

THE REFLECTION OF CULTURE IN ENGLISH LITERARY WORKS: THE CASE OF CHIVALRY

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Abstract: The paper presents an account of chivalry from Beowulf to Arthurian Romance and its depiction in the literary works of the chosen authors. The first part of this article deals with the early depiction of the pre-chivalric manners in Beowulf and the Chansons de Geste. The second and third parts respectively focus on the chivalry in genre of Romance and Arthurian romance.

Key words: chivalric manners, literary genres, romance, Arthurian romance, historical novel

Introduction

Chivalric manners and the institution of chivalry in Europe and in Britain have become an interesting source for research in various fields of study such as history, social anthropology, political sciences yet most importantly literature. Every period had its specific features how the chivalry and its principles were influencing almost the whole society; those features were usually captured into the form of literary works as the pictures of the society. The present paper focuses on the most significant literary works of certain periods and depicts chivalry as the reflection of the individual periods.

History, culture and traditions of the tribes living on the area of the British Isles have influenced the content of the early literary works. Records of the historical events are often supported with picturesque descriptions of the heroic deeds of individuals, mostly leaders of the tribes. Their authors, mostly anonymous, drew inspiration from the sagas, myths or legends from Scandinavia or from the stories introduced through the oral tradition directly on the Isles. Heroes of their works are usually valiant warriors fighting against mystical creatures, powerful enemies, or they are just protecting those who are in need. They are described usually as strong men, mounted on their armed horses with a large sword or an axe in their hands. They respect a lord they serve to, they keep the promise they have given and fight for honour. Such heroes and their behaviour have become a base for traditions of chivalry and knighthood in both real and literary worlds over centuries.

1 From Beowulf to the Chansons de Geste

The Old-English epic poem **Beowulf** is included in form of the manuscript in the Nowell Codex and is dated between 8th and the 11th centuries. As the one of the most imminent literary works from the Anglo-Saxon pre-medieval period that has been found on the British Isles, its main character and his way of life can be considered as the examples of the pre-knightly warrior with the code of ethics known as **comitatus** typical for the medieval Scandinavian culture. Even though the story more focuses on the deeds of the individual, it presents the bond caused by vow between him and his co-warriors, which as the motif appears also later in the medieval notion of chivalry. According to comitatus, the leaders should be the examples of bravery and heroism, only after that they deserve the right to gain respect: "We shall fight for our lives, foe against foe; and he whom death takes off must resign himself to the judgment of God." (Raffael, 1963, line 1200) In such an early period, the influence of Christianity was not as strong as during the later periods, so Beowulf serves as the good example of application of the motif of evil and its destruction common for both non-Christian and early Christian literature; however, the work contains more parts alluding to and emphasizing the Christian tradition, as in the parts where the main character praises

God for the strength and courage that were given to him on the battlefields: "My life was almost lost, fighting for it, struggling under water: I'd have been dead at once, and the fight finished, the she-devil victorious, if our Father in Heaven had not helped me." (Raffael, 1963, lines 1656-1658) Beowulf as the literary work introduces the changes in notion of the values and qualities expected from heroes and points more to the human character and will rather than to the demands of some institutions.

Even though the dawning of the new Anglo-Norman society in 1066 introduced different traditions and way of life including the knighthood and institution of chivalry, the Anglo-Saxon culture and some of its aspects were assimilated into it. Still, the situation differed in various parts of the country. While the south was under the control of the new Anglo-Norman society, whose official language became the French language, and the literary traditions known in France appeared also on the Isles, the northern areas of the country, mainly Scotland and Ireland, kept the Old English and the Celtic languages and the literary traditions known from the previous period and with just a partial influence of Christianity. The old epic poems dealing with the heroic acts were substituted with the new genre, though containing similar subjects. Firstly, those new forms were sung by minstrels and bards on the courts of the nobility and soon became a source of entertainment for wider audience, known as "**the chansons de geste**"².

