

PROLOGUE



MARK TWAIN'S Connecticut Yankee, finding himself suddenly transported across centuries into the strange world of Camelot, manages, despite the shock of time travel, to preserve his acute sense of observation. From the start he views the Arthurian court ambivalently, feeling horror at its failure to anticipate the democratic and technological glories of his own nineteenth century, mixed with a somewhat reluctant dash of romantic admiration for its very otherness, exhibited with such vigour and colour, especially in the quaint richness of its verbal expression.

If the Yankee thus drops substantial weights onto the pans swinging on each side of the scales of judgement, the balance arm tips heavily toward the negative. His early conclusion is that Camelot must be an insane asylum, its denizens virtual savages who can be dismissed as 'white Indians'. Listening to the talk in court for the first time, he reports:

As a rule the speech and behavior of these people were gracious and courtly; and I noticed that they were good and serious listeners when anybody was telling anything—I mean in a dogfightless interval. And plainly, too, they were a childlike and innocent lot; telling lies of the stateliest pattern with a most gentle and winning naivety, and ready and willing to listen to anybody else's lie, and believe it, too. It was hard to associate them with anything cruel or dreadful; and yet they dealt in tales of blood and suffering with a guileless relish that made me almost forget to shudder.¹

This passage, of course, shows us much that we try to avoid as historians. Here the Yankee shares the prejudices of his age and wears the racial blinkers of his creator; he also reveals the sour suspicion of all things venerably European that periodically appeared in Twain's books.²

Yet we can more easily read on past the prejudices and culturally smug comments about childlike natives when we observe that the passage and the book, whatever their obvious failures in cultural relativism, present a thoroughly

¹ *A Connecticut Yankee*, 13. Twain would have appreciated Clausewitz telling his wife that it would be years before he could recall the scenes of Napoleon's Russian campaign 'without a shuddering horror'. Quoted in Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, 8.

² The complex, shifting, even contradictory relationship between Twain and European culture is noted in Kaplan's fascinating study, *Mr Clemens and Mark Twain*.

salutary admonition to us as modern analysers of the medieval phenomenon of chivalry. For the great danger in the study of chivalry is to view this important phenomenon through the rose-tinted lenses of romanticism, to read chivalry in terms of what we want it to be rather than what it was. However glorious and refined its literature, however elevated its ideals, however enduring its link with Western ideas of gentlemanliness—and whatever we think of that—we must not forget that knighthood was nourished on aggressive impulses, that it existed to use its shining armour and sharp-edged weaponry in acts of showy and bloody violence. As Twain reminds us succinctly, we must not forget to shudder.

To avoid romanticism should enable analysis, of course, not prevent it. An occasional, salutary shudder does not mean we must judge chivalry—as Twain does here—by modern liberal standards, nor indeed that we must judge it at all, but simply that we should take care not to be blinded by the light reflected off shining armour; we should try instead to look at the social effects of chivalry as dispassionately as possible, and now and then manage to write of chivalry in a tone other than the reverential. Such efforts in no way diminish an appreciation of the vast investment in chivalry by medieval people or of the vast importance attributed to chivalry by modern analyses that may go well beyond the particularly medieval range of vision. In fact, the most compelling reason to avoid romanticizing chivalry is that taking a view through rose-tinted lenses distorts and finally trivializes this extraordinarily powerful force in early European history.

Significant benefits accrue if we follow Twain's advice and avoid romanticism. We can better evaluate the mixture of the ideal and the actual in the medieval past. We can consider chivalry as a range of ideals closely and complexly intertwined with a set of practices and problems, noting always the context which required this fusion. By escaping romanticism we can better recognize the linkage between chivalry and major issues in medieval society, especially the crucial issue of violence and public order.

