Knights of the Round Table:
Knighthood in History vs. Medieval Arthurian Literature Part 1

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Abstract: In Part one of this three-piece serialization, this piece will compare and contrast fictional knights to their real-life counterparts living around the same time and place as when the legends were written. Primarily, this is in England and France from the mid-twelfth to the early fourteenth centuries. This analysis discusses the ways the literature from this period created an ideal knight that, while inspired by the knights living during this time, was very different. Furthermore, this paper explores the influence this literature had on knights and their culture. In order to address the differences between fictional and real knights, part one discusses the historical reality of the archetypal knight. In this case, who were knights historically, what did they do, and what was their role in medieval society. While this is a broad topic and covers many centuries and an entire continent, for the sake of simplicity this paper focuses on western Europe, namely England and France from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. While some documents found in this research may fall outside of that purview, that is because the question of the development of knighthood is pertinent to this discussion. Furthermore, it should be noted that because knighthood was so quintessentially European, it existed and spread across the continent.

The story of King Arthur is an incredibly well-known one, even if one has never read a book on the legend, they are familiar with the general plot. Its ubiquity and longevity are due in part to the fact that legends of King Arthur and his knights have been continuously written since at least the tenth century, with evidence that places the story's origin even earlier as an oral tradition.[i] The legend of King Arthur and his knights have come to represent the Middle Ages to the modern reader.

King Arthur, in most interpretations, was the perfect king and the Britain he presided over was a magical kingdom populated with wizards and heroes. Geoffrey Chaucer, in his *Wife of Bath's Tale,* described Arthur as: "He whom the Britons hold in great honor."[ii] In Medieval Europe, however, the legends largely focused on the knights rather than the titular king. Medieval authors like Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes wrote almost exclusively about the members of the court, with Arthur himself appearing as a side character. These stories have survived for centuries, giving us an idea of who the knight was supposed to be. Fictional heroes like Lancelot and Gawain serve as a point of comparison to the kind of men they supposedly represented, that is the knights.

The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast these fictional knights to their real-life counterparts living around the same time and place as when the legends were written. Primarily, this is in England and France from the mid-twelfth to the early fourteenth centuries. This paper will look at the ways the literature from this period created an ideal knight that, while inspired by the knights living during this time, was very different. Furthermore, this paper will explore the influence this literature had on knights and their culture. The romanticized knight of medieval fiction has endured and distorted our modern view of knights and the Middle Ages as a whole. The goal of this research is to separate, at least in part, the legend from reality.

In order to address the differences between fictional and real knights, this paper will first discuss the historical reality of the archetypal knight. In this case, who were knights historically, what did they do, and what was their role in medieval society. While this is a broad topic and covers many centuries and an entire continent, for the sake of simplicity this paper will mainly focus on western Europe, namely England and France from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. While some documents found in the course of this research may fall outside of that purview, that is because the question of the development of knighthood is pertinent to this discussion. Furthermore, it should be noted that because knighthood was so quintessentially European, it existed and spread across the continent.

Next, it is important to explain the enduring popularity of Arthuriana, a term used to refer to writings and material related to legends of King Arthur. Arthur has appeared consistently in medieval sources dating back to at least the 9th century, if not earlier.[iii] Using these primary sources, it's possible to create a chronology for the Arthurian legend, from this first reference down to the 19th century. This chronology explains how the story developed over the medieval period and how Arthurian influence continues today. Academic debate on Arthur's influence in the medieval period and the historicity of the legend are part of this issue. Some historians have even suggested that King Arthur was a historical figure, a question which has been hotly debated since at least the 19th century.[iv]

Finally, how the romance literature of the medieval period interprets and romanticizes the reality through the lens of Arthuriana as a nostalgic, fantastical setting. This will address the broad themes of romance literature, its origins, and authorship. Romances were written by the *troubadours*, who either were knights or worked for knights, and they wanted to aggrandize knighthood to their audience, who were also knights.[v] Additionally, the themes of courtly love

and chivalry, which define the genre as a whole are important to this discussion. In this paper the actions and stories of Arthur's knights, as shown in medieval literature, will be compared to those of real knights. Primarily, this will use works of romance from England and Northern France during the late 12th to mid-13th centuries. These sources will be used in direct comparison of monographs which focus on knights, as well as primary source documents relating to warfare and chivalry. These stories all presented supposedly ideal knights which strictly adhered to codes of chivalry and courtly love that, as we will see, were not followed by actual knights.

Fiction sparked my interest in history, and I believe that they can be used together to understand the past. Mythology and history are considered opposite subjects, one is by nature fiction and the other has an assumed veracity. On the surface, they seem incredibly disparate. However, mythology and indeed literature can serve as primary sources for the culture and time they come from. King Arthur was a part of what would today be considered pop culture, these stories reflected what the authors thought was important. Even things that are taken for granted in these romances, like court protocol and the fabrics of dresses described can teach the reader about life in the Middle Ages. I believe that because Arthuriana is so focused on a specific class, yet so widespread, it can provide a new perspective on knighthood in Medieval Europe.

