

Essay Two

“Excesses of the Medieval Christian Hero”

Russell J Lowke, December 12th, 2001. (Undergraduate)

Question: “One suspects that, despite Biblical admonitions, the doctrine of ‘turning the other cheek’ was not near and dear to the hearts of medieval warrior aristocracies. Is there an inherent contradiction in the concept of a martial “Christian Hero?” Examine and compare the depictions of warrior heroes, and the presentation of heroic ideals, in two or more of the works we read this term (the Song of Roland, Chrétien’s works, Gottfried’s Tristan, etc.)”

Despite strong pious inclinations and regardless of the principle that, “he who lives by the sword, dies by the sword”, medieval warrior-aristocrats subscribed heavily to a viewpoint that might makes right. The knight, his function, and his chivalry, were geared entirely towards mortal combat. His code of ethics permitted quarrels to be resolved not by reason, negotiation or common sense, but only by means of challenge, duel and physical contest, executed by jousting on horseback and hand to hand melee. Death for one participant or the other was not the goal as, more often than not, high nobles in such contests were not murdered, they being protected by both their heavy armor, and the understanding that each noble’s life was valuable and worth a heavy ransom. Their peasant subjects, however, frequently died by the thousands.¹ Chivalry was a game practiced by the nobles, whose rules were alluded to or implied, sometimes with exaggeration or even humor, through poetry such as *The Song of Roland*, or literature such as *The Arthurian Romances* of Chrétien de Troyes. Indeed, in the fifty years from 1190 to 1240, Arthurian romance was the prevailing vogue in France. No writer could escape the influence of Chrétien, the initiator of the sophisticated courtly romance, and praised for the inner meaning that he wove into his tales.²

The code of ethics practiced by Christian medieval knights were not Christian by modern definitions; however, feudal values must be judged by feudal Christianity. Devout Christians may have believed in the doctrine of charity, non-violence, and the pursuit of compassion, but as a religious institution the Catholic Church supported and condoned war. The wholesale slaughter of Muslims was endorsed by Pope Urban II, who, on November 27th, 1095, declared the first crusade, calling “on Frankish knights to vow to march to the East.”³ His sermon was aimed at freeing Christians from “the yoke of Islamic rule,” and to liberate the tomb of Christ from Muslim control, all these declarations were made in the name of God, while the crowd chanted, “God wills

¹ An example of this phenomenon can be found in Chrétien De Troyes when a powerful duke concedes to the hero Cligés. Chrétien De Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, (London : Penguin, 1991):174.

² William W Kilber, Introduction to *Arthurian Romances* , (London : Penguin, 1991): 21.

³ Jonathan Riley-Smith, “The Crusading Movement and Historians,” *Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades*, ed. Jonathan Riley-Smith, (U.K : Oxford University Press, 1995): 1.

it!”⁴ The church vindicated itself by using Biblical passages such as Matthew 10.34, in which Jesus states, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword,” and, more broadly, John 2.15, when Jesus inflicts punishment upon sinners, “Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple.” In the Hebrew Bible the Israelites frequently waged war against non believers, with the aid of God; on this basis, the Church supported war and the old Roman concept of just war was appropriated by St. Augustine so to warrant retaliation of attacks against God by heretics.

Medieval society was divided into three distinct groups; those who work, the peasants; those who pray, the clergy; and those who fight, the knights. Throughout the Middle Ages, Christian Europe was in a state of constant turmoil. Feudal conflict between barons was ceaseless, and the knightly class was kept well accustomed to the arts of war. A knight’s honor was precious, and the trustworthiness of his word and oath must not be tenuous. Knights would go to any extreme to defend their integrity, and the slightest insult could prompt rebuff and challenge. The story of the *Knight in the Cart*, depicts this frequently. The very name of the story addresses issues of esteem, for it is a great dishonor for a knight to ride in a stock’s cart, “May it never please God that I ride in a cart!... I believe I’d rather be dead than suffer this disgrace.”⁵

In Chrétien’s *The Knight of the Cart*, when Lancelot is knocked off his horse into the ford, he does not “turn the other cheek”; instead, he immediately challenges the offending knight to mortal combat.⁶ In Chrétien’s *Cligés*, the hero feels that he has been “born under a lucky star,” when he finds an opportunity to perform “bold deeds of chivalry openly,” in front of the girl that his heart desires. Immediately he proceeds to sever the head and half the neck from the body of his opponent.⁷ Similarly, when challenged to a tournament, Cligés charges so fiercely that he fells his opponent, whose horse falls with such force that it tears off his right leg.⁸ At the conclusion of *The*

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Chrétien De Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, (London : Penguin, 1991): 241.

⁶ Chrétien: 218.

⁷ Chrétien: 168.

⁸ Chrétien: 165.

Knight of the Cart, Lancelot brutally kills his adversary Melegant, “[Lancelot] opened Melegant’s belly so wide with his sharp sword... A second blow slashed his helmet, knocking the nasal into his mouth and breaking three teeth.... Lancelot approached, unlaced Melegant’s helmet, and cut off his head... [nobody] felt any pity whatsoever.”⁹ Thus, violence is not only endorsed, but celebrated in these Christian stories, and intermingled with honor and revenge. This combination virtually defines chivalry.

