

Defining Chivalry in the Arthurian Cycle

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This essay will explore the definition of chivalry as it is presented in the Arthurian cycle of stories. There are many definitions, comparisons, and lists of practices that define what chivalry is and what it entails, and this essay will examine some of those definitions and how they are represented in Peter Ackroyd's retelling of Thomas Malory's classic Arthurian cycle *Le Morte d'Arthur*, with specific reference to two of the Knights of the Round Table.

Chivalry can be generally defined as a code or set of ideals upheld by men in the occupation of knighthood during the Middle Ages. Chivalry was a code of behaviour that knights strove to uphold, and they were also defined by it – knights extended, defended and received chivalry, and it was, in essence, what made a knight a knight. Doel and Lloyd, in *Worlds of Arthur: King Arthur in history, legend and culture*, define King Arthur himself as a 'chivalric nobleman in which the ideal heroic qualities of the man-at-arms – his aggressiveness and fierceness and unswerving allegiance to his feudal lord – [are] blended with gallantry, graciousness and Christian humility.' (Presentation 5, Peta Beasley, slide 11: Doel & Lloyd, page 107)

Keen, in his introduction and exploration of chivalry as a cultural practice, describes it thus:

'Sometimes chivalry is spoken of as an order, as if knighthood ought to be compared to an order of religion: sometimes it is spoken of as an estate, a social class – the warrior class whose martial function, according to medieval writers, was to defend the *patria* and the Church. Sometimes it is used to encapsulate a code of values apposite to this order or estate. Chivalry cannot be divorced from the martial world of the mounted warrior: it cannot be divorced from aristocracy, because knights commonly were men of high lineage: and from the middle of the twelfth century on it very frequently carries ethical or religious overtones. But it remains a word elusive of definition, tonal rather than precise in its implications.'

(Keen, M. *Introduction: the idea of chivalry*, p. 2)

In accordance with the idea that knighthood is an order comparable to a religion, a set of ten 'Commandments of Chivalry', written in 1891, can be found in Leon Gautier's book *Chivalry*, and are as follows:

1. 'Thou shalt believe all that the Church teaches, and shalt observe all its directions.

2. Thou shalt defend the Church.
3. Thou shalt respect all weaknesses, and shalt constitute thyself the defender of them.
4. Thou shalt love the country in which thou wast born.
5. Thou shalt not recoil before thine enemy.
6. Thou shalt make war against the Infidel without cessation, and without mercy.
7. Thou shalt perform scrupulously thy feudal duties, if they be not contrary to the laws of God.
8. Thou shalt never lie, and shall remain faithful to thy pledged word.
9. Thou shalt be generous, and give largess to everyone.
10. Thou shalt be everywhere and always the champion of the Right and the Good against Injustice and Evil'

(Presentation 5, Peta Beasley, slide 26: Gautier, 1891)

When a knight's behaviour was not considered chivalrous, it was generally described as shameful or disgraceful; when a knight did not uphold the chivalric code then they returned to their court 'in disgrace' (Malory, p. 97). Again, the idea of knighthood as an order comparable to religion goes some way to explaining why disgrace and shame was felt by those who did not uphold the chivalric code – similar to the feelings of shame wrought upon those who sinned or did not uphold the Catholic religious practices of the time.

In Malory's comprehensive Arthurian cycle *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the character of Sir Tristram follows a similar path to that of the famous Sir Lancelot du Lake: he is an excellent fighter and considered a noble champion of the chivalric code, except for one glaring instance of shame – that of loving his king's wife more than was considered decent.

Malory portrays Sir Tristram's behaviour and actions as highly chivalric, even before he is dubbed a knight. At a young age his stepmother tries to murder him, for which she is condemned to death. Tristram convinces his father, the king, not to have her executed, and she is forever grateful to him for saving her life (Malory, p. 93). Even though he is quite young, this act upholds the chivalric practice of generosity and of defending the weak.

When Tristram is older he 'travelled to the court of France in order to be tutored in the arts of chivalry.' There Tristram learns the 'language and culture of that most civilised of courts' (Malory, p. 93). He learns music, harp playing, hawking, and hunting, and even writes a book on hunting. These are all considered worthy, knightly pursuits of a noble young gentleman, and contribute to his already chivalrous attitude.

