

# Book Reviews



Nigel Saul, *Chivalry in Medieval England*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press (2011).

Chivalry has declined since it first dignified medieval men's pursuit of excellence. On its inception in twelfth-century Europe, chivalry offered knights new opportunities for camaraderie, heroism, and comity in battle; moreover, it both occasioned an ethic for men's individual conduct and modelled a renowned, embodied masculine character for men who aspired to success at court. Chivalry required discipline and accomplishment; its measure was, therefore, personal and performative. Its core traits—bravery, honor, courtesy—influenced gentility and gentlemanliness, which from the fifteenth century onwards increasingly gauged the conduct of armigerous and professional men. Once its persistent impact on British masculinities finally dwindled in the early twentieth century, chivalry meant little more than men's benevolent placatory or protective deeds. This meaning has endured and has consequently reinforced disturbing assumptions about twenty-first-century male disposability. Men have traditionally appeased women; men have also subordinated themselves to customary gynocentric societal assumptions of women's parental superiority—the still-current chivalric rescue maxim, *women and children first* means just that—and men have steadfastly enlisted, or have been conscripted, to serve and protect in various armed forces. The atrocities of World War One rendered chivalric heroism unconvincing, but men still disproportionately sacrifice themselves as combatants. Some might claim that chivalry is dead; its spirit endures, however, and is deadly to men.

The two exemplars of medieval chivalry that interest most twenty-first-century readers are courtly love and literary romance, and in his *Chivalry in Medieval England*, Nigel Saul argues that these types were incidental to its development. Saul regards the predominantly-masculine arenas of war and economics as central to its engendering by a newly-confident military elite conscious of its commonality. Disciplined, principled fighting men earned wealth and honor; their ethos was voiced in historical texts, romances, and the visually symbolic language of chivalric heraldry. At first glance Professor Saul's analysis seems to argue for an orthodox Marxist division of society into base and superstructure (the actions of a newly-powerful knightly class determining the nature of its cultural expression); however, his treatment of twelfth-century knightly "self-consciousness" (p. 66) and various medieval Englishmen's motives for seeking military honor ("adventurers, freebooters, mercenaries, self-seekers and chancers" as well as "warriors like Chaucer's Knight, for whom financial considerations were largely secondary" [p. 128]) suggest a sensitivity to the complexities of cultural and material reciprocity. Unlike Maurice Keen's *Chivalry* (Yale University Press 1984), which argues for the "fusing" together of material and cultural elements into "something new and whole in its own right" (p. 16), Saul's *Chivalry in Medieval England* consistently distinguishes the lived experience of chivalry from cultural representations of the argument; it consequently affords new opportunities for male-positive recontextualizations of courtly love and literary romance.

In his examination of Marie de France's *Lais*, for example, Saul notes that the conventions of courtly love originate in "the particular circumstances of twelfth-century society" (p. 265): because of primogeniture and the twelfth-century church's making marriage a sacrament, landless young knights resorted to charming wealthy women for their material and sexual satisfaction. The gynocentric framing of the knight-lady relationship might be better understood as vassalage, a socioeconomic circumstance whose transactions acknowledge courtly love's hierarchical referent rather than evincing a reverential elevation of women. Men could negotiate these conventions to marry up, and (as Saul's account of Sir Ralph Monthermer's and Richard Calle's marriages suggests) they did.

By emphasizing gratuitous fighting, often to please women, literary romance misrepresented the martial circumstances of chivalry, which Saul describes as a "tough down-to-earth business" (p. 148) that "involved more than the enacting of ritualized combat and the performing of brave deed to impress ladies" (p. 153). Instead it consisted in "the honing of fighting skills in the lists, the building of group solidarity" in tournaments, and "the encouragement of bravery in the quest for honor" (p. 153). Medieval noblemen cherished their honor, which Saul succinctly defines as, "the value which a nobleman placed on himself and the expectation that that value would be recognized by others" (p. 187). Its chivalric measure was personal and performative, expressing itself "principally in terms of action and display" (p. 187), deeds which sometimes involved violence but often comprised personal restraint and public acts of grace originating in Norman codes governing the humane prosecution of war and treatment of prisoners. Disagreeing with scholars like Richard W. Kaeuper who, in *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford University Press 1999), argues that chivalry encouraged "heroic" (p. 8) violence, Saul argues it was a "moderating force, providing a code of polite behavior which prevented disputes from tipping over into violence" (p. 178). Kaeuper, in his well-researched book relies on romances to buttress his argument but concedes that "we cannot expect [chivalric] literature [...] to serve as a simple mirror to the social reality of the world in which it emerged" (p. 33). Saul skeptically asserts: "It is clear that we cannot take the fictions of the romances as directly mirroring the values and norms of chivalric society" (p. 196). He acknowledges the brutal violence inherent in military and court-tournament chivalry; however, he notes chivalric honor's role in tempering violence rather than enabling it.

Chivalric bravery, honor, and courtesy were valued by men who shared the harrowing experience of military conflict, men who might have been on opposite sides but who were brothers in arms.

Chivalry suffered successive declines in the thirteenth, sixteenth, and the early-twentieth centuries. Saul attributes the first two of these declines to financial considerations that lead to the bankrupting of knights in the thirteenth century and the indifference of a nascent gentry class in the sixteenth. Mark Girouard has argued, in *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (Yale University Press 1981), that the chivalric code could not comprehend the atrocities of technology and scale inherent in “the concept of total war” (p. 293) that enveloped combatants during World War One. Both his and Saul’s books convincingly emphasize a need to investigate the material realities of men’s experiences rather than relying on scholarly and literary commentaries on them—a lesson yet to be learned in most twenty-first-century conversations about men and gender.

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