

Chivalry: A perfectly good ideal

Chivalry or chivalrous behaviour encapsulated the ideal virtues of the perfect knight. The Arthurian knights aspired to these virtues in their behaviour and code of chivalry. This essay will seek to suggest, through discussion and analysis, that only the impossibly perfect individual, a saint, can achieve truly perfect chivalrous behaviour. The order of chivalry is an idealised code too difficult for any mortal man to strictly adhere to. Firstly the criteria for becoming a knight and the oath of chivalry will be examined. Secondly, a comparison of two knights', Gawain and Lancelot, and their unsuccessful attempts to maintain their chivalric oaths will be discussed. Finally Galahad, 'the perfect knight', will be analysed and the reasons for his success as a truly chivalrous knight.

In order to become a knight the individual must exhibit knightly qualities. Of these knightly qualities Keen cites Lull in stating, "The most loyal, most strong and of most noble courage, was chosen to be a knight." (1984, pg. 9). One may surmise thus that the individual must be of noble lineage, good breeding, and fine temperament or as Keen states, "visible testimony to the combination of good birth with virtue." (1984, p.2) Moreover the qualities a knight must exhibit are similar to the qualities of a French *chevalier* of which Keen (1984, p.1) states:

"It denotes a man of aristocratic standing and probably noble ancestry, who is capable, if called upon, of equipping himself with a war horse and the arms of a heavy cavalryman, and who has been through, certain rituals that make him what he is"

One such ritual, in order to become a knight, is the oath taken when receiving the "order of chivalry". (Keen, 1984, p.4)

The order of chivalry was the oath sworn and renewed each year by Arthurian knights. This code underpinned the knight's motives to engage in combat, a licence to

fight. Of the knights will to combat Cavendish states, "Only then, in a fight, is he most fully his best self. (1988, p.117). Thus through combat the knight becomes "his true and best self..."(Cavendish, 1988,p.116). The code consisted of seven virtues as Lancelyn Green (1953) states

Do no outrage nor murder nor any cruel or wicked thing; fly from treason and all untruthfulness and dishonest dealing; give mercy unto those that seek it--or sit no more at this Table. And always give all the help in your power to ladies and damsels, go out to succour gentlewomen and widows, turn from all else to right any wrong done to any woman in the world--and never, on pain of death and eternal disgrace, do you any ill thing to a woman, or suffer it to be done. Nor, for love or gain, fight in any quarrel that is not just and righteous.

The oath also presents the idolised position of woman to the Arthurian knights.

The knight would champion the cause of woman. The love between knight and lady was not physical, "par amours" (Keen, 1984, p.13) rather implicit and passionate, "the loyal lover keeps his love secret"(Keen, 1984, p.13). The knight merely sought the approval of the lady. This 'courtly love' fuelled knights on, of this Cavendish states, "his passion for her lends strength to his arms in combat. (1988, p.116). The knight must love the woman from afar, defend her honour, seek her favour but never physically consummate the love. The knight must be true, just, honest and brave defending the honour of woman at all available opportunities. One may now consider the virtues of Gawain, a knight of the Round Table.

The oath of chivalry and a knight's personal virtues ensure chivalrous behaviour. Of the virtues of a knight of the round table one may consider Sir Gawain, of which Hopkins (1993, p.56) states

"Gawain's ideal of knightly perfection, and in particular the five knightly virtues: generosity, fellowship, purity, courtesy and compassion."

Gawain must be brave and generous, ensure his integrity, honesty, and purity and remain polite and sympathetic, particularly to woman. Therefore Gawain's personal virtues and the sworn oath, the order of chivalry, should ensure chivalrous behaviour. However, an inherent problem within the order of chivalry is the insistence on the idolisation of woman. The oath sworn to defend, protect and help all women in need. Thus the needs of women must be respected and honoured. The knight must maintain his integrity, honesty and purity ensuring loyalty to king, lord and lady. The double bind of loyalty, to lady and lord, ensures that Gawain, and similarly Lancelot, have difficulty maintaining perfectly chivalrous behaviour.

Gawain breaks his chivalric oath while questing for the Green Knight. Seeking rest Gawain strikes up a bargain with a lord of a castle, "to exchange whatever each of us has won during the day when we meet in the evening" (Hopkins, 1984, p.58). Gawain agrees, "with glad goodwill." (Hopkins, 1984, p.58) Gawain however fails to honour his promise to the lord. The lady of the Castle, the lord's wife, makes two unsuccessful attempts to seduce Gawain into lovemaking, receiving only a kiss for her efforts. On the third failed attempt the lady then gives Gawain a green sash and promises him to secrecy. Gawain duly "gave his word that no-one should ever know anything about it, but they two." (Hopkins, 1984, p.62). When questioned by the lord of the castle, later, Gawain makes no mention of the scarf. Gawain has not been completely honest with the lord. The chivalric oath and his virtues ensure Gawain must respect the wishes of both lord and lady. Later Gawain states, "I am a knight and I must keep my word." (Hopkins, 1984 p.63). Gawain it would seem has lied to the lord.