In any romanticized reading, chivalry becomes a purely positive and uncomplicated factor in securing order. Such a reading holds, in essence, that chivalry brought about the internalization of necessary restraints in a vigorous group of men—valorous and violent men, to be sure, but potentially the finest of fellows their society could produce. These stout men learned the ideal, used their weapons in the name of God and in aid of the weak and oppressed. If violence and the prevalence of war in medieval society caused any problems of order, some modern scholars imply, these problems could not be inherent in chivalry itself, nor could they even be encouraged by chivalry. Rather, the trouble stemmed from the insufficient generalization of chivalry in society, from the

unfortunate fact of limited diffusion, with chivalry unable to touch all warriors with its simultaneously elevating and restraining hand.

A preference for reading texts in this fashion is surely understandable. Scholars' tasks are so much easier, so much more hopeful, if the tone of the texts is considered unproblematically upbeat, if these texts are considered to favour values scholars themselves hold dear. Most denizens of the groves of academe, after all, tend to be mild-mannered (except for the verbal violence of departmental meetings, long footnotes, reviews, and the institutional cocktail party); they sometimes also show a certain emotional commitment to positive value judgements about their particular era and field of study.

An element of modern scholarly identification with the upper social layers in the distant past may even lie buried now and then within this line of argument, for should any slightly distasteful issues about warlike violence arise in analysis, the locus of trouble is quickly identified and the terminology is quickly changed. 'Soldiers', whose very name implies wage-taking rather than the true calling (and the right social status) might, granted, be hard for the knights to control; they might get out of hand, might ride, pillage, burn, and rape on a scale sufficient to constitute a social problem; but the problem of the soldiery was that they were not knights and had yet to acquire the internalized restraints of chivalry. War on the home front, the 'private war' of knight against knight, or of knight against the sub-knightly, was apparently either uncommon or simply the means of asserting needed hierarchical order.

This study argues, to the contrary, that in the problem of public order the knights themselves played an ambivalent, problematic role and that the guides to their conduct that chivalry provided were in themselves complex and problematic. The issues are built into some of the very ideals of chivalry, not merely in the lamentable inability of fallible men to attain them. This approach is not simply a self-consciously hard-nosed brand of realism or even some species of cynicism. It takes as a given the yawning gap between a knightly practice that is recoverable (if we only look diligently) and the impossibly high ideals expressed for it in one major text after another. This gap is unsurprising and need spawn no modern moralizing.

Upon discovering this divergence, beginning students, of course, often decide to debunk chivalry: the cads did not live up to the high ideals after all. Any slice of human history could, however, show groups of people more or less professing one course and more or less following another; surely that discovery cannot be the point of serious study. Nor need it be the point in a study of chivalry and order. The chivalry that knights practised upheld the high ideals of a demanding code of honour; as we will see, these ideals were probably achieved as nearly as any set of human ideals ever can be in an imperfect

world. Yet even when achieved, their ideals may not have been fully compatible with the ideal of a more ordered and peaceful society also being advanced during 'the age of chivalry'.

The issues analysed in this book are thus as much social as individual and the questions concern political and social order more than any judgement of knighthood. Of course, competing investments of meaning will compel us to think of chivalry throughout this book as a concept working under constant tension. The goal is to discover the mixture of ideals and practices knights followed in an atmosphere of reform, and to learn how this process affected the effort to secure public order in a society just coming to its mature formation.

It will not prove helpful to analyse chivalry in terms of an unreflective and rough practice of knights confronted by a glowing theory or high ideal that outsiders all agreed upon and wanted to impose. Each competing ideal sought to bend chivalry to its plan; knights took up some of these ideas, rejected others, and were sure they had ideals of their own.

Use of the term chivalry by the medievals themselves suggests a blurring of such simplistic categories as theory and practice. When they spoke or wrote of chivalry (*militia* in Latin, *chevalerie* in French), any of three related meanings may have been in their minds. First, the term could mean nothing more theoretical or ethical than deeds of great valour and endurance on some field of combat, that is, heroic work with sword, shield, and lance. Second, the term could mean a group of knights. In the simplest sense this may be the body of elite warriors present on some particular field of battle. In a more abstract sense the term might refer to the entire social body of knights considered as a group stretching across space and time. Third, chivalry might be used to mean a knightly code of behaviour.

