

Darcy Egan

Dr. Butler

Senior Honors Project

27 June 2012

Is Chivalry Really Dead? – An Exploration of Chivalry and Masculinity in
Medieval and American Literature

When asked to describe medieval literature, most individuals would be quick to cite knights, battles, and chivalry. Large battles and armor are very present images in the contemporary understanding of medieval times, but many individuals lack a clear concept of chivalry – the code of honor guiding these endeavors. In a sense, chivalry has devolved into a commonplace term; in a social context, many individuals claim that “chivalry is dead.” Yet, such phrases ignore the rich and complicated notions of chivalry, particularly as established by medieval texts. In a medieval context, authors often examined chivalry and codes of masculinity within the battle motif. Such an examination is not wholly lost in translation to American literature. Twentieth-century American authors Ernest Hemingway and Tim O’Brien use contemporary wars to examine masculinity. In their respective texts, they raise questions concerning the definitions of warrior, man, and courage. This project will begin with an analysis of medieval works in order to establish a functional definition of chivalry and the medieval conception of masculinity. This analysis will include both primary and secondary texts and focus mainly on the definitions of chivalry and how the various authors use storytelling as a means to examine these definitions.¹ While masculinity and chivalry are not interchangeable terms, there is an inherent link; throughout medieval literature, chivalry guides the behavior of the warrior – a task assigned solely to men.

¹ For a more complete list of relevant texts, please see the Bibliography page.

Chivalry is essentially a code of honor, particularly among men at war. In analyzing medieval texts, I will work with my project advisor, Dr. Butler, to grasp the primary texts in their original languages. Doing so will build on my experiences in my Old English course and allow for a closer analysis of the pertinent works and their prevailing themes. Old English texts such as eleventh-century *Beowulf*, tenth-century *The Wanderer*, and *The Battle of Maldon*, written sometime after August 991, and Middle English texts such as late fourteenth-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, present both heroic and flawed characters. In particular, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the reader is called to question not only whether Gawain is a chivalrous individual, but whether such chivalry is truly commendable. Gawain faces three challenges; at times, chivalry seems to oppose survival. The *Gawain* poet uses storytelling as a mode to examine chivalry; one can tie both the use of storytelling and the prevailing themes to the later works of this project, particularly those of Tim O'Brien. Moreover, in examining the notion of storytelling, it is important to note that each of the previously mentioned medieval texts is anonymous; these anonymous texts, by nature, contrast with the tendency to meld information about the author with his or her work, as is prevalent in readings of twentieth-century American texts, for example.

Beowulf also demonstrates the importance of storytelling in maintaining and examining chivalry; the warrior is lauded with various epithets and the text includes rich detail of the brutality and physicality of war. The author constructs the persona of Beowulf by recounting various tales of his strength and success in battles. In a sense, stories promote the warrior. Fitting with medieval themes of chivalry, *The Battle of Maldon* provides a historical account of battle. In the battle, the leader Byrhtnoth is convinced by the Viking messenger's false flattery to allow the Vikings' passage onto land. The messenger appeals to his sense of honor; yet, once on land,

the Vikings overcome the Anglo-Saxons; in essence, an adherence to honor results in utter destruction. Then, as the Vikings gain control during battle, the new leader of the Anglo-Saxons offers a speech; the speaker and narrator appear to chastise those who have fled rather than remain loyal in battle. According to George Clark, despite the regrettable decision to allow the Vikings on to the shore, “the poem leaves no room for doubt on the cause of the English defeat, and that cause was not Byrthnoth’s chivalry, folly, or pride;” rather, the cause of defeat was the flight of Byrthnoth’s men (258). *The Battle of Maldon* encapsulates the major issues of chivalry in battle. Moreover, criticism of other works centers on perceptions of heroism and praise; for instance, Beowulf is described as eager for praise. Examining these perceptions will be a crucial element in drawing links between these battle texts, and between the later battle texts that will be addressed in the project.

The Wanderer examines the fate of the servant separated from his lord, demonstrating the immense loyalty that is characteristic of medieval chivalry. Throughout the work, the narrator depicts immense heartache through physical imagery. He no longer has any ties to other individuals or to any physical location; quite literally, he wanders the earth, lamenting the tremendous loss of his lord. While *The Wanderer* does not take place during a battle, it does reflect upon the traumatic end of a battle and the close ties of loyalty that called him to fight.

The project will analyze unifying themes throughout each of the medieval works. In particular, one can explore how each of these texts adheres to a notion of chivalry, and how such adherence may in fact be problematic or unfavorable, perhaps placing the chivalrous in greater peril, as is the case in *The Battle of Maldon* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. While chivalry is revered – for instance, consider the glorification of Beowulf as warrior – it seems to promote an unfortunate end in many of the texts. In *The Wanderer*, this sense of chivalry

ultimately leaves the protagonist alone in the world after the death of his lord; critic Marijane Osborn notes that even the seabirds vanish. There is certainly room to probe this disconnect and to create a synthesized reading of chivalry in medieval literature.

