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978-1-107-04221-6 - Chivalry and the Ideals of Knighthood in France during
the Hundred Years War

Craig Taylor

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Introduction

Military ethics is a very important subject in the modern world, especially in the light of outrages that continue to be committed by soldiers in wars across the globe. A recent project brought together experts on education in the military, to discuss the values emphasized and taught within different armed forces across the world. Their discussions demonstrated the universality of core principles such as honour, courage, loyalty and discipline, which have resonated throughout warrior cultures across history. What they also revealed, though, was tremendous variations in the precise list of military values prescribed by each specific armed force, the relative importance assigned to these qualities and – most important of all – the interpretation of them in practice.¹

Debates about military ethics and values at the start of the twenty-first century raise important questions about the stability of the norms and codes for warriors in past societies. Perhaps the most famous and influential martial ethos is that associated with the chivalric elite of western Europe between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. Like many other warrior societies, chivalric culture celebrated qualities such as honour, prowess, loyalty, courage, mercy and wisdom, alongside more ‘civilizing’ values associated with life at court. Simple lists of the ideals proclaimed by writers in chivalric society do not do justice, however, to the complexity of debate on the ethics and ideal behaviour of knights recorded in sources such as romances, chronicles and more overtly didactic texts. Indeed, medieval writers were far from consistent in their presentation of the various qualities associated with knighthood, or their relative importance for knights, not just as warriors but also as courtiers.² Such

¹ See P. Robinson, N. de Lee and D. Carrick (eds.), *Ethics Education in the Military* (Abingdon, 2008), together with the companion volume, D. Carrick, J. Connelly and P. Robinson (eds.), *Ethics Education for Irregular Warfare* (Farnham, 2009), as well as the *Journal of Military Ethics*.

² This book focuses upon the martial values and ideals of knighthood. For sustained discussions of the more courtly aspects of aristocratic identity, see, for example, J. Lemaire, *Les visions de la vie de cour dans la littérature française de la fin du moyen âge*

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complexities have often been brushed aside by modern commentators, either because of an undue focus upon one or two particular medieval texts or, more worryingly, because of the anachronistic association of the word ‘chivalry’ with an extremely romantic notion of soldiers inspired by love, or behaving in the most noble and honourable fashion in warfare.

Recovering the full range of medieval debates about warrior values during the age of chivalry is tremendously important for military history, in which recent attempts to explore the relationship between culture and war in the late Middle Ages have been somewhat undermined by naïve and simplistic assumptions about the values that were championed within chivalric culture.³ At the same time, analysis of the changing and shifting norms of knightly behaviour in warfare, and in the wider contexts of violence and male competition, is an important element of the study of medieval masculinity and gender.⁴ Above all, though, analysing the range of debates about knightly behaviour in the Middle Ages is of essential importance for cultural and intellectual history, especially given that so much serious scholarship has focused upon the study of medieval ideas of kingship, the state and national identity, for example, but there has been too little sustained analysis of the ideologies of knighthood and warfare.⁵

To trace the full complexity of medieval debates about warrior values across the complete chronological and geographical range of the age of chivalry would be an extraordinary challenge. Instead, this book focuses upon what was undoubtedly the golden age of writing about knighthood and warfare in late medieval France.⁶ There were few aristocratic libraries in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries that did not include copies of *chansons de geste* and romances recounting the deeds of great heroes of

(Paris, 1994), and R. Brown-Grant, *French Romance of the Later Middle Ages: Gender, Morality and Desire* (Oxford, 2008).

³ See, for example, J. A. Lynn, ‘Chivalry and *chevauchée*: the ideal, the real, and the perfect in medieval European warfare’, in *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture from Ancient Greece to Modern America* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 73–109.

⁴ This is not to deny the overriding importance of studying the social realities that existed behind cultural norms of masculinity.

⁵ See J. Krynen, *Idéal du prince et pouvoir royal en France à la fin du moyen âge (1380–1440): étude de la littérature politique du temps* (Paris, 1981), and *L’empire du roi: idées et croyances politiques en France, XIIIe–XVe siècles* (Paris, 1993), together with J. H. Burns (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought 350–1450* (Cambridge, 1988).

⁶ Important reference tools for the study of sources include G. Hasenohr and M. Zink (eds.), *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises: le moyen âge* (Paris, 1992), D. Sinnreich-Levi and I. S. Laurie (eds.), *Literature of the French and Occitan Middle Ages: Eleventh to Fifteenth Centuries* (Farmington Hills, MI, 1999), and B. Bousmanne, F. Johan, T. Van Hemelryck and C. Van Hoorebeeck (eds.), *La librairie des ducs de Bourgogne: manuscrits conservés à la Bibliothèque royale de Belgique* (8 vols., Turnhout, 2000–).

