



THE COALITION OF MASTER'S
SCHOLARS ON MATERIAL CULTURE

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Published by: The Coalition of Master's Scholars on Material Culture

URL: <https://cmsmc.org/publications/knights-of-the-round-table-3>

Date Published: February 24, 2023

Citation: Krehbiel, Fredderica. "Knights of the Round Table: Knighthood in History vs. Medieval Arthurian Literature Part 3." The Coalition of Master's Scholars on Material Culture, February 24th, 2023.

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

By: Fredderica Krehbiel

Abstract: 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 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.

Keywords: *knighthood, medieval literature, Arthuriana, feudalism, courtly love, chivalry*

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 they 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.¹ 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.

Arthuriana: A Chronology

The stories of King Arthur and his court were created over centuries by writers who used mythology and history to make their own creations.^{lxv} According to author Rodney Castleden, King Arthur has been reimagined through the lens of different authors^{lxvi} Even though his knights were most prominent in the tales, the King himself remained the most integral part of the Arthurian legend. King Arthur and Camelot are synonymous with the Middle Ages and have been featured in almost every form of media, from animation to advertisements. For many, Walt Disney's 1963 film, *The Sword in the Stone*, was the first and most significant interpretation of the legend.^{lxvii} This film was loosely based on T.H. White's 1958 book *The Once and Future King*, rather than medieval source material.^{lxviii}

By the time White was writing, the character of Arthur and much of the general plot had been consistent since the 15th century. This is largely due to Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Mort D'arthur*, a book written in 1485 that unified a jumbled and very old Arthurian tradition into a single text. It had survived because it comprehensively and compactly told the entire tradition in one narrative.^{lxix} According to Malory, Arthur was the legendary king of Britain, and his court was filled by a circle of knights who sat at a round table in his castle Camelot. In *Le Mort D'arthur* Arthur becomes king of Britain when he "lightly and fiercely" pulls an enchanted sword from a stone put in place by the wizard Merlin.^{lxx} King Arthur filled his court with many knights, the most famous of which is Lancelot du Lac, who is described in the text as the

“noblest knight living.”^{lxxi} Lancelot has an affair with Queen Guinevere, King Arthur’s wife, which fractures the knights and brings about King Arthur’s downfall. In the final battle, Arthur is killed by his nephew and sometimes son, Sir Mordred.^{lxxii}

The Arthurian tradition has made an impact on British culture, which carries on throughout its history. Because the Arthurian legend has been retold in so many different ways over such a long period of time, one may wonder about the story’s origins, and in fact some have wondered whether King Arthur had a basis in history. Stories about King Arthur started throughout the British Isles since at least the 9th century, though some speculate even earlier, in the 6th century.^{lxxiii} One of the first places he appears is in the Battle of Badon, which appears in many of the earliest records. A mid-fifth century monk and historian named Gildas wrote the only contemporary account of the Anglo-Saxon invasions.^{lxxiv} Gildas goes into detail in his description of the battle between the Saxons and the Britons, led by Arthur, partly because he was born in the same year and witnesses were supposedly available.^{lxxv} However, Gildas doesn’t mention Arthur by name in his account of this battle, which is unusual as his work was very emphatic regarding the failings of the Britons and their kings. According to one expert, “Gildas does not say who the British commander was, or whether the British were besiegers or besieged. No doubt that was partly because his deepest convictions are already decided by God, so historical facts were not very important.”^{lxxvi}

Arthur is first definitively named as a participant in Badon in the *Annales Cambriae*, a record of Welsh history compiled in manuscripts from the 13th century, but likely written much earlier with some of the earliest records dating to the fifth century.^{lxxvii} Arthur only appears in two lines of the record, which don’t reveal much about Arthur or where he came from and doesn’t even refer to him as a king. These two lines are the basis for the entire King Arthur

legend. The chronicle says that in 516 someone named Arthur carried the cross at the Battle of Badon.^{lxxviii} “The Battle of Badon, in which Arthur carried the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ for three days and three nights on his shoulders and the Britons were the victors.”^{lxxix} The next entry, dated to about 537, is just as vague: “The battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut [Mordred] fell: and there was plague in Britain and Ireland.”^{lxxx}

The king’s career is first discussed in greater depth in *Historia Brittonum*, a book written around 828 that is often attributed to Nennius, a Welsh monk.^{lxxxi} While some of the book has a historical basis, its references to dragons and its poetic style put the reliability of the text into question; because of the scarcity of sources from that period, the book is still useful according to Castleden.^{lxxxii} *Historia Brittonum* offers a series of battles Arthur supposedly fought against the Saxons, with the Battle of Badon being the twelfth.^{lxxxiii} Interestingly, Nennius refers to Arthur as *dux bellorum*, a Latin term for war leader, which can also be used to describe a king.^{lxxxiv}