Knighthood In Medieval Europe

The image of the classic knight in shining armor is emblematic of the Middle Ages for many, but the brave, dashing gentleman in silvery armor defending damsels in distress is, to say the least, inaccurate. Knights in Romances, particularly Arthurian Romances, differed from real knights in four key ways: the way they fought, the duties expected of a knight by their lord, their

relationship with the church and most importantly their definitions of the term chivalry. Chivalry is one of the most confusing aspects of knighthood yet it is inseparable from the identity of knights. "Chivalry may be described as an ethos in which martial, aristocratic and Christian elements were fused together."[vi] For the historical knight, chivalry was simply a catch-all term for the culture of knights and their aristocratic lifestyle.[vii] This distinction is emblematic of the disparity between knights in fiction and knights in history, the real knights of medieval Europe were decidedly less fantastical, and certainly less romantic than our ideal.

Who is and isn't a knight differs greatly throughout the middle ages and throughout Europe. In France, the prevailing term was the Latin *miles* or *milites* literally translating to soldier.[viii] According to French medieval historian Georges Duby, "In the thirteenth century, a single Latin word, *miles*, was always used to express membership of the coherent group already formed by the knighthood." [ix] What began as a term to denote a career became a term denoting a particular noble class by the early 11th century. "Henceforth we find it [the word *miles*] used in two ways- either individually by men who displayed it as a personal title in the protocol at the beginning or end of charters, or collectively, to describe the particular rank of certain members of a court of justice or certain witnesses." [x]

A similar term in Germany, *ministrales* denoted a servile knight or vassal around the same time.[xi] These knights were considered un-free, meaning that they were pledged to the lord and belonged to the household of their lord, similar to a serf, however this did not mean that they were poor or slaves as we would assume.[xii] Throughout Europe, different terms came to be used to describe these fighting men, especially as they gained importance in their respective societies. However, there was one common thread amongst all these terms, that is the importance of warfare to the knight. "First, foremost, and always, the knight was a soldier: in Latin *miles*, in

French *chevalier*, in German *Ritter*, Italian *cavaliere*, Spanish *caballero*, and in Anglo-Saxon *cnicht*."[xiii] One can assume that this Anglo-Saxon *cnicht* is where the modern English *knight* came from.[xiv] Nonetheless, despite the variation among the names, these titles hold a common thread: every one of the terms described denotes a warrior on a horse.

But who precisely were these knights and what did they do? Knights were mounted warriors, however this isn't the only aspect of knighthood, certainly, the notion of an army on horseback existed by this time, but these were not called knights.[xv] French medievalist Marc Bloch, defines a knight as a military vassal, or, more specifically: "typically a man who served on horseback in heavy armour, and the function of the vassal consisted above all in fighting in this manner for his lord."[xvi] Medievalist Maurice Keen in his book *Chivalry* defines a knight as: "a man of aristocratic standing and probably of noble ancestry, who is capable, if called upon, of equipping himself with a warhorse and the arms of a heavy cavalryman, and who has been through certain rituals that made him what he is…"[xvii] What is important here is the acknowledgement of nobility as a part of knighthood, because knights were noblemen.

Membership into this sort of military service required expensive equipment, which limited the kinds of people who became part of this mounted warrior group. By the 13th century, a war horse was worth five times the amount of a cow. "To be a cavalryman began to imply substantial means or substantial parentage."[xviii] In essence, to become a knight was expensive, making the occupation exclusive to noblemen who could afford it. Knights were invariably in service to a lord, who would call for their military service and loyalty. In exchange for the costly enterprise of knighthood, these warriors would be rewarded by their lords with gifts of land.[xix]

This sort of interdependent relationship, known as vassalage, was the primary form of bond under the system of feudalism. Feudalism was a system based on interdependent

relationships with an emphasis on land ownership and personal obligations.[xx] Under this system,

all knights were vassals, and as such occupied the upper levels of feudal society. Medieval

historian Susan Reynolds defines vassalage as "the relation between a lord and his free or noble

follower- his vassal. Because the vassal was a free man they see the relation, although unequal,

as having had a voluntary and reciprocal quality that distinguished it significantly from that of a

lord with his peasant tenants or subjects."[xxi] Under this relationship the vassal would provide

military service, or a payment called scutage if he's unable to meet this requirement, in exchange

for payment in the form of land and protection.