Even though the population on the Isles was divided into the French and the English-speaking, Furrow points to the popularity of **chansons** which increased within most of all listeners and readers with no regard for their origin. Of course, the Anglo-Norman forms of **the chanson de geste** worked with more distinctive features and reminded the historical narrative. As in comparison in France, where previously stories about the heroes and their heroic deeds developed into the genre of **chanson de geste** and the genre of **romance** as two different literary genres and themes of which were focusing more on the Matter of France naturally, on the British Isles, those two genres covered almost the same area of the Anglo-Norman literature where the main source of inspiration arose from the Matter of England: "Chansons de geste had a peculiar function in insular literary and generic history, and were central to the formation of the genre of romance in England for both writers and readers." (Furrow in Ashe, 2010, pg. 57) The first recorded **chansons** date back to the period before the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth centuries. One of the best known, **The Song of Roland**, is originally a French poem written around 11th century. The version found in the Oxford manuscript was written between 1140 and 1170, what refers to the time of the First Crusade. The theme of fight against the heathens in the Holy Land gave an opportunity to create many new chansons dealing with problematic of Christians protecting their faith and Holy Land and knights with their courtly manners, on the European political and religious field, moreover, the chansons, soon turned into a kind of support for their plans, what meant partial exploitation of chivalry and its principles.

The poem depicts the story of Roland, Charlemagne's nephew and the leader of emperor's rearguard on their return from the campaign against the Muslims in Spain in 778, where at the end Roland's pride and betrayal of Ganelon lead to Roland's death. Though the author of the Song considers Roland as an example of the valiant knight and the predecessor of a crusader, he presents him also a bit selfish in attempt to prove his loyalty of King for a price of having risked lives and keep his prestige in the eyes of his lord and his country: "'Says Oliver', 'The pagans are in force, 'While of our Franks it seems there are too few. Therefore, companion Roland, sound your horn! King Charles will hear, the army will turn

² Wikipedia 'songs of [heroic](#) deeds' (from gesta: Latin: 'deeds, actions accomplished'), are the [epic poems](#) that appear at the dawn of [French literature](#). The earliest known examples date from the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, before the emergence of the [lyric poetry](#) of the [trouvères](#) ([troubadours](#)) and the earliest verse [romances](#)."

back."Roland replies, 'That would be mad, insane! For I would lose renown throughout sweet France,'" (Robertson, 1972, Stanza LXXXIII, line 1049). The story, out of many things, offers the picture of conflict between the secular and religious worlds for the distribution of power, slightly criticising the chivalric manners and the service to the king at exclusion of the interest of the Church in the Holy Land. On the other hand the author of the Song took into account the importance of Christianity, its influence and teaching on chivalric manners and behaviour in order to emphasize the attitude towards the Saracens. The differences of the Saracen culture contrasting with the Christian culture and also the impact of their clash were presented in the Anglo-Norman and Middle English literary works. (Furrow in Asche, 2010) Furrow explanation dwells that in a way

... the opposition between Saracen and Christian recurrent in chansons de geste was the factor most appealing in England. It was an opposition that made chivalric violence thoroughly legitimate for medieval readers and it accords with the development of the genre romance in England as one in which warfare is often of decidedly more interest than love. (Furrow in Asche, 2010: 71)

The author of **The Song of Roland** offers more complex interpretation of knights with all the duties towards the secular and religious worlds, where the protection of the Holy Land and being in the service of their lord were almost equal: "A man should suffer greatly for his lord, Endure both biting cold and sweltering heat, And sacrifice for him both flesh and blood." (Robertson, 1972, Stanza LXXXVIII, line 1117).

The Song of Roland, out of other epical poems concerns with the questions of completing the chivalric duties in general and with hero's moral dilemmas of personal honour in accordance with the service. The reaction and acting of the protagonists in certain situations became an inspirational guide in terms of how the knights should or should not behave in order to avoid such situations. Many aspects of chivalric manners and ethics that were present in the Song, such as fight to prove innocence instead someone else, appeared also in the other works, for example in Scott's *Ivanhoe*. Therefore, it is obvious that the medieval noble society found some inspiration in the moral content of the work, where the code of manners and behaviour turned later to the form of the code of chivalry.

2 Romance

The growth importance of the chivalric ideology and its codes of ethics in the Anglo-Norman society during the 12th and 13th centuries caused few changes affecting the area of literature. The favourite **chansons de geste** soon became less satisfactory for readers of that period, and such a situation headed towards the formation of a new literary genre, **romance**, for which **the chansons** became an important springboard. In Saunders view, **romance** serves as the link between the traditional epic poetry of the past and the following genre of novel (Saunders in O'Neill, 2010). As in the case of the chansons, this genre draws the inspiration in real events and historic persons. Scott in his *Essay on Romance* presents, that "Romance and real history have the same common origin. It is the aim of the former to maintain as long as possible the mask of veracity." (Scott, *Essays on Chivalry, Romance, and the Drama*, 1834, p.134)