From the twelfth century onwards, Arthurian legend became more prominent in English writing. Part of this can be attributed to Geoffrey of Monmouth, and his work, *History of the Kings of Britain*, written around 1136.^{lxxxv} Monmouth’s contemporaries and modern readers acknowledge that some of the literary sources referenced in *The History of the Kings of Britain* were invented by Monmouth himself.^{lxxxvi} For example, Monmouth references what he calls a “very ancient book” but he never divulges the author or the title of the account which serves as his main source for Arthur.^{lxxxvii} Monmouth introduced or referenced many elements of the legend, including Arthur’s Excalibur, which he calls Caliburn; Arthur’s status as a king; the Isle of Avalon; and Arthur’s eventual resurrection, which drew from pre-existing Celtic traditions at the time.^{lxxxviii} Another notable addition to the legend by Monmouth is the figure of Merlin, who appears to provide assistance to various British kings in Monmouth’s *History*.^{lxxxix} Historian

Rodney Castleden said of the wizard, “Merlin comes across as a magical semi-pagan figure, while Arthur is a Christian hero.”^{xc} King Arthur’s treatment in Monmouth’s writing is one of the most complete, taking up chapters as opposed to the two lines seen in the *Annales Cambriae*. Arthurian expert Geoffrey Ashe calls this a “flowering of the legend.”^{xc}

Some experts have said Monmouth’s *History* was a reaction to the aftermath of various invasions of Britain, but depending on the source, it was either in support of or in opposition to the threat of colonization looming over Wales in the early 12th century.^{xcii} According to medievalist Barbara Harvey, “In 1136, at about the time Geoffrey was writing his *History*, the Welsh were seizing the chance offered by the death of Henry I to shake off the rule he had imposed upon them.”^{xciii} There are many interpretations of Monmouth’s *History*. Some have argued it is an appeal to the Anglo-Norman rulers for unity, or an “illustrious genealogy” of these rulers, or even to express Monmouth’s Breton or Welsh sympathies.^{xciv} Those who argue in favor of Monmouth’s book as a pro-Welsh history argue that Monmouth was a Breton patriot who promoted, as medievalist Michael Faletra put it, a “pan-Celtic alliance” by glorifying the Bretons of the ancient past and by extension the Welsh.^{xcv} Monmouth used Welsh influences and legends to help write his Arthur, and according to medieval literature expert Victoria Flood, intended for his vision of Arthur to serve as a symbol for the Welsh.^{xcvi} However, Arthur became a symbol of the Anglo-Norman monarchy.^{xcvii} Henry II in particular associated himself with the Arthurian tradition: he wanted to compare himself to Arthur, who had complete dominion over Britain, to justify his control of the island.^{xcviii} Henry II was so interested in the legend that he searched for Arthur’s supposed tomb in Glastonbury Abbey.^{xcix}

The History of the Kings of Britain marked an important development in Arthuriana as Arthur became less a historical character and more of a literary figure. The twelfth century saw a

proliferation of Arthurian texts. Robert Wace's *Roman de Brut*, written around the 1150's, was an elaborate French translation of Monmouth's *History*, and introduced the now famous Round Table.^c Wace's Arthur was aligned with the French ideals of chivalry; this Arthur was, as historian Frances Gies puts it, "the paragon of knighthood, in the tradition of the romances."^{ci} Arthur became a part of a larger trend in medieval literature: the burgeoning genre of Romance which made medieval literature increasingly secular. Romances, which originally meant poems written in French rather than Latin, was the genre of poetry concerning courtly manners and chivalric culture.^{cii} According to literary scholar Eugene Vinaver, "Love interest and the pursuit of adventures unrelated to any common aim thus displaced the theme of the defence of Christendom and the preoccupation with feudal warfare."^{ciii} In this new genre, Arthur also changed. King Arthur was pushed into the background as the focus of the Arthurian canon now shifted to the knights.^{civ} This is not surprising considering that the troubadours who wrote these romances were either knights themselves or worked in their service.^{cv} This shift was finalized in the work of French poet Chretien de Troyes, who wrote around the 1170's. His five romances: *Erec et Enide*, *Cliges*, *Lancelot or the Knight of the Cart*, *Yvain* and *Perceval*, all featured a different knight of Arthur's court rather than the king himself.

