

The code of chivalry assignment



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The Code of Chivalry The term chivalry has its origin in the medieval institution of knighthood. Chivalry and knighthood have been popularly studied by scholars. The term chivalry originates from the old French word *chevalerie*. This word itself derives from the Latin term *caballarius* that means someone on the horseback. Chivalry is not a legal or technical term, rather the word has its root in the vernacular of twelfth century.

The meaning of this word as used in the French literature of the High Middle Ages remains imprecise, as it could “ refer variously to a group of mounted aristocratic warriors or the behavior of such a group or the standard that members of the group would have liked to meet” (Bouchard 103). The old French term *chevalerie* continued to describe warrior like qualities of armed men on horseback up until the final decades of twelfth century.

The term did not have moral and political overtones at the time. The term that described polite and virtuous behavior of nobles including the art of courtly behavior was *cortoisie* (Bouchard 103). Historians have spoken of Age of Chivalry in Europe when the Viking raids came to an end. In the Middle Ages a code of knighthood, also known as Code of Chivalry developed that emphasized bravery, honesty, and courtesy. The Age of Chivalry distinguishes feudalism in Middle Ages apart from the others.

Feudalism was not unique to Europe but almost every contemporary kingdoms throughout the world used some form of feudal government. The society in Medieval Ages was harsh and brutal. The knights were the same barbaric tribesmen that had devastated Rome not long back. Hence a Code of Chivalry was developed to tone down the brutal temperament of the

warriors in a Christian setting. All knights were supposed to follow the Code of Chivalry. It set up standards for the training, and behavior of knights both in and out of combat.

The Catholic Church was concerned with harshness and brutality prevalent during the Middle ages. In the opinion of Church Officials knights could show honesty, generosity, and courtesy as also respect to women if they took vows during the knighting ceremony. Therefore, by 1100s Church began to take special interest in knighting ceremony adding an aura of moral significance to it (Stanton & Hyma 261-262). In due course and over a period of time developed the code of chivalry that was religiously sanctified.

With religious sanctification the spirit de corps of the knightly world gained strength along with impacting upon the moral law of the group. Before a future knight took back his sword from the altar he was required to take an oath defining his obligations. Not all dubbed knights had their arm blessed and hence not all of them took the oath, but according to many ecclesiastical writers, even those that did not pronounce the oath with their lips were bound to the code by a kind of quasi-contract.

Slowly and gradually, the rules thus formulated found their way into texts beginning with prayer, followed by various writings in vulgar tongue. “ One of these composed shortly after 1180, was a celebrated passage from the *Perceval* of Chretien de Troyes. In the following century these rules were set forth in some pages of the prose romance of *Lancelot*; in the German *Minnesang*, in the fragment of the ‘ *Meissner*’; finally and above all, in the short French didactic poem entitled *L’Ordene de Chevalerie* (Bloch 38).

In the middle ages, along with strength and skills of combat, a knight was expected to be chivalrous, that is, the aggressive side of his nature was expected to be tempered with modest qualities of bravery and courtesy, gallantry and honor toward ladies. The Middle Ages culture strongly focused on the Knights Code of Chivalry. ‘ The Song of Roland’ composed between 1098 and 1100 documents one such code. This code that describes eighth century Knights of the dark ages is also known as Charlemagne’s Code of Chivalry, for Charlemagne is depicted fighting battles.

The codes that can be deciphered from the song include fear of God, to serve the master or liege lord faithfully, to protect weak and defenseless including orphans and widows, to avoid wanton offence, to live with honor and glory and despise pecuniary considerations, to fight for the public good and welfare, to obey those in higher position, to defend the honor of other knights, to refrain from dishonesty, deceit, meanness, and unfairness, to safeguard faith, to speak truthfully under every condition, to persevere to logical in any assignment or enterprise, to defend the honor of women, to accept any challenge thrown by an equal, and never to show the back to an enemy (middle-ages. org. uk). There are at least 12 acts of chivalry out of 17 entries in the code available in the Song of Roland. The rest of them relate to combat.

