“THE FALSE KNIGHT”? THE TENSION BETWEEN HISTORICAL AND LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF CHIVALRY IN FRANCE AND ENGLAND, C. 1100-1500

by

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Knights of the Middle Ages: History and Literature **1**

Chapter 1: Historical Development of Knighthood in Medieval England **13**

The First Knights in Europe 13

The Norman Conquest and its Influence on Knighthood in England 15

Knighthood as a Social Status 18

"Deus lo Vult": Knighthood and the Church 21

Chapter 2: The Flower of Chivalry **24**

Historical Evidence for Medieval Chivalry 24

Chivalric Biography: William Marshal 27

Chapter 3: Knighthood in Literature **33**

Knights and Chivalry in Literature 33

Knighthood in Sir Thomas Malory *Le Morte d'Arthur* 39

Chapter 4: Historical Development of Knighthood in Medieval England **53**

The Representations of the Medieval Knight in Literature and History 53

Historicized Fiction and Fictionalized History: *Le Morte d'Arthur* and *The History of William Marshal* 59

Conclusion **64**

Bibliography **68**

Introduction

Knights of the Middle Ages: History and Literature

For many, medieval chivalry evokes the image of the "knight in shining armor" — a man covered in shining metal plating, who rides on horseback, who competes for the attention of noble and fair ladies, who proves himself by fighting against other knights in jousting tournaments, who saves maidens in distress, who dedicates his life to his lord and land, who absolves honorable deeds, such as protecting the poor and fighting for the weak, who through his courageous, virtuous, and loyal nature uplifts himself from the common people. However, the virtues and ideals commonly associated with knighthood and chivalry often have little to do with the historical reality of the Middle Ages. Joachim Bumke explains that:

> discarding historical sources in favor of literary works, they regarded the brave knights and fair ladies of medieval literature, whom they took as reflections of reality, as witnesses of a vanished and more beautiful world, in which man in a spirit of childlike piety had still been at one with himself and with the great order of the universe. (1)

The modern ideas and expectations of the chivalrous knight are a glamorized image, mostly created by medieval and Victorian literature and poetry, such as Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, *The Song of Roland* (arguably written by a poet named Turold), Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe,* and Lord Tennyson's poem *The Lady of Shallot*, as well as contemporary pop-culture, such as G.R.R. Martins epic fantasy novel series *A Song of Ice and Fire* and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The*

Lord of the Rings. These literary works among countless others, have sustained the interests of many about Europe's Dark Ages for the centuries, and have created a highly glamourized image of the noble knight in the collective memory of western Europe.

Knights played an essential role during the Middle Ages, especially between the eleventh/twelfth up until the sixteenth century, and their appearance as either brave soldier or valiant lover inspired the hearts of many artists and authors. Literature became simultaneously the cause and the effect of the development of chivalric idealism and thus rendered the life of a knight into an ultimate imitation of art. It is due to the literary ideals that knighthood and chivalry were inseparably welded together, particularly in the literary cycles of the legendary French ruler Charlemagne, and his knightly soldiers, further developed by the influence of the English cleric Geoffrey of Monmouth with his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136), and finally and mostly shaped by the French author and poet Chrétien de Troye's *Le Chevalier de la Charette* (published between 1177 and 1181) and by Sir Thomas Malory's legends of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, regrouped and published in his book *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485).

But what is chivalry? To fully understand medieval chivalry, one must go back to the origins of the knight. To retrace the emergence of the knight, scholars base their research mostly on two historical factors. Firstly, they look at the terminology as well as the etymology of the word "knight." Secondly, they analyze at what point in history knighthood changed a man's juridical and social status in medieval society. However, the analysis of the terminology of the word "knight", with all its modern implications and associations, proves significantly difficult for historians. The meaning of the word varied enormously throughout the Middle Ages and meant different things in various countries and languages during various times. Nonetheless, scholars have agreed that it is through the upcoming Latin word *miles* or its plural form *milites,* during the

ninth to the thirteenth century through which they can retrace the first emergence of the so-called knight. During the period of the Roman Empire, the word “miles” was already used to designate a Roman soldier and his military service. In 1025, the Latin word “miles or milites” was firstly associated with the military meaning of the word. “Miles” was used to designate a common soldier/cavalryman, who owned a horse, armor, and weapons (Johns, 15).

The word knight originates from Germanic and derives from Knecht (servant, bondsman, vassal) and Ritter. These terms are all synonymous words for the French term “chevalier”. In France, the title “chevalier”, was already closely linked to what modern people understand under the word knight. The term “chevalier” literally means horseman or mounted knight and is the early equivalent of the English word knight. “Chevalerie” was the horseman’s craft, meaning “horse soldiery”, which came to be known in England as chivalry. The French word “chevalerie”, carries connotative similarities to chivalry, describing the warrior’s skill in the art of horsemanship (Saul, 7). Thus, what began with a word describing the military cavalry, the term chivalry later evolved into a code of ethical ideas.

Around the eleventh century, we start to see a distinction being drawn between foot soldiers and cavalrymen, and the world “miles” was used to indicate the latter. Bumke explains that the French word chevalier originally appeared in the older *chansons de geste* after 1100. The words usage during the early twelfth century suggests that its meaning initially described a military function (48). It was only later that the word “miles” started to acquire associations of nobility which it had lacked during the previous centuries (Saul, 18). Gradually the meaning changed and the word “miles” was applied to noble warriors and ‘it almost always took on a moral and ideological flavor’ (Bumke, 49). It was ‘the verse romances of Chretien de Troyes, around 1160 to 1180’, that made the word chevalier become ‘the central concept of the new courtly social ideal’,

also symbolically linking its meaning to the aristocracy, as Bumke argues (48). This also arguably explains the close connection between knighthood and chivalry that flourished in literature through medieval courtly romances, especially in England. Not only did most of the English nobility speak French throughout the Middle Ages, but many were also of French origin. Thus, the adoption of the word chevalier into the English language and the emerging link to chivalry, was inevitable, as French culture had an enormous influence on English society especially after the Norman conquest in the eleventh century.

Richard Barber designates the predecessor of the knight or the “chevalier” as “mounted warrior” and makes a clear distinction between this proto-knight and the knight ‘who enjoys a specific social status and a distinct ethos, esprit de corps, mentality, which eventually blossoms into the wider culture of chivalry, and draws on literary and spiritual ideals’ (4). Though the etymological development of the word knight, the changing nature of knighthood from its early associations up until the late Middle Ages becomes largely evident. The term knight with the overtones that it now carries for modern and even late Medieval audiences, only first emerged during the twelfth century with the growing influence of the church in military affairs. However, ‘it was not until the thirteenth century that warriors acquired a social rather than practical status: […] this is largely due to the emergence of knighthood as an order within society, replacing its original specialist military nature’ (Barber, 15). The knight’s role and his position in society shifted; the knight changed from being merely a mounted warrior—who, until the late eleventh century, was only ‘an embryonic version of the knight’, to representing a prestigious social class that emerged in the later high Middle Ages, and that undeniably served as inspiration for many literary works about knights and blossomed into the complex culture of chivalry (3).

The influence of chivalry on art and literature was unquestionable. ‘Chivalry provided the writers and artists of the Middle Ages with both a rich narrative repertory and an inexhaustible store of visual motifs’ (Saul, 5). Springing from the aristocratic society of medieval northern France, historical chivalry was just as complex and multilayered as historical knights and knighthood and was only just introduced in its embryonic version to England by the Normans through the Norman conquest after 1066. Chivalry is difficult and even impossible to define. The meaning of Chivalry reaches into many categories—military affairs, religion, gender, forms of individual behavior, and violence. However, we immediately recognize chivalry when we see it even without a clear definition. Saul writes that ‘medieval chivalry was more an outlook than a doctrine, more a lifestyle than an explicit ethical code. It embraced booth ideology and social practice’ (3). The central values of chivalry were honor, loyalty, prowess, generosity, courage, courtesy, ‘qualities which were esteemed by the military class and which contemporaries believed the ideal knight should possess’ (Saul, 3).

Chivalry carried different connotations for different people. For the clergy or the religious community, chivalry carried a religious vocation and it was the ‘responsibility of knights to wage war in a just cause, pre-eminently the recovery of the Holy Places from the infidel’ (3). For the legists, chivalry was ‘a set of moral guidelines to distinguish proper behavior from improper’ and to bring peace and order to the medieval society’ (3). And for the writers of poems, romances, and literature, chivalry ‘was about the attainment of virtue through ennobling feats of arms to win the favor of a lady’, or it was about ‘fighting on horseback, jousting in tournament lists and the achievement of manliness through prowess’ (3). The different core values promoted and conveyed by chivalry laid the moral groundwork for knighthood and additionally had considerable influence across the medieval aristocratic society, which were shaped in a chivalric image.

The literary influence created several historical inconsistencies regarding knighthood, as well as its development and its link to chivalry. Many historians and scholars have encountered major difficulties and challenges while retracing the historical origins, emergences, and development of knights, knighthood, and chivalry, without applying anachronistic “truths” established by literature to these warriors of the past. Medieval literary works played an important part in shaping the image of the medieval knight, to the point that the vivid and colorful imagination promoted by literature, overshadowed historical realities. Nicholson highlights that ‘many medieval texts are now regarded by historians as having been written primarily to entertain (such as epics or *chansons de geste*) were believed by their contemporaries to record actuality, while others which are now generally regarded as fantasy (such as Arthurian romances) were presented by their writers as recording actuality and had a clear didactic intention in addition to their function as entertainment. In short, it would be misleading to claim that there is a clear distinction between “reality” and “fiction” in medieval writings’ (viii). Thus, it is often difficult to define where the romanticism ends and where history begins. Nevertheless, Saul argues that to understand knighthood and chivalry ‘it is necessary to look at both history and literature and to give equal weight to the words of reality and imagination, in order to examine the complex interaction between the two which produces chivalry’ (cover). Author Helen Nicholson further explains that ‘the use of “fictional” literature as a historical source is deeply problematic. Yet, given the evident popularity of the legends of Charlemagne and Arthur, and of other adventure romances, historians cannot simply ignore them’ (14). Thus, it is important to study the historical truths in order to understand literary fiction and vice versa.

By exploring the historical context behind medieval, this thesis will trace the roots of the knight in medieval culture and analyze the historical and social evolution of knighthood and

chivalry during the Middle Ages. The analysis will focus on England after the Norman Conquest and outline the development of knighthood within English society up until the sixteenth century. The chivalric biography of William Marshal will offer insight into the life of a former knight and provide important historical information about twelfth-century knighthood.

The critical analysis of the images and ideals embodied by the literary knightly heroes of medieval epics and romances will be established by looking at a broad variety of literary works from the early to the late Middle Ages. The character analysis of Lancelot and Mordred will not only be exemplary for the literary idealistic portrayals of chivalry but Malory's book *Le Morte D'Arthur* also serves as means of critical expression for the over idealistic versions of knighthood presented in literary romances. This will lead to the analysis of how and why the concept and image of the medieval knight shifted from the early medieval period to the more complex knighthood featured in romantic/courtly love literature, by looking at literary, historical and social reasons from the ninth century up to the sixteenth century. The dissimilarities between literary and historical knights will effectively be highlighted by comparing the historical biography of William Marshal with the literary work of *Le Morte* by Malory. Additionally, the thesis will consider the powerful blend of imagination and reality and explore the mutual exerted influence of history and literature on the development of knighthood in both contexts.

The popular views of the medieval knight as the ultimate embodiment of chivalric behavior has sparked numerous scholarly and critical discussions about the historical realities and fictional misrepresentations surrounding the medieval hero *par excellence*. Many scholars and historians alike have tried relentlessly to explore knighthood's and chivalry's development over the course of the Middle Ages. Richard Barber's book *The Knight and Chivalry* offers monumental research and extensive historical overview of the prehistory of the emergence and development of the

knight in Europe. Barber, like many other historians, asserts that, contrary to the common belief, the knight is not a static character but ‘an elusive chameleon-like figure; [and] the moment we try to define him, he appears in a different guise’ (21). Barber demonstrates extensively the wide-ranging historical and etymological issues with the word ‘knight’ in relation to the often simplified contemporarily idealized views on knighthood (preface). However, much of Barber’s further research is mostly centered around the development of the knight in a European context, which proves mostly invaluable for this paper.