Chretien de Troyes added the character of Lancelot, as well as his affair with Guinevere, who had been briefly referenced in Monmouth's *History*. By the end of the 12th century, they became integral parts of the legend.^{cvi} ^{cvii} The romances represented many aspects of the secular knightly lifestyle from tournaments to heraldry.^{cviii} De Troyes' Lancelot was, like Wace's Arthur, the exemplar of knighthood, as were all of the knights-errant in De Troyes' poetry, according to the author. He seemed eager to instruct readers to follow in his protagonists' examples, with characters going on lengthy, edifying asides on the nature of love and courtesy.^{cix} Courtly love

and chivalry were introduced through the 12th century romances purely as a literary ideal.^{cx}

Romance literature dominated the Arthurian canon for the rest of the medieval period, ultimately compiled in Malory's *Le Morte D'arthur* in 1485.

By the time Malory was writing, in the later 15th century, Arthuriana had been around for centuries and left a mark on medieval culture. This impact was perhaps most strongly felt among the knights, who wanted to emulate the prestige of knights in romances, through pageantry and writing.^{cx} For example, Arnold de Guine, an early 13th century Flemish nobleman and lord, called upon the Arthurian tradition in the chronicle of his life, even requesting to be trained by Phillip of Flanders, who was praised by Chretien de Troyes himself in his romance *Perceval*.^{cxii} Chretien says of Flanders: "Count Philip of Flanders, who surpasses Alexander, whom they say was so great."^{cxiii} The fact that Arnold de Guine sought to learn under Philip of Flanders after the book was written speaks to the reputation of Arthurian literature. The romances made knighthood glamorous; even King Henry II wanted to emulate Lancelot by asking for the King of Scotland to knight him.^{cxiv}

Arthuriana had seeped into tournaments, which became known as round tables, that copied the pageantry of those in the fictional Camelot.^{cxv} One 1279 round table had about one hundred damsels and one hundred knights riding to the grounds while singing.^{cxvi} Arthurian romance often uses the tournament as a theme, as it did in de Troyes' romances. Beginning in the 13th century, the nobility was using fantasy as inspiration for tournaments; Edward I in 1284 had participants take on Arthurian roles during the games.^{cxvii}

In the Middle Ages, King Arthur and Camelot were glorified and were a patriotic symbol of England and its rulers.^{cxviii} Fiction often serves as a representation of culture, as historian Erich S. Gruen aptly puts it: "people strove to articulate their special qualities with reference to

the dominant [culture]...”^{cxxix} In the early 12th century the newly minted Norman rulers of England were looking for a past to hold onto; *The History of the Kings of Britain* fulfilled this need by tracing English history back to its legendary ancient origins, all the way back to the Trojan War.^{cxx} According to Higham, *Arthuriana* “provided the new Anglo-Norman kings with a predecessor of heroic size, a great pan-British king in a long line of monarchs capable of countering contemporary pressures for decentralization, as had occurred in France, and reinforcing claims of political superiority over the Celtic lands.”^{cxxxi} The reign of King Arthur, for the British monarchy of the Middle Ages set a royal precedent as well as serving as propaganda.

Some scholars have argued for the existence of a real, historical King Arthur. Much of this argument is built on the appearance of Arthur in a series of sometimes dubious, historical accounts. R.S. Loomis, one of the foremost authorities on Arthurian literature said, “There is a certain amount of early material dealing with him, but the difficulty lies in distinguishing what is, if anything, history from what is legend.”^{cxxxii} According to some, sources such as the *Annales Cambriae*, Gildas and Nennius are an earnest attempt to record history, which supposes the actual existence of the legendary king.^{cxxxiii} Historians in favor of the existence of a historical Arthur have pieced together a theory on his identity: a military leader who lived in the sixth century during the Anglo Saxon invasions.^{cxxxiv} Medievalist Kemp Malone argued that perhaps the historical Arthur lived earlier, and wasn’t even British; in his 1925 book he pointed to a second century Roman commander, Lucius Artorius Castus, as a historical prototype for Arthur.^{cxxxv} In the century that Arthur supposedly lived, there was an increase in the name Arthur in records from the Celtic regions of the British Isles, suggesting the presence of a figure these people were named after, as noted by linguist Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson.^{cxxxvi} There is no conclusive evidence as to whether Arthur existed, because of the breadth of representations of

Arthur and a lack of contemporary records.^{cxxvii} Higham says that, “The likeliest origin was a military leader of repute in Roman Britain who had become legendary...”^{cxxviii}

The 19th century saw a rediscovery of Arthuriana, as well as all things medieval, as a source of symbolism.^{cxxix} King Arthur was used to express ideas of England's past, as well as to present certain aspects as an ideal of English identity such as virility and Christian faith.^{cxxx} The Pre-Raphaelite art movement of the 19th century reinvigorated interest in the Middle Ages, and Arthur especially.^{cxxxi} The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a group of artists that wanted to return to the “moral and descriptive truthfulness” they felt characterized art before the renaissance, that is, medieval art.^{cxxxii} They were especially concerned with narrative in their paintings, with scenes from Shakespeare and contemporary poetry dominating their paintings.^{cxxxiii} This renewed attention to medieval themes was reflected in the works of writers and historians of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* and T.H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, the basis of Disney’s *Sword in the Stone*, demonstrated this continued popularity.