Next, the project will examine twentieth-century American authors, particularly Ernest Hemingway and Tim O'Brien, and how their respective works explore themes of masculinity. Each author focuses on a distinct war – Hemingway examines World War II while O'Brien examines the Vietnam War. Even within a single century of literature, there are some differences in approach and reaction to masculinity and battle. In *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway's protagonist Frederick Henry enters the war as a soldier in an effort to reinforce a masculine identity, yet the war does not adequately perform this function. In fact, it appears as though his love interest Catherine embodies masculinity more than he does as the protagonist. In this way, Hemingway uses an overtly masculine setting to subvert the accepted notion of masculinity. While Hemingway celebrated traditional masculinity, Charles Hatten asserts that the text depicts the fragility of masculinity, as demonstrated by Frederic's experiences at war, reified sexuality, and Catherine's ultimate subversion of masculinity (76). Trevor Dodman asserts that Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* is, in essence, a trauma narrative. In many ways, talking about the war in a mechanical sense – the bullets, amputations, and shrapnel – offers a way to address trauma on a deeper level (258). By employing physical descriptions and a strong female character, Hemingway constructs a story which analyzes masculinity. Hemingway's work, like the medieval texts addressed previously in the proposal, demonstrate the relevance of storytelling in examining war experiences.

O'Brien adopts a metafictional approach in his *The Things They Carried*; rather than present a wholly autobiographical approach, O'Brien presents a "story-truth," embracing the

notion that art may in fact impart greater truth than accurate stories. Working with this notion of truth, O'Brien constructs a cycle of short stories centering on topics such as courage and the art of story-telling. By engaging with various anecdotes of his own experiences and those of other soldiers, O'Brien articulates an inclusive reading of the Vietnam War. His work is particularly relevant to the discussion of battle literature, as it addresses storytelling directly. One cannot discuss perceptions and presentations of masculinity without assessing how one discusses war, and why. The approach is crucial to the message of the text.

O'Brien finds courage – one of the major elements of chivalry – to be problematic. In relating his decision to answer his call to the draft rather than run away, the narrator assesses the common definitions of courage. For O'Brien, either decision holds some semblance of courage. If he were to fight in the war, he would be courageous in answering his call of duty and accepting the physical dangers of war; however, he would also be fighting in a war that he opposed. On the other hand, if he were to flee to Canada, he would be courageous in risking a prison sentence and never seeing his family and friends again in order to be faithful to his beliefs; however, he would also fit into the group of Vietnam deserters, who were generally considered to be cowards. Neither decision is perfect; this dilemma calls the previously unquestioned codes of masculinity and chivalry into question.

By working with both medieval and twentieth-century American texts, this project will engage my interest in and experience with both fields. Moreover, through this project, I aim to create a synthesis between the two periods. The themes are not entirely separate; rather, even centuries later, authors still grapple with issues of chivalry and masculinity. Moreover, masculinity and war continue to be linked by notions of both honor and physicality. By juxtaposing the two periods, the project will attempt a cohesive reading of these important

themes, as well as an analysis of their respective approaches. Writers have taken to prose and poetry, and many variations within those categories, to address war. This project will look at various forms of literature, as variations not only between genres, but within each genre.

While the project will assert a larger connection between medieval literature and twentieth-century American literature, I will also analyze how the notions of chivalry and masculinity have shifted or been reanalyzed. For instance, twentieth-century American literature makes a more overt effort to question notions of masculinity and chivalry than medieval literature does. Furthermore, one must also note the continued relevance of literature in the discussion and examination of historical events, especially battle. Centuries have passed, but individuals continue to ponder some of the same pivotal questions of chivalry and masculinity.

In light of current gender equality struggles and the war in Iraq, this project is particularly relevant. Throughout history, the opinions of wars and the soldiers who fought have differed greatly. For example, in medieval texts, the warrior is glorified, and participation in battle was both commended and expected. Yet centuries later, many individuals did not agree with the Vietnam War and consequently, did not respect the returning soldiers. Even though proponents of the Vietnam War faced harsh criticism and a lack of acceptance, other groups applied to deserters the label of “coward.” Thus, regardless of the perceptions of war, war and masculinity appear to be inherently linked. The warrior is still an idealized notion. The flux of writing and news stories concerning war raises several important questions about masculinity. How does society define masculinity? And is this an ideal? Moreover, each of the texts presented in this project reflects some level of trauma, from the loss of a lord in *The Wanderer* to physical injury in *A Farewell to Arms*. War, prescribed by notions of masculinity, leaves a lasting mark on the individual and society, and is and will continue to be an issue for returning veterans. Currently

pressing questions about the Iraq War continue to reflect critical interrogations of these literary works; individuals seek to understand the necessity of war and the perception of the warrior and heroism. In terms of gender issues, these texts point to the seemingly inherent link between war and masculinity. Such a link, though problematic, still pervades literature and society.