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chivalric culture, from King Arthur to Alexander the Great, the Greek and Trojan warriors who fought at the siege of Troy, Charlemagne and his companions such as Roland, Oliver and Ogier le Danois, and crusaders such as Godfrey de Bouillon.⁷ During the late Middle Ages French writers were reworking these famous tales, both in verse and in prose, and addressing more courtly aspects of knighthood in other poetic genres.⁸ There was also an expanding interest in narratives of more contemporary French knights, increasingly written in prose rather than verse. Chroniclers such as Jean de Joinville, Jean Le Bel, Jean Froissart, Enguerrand de Monstrelet and Jean de Wavrin led the way, but there were also heraldic narratives by writers such as Gilles Le Bouvier and Jean Le Fèvre, and biographies by authors such as Guillaume de Machaut, Jean Cabaret d'Orville, Guillaume Gruel, Perceval de Cagny and Antoine de La Sale.⁹ At the same time, a flourishing market for original, didactic works addressed to kings, princes and noblemen included a significant number of texts that discussed knighthood and warfare, written by authors such as Geoffroi de Charny, Philippe de Mézières, Honorat Bovet, Christine de Pizan, Alain Chartier, Antoine de La Sale and Jean de Bueil.¹⁰ Although a few of the new works that touched upon these questions were written in Latin, the vast majority were composed in the vernacular. Indeed, the late Capetian and Valois monarchs sponsored an extraordinary programme of translations of classical works, which gave royal and aristocratic audiences access to many books providing guidance and commentary on warfare by authors such as Aristotle, Titus Livy, Vegetius and Valerius Maximus, as well as more recent writings by John of Salisbury and Giles of Rome.¹¹

The overall subject of these works, in modern parlance, was chivalry. For the writers themselves, the term 'chivalry' was most commonly used as a collective noun for the order or class of knights that by the late

⁷ See pages 10–11 below.

⁸ See D. Poirion (ed.), *La littérature française aux XIV^e et XV^e siècles*, vol. I, *Partie historique* (Heidelberg, 1988), together with M. Zink, 'Le roman de transition (XIV^e–XV^e siècle)', in D. Poirion (ed.), *Précis de littérature française du moyen âge* (Paris, 1983), 293–305; Brown-Grant, *French Romance*; M. R. Warren, 'Prose romance', in W. Burgwinkle, N. Hammond and E. Wilson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of French Literature* (Cambridge, 2011), 153–63.

⁹ See D. B. Tyson, 'French vernacular history writers and their patrons in the fourteenth century', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, new series, 14 (1986), 103–24, and E. Gaucher, *La biographie chevaleresque: typologie d'un genre (XIII^e–XV^e siècle)* (Paris, 1994).

¹⁰ P. Contamine, 'Les traités de guerre, de chasse, de blason et de chevalerie', in Poirion, *La littérature française*, 346–67.

¹¹ *Translations médiévales*, ed. C. Galderisi.

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Middle Ages was effectively synonymous with the aristocracy.¹² For modern audiences, the most famous chivalric manual is the so-called *Livre de chevalerie*, written by Geoffroi de Charny around 1350. This title is actually an invention of modern editors, however, and the term ‘chevalerie’ appears in the work on only a handful of occasions, when it refers to the order of chivalry – that is to say, the knights and men-at-arms to whom Charny addressed his advice.¹³ When medieval writers did use the term ‘chevalerie’ in a wider sense, it was to refer to a knight’s technical skill as a warrior and horseman, and to his deeds of arms.¹⁴ More rarely, late medieval French writers used the term ‘chivalry’ to refer to the deeds of arms performed by such individuals, most commonly in warfare.