When he was eighteen he returned to his family in England, to find that the King of Ireland had demanded tribute from his father. Tristram's father offered to settle the matter by

having two knights fight to settle the matter – one knight for the King of Ireland and one for himself. The King of Ireland sent Sir Marhalt, a knight of the Round Table who was well-known for his bravery and skill in battle. Tristram's father sent out word for a knight to fight Sir Marhalt, but no man came forward. Tristram offered to ride to the court of his uncle, King Mark, and be made a knight to fight Sir Marhalt, to which his father said 'I am content, if your courage rules you' (Malory, p. 93-94). Tristram was made a knight, and he and Sir Marhalt met on an island off the coast of Cornwall in order to fight undisturbed. Sir Tristram said to his companion Gouvernail 'Tell [my father] this too. I will never be accused of cowardice. If I die with honour, he must pay no tribute to Ireland. But if I should flee, then let him flay my corpse and deny me Christian burial' (Malory, p. 96). This speech is a strong example of the chivalric code in practise. Sir Tristram does not want to be known as a coward, and if he were to run away from the fight with Sir Marhalt he would bring shame on himself and the order of knighthood. However, if he were to lose the fight but die honourably, i.e. fight to his last breath and not surrender or run away, he will have upheld the chivalric code and his father would not be obliged to pay tribute to the King of Ireland for Sir Tristram's honourable sacrifice for his country. This speech demonstrates the chivalric practices of bravery, courage, patriotism and loyalty.

Sir Marhalt arrived and commented upon Sir Tristram's youth and apparent inexperience, to which Sir Tristram replied 'You must realize, fair knight, that I will not avoid battle with you. I was made a knight precisely in order to fight you. I am the son of a king. I have sworn an oath to assail you with all my strength, and to save Cornwall from the exaction of tribute. That is my cause. That is why I come against you here' (Malory, p. 96). They fought, and Sir Tristram gave Sir Marhalt a mighty blow to the head, and a piece of his sword lodged in Sir Marhalt's skull. Seeing that he was to be defeated, Sir Marhalt fled to his ship, taunted by Sir Tristram, and then he 'sailed back to Ireland in disgrace', where he soon died of his wounds (Malory, p. 97). Sir Marhalt's flight from the battle is considered shameful, as one of the commandments of chivalry is 'Thou shalt not recoil before thine enemy' (Gautier, 1891).

This first chapter of Sir Tristram's knighthood illustrates the chivalric ideals of courage, bravery, and loyalty to one's king and country. Despite Sir Tristram's youth and inexperience, when a challenge was issued to defend his kingdom against an enemy, he alone answered the challenge, and became a knight specifically to defend and uphold his loyalty to his king and country. This upholds Gautier's commandments 4, 5, 7, 8 and 10, concerning loving one's country, never recoiling before the enemy, remaining faithful to thy pledged word, being a

champion of the Right and the Good against Injustice and Evil, and scrupulously performing feudal duties (Gautier, 1891).

Despite winning the battle, Sir Tristram was badly wounded by Sir Marhalt's poisoned sword, and travelled to Ireland to be cured. He was taken to the King of Ireland's court, where he disguised his identity so as not to be killed in revenge for the death of Sir Marhalt. There he was healed by the King's daughter, Isolde, and Sir Tristram and Isolde soon fell in love. Sir Tristram stayed at the court of the King of Ireland for many months, and participated in tournaments and jousts against many brave knights, earning the respect of the King, Queen, Isolde, and everyone in the court.

The Queen eventually discovered that Sir Tristram was the one who killed Sir Marhalt, and the King confronted him. 'I will not lie to you sir... I called myself Tramtrist because I did not wish to be known. Yet I must tell you, sir, that I fought your knight on behalf of the King of Cornwall. I wished to be called a true knight who fought for those he loved.' And the King replied 'As God is my judge, I hold no grudge against you. You were behaving according to the proper forms of knighthood' (Malory, p. 102).

This incident shows that, despite Sir Tristram having killed one of the King of Ireland's knights, the King so admired him for his proficiency as a chivalrous knight that he cannot be angry with him for killing Sir Marhalt. Sir Tristram then leaves the court of the King of Ireland and pursues many adventures, eventually becoming a Knight of the Round Table.

In conclusion, chivalry in the Arthurian cycle of stories can be best described as a set of codes and practices upheld by knights which was comparable to a religious order. When upheld, knights were considered honourable, dutiful and faithful, and were well-respected and admired by noblemen and women. When it was not upheld, however, it was considered shameful and disgraceful, and many knights preferred death to the shame and disgrace of breaking the code, as they were considered poor knights and untrustworthy if they were unchivalrous.

The first chapter of Sir Tristram's adventures in Peter Ackroyd's retelling of Thomas Malory's Arthurian cycle of stories illustrates many of the practices and behaviours that were required of knights in order to be considered chivalrous. The scene with Sir Marhalt also illustrates that knights who did not uphold the chivalric code were disgraced, and that it was better for a knight to die in a fair, honourable fight than to flee and be branded a disgraced coward.

References

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