

Matter and Categories of English Medieval Chivalric Romances

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to discuss matter and categories of chivalric romances in medieval period of English. As a literary genre, 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. Chivalric romances were highly influential in shaping the ideals of chivalry and courtly love in medieval society, and they continue to be studied and appreciated for their depiction of heroic adventures and romantic themes. It is described that chivalric romances are categorized by the means of love, courtly life, religion, fantasy and magic.

Keywords: Chivalric, depict, prose, medieval, genre, heroic, knight, romance.

INTRODUCTION

English chivalric romances are a specific subset of chivalric romances that originate from England. These romances were popular during the medieval period and typically feature English knights as the protagonists. They often incorporate elements of English history, folklore, and culture into their narratives. Some well-known examples of English chivalric romances include *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser. These works reflect the unique characteristics of English literature and contribute to the rich tradition of chivalric romance in England.

The chivalric romances did much to shape our view of the medieval period. Their influence can be found directly and indirectly in many adventure stories. *Don Quixote* (1605) was considered one of the first novels in western literature and was heavily influenced by the chivalric romances. The main character, Don Quixote has read many chivalric romances and decides to revive the ideals of knighthood in Spain.

The characteristic quests that feature in chivalric romances can be seen in the fantasy work of JRR Tolkien, where the protagonists set out to explicitly achieve one goal. JRR Tolkien himself was a medieval scholar at Oxford. One Indiana Jones film, *The Last Crusade* (1989), goes as far as taking on the same quest. The film has the hero searching for the holy grail, much like Lancelot before him. There can be similarities when looking at stories of the “Wild West” with their cowboys often defending the weak and saving the fair maiden.

The Castle of Otranto (1764) used a medieval setting and romantic plot and added ghosts. This addition of haunting elements to a romance story marked the beginning of the gothic genre. So chivalric romances can be seen as a forerunner to stories such as *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. Most contemporary stories will contain at least one element of the chivalric romance. So it is safe to say that the influence of chivalric romance is far-reaching. Chivalry is simply behaving according to the chivalric code. It represents the ideal of knighthood. The word today is still associated with 'gentlemanly' behaviour. The chivalric code includes; having faith and defending the church, defending the weak and being patriotic and brave.

MATERIALS AND DISCUSSION

Chivalric persons are not to lie, must be honest and generous and always champion good over evil. Most of the chivalric code can still be seen as honourable today. A knight's sense of honour is important, they believe that the success of the collective is greater than the individual. Other parts of the code have not stood the test of time, however, today we would certainly frown upon waging wars on so-called infidels without mercy.

Courtly love

Courtly love is all about courting a loved one. Traditionally, a knight would fall in love with a 'fair maiden'. Accepting the maiden's freedom of choice, the knights will try to prove themselves worthy of the lady's love. They will do this by acting noble and brave and doing anything she asks. It would not be unusual for knights to be sent out on quests to prove themselves. Sometimes a knight may find themselves competing with another for the same maiden. In this case, the two knights would prove which knight was the most strong and brave in order to win the maiden's heart. A famous example of this would be the tale of Lancelot and Guinevere.

Religious Piety

Part of the chivalric code was to have unerring faith in the church. Knights truly believed they had God on their side. This could be seen as problematic today as knights would often go on crusades to conquer the 'holy land' of Jerusalem. Other times their quests would involve retrieving holy relics, such as Lancelot's search for the holy grail in *The Vulgate Cycle* (Est. 1215)

Adventure

All chivalric romances are adventure stories. Knights go on quests to either prove their worth or discover a certain object or skill. Sometimes it is to win the heart of a lady and sometimes it is just to prove how brave they are. Many of these adventures are found in *Le MorteD'Arthur* by Thomas Mallory.

Magic

Characters like Merlin and Morgan Le Fay often bring a little magic to chivalric romances. Morgan Le Fay was an enchantress who has been depicted as both good and bad. In the early works of Chretien de Troyes, she is seen as a great healer. In *Le MorteD'Arthur* by Thomas Mallory, Morgan Le Fay is depicted as an enemy of King Arthur and his round table.

Fantastical antagonists

Chivalric romances used fantastical antagonists to excite audiences and prove their heroes' bravery. Not too dissimilar to the comic book movies we would watch today. These antagonists may come in the form of wizards, giants or dragons. In fact, the antagonists in chivalric romances can be anything, the key is that they excite the audience.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Chivalric romances can be categorized into several different subgenres based on their themes, settings, and narrative structures. Some common categories of chivalric romances include:

1. **Arthurian romances:** These romances focus on the legendary King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. They often include quests, battles, courtly love, and magical elements. Examples include 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' and 'Le Morte d'Arthur' by Sir Thomas Malory.
2. **Courtly romances:** These romances emphasize courtly love and the codes of chivalry practiced by noble knights and ladies. They often feature themes of honor, loyalty, and idealized love. Examples include 'Tristan and Iseult' and 'Lancelot,' or 'The Knight of the Cart' by Chrétien de Troyes.
3. **Crusade romances:** These romances are set against the backdrop of the Crusades and often feature knights on a quest to reclaim the Holy Land. They explore themes of religious devotion, heroism, and adventure. Examples include 'The Song of Roland' and 'The Talisman' by Sir Walter Scott.
4. **Breton romances:** These romances are set in the region of Brittany in France and often feature Celtic folklore and supernatural elements. They may involve quests, magic, and encounters with mythical creatures. Examples include 'Sir Orfeo' and 'Yvain, the Knight of the Lion' by Chrétien de Troyes.

5. *Prose romances*: These romances are written in prose rather than verse and often feature longer, more complex narratives. They may incorporate elements of fantasy, adventure, and courtly love. Examples include *Amadis of Gaul* and *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser.

CONCLUSION

These categories are not mutually exclusive, and many chivalric romances may overlap in themes and characteristics. Overall, chivalric romances offer a diverse range of stories that celebrate the ideals of chivalry, honor, and romance in medieval literature.

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