

CHIVALRY IS PATRIARCHY: RE-READING MEDIEVAL COURTESY THROUGH GENDERED POWER

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ABSTRACT

Honestly, Chivalry isn't really as cool as people like to imagine. People love picturing knights swooping in, to save the day, but the reality - That whole idea just turns women into props. It's not some grand romance; it actually feels pretty stifling. Women get stuck up on pedestals, treated like they'll shatter at the first sign of trouble, and expected to keep quiet.

In the Medieval stories such as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the woman's only important because she's part of the guys' game. Or take Chaucer's Canterbury Tales there is the story The Knight's Tale -women there aren't even real characters; they're just rewards, basically handed out to whoever wins. The men dream up a perfect goddess and project whatever traits they want. This is so-called 'ideal', total illusion, just something to help keep women boxed in.

Some people try to say chivalry is about respect or caring, but honestly, those arguments fall flat. Chivalry keeps women trapped. There's not much real respect-it's mostly rules for men to pat themselves on the back, while women get stuck playing the 'perfect maiden.' Any hint of romance gets lost in the show; it's just guys flexing their masculinity where it feels safe.

Chivalry doesn't push back against patriarchy. It just covers it up with fancy language. When you really dig into these stories, chivalry isn't all that noble or pure. It's a safe way to keep old sexist ideas alive, dressed up in honor and love.

KEYWORDS: *Gender Performativity, Chivalric Discourse, Symbolic Capital, Feudal Patriarchy, Feminist Historicism, Medieval Patriarchy.*

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The Gentle Mask of Power introduces the mind:

We know chivalry on an emotional level to almost strangers, yet it was at work in the barbaric medieval world and was, at least on one level, the very principle of the fight. Knights kneel before women and swear oaths of protection and embark on quest after quest like animals. But what respect requires distance, silence and idealization? What kind of attachment can only be made to a woman because she can't act for herself?

This paper argues that medieval chivalry is an aestheticized form of patriarchy. It takes gendered roles (active knight, symbolic lady) with women's reputation and transposes those into male honor, that's to say it does both in terms of codes of courtesy that seem right and ethical and also because they preserve hierarchy.

In Chaucer I, first start my analysis of ideal womanhood, and in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight to explain if courtesy becomes a trap; then I understand courtly love by investing in a symbolic economy of desires; then the code ends with a conversation with Malory. And as I dig more into it, I have access to ever more texts and find these texts and use feminist and historicist perspective to relate them in that one way.

Chivalry in literature is not descriptive; it is prescriptive. It conceptualizes masculinity as action and femininity as signification. In doing so, it sets up a society that is gendered, one centered on the female-dominated field of honor in the male world and that men can access women who are greater than their honor.

It is for this reason that a theoretical lens is ideal. Foucault has observed power isn't merely repressive; such power constructs its very subjects it seems to have control over (Foucault 194–95). Chivalry makes out "the knight" and "the lady" as recognizable roles. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital suggests how a lady's pure character or public image flows into the reputation of a knight (Bourdieu 171). In a similar vein, Beauvoir's statement that women function as 'the Other' at first sight is true: 'Men' are not so much as 'Chivalric' to have in her.

I. Ideal Womanhood: Image Without Interior

The chivalric lady is everywhere and yet curiously absent. She is described in very minute detail-complexion, bearing, decorum; interiority remains thin. For instance in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Emily is portrayed as a visual event in *The Knight's Tale*, Palamon and Arcite fall in love at first sight, only that which they love is an image. It becomes such their fight that Emily is the prize for that. Their prayer to Diana, which is her most eloquent declaration of her wish not to marry, takes place and is quickly forgotten (Chaucer, CT I[A] 2297–2306). The male conflict is

resolved through her body, not her will.

