

CHIVALRY ROMANCE IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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Chivalric romance, a genre prevalent in medieval and early modern European courts, encapsulates the ideals of loyalty, honour, and courtly love through the exploits of legendary knights. These narratives, typified by characters such as Sir Gawain and Lancelot, functioned as both entertainment and moral instruction, mirroring the societal values and inherent tensions of their time. This essay analyses the dual function of chivalric romances as moral and political instruments.

Key words: *chivalric romance; knighthood; chivalry; medieval literature; Arthuriana; Gawain; Lancelot.*

РЫЦАРСКИЙ РОМАН В ИСТОРИЧЕСКОМ КОНТЕКСТЕ

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Рыцарский роман – жанр, распространенный при средневековых и ранних современных европейских дворах, – воплощает идеалы верности, чести и придворной любви через подвиги легендарных рыцарей. Эти повествования, в которых фигурируют такие персонажи, как сэр Гавейн и Ланселот, выполняли одновременно развлекательную и нравоучительную функцию, отражая общественные ценности и присущие их времени противоречия. В этой работе анализируется двойная функция рыцарских романов как морального и политического инструмента.

Ключевые слова: рыцарский роман; рыцарство; средневековая литература; Артуриана; Гавейн; Ланселот.

The chivalric romance is a type of prose and verse narrative that was popular in the noble courts of high medieval and early modern Europe. It describes the adventures of legendary knights, and celebrating an idealized code of civilized behaviour that combines loyalty, honour, and courtly love.

However, the chivalric novel was not only entertainment at the courts, but also a moral compass, an illustration of the lives of knights and, for modern people, a way to learn more about medieval life.

Sir Gawain is a character in Arthurian legend, in which he is King Arthur's nephew and one of the premier Knights of the Round Table. He has subsequently appeared in many Arthurian tales in Welsh, Latin, French, English, Scottish, Dutch, German, Spanish, and Italian, notably as the protagonist of the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

In early Welsh literature, including the *Mabinogion* and a Welsh translation of Geoffrey's *Historia*, Gawain appears as Gwalchmei [1]. In several of the romances and in Malory, Gawain's strength waxed and waned with the sun, raising the possibility of a connection with a Celtic solar deity.

Like Arthur, the figure of Gawain was born long before the Arthurian legends were written in verse or prose. He comes from the oral tradition, and by the time the Latin Chronicles or the French romances were written, their authors felt it sufficient to simply allude to his adventures. Gawain has no obvious origin in existing early Celtic legend, but he appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle, and Geoffrey drew his Arthurian characters almost exclusively from Celtic tradition.

Though his origins are uncertain, Gawain does have two predecessors or counterparts, Cuchulainn – an early Irish hero whose adventures were assigned to Gawain, in modified form, in French and Middle-English literature and Gwalchmei, a Welsh hero who, like Gawain, is the nephew of Arthur.

William of Malmesbury says he was Arthur's nephew and that he ruled Galloway, which was apparently named after him, and that his grave was discovered in Pembroke in Wales.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight tells a story, relying on textual predecessors such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, as evident from the conventional beginning that relates the origins of Britain with Brutus and also from numerous other similarities, such as the arming of Sir Gawain that resembles the arming of Arthur, including the shield with the image of Mary.

Like Geoffrey's text, which also relied on another textual predecessor, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* cannot be used as a historically reliable source, and yet, to borrow Thorpe's words about Geoffrey's work, the "material is unacceptable as history; and yet history keeps peeping through the fiction" [2, p. 187]. The poetic representation is somewhat divided between images of reality and the attachment to the past. At the time when the poem was written England was facing numerous challenges, such as the war with France, depopulation caused by the plague, the Peasants' Rebellion 1381, and the dissolution of feudalism. If familiar with historical context, while comparing what had been with what was, the reader may notice what had changed, particularly in terms of the dissipation of certain important ideals and values, in spite of their apparent strength, purity and magnificence [2].

Many saw this poem as an example of the otherworldly intervention that disrupts the seemingly peaceful and stable world, and as such, serves as the trigger that exposes the “pre-existing problems or tensions within the central aristocratic society which it cannot resolve on its own, or in order to bring to light faults in that society which might otherwise go unnoticed and uncorrected” [3, p. 87].

Gawain’s failure to remain true to all knightly virtues could be interpreted as criticism of the entire system, the court and knighthood in general, skillfully cloaked in ideals and virtues that fail when practiced outside the court and in real life [3, p. 72]. Behind the walls of the court, knights can be chivalrous, courteous, brave and pious at celebrations, tournaments and in other formal and controlled situations. Outside this zone of comfort, when the rules can change arbitrarily, and when the opponent is unpredictable and not as protocolary as at court, the ideals of knighthood, embodied in the *Knights of the Round Table*, can easily fail the test.

For knights, warfare was fairly safe: armor was protective, pitched battles were avoided and knights made a genuine effort not to kill each other. For many knights, capturing the enemy for ransom was a means to make a living. Geoffroi de Charny even admonishes this practice in his treatise: “there are a number of men who pay more attention to taking prisoners and other profit, and when they have seized them and other winnings, they are more anxious to safeguard their captives and their booty than to help bring the battle to a good conclusion.” A knight would be captured in battle, and his family would be expected to raise the ransom for his release. Sometimes the high price of the ransom would be ruinous to the family [4, p. 10-11].

But chivalric novels were not only used for moral education, but were just as handy in politics.

Lancelot du Lac (French for Lancelot of the Lake), is a character in some versions of Arthurian legend where he is typically depicted as King Arthur's close companion and one of the greatest Knights of the Round Table.

Lancelot's name appears third on a list of knights at King Arthur's court in the earliest known work featuring him as a character: Chrétien de Troyes' Old French poem *Erec and Enide*.

In Hungary and in neighboring countries, Ladislaus was a well-known and important figure that "seemed expressly designed to personify the knight-king ideal"[6, p. 175]. Lancelot origin was a controversial theme for many years. He was nowhere to be found nor in the Celtic myths, nor in Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle *The History of the Kings of Britain*. In these postulated by Ferdinand Lot and Roger Sherman Loomis, Lancelot's figure is related to Llenlleog, an Irishman in the early Arthurian Welsh tale *Culhwch and Olwen*. Alfred Anscombe proposed in 1913 that the name "Lancelot" came from Germanic. But the origins of Lancelot were found in Hungary, according to a study by Central European University. The famed knight of the Round Table, Sir Lancelot du Lac, may very well have been based on Hungary's King Laszlo, also known as Ladislaus I [5].

Perhaps it was during the First Crusade that the fame of the King of Hungary was brought to the lands of France by someone in the army. Then there was a commission to write a romance featuring the Hungarian king might well have been related to the marriage of Margaret Capet and King Bela III in 1186. It shows that there was a precedent for including Hungarian historical figures into narratives and described the subtle ways that the political agendas of the period are reflected in Arthurian romances.

In conclusion, chivalric romances played a multifaceted role in medieval and early modern European societies. Beyond their primary function as courtly entertainment, they served as moral compasses, illustrating and propagating the virtues of loyalty, honor, and courtly love. Figures like Sir Gawain and Lancelot provided exemplary models of knightly conduct while also exposing the inherent flaws and tensions within the aristocratic order. These narratives were instrumental in advancing political agendas, weaving historical and cultural figures into their tales to reflect and shape contemporary political landscapes. Thus, chivalric romances were not merely stories of adventure but were integral to the cultural and political fabric of their time, offering insights into the values, conflicts, and power dynamics of the medieval world.

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