In the 11th century, Bishop Fulbert of Chartres wrote a letter in which he explained the

responsibilities of vassals to their lords: "He who swears fealty to his lord ought always to have

these six things in memory; what is harmless, safe, honorable, useful, easy, practicable."[xxii]

Vassals would provide aid and counsel to their lords by their martial services and attending the

lord's court.[xxiii] The main obligation of the lord to his knights was the granting of land, a system

so successful that land held through vassalage was the main mode of land ownership through

much of the middle ages.[xxiv] The rewards of these lands became a mark of nobility as the fiefs

were handed down to successors.[xxv] When these fiefs became hereditary, vassals gained a sense

of security in their noble birth, this in turn created the aristocratic culture of knighthood.[xxvi]

Vassals would undertake an oath of fealty in which they swore under god, that is to say in public,

to uphold their obligations to their lord and usually the lord and his vassal would kiss or clasp

hands to demonstrate the amiability of the oath.[xxvii]

Warfare was the primary occupation of the knight and in literature, was the most

important aspect of chivalry. Violence and warfare was the essential activity for the medieval

man, it was also an affirmation of the knight's virility.[xxviii] French knight Geoffroi de Charny in

his treatise on chivalry discusses at length the importance of honoring knights who had fought in wars: "For it is from good battles that great honors arise and are increased, for good fighting men prove themselves in good battles, where they show their worth in their own locality without travelling outside it."[xxix] Another example is King Richard I, known as Richard the Lion-Heart, in the Third Crusade is described as a hero throughout the account. "He, indeed, was emboldened by their fear. Letting his horse go, he charged swiftly at the enemy. He broke up the enemy's crowded battle line by charging through it."[xxx] This account bears a striking resemblance to Arthurian romances of the same time. Chrétien de Troyes, a poet and author writing around the same time describes a Knight of the Round Table in battle very similarly. "His companions, likewise, showed largesse in the spilling of blood and brains and spent their blows freely."[xxxi] There was, in fiction, an ideal representation of the knight in battle and it bled into historical account and the ethos of chivalry. In fiction, the knight was glorious and had a lust for bloodshed.

The reality of medieval warfare was less glorious. In fact, for knights, it was fairly safe: armor was protective, pitched battles were avoided and knights made a genuine effort not to kill each other.[xxxii] For many knights, capturing the enemy for ransom was a means to make a living. Geoffroi de Charny even admonishes this practice in his treatise: "there are a number of men who pay more attention to taking prisoners and other profit, and when the have seized them and other winnings, they are more anxious to safeguard their captives and their booty than to help bring the battle to a good conclusion."[xxxiii] A knight would be captured in battle, and his family would be expected to raise the ransom for his release.[xxxiv] Sometimes the high price of the ransom would be ruinous to the family.[xxxv]

Another pastime of the knight was tournaments. A tournament was a mock-battle, consisting of a melee of knights and usually jousting.[xxxvi] Tournaments hold pride of place in many of De Troyes' romances. In the romance Cliges, the titular knight shows his prowess at King Arthur's tournament, winning the favor of the king and his knights. "No sooner had he reached court than everyone ran out to greet him, making much ado over him and showing more happiness at his coming than had ever before been seen, and all those who had been captured by him at the tournament addressed him as lord."[xxxvii] Charny says that knights could build a reputation and wealth for themselves through tournaments.[xxxviii]

This is exactly what one William Marshal, a knight, nobleman and later regent of England who was referred to as the flower of chivalry, did.[xxxix] A younger son of John the Marshal, a lesser nobleman, he grew up during a period of civil war in eleventh century England called the Anarchy.[xl] "If William did not mourn his father, it is not that he reproached him for having sent him out of the house virtually empty-handed."[xli] William was then taken in by a relative and trained to become a knight, eventually being knighted right before being sent off into the Battle of Drincourt.[xlii] "He had no sooner left the Tancarville household than he was already tourneying and winning."[xliii] His prowess brought him to the attention of Eleanor of Aquitaine, queen to Henry II, and became one of the chief knights of his household as well as tutor to his son, the heir.[xliv] By the time of his death at the age of seventy, he was the Earl of Pembroke and regent to Henry III.[xlv] His martial prowess in tournaments established him as a capable knight and caught the attention of the ruler who would become his patron, much like in the story of Cliges.