Not only the elements of reality but also, as Saunders points out that the motives such as "exile and return, love, quest and adventure, family, name and identity, pagan and Christian," have given the character to the genre of romance and are depicted also in the first recorder English romances, *King Horn* and *Havelok the Dane* from the thirteenth century. (Saunders in O'Neill, 2010, p.26)

The mastery of **romance** dealing with the topic of chivalry on the British Isles resided in that its authors set the already famous historical characters into a new setting according to their own imagination. While Saunders (In O'Neill, 2010: 26) focuses on the sources for an

inspiration “which drew on the matter of Britain, Celtic folk material, and in particular, on legends of King Arthur and the Round Table,” Scott (1834: 170) praises the quality how the sources were processed:

... those high tales, in which the virtues of generosity, bravery, devotion to mistress, and zeal for the Catholic religion, were carried to the highest perfection in the character of the hero, united with the scenes passing around them, were of the utmost importance in affecting the atmosphere of that age.

Considering the ideas mentioned above, various versions of the same stories dealing with the life of the famous characters such in case of romances about King Arthur, lead to increase of their popularity and widening the group of readers. Better availability of the stories brought amusement among not only the nobility on the courts but also the country gentry, growing class of merchants or simple peasants, especially after the introduction of the romances written in English not French.

Writers had to withstand a difficult task: to depict the manners and principles of Chivalry of that period realistically enough but at the same time to adjust and often exaggerate the virtues of knights in order to make the stories more interesting for readers, believable enough. Scott (1834: 172) very precisely expresses the characteristics focusing on the idealised features in chivalry:

The most adventurous and unshaken valour, mind capable of the highest flights of romantic generosity, a heart which was devoted to the will of some fair idol, on whom his deeds were to reflect glory, and whose love was to exhibit all his toils, these were attributes which all aspired to exhibit who sought to rank high in the annals of chivalry.

Scott (ibid) offers another option defining chivalric manners, the contrary to the idealised one:

... the valour of the hero was often stained by acts of cruelty, or freaks of rash desperation; his courtesy and munificence became solemn foppery and wild profusion; his love to his lady often demanded and received a requital inconsistent with the honour of the object; and those who tried to find their attachment on the purest and most delicate metaphysical principles, carried on their actual intercourse with a licence.

Conclusion of Scott’s diverse interpretations of the knightly manners depicted in the literary works though influenced by real life reflect the attempts to bring more balance into the genre of romance.

3 Arthurian Romance

The tradition of the Arthurian romances comes from early ballads and songs about King Arthur from the 6th century. Even though his existence has never been proved, he has become one of the most popular and famous kings depicted in the British literature. The stories about him, his Knights of the Round Table, their adventures and deeds became an inspiration for every admirer of the knighthood, for chivalric ideology and for the establishment of various orders of knighthood which rose from Welsh traditions and were taken over by Anglo-Normans. Even though some of the stories often introduce a world full of magic and fantastic creatures to the reader, more or less they are a mirror to the real life of that period.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is considered to be a typical representative of this genre. Originally a narrative work written in verses from the twelfth century is translated by the author known as the Pearl Poet into 101 stanzas in English sometimes in the fourteenth century. Saunders appreciates “the emphasis on the virtue, the interweaving of symbol and narrative, the vivid realism, dialogue and drama, and the incomprehensibility of the human predicament.” (Saunders in O’Neill, 2010, p.32) The story presents its four ‘fitts’, four cycles,

and the basic points of the chivalric ethics influenced by Christianity that focus on the tempting the hero's obedience and loyalty to God, to King and to Lady with all the consequences resulting from that. Tolkien's interpretation of Pearl Poet in order to keep the principles of chivalry and the struggles related to them especially in delicate moments with the Lady, "... in 'Sir Gawain' he has given the life to his ideal by showing it incarnate in a living person, modified by his individual character, so that we can see a man trying to work the ideal out, see its weaknesses (or man's weaknesses)" (Tolkien, 1980, p.5), at the same time to prove his loyalty to the lord of the house. But because of "the warmth of his character, generous, even impetuous, which by a slight excess leads him ever to promise more than necessary, beyond the consequences that he can foresee," he has to reappraise, and adjusts the principles to his own situation, when he has to return the kisses, but withholds the ownership of the belt in front of the lord. (Tolkien, 1980, pg.6) Saunders interpretation is similar, moreover, she presents that: "In balancing demands of chastity, courtesy to his host's wife and loyalty to his host, Gawain's Christian virtue is set against his reputation as celebrated courtly lover, and the different faces of chivalry, spiritual and secular, are shown to coexist uncomfortably. Gawain survives the test of chastity but his integrity and faith are less sure" (Saunders In O'Neill, 2010, p.36).