Peter Coss’s historical book *Chivalry in Medieval England* offers a valuable source for tracing the early rise of the knight in medieval England from 1000-1400. Coss’ analysis is narrower than that of Barber; Coss focuses his research on the Norman Conquest and William the Conqueror’s undisputed influence on the later development of English knighthood. Coss emphasizes on the multilayered societal changes that William brought to the English society and aristocracy, such as feudalism and knight service, which actively changed ‘the actual position, role and image of the knight’ (4-5). Eventually, knighthood in England began to carry social status, which initiated the possibility for knights to become an exclusive and wealthy social elite (Coss, 46).

Gradually, alongside the occurring changes of knighthood in medieval society, a chivalric code of honor was taking shape. Nigel Saul, in his work *Chivalry in Medieval England*, invites its readers to approach knighthood via the concept of chivalry, which he believes to be an indispensable inspiration for the historical knights as well as the chivalric idealism of knighthood that crystalized in the later medieval romance literature. Chivalry formed a framework for the central moral basis for knighthood, encouraging ‘the growth of a new civilianized concept of knightly behavior’ and transforming the knight from a mere warrior to an aristocratic courtly figure

and hero of historical and literary fascination (Saul, 365). Chivalry flourished above all in the epic ethos and the chivalric courtly literature of the Middle Ages. Moorman, in his book *A Knyght There Was*, contrary to the above-mentioned historical approach, presents an extensive landscape of the evolution of the knight in literature. As a scholar of medieval literature, he refrains from presenting historical evidence of the societal evolution of knighthood and instead dedicates his research to the literary study of medieval knightly/courtly literature and the diversified appearance and roles of the literary knight in these writings. From Chrétien to Malory, and Chaucer, Moorman examines 'the changing concept of the character of the knight through the really important literary works of the Middle Ages', and tries to trace a literary landscape of the role of the knight, the status of knighthood, and the essence of knightly chivalry, which often contrasts the historical role of the knight within medieval society.

Yet, while Barber, Coss, Saul, and Moorman touch upon the idea that history and literature exerted mutual influence on the development of chivalric knighthood, their research explores either social or literary history. They fail to expand upon the idea that both mediums jointly influenced the historical and literary evolution of knighthood. In fact, not many scholars have dedicated their critical attention to an extensive analysis and comparison of the promptly featured romantic ideals of knighthood in relation to the actual practices of knighthood or the knight's role within society. Consequentially, not enough scholarly research has been done to explore the pivotal mutual influence of literature and history on the development of chivalric knighthood throughout the Middle Ages. Nonetheless, scholars such as Hellen J. Nicholson, devote special attention to the reciprocal influence of literature and history. In her book *Love, War, and the Grail*, she insists on the importance to consider both the impact of history and literature while examining the many aspects of knighthood and chivalry. Nicholson argues that any attempt to effectively separate

reality and fiction is inherently flawed and as such, it should be of critical scholarly interest to examine how these two concepts informed each other. Nicholson believes that chivalric literature could provide insight into the historical knightly class and its development while considering the subjective view of those who were a part of that societal group (16).

This thesis will follow Nicholson's scholarly approach in order to examine discrepancies, as well as the analogies between the historical knights and the literary knights. However, rather than examining both mediums separately, I will provide a combination of historical and societal analyses of the actual practices and roles of medieval knights, while exploring and contrasting history with the literary portrayal of knighthood and chivalry. As the comparison will show, there are clear differences between reality and the romantic ideals of literature, although both portrayals are equally important. Furthermore, the comparative method will enable this thesis to demonstrate that 'the factual core of reality' regarding the development of knighthood and chivalry in history, 'spins around fictional narratives', which result in a parallel influence between both mediums (Saul, 45;46). Knights profited from an often-privileged representation in literature, which, on one hand, inspired real knights to consciously imitate the knightly ideals of literature, and on the other hand literature spun their fictional narratives around medieval knights.

The first chapter of this thesis will trace the early roots of the knight and analyze the etymological origins of the Latin word "miles"—a word that eventually became synonymous with the English word "knight." Additionally, the chapter will shed light on the birth of knighthood in England, due to the major social influences of William the Conqueror after the Norman Conquest in 1066. His societal reconstructions lead to the eventual rise of knighthood as an exclusive aristocratic social elite. The military function of knighthood was notably changed by the Catholic Church, which tried to limit the violent behavior of the new warrior elite. The Church intended to

encourage the knights to fight for a religiously just cause by participating in the crusades. This new ethic of war lead to the development of a proto-chivalric code of behavior, that eventually crystallized into the vibrant chivalric culture.

Chapter two will illuminate the concept of historical chivalry, that was heavily influenced by the development of tourneying and elaborated on through the influence of the Church. The chivalric principles will be examined through the chivalric biography of William Marshal, who was celebrated by his contemporaries as the best knight England has ever had and as the paragon of chivalry. His character is crucial for our understanding of how historical chivalry grew throughout the Middle Ages.

The third chapter will focus on the development of the knight in literature and offer an overview of the role of knighthood from the early *chansons de geste* to the fifteenth-century *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Malory's Arthurian legends in *Le Morte* serve as a literary template to analyze the knightly images and ideals produced by the late medieval literature. Furthermore, the critical analysis of *Le Morte* work, will illustrate a more nuanced characterization of knights and knighthood, and reveal that knights were not only honorable and chivalrous but could also succumb to violent and self-serving brutal behavior. Malory's conception of "good" and "bad" knighthood will be explored through an analysis of the knights' Sir Lancelot and Sir Mordred.

The final chapter of the thesis will draw on the insight gained from the historical and literary approaches applied in the previous chapters and will focus on comparing the often-divergent image of the knight, knighthood, and chivalry in history and literature. Additionally, the chapter will provide extensive research on how and why the knight's role shifted substantially in a literary context compared to history, by looking at possible literary, historical, and social reasons.

Chapter 1:

Historical Development of Knighthood and Chivalry in Medieval England

The First Knights in Europe

> It has to be admitted that the origins of knighthood present considerable problems for the historian, not least because the interpretation of sources, and most specifically their terminology, is fraught with difficulty. There were naturally immense differences between regions, and indeed within regions, and the pace of change varied considerably. (Coss, 6)

The knight remains the most defining figure of the medieval period. Yet, writing about medieval knights and knighthood is a backward-looking process at a concept enveloped in a complex and obscure history and surrounded by anachronism established in the subsequent centuries. The popular representation of the knight as a nobleman on horseback, however, has little do to with historical reality. In fact, the proto-knights were only a 'little more than simple fighting men, skilled in horsemanship and the use of arms, valued for their function as defenders and feared as potential disturbers of the peace' (Barber, 21). Knights only gradually emerged in medieval society through several multilayered and complex changes in society and history. Arguably, the first concept of knights appeared in the Carolingian Age during the reign of the Frankish ruler Charlemagne in the eighth century. Charlemagne required mounted soldiers to fight and defend his land, which stretched across waste regions in Europe. Charlemagne needed armed forces who

would endure regular campaigning in distant and difficult terrain and who could reach potential endangered areas in a shorter period of time (Barber, 6). As for the Franks, war was no longer local or passive but stretched among vast regions throughout the European continent, the "chevalier" was a perfect addition to his military strategy.

Horses have been domesticated and used for battle for much longer than stirrups have been around. Alexander the Great, for example, was accompanied by his legendary companion cavalry in battle. It was, however, only through the discovery of stirrups that cavalry warfare became a considerable military force (Jarymowycz, n.p.). Stirrups were designed to support the soldier's entire foot while riding. The mounted warrior, with stirrups attached to his horse's saddle, became the centerpiece of European militaries. The stirrups changed the pace of war and perfected the use of cavalry while rendering this military strategy more deadly than ever. However, the stirrup alone was not enough to ensure the prevalence of the mounted warrior, it was the use of cavalry charges with lances that shaped and ensured the long-lasting role of the chevalier in war. With these charges, mounted warriors could burst through chainmail and knockdown shields, while doing considerable damage to foot soldiers and breaking their frontlines by simply trampling them down with their horses. Thus, a new type of warfare was born which was known as mounted charge or shock combat. Armed riders were scarce in the west, however, the eccentric military activity in Europe created an immense demand for mounted warriors. As a result, coming out of the reign of Charlemagne, into the early Middle Ages, we begin to see a kind of amorphous group of people who are mounted warriors or chevaliers.

While mounted combat was already well established in European military warfare, it was only introduced to England in 1066 through the Normans. The use of the mounted charge or shock combat is confirmed by the Bayeux Tapestry, which portrays the events leading up to the Norman

conquest and depicts in detail the Battle of Hasting. The Bayeux Tapestry shows that the English army mainly consisted of axe-wielding foot soldiers, while the Norman elite is depicted on horseback fighting with lances and occasionally swords (Saul, 7). The tapestry provides an early depiction of the new cavalry tactic that developed during the eleventh century—one that stood in stark contrast with the English fighting style.

The Norman Conquest and its Influence on Knighthood in England

When the Normans arrived in England, there was no such concept as a knightly warrior class (Scammell, 591). However, after their conquest, the Normans introduced an early concept of knighthood to England. 'Knighthood came to England as a mature idea. Knights had been visible as a social group in French society for maybe a century before they arrived as the spine of Duke William's conquering army in 1066', as Crouch highlights (3). Arguably, the Anglo-Norman period gave knighthood its first contours. The Normans inspired English society with their new battle techniques, their honorable set of values, and their reorganization of society. But it was especially their warrior aristocracy and society, that provided the necessary groundwork for the later development of a knightly class as an independent social elite. To gain the necessary administrative control over his newly conquered kingdom, William of Normandy, also known as William the Conqueror, updated the existing hierarchy of land ownership and granted territory to his closest followers. This new form of governing introduced a different form of feudalism, which was not conventionally practiced in England. With the Norman conquest, undoubtedly one of 'the most conspicuous phenomenon to attract attention is the introduction of what it is convenient to term the feudal system', Round explains (417). Even though it is a commonly disputed historical theory, many scholars and historians argue that William the Conqueror introduced feudal

institutions of vassalage to England, and thus, making the Norman conquest 'the pivot of an entire social system' (Scammell, 591). Robert Hoyt clarifies that William introduced to England the traditions, practices, and organizations which were common in Normandy and northern France. William rewarded his barons and lords with their own land, which they governed as vassals in return for fealty and military service (28). Under Williams's reign, the Normans went on a castle building campaign and through the introduction of feudalism, he reorganized English society. The feudalist system was most commonly divided into four social hierarchal parties. The king, being at the peak of the social hierarchy, had the most power and owned all land. The tenants-in-chief, usually barons or bishops, held land directly under the king or prince they did homage to. Their tenure came with great honor and responsibilities. Their primary role was to provide the royal army with the necessary military troops. The under-tenants were usually miles or lords, who through military service, became the vassal of the tenants-in-chief. They were granted land or "fief", in return for their homage and oath of fealty. Those who provided the barons and bishops with such a service, increasingly came to be called knights. At the very bottom of the feudalist social hierarchy were the peasants, also sometimes known as "serfs" or "villeins".

The abstract term of feudalism is very disputed and historians instead most commonly discuss the concept of knight service. It is essential to note, however, that people did not yet use the word "knight" during this period in history. Knighthood was not yet seen as a profession nor did it exist as a social concept; it was only linked to military duty, practiced by men-at-arms. Scholars such as Jean Scammell argue that it was the equipment that made a man a knight. Originally, knighthood was defined by military equipment, and being knighted did not change a man's juridical or social status. If a man lost his military garbs, he ceased to be a knight until he was reequipped with suitable equipment (Scammell, 592). He furthermore explains that 'there

were knights who owned their own equipment and were enfeoffed of free land held by military service with that equipment. They did not in 1100 have a manor and court. They were not *liberi homines,* but owning their own arms they were knights for life' (598).