According to Arthurian Experts Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer, “despite an external and internal landscape apparently hostile to romance, Arthur returned to English literature after more than three hundred years with an intensity remarkable for both the quality and quantity of works produced.”^{cxxxiv} In fact, this period saw much scholarly debate on the historicity of Arthur; in the beginning of the Victorian period, much of the debate was wrapped up in ideas of Anglo-Saxon superiority.^{cxxxv} “After the Second World War, the British King Arthur who had famously triumphed over Germanic invaders in the Dark Ages was widely, but not always consciously, reconstructed as a historical icon for post-war British society.”^{cxxxvi} As

late as 1997, Scottish politicians recreated Arthur's famous sword in the stone as a means to express Britishness During the United Kingdom General Election.^{cxxxvii}

To the modern reader, Arthur has come to represent not only British ideals but also the medieval period as a whole. Through Arthuriana, the Middle Ages are both a faraway time, yet accessible to the imagination of the viewer.^{cxxxviii} Arthuriana evokes a nostalgia that idealizes the past with modern longings and values.^{cxxxix} The legend of King Arthur is still incredibly popular, and has been reimagined in musicals such as *Camelot*, television shows such as BBC's *Merlin* and loosely in Marvel Comics superhero title *Excalibur*. Arthur has come a long way from his first mention in the *Annales Cambriae*.^{cxl} The continued popularity of Arthur could be explained simply in its reinvention, but it is still familiar and nostalgic despite reimagining, using the same symbols and scenes to communicate new messages than the work before.^{cxli}

Arthuriana survives centuries because it is reinvented, with authors using the tradition in new ways to communicate new meanings.^{cxlii} As Arthurian expert Dan Nastali notes: "every Arthurian work represents, to some degree, a personal response to the received material, and each work reinvigorates the tradition, for better or for worse, by placing before the public yet another object to respond to."^{cxliii}

The Knight of History versus the Knight of Romance

In the later middle ages, romances became one of the most popular types of secular literature among the upper classes.^{cxliv} A narrative poem with aristocratic characters engaging in combat and/or love affairs, written in a vernacular language after 1100 qualifies as a romance.^{cxlv} Although the high point of romance, that is the period when romance was perhaps most prolific was the century between 1150 to 1250, romances were written well into the fifteenth century.^{cxlvi} The name, *romance*, came from the Latin *roman*, meaning vernacular; although it came to be

understood as literature from France, where romances first emerged.^{cxlvii} The rise of romances was tied literacy expanding beyond the clergy, who wrote almost exclusively in Latin, to the noble and middle classes, who wanted literature in their native or vernacular languages.^{cxlviii} “As the idea of vernacular literacy takes root and becomes institutionalized, functional, practical literacy in the vernaculars spreads to the noble, merchant, and political classes, and with it, the audience for written forms of vernacular verse.”^{cxlix} By the 15th century, members of these secular upper classes were commissioning anthologies of romances and other vernacular literature known as “grete books.”^{cl} Aside from being written in the common language, romances set themselves apart by being almost purely recreational, meant to entertain rather than impart a lesson on its reader.^{cli} The chief patrons of recreational literature were the women of the noble classes, who preferred more refinement in their poetry than had been in previous genres.^{clii} In fact, Chretien de Troyes patron for his *Lancelot* is Countess Marie of Champagne, daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine.^{cliii}

The genre of romance evolved from the older *chansons de geste*, literally “songs of great deeds”, these stories were focused on war and valor and are sometimes described as epic poems.^{cliv} Of the chansons, one of the most famous is also one of the earliest: *The Song of Roland*, written around 1100, which tells the story of a knight in Charlemagne’s army in a war against “sinful pagans”.^{clv} These poems did not shy away from depicting violence, the hero of *The Song of Roland*, towards the end of the poem is described as having suffered a blow “which brake his temple’s veins,” and eventually caused “out his ears his brains [to] runneth forth.”^{clvi} The *chansons de geste* placed emphasis on martial strength and brutality, feudal loyalty, and religious piety as the essential virtues of the hero; however in the romances a new emphasis was placed on courtly manners, love affairs and the adventures of the individual hero

independently.^{clvii} However, the romance was also a departure from the *chanson de geste* in that it reflected the audience and the new chivalric culture which developed around the 12th century, particularly codified with the writings of Chretien de Troyes in the 1170's.^{clviii}