Yet, in modern English, chivalry has developed a much broader and more confusing meaning. For many historians it encompasses the full scope of aristocratic culture during the high and late Middle Ages, including not just the literature but all aspects of both court and martial life and lifestyle, including tournaments, feasts and knightly orders, heraldry and knighting ceremonies.¹⁵ From such a perspective, chivalry is not merely the literary representation of knighthood but also the social practices and rituals of knights at court, the military activities of medieval knights and men-at-arms, and the values and ethos that informed and framed these practices. In other words, chivalry constituted the norms, values, practices and rituals of medieval aristocratic society from the high Middle Ages onwards. Other scholars focus on a more narrow definition of chivalry, as the values, ethos and ideals of knighthood, either as practised by the knights themselves or as described by the writers of the

¹² For the complex definition of aristocracy and the knightly class in late medieval France, see P. Contamine, ‘Points de vue sur la chevalerie en France à la fin du moyen âge’, *Francia*, 4 (1976), 255–85, *La noblesse au royaume de France de Philippe Le Bel à Louis XII: essai de synthèse* (Paris, 1997), M.-T. Caron, *Noblesse et pouvoir royal en France: XIIIe–XVIe siècle* (Paris, 1994), and G. Prosser, ‘The later medieval French noblesse’, in D. Potter (ed.), *France in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2003), 182–209.

¹³ *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny: Text, Context, and Translation*, ed. R. W. Kaeuper and E. Kennedy (Philadelphia, 1996), 162–6, 170. In the fifteenth-century inventories of the library of the dukes of Burgundy, the work was referred to as ‘le livre de Charny... escript en prose’ and ‘le livre nommé l’Ordre de Chevalerie’: Bousmanne *et al.*, *La librairie des ducs de Bourgogne*, II, 233.

¹⁴ G. S. Burgess, ‘The term “chevalerie” in twelfth-century old French’, in P. R. Monks and D. D. R. Owen (eds.), *Medieval Codicology, Iconography, Literature and Translation: Studies for Keith Val Sinclair* (Leiden, 1994), 343–58; L. Paterson, ‘Knights and the concept of knighthood in the twelfth-century Occitan epic’, in W. H. Jackson (ed.), *Knighthood in Medieval Literature* (Woodbridge, 1981), 24. Also see R. W. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford, 1999), 4, and ‘Chivalry: fantasy and fear’, in C. Sullivan and B. White (eds.), *Writing and Fantasy* (London, 1999), 63.

¹⁵ M. H. Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, CT, 1984).

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age.¹⁶ Chivalry in the latter sense is often associated primarily with the courtly romances, which offered a very heroic and idealized vision of knightly values and behaviour.¹⁷

This has given rise to a final way in which the term ‘chivalry’ is defined and used: as an eternal ideal of elegant and civilized masculinity, reflecting a modern, nostalgic fantasy of a world of medieval knights who treated war as a noble game and constantly sought to impress and to romance ladies with their elevated and courtly manners. Gillingham has defined chivalry as

a code in which a key element was the attempt to limit the brutality of conflict by treating prisoners, at any rate when they were men of ‘gentle’ birth, in a relatively humane fashion. I suggest that the compassionate treatment of defeated high-status enemies is a defining characteristic of chivalry.¹⁸

Indeed, chivalry has even been elevated to an analytical concept by many military historians, who use it in the study of contexts far removed from the chronological, geographical and social boundaries of the knightly world as it has been traditionally defined. Thus a recent comparative study has reported that ‘[a]ncient China, for instance, had a code of chivalry’, citing ‘stories of Chinese commanders refusing to attack an enemy when he was disadvantaged crossing a river’.¹⁹ This notion of chivalry has informed recent debates about military law and ethics amongst contemporary armed forces.²⁰

To a certain degree, the range of ways in which scholars use the term do not matter, as long as they are clear and self-conscious about the definition that they are employing. In this book, I prefer to use the term ‘chivalry’ as a proper noun, to refer to the people who formed the knightly or aristocratic class, rather than to chivalric culture in its broadest sense or to the ideals, norms or ethos of knighthood. Most

¹⁶ See, for example, R. W. Kaeuper, ‘The societal role of chivalry in romance: northwestern Europe’, in R. L. Krueger (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, 2000), 99.

¹⁷ See, for example, D. Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2003), 21; also see R. W. Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* (New Haven, CT, 1977), 105–38.

¹⁸ J. Gillingham, ‘1066 and the introduction of chivalry into England’, in G. Garnett and J. Hudson (eds.), *Laws and Government in Medieval England and Normandy* (Cambridge, 1996), 32.

¹⁹ P. Robinson, *Military Honour and the Conduct of War: From Ancient Greece to Iraq* (Abingdon, 2006), 1.

²⁰ R. Moelker and G. Kümmel, ‘Chivalry and codes of conduct: can the virtue of chivalry epitomize guidelines for interpersonal conduct?’, *Journal of Military Ethics*, 6 (2007), 292–302; A. Moseley, ‘The ethical warrior: a classical liberal approach’, in Robinson, de Lee and Carrick, *Ethics Education in the Military*, 179; D. Whetham, *Just Wars and Moral Victories: Surprise, Deception and the Normative Framework of European War in the Later Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2009), 2.