Just what that code should be was not clear in detail, sometimes not in fundamentals. Idealist critics wanted to change much in the knightly mixture of ideals and practices; some of these idealistic reformers were knights themselves. Chivalry can only be interpreted, in other words, as a mixture of ideals and practices constantly critiqued by those who wanted to change both.

PART IV



THE AMBIVALENT FORCE OF
CHIVALRY

NEAR the opening of his *Cliges*, Chrétien de Troyes, speaking directly to his audience in words now become famous, confidently announces the *translatio* of ancient civilization to the world of medieval France via the linked agencies of chivalry and learning:

These books of ours have taught us that Greece once stood pre-eminent in both chivalry and learning. Then chivalry proceeded to Rome in company with the highest learning. Now they have come into France. God grant that they be sustained here and their stay be so pleasing that the honour that has stopped here in France never depart.¹

Speaking for many in his age, this influential author declares chivalry an essential element of civilization; he even suggests that it functions as one of the two components which take the measure of a civilization. He is enough a citizen of the world of *clergie* to include learning (the learning of the clerks, that is) alongside chivalry, but he gives chivalry equal rank, and first mention, as the key to honour.

Several centuries later the biography of the much-admired Jean de Boucicaut, marshal of France, *Le Livre des fais du bon messire Jehan le Maingre, dit Boucicaut*, announced, in words clearly recalling Chrétien's:

Two things have been established in the world, by the will of God, like two pillars to sustain the orders of divine and human laws . . . and without which the world would be like a confused thing and without any order . . . These two flawless pillars are Chivalry and Learning, which go very well together.²

For something like half a millennium of European history such evaluations of the importance of chivalry produced basic agreement among virtually all the laity whose opinion counted in this society and among most clerics as well; beneath helmets and tonsures, wimples and mitres, all heads nodded sagely, all thought chivalry was virtually equivalent to civilization, or at least stood as one

¹ Staines, tr., *Romances of Chrétien de Troyes*, 87; Luttrell and Gregory, eds, *Chrétien de Troyes*, ll. 30–9.

² Lalande, ed., *Jehan le Maingre*, 6–7: 'Deux choses sont, par la volonté de Dieu, establies au monde ainsi comme .II. pillers a soustenir les ordres des loys divines et humaines . . . et sanz lesquelz seroit le monde ainsi comme chose confuse et sanz nul ordre. . . . Yceulz .II. pillers, sanz faille, sont Chevalerie et Science qui moult bien se couviennent ensemble.' Lalande notes somewhat similar expressions appear elsewhere in the book. We will see below (Chapter 13) that in the thirteenth century Ramon Llull took a similar view in his much-read book on chivalry.

of its essential components, certainly that it was the model for the lives of lay males.

Characteristic praise flows in the biography of William Marshal. In the final scenes, as William lay dying, the monk-knight who came to receive him into the Order of the Temple praised him unstintingly as the greatest knight in the world, with the most prowess, 'sens', and loyalty. He announced with certainty that God would receive William in heaven. Similar praise for William's ideal chivalric career echoed in the laudatory sermon preached by an archbishop beside his bier and, again, in the approving oral obituary composed in the conversation of the French royal court. He was, simply, 'the best knight in the world (*Le meilleur chevalier del monde*)'.³ For all of these speakers it seemed that no more need be said.

Yet of course there was much more to be said on the subject of chivalry; medieval writers regularly spoke, however more subtly and indirectly, to their fundamental fears of the violence and disruption carried out in the world by 'the chivalry'. Early in his *Perceval* Chrétien de Troyes provides a classic case in point. The young, absolutely naive, and primitive hero, hunting alone in the forest, for the first time sees knights in splendid and shining armour emerge from the green curtain of trees. Almost stunned, Perceval asks their spokesman the arresting question, 'Are you God? (N'iestes vos Dieux?)'⁴ Was this a question Chrétien wanted the knights of his society to consider? Were they, like the first sinners in Eden, setting themselves up in the place of divinity, arrogating to themselves God-like power? The danger certainly seems to have been in the mind of Perceval's mother, for when he tells her he has seen shining angels in the forest she replies, 'I commend you to God, dear son, for I'm deeply afraid for you. I do believe you've seen the angels who cause people such grief, killing whoever they come across.'⁵ He assures her that she is wrong, that the strangers told him they were knights. Hearing this word, she faints.⁵ It is hard not to read this passage as a telling criticism of the chivalry of Chrétien's own day; his romances abound in trenchant social criticism and suggestions for an

³ See Meyer, ed., *Histoire*, II, ll. 18351–end of text.