The concept of knight service, which is 'likely to have evolved in the first quarter of the twelfth century', refers to a form of feudal land tenure performed in the European feudalist system (Barber, 22). This feudal service describes a legal contract or bond that a mounted warrior would enter with a lord, a baron, or the king, in which military duties were performed in return for tenures of land or "fief." The mounted warrior was either supported by his lord's household, personal landholdings and provisions or by cultivated dependent territory (Saul, 15). Knight service developed naturally during the tumultuous period after the conquest and the introduction of cavalry into English warfare. The new warfare was expensive and extremely difficult to sustain, and only the wealthy elite could cover the costs. Saul explains that

> the emergence of cavalry encouraged the development of a social elite for one very straight forward reason: it greatly increased the cost of warfare, so that only the rich could afford it. A mounted warrior needed a horse-one specially bred and trained-and that was expensive. […] He also needed ample of members of servants, stable boys and esquires to attend to his own necessities and those of his horses. (14)

Knights did not yet hold any significant social position; many of them came a peasant background and were not capable of owning their own land nor estate, so they relied heavily upon the support of wealthy nobles or lords (Coss, 9). Nonetheless, the knight service was beneficial for both tenants, as the tumultuous period after the war proved to be extremely dangerous for the lords and ladies of the Anglo-Norman society. Coss points out that 'it is hardly surprising, in the circumstances of the time, that the great Norman lords who dominated England after 1066 should

have found it highly desirable to maintain large military households' (18). The nobles kept household knights for their own protection. These military households were comprised of a warrior elite, specially trained cavalrymen, who devoted their loyalty and service to one particular lord (Crouch, 4). William's influence dominated the later development of England's history and society, especially in relation to knighthood, since this new social system proved vital for the rise of a knightly class.

Knighthood as a social status

The gradual rise of the social status of knighthood was ensured by a knight's right to own land and hold his property as an individual free man. This was probably the aspiration of many household knights, as owning personal land would grant them a more prestigious status in society. Knights came to be granted lands under the process known as subinfeudation or substitution (Kreikebaum, 30). This English law permitted tenants, usually holding land under the king, baron, or superior lord, to be granted their own land by their vassal lord with all the privileges and responsibilities falling to the new landholder. In feudal Anglo-Norman England, this was known as knight's fee, which was usually a measure of land deemed sufficient for the knight to support himself, as well as his family, esquires, and even servants. The endowment of a knight with land inevitably meant a change and rise in his social position. Stenton additionally argues that 'in the next generation [a knight's] heir would probably be accepted as a baron of his lord's honor, and his opinion would begin to count, not only among his peers in his lord's court but in the court of his shire and on juries drawn from the knights of the country-side' (299). The knights' political involvement in the courts of the shire, elevated their social position to a separate social elite. Being

a knight came with civil duties and political responsibilities. The shire courts 'were more than simple customary law courts. The shire court was an assembly at which a whole range of concerns might be aired' (Crouch, 14). The *legales milites* (law-worthy-knights) were responsible for the law, justice, and order.

The rise of knighthood as a social elite was also facilitated by the particular structure of the Anglo-Norman society. Both before and after the Norman Conquest, England was ruled by a warrior aristocracy, its subordinates, and associates. Thus, the relationship between lords and their warriors or knights was of utter importance. Anglo-Norman society was a warrior society and many nobles and barons were warriors themselves, often highly trained soldiers on foot and horseback. Stenton highlights that

> knighthood in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries had denoted nothing beyond proficiency in the art of fighting on horseback. Skill in this art could be acquired by any able-bodied youth brought up in a military household, and although it is hard to imagine a baron of this period who was not also a knight, knighthood itself implied no distinction of birth or education. (298)

Knights became more autonomous throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Even if they had sworn loyalty and service to another noble, knights rose on the social ladder through their independent landholdings, developing 'a growing sense of personal lordship, local identity, and proprietorship' (Saul, 68). The line between knights as mere vassals for tenants-in-chief, blurred slowly during the late thirteenth and fourteenth century, 'for many knights were also barons, and as such ranked immediately below the king in social hierarchy' (Barber, 331). At this point in history, these tenants were men of the same social condition as their lord, holding their own houses and owning their own knights. Those knights often occupied many vassals (knights)

in their own household, which they assembled for their lord as a contribution to the feudal host. Thus, the social distinction between the barons, nobility, and knights disappeared gradually, and knighthood gradually 'embraced a range of wealth and a variety of conditions' (Coss, 27).

The old feudal basis of knighthood had completely disappeared by the early fourteenth century and by the end of the same period, the dividing line between nobility and knights had effectively vanished; the 'descendants of the knights had fully adopted the nobles' insistence on birth as the great criterion' (Barber, 43). Only a certain noble elite was allowed to follow the path of knighthood and receive the honorific title of knight. At this stage, knighthood could no longer be freely bestowed upon any man, but had to be inherited through ancestry, and, while not all knights were high nobles, nobles regarded themselves as knights. This change in attitude indicates that social status and knighthood were fusing together, merging into a single social group, and developing a collective identity. Additionally, by the end of the thirteenth-century the general numbers of knights decline greatly and knighthood 'was taken up only by a small and relatively affluent elite' (Faulkner, 1). The thirteenth-century was perhaps the most peaceful period of the Middle Ages and the need for knights decreased dramatically during this time (Saul, 60). Thus, it was mostly the elite who pursued the path of knighthood, even if not exclusively. The son of a knight became automatically a squire, making him eligible for knighthood through ancestry. The path to knighthood usually started at the age of seven. A boy born in nobility was sent to serve in the household of a prince or knight as a page. At the age of fourteen, he became a squire. He would be trained in several disciplines that are later required to be mastered by a knight, such as horse riding, fighting with a sword and lance, hunting, taking care of his armor, etc. At the age of twenty-one, they could be knighted through an elaborate ceremony called an accolade.

Through these social changes and growing institutions, knights 'transformed into a highly self-conscious aristocracy, punctilious in regard to questions of rank and precedence' and it was through the 100 Years' War, which 'created an atmosphere in which all recipients of knighthood came inevitably to form a class apart from other men; and knighthood, which had long been a title of honor, became a symbol of personal distinction' (Stenton, 290;300). As a result, knighthood acquired an increasingly exclusive social status.

"Deus lo Vult": Knighthood and The Church

While life in Europe became increasingly organized, a code of honor was developed based upon ideas of chivalry, religion, and the knight's status as a professional warrior. The Church and Christianity had a considerable influence on knighthood and effectively introduced a set code of honorable behavior that would crystalize into the later medieval courtly culture of chivalry. The churches' attempt to regulate and influence knighthood played an important part in the shaping of the knight's image as a noble warrior for the centuries to come. Coss explains that since the early eleventh century, the church continuously attempted to control military activities. Eventually, knights started to serve directly under the Catholic Church and ultimately participated in the crusades (46). The need to control and regulate the profession of arms derives from the Church's unacceptability of the violence of war and the ethical transgressions against the human race. The Church intended to undermine the savagery, the selfish tyranny, and the cruelty of warfare and its active supporters. Barber explains that in order to achieve regulation of knighthood and change the

ethics of war, the Church, rather than to forbid its practice, 'encouraged knighthood but only in order to control and tame the warrior' (250).

This new ethic and the proto-chivalric code forbade knights to exercise uncontrolled violence. The Church believed that war should only be waged on behalf of a just cause, and thus, partaking in crusades was desirable and even expected from Christian knights. Saul adds that 'crusading in other words, while providing a means to regain the Holy Places, also offered a solution to the long-standing problem of the unruly knight in Christian society (220). All those who took the cross went to war as "soldiers of God" (milites Dei) and "servants of Christi" (milites Christi). The Christianization of the knight was a crucial step for the social transformation of the knightly class since even if the Church fundamentally disapproved of all war-like activities, the Church gave the warrior a noble place in society due to its willingness to acknowledge knighthood as a military and spiritual profession (Barber, 67). Furthermore, the Church bestowed a religious mission upon knighthood, linking the role of the knight to a higher purpose. Flori argues that 'the production by the Church of didactic works promoting identical values and ideals, helped to increase the sense of there being a function, even a mission, reserved for knighthood' (250). This conviction of accomplishing a spiritual mission further developed the knight's role as defenders of the Christian faith and the Church.

Since the crusades were deemed successful and important by the Church, knightly orders, such as the Hospitallers, the Teutonic Knights, and the Templars, began to appear. These men, who as half-monks and half-knights, lead a virtuous life as defenders of Christ and the Church. These knightly institutions formed pacts with monasteries and their members exercised their secular power to defend cloisters and protect pilgrims on their journey to the Holy Land (Barber, 266). The spiritual knight should exercise his profession of arms in the service of the Catholic

Church and the Christian religion. Flori emphasizes on the fact that ‘the church attempted […] to inculcate into the knights the mission to protect the clergy and the weak, in particular widows and orphans, with the intention of making the knights into an order with a predominantly religious ideology’ (257). The Church anticipated that these spiritual knights as servants of God, should protect the weak, and defend the Church against evildoers. Accordingly, the knight was consequently bound to the Christian faith and ‘the chivalric calling had become a Christian mission’ (Knipfher, 24).

The Christianization of knights added a social and ethical dimension to knighthood, which lead to a new ideal of spiritual knighthood. These Christian knights associated themselves with strict monastic rules and embodied virtues of fidelity, loyalty, piety, and displayed a profound devotion to God. These virtues of Christendom formed a basis for an international code of honor and conduct not only in war but also in society. This primitive version of chivalry, inspired by the ‘central idea of serving the cause of God, defending the oppressed and combatting the infidels’, laid the groundwork for the development of a chivalric code and was the most influential legacy of the crusading movement in the history of knighthood (Williamson, 338).

Chapter 2:

The Flower of Chivalry

Historical Evidence for Medieval Chivalry

Much like knighthood, chivalry is an elusive concept, multilayered and even broader in its definition. Maurice Keen highlights that chivalry 'remains a word allusive of definition, tonal rather than precise in its implications' (Keen, 2). Several recent historians have tried to give a possible definition of chivalry, yet even though they all describe the same idea, their conceptualization of chivalry deviates greatly from each other. Many scholars, while lacking a universal definition, describe some aspects that constitute the concept of chivalry. Sir Edward Strachey argues that chivalry is like the concepts of 'love, duty, patriotism, loyalty, which makes us feel their meaning, and the reality of what they mean, though their ideal and comprehensive character hinders us from readily putting it into the forms of a definition' (xix). For Nigel Saul, on the other hand, 'medieval chivalry was more an outlook than a doctrine, more a lifestyle than an explicit ethical code' (3). Richard Kaeuper gives a clearer definition and suggests that 'chivalry in fact provided the *esprit de corps* for the laity in the medieval world; it framed not only war and peace, but status, acquisition and distribution of wealth, the practice of lay piety, the elevated and elevating nature of love, and ideal gender relationships, among much else. (5). For Maurice Keen, chivalry is a problematic and abstract ideal, 'it remains a word elusive of definition, tonal rather than precise in its implications' (2). These four historians agree on one point: that there is no universal definition of chivalry because it combines multiple elements, customs, rules, and values.

Chivalry has its origins in the medieval military world and developed over a long period. Chivalry began to develop during the aftermath of the Norman Conquest, with the cultural and social changes it brought to England. Its outlook was purely military, and only during the twelfth and thirteenth century, courtly behavior and administrative functions had contributed to the changes in the conceptions of chivalry. Although chivalry was introduced to England by the Normans in the eleventh century, 'it was from the early fourteenth century that chivalric ritual began to penetrate warfare extensively, with vows, glorious feats of arms, and brave deeds done to impress women' (Prestwich, 235). The increasing popularity of knightly tournaments and jousting played a central role in shaping elements of chivalry, as 'the tournaments may be fairly described as the central ritual of chivalry' (Barber, 155). Tourneying created an arena for knights in which they could perform and display their prowess and skillfulness at arms. It was the knight who performed best, who could earn the attention of lords and heralds and win the hearts of the ladies of the court. Keen explains that the history of the growth of tourneying, as an exclusive social knightly activity, laid the groundwork for the early development of historical chivalry (83).

Nevertheless, an intellectual framework was added to the concept of chivalry by the influence of the Church. Charles Moorman explains that 'the Church had now come to control, certainly in spirit and often in detailed operation, the life of the knight—his education, his training, his investiture with its oaths and rituals, and, in fact, his whole career' (15). As a matter of fact, the moral standards of chivalry were informed by a predominant culture of piety, righteousness, self-sacrifice, martial prowess, and service of the Medieval Christian faith. Saul adds that 'the religious conception of chivalry, encouraged by the church and articulated in these treatises, fed through into romance and poetry' (201).