One of the largest audiences for these stories were the knightly class, including noblewomen, who wanted to see themselves and their values reflected in the poetry.^{clix} Romances did not lose the violent edge present in the *chansons*; for example, Chretien de Troyes's *Erec et Enide* has multiple graphic scenes of violence. One example in particular from the romance reads: "...Erec thrust the finely made, keen-edged iron into his [the knight's] throat beneath the chin; he sliced through all the bones and nerves, and the iron burst out the other side."^{clx} This demonstrates that the romances had not lost the ferocity of the *chansons*, but added a veneer of pageantry and courtliness that defined the genre.^{clxi} Historian Nigel Saul says that "romance, in a sense was an inevitable accompaniment to war: when the pain and suffering of conflict were so great, it provided an element of glamour which made the suffering seem worthwhile."^{clxii} Medieval romance was a genre of literature that tried to define knighthood in terms like chivalry, placing an equal emphasis on the nonviolent aspects of knighthood as the earlier *chansons* had on the violent aspects.^{clxiii} The romances were less about expressing the heroic ideals and instead expressing the ideals of the aristocratic class the heroes came from.^{clxiv}

Romance has been credited by historian John Frederick Rowbotham as the "most important of all the forms of composition cultivated by the troubadours."^{clxv} The troubadours were composers or authors hired by noble courts, although modern historians have ascribed the term to a specific class of poet, this was not the case in the middle ages.^{clxvi} "In medieval France, they [the terms troubadour and the northern *trouvere*] could be applied to anyone who wrote or composed anything at all, lyric or narrative, with or without music."^{clxvii} The troubadours

flourished after the end of the first crusade in the 12th century, they were inspired by the “civilized court and castle life” they worked in.^{clxxviii} According to medievalist Frances Gies: “The troubadour was a knightly poet. He wrote for and about knights.”^{clxxix} However, Troubadours were not exclusively men, in fact, the noblewomen who patroned the troubadours themselves could be poets; these *trobairitz*, as they have been called are largely dismissed as amateurs in comparison to their male equivalents.^{clxxx} Marie de France, a contemporary of De Troyes and an author of English short romances or *lais*, who wrote for the court of Henry II in the 1170’s credited her stories as translations of earlier troubadour poems.^{clxxxi} In the introduction of her lai, *Equitan*, Marie de France said that she isn’t the originator of the story but rather that she “heard recited” from Breton sources.^{clxxxii}

The romances however, included themes not found in previous literature, specifically ideas of courtly love and chivalry; which were meant to appeal to the noblewomen commissioning the earliest romances.^{clxxxiii} According to medievalist Nigel Saul, “In the writings of the twelfth-century troubadours and lyric poets we find the first stirrings of a sensuous new mood. Love and the amorous desires of the heart were for the first time treated as central to the poetic vision.”^{clxxxiv} English literature historian A. B. Taylor credited Chretien de Troyes in particular with having “established courtly love and chivalry as the enduring themes” of romance literature.^{clxxxv} The term courtly love was coined in 1881 by Gaston Paris to describe an innocent yet illicit kind of relationship that adhered to a complex set of rules, based on the affair of Lancelot and Guinevere described by de Troyes.^{clxxxvi}

However, it was Andreas Cappellanus who wrote a treatise on love around 1200, based on “Ars Amoria” by the Roman poet Ovid.^{clxxxvii} Cappellanius worked under Marie de Champagne, the same patron as de Troyes, and cites the countess as an expert on love.^{clxxxviii} In

his treatise, Capellanus defines love as “a certain inborn suffering derived from the sight of and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex, which causes each one to wish above all things the embraces of the other and by common desire to carry out love’s precepts in the other’s embrace.”^{clxxxix} However, in Capellanus’ treatise he says that this kind of love is only reserved for the nobility and says that peasants are incapable of love, and it is unnatural for them and that it distracts them from working on their farms.^{clxxx} There are additional rules that Capellanus says are essential for *fin d’amour* or “true love”.^{clxxxi} Namely, that love exists outside of marriage, the lover was supposedly beholden to his lady and that a lover will be made a nobler person by love.^{clxxxii}