Tournaments were more than ostentatious displays of wealth and entertainment. They were part of a ritual of courtly manners and a way for knights to build their reputation. The

medieval tournament was a successor to the judicial duel, a form of trial by combat that was later replaced by the jury system, and ceremony.[xlvi] Knights could resolve conflicts or feuds through these tournaments, settling disputes by combat was a means of placing the verdict in God's hands.[xlvii] Take for example the treatise on organizing a tournament written by Rene of Anjou in 1460, while this is a much later text, it does show the degree of ceremony involved in these events. Take for example the method of invitation presented in the beginning of the text: "the aforesaid prince ought first to send secretly to the prince to whom he wishes to present the sword, to find out whether or not he intends to accept, and in order to arrange the appropriate public ceremonies if he wishes to accept."[xlviii] The pomp and ceremony of tournaments was later used to emulate the Arthurian court. In 1284, King Edward I hosted a "round table" tournament, where knights from all over Europe fought and he was presented the crown of King Arthur.[xlix]

The medieval lady is a character as complex as her knight, in part because so little was written about her beyond fiction. For the purposes of this paper a lady is used to refer to a noblewoman, in order to contrast the experiences of the noblemen that constitute the knightly class. In romances of the day, the lady was quiet and at the mercy of her knight. In the *Lais of Marie de France*, women are rarely, if ever, named characters. *Lanval*, one of the lais, features a knight of the round table who is rescued twice by his lady love, however Guinevere is the only named female character.[l] In Arthurian literature, women are painted as helpless and this was justification for violence against them. In The Knight of the Cart, de Troyes says that a knight must protect the lady he is escorting. "But if she were being escorted by another, and the knight chose to do battle with her defender and defeated him at arms, then he might do with her as he pleased without incurring dishonor or disgrace." However, medieval women were not completely helpless, the letters of Margaret Paston to her husband detail her preparations to

defend her home. In one letter from 1448 she says: "Right worshipful husband, I recommend me to you, and pray you to get some crossbows and windases to bend them with, and quarrels [that is bolts fired by crossbows] ..." "As the Medieval period went on, women progressively lost their independence, their place in the public eye and economic opportunity lessened as time went on.[li]

Many aspects of medieval womanhood were controlled, Charny's treatise includes a chapter on how women ought to dress to please their husbands.[lii] Much of women's role in the period was based upon their marriage prospects, and this interest began at a young age for medieval women. The childhood and adolescence of a medieval woman, no matter her class, was centered on her matrimonial prospects.[liii] The Arthurian tradition is also obsessed with marriage, the romance *Erec et Enide* focuses on a married couple and shows a wife balancing her love and concern for her husband and avoiding violence at his hands. In the story, Erec blames his wife for the lapse in his chivalric reputation and sets out on a quest to punish her for it.[liv] In the Middle Ages, marriage was about economics, particularly for the nobility who also sought to increase or preserve their family's standing. According to Georges Duby: "this meant giving away their daughters and negotiating as best they could their daughters' reproductive potential and the advantages which they were supposed to endow their off-spring."[lv] Medieval marriage focused on the submission of the wife, and discussions on the topic were written by men, for men and had "three precepts: monogamy, exogamy and the repression of pleasure."[lvi]

[lvii] Arthurian romance was obsessed with an idea called courtly love, that is, a code for noblemen and women to supposedly abide by in order to love well. One treatise exists on the subject, written by Chretien De Troyes contemporary, Andreas Cappellanus, his *Art of Courtly Love* is adapted from the works of Ovid, and medieval poetry and gives rules for the lovers. Most notably, Cappellanus asserts that love is suffering, and must be kept a secret because love only

exists outside of marriage.[lviii] "The lover and his lady are no longer playing a game of mutual deceit. She is now his feudal suzerain, and he owes allegiance to her, or to Cupid through her. Her status is far above his…"[lix] In Arthuriana, this language is rampant. "One who loves totally is ever obedient, and willingly and completely does whatever might please his sweetheart. And so Lancelot, who loved more than Pyramus...must do her bidding."[lx] However, the real medieval lady held little to no authority over her own life.

Courtly love made adultery permissible in literature, Lancelot and Guinevere's affair is a famous example. However, adultery was not as accepted in reality. Husbands and wives owed each other relations as part of the contract of marriage; Pope Innocent III once said in a letter that: "Nonetheless if the wife refuses to obey because she fears to lapse from chastity, her husband may and ought render the conjugal debt to her with the fear of the Lord."[lxi] Furthermore, there was increased concern with the virginity of unmarried women.[lxii] In this system men's dalliances were allowed but women were expected to protect their virginity, in part to preserve the lineage for inheritance's purposes.[lxiii] This schism between the sexes influenced different attitudes to adultery, in that men were subject to more provisions than women because men were thought to be more virtuous and responsible as head of the household.[lxiv]

The knight and the lady are two archetypal characters of the medieval romance genre, however, the real knights and ladies who inspired these characters lived much more complicated lives than is revealed in the stories. Knights, that is the noble mounted warrior class of vassals, were balancing their feudal obligations of warfare with the Christian world around them. The identity of knighthood was developing along with the Medieval world but was defined by its violence and nobility. The knight and the lady were people whose lives were defined by their submission, the lady to her father and her husband and the knight to the feudal lord. If the lives

of medieval knights and ladies differ in one way from that of their fictional counterparts it is in that they are three-dimensional.

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