Chivalry formed its roots above all in history. However, it is important to note that it was only through literature that a chivalric code was articulated and captured in writing. Two of the most famous books of chivalry, by medieval standards, were *the Book of the Order of Chivalry* by Ramon Llull (c. 1274-6) and *the Book of Chivalry* by Geoffrey de Charney (c. 1351-2). Both books preoccupy themselves with creating and codifying the rules for a unilateral order of chivalry. These works should be acknowledged as guidelines, as they are intended to convey the appropriate qualities for medieval knights. The ideals of chivalry flourished and were popularized through the medieval literature of the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. Barber explains that

> the powerful blend of the imaginative and the real was to be the staple entertainment and inspiration of the knightly world for almost four centuries. It was in this fictional world that chivalry took its final shape, and it was there that it appeared in its most alluring guise. (105)

Literature and romance have elevated these ideas and ideals of chivalry. It is thus that we can assume that literature was a deciding factor for chivalry's cultural and spiritual unfolding.

Chivalric Biography: William Marshal

This form of proto-chivalry, shaped by jousting tournaments and envisioned by the spiritual ethics of the Catholic Church, was an ideal that many knights looked up to but only rarely followed. Nonetheless, men like William Marshal came close to the chivalric ideal. Marshal united nobility, knighthood, chivalry, and embodied its connections. William Marshal 'is an important character in our growing understanding of how the idea of chivalry grew', as Crouch suggests (186). In his book *Chivalry in Medieval England*, Nigel Saul clarifies that William Marshal was 'the most highly esteemed knight of his day' (200). Indeed, the life of William Marshal is an interesting one. Rising from 'obscurity to the very top of the feudal aristocracy', William became England's most celebrated knight (29). Marshal's military qualities, his outstanding conduct as a companion and royal advisor, and his exemplary behavior as a chivalrous knight fashioned him into the paragon of chivalry. Barber clarifies that 'William Marshal certainly deserved his posthumous fame; the account of his life is no artificial eulogy, for it was written largely at the dictation of his squire and rings true in most of its details; yet he stands as a shining example of what a knight could be and do' (141-142). Marshal's life was captured in many literary writings, making him 'the subject of one of the first vernacular biographies of the Middle Ages' (Kniphfer, 45). Much of his life is drawn from the lengthy poem known as the *Histoire de Guillaume le Marechal*, which was commissioned by his eldest son. Young writes that the poem is 'one of the best sources for the knightly code of values in the late twelfth century' (641). The French historian Georges Duby, was also fascinated by William Marshal and wrote his heroic biography *William Marshal: The Flower of Chivalry* (1985). His book is a historical reconstruction of William Marshal and based on the

biographical poem *Histoire* written in the thirteenth century. Duby's motivation for his book sparked from a curiosity of knowing about the secular knightly mentality and what this knight's life could teach 'us of the culture of chivalry' (38).

The extensive documentation of the Marshal's chivalric career as a knight provides important insight into the twelfth-century social practices, such as tourneying and jousting, offers information on medieval political relationships, and illustrates the contemporary views on knighthood and in return how knights perceived themselves during the Middle Ages. *The History of William Marshal* is the only complete documentation of the life of a knight-errant in the twelfth century that has survived over the centuries (Barber, 141). William Marshal was frequently the subject of praise. His biographer states that 'in our time there has been no finer knight anywhere nor one who so excelled in arms, so talented a warrior' (Bryant, 226). Historical records of knights are scare and William Marshal is an important historical example of English knighthood since he personifies idealistic values of chivalric knighthood and unites 'prowess, goodness, largesse and wisdom […] together in one man' (81). The Marshal's practices of chivalric values are representative of the cultural development of chivalry and its ideals, which were previously considered in this chapter. It is crucial to explore the Marshal's knightly career and to analyze his representation as a chivalric figure in *The History of William Marshal*, because it provides insight into why he was celebrated by his contemporaries as the epitome of knighthood and became an active 'inspiration […] to all worthy knights who can hear about his life' (226).

William Marshal was born around 1147 and was knighted by his master William de Tancarville in 1167. Not much is known of his birth since 'it is too low for the archives to be much of help' (Duby, 3). However, Duby is quick to add that 'whereas in the year we are now speaking of – 1219 – fortune has raised him so high that we can follow, almost day by day, his final deeds,

his last exploits' (3). His father John FitzGilbert was a marshal at the court of King Henry I. William was granted the hand in marriage of Isabel de Clare, heiress to the earldom of Pembroke. He served five English rulers as a royal advisor and was a warrior of outstanding ability. William died in 1219 as regent of England. He earned his living primarily as a professional soldier, although his métier was jousting. William regularly attended tournaments 'where he performed so outstanding that all marvelled at his strength and might' (Bryant, 43). He used the tournaments 'to prove his prowess and enhance his reputation', while growing extremely wealthy on prize money (42). 'By 1180 he had the means to maintain his own establishment of knights' (Saul, 28). William was always in search of military glory. In battle and tournaments, he demonstrated his exceptional skill at arms. It is through his prowess that he displayed in countless tournaments that William made a name for himself, to the point that even the most skilled knights and the noblest lords looked up to him. In fact, he became so popular that 'each lord sought to have him […] and claimed to be willing to pay the high price' (Duby, 97). He was also very popular among his comrades-in-arms; even though he always ended victorious in the tournaments, he never displayed overbearing pride but treated others with respect. Duby writes that William Marshal personified largesse and generosity. He explains that 'abandoning himself [William] to the eminent pleasure of giving presents to everyone, to the less fortunate, to those who had been taken prisoner that day, emptying his purse and leaving his own prisoners marveling at all they still owed him; he kept nothing for himself, except glory' (111-112).

William's knightly career was inspired by the new social concept of spiritual knighthood. William Marshal exercised his profession in the service of the Catholic Church and exemplified the idealistic and spiritual values of Christianity. In fact, it was his participation in the crusades that lead to the peak of his desire to become a *Prudhomme*; the image of an ideal noble warrior.

From 1184 to 1186, William fought in a series of religious wars against Muslims in the Latin East (Saul, 29). Throughout his journey, he met warrior-monks, knights who fight and dedicate their lives to a deeply spiritual and religious cause. Their lifestyle inspired William Marshal, seeing in them his calling as a knight. William 'as a connoisseur, admired how joyously, how effectively they [warrior-monks] outstripped all others in battle. William realized that they combined 'the merits of the two ruling categories of human society, the religious order and the chivalric order, and that these men thereby stood, judging from all appearances, in the forefront of those who will reach paradise' (Duby, 13).

William Marshal exemplified a code of chivalry that defends the weak, shows generosity, charity, and courtesy to all, especially to women. He had a rather ambiguous history with women, but which was always marked by his appreciation and consideration for the other sex. He had a good deal of respect for his mother and sister, which he visited occasionally when he was in England. He also had an exceptional relationship with Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine. She was arguably the reason for his subsequent advancement as a knight in the higher circles of nobility and royalty. William's conduct with women notably mirrored the game of courtly love featured in the literary chivalric romances. Duby illustrates that 'the knight's ethic […] obliged him to ride at full tilt to rescue of wellborn women when he found them in danger' (45). However, his virtuous conduct with women, especially wellborn women, contributed to the accusations of William having an adulterous affair with Queen Margaret, daughter of Louis VII. Furthermore, his 'fine career in tournaments and wars' lead to 'the envy of many' (Bryant, 43). Nonetheless, it is unclear if any of these charges against William were true or if they were 'derived from contemporary romances and erroneous gossip' (Crouch, 50).

William's career entered a new phase and his social function as a knight was uplifted as he became tutor-in-arms of Henry the Young King, son of Henry II. 'King Henry […] selected the finest knights in the realm to be his companions. The Marshal was summoned – so valiant and loyal, endowed with every quality, lacking none – and the king placed him with his son […] for guarding and instructing him' (Bryant, 47). He started as his tutor and guardian, but soon their relationship grew into intimate companionship, and friendship while supervising Henry's knightly development. Duby puts forward that 'William, then, as a kind of palace mayor; [kept] guard over his still-adolescent master, he direct[ed] him, he control[led] him'; he had complete supremacy over the heir of Henry II (80). William was a part of the knightly entourage of the Young King, who served as his personal royal guards. The relationship between William Marshal and the Young King was marked by immense loyalty and devotion. Duby highlights that 'William Marshal was […] the most loyal man' (Duby, 25). However, their allegiance was only temporary since the Young King died at the age of twenty-eight.

William Marshal was representative of feudal customs and knightly behavior of the twelfth century, and embodied knightly and chivalric qualities; he was 'endowed with virtually all the qualities which contemporaries esteemed in a knight. William had the soldierly virtues of courage, strength, vigor, and boldness. At the same time, he possessed the complementary qualities of charm, courtesy, and affability' (Saul, 30). Contemporaries celebrated his virtues and praised the earl of Pembroke as 'valiant and wise', and 'whose heart was ever whole and pure' (25;138). Guillaume de Barres, a French *chevalier* and close friend of Phillip II of France, complimented William and affirmed that 'there was no better knight anywhere, and none who was more diligent in arms. I saw, and I call upon God as my witness, that I have never seen a better knight than he in all my life' (25). William had displayed qualities that were valued by feudal sovereigns. Sidney

Painter accounts that William 'was noted for his loyalty, for his general reliability. He told the truth and fulfilled his obligations' (60). The Marshal was a man who dedicated his life to his lord, his king, his kingdom, a man who united extraordinary military capacities with the softness and gentilesse of the heroes of chivalric culture and united these qualities through his knighthood. The unification of outstanding valiance and prowess, as well as his embodiment of courtly and chivalric behavior, surrounded William Marshal with mystique and fascination. It was through this excellence that he bloomed into the perfect knight, and 'having borne chivalry to its fulfillment', the knight William Marshal can be rightfully considered 'the flower of chivalry' (Duby, 152).

Even before a code of behavior was articulated and a rich chivalric literary culture was elaborated, chivalric behavior could be observed among knights much earlier than chivalry was codified by literature. The story of William Marshal is one of the best-known stories of early chivalry. Such chivalric ideals, influenced by the practices in tournaments and jousting, and envisioned by the Church, are central characteristics in the biography of William Marshal. The Marshal was a remarkable knight, whose career was exemplary for the possible individual accomplishments that a knight of the early Middle Ages could achieve. The Marshal's exceptional prowess and performances in tournaments, as well as his excellent qualities as a leader, and remarkable mentorship for the young king, set his knightly career apart from the lives of many other knights. William rose from being a mere soldier to an important nobleman, mentor and leader due to his loyalty, courtesy, honor, and military capacities; qualities which became central to the later concept of chivalry observed in romance literature.

Chapter 3:

Knighthood in Literature

Knights and Chivalry in Literature

The warrior (or knight) as a literary figure, was not only a prominent character in the late medieval romances, but its first appearances 'can be dated back as early as the *chansons de geste*' (Stenton, 300). One popular example of a *geste* is the *Chanson de Roland*, which concerns itself primarily with the legendary deeds of the epic warrior Roland. Charles Moorman claims that 'Roland of the *Chanson de Roland* is one of the literary and, by extension, historical forerunners of Chrétien's knights' (21). However, unlike Lancelot, Roland is' neither lover nor courtier', but his knightly qualities lie in prowess and loyalty to his liege (Moorman, 22). Moorman writes that in the *Chansons de Roland*, 'prowess in arms was the chief virtue of any knight […], the virtues of loyalty and generosity, themselves outgrowths of prowess, soon came to be valued next to prowess' (12). Thus, on a less exalted level, courage and loyalty, as well as prowess and capabilities in arms were the central characteristics that defined the epic hero. However, the appearance of knighthood and the flourishing of chivalry, marked a change in attitude between the old warrior ideals and the new knightly hero and thus, the role of the literary knight shifted from epic hero to romantic lover.

As chivalry began to be acknowledged in medieval society, its presence and prominence grow in literature. Saul explains that the concept of ideal chivalry was recorded in various literary forms, for instance in chronicles, romances, chivalric biographies, and marvels of courtesy (305). These works presented chivalry as an ideal code of conduct, which could serve as a moral basis and influence for many individual knights (Saul, 305). Thus, as chivalric romances became more popular, 'the knight became the principal hero in many literary works' (Stenton, 300). The writers of the chivalric romances picture the knight 'in an idealized form as the courteous, humane, gentle knight who without blemish or stain rides about dispensing justice and mercy' (Moorman, 21).