⁴ Bryant, tr., *Perceval*, 3; Roach, ed., *Roman de Perceval*, 6. This attraction is elaborated in the Post-Vulgate Cycle: see Asher, tr., *Merlin Continuation (end)*, 8; Bogdanow, ed., 'Folie Lancelot', 83.

⁵ Bryant, *Perceval*, 5; Roach, *Roman du Perceval*, ll. 306–400. She has good reason to fear: her husband has been maimed in knightly combat and her two older sons killed the very day of their knighting. Similar evaluations can be found in much lesser works. A questing Lancelot, seeking shelter in *The Marvels of Rigomer*, comes upon a monstrous old woman beside a fire he is sure is magical. Snoring on all fours like a beast, she badly frightens both Lancelot and his horse. When he identifies himself as a knight she threatens him, declaring that for a thousand years she has heard that knights are the worst things in the world who kill just as they like. Kay notes that women are often given a role as social critics and counter-narrative agents: *Chansons de Geste*, 138, 176.

improved *chevalerie* that might truly stand alongside ideal *clergie* as a prop to civilized life.⁶

The tensions are inherent: chivalry will be praised as a solution to the problem of which it is so integral an element. The grounds for this widespread pattern become immediately apparent if we consider chivalry in its broadest sense of ethos or ideal. A code to guide dominant laymen would necessarily do major social work: it would provide guidelines for basic questions confronting a society that was expanding its intellectual as well as its physical, social, and economic boundaries.

Did chivalry in fact address basic social questions? As an experiment, I have for years asked students in seminars to draw up a list of the primary issues that societies must confront, once they have secured the fundamentals of living space and sustenance. Although the list produced by such a discussion varies somewhat, it regularly includes the following social needs: principles of distributive justice, means for resolving disputes, rules about licit and illicit violence and its practitioners, guides for regulating social hierarchy, standards for relationships between the sexes, means both for satisfying spiritual longings and regulating the authority of the spiritual in the temporal world.

Such a list is fascinating and instructive, for we can see at once that all of these issues closely involve chivalry. How were the dominant layfolk to live, love, fight, practise piety, merit their high status and its considerable rewards? All such lines of thought led to chivalry. Like some social analogue to the molecular structures of organic chemistry, chivalry results from the powerful bonding of prowess to honour, piety, status, and love. Yet these bonds, if strong, are complex and even conflicted; medieval people interpreted them in particular ways and argued over their ideal nature and content. Is prowess an unalloyed good? Does it unerringly reveal status? Is it blessed by God? Does it lead to love? Simply to state a few such questions points to the issues in the chapters to follow. The importance of such questions helps us to understand how chivalry could for so many centuries stand at the centre of so much belief and debate. Any medieval writer interested in any one of these issues might well want to valorize his or her point of view by identifying it with the great code which formed a capstone of the arch of civilization.

Was there, then, only one point of view, the single 'ideal chivalry' of university survey courses, against which any thought or action could be measured? Medieval Europe, despite what some textbook writers and some romantics want to imagine, does not look like a society with a single set of answers with regard to chivalry—or much else. The extensive literature of

⁶ For Chrétien's work as social criticism or reform, see Topsfield, *Chrétien de Troyes*; Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes*; Krueger, *Women Readers*, 33–68.

chivalry scarcely appears as an unproblematic literature of agreement or celebration, of praise for a single code, universally accepted as 'true chivalry'. Debate, criticism, and competing reform ideas surge through these texts.