Gawain acts unchivalrous to save his own life. Gawain's 'word' seems to be malleable whereby Gawain can lie when need be and be chivalrous, honest and brave when necessary. The Green Knight chastises Gawain for his duplicity saying, "here you failed a little and you lacked loyalty; but it was...only for love of your life, and I blame you much less for that." (Hopkins, 1984, p.67). Later Gawain realises his error when in Arthur's court he, "confessed with a blush of shame how he failed in faith"(Hopkins, 1984, p.68). Gawain is human and to be human is to err, which Arthur realises and thus Gawain is forgiven. Unchivalrous behaviour, dishonesty, it would seem is justified for self-preservation, a very human quality. Lancelot's betrayal represents another knight whose human qualities cause him to act unchivalrously.

Lancelot's is the best of all knights. King Arthur knights Lancelot because the Lady of Lake prophesises Lancelot will "bring great honour in years to come." (Hopkins, 1984, p.69). He is a knight second to none, "strong and swift and he fought like a lion." (Hopkins, 1984, p.70). Later he becomes known as the, "best and noblest knight of the Round Table." (Hopkins, 1984, p.74). One may argue Lancelot is the epitome of knighthood and chivalry. However, Lancelot is not perfectly chivalrous.

Lancelot is tricked into consummating his love for Guinevere. Lancelot commits treason against Arthur. Lancelot is Guinevere's champion, as Lancelot states, "I shall ever be your own knight, now and always."(Hopkins, 1984, p.69). Tricked by Dame Brisen into drinking poisoned wine Lancelot, thinking King Pelles daughter is Guinevere, is "enamoured and maddened that he might make no delay but went at once to bed." (Hopkins, 1984, p.78). He awakes and

seeing it is not Guinevere he cries, "You traitress! Who are you that I have laid by all this night? You shall die right here at my hands!" (Hopkins, 1984, p.79). Lancelot, the *crème de la crème* of knightly prowess and chivalric honour, has broken two of the sacred oaths of the order of chivalry.

Lancelot has committed two unchivalrous acts because of love. Lancelot has committed high treason, "one of the greatest acts of treason any man could commit was to sleep with his lord's wife"(Hopkins, 1984, p.105). Secondly, Lancelot now plans to kill Elaine, a woman, simply because he was tricked into acting on his desire. Elaine beseeches him, "Fair courteous knight Sir Lancelot, you are come of kings blood, and therefore I require you to have mercy upon me!"(Hopkins, 1984, p.79). Elaine calls on Lancelot as a knight and son of a king to grant her mercy. In accordance with the chivalric code Lancelot is merciful. However, Lancelot has acted unchivalrously in consummating his love for Guinevere with Elaine. Similar to Gawain, Lancelot's unchivalrous behaviour is justified by his love. Both knights, Gawain and Lancelot, act unchivalrously because of human desire. However only one knight, Galahad, remains truly chivalrous in all his actions.

Galahad's perfection and lack of failure lead him to become the perfect embodiment of a chivalrous knight. Galahad is destined for greatness, as King Pellès is aware, "the good knight" (Hopkins, 1984, p.77). Galahad appears in the middle of the great hall of Camelot, heralded by a holy man. Galahad is he, "who will achieve the greatest deeds yet seen in this land." (Hopkins, 1984 p.115) Galahad, son of Lancelot and King Pellès daughter Elaine, goes on the quest for the Grail. During this quest Galahad is chivalrous, defending the

honour of woman he rescues the maidens from the Castle of Maidens. Moreover when King Pellinore's daughter is threatened Galahad exclaims, "You shall not touch this damsel" (Hopkins, 1984, p.138). Galahad finally succeeds where no other knight can, he finds the Holy Grail, and thus completes the Grail quest. Galahad thus becomes the greatest knight. He acts completely chivalrously and maintains his integrity throughout his quests. It is this perfection that makes Galahad seem inhuman

Galahad is an angelic saint who is inhuman in his perfection. As Cavendish argues Galahad is a "thoroughly unsatisfactory character" (1988, p. 118). Galahad has been prophesied to become the best knight. Galahad has no sin, not tainted with human desire he is virginal and perfect. Upon completing the quest he is "taken up into heaven by angels."(Cavendish, 1988, p.119). Galahad is a saint. In comparison to Lancelot and Gawain, Galahad is never challenged to make moral decisions regarding his oath. Galahad suffers no tests of moral conscience. Galahad not needing to develop his moral character is already perfect. Galahad does not lust, love or lie to save his life. Galahad simply arrives, fights, wins and finds the Grail. Galahad, unlike Lancelot and Gawain, makes decisions unclouded by emotional judgement. Galahad is the one and only knight whose perfection allows him to seek and find the grail. Galahad is perfect, angelic and saintly, whereas Gawain and Lancelot are human men striving for perfection, "men who, learning with experience have set themselves to study their profession"(Keen, 1984, p.13).

Chivalry or chivalrous behaviour to the Arthurian knights was the ideal of the perfect knight. The Order of Chivalry was a set of rules whereby the knights

aspired to perfection, but inevitably humans are not perfect. As humans we make mistakes and we learn from mistake, thus knights would fail, learn and aspire to the virtues of chivalry. Only an ideal person, can hope to be perfectly chivalrous, as Keen states, "it is too idealistic"(1984, p.5). Chivalry is something to aspire to, a dream and vision of the perfect behaviour and perfect virtues of a perfect person. The stories of knights such as Gawain and Lancelot depict warriors learning from their failures, seeking to find perfection, unlike the tales of Galahad where perfection is not a quest, but simply a stated fact.

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