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importantly of all, I resist using the term ‘chivalry’ as a theoretical term in the way that some military historians have employed it recently. As Kaeuper has ably demonstrated, to define chivalry in terms of the more romantic and civilized messages that were supposedly offered by chivalric literature would be to ignore the overwhelming presence of contradictory themes in exactly the same texts, especially the powerful encouragement of violence and aggression.²¹ Indeed, the crucial point is that medieval commentators were far less certain and definite about the ideal values and behaviour of knights than modern audiences might imagine.

The writers of late medieval France, like their predecessors and their contemporaries in other regions such as England, Italy and Spain, offered complex reflections upon chivalry, both in its wider sense as aristocratic culture and in the narrower sense of the values and ethos of the chivalric class. Indeed, there was a great deal of debate in the Middle Ages about how a knight or man-at-arms should behave. Keen has said: ‘From a very early stage we find the romantic authors habitually associating together certain qualities which they clearly regarded as the classic virtues of good knighthood: *prouesse*, *loyauté*, *largesse* (generosity), *courtoisie*, and *franchise* (the free and frank bearing that is visible testimony to the combination of good birth with virtue).’²² Yet the precise list of qualities required of the ideal knight could vary from writer to writer, as the standard martial qualities such as prowess, loyalty and courage were moderated by reference to other virtues and values, such as mercy, but also *mesure* (moderation), magnanimity, prudence and discipline, while intellectuals also debated the relationship between the martial values and more courtly qualities such as courtesy and love.

Moreover, while each of the values associated with knighthood may seem self-evident at first glance, their precise meaning was subject to constant debate and analysis by medieval authors.²³ As Kaeuper has argued, we must be ‘cautious about asserting what “ideal chivalry” inevitably had to say about warfare, women, piety, or a host of other topics. Textbook lists of ideal qualities – largesse, courtliness, prowess, service to ladies and the like – are not so much wrong as inadequate.’²⁴ It is essential to resist the modern temptation to simplify the chivalric ethos into a simple, coherent code and brush over the complexity and even

²¹ Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence*. ²² Keen, *Chivalry*, 2.

²³ As Busby has commented, in *Le roman des eles by Raoul de Hodenc and L'ordene de chevalerie*, ed. K. Busby (Amsterdam, 1983), v: ‘Such concepts as courtesy or knighthood are not static, and whilst central ideas do remain fundamental, accents and stresses develop and shift.’

²⁴ R. W. Kaeuper and M. Bohna, ‘War and chivalry’, in P. Brown (ed.), *A Companion to Late Medieval English Literature and Culture* (Oxford, 2007), 274.

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contradictions of an ideal, which were constantly highlighted and explored by medieval writers and commentators.²⁵ This has been mostly clearly explored in the case of *courtoisie*, and in particular for the ideals of love and the *fin d'amors*.²⁶ Not only were medieval writers keen to define precisely how a knight should behave at court, they were also concerned about the potential harm that decadence and indulgence might cause, in both earthly and spiritual terms. Writers therefore explored the nature of knightly honour, questioning not just its role in justifying violence but also the difficult relationship between such earthly and mundane concerns, and the Christian emphasis upon eternal salvation (Chapter 2).

Intellectuals and writers also asked very careful questions about the martial values and behaviour of the knight or man-at-arms, emphasizing in particular the importance of moderation. First and foremost, they explored the limits of prowess and aristocratic violence, debating the circumstances under which knights could resort to violence, and the legal and moral status of different kinds of warfare, from crusading and royal wars to feuds and private warfare (Chapter 3). Writers also debated the true meaning of courage, stressing the shame of cowardice but also warning of the dangers of bravado, rashness and overconfidence, which were particularly associated with youthful impetuosity and a lack of prudence and experience (Chapter 4). Indeed, mercy and prudence were both emphasized as important moderators of knightly behaviour. On the one hand, the association of the ideal of knighthood with mercy, which has so powerfully affected modern notions of chivalry, was an important counter to the concept of vengeance and righteous anger, which was equally embedded in chivalric culture in the Middle Ages (Chapters 5 and 6). Similarly, prudence and wisdom were important moderators of knightly behaviour, and in turn raised questions about the ways in which knights and men-at-arms should acquire such experience, and the role of books and writers alike in that process (Chapter 7).

