: England is thrown into the chaos of war existing before the reign of Arthur, Mordred himself dies, and Arthur is killed. A stern warning as to the consequences of what happens when powerful men break the code of chivalry, Mordred’s actions and their results are obviously meant to dissuade powerful nobles in chivalrous societies from aspiring to power not theirs, especially
when their king is away at war. Nobles of the age were very independent, and because the kings counted on the earls, princes, lords, and dukes for assistance and support, it makes sense that, in betraying Arthur, Mordred evokes in the reader the most heated passions and the most disastrous results in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (Knight 105).

Gawain is portrayed as King Arthur’s right-hand man, present from beginning to end, always faithful and always spoiling for battle. Through various myths, notably *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and “The Poisoned Apple,” Gawain is depicted as a knight who, while very skilled in war, has his equals, and while constantly in pursuit of battle is almost foolhardy in his never-ending hunt for blood and honor. First to take up the opportunity to decapitate an apparent adversary, Gawain is ultimately taught a lesson (as is the knight reading the tale) in honesty and honor, as Gawain is caught in a lie and punished accordingly. Humbled momentarily, the imprint of “honor above all” which is made on a young Gawain manifests itself unfavorably in the next-to-last tale in the Arthurian series. “The Poisoned Apple,” in which Lancelot is discovered as the secret lover of Guinevere and eventually ab­scends with her while killing two of his erstwhile companions, teaches the reader what honor can lead to if it is uncompromising. Gawain swears an oath to kill Lancelot and constantly goads Arthur on his mission to slay Gawain. Gawain’s stubborn insistence on retribution alienates Lancelot completely, isolating one who would have told in the coming war against Mordred. In keeping Arthur from home, Gawain’s mission allowed Mordred to raise a loyal army and begin consolidating power. Gawain provides the reader with a good picture of the average knight, thirsting for honor even when strategies other than attack are called for (Knight 141-142).

Galahad and Perceval are both included in “The History of the Holy Grail.” They represent what the pious knight should strive for in chivalry. Pure of heart, Galahad is accepted into heaven, and Perceval is entrusted with guarding the sacred vessel. None of the other knights (save Bors, who also becomes a guardian of the Grail) are afforded these honors, but it is simple to
see that the unblemished virtue of the knights honored by heaven is present to show a knight what he had to gain by being pious. It is important to note that Lancelot is not eligible for reward, for he has housed impious thoughts about Guinevere, and these thoughts bar him from having a pure soul. An overwhelming number of the knights of the Round Table cannot even find the grail, perhaps reflecting the fact that religion was not an important factor in the knighthood of the time, and many knights, though paying homage to Christianity, fell somewhat short when it came to the expectations placed on them by the church (Keen 60-61).

Kay, Arthur's seneschal, is reviled by all and inevitably loses any contest of arms in which he participates. This is a reflection of the hatred felt for all seneschals of the time; tax collectors and managers of their Lord's estate, the stereotypical seneschal was a greedy, loudmouthed braggart. The humiliation of Kay again and again at the hands of various knights (but most often Lancelot) serves not as a commentary on the actual skill of all seneschals; rather, it seems to be almost wishful thinking on the parts of the authors of these legends and myths (Knight 79).

The perceptive historian would see that chivalry was never much more than a set of standards which kept the nobles firmly in power. The great lords did not respect the chivalric codes themselves but used them to legitimize their rule. Only obeying the laws of chivalry when they saw fit, kings and nobles eagerly ignored the precepts of chivalry when they stood to benefit (Phillipe de Hardi's rather pragmatic marriage) or when they saw the “transgression” as necessary (Henry V at Agincourt) for their survival. When chivalry was used, the consequences were disastrous, as can clearly be seen in the results of the battle of Poitou, where King John the Good of France and his knights of The Order of the Star were cut to pieces. The Order of the Star was a knighthood somewhat akin to England's Order of the Garter, but the “Knights of the Star” were not allowed to flee from battle. Arguably the most chivalrous group ever, all its members were slain or captured at Poitou in 1356 (Neillands 131-32). Unarguably present, as seen in the previous
example (which was the rule, not the exception), chivalry ceased to be militarily effective in the early fourteenth century and had never been taken seriously in the political and economic spheres. Literature, though ostensibly supporting chivalry in “The Knight’s Tale” and advocating it outright through Arthurian legends, certainly shows that chivalry had its faults, both as an ideal (the example of Gawain) and as an effective way of governing (though he does not provide an alternative, in ridiculing the power of chivalry through Theseus’ ineffective attempts to control situations, Chaucer points out the major flaws in chivalry). The words, thoughts, and actions of characters in literature provide insight as to how effectively people expected chivalry to function and what weaknesses were present in the system. Noel Fallows is only half-correct when he states that period literature and the reality of the day were diametrically opposed:

In the Middle Ages the chivalric world in fiction was often diametrically opposed to the chivalric world in fact, for the honor codes that regulated the lives of the fictional heroes of chivalric romance often did not make a smooth transition from fiction to reality, and consequently tended not to regulate the lives of their real-life counterparts... Few knights strictly heeded the law, and most fought more amongst themselves and with the king than they did with... the common enemy (53).

While Fallows is correct in the sense that the honor codes regulating the lives of heroes of the time were rarely followed, he does literature a grave injustice by stating that all literary figures precisely followed the codes of chivalry. Just as “Dissent from the chivalric collectivity finds expression through... that other late medieval Arthurian text that is uneasy about public and chivalric values, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” (Knight 145), “The Knight’s Tale” parodies the shortcomings of chivalry nearly as effectively as did the ransoms extracted from the families of the Knights of The Order of the Star on the field at Poitou or the life-blood of the French nobility at Agincourt. It is certain that chivalry was never popularly followed, and though the novel and
historical account differ in their approaches to this fact, their conclusions are nearly identical.

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