Troilus and Criseyde help to show this pattern and validate it. Criseyde speaks more than Emily; she thinks as she considers, waits, chooses. However, she is bound up by war itself and reputation and male mediation (Pandarus). Chaucer's line "For she was wys and lovede Troilus" keeps her true in person (Chaucer, TC II.687) and so the words of honor swallow her agency when she is traded in a political deal. So is to be said about her "inconstancy" as part of structural coercion, as critics are fond of telling us, which registers structural coercion rather than essence (Dinshaw 112). Butler's conceit of gender as performance here is useful as well: Criseyde's "fickleness" seems less the nature of a species than an individual compelled by conditions and surveillance (Butler 33).

II. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Courtesy as a Trap

The bedroom scenes depicted by Sir Gawain and the Green Knight with Lady Hautdesert, wife of Bertilak are sometimes read as female initiative. She speaks confidently, pushes Gawain, even appears to control the exchange. But the whole story is orchestrated by male authority (Bertilak). Her voice is vital here. Now her invitation of "Ye ar welcum to my cors" is a test (SGGK II. 1237–38, trans. Armitage). Gawain's dilemma—how to be courteous but not so much of a gentleman with a view to chastity—demonstrates the central tension of chivalry at the core. Reading Foucault, this scene, the situation reads as a microphysics of power; surveillance, confessing and self-regulation (Foucault 202).

III. Courtly Love: Desire as Discipline

Courtly love appears to elevate women—to lift them from beneath the knight and view him as her subject's work, and not her own work. Elevation is not emancipation. It is a method that turns desire into discipline.

The loved one is often unattainable—married, distant or even out of reach. That distance is where its relationship is the backbone, so the relationship isn't necessarily reciprocal. It inspires; the knight takes actions. Bourdieu's symbolic economy is also observable in time: the lady's honor circulates as a weapon that the knight can put up, show off, and use for success.

The lyric tradition has images like this: the silent lady, the sad lover, the untold vow. What's missing there is mutuality. The lady's "power" is real but it is just as narrow and cannot change the social situations which render her as she is.

IV. Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur: Fractures in the Code

Malory's world shows the strains of chivalry. Guinevere's situation

is emblematic: queenly and constrained. Her relationship with Lancelot becomes a political crisis not only for the intimacy but because it threatens the symbolic order.

These trials and charges and threats of execution are a huge focus on Guinevere and her reputation falls prey to them. Lancelot gets destroyed and yet his chivalric character is still preserved in the distance. The asymmetry does so tell we shouldn't ignore it. Patriarchy is no longer content to the background but rather to create consequences.

Then there are other figures. Elaine's helplessness is rewarded; Isolde's desire is tragic; Morgan le Fay's knowledge is dangerous. Women according to the code are idealized, and those who aren't are pathologized. The system needs both figures-the angel and the threat-to steady itself.

V. Violence, Protection, Possession

Chivalry binds violence to virtue. The knight would have to battle but for the right reasons-defending the weak, serving one's wife, preserving honor. But "protection" is also easily lost to possession.

Romance stories are stories about rescues and guardianships. The woman becomes the occasion for action, not its author. Through marriage this logic is consolidated as chivalric ideals go together with property, alliance and inheritance. A woman's body becomes a physical ground in which social contracts get written through and enforced.

Based on this New Historicist perspective, these stories echo laws and economic activities of the period with dowry, wardship, arranged marriage all coming back for a moral gloss. Literature doesn't merely mirror these constructs; it creates them.

VI. Disruptions and Counter-Voices

Medieval texts are not monolithic. They contain irritants-voices that counter the smoothness of the code. The Woman of Bath is not one who enjoys silence. She learns how to manipulate power from every layer of herself, not just for a boy, and demands that a woman control her husband's house. A romantic story that also makes a radical turn on the romantic narrative of man. What women want and want to gain is not a pedestalization but one of leadership in reality at the heart of life. So the response is one to destabilize courtly reverence's logic and faith as a whole.

Criseyde, read against the grain, also disrupts. With less talk of constraint than of morality, her decisions look less like betrayal and more like navigation. Morgan le Fay herself is strategic and learned and uncontained, so why the system won't allow it? What her negative story tells us is as much about the system as it does for her.