The subject need not thus disintegrate or slip from our hands. As scholars such as Maurice Keen, Georges Duby, and Jean Flori have argued, there is enough continuity to allow us to discuss chivalry as a recognizable phenomenon over the centuries. From some point in the twelfth century a core of ideas and practices persisted among knights. William Marshal in the late twelfth century, Geoffroi de Charny in the mid-fourteenth century, and Thomas Malory at the end of the fifteenth century can be imagined sitting down together to discuss such a core of ideal beliefs and practices rather comfortably.⁷

Yet their works criticize as well as praise the ideas and practices of fellow knights; and others, too, would have their say. When we move beyond the inner circle of practising knights into the vast realms of chivalric literature of all stripes, we can hear polyphony—at times, perhaps, cacophony; the tension crackles, and we encounter fears, doubts, and debate, as well as agreeable celebration. This is surely a literature of contending views on basic issues.

Of course, debate encouraged valorization: chivalry won social power not only as the framework for the ideals of dominant laymen, but from repeated efforts at reform, each praising an ideal to meet some set of interests. Dissatisfaction with chivalry in the sense of a body of men who wielded very real weapons in the world, or with the disruptive nature of their violent work in an emerging civilization, could be most usefully and discretely expressed as praise for the ideal code favoured by the writer. But we will do well to remember that social criticism and ideas of reform are as real as the praise, even if less obvious.

Chapter 7 helps to explain why. Knights worshipped at the shrine of the demi-god prowess and practised violence as an esteemed and defining entitlement. The primary constituent in chivalry was prowess which wins honour, weapons in hand. What this meant on the tourney field, in a raiding party, on the battlefield, is taken up in Chapter 8.

The fundamental bond of prowess and honour was strengthened, as noted above, by the addition of three further bonds: a practised form of piety (already explored in Chapter 3), an assertion of high status (Chapter 9), and a troubled link with love and gendered relations (Chapter 10). The lavish eulogies sung to chivalry—and the worries more prudently expressed—can scarcely be understood without recognizing its bonds to these crucially important social issues.

⁷ Discussed in Chapter 13.

Chapters 11 and 12 take up *chanson de geste* and quest patterns, respectively, with a double goal: first, to get a closer look into highly useful evidence and, second, to demonstrate that the ambivalent role of chivalry in issues of order appears forcefully in entire works no less than in passages selected from many works.

Finally, Chapter 13 considers the critical and reformist views of the knights themselves. Again using specific works, we can see that ideas for change and improvement did not all come from the non-knightly. If model knights loudly and predictably praised chivalry, their fears and reformist ideals were real and their carefully chosen words are audible and significant.

THE PRIVILEGED PRACTICE OF VIOLENCE: WORSHIP OF THE DEMI-GOD PROWESS



DURING the Battle of Mansourah in the crusade of Louis IX (1250), Joinville, St Louis's companion and biographer, sought refuge with his men in a ruined house surrounded by their enemies. Saracens who climbed the broken roof thrust lances literally into the French knights' faces. Two knights suffered multiple facial wounds and another took a lance blow between the shoulders 'which made so large a wound that the blood poured from his body as if from the bung-hole of a barrel'. In this crisis, Érad de Sivercy spied French forces in neighbouring fields; but before riding for help he asked Joinville if he could do this without loss of honour, repeating his earnest question to all the others. 'I said to him,' Joinville reports, '“My dear man, it seems to me you would win great honour for yourself if you went for help to save our lives,”' adding, '“your own, by the way, is also in great danger.”' Érad brought help, but later died from a wound that had left his nose dangling over his lips.¹

The vivid story told by Joinville rushes us into the vortex of the world of chivalry: we see bloody hand-to-hand combat, and hear serious talk of honour. Prowess and honour are closely linked in the knights' minds, for the practice of the one produces the other, a theme tirelessly expounded in all chivalric literature. Malory (as always, an ideal spokesman) writes repeatedly and enthusiastically of the *worshyppe* owed to men of valour and won by them.² Honour is the veritable currency of chivalric life, the glittering reward earned

¹ Wailly, ed., *Histoire de Saint Louis*, 93–5; Shaw, tr., *Joinville and Villehardouin*, 220–1.