There were many reasons why the writers of late medieval France, like their predecessors, carefully debated and explored the values and ideals of knighthood. First and foremost, there were fundamental tensions within these models that were never fully resolved: between the humility and piety of a true Christian and the vainglorious importance of honour

²⁵ One famous attempt to do precisely the opposite are the ten commandments of chivalry identified by L. Gautier, *La chevalerie* (3rd edn., Paris, 1884), 31–100.

²⁶ See, for example, C. S. Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of the Courtly Ideals, 939–1210* (Philadelphia, 1985), Lemaire, *Les visions de la vie de cour*, S. Gaunt, *Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature: Martyrs to Love* (Oxford, 2006), J. A. Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago, 2006), and Brown-Grant, *French Romance*.

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and reputation in chivalric culture, for example; between the powerfully masculine model of warrior aggression and the more restrained, civilized – even effeminate – notion of the courtier; and between expectations of male behaviour as youths and as adults.²⁷ Moreover, normative models of masculinity such as the knightly ethos may appear to offer solid and stable images of manhood, but it would be extraordinary to imagine a static and simple model of masculine behaviour that remained unchallenged for hundreds of years, immune to changing social contexts.²⁸ Textbooks usually define the age of chivalry as running from at least the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries – a period in which the practical function of knights in military, political and social terms was subject to important changes and pressures, and the precise identity of the aristocratic class itself was in constant flux, as old families died out and new men rose to replace them. Given such circumstances, it was surely inevitable that the ideal of knighthood would change and also be subject to debate, even if core values such as honour, prowess, loyalty and courage remained constant.

Indeed, of fundamental importance is the fact that chivalric texts were not simple mirrors to the world around them but sought to be an active social force, shaping attitudes and advancing ideals for what the aristocracy ought to become, rather than simply celebrating and commemorating an existing social reality.²⁹ As the classical scholar Mary Beard has noted, '[I]t is warrior states that produce the most sophisticated critique of the militaristic values they uphold.'³⁰ During the age of chivalry, the most overt criticisms were voiced by clerics and intellectuals who

²⁷ F. Joukovsky-Micha, 'La notion de "vaine gloire" de Simund de Freine à Martin Le Franc', *Romania*, 89 (1968), 1–30, 210–39; A. Putter, 'Arthurian literature and the rhetoric of "effeminacy"', in F. Wolfzettel (ed.), *Arthurian Romance and Gender* (Amsterdam, 1995), 34–49; D. Barthélemy, 'Modern mythologies of medieval chivalry', in P. Linehan and J. L. Nelson (eds.), *The Medieval World* (London, 2002), 215; R. M. Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia, 2002).

²⁸ 'Male experience and the meanings of maleness... were complex and culturally variable, which meant they might be historically variable as well': D. G. Neal, *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England* (Chicago, 2008), 4; also see C. Fletcher, *Richard II: Manhood, Youth, and Politics, 1377–99* (Oxford, 2008), 45: moralists tried to impose meaning upon 'the various constellations of ideas which formed around manhood, ideas which might be interpreted in quite different ways by those with different agenda [sic]'.

²⁹ On the ability of medieval texts to 'mirror and generate social realities', see G. M. Spiegel, 'History, historicism, and the social logic of the text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum*, 65 (1990), 59–86.

³⁰ M. Beard, *The Roman Triumph* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 4. Also see W. I. Miller, *Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence* (Ithaca, NY, 1993), 14: 'No culture is so purely consistent that competing views are not available within it... [A]ll cultures are riddled with internal contradictions and competing claims.'

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preached or complained about the behaviour of knights, from Pierre de Blois, Bernard de Clairvaux, John of Salisbury, Etienne de Fougères and Thomas Aquinas to late medieval intellectuals such as Philippe de Mézières, Honorat Bovet, Eustache Deschamps, Jean Gerson, Christine de Pizan, Alain Chartier and Jean Juvénal des Ursins. In their sermons, letters and didactic treatises, they carefully examined the values and actions of contemporary knights, in debates that were framed by classical authorities ranging from Aristotle and Cicero to Vegetius. Their concerns were also evident in narrative genres such as romances, chronicles and chivalric biographies.³¹

These narratives usually glamorized and revelled in the glories and pageantry of knighthood, offering colourful images of the richness and splendour of life at court, along with highly exaggerated and dramatic accounts of heroic action, rather than providing straightforward depictions of social and military reality.³² Such hyperbolic representations of warfare are an important reminder that the authors' goal was less to offer a realistic portrayal of the psychology and values of contemporary warriors than to follow the demands of the genre and impress their audiences with their particular recounting of tales that were often extremely well known.³³ The authors of chivalric narratives were not objective witnesses to the changing world around them but were offering a programme of courtly education, infused by moral philosophy.³⁴ In the Middle Ages storytelling and history were understood to serve a didactic function, instructing and guiding audiences towards moral and religious truths.³⁵ Facts and the accurate representation of reality were far less important than the moral and spiritual lessons that such narratives could provide. As Kaeuper has recently stressed, 'We must read these texts both

³¹ R. L. Krueger, *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, 2000); also see M. Zink, 'Le roman', in Poirion, *La littérature française*, 197–218.