It was, however, the addition of the knight's duty as a lover, which permanently merged the concepts of knighthood, nobility, and chivalry together, leading to the development of a new literary concept: *l'amour courtois* (or courtly love). It should be noted that the expression *amour courtois* does not have its origins in medieval past; it was originally coined by Gaston Paris in 1888 to describe the love between Lancelot and Guinevere in Chrétien de Troyes's poem *Le Chevalier de la Charette* (Denomy, 46). Moorman argues that 'the integration of courtly love into the knightly code in the period extending roughly over the twelfth and thirteenth centuries not only make the knight fit for the hall and the bower as well as for the battlefield, but it also makes him fit for literature' (Moorman, 19). It was in the literary form of chivalric romances that transformed the image of the knight, from a pure militaristic image, to gentle and courtois lover, closing unchangeably the gap between knighthood and chivalry.

The concept of *l'amour courtois* originated in French literature, even if its definition is only of recent account. Most commonly, historians agree that the concept of courtly love firstly emerged in the twelfth century, known as the French Vulgate Cycle (Moore, 621). Arguably the most important figure for the development of courtly love in literary history was the French author

Chrétien de Troyes. It was during his time as a writer in which knighthood and chivalry became inseparable in literature and in history. His stories 'treated courtly love as a part of the chivalric code', lifting knighthood to new heights and indefinitely ennobling the knight as lover (Moorman, 164). Chrétien's surviving romances are *Eric et Enide*, *Cliges, Lancelot* or *Le Chevalier de la Charette*, *Yvain,* or *Le Chevalier au Lion*, and *Perceval* or *Le Conte du Graal*. Barber highlights that in his romances,

> Chrétien offers a very different atmosphere. Drawing on the love of action of the knights and the longing for love stories of the ladies, and blending both with the newly current "Breton tales" of Celtic marvels and enchantments, he created a new world and cast a spell over chivalry from which it never quite awoke. (106)

Two of his stories that became eventually the most relevant for the later development of the Arthurian tales are Perceval and the Holy Grail and the tales of Lancelot of the Lake. Chrétien crafted some of the most memorable and influential medieval chivalric heroes. For instance, Chrétien's twelfth century poem *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* introduces the adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Queen Guinevere and popularizes the idea of courtly love. The concept of courtly love introduced a distinct version of love which has never been seen before. Denomy explains that

> courtly love is a type of sensual love and what distinguishes it from other forms of sexual love, from mere passion, from so-called platonic love, from married love is its purpose or motive, its formal object, namely, the lover's progress, and growth in natural goodness, merit, and worth. (44)

Courtly romances presented a unique kind of love, which was essentially different from other forms of adoration. According to C.S. Lewis, the chief characteristic of courtly love is ‘humility, courtesy, adultery, and the religion of love’ (2). Courtly love accentuates the special relationship between the sexes in which the woman holds a position of power, and the knightly lover tries to gain the lady’s favor by absolving numerous heroic deeds in order to win her heart. Properly and devoutly, the knight-lover needs to demonstrate the depths of his devotion and love by absolving noble deeds and displaying generosity, courtesy, and bravery. Moorman argues that the role of the literary knight fundamentally changed with the flourishing of courtly love as a literary phenomenon,

for courtly love plummeted the knight, the fighting machine who had been first ironclad barbaric bully and then ironclad Christian bully, into two dilemmas, two sets of incompatible choices which he could not avoid if he were to retain responsibilities of a knight and the added duties of a lover. (Moorman, 17).

It was the duties of a lover, which bound the knight inevitably to womanhood.

Generally, men where the subject of countless literary works. However, there is within a set framework also female presence in medieval literature. Especially in chivalric romances the lady played a central role in the stories. ‘When the knight’s lady first appears in the literature of the mid-twelfth century, she is unlike anything before or since, unrivalled in her command over men’s hearts, a remote, almost divine being (Barber, 71). The lady becomes the pivotal inspiration behind a knight’s actions and the cause behind his every deed. Barber emphasizes on the essential importance of the woman and that achieving a lady’s love was of more worth than any military achievement. He explains that

> from the time of the first romances, chivalry and the worship of fair ladies are so intimately bound up as to become almost indistinguishable; the knight who aspires to chivalric glory does not yearn to lead armies in Alexander's footsteps, does not dream of the gold of power, but longs to shine for his prowess as an individual, that he may earn the silver of his lady's love. (Barber, 71)

A lady's favor could only be attained through noble deeds, and thus the concept of knightly quests and the wandering knight in search for adventure became central to the medieval chivalric romance literature. The knight 'seeks adventure for only one reason: to stonden in his lady grace. So, he roams the wide world in search of ogres, giants, dragons, and Black Knights of Black Lands to demonstrate, by deeds as well as by poems and songs, that he is essentially worthy of the favors of his beloved' (Moorman, 21).

Alongside the introduction of the questing knight, "knight-errantry" also emerged from the tradition of chivalric romances. The term knight-errant occurs for the first time in the fourteenth century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The adjective "errant" meaning "wandering" or "roving", describes a knight, who in search for adventures, wanders the land to prove his chivalric virtues through knightly deeds. According to Moorman 'the knight is now a wanderer searching for adventure and in his quest encountering marvels and trials beyond the imagination of Roland [...]. (28). The knight-errant remained popular even in the later medieval literature, and became the traditional figure of chivalric romances. The templates for knight-errantry are for example the literary knights Lancelot, Gawain, Percival, etc., mostly heroic knights of the Round Table in the Arthurian cycle.

The most popular medieval writings were the various stories of the Arthurian romances. Perhaps, the most famous telling of King Arthur's stories is that of Sir Thomas Malory. Indeed,

Malory is often perceived as the pinnacle of Arthurian culture in medieval England (Moll, 3). From Arthur to Gawain, from Lancelot to Mordred, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, presents his readers with a variety of different knights, all embodying various chivalric virtues and knightly perfections as well as imperfections. Relying heavily on former source material, Malory rewrites many of the Arthurian knightly tales and introduces the literary figure of the tragic knight. In fact, tragedy stalks many of his knights and Lancelot, Mordred and even Arthur fall victim to a calamitous fate. As declared by Moorman, 'the central theme which these narrative lines emphasize is not simply the nature of chivalry, but more exactly the tragic nature of the Round Table civilization and, hence, of the courtly life' (102).

The historical knight began as a simple warrior, an armed man on horseback, skilled with lance and sword. But with the blossoming of the medieval chivalric romances, and the establishment of a sophisticated code of behavior, the historical knight began to be idealized and eventually entered the realm of fiction. The ideals of knighthood underwent significant changes and have rendered the knight into a complex figure of literature and the concept of chivalry became a 'matter of morals and character, rather than of class or prowess' (Lupack, 4). From Roland to Malory's Lancelot is a long and complex journey (Moorman, 108). Moorman explains that 'as the knight, like the court he represents, becomes more sophisticated, he becomes more complex, more a creature of the fallen world of mixed good and evil (108). It was through the convoluted development over many centuries that the chivalric knight was caught up in the limbo of fiction, becoming 'almost purely [a] literary figure' (28).

Knighthood in Sir Thomas Malory: *Le Morte D'Arthur*

In his preface to *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Caxton writes:

> And I […] have done set in imprint, to the intent that noble men may see and learn the noble acts of chivalry, the gentle and the virtuous deeds that some knights used in those days, by which they came to honour and how they that were vicious were punished and oft put to shame and rebuke; humbly beseeching all noble lords and ladies, […], that they take the good and honest acts in their remembrance, and to follow the same. (xiv)

By the late fifteenth century, knighthood and chivalry had essentially ceased to have any social importance, the writers of chivalric romances still bore a significant fascination for knights and their chivalrous code of honor (Moorman, 96). Sir Thomas Malory and William Caxton were among several other medieval authors who translated, reworked, and composed chivalric/courtly literature. The literary chivalry became undeniably immortalized in the written word by the revival of the Arthurian legends during the fifteenth century through a vast work known as *Le Morte D'Arthur*.

Le Morte D'Arthur, compiled and re-worked by the enigmatic author called Sir Thomas Malory, is an anthological collection of the chronicles of the rise and fall of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. He finished his work sometime between 4 March 1469 and 3 March 1470, during his time in prison (Whitteridge, 17). It was during the War of the Roses that Malory wrote his adaptation of the legends of King Arthur and his knights while complying and interpreting existing sources and including his own additions to the stories (e.g. the Gareth story).

After Caxton's publication, Malory's work was received with overwhelming popularity and is probably one of the most important works in regard to the legends of King Arthur. Goodman even proclaims that *Le Morte d'Arthur* 'ranks as the crowning masterpiece of medieval English Arthurian literature' (11).

The majority of the legends of King Arthur and his knights were realized before Malory's time. However, Malory rewrote and reinterpreted these sources and added his own original material, creating almost an entirely improved and united version of the existing stories. One of his major sources was the prose generally referred to as the *Prose Lancelot* or the *Vulgate Cycle,* which was supposedly written around 1230-35 in France, possibly in Champagne (Cable, 9). Malory presents with an immense complexity the former stories of King Arthur and the noble and chivalrous knights of his court. His collection of these legends presents 'a panorama of every essential element in the romance literature of the period' (Barber, 122).

When Malory tells the stories about the Arthurian knights and their display of knightly and chivalric qualities, it is important to specify that he had an explicit idea about knighthood and traditional chivalry. While Malory has not ignored the essence of the original French sources, he nevertheless altered them to some extent, and effectively turned away from the French chivalric ideal. This becomes evident while comparing the original *Prose Lancelot* with his *Morte d'Arthur*. In the original source, Bors de Ganis states that the virtues of a knight were 'beauty and prowess, valor and chivalry and gentility' (Cable, 78). The French source only briefly mentions the virtues of a knight. Malory on the other hand is to a much greater extent concerned with the 'earthly values of knighthood', the ideal of knightly chivalry, 'love and fellowship, and *worshyp*' (Whetter, 105). He codifies these chivalric values by adding the Oath of the Pentecost to the Arthurian myth

Despite many uncertainties surrounding the true identity of Sir Thomas Malory, one certainty is that he himself was a 'knight' (Malory, 749). As such, he would have had a great interest in chivalry and the ethics which surrounded chivalric knighthood. Whatever form of chivalry remained in the fifteenth century; Malory would have surely been a subject to it. The oath sworn to Arthur by the knights at the founding of the order of the Round Table articulates Malory's preoccupations with knightly chivalry and the political reality of fifteenth century England, for it states:

> [Arthur] charged them never to do outrageousity nor murder, and always to flee treason; also, by no means to be cruel, but to give mercy unto him that asketh mercy, upon pain of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of King Arthur for evermore; and always to do ladies, damosels, and gentlewomen succour, upon pain of death. Also, that no man take no battles in a wrongful quarrel for no law, nor for no world's goods. Unto this were all the knights sworn of the Table Round, both old and young. And every year were they sworn at the high feast of Pentecost. (Malory, 83)

The oath specifies the sorts of conducts in which the knights should and should not engage. Moorman illustrates that 'Arthur's charge to the young knights represents the core of what the modern reader looks back upon as the code of chivalric conduct – honor, fair play, and respect for women, concepts very close to the collective heart of western man' (9). The oath forms the basis of knightly conduct and arguably lays the foundation of the chivalric behavior of the knights of Camelot. The peace-keeping oath establishes a system of justice and corporate ideal and articulates the values and beliefs of the Arthurian chivalric community (Kelly, 43).

Through his literary work, Malory creates a textual framework for the exploration of existing disparities between knightly ideals established by literature and the realities of historical

knighthood of the fifteenth-century. *Le Morte* presents a complex and multi-faceted portrayal of knighthood and chivalry, in which knighthood is measured in relation to the established chivalric oath. Malory offers a distinguishable image of the knight and illustrates the oppositions of what it means to be a "good" knight and a "bad" knight during a period of political and social instability. Fulton suggests that Malory 'distinguishes between those who fight for honor prior allegiances and those who betray their lords out of ingratitude or in hope of gain' (301). While many chivalric romances feature a glorification of chivalry and portray the individual knight as hero, Malory was aware of the inconsistencies of chivalry as well as the overly idealistic nature of knighthood in literature. Jamison suggests that Malory did not see chivalry as 'intrinsically evil, nor do the best characters fundamentally fail to live up to some true code; rather chivalry is noble but fatally flawed, fatally unstable, and so too must be its practitioners' (14). Malory recognizes paradoxes in the code of chivalry, as well as conflicting types of knighthood.