The Song of Roland also endorses violence, particularly when targeting Saracen “infidels.” Roland welcomes the opportunity to demonstrate his commitment to feudal principles, “And may God grant it to us,” he says, “It is our duty to be here for our king... Now let us take care to strike great blows, so that no one can sing a shameful song about us. The pagans are wrong and the Christians are right.”¹⁰ The hate of the pagans is emphasized, even justified, as he strikes great blows with his sword Durendal, severing a pagan “from his back his entire spine” and exclaiming, “We are right, but these wretches are wrong.”¹¹ One might speculate that the priests, whose duty it is to pray for their knights, must pray diligently, and very hard indeed, to compensate for the amount of bloodshed the church had inspired. This is also expressed in *The Song of Roland*, when the Archbishop Turpin epitomizes the values of the true knight, complementing Roland’s valor, and observing that knights who are not “strong and fierce” ought rather, “...to be a monk in one of those monasteries... and pray all day long for our sins!”¹²

When conflict was resolved by a contest of arms, the offended knight made a challenge, and through this artifice honor was resolved, regardless of specifics and details of a situation. In *The Knight of the Cart*, when the Queen is accused of committing adultery with the Seneschal Key, she protects her dignity by electing Lancelot to challenge any who may accuse her, “‘Lancelot,’ she began, ‘Melegant has accused me of a disgraceful act. All those who hear it will think me guilty,

⁹ Chrétien: 294.

¹⁰ *The Song of Roland*, (London : Penguin, 1990):61.

¹¹ *The Song of Roland*: 76

¹² *The Song of Roland*: 89

unless you force him to retract it... the seneschal shall be proved guilty unless he can defend himself in single combat, or find another to undertake the battle on his behalf.”¹³ Lancelot, being the best knight, and in fact the adulterer, simply fights and defeats the accuser, “virtue” is claimed by means of force. Feudal conduct dictated adultery to be the most woeful sin short of treason. It was most harshly denounced by the medieval Church. Yet nowhere does Chrétien condemn the behavior of Lancelot in his adultery with the queen.¹⁴

There are many contradictions in the knight’s code. Chrétien sets an example of the King of Greece holding largesse as the highest virtue, placing it over birthright, courtesy, wisdom, gentility, riches, strength, boldness, power, and beauty.¹⁵ Chrétien often makes fruitful example of deception, saying that, “when his lord is listening, he praises him in conversation with another, pretending that his lord cannot hear what they are used to saying to each other... And should his lord wish to lie, he is quite ready to back him up and his tongue is never slow to proclaim the truth of whatever his master says. Anyone who frequents courts and lords must be ready to serve with lies.”¹⁶ Chrétien has his hero Cligés suggest equipping using the colors of the enemy, so that they, the enemy, might mistake them for one of their own, “Let us change our colors... by taking the shields and lances from the traitors we’ve slain... God willing, we’ll capture or kill them all.”¹⁷ Later, before another battle, he disarms a Saxon and dresses himself in his armor, then cuts off the man’s head using the Saxon’s own sword.¹⁸

The most glaring double standard presented by Chrétien occurs in a scene where a girl approaches Lancelot, requesting that he escort her. She describes that customs and practices where such that, if a knight encountered a damsel or girl alone, “he would as soon cut his own throat as treat her dishonorably.” Disrespect would forever blight his good name. However, if she were

¹³ Chrétien: 268.

¹⁴ William W Kilber, Introduction to *Arthurian Romances*, (London : Penguin, 1991):14.

¹⁵ Chrétien: 125.

¹⁶ Chrétien: 178.

¹⁷ Chrétien: 148.

¹⁸ Chrétien: 165.

being escorted by another, were a knight to battle her defender and defeat him then, “[the victor] might do with her as he pleased without incurring dishonor or disgrace.”¹⁹ Here again, the contest of arms absolves the sinner of any trespass. Chrétien repeatedly illustrates inconsistencies as egregious as this. Similarly, when a girl requests Lancelot to cut the head off a defeated knight, he is torn between generosity towards the girl and mercy for the knight. To Lancelot, both Generosity and Compassion demand to be satisfied,²⁰ so he grants the knight mercy enough to arm himself once more, and does battle with him again, then slays him. This fulfills the letter of the knight’s code, but not the spirit. This deed is accepted as noble and, “A very great joy spread through all those who had seen the battle.”²¹

Medieval Chivalry, and the behavior of its Christian Heroes, stands in stark contrast with modern Christian ethics and values. Real world practical demands of feudalism required combativeness of its subjects. To this end, the knight, with his code of chivalry, performed his function well, as such, they could not “turn the other cheek,” for in doing so they would be betraying their function. The Church directed and endorsed the violence, and, as we see in the works of Chrétien, the knights reveled in the bloodshed. Chivalric code was propelled by the turbulent necessities of Medieval Europe, and as the monks’ function was to pray, so too it was it the knights’ function to fight.

¹⁹ Chrétien: 224.

²⁰ Chrétien: 242.

²¹ Ibid.

Bibliography

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