Butler is back to reinforce an important point: These figures represent gender as a matter of performativity and contingency. When our performance gets affected, anxiety is represented on the system side.

VII. Theoretical Synthesis: How Chivalry Works?

If we pull back and take all the threads, we come to realize chivalry isn't so much a moral code and much more a carefully planned cultural factory. What makes it so successful isn't the force, but finesse. It exhorts rather than commands; it invites rather than directs.

A Foucauldian view shows us how power flows quietly. In chivalric culture, surveillance takes on a sense of internalization. Knights watch themselves-how they're speaking, how they behave before women and how they manage desire. Reputation is discipline. Gawain does not need punishment so he punishes himself. The system works best when it is invisible.

Pierre Bourdieu, in turn, makes this concept apparent: honor is symbolic capital. So a knight's reputation is affected as much by the women he interacts with as by his actions. A woman's chastity, beauty and social standing are essentially convertible assets. That moment in *Troilus and Criseyde* is when everything changes for Criseyde when she enters the gaze of Greece-her identity can be re-coded as being in the new symbolic economy. What appears to be personal betrayal does not in fact mean such a change in social position.

Simone de Beauvoir's conception of woman as 'Other' is almost impossible to miss in medieval literature. But although women are central to chivalric narratives they rarely define themselves through their existence. Emily, Guinevere, Elaine-each is necessary but none fully self-determining.

Judith Butler allows me to make this more concrete. Gender, in these texts, is far from stable: performance is done, repeated, and policed. The knight performs valor and restraint; the lady is modest and desirable. When that fails-when Criseyde gambles on survival over loyalty or when the Wife of Bath asserts authority-the whole system takes it out on her, with anger, mockery or punishment.

New Historicism establishes these literary patterns in physical conditions. Marriage was seldom about romance; it was about land, alliance and lineage. Women's bodies were entangled in systems of inheritance and exchange. Chivalric literature does not invent these structures; it also gives them narrative elegance. It teaches audiences by the stories what to feel about them.

One could also see things from a Marxist perspective: women

circulate as exchangeable figures in a feudal economy of power. They are not commodities in a crude sense, but they function within systems of value and transaction. The tournament, the marriage alliance, the rescue narrative-all involve forms of symbolic exchange where women are the medium.

What then emerges as a layered apparatus:

- Discipline without coercion (Foucault)
- Honor as convertible capital (Bourdieu)
- Women as structured Other (Beauvoir)
- Gender as repeated performance (Butler)
- Literature as ideological reinforcement (New Historicism)

Chivalry survives precisely because it does not appear to be domination. It looks like beauty, discipline, but also even love.

VIII. Conceptual Extensions Outside of the Canonical Frame

To deepen the argument one needs to not simply describe texts but engage with their language-because chivalry is always hidden in tone, in phrasing, in what is taken casually and even in words.

In *The Franklin's Tale*, Dorigen's lament contains one of the most eye-opening lines: she fears the "grisly feendly rokkes blake" which menace her husband. Her speech is expansive, emotional, and intelligent. But she announces that she does so quickly to Aurelius, and her story quickly shifts toward male arbitrariness. Arveragus insists that "trouthe is the hyste thyng that man may kepe." Truth becomes masculine ethics and Dorigen's body is the field where truth gets tested. Her voice opens this kind of dialogue in men and male honor settles this.

In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer wrote of Criseyde: "For she was wys, and lovede Troilus." The line is elegant, even kind. And wisdom here is immediately tied to her relational identity-she is worth something in love. Later, when she remains in the Greek camp, Troilus feels betrayed but the text does not spoil her fate. As feminist readers have said, her "inconstancy" is not moral failure but structural entrapment.

And Lady Bertilak's words in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are laced with irony. She entreats Gawain: "Ye ar welcum to my cors, / Yowre won to wale." At the surface is an invitation, and it's a test. Consent language is put in practice, and rejection is done in the same way. Gawain does not accept entirely, nor does he reject completely. The entire scene represents what Butler might call the unstable nature of gendered performance: Gawain is forced to act out desire and discipline of body.

