

Topic Page: [Chivalry](#)

Definition: **chivalry** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

(Fr. *chevalerie*, knighthood) Code of ethics and behaviour of the knightly class that developed from the feudal system. A combination of Christian ethics and military codes of conduct, the main chivalric virtues were piety, honour, valour, chastity, and loyalty. A knight swore loyalty to God, king and his love. Chivalry was always prone to corruption, and the traditions died out in the 15th century.



Image from:

[Reconstruction of a pair of sport jousters from... in DK Eyewitness Books: Horse](#)

Summary Article: **Chivalry**

From *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*

In the Middle Ages, *chivalry* was a synonym of *knighthood*, describing either the reality of being a knight or the virtues associated with idealized portrayals of knights in medieval literature and culture. Thus, the degree of a man's chivalry was measured by his adherence to codes of behavior that might vary with time and place but would always include skill and bravery in battle ("prowess"), personal responsibility and dignity ("honor"), and a reverent and protective stance toward women, translated into direct action to help a woman in need or in danger ("service"). This last aspect of chivalry, which is most commonly referenced today when a man is called "chivalrous," usually consists of a man's willingness to inconvenience himself for the benefit of a woman, for example, by opening a door for a female companion or by stopping on the highway to assist a stranded motorist. Such chivalry continues to be perceived as a masculine quality: A woman performing these same actions might be praised as "considerate" or even as "courteous," but not as "chivalrous."

The cultural resonances of the term *chivalry* have changed repeatedly since its medieval origins, but chivalry as a collective ideal has been closely associated with issues of gender and power. Originally denoting an entirely masculine sphere of operations, *chivalry* later became a word associated with particular dysfunctions in male-female relationships, then an ideal designed to remedy those dysfunctions by promoting a masculine identity centered on devotion to women. More recently, in the often-quoted phrase "Chivalry is dead," this ideal is preserved in a nostalgic reference to positive aspects of male-female relations that the speaker believes to have been extinguished by transformative modern forces such as democratization, industrialization, and the feminist movement.

Chivalry in the Middle Ages

The English word *chivalry* was derived directly from the French word *chevalerie*, meaning literally "exploits on horseback." When French first became a written language (10th and 11th centuries), the connotations of this word were military: It emphasized the great difference in status between low-ranking members of the infantry and men from the nobility, who alone were trained to ride into battle on costly warhorses. In French texts from this early period, one already finds the superlative description of a few noble warriors as "flowers of chivalry," a metaphor suggesting their fully developed embodiment of collective ideals: Those ideals were entirely military, however, having to do with how a mounted warrior interacted with men rather than with women.

Just as a man called a *chevalier* was being distinguished from a warrior who fought on foot, this term

also distinguished him from other members of the nobility, those who had become priests or whose primary occupation was the governing of their families' ancestral lands. Landowners did go to war on horseback, but a man whose primary title was chevalier was likely to be a younger son from a noble family, someone who fought to defend his family's claim to a certain piece of land but who could not expect to inherit or govern that piece of land and thus whose access to wealth and power would always be limited. In a time when many legal matters were decided by combat or by a judge, rather than by written laws and contracts, ambitious younger sons could acquire their own territories by military conquest, especially if they could kidnap and/or marry by force a woman for whom such territories had been designated as a marriage dowry. During this period, therefore, apprehension arose about the tendency among some younger sons to leave their families' lands and move about the countryside alone or in bands of mounted warriors, seeking opportunities for such unauthorized plunder and for the social climbing that could result from it.

Beginning in the 12th century, it became a deliberate strategy of the dominant culture to promote a new definition of chivalry that went beyond military strength to encompass ethical personal conduct, especially toward women. Yet the gradual development of certain prominent feudal lands into nations during this same period (12th and 13th centuries) meant that a young knight without land could gain great wealth and influence through loyal service to a king: That is, he could do so if he were able to prove his own trustworthiness. Therefore, what the new, idealized chivalry offered to the young knight was a new measure of dignity and a new and easier path toward worldly success.

The new phenomenon of written literature in languages other than Latin (particularly Old French, which was the language of the dominant culture in both France and England from the 11th to the 14th centuries) provided an appropriate arena in which to promote this redefinition of chivalry. Texts recounting the legends of King Arthur, in particular, lent themselves well to this project. For instance, Arthur was represented as a powerful but wise king reigning over a vast territory by delegating power to a select group of younger knights whose military strength would allow them to excel at the king's missions and eventually be rewarded with wealth and power of their own. The drive toward personal excellence among the sympathetic knights in these stories was explicitly shown to have replaced the drive toward simple dominance by any means necessary or available, which continued to motivate the villains of Arthurian literature. Because noble women were important patrons of such chivalric literature, they helped to set its agenda and also made up a significant proportion of its audience, which ensured that romantic episodes and those promoting ethical conduct toward women would receive consistent attention in literary dramatizations of the new chivalry. Since this was a competitive model in which the goal for each knight was to be perceived as the best man in every respect, a tendency toward inflation was built into it: The most successful of the resulting literary texts thus featured knights such as Lancelot, who were simultaneously the best fighters and the most passionate and respectful lovers that the world had ever known.