Lancelot, or, The Knight of the Cart, is perhaps one of the most enduring examples of courtly love; the romance was primarily concerned with their adulterous and incredibly emotional affair that it was Paris’ inspiration for the term courtly love.^{clxxxiii} In the romance, Lancelot dishonored himself by climbing into a prison cart in order to find Queen Guinevere and rescue her.^{clxxxiv} De Troyes says that climbing into the cart would be a disgrace, but he also says that “because Love ordered and wished it, he jumped in; since Love ruled his action the disgrace did not matter.”^{clxxxv} De Troyes focused on this tension between reason and passion as a main theme of *Lancelot*, and perhaps as literary expert Fanni Bogdanow suggests, a criticism of courtly love.^{clxxxvi} Regardless, eventually when he and Guinevere are reunited, she dismisses him and Lancelot all but dies from grief and defends his actions, “whatever one might do for one’s sweetheart should be considered an act of love and courtliness.”^{clxxxvii} This sentiment is repeated in *The Art of Courtly Love*, in which Capellanus said: “no one does a good or courteous deed in the world unless it is derived from the fount of love.”^{clxxxviii} As a courtly lover, Guinevere was Lancelot’s top priority, the key catalyst for all his subsequent actions in the romance.^{clxxxix}

Lancelot was very much a representation of the exemplary courtly love affair, de Troyes' representation of this made Lancelot and his affair with Guinevere some of the most popular elements of the Arthurian canon.^{cxc}

However, *Lancelot* was only one example of the ethos of courtly love, one of the most universal aspects of courtly love is the fact that it was extra-marital.^{cxcⁱ} In Marie de France's lai, *Lanval*, Guinevere propositioned another one of Arthur's knights and when she is rejected he is put on trial by Arthur for insulting her.^{cxcⁱⁱ} Another example, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain's hostess seduced him, saying that as "the embodiment of courtliness to the bones of his being," the knight must want to kiss her.^{cxcⁱⁱⁱ} The lady even faulted Sir Gawain for not having a mistress, because without love, Gawain lacked motivation and the height of chivalry.^{cxc^{iv}} De Troyes did not address the extra-marital nature of the affair in his *Lancelot*, but later authors, especially Sir Thomas Malory in his 1485 book *Le Morte D'Arthur*, certainly did.^{cxc^v} Malory agreed that it is Lancelot's relationship with Guinevere that inspired him to become a hero, but also made their affair the cause of Arthur's eventual downfall.^{cxc^{vi}} According to medievalist Derek Brewer, "Lancelot does cause misfortune to all about him, because through him and Guinevere are the greatest king and flower of knights destroyed."^{cxc^{vii}} In an earlier series of anonymous romances, the *Lancelot-Grail* or *Vulgate Cycle* written in the 1230's, King Arthur almost puts Guinevere to death and declares war on Lancelot for their affair.^{cxc^{viii}} In Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* the affair seems to be common knowledge but was described as shameful.^{cxc^{ix}} According to Malory: "I marvel that we all be not ashamed to see and to know how Sir Lancelot lieth daily and nightly by the Queen...that we should suffer so noble a king as King Arthur is to be shamed."^{cc}

Courtly love as a concept developed in response to the strict religious doctrine around purity and chastity that were becoming more pronounced in the 12th century.^{cc1} In the 1380's the monk Thomas of Walsingham accused the knights of Richard II's court of being "Knights of Venus" and showing more prowess in bed than in battle.^{cc2} Indeed in the later middle ages, particularly in the 15th and 16th centuries knighthood turned away from the courts of arms to the courts of love.^{cc3} Adultery was permissible in men, but in women "cost a husband his honor" according to Gies, with the lovers often facing severe punishment.^{cc4} This view is largely in line with Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*. However, adultery was not grounds for killing one's wife in the Middle Ages despite being considered shameful.^{cc5} In the Middle Ages, marriage was more about the transfer of property and upwards mobility rather than love.^{cc6} Furthermore, wives were expected to submit to their husbands completely.^{cc7} The courtly love of the romances preached the opposite. In Cappellanus, the lady becomes the lord, and her lover must submit to her.^{cc8} Lancelot and other fictional courtly lovers were a sort of wish-fulfillment for the female audience; they represented passionate extramarital love that was impossible for this audience.^{cc9} De Troyes in particular wrote for Marie de Champagne, who according to the introduction of Lancelot, specifically requested the element of courtly love be included.^{cc10} Courtly love appears to have existed in literature rather than in reality.