One of the best known literary works dealing with courtly manners, courtly love and adventures related to the Arthurian tradition and tradition of chivalry is the collection of romantic tales, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, written by Thomas Mallory somewhere between 1450s and 1470, and firstly published in 1485 by William Caxton. Even though the collection is written almost at the end of the 15th century, the author worked with the old French versions of the Arthurian romances and some of them translated in to English. In spite of the fact that Malory found his inspiration in older romances, his translation is original and innovative for the use of the language that is closer to Early Modern English.

The earlier **romances** introduced a more positive view on the chivalry and knighthood, but the socio-political situation of the 15th century slowly lead towards the decline of the institution of chivalry which was transferred into literature as well. In his collection of eight books, Malory created a new personality to some of the most striking characters to be found in the English literature: King Arthur himself, a tragic hero; Launcelot, the noblest knight in the world torn by a conflict of loyalties which must result in his destruction of all he loves best; Sir Gawain, vengeful and treacherous but steadfast in loyalty to his king; Queen Guinevere, emblem of courtly courtesy, generous but also fierce in jealousy; and many more. (Gardner on CliffsNotes web site.)

Mallory's vision of idealised King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table much differs from the previous mostly admiring versions of romances. Malory through his choice of the form of romance written in prose indicates the directions of the plots and the fates of his characters. His original depiction of the complexity of the human character is fascinating especially in the case of the ideals of the chivalry as King Arthur and his brave knights. Previously admired and glorified knights and heroes of the ballads and romances are shown more from their darker side. As in the case of Sir Gawain in Pearl Poet's romance, who occurs in the situation where he has to rearrange his scale of knightly values, Malory's characters have to deal with the circumstances where their ethical principles and values of knighthood and chivalry stopped on the crossroads, and the following decisions they made, directed their lives often to a tragic end, what Cooper defines in a way that "it is not an exercise in nostalgia for a golden age: it is an account of the destruction of the ideal." (Cooper in Malory, 1998: xii)

Scott's general definition of the code covers the duties of knights towards God, his King, and his Lady, and it is obvious that he draw his inspiration also from Malory's work. The motif of courtly love between the knight and the lady of his heart reach different levels,

influenced by the secular and religious ideas that Malory puts in contrast courtship, marriage and love independent of marriage, which may seem as breaking the social taboo of adultery with someone else's wife and religious ideals found in romances; examples of "Gareth's winning of his Dame Lyonesse as his wife, the illicit passion of Lancelot and Guenivere or Tristram and Isolde, the elevation of virginity in the knights of the Grail quest." (Cooper in Malory, 1998, p. xiv) Malory gives more space to heroes and heroines from the opposite site of the scale, whose desires influence the story and the fate of the main heroes. "His villains in his presentation of love are those of men and women who are promiscuous, jealous, or violent, or who betray lovers to destroy them." (Cooper in Malory, 1998, p. xiv)

One of the most imminent points of the chivalry ethics depicted in the literary works is the loyalty of the knight to his King. It represents the feudal relationship of the real world in the Middle Ages, even though in the romances the relationship is more or less idealised. Malory introduces that even such a powerful fellowship as the Round Table had its weak points which were in fact the weaknesses and vices of the knights themselves. The motives such as love, jealousy or hatred serve as the starters of breaking of the vows and chivalric oaths not only by the knights but also by the kings resulting into the tragic fate of the characters after crucial events in Malory's tales: "Good knights will frequently be defeated and mistreated by stronger and wicked ones, and rely on the most powerful figures, Lancelot or Tristan, for rescue." (Cooper in Malory, 1998, p. xiv)

In order to emphasize the depiction of characters and their attitude towards knightly principles, Malory uses specific vocabulary to define two opposite groups and the words such as "noble, worshipful", or "good" describing the knights as were Tristan or Lancelot, while "shameful, false, traitors," and "recreant" as close descriptions of characters belonging to Tarquin, Breuniss san Pit e or Mordred. (Cooper in Malory, 1998)

Conclusion

The institution of chivalry has played an important role in shaping the society on the British Isles. The manners were not only the principles for the nobility how to behave; they served also as guides to become the examples for the rest of society. Every historical and literary period had their own set of criteria of acceptable behavior that was very often based on the core principles of the chivalric and knightly manners. Many authors depicted the way how the society understood the principles that were adjusted to some extent to the fashion of those times. This paper presents an overview of chivalry and its principles depicted in the eminent works in literature within individual periods.

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