The Duke of Burgundy in 14th century describes a number of chivalric virtues of the Knights Code of Chivalry to include “ valor, diligence, hope, resolution, truth, liberality, sagacity, temperance, prudence, faith, charity and justice” (middle-ages. org. uk). The Code of Chivalry, as we see above, prescribes a set of ideals of the Middle Ages. They formed a part of oaths

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and vows of swearing in ceremonies of knighthood. The oaths of combat, ideals of chivalry together with rules of etiquette and conduct were sacred in nature and popularly incorporated in poems, ballads as well as other literary works. These songs and ballads – describing valor and chivalry to be followed by the knights – were sung by wandering minstrels in the Middle Ages. The Dark Age myths of Arthurian Legends featuring King Arthur, Camelot and the Knights of the Round Table further strengthen the idea of a Knights Code of Chivalry. The Arthurian legend revolves around the Code of Chivalry which was adhered to by the Knights of the Round Table – Honour, Honesty, Valour and Loyalty” (middleages. org. uk). Among the most popular stories of knightly adventure is recounted the legends of King Arthur and the knights of Round Table. Although the first Arthurian stories were written in the twelfth century, the publication of Thomas Malory’s *Morte d’ Arthur* in 15th century made Arthurian legends highly popular. The Arthurian tales describe knightly virtues of brave, adventurous but gentle knights.

These tales speak of the heroic ordeals of knights who combine the twin knightly ideals of “ chivalry and courtly love” (Marshall Cavendish Corporation 437). According to the contemporary Church, a knight actually served God in his role as the defender of the weak and helpless, and it was the privilege of a knight to do so. The knighting ceremony was imbued with symbolism so that a knight would remember his vows and could live best up to them. Taking a bath was the first ritual that prepared a squire for knighthood. It symbolized purity that a knight was under the vow to maintain. This was followed by spending a night in chapel watching his weapons on the altar.

There, he would confess his faults to God and resolve to be a true and upright knight. This was followed by a solemn religious service, where the squire's sword was blessed on the altar by the church officials. Finally, the young man knelt before his lord to receive a light blow with sword on his shoulder called "accolade". The young knight was then told to be valiant in the name of God (Stanton & Hyma 262). One might wonder what possibly could be the worth of chivalry today. However, the worthiness of medieval culture may have positive contributions to make even today when we may be culturally deficient in certain respects in comparison to our forefathers. We owe the concept of being gentleman to medieval literature.

The concept of gentlemanly behavior is much degraded today. We seem to have forgotten the virtues of what it means to be a man with the consequence of much of the social problems from alcoholism to spousal abuse originating from the lack of manly virtues. Chivalry in medieval times was the foundation of male ethical code. It shaped the tenets of gentlemanly conduct every where. Chivalry is certainly not an outdated concept in the modern world. A certain standard of ethical conduct is expected in our behavior and attitude toward others. The relationship between men and women, weak and strong, white and black ought to be defined by standards of behavior and conduct akin to chivalrous code.

However, it is a fact that the modern society is the fast paced technological society with disintegrating family and community institutions where the old norms are breaking in to be replaced by the new norms. The individual is a free citizen of modern democracy with rights and duties protected by the constitution. The modern state is a secular state and consequently free of

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religious symbolism in the matters of state administration. Nonetheless, the Presidents, Governors, people's representatives and public officials are bound by the oath of constitution in their conduct and behavior. They are expected to demonstrate the highest standards of ethics and morality in their behavior.

Nonetheless, there are a number of public figures whose personal lives leave much to be desired. Works Cited Bloch, Marc. Feudal Society, Vol 2: Social Classes and Political Organisation, 2nd Edition, Routledge 1989 Bouchard, Constance Brittain. STRONG OF BODY, BRAVE AND NOBLE: Chivalry and Society in Medieval France, Cornell University Press 1998 " Knights Code of Chivalry". Accessed November 2, 2009 from <http://www.middle-ages.org.uk/knights-code-of-chivalry.htm> Marshall Cavendish. , . Alex Woolf; Steven Maddocks (Eds.) Exploring the Middle Ages. Marshall Cavendish 2006. Stanton, Mary & Hyma, Albert. Streams of Civilization: Earliest Times to the Discovery of the New World. Christian Liberty Press, 1992