Arguably, Malory's preoccupations with the often idealized yet problematic chivalric knighthood are fully illustrated through the character study of Sir Lancelot and Sir Mordred. Both Arthurian knights demonstrate, on the one hand, the epitome of knighthood, and on the other hand, the lowest form of chivalrous behavior. Malory offers a thoughtful depiction of the questionable ideals of literature and the reality of knighthood of the fifteenth-century. While Lancelot is 'The Heroic, The True, and the Worshipful' and thus supremely embodies ideal chivalry, Mordred's imperfect knighthood is representative of the wicked and evil, standing in stark contrast with the honorable virtues deemed conform by the oath (Kennedy, 5). Lancelot and Mordred are knightly oppositions; a type and an anti-type of chivalric knighthood. They display a significant divergence and contrast of knightly character and eventually break the conventional roles of the literary knight.

Even though the storyline of *Le Morte D'Arthur* focuses on Arthur's reign and the eventual fall of his kingdom, Malory's main attention is turned to the knights, especially Lancelot. The Arthurian knight becomes the central hero of *Le Morte* since, according to Malory, his 'prowess and manhood […] were more than wonder to tell' (134). The centrality of Sir Lancelot's character becomes evident as Malory lets us know that 'he is the first knight that the French book maketh mention of after King Arthur' (147). Saul explains that 'Malory saw in Sir Lancelot the model for a practical, rather than a visionary, knighthood' (314). Of all the Knights of the Round Table, Lancelot is the highest example of earthly chivalry, and as such the worthiest model for Malory's (personal) knightly inspiration. As a typical figure of chivalric romances, Lancelot offers three idealistic and idolizing embodiments of true knighthood: 'the knight as a warrior on the battlefield, as knights-errant in quest of adventure, and as courtiers' (Kennedy, 5).

Lancelot's heroic character becomes apparent during his participation in the conquest of Rome—an episode in which he demonstrates his exceptional warrior prowess. During the battle against Lucius the Roman Emperor, Malory notes that 'Sir Launcelot fought so nobly that no man might endure a stroke of his hand, but where he came, he showed his prowess and might, for he slew down right on every side; and the Romans and Saracens fled from him as the sheep from the wolf or from the lion' (134). Lancelot is not only an exceptional warrior but also an extraordinary performer in jousts and tournaments. During King Bagolemagus' tournament Lancelot demonstrates his exceptional skills and boldness, through which he 'increased so marvellously in worship, and in honour' (147). He is praised as the undefeated hero, 'for in all tournaments and jousts and deeds of arms, both for life and death, he passed all other knights, and at no time he was never overcome' (147).

Lancelot is worshipped and admired by other Knights of the Round Table for being 'the flower of knights' and 'of all knighthood', and 'the noblest knight living', renowned in prowess and chivalry (151; 481). Sir Tristram is so impressed by Lancelot that he utters: 'as soon as I may I will see Sir Lancelot and in fellowship me with him; for all the knights of the world I most desire his fellowship' (264). Lancelot rises to the pinnacle of honor at Arthur's court primarily through his considerable deed of arms and his title as 'the best knight in the world, derives his position from his expert handling of lance and sword' (Barber, 129). Book V of *Le Morte* additionally emphasizes Lancelot's unconditional allegiance to King Arthur and chaste loyalty to Queen Guinevere. His enviable fealty means that the Queen thinks dearly of him as well and 'had him in great favour above all other knights' (Malory, 147).

Lancelot's love for Guinevere and his prowess in arms are intimately related. As committed knight-errant, he demonstrates his devotion for his lady through noble deeds and fulfillment of chivalric quests and so 'for her [Guinevere] he did many deeds of arms […] through his noble chivalry' (147). The questing for adventures in favor of a lady is a part of the knightly ideals of the courtly lover/knight-errant and Lancelot seeks many quests earn his lady's attention (Miller, 30). As expected of 'a true knight', and in honor of his lady, Lancelot engages in dangerous adventures, slaying despicable monsters, ravenous animals, and dragons, and comes to the rescue of many damsels in distress (Malory, 152). However, according to Malory's text, the adventures undertaken by the knight-errant are only fully valued when it increases the knight's standing and reputation in the eyes of the lady he cherishes. For the sake of gaining his lady's love, 'he mounted his horse, and rode into many strange and wild countries, and through many waters and valleys, and evil was he lodged' (Malory, 161).

Thus far, Lancelot's feelings for Guinevere are arguably grounded in his conviction of knightly loyalty and not tainted with adulterous motives, respecting the ethical standards of his honor-bound vassalage to Arthur. Moorman writes that 'thus, we first see Lancelot […] as an aspiring young lover, subduing false knights for Guinevere's sake' (168). Rejecting every advance of other women for the devotion towards his queen, Lancelot is often accused by other damsels that he 'love Queen Guenever, and that she hath ordained by enchantment that [he] shall never love none other but her, nor none other damosel nor lady shall rejoice [him]' (Malory, 160). Against these assertions, Lancelot opposes: 'I may not warn people to speak of me what it pleaseth them; but for to be a wedded man, I think it not; for then I must couch with her, and leave arms and tournaments, battles, and adventures, […] and that I will refuse in principal for dread of God' (Malory, 160). He denies all claims of leading an adulterous affair with Guinevere, since he believes that a true knight-errant 'should neither marry nor involve themselves in paramours' (Moorman, 168). Furthermore, Lancelot explains that knights-errant must engage in wars, battles, and adventures 'for other they shall be overcome with a simpler knight than they be themselves, other else they shall by unhap and their cursedness slay better men than they be themselves' (Malory, 160). However, Malory does not deny Lancelot's potential romantic feelings for Guinevere, since he states that Lancelot 'loved the queen again above all others ladies and damosels of his life' (147).

Until this point, Lancelot was a courtly lover and a knight-errant, unvanquished hero, and the model of perfection, worthy of being the epitome of knightly aspiration. He remained the perfect knight, faithful to his lady and lord, and all conquering in tournaments and jousts. Nonetheless, we are informed at the end of book VI: 'so at that time Sir Launcelot had the greatest name of any knight of the world, and most he was honoured of high and low' (173). The text hints

at the vanity of Lancelot's knightly career and his potential downfall from grace, due to his sinful love. Malory's text, with an arguably oblique implication of adulterous behavior, informs us that their love has become intemperate and that 'ever his [Lancelot's] thoughts were privily on the queen, and so they loved together more hotter than they did to-forehand, and had such privy draughts together, that many in the court spake of it' (629). Lancelot's once platonic devotion for Guinevere turns into a passionate (adulterous) love.

The love between Lancelot and Guinevere derives from the division of loyalties. Lancelot is eventually caught between the struggle of loving his queen virtuously and serving his king truthfully. Vinaver reveals that Lancelot struggles to balance 'the heroic loyalty of man to man […]; and 'the blind devotion of the knight-lover to his lady […]' (Ixxxii). Malory tells us that Lancelot 'forgat the promise' of loyalty he swore with the oath to Arthur 'and the perfection' he once strove for as a part of his knightly ambitions (Malory, 629). Lancelot becomes unstable and has difficulties upholding his former virtuous life. Kennedy argues that 'for love of Guinevere, Lancelot gives up the humility and devotion to chastity which had characterized him earlier as a True knight and so suffers a moral decline' (5).

Rather than advocating the 'idealization of heterosexual love expressed in the courtly literature of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries', Malory's text condemns the adulterous love between Guinevere and Lancelot as sinful, since he rejects the idea that 'to love a lady makes a knight better' (Kennedy, 89). Malory's text tells us that Lancelot's

> sin is so foul in him he may not achieve such holy deeds, for had not been his sin he had passed all the knights that ever were in his days; and tell thou Sir Launcelot, of all wordly adventures he passeth in manhood and prowess all other, but in this spiritual matters he shall have many his better. (488).

The sinfulness of his being is additionally highlighted by his half-brother Sir Ector, who laments Lancelot's imperfections by calling him 'the truest lover of a sinful man that ever loved a woman' (748). The moral decline provoked by his sinful behavior, not only damages Lancelot's image as the worshipful knight, since he became 'a sinner who love[d] his lady and his reputation too well, and God too little', but additionally he dishonors Arthur and all the Knights of the Round Table (Barber, 124). Eventually, while succumbing to madness due to his malfeasance of having committed the mortal sin of adultery, Lancelot becomes a broken knight dubbing himself *Le Chevaler Mal Fet* (Malory, 509).

Lancelot's behavior violates the knightly principals of Christianity and the chivalric oath, which lead to his knightly deterioration. Saul highlights that for Malory, 'the downfall of knighthood began when knights put personal feelings before their obligations to their order' (315). Lancelot's negative character development is an important aspect for Malory's depiction of problematic knighthood. Malory demonstrates that, despite Lancelot's reputation as 'the noblest knight living' and 'the best knight in the world', he eventually falls from grace through personal failings and self-serving decisions (151;158). Lancelot's negative character traits work as counter-balance for his many positive characteristics.

Even though Mordred is an inferior knight compared to Lancelot, he nonetheless, occupies a central function in *Le Morte*, which exceeds his simple role as a villain. In most narratives, Mordred is by no means a classical personification for ideal knightly chivalry. Mordred appears as 'a malevolent villain and traitor' not only towards his King and Liege but, in Malory's version, he also betrays the code of the Pentecost and the code of chivalry, dishonoring his knighthood (Bruso, 46). His moral 'career [is presented] as contradictory to the Arthurian oath' (Fries, 607). Malory often denounces him as 'the false knight Sir Mordred' (404).

However, Mordred was not always a personification for cursed knighthood. On the contrary, he was an honorable and admirable knight in the Welsh tradition (Tichelaar, 47). Loomis specifies that Mordred, together with Nasiens, King of Denmark, are praised as 'men of such gentle, kindly, and fair words that anyone would be sorry to refuse them anything' (146). A negative portrayal of Mordred's character was only established in the later versions of the Arthurian myth. It was, however, mainly through Geoffrey of Monmouth's evil and wicked portrayal of Mordred, 'that allowed his successors to exaggerate this wickedness to extremes', turning Mordred into the "black knight" of the Round Table. (Tichelaar, 49). For Instance, in the French romance *Claris et Laris*, Mordred is guilty of attempted rape (49). In Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, we encounter Mordred as Arthur's bastard child born of incest between the king and his sister Morgan le Fay. Both sources feature one of the darkest versions of Mordred's character.

Mordred's evil nature is an important characteristic of the dualistic representation of knighthood. Edwards points out that Malory 'draws his villains more sharply, so that the wickedness of [Mordred] offers a better contrast to his champions' (32). Nonetheless, one should not dismiss Mordred's characters as a simple evil counterpart to Lancelot. In fact, for Malory, Lancelot, as well as Mordred are exemplary in both a positive and negative sense. The character of Sir Mordred effectively highlights that knighthood does not guarantee good behavior and that not all knights seek to embody chivalry. As Richard W. Kaeuper suggests, as a knight himself, Malory 'recognized both the possibilities of knighthood and chivalry and the problematic behavior of [his] own knightly companions' (273). It becomes evident that Mordred arguably embodies a certain "reality" of knightly behavior that Malory potentially witnessed from his companions and opponents alike during a war dominated period. As such, incorporating the wicked side of

knighthood through Mordred's character, proves undeniably valuable for Malory's contrasting vision of "good" and "bad" knighthood.

Malory portrays Mordred as an 'unhappy knight', who is dominated by bitterness and jealousy and overcome by 'great anger' (693). Mordred often finds himself under the judgment of other Knights of the Round Table. Lancelot for example sees in Mordred a 'double traitor', who has brought 'much shame […] unto my lord Arthur' (740). Not only is Mordred's knighthood inherently tainted due to his parent's adulterous union, but he also exhibits unknightly traits: he is treacherous, dishonorable, dishonest, disloyal, overly ambitions and commits several murders and patricide. Mordred's villainous nature becomes apparent numerous times in the narrative during ugly incidents. Conscious of his actions, he deliberately violates the Pentecostal oath by murdering out of personal animosity. Jealous of his fame and prowess, 'Sir Mordred set upon Sir Lamorak in a privy place, and there he slew his horse', and ignobly 'gave him his death wound behind him at his back' (Malory, 433). Bedwell insists that 'Lamorak's overall victory, his success where he failed, and the personal of favor from king Arthur, are enough reason for this treasonous, shameful and felonious murder' (16). Tristram and Gareth stricken by the news of Mordred's murderous actions, utter their disgust. Disapproving of his actions, Sir Tristram calls 'treason' upon Mordred (433). Gareth, aware of Mordred's corrupt moral standards, declares: 'brethren as they be mine, I shall never love them, nor draw in their fellowship for that deed' (433). However, Mordred continues to sully his knighthood by extending his hate from Sir Lamorak to Sir Dinadan. Malory tells us that he does not let his resentfulness rest, for 'after, in the quest of the Sangreal, cowardly and feloniously', he 'slew Dinadan' (387). Mordred kills a second Knight of the Round Table, 'disregarding the principle of fidelity', (Miko, 211).