Chivalry was the other important contribution of romance literature to medieval culture, however, the evidence of chivalry's impact was much clearer than courtly love's, especially among the military classes.^{cc11} Romances through chivalry created an identity of knighthood, elements of which, through the knightly class, changed the manners and culture of the aristocracy overall.^{cc12}

What chivalry meant was hard to define, according to Saul, “Medieval chivalry was more an outlook than a doctrine, more a lifestyle than an explicit ethical code.”^{ccxiii} There were, however, some qualities that made one chivalrous according to the romances: prowess, loyalty, generosity, courtesy and a “free and frank bearing.”^{ccxiv} The concept of chivalry was the result of a transformation of the medieval army that placed mounted knights at the forefront, which built camaraderie and a sense of identity among them.^{ccxv} There were many codes of chivalry, much like Capellanus’s rule book, that attempted to create a single meaning of the term but drew different conclusions.^{ccxvi} However, the romance literature in particular popularized the more courteous aspects of the concept and codified its values.^{ccxvii}

In De Troyes’s *Lancelot*, Gawain serves as a foil to Lancelot, the perfect courtly lover, by representing the perfect chivalric knight.^{ccxviii} Unlike Lancelot, Gawain refuses to board the cart as it would be too great a dishonor.^{ccxix} The rest of De Troyes’ romances neglect courtly love in favor of chivalry.^{ccxx} In particular *Cliges* features all of the qualities of chivalry, the knight’s father, Alexander demonstrates generosity he was “mindful of the emperor’s exhortation and advice to have his heart ever ready to give and spend liberally.”^{ccxxi} Later in the same romance, Alexander “showed largesse in the spilling of blood” as he and the other knights in King Arthur’s court put down a rebellion by a traitorous Count.^{ccxxii} In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain laments his failures as a knight in having “forgot the fidelity and kindness every knight knows,” when he took the girdle in secret from the hostess.^{ccxxiii} However, Gawain is praised for his chivalry in part because of his “good cheer”, even when facing death, he attempted to seem in good spirits.^{ccxxiv} In *Le Morte D’Arthur*, chivalry is secular, the knights of the round table are united in their loyalty to Arthur; they swore to abide by rules that forbade treason, emphasized mercy and never be involved in petty wars.^{ccxxv} According to Malory, “And

some there were, that were but knights, increased in arms and worship that passed all other of their fellows in prowess and noble deeds.”^{ccxxvi} In Malory’s Camelot, the knights of the Table Round proved their prowess to Arthur by competing in jousts and tournaments.^{ccxxvii}

However, Malory himself was a less than ideal example of chivalry, for one thing he wrote *Morte D’Arthur* while imprisoned in 1470.^{ccxxviii} Paradoxically, despite Malory’s knights of the round table vowing to defend women, Malory, also a knight, was accused of *raptus* against a woman known as Joan Smith.^{ccxxix} *Raptus*, in medieval legal documents was a term used to describe “sexual assault, forcible abduction, or consensual departure,” although Malory was accused of having assaulted Smith.^{ccxxx} In essence, the version of chivalry in romances were, for lack of a better term, a romanticized one. Medieval society, particularly among the knightly classes, was violent; war had an almost constant presence which led to pervasive violence in medieval culture.^{ccxxxi} According to Saul, “violent, aggressive behaviour was a feature of the disputes that knights engaged in over land and status as much as it was of their conduct in arms.”^{ccxxxii} One letter from a knight simply known as Guy dating to 1249 describes the “exquisite tortures [through] we extracted the truth from the sailors who fell alive into our hands.”^{ccxxxiii}

Chivalry was based on an aristocratic sense of honor.^{ccxxxiv} The knight, in order to be considered honorable or chivalrous, had to be willing to defend the faith and his lord, while also governing his own lands.^{ccxxxv} Being willing to defend the faith made chivalry part of the language of the crusades and according to medievalist Maurice Keen, “brought church authorities, and in particular the reformed papacy of the late eleventh century, to terms with war and the warrior’s place in society.”^{ccxxxvi} The church had made an attempt to create, or at least promote, a code of chivalry albeit one that was more likely to be disobeyed than followed.^{ccxxxvii}

The “Truce of God” in 1063, just thirty years before the First Crusade, attempted to put limits on violence creating a specific period of peace, from Wednesday to Monday, during which any act of violence would be punished.^{ccxxxviii} The Crusades made an exception to this rule, and provided the crusader with many earthly benefits.^{ccxxxix}

All of the heroes of medieval romances were noblemen, so it is no surprise that nobility was one of the chief values of chivalry.^{ccxi} From the thirteenth century onwards there was a new emphasis on the lineage of the knights, especially in terms of nobility and heraldry.^{ccxli} Heraldry referred to the distinctive insignias, coats of arms and other markers on shields and banners which denoted lineage or identity.^{ccxlii} In *Etablissements de Saint Louis*, a legal text dating to 1270, knighthood in France was inherited from the father’s own knighthood.^{ccxlili} The term chivalry now not only applied to those formally knighted but, according to Keen “it also comes to be used to describe the obligations, estate, and style of life of those entitled, on account of their birth, to aspire to knighthood.”^{ccxliiv} This is a sharp contrast to De Troyes’s knight Alexander, who chooses to abandon his hereditary knighthood in order to seek knighthood from King Arthur “in order to learn honor.”^{ccxlv} Unlike in the romances, chivalry was just as much about social standing and nobility as it was about martial ambition and honor.^{ccxlvi}