Chivalry as a collective ideal continued to dominate the literary and social culture of the late Middle Ages and beyond (14th to 16th centuries) and took on some new forms: guidebooks for chivalrous conduct proliferated, debates were held about how a virtuous knight might resolve various ethical dilemmas, and new orders of knighthood were founded to garner the support of noble men for particular beliefs, virtues, or military projects. Literary texts also adopted new attitudes toward chivalry: Alongside new versions of traditional legends, now sometimes adapted for wider, nonnoble audiences, texts appeared featuring parodies of chivalric conduct, the best of which served as perceptive social

commentaries and thus remain classics of world literature (such as Cervantes's *Don Quixote* or Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*).

Chivalry in the Modern Era

In the 16th through 18th centuries, political and economic changes made knighthood obsolete as a primary occupation, but chivalry remained a significant cultural ideal, and some noble men continued to belong to chivalric orders as a way of enhancing their political or social affiliations. Beginning in the late 18th century, as democracy became the new cultural ideal of many, chivalry was increasingly associated with political and cultural conservatism or even nostalgia. It was in this context that Edmund Burke, in a 1790 commentary on the French Revolution, wrote a famous passage on the demise of chivalry, which is believed to be the source of today's expression "Chivalry is dead," even though those precise words appear nowhere in it.

Burke's formulation is simple: Manliness is the heart of chivalry, and chivalry underpins aristocratic hegemony, which, in turn, is the source and essence of European "glory." Burke's statement was a harbinger of a nostalgia for chivalry which found its fullest expression in the "Arthurian revival" in European literature of the early 19th century. In particular, novels by Sir Walter Scott, such as *Ivanhoe* (1819), fostered among members of the ruling elite a longing to live by an idealized chivalric code. Toward the end of the century, Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1885) and the paintings of the pre-Raphaelite artists reframed the Arthurian legend for Victorian audiences. Literary and film versions of the Arthurian and other chivalric legends continue to proliferate to this day and may seek to express a variety of ideological viewpoints, usually with an emphasis on masculine identity and/or gender relations (e.g., the films *The Fisher King*, 1991, or *First Knight*, 1995).

Leading up to the American Civil War, the dominant classes of the southern states defended the legitimacy of a social order based on what they insisted were chivalric principles. This conception of social order found support in European literature of preceding decades. Its romantic viewpoint was opposed to the perceived soullessness of the republican egalitarianism and common sense of the North. In *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain claimed that Sir Walter Scott should be held responsible for the Civil War, since his novels had so influenced the ideals and behavior of generations of Southern men and women. Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) was an Arthurian novel with both comic and political twists, serving as a defense of republican common sense against what he saw as a willful return to medieval backwardness. Twain notwithstanding, chivalric romanticism survived the Civil War in the South. As an ideology, it was openly propagated in the notorious classic film *Birth of a Nation*. The Ku Klux Klan, especially in its second (20th-century) manifestation, draped itself in outward symbols of knighthood. This pseudo-chivalry was not fully discredited as a viable political course at a mainstream level until the time of the civil rights movement. Until that time, hate crimes were committed with some frequency against blacks by whites, including members of the Ku Klux Klan, ostensibly in defense of (white) womanly virtue. An ideology that originated in part as a means of limiting violence against women had thus become a justification for terrorizing a subordinate population.

Two Sides to Chivalry

On one hand, chivalry originated as a code of the ruling class and has been used in various ways to justify privilege and oppression since. In particular, it has served the institutions of aristocracy, gender-exclusive suffrage, and slavery. On the other hand, chivalry also originated as a means of establishing

social order and protecting the vulnerable, especially women, and in its long history, it has undeniably been useful in this way on many occasions. For example, until 1998, the Geneva Conventions treated rape as a “crime against honor,” alluding to a code of chivalry in providing some limited protection against rape during wartime. Now rape is considered by international law as a form of torture and an issue of universal human rights rather than one of personal honor. Undoubtedly, this change is for the better, but its recent date is a reminder of the previously crucial role of chivalry in preventing some abuses of power.

See also

Courtly Love; Masculinity Studies; Romance Fiction

Further Readings

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