³² R. W. Kaeuper, 'Literature as essential evidence for understanding chivalry', *Journal of Medieval Military History*, 5 (2007), 5.

³³ Hanning has argued that 'generic conventions...complicate any attempt to equate the textual representation of a mounted warrior class or caste with the actualities of its existence': R. W. Hanning, 'The criticism of chivalric epic and romance', in H. Chickering and T. H. Seiler, (eds.), *The Study of Chivalry: Resources and Approaches* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1988), 93.

³⁴ See C. S. Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness*, and 'Book-burning at Don Quixote's: thoughts on the educating force of courtly romance', in K. Busby and C. Kleinhenz (eds.), *Courtly Arts and the Art of Courtliness* (Cambridge, 2006), 3–28, together with R. W. Kaeuper, 'Chivalry and the "civilizing process"', in R. W. Kaeuper (ed.), *Violence in Medieval Society*, (Woodbridge, 2000), 21–35.

³⁵ Jaeger questions 'whether anyone in the Middle Ages would have distinguished the didactic from the aesthetic. The author of fictional literature counts as *bonorum morum instructor*': Jaeger, 'Book-burning at Don Quixote's', 12, note.

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prescriptively and descriptively, as statements of what an author wants chivalry to be no less than what he or she recognizes it is.³⁶ Simply put, the idealized and romanticized image of the knight in chivalric narratives provided both 'a cultural fantasy and a cultural education'.³⁷

In the *Cent ballades*, Christine de Pizan called upon the knights of her day to look to the example of great heroes and worthies ('preux') of the past, from Old Testament warriors such as Judas Maccabeus, Joshua and David to Alexander the Great, Hector and Julius Caesar, and Arthur, Charlemagne and Godfrey de Bouillon.³⁸ These great heroes provided a powerful platform from which to comment on contemporary behaviour. Authors constantly looked backwards to the famous worthies of the past as role models for the present. Indeed, the fact that the Greeks, the Romans and the knights of King Arthur had all ultimately failed encouraged reflection on the seeds of disaster and the lessons that this might offer for medieval audiences. These heroes, confronted with difficult choices, usually failed to attain the highest standards of the knightly ideal or ultimately suffered a dramatic fall from grace as fortune's wheel turned against them, all of which encouraged reflection and debate about the personal deficiencies that had led to such disasters. Thus Gilbert has noted: 'In twelfth-century French verse romances, the Arthurian setting provides a place emphatically not the real, present world, in which to test principles of fundamental relevance to that world: principles moral, psychological, social and political.'³⁹ The early tales tended to interrogate and experiment with ethical models in a playful manner, whereas the appearance of the Grail romances in the thirteenth century marked an increasingly serious examination of such questions, using the Grail quest to scrutinize the dangers of vainglory and earthly concerns with reputation and honour. Then later medieval versions offered deeper examinations of the collapse of the Round Table and the questions that this raised regarding the relationship between individual achievement and the common good.⁴⁰ Other narratives explored possible reasons for the fall

³⁶ Kaeuper, 'Literature as essential evidence', 3.

³⁷ R. Morse, 'Historical fiction in fifteenth-century Burgundy', *Modern Language Review*, 75 (1980), 53.

³⁸ *Les oeuvres poétiques de Christine de Pisan*, ed. M. Roy (SATF, 3 vols., Paris, 1886–96), I, 92–3.

³⁹ J. Gilbert, 'Arthurian ethics', in E. Archibald and A. Putter (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend* (Cambridge, 2009), 157.

⁴⁰ Brown-Grant, *French Romance*; L. Ashe, 'The hero and his realm in medieval English romance', in N. Cartlidge (ed.), *Boundaries in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, 2008), 139; E. Archibald, 'Questioning Arthurian ideals', in Archibald and Putter, *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, 139, 145–7; Gilbert, 'Arthurian ethics', 154–62.