Through this project, I will engage with medieval and twentieth-century American texts in order to evaluate links between the two periods and assess any changes in either the terms of masculinity and chivalry, or how such terms are presented. Moreover, the project will offer an opportunity to discuss gender and war, which are still major issues. As the United States is still involved in a war – which faces varying degrees of opposition – this project is particularly relevant. It is important to assess how literature and history work in conjunction, as well as why and how individuals use literature to examine such issues. After completion, I will submit this project for publication and possible presentation at Celebration of Scholarship.

Bibliography

Anderson, J.J. "The Three Judgments and the Ethos of Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *The Chaucer Review*, 24.4 (1990): 337-355. Web.

The Battle of Maldon. The Cambridge Old English Reader. Ed. Richard Marsden. New York: Cambridge University Press 2004. 254-269. Print.

Bloomfield, Morton W. "Beowulf, Byrhtnoth, and the Judgment of God: Trial by Combat in Anglo-Saxon England." *Speculum* 44.4 (1969): 545-559. Web.

Clark, George. "The Hero of Maldon: Vir Pius et Strenuus." *Speculum* 54.2 (1979): 257-282. Web.

Dodman, Trevor. "'Going All to Pieces': A Farewell to Arms as Trauma Narrative." *Twentieth Century Literature* 52.3 (2006): 249-274. Web.

Elliott, Ralph W. V. "Byrhtnoth and Hildebrand: A Study in Heroic Technique." *Comparative Literature* 14.1 (1962): 53-70. Web.

Hatten, Charles. "The Crisis of Masculinity, Reified Desire, and Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4.1 (1993): 76-98. Web.

Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*. New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1995. Print.

Lieberfeld, Daniel. "Teaching about War through Film and Literature." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 40.3 (2007): 571-574. Web.

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. New York: Broadway Books, 1990. Print.

Osborn, Marijane. "The Vanishing Seabirds in *The Wanderer*." *Folklore* 85.2 (1974): 122-127. Web.

Rosier, James L. "The Literal-Figurative Identity of *The Wanderer*." *PMLA* 79.4 (1964): 366-369. Web.

- Selzer, John L. "'The Wanderer' and the Meditative Tradition." *Studies in Philology* 80.3 (1983): 227-237. Web.
- Shedd, Gordon M. "Knight in Tarnished Armour: The Meaning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *The Modern Language Review* 62.1 (1967): 3-13. Web.
- Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. *Broadview Anthology of Medieval Literature*. Ed. Joseph Black. 259-323. Print.
- Stroud, Michael. "Chivalric Terminology in Late Medieval Literature." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37.2 (1976): 323-334. Web.
- Walker, Greg. "The Green Knight's Challenge: Heroism and Courtliness in Fitt I of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *The Chaucer Review* 32.2 (1997): 111-128. Web.
- "The Wanderer." *The Cambridge Old English Reader*. Ed. Richard Marsden. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. pp. 329-334. Print.
- Weiss, Victoria L. "The Medieval Knighting Ceremony in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *The Chaucer Review* 12.3 (1978): 183-189. Web.
- Wesley, Marilyn. "Truth and Fiction in Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried*." *College Literature* 29.2 (2002): 1-18. Web.

Task	Expected Completion Date
Meet with Honors Program Director	End of Spring 2012 Semester
Finalize Topic/Meet with Advisor	June 20
Research	July 1
Finalize Bibliography	July 10
Draft of Proposal Narrative	July 20
Full Draft of Proposal	July 28
Submit to Advisor for Review	August 16
Revisions	August 24
Submit to Honors Program Director for Approval	August 25
Subsequent Revisions	Sept 10
Resubmit to Advisor for Review	September 10
Subsequent Revisions	September 13
Resubmit to Honors Program Director	September 14
Further Research	September 30
Thesis: Pages 1-5	October 10
Meet with Advisor	TBD
Thesis: Pages 6-15	October 25
Meet with Advisor	TBD
Thesis: Pages 16-26	November 15
Meet with Advisor	TBD
Thesis: Complete	November 20
Subsequent Revisions	-----

Reader 1 Review (Advisor)	November 30
Reader 2 Review	December 1
Reader 3 Review	December 3
Subsequent Revisions	-----
Submit to Advisor/Meet with Advisor	December 5
Subsequent Revisions	-----
Submit to Honors Program Director	December 8
Subsequent Revisions	-----
If necessary, resubmit	