Malory's text additionally exposes Mordred's malevolent nature by stating that 'Sir Mordred had ever a privy hate unto the queen Dame Guenever and to Sir Launcelot' (693). Intending to harm Lancelot's reputation, Mordred openly accuses Guinevere of adultery. The love between Lancelot and Guinevere is noble, but adulterous and in return sinful, thus the love is condemned as a religious crime and unacceptable in a Christian context. Since 'the adultery cannot be ignored at court', it becomes a 'formidable weapon in the hands of Mordred' (Moorman, 174). Mordred uses his claims against queen Guinevere to antagonize Arthur and Lancelot and to harm their social standing. Arthur, blinded by Lancelot's alleged betrayal, entrusts Mordred as regent of his kingdom, while he goes to fight on the continent. Driven by the selfish desire for the throne, Mordred turns back on his knightly loyalty towards his liege and father Arthur and usurps his kingdom. Malory tells us of Sir Mordred's wickedness by stating that Mordred 'presumed and took on him to be King of England' by falsely claiming 'that King Arthur was slain in battle with Sir Launcelot' (729). The Bishop of Canterbury calls Mordred's immoral actions out and states 'will ye first displease God and sithen shame yourself, and all knighthood? Ye will make a foul work in this land' (729). Mordred threatens him and warns him 'for an thou chafe me any more I shall make strike off thy head' (729). Mordred additionally makes attempts against Guinevere and seeks to force her into marriage with him. However, Guinevere adroitly escapes Mordred and locks herself in a tower, resulting in him laying 'siege about the Tower of London, because the queen would not wed him' (740). Guinevere resists Mordred, objecting to his nefarious behavior. She disapproves and declares 'that she had liefer slay herself than to be married with him' (730). Corruption, fraud, violence, and treason taint Mordred's knighthood, weaving his unavoidable tragic fate.

The evidence in the last Book XXI shows that, even though Mordred is considerably inferior to Lancelot knightly prowess, he is nonetheless extremely powerful and a worthy warrior. The narrative states that 'Sir Mordred that day put him [Arthur] in devoir, and in great peril (734). As Mordred subsequently provokes Arthur into a civil war, Malory apprises the reader that 'never was there seen a more dolefuller battle in no Christian land' (734). Mordred's warrior prowess was so great that 'thus they fought all the long day, and never stinted till the noble knights were laid to the cold earth; and ever they fought still till it was near night, and by that time was there an hundred thousand laid dead upon the down' (734). Mordred, fatally wounded, finally kills his father Arthur, ending his once prosperous kingdom and provoking the irrevocable destruction of the knightly fellowship of the Round Table. It is perhaps Mordred's death, which he meets courageously in the face of his father, that gives us a glimpse of chivalry in this otherwise thoroughgoingly ignoble character.

Many features of the later medieval courtly romances were inherited from the *Chansons de geste*. The knight as outstanding warrior and hero, who sets himself apart through his military capacity and prowess, was not only a central feature of the epics. However, the literary chivalric characteristics of the late Middle Age are by far more complex. Chivalry underwent several social changes in medieval society, as well as in literature. Literature fashioned new values and ideals around chivalry which blossomed into a complicated and often idealized chivalric culture. The chivalrous knights of French and English stories, distinguish themselves from the warriors of the *geste*. While the *geste* emphasize a knight's military prowess and loyalty to a particular lord or liege, the chivalric romances central themes are knight-errantry, noble deeds, courtliness, and courtly love. While Chrétien's writing popularized the ideas of knight-errantry and courtly love, it

is Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* that builds on these characteristics and combines former ideas with newly created ideals in his text.

Malory's *Morte* features all the chivalric qualities that a knight should possess. Arthur's knights are honorable, just, courteous, noble, exceptional in tournaments, gentle to noble ladies and damsels, and loyal to their king. Lancelot is the pivotal example of a perfect chivalric knight; 'he is the very paradigm of Malorian knighthood' (Grimm, 1). Nevertheless, Malory is also aware of the contradictory demands on chivalric conduct and the reality of the knightly class. Malory's awareness of the flawed and unstable nature of chivalry, echoes in Lancelot's and Mordred's character development. In fact, the conventional romantic views of knighthood established by previous literary works, are effectively challenged by Malory's text. Scholars are of the opinion that the purpose of the romances, such as Chrétien's *The Knight of the Cart* or Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, was to entertain the nobility and aristocracy, but they hardly represented factual reality of the knightly class or medieval society (Black, 91). Yet, considering the different types of knightly characters (e.g. Mordred and Lancelot) in Malory's *Morte,* this controversial depiction of knights sparks critical discussions about the representations of knighthood in fiction literature and raises important questions about the degree of fictionality and historical veracity contained in romance literature.

Chapter 4:

The Representations of the Medieval Knights in Fiction and History

"The Accolade" by the British painter Edmund Blair-Leighton and the thirteenth-century psalter commissioned for the Westminster Abbey, are perhaps two of the most attractive drawings of the medieval knight. Both paintings depict an idealized and romanticized image of the Christian knight and chivalry. Leighton's painting, produced in the 1900s, is a medieval-themed art that depicts the accolade, a knighting ceremony which, in this context, is performed by a red-haired noble-lady or queen. She knights a young man keeling in front of her by tapping her sword on his shoulder. The aspiring knight bowed at her feet, is dressed in his full armor, and bears the crest of an eagle on his coat of arms. The ceremony is held in a large room within a castle and in the background, an audience has gathered to witness the knighting process. The color-washed sketch in the psalter likewise depicts a kneeling knight with outstretched arms and hands, holding a lance under his left arm with a triangular tailed flag fastened at the top, recognized as a *pennon*. He is wearing a *surcoat* over his armor, bearing the emblem of the *cross patée*, a type of Christian cross which adorned the attires of the knights during the Crusades. This depiction suggests that the kneeling knight is a crusader knight and emphasizes the centrality of the medieval knight's military service to the Church. In front of him, a page hands him his helmet and behind the kneeling knight, a warhorse rears up and commences to walk forward.

Much of the knowledge that we possess about medieval knights and medieval society, in general, must be 'meditated through texts and archeological evidence' (Nicholson, viii). As a

result, just like in the art of Leighton and the illustration in the thirteenth-century psalter, the role of the knight in the Middle Ages is often obscured and clouded by the fantasies of fables and legends. The knight virtuous and courtly praised for his prowess, loyalty, and sagesse, who competes in jousts to prove himself before his lord, and absolves heroic deeds to gain the favor of his fancied lady; much of this presumed reality has been distorted and propagated by the colorful and imaginative literary influence of the medieval romances. The courtly romances written by Chrétien de Troyes, the Arthurian legends reworked by Sir Thomas Malory, etc., have dominated the modern views on medieval knighthood and their literary creations have left a remarkable imprint on history throughout the centuries. For example, the knight-errant Sir Lancelot exhibits […] the distinctive marks of the courtly lover and defines the relationship between love and knighthood and exemplifies the courtois ideals of the knight-lover (Moorman, 169). He is known to be the best knight in the world, renowned for his prowess in tournaments and battles, praised for his fidelity and undying love for queen Guinevere. However, the representation of knighthood and chivalry of Chrétien, Malory, and other medieval writers, existed presumably rather as a literary fantasy than a common rule.

Yet, the fictional reality of the literary romances has dominated the image of the knight throughout the centuries, and in return questions about the historical veracity of the practices and believes of the medieval knights arose. The legends often depicted largely invented traditions, and as such 'the taking of vows, the performing of brave deeds for women, the fighting of friendly jousts on campaign - these are all conspicuous by their absence' (Saul, 157). To what extent fiction and history affected each other is an ongoing discussion in scholarly debates which renders it impossible to draw a firm conclusion.

Even so, two important differences can be observed between historical and literary chivalry. The knight's behavior in war and his attitude towards women often derived greatly from the idealized depictions of romances. Saul clarifies that 'knights were a military class and they found fulfillment in proving their expertise in arms. Inevitably, some of the worst offenders were knights who had been inured to violence by their long experience of soldering' (181). In fact, the knights' willingness to employ violence 'is well attested in court records, which show knightly offenders indicted out of all proportion to their number' (Saul, 178). Gradually, while gaining more individual and social power, the disruptive violence exerted by the unruly nature of knights became a legitimate social worry. The knights were mostly encouraged to demonstrate their prowess in a violent matter, either by competing in tournament jousts, in order to prove their military worthiness to their lords and ladies, or by fighting on the battlefield in the interest of territorial gain and defense, either as a personal matter or declared by the king. Additionally, as the knights' violent behavior remained mostly unchecked, the fear of the Church increased, since 'medieval knights trained in combat and encouraged to fight for pleasure and profit, posed a real threat to civil peace if their talents were not regulated' (Echard, 468). Hence, in the eleventh century, the Church attempted to limit aggressive behavior through spiritual sanctions and sought to civilize the feudal structures of society through religious and non-violent means. 'This idea found concrete historical expression in the Peace of God movement', which was the first peace mass movement of the Middle Ages led by the Catholic Church (Bumke, 50).

Nonetheless, romances so insistently celebrate knights as defenders of peace and upholders of justice. However, much of these ideals were idealistic goals, and 'throughout the twelfth century, writers attacked knights as violent, greedy, disorderly, luxurious-loving and proud' (Barber, 371). Far from the realities presented by the medieval courtly romances, the moral ideals

of chivalry were often forgotten in the midst of war and the battlefield was no place to showcase honorable gallantry. Bumke discloses that 'pillaging and plundering were the customary techniques' (2). The knights' treatment of prisoners and non-combatants was often extremely brutal, violent, and marked by atrocities, and only barely did the common people witness honor in knightly behavior. Prisoners of war 'who found themselves at the mercy of their opponents had to reckon with the prospect of death or mutilation' (Saul, 8). The damsels in distress often failed to be saved by heroic knights. On the contrary, knights presented a sexual threat and regularly engaged in degrading and violent behavior against women. The prominent violence among the knightly class 'reveals that noble knighthood was not primarily a social but an ideological phenomenon' (Bumke, 49). In fact, the case of Sir Thomas Malory, the author of the *Morte d'Arthur*, illustrates the issue of 'the high level of violence in knightly society' (Saul, 183). Malory was a knight, who during his lifetime, was caught between the violent period of the War of the Roses, a dynastic civil war fought between the house of Lancaster and York. Malory is an overall divided figure, whose career as a knight 'was regularly punctuated by bursts of violence' (Saul, 182). Several times, he found himself imprisoned during his life and was convicted of having committed crimes of rape, extortion, theft, sacrilegious robbery, attempted murder, cattle-lifting, and several other acts of aggression (Lewis, 104).

The reality of knighthood mostly appeared distorted in the epic legends and courtly romances. There were several social reasons for the ideological development of knighthood in chivalric literature. Nicholson observes 'that chivalric literature developed for the newly-forming knightly class in response to external pressures: hostile ecclesiastical attitudes towards warriors and the ascendancy of the new literary class which was a product of the twelfth century renaissance' (16). As such, it is of interest to examine the causes for the substantially growing

differences in the identity of the knight featured in literature compared to history. The songs and poetries of the troubadours and minstrels are one major factor for the substantial shift between fiction and reality. As court servants, their writings were commonly dedicated to courtly nobles and to a knightly audience. Their poetic creations mainly dealt with the gallantries of knighthood, chivalry, and courtly love, in hopes of pleasing their contemporary audience by ways of flattery. For example, 'the so-called knight-errantry, the spurious and phantastical chivalry of a later age, was largely produced by the exaggerations of wandering minstrels and troubadours' (Williamson, 335). Troubadours and minstrels often embellished reality, yet strengthened the idea of a knight's code of chivalry and the idea of courtly love.