In *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Guinevere's trials expose the stakes of honor that be male and female. At one point she is condemned to be burned-her body literally placed at the center of public judgment. Lancelot saves her, but there is no emphasis on her suffering but on his heroism.

In *Sir Orfeo*, Heurodis is abducted with eerie calm. She knows her capture will come, but she is unable to avoid it. The body becomes the vehicle through which they go about making physical contact with people, but no narrative story control can be found as far as she is concerned. Orfeo's anguish and grief carry on so deeply he cannot get much emotional ground.

The same is true for religious texts too. The Virgin Mary is depicted in terms of purity and obedience-her power lies in submission: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord," her greatness in being content. It's austere in language, but it has substance. In the end, perfect womanhood is understood as acceptance.

IX. Feminist Interventions and Recent Critical Voices

Modern feminist criticism has assisted in re-reading these texts-not as timeless romances now, but as sites of ideological negotiation.

Carolyn Dinshaw, in her work on Chaucer, argues that medieval texts create gender as a relational category, and that is constantly mediated by social and textual practices. Criseyde, as this story puts it, is not merely a character but rather a node in a tale of the network of male desire and narrative control.

As Elaine Tuttle Hansen writes in *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, Chaucer's women may look to be speaking, but their speech is framed, interrupted, or redirected. Authority is unstable. The Wife of Bath, for example, is formidable, but can still be constrained within a comic framework that both empowers and inhibits her presence.

Jill Mann places a focus on Chaucer's tension between experience and authority. Female experience is frequently acknowledged, but it seldom leaves its mark long term.

From a broader medieval perspective, scholars like Dyan Elliott have shown how ideals of chastity and purity served as tools of control, particularly within religious discourse. The female body becomes a site of anxiety, regulation, and symbolic meaning.

There is even much more recent work using intersectional theoretical frameworks, noting that class, rank, and feudal hierarchy intersect with gender. Not all women occupy the same position within chivalric systems. A queen, a noble lady, a peasant woman, and others experience the code

differently-yet all are shaped by its logic.

X. Theoretical Frame: Ideology, Performance and Internalization

To pursue the point further we should think of chivalry not as a set of rules alone, but as ideology in the fullest sense. Louis Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses will be useful here. Literature functions as a cultural institution that reproduces dominant values. Chivalric romance hasn't just entertained its audience; it has also trained them to recognize and internalize certain norms-namely about gender, honor, and power. Gramsci's vision of cultural hegemony also resonates. Chivalry doesn't operate through force-it's consent. Its values come off the surface as natural and even desirable as well. Women are not just oppressed-they are treated with respect and invited to adopt roles which appear honorable.

And this is where Foucault and Butler come together in an extraordinary way. Power is best when it is internalized-when we regulate ourselves. The chivalric lady polices our modesty; the knight watches his own desire. Gender is a script that lies waiting for them to repeat all over again.

At the same time, there is always slippage. No performance is perfect. The Wife of Bath talks too much; Criseyde chooses survival; Morgan le Fay refuses containment. They reveal how delicate the system is. They remind us that patriarchy, even in its most slick forms, is never complete.

Conclusion: Elegance as Constraint

Chivalry offers a language of refinement-honor, restraint, devotion. It definitely cuts off some brutality. But it does so by redistributing power and not destroying it. Women are treated as symbols, and their power is limited along the way; men, by contrast, remain in a code that is ethical, if pretty, and quietly they will keep it asymmetric.

Reading medieval literature with this in mind doesn't dilute it. It makes its edges more salient, its ironies clearer. The knight's bow, the lady's silence, the ritual of service-these are not mere flattery. They are part and parcel of a system that has turned inequality into style.

And such an echo doesn't stop there in the Middle Ages. The grammar of idealization-putting women on pedestals and curbing their movement-still exists in many modern forms of the language of class. To recognize chivalry as patriarchy is not to say not to respect courtesy but to ask what it costs, and to whom.

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