When one pictures the medieval knight, they imagine a dashing hero in a suit of armor rescuing damsels, a man who adheres to a strict moral code of mercy and honor. This knight is less a character of history but rather a fiction, a character passed down through centuries of romance literature. Romance literature is a term used by modern historians to describe the large body of secular poetry from the Medieval period that was largely written about the exploits of the nobility.^{ccxlvii} One of the most persistent types of romance were the Arthurian romances,

which were set in the court of the legendary King Arthur. During the Middle Ages King Arthur, and more often his knights, were the subject of hundreds of romances. They were so ingrained in the medieval pop culture that one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is an Arthurian romance.^{ccxlviii} The Arthur of romance was the height of chivalry, and the representation of knighthood presented in these romances became our modern standard.^{ccxlix}

In order to explain the ways in which literary and historical knights are different, it was first necessary to explain what a real knight was. The knight was a social class, distinguished by their aristocratic status and their military capability as armored cavalry.^{cccl} Knighthood was a direct product of vassalage, a feudal system of land-owning in which a vassal swore aid and counsel to his lord in exchange for land.^{cccli} This aid almost invariably took the form of military service. A knight's honor and virility as a leader and a member of chivalric culture depended on his performance in battle.^{ccclii} This focus on warfare in knightly culture made its appearance-albeit romanticized- in the romances and their predecessors the *chansons de geste*. But that was the way knights wanted us to see them, and their fighting. In reality, knights were perhaps the most well-protected people on a medieval battlefield.^{cccliii} Knighthood, both in fiction and in history however was defined by an ethos of violence, nobility, and subservience to their lord.

The knights of medieval romance were often roaming knights-errant, but they are still shown to ultimately be loyal to their liege, in many cases the legendary King Arthur. Arthur, to the medieval imagination was the greatest of all British kings, the legendary ancestor to England's monarchy.^{cccliv} Arthur was a cultural icon for Medieval Britain, and he appeared in writings beginning in at least the 9th century.^{ccclv} By the twelfth century, when romance literature was in its most prolific period, the legend had flowered with the writings of French poet Chretien de Troyes.^{ccclvi} Arthur and his knights were written to be the pinnacle of chivalry, meant to serve

as examples for members of the knightly class.^{cclvii} Through Arthuriana, knighthood took on a new desirable identity, with even kings seeking knighthood.^{cclviii} With the end of the Middle Ages, Arthur fell to the sidelines, only to be revived by the Victorians. In particular art and poetry movements like the Pre-Raphaelites, people were nostalgic for the medieval period as presented in Arthuriana.^{cclix} Arthuriana became more than a representation of a particular class and a symbol for England as a nation.^{cclx} But the romantic representation of medieval history as shown through Arthuriana created a nostalgic and idealized past and with it, a romantic image of the knight.^{cclxi}

In this serial, I have argued that the real knights of the Middle Ages were noble in terms of heritage rather than ideals, that chivalry was practiced as a culture of knighthood as a warrior and aristocratic class and not an ethical code of behavior.^{cclxii} Chivalry was a principal that was based more on warfare and aristocracy than in religious morality. The knight of medieval romance was the result of the patronage of noblewomen and knights aggrandizing their chivalric identity.^{cclxiii cclxiv} The chivalry of romances was concerned with mercy, and in particular the protection of women. But even the author of one of the most famous interpretations of the Arthurian legend failed to live up to this standard, writing his book while in prison for assault. On crusade, another knight described with excitement torturing his enemy, while in romances from the same time knights were applauded for their mercy.^{cclxv} This was the knight of history, a warrior and a landowner, not the courtly lover and jousting seen in the romances of Chretien de Troyes.

These were real living people, not two-dimensional characters, and like any person, they were not ideal. Through my research, I have compared and contrasted the knights of medieval romances from the knights of Medieval Europe. Arthuriana, and romances writ large, survived

because they were entertaining, but they also show us how knights wished to be seen. The troubadours who composed the romances were often writing for knights, and they created a knight that was ideal. All of the accoutrements of chivalry, the heraldry, tournaments and indeed romances themselves were created by the knighthood as a means to applaud itself. Lancelot endures as our archetypal knight not because he represented reality, but because he was the archetype knights wanted to be seen as. In the 13th century, kings put on elaborate round-table tournaments, where knights cast themselves as romance heroes.^{cclxvi} In essence, I believe romances didn't represent knighthood as it was, but represented the way knights wished to be seen.

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