Likewise, biographers and storytellers are responsible for the creation of a distorted glamourized image of knighthood. Courtly poets heavily influenced the image of knighthood by making love a knight's highest inspiration of his métier. The idea of courtly love was the newly literary creation of courtly poets notably from the French poet Chrétien de Troyes. Through the influence of his works, knighthood became a new courtly and social ideal and the knight was inevitably linked to womanhood. The female social milieu influenced the amorous culture of knighthood. In fact, Chrétien admits 'that the subject and its meaning' of the popular courtly narrative *Lancelot The Knight of the Cart* 'c[a]me from his lady [Marie de Champagne]' and credits her that 'she gave him the idea, and the story; his words do the work of her matter' (Rafell, 2). *L'amour courtois* was of significant interest to a female audience since aristocratic women commonly commissioned works of courtly love. Writers [purposely] 'misrepresented the position of women they portrayed' and chivalry, culturally, socially, and 'ritually elevated women' (Saul, 262;270). Contrary to the often-inferior social position of women in medieval society, the courtly romances offered a fictional escapism and inverted the normal gender relationship. The lady 'is

shown in a superior position, empowered to grant her favors or to withhold them as she sees fit' (263). Marriages were not arranged on the basis of love but were an affair of political interest or dynastic consideration (Lewis, 16). In a time where marriages had a purely utilitarian function, it is of no coincidence, that an idealization of passionate, erotic love became an actively explored subject in courtly romances. The knight a powerful and strong figure, and the epitome of manhood, was the perfect inspiration for the female fantasies.

Historicized Fiction and Fictionalized History:
Le Morte d'Arthur and The History of William Marshal

Some critics and scholars believe that medieval romances only propagated an idealistic view of the code of chivalry and knighthood, whereas more recent studies suggest that the romances can accurately represent historical realities (Echard, 466). The knight's appearance in literature does not perhaps tell us about factual truths and historical evidence of the time. Nonetheless, their pervasive presence in literature over many centuries is a valuable piece of evidence itself on how contemporaries, writers and their audiences, viewed knights and knighthood. Nicholson has argued eloquently that 'while it was not total realism, fictional literature must at least have a context in actuality'(vii).

In fact, the chivalric biography of William Marshal provides a valuable starting point to demonstrate the crucial influence of history on literature and how both mediums interacted collectively. The Marshal became an inspirational figure for the development of the chivalric ideal as presented by the later courtly romances since he was an exceptional knight, and 'was by any standards extraordinary and seen as such by his contemporaries' (Bryant, 1). In his biography, we see how the knight William Marshal, a person of no considerable influence, made his way to an important knightly figure through his exceptional skills, military capacities, and political keenness. Marshal's exceptional performances in tournaments, his outstanding military prowess, his controversial history with women and allegations of adulterous tendencies, etc., are all events of his life that bear substantial similarities to the portrayal of Malory's Lancelot in *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

In fact, the biography of William Marshal 'has therefore been compared with the sub-genre of the *roman d'aventure*' (Bumke, 90). Bryant explains that 'the work does at times treat Marshal and his deeds as heroic in the manner (and on the scale) of the chansons de geste' or presents his character in a similar light than the knightly heroes of the Arthurian legends (1). Indeed, Marshal and Lancelot shared echoing similarities: both had an extraordinary career as knights, they were knight-errant's, exceptional in every possible way, they were deemed virtuous and honorable, they were praised for their loyalty to their lord; they were considered to be the best knights in the world by their contemporaries and the epitome of chivalrous behavior.

Considering the striking similarities between a supposedly historical knight and a knight of fiction raises considerable questions about the historical veracity and the degree of fictionality in the representation of knighthood in both works. *The History of William Marshal* is often deemed to be generally a subjective adulation of its subject since Marshal 'is presented as – to all intents and purposes – flawless: not simply a magnificent warrior, supreme in tournaments and battles alike, but also a paragon of the key chivalric virtues of prowess, largesse and unfailing loyalty' (Bryant, 1). Commissioned by his own son, the poem was mostly adapted in a more dramatic and heroic tone and his ignoble actions were often disregarded on purpose (1). His biographer for example 'never says that Marshal killed anyone, though we know from Welsh, Irish and Capetian historical sources that the Marshal was responsible for acts of widespread butchery' (*Prowess, Piety, and Social Order*, 91).

On the other hand, even though his *Morte* is considered to be a pure work of fiction, Malory presents a more flawed and problematic version of knighthood in his work. Hodges suggests that 'it is not surprising, therefore, that Sir Thomas Malory imprisoned in the midst of the War of The Roses, should be painfully aware of the diversity of chivalric ideals' (Afterword). Malory depicts

a multitude of different types of knightly characters in *Le Morte*. His text represents both an ideal of chivalry and a problematization of this ideal. Whereas both Lancelot and William Marshal appear perfect in every way, Lancelot's character is considerably more complicated. The knighthood he embodies is vitiated by his adulterous feelings for Guinevere and his self-serving actions in regards to his feelings.

Additionally, the knight Mordred embodies a different version of knighthood. Compared to Lancelot and William Marshal, the villainous knight Mordred excels through his ignoble actions and is by no means representative for noble and chivalrous behavior. Whereas Lancelot represents the honorable and idealistic side of chivalry, Mordred, on the contrary, embodies the flawed and perhaps the more realistic side of knighthood. Nonetheless, whether virtuous or vile, both knights are unable to maintain the ideals of loyalty and fail to uphold the knightly oath of chivalry. Their failures as knights arise from personal conflicting emotions of love, hate, loyalty, jealousy, and piety, resulting in the eventual infringement of the oath. Malory's knights are flawed, more realistic, and humane, whereas William Marshal's biography aimed at representing his knightly subject 'as a hero' (Bryant, 21).

Considering the aim of *The History or William Marshal* in relation to the more controversial portrayal of knighthood in Malory's text, it makes one wonder if perhaps Malory's *Morte* carries more historical veracity than the Marshal's biography. Rather than romanticizing knighthood and chivalry, Malory presents an ideal version of knighthood with Lancelot and creates an anti-type of this same ideal through Mordred. Considering the historical circumstances of Malory's life, he provides a framework for debate about the issues surrounding chivalric knighthood and gives his readers a critical perspective of the often-glamourized image of knights, which the biography of William Marshal lacks. Even though *The Life of William Marshal* is often

considered a more historical text than Malory's, it is nevertheless, a highly idealized text, enwrapped in the ideology of its time. In fact, it is no more objective than Malory's.

Given the diversified, yet often intersecting portrayals of knighthood in a presumably historical work in comparison to a fictional narrative, it is of vital importance to consider literature and history as mutually important sources in order to fully understand and analyze the changing image of the knight in history and literature. Düzgün claims that 'history turns into literary narrative, or literary narrative turns into history; therefore, literature and history live in each other's pockets' (1). Historical characters often served as inspirations for the fanciful stories in literature and in return these stories inspired the lifestyle of many knights. The dissemination of literary idealizations of knighthood into society had ideological consequences and informed 'the chivalric lifestyle of the aristocracy [who] found its mirror in literature, just as literature found much of its inspiration in chivalry and historical knights' (Saul, 37). History and fiction sustained the social development of knighthood and nourished the chivalric spirit. This highlights the intimately connected development of historical and fictional knighthood. For example, the Order of the Garter (1348) was a revival of the Round Table of Arthurian legends and had, therefore 'its origins in romance, in the wish to restore chivalric dignity and splendor of ancient Britain' (Mills, 134). Additionally, Edward III 'created a chivalric order with echoes of Arthur's own. It is hardly surprising that aspects of the world of romance should have infiltrated knightly practice' (Saul, 157).

Romances colored knighthood and history informed the stories of imagination. The literary knights became the model of inspiration for historical knights, just as historical knights influenced the creation of fictional knights, creating a complex and inseparable symbiosis between fiction and history.

Conclusion

Retracing the origins of knighthood in early medieval Europe has proven to present considerable issues for historians and scholars alike since the concept of the medieval knight, who weds the ideals of knighthood and chivalry, is mostly obscured by the constant social changes of the status of the knight in medieval society and distorted by the glamourized image provided by literature, movies, modern media, and pop culture. Analyzing knighthood in history or literature is a backward-looking process at a concept that diverged greatly from the modern perceptions of the medieval knight, which were often misconceptions that sparked from the romance literature rather than historical reality. However, whether in literature or history, knighthood and chivalry were synchronously evolving concepts. Contrary to the common belief, the figure of the knight only gradually emerged in medieval society. The status of the knight changed considerably from the early Middle Ages up until the late sixteenth-century. Knighthood and chivalry, which form the fundamental characteristics of the medieval knight, underwent complex historical, societal, and literary changes in the course of a few centuries, which ultimately turned the knight into the noble heroic figure with the many implications and associations knighthood now carries.

The birth of knighthood began in the Carolingian Age under the reign of the Frankish ruler Charlemagne in the eighth century. In England, knighthood was only introduced in its embryonic version through the invading army of William the Conqueror during the Norman conquest in 1066. William the Conqueror new form of governing introduced feudalism/knight-service to the Anglo-

Norman society; a bond between lord and vassal with mutual obligations of both parties. The lord, in return for his knight's military service, provided his vassal with land. This system was a vital component for the rise of knighthood as an individual socio-political class. However, for a long time, knighthood was not recognized as a profession, nor did it exist as a social concept during the early Middle Ages—knighthood was only linked to the traditional military profession and duty practiced by soldiers or men-at-arms. The proto-knight had little to do with the courtois nobleman on horseback and was, in fact, only visible through his armor and unique fighting style on horseback, but had no individual social standing. The social rise of the knight was enabled through the law of subinfeudation or substitution, which enabled the knight to possess individual property and as such earning the status of a free man. The knight was no longer tied to vassalage and service to his lord. With the knightly class gradually gaining more independence and replacing their primarily military nature, approached and ascended to lower and higher nobility through social reconstructions. Knighthood was eventually driven towards a prestigious social status.

However, with the growth of the state of power of the knightly class, society experienced issues of military discipline. The Church directing and sanctioning the knights' violent behavior in hopes of limiting the atrocities carried out by the knightly military class and inflicted their ideals and desires upon knights. The Catholic Church encouraged the development of a new civilized concept of military service. The noble warrior should exercise his profession of arms during the crusades in the service of the Catholic Church and the Christian religion. The new "spiritual" knight embodied virtues of fidelity, loyalty, piety and carried a deep devotion for Christianity. This sparked the development of a code of behavior set up by the Church to limit the brutality in conflicts. This code of behavior crystallized into the later medieval culture of chivalry.

In literature, chivalry effectively transformed the knight from a mere mounted warrior to an aristocratic courtly figure. The literary knight's prime function in the *chansons de geste* was his exceptional skill at arms, but which was eventually complicated in Chrétien de Troyes romances and Malory's Arthurian legends by adding a sophisticated moral code of behavior, the devotion to the Church, and the loyalty to a lady's love. In fact, the virtues of a knight as imagined by literature should not only encompass prowess in battle, but the knight should also be honorable, loyal, generous, courageous, gentile, courteous. The literary knight changed from a mere warrior on horseback to an idealistic embodiment of the virtuous and honorable noble knight. Thus, literature nourished the ideal of knighthood and informed the central ideas of chivalry. Knighthood and chivalry gradually formed an intimate and permanent union in literature and in history.

Many scholars and historians argue that medieval courtly literature only propagated fictional, glamourized image of knighthood and chivalry and had not much in common with the reality of the Middle Ages. The ideals and the reality of knighthood were often in conflict since they often fell victim to exaggerations and distortion of reality by minstrels, troubadours, writers. For example, the writers of the *chansons de geste* and the composers of the historical biography of William Marshal used a real historical character as inspiration for their literary works and fashioned around them fanciful and largely invented stories. Contrary to the romanticized images of knighthood in contemporary literature, Malory provides an idealized version of knighthood and at the same time a more problematic version of this same ideal. Many of the virtuous depictions of the knights in literature were certainly true, yet, which elements ultimately sprung from the vivid imagination of its writers and to what degree these stories depicted historical veracity, remains largely debatable.

Nonetheless, this thesis shows that it is of central importance to give equal consideration to literature and history in order to delineate the entirety of the concept of medieval knighthood. History and fiction inevitably formed an intimate relationship since history was the inspiration for literature, and literature found its mirror in history. As such, it is important to consider both literature and history in order to fully understand the changes that medieval knighthood underwent. Based on these conclusions, scholars and historians should look beyond fictional narratives and historical studies, and consider the mutual exerted influence of literature and history on the development of the medieval knight.

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