² Tristram, preparing to fight two Round Table knights who have beaten his cousin, says 'have ye no doute but I will have ado with them bothe to encrece my worshyp, for hit is many day sythen I dud any armys': Vinaver, ed., *Malory. Works*, 248. Malory is not alone. In the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, Bors calls for his companions to test their worship 'With spere and sheld and armes bright': Benson, ed., *Morte Arthur*, ll. 1550–5. In the Post-Vulgate *Merlin Continuation* Gawain wonderingly observes a stranger knight knock ten challengers from their saddles, each with a single blow. He not only proclaims the victor 'the best joustier I may ever see', but adds, 'For indeed, he should never lack honor, since he wins it so well'. Asher, tr., *Merlin Continuation (end)*, 3; Sommer, ed., *Zeitschrift*, 20.

by the valorous as a result of their exertions, their hazarding of their bodies. It is worth more than life itself.

Yet even if we keep the importance of honour firmly in our minds, we should not forget that the prowess from which it springs is the fundamental quality of chivalry. Prowess was truly the demi-god in the quasi-religion of chivalric honour; knights were indeed the privileged practitioners of violence in their society.

In the *Lancelot do Lac* the young hero learns from the Lady of the Lake that 'kighthood was not created and set up . . . because some men were originally more noble or of higher lineage than others, for all people are descended from one father and one mother'. Given this common descent, he asks rhetorically, how would one become noble except through prowess? Once evil had entered this world, the corrective could only be found by selecting as knights 'the big and the strong and the handsome and the nimble and the loyal and the valorous and the courageous'.³ Nearly two centuries later Froissart, the ardent chronicler of chivalry at work in the Hundred Years War, asserted that, 'as firewood cannot burn without flame, neither can a gentleman achieve perfect honour nor worldly renown without prowess'.⁴

In the real world, to be sure, overweight lords with rusting armour but vast acreage and good lineage might command the respect given to rich and lordly patrons in any age. And important clerics who were lords of men and lands could be quite clear about their honour, even though they were formally prevented by their order from the display of prowess in combat. But in chivalric ideology, tension between lineage and prowess is suppressed; the assumption, almost without exception, is that honour originates, is merited, proved, and increased sword in hand by those whose lineage leads them to such deeds.⁵ Pharian, in *Lancelot*, speaks of 'the honour of this world, towards which all prowess struggles'.⁶ Youths of noble birth, such as the young Gareth or Perceval, are drawn almost mystically to the armour and weapons of knight-hood.⁷ Havelok the Dane, nearly lost beneath kitchen grease and soot, soon comes to his true vocation, warrior as well as king.⁸ In the *chansons*, even a

³ Elspeth Kennedy, ed., *Lancelot do Lac*, I, 110–11, 142; tr. from Corley, *Lancelot of the Lake*, 52.

⁴ Luce, *Chroniques*, I, 2: 'Si comme la busce ne poet ardoir sans feu, ne poet le gentilz homs venir a parfait honneur ne a la gloire dou monde sans procee.'

⁵ See the useful discussion in Elspeth Kennedy, 'Quest for Identity'.

⁶ Rosenberg, tr., *Lancelot Part I*, 39; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, VII, 164. Elspeth Kennedy's text reads somewhat differently at this point: *Lancelot do Lac*, 92.

⁷ Malory pictures the young Gareth arriving at court eager to witness jousting. Kay is unimpressed by his first humble request for sustenance: 'for and he had be come of jantyllumen, he wolde have axed horse and armour': Vinaver, ed., *Malory. Works*, 178–9. Gist provides a number of Middle English examples of the noble urge to exercise prowess overcoming circumstances of upbringing: *Love and War*, 140, n. 13.

⁸ 'Havelok the Dane', in Sands, ed., *Middle English Verse Romances*.

great cleric such as Archbishop Turpin must fight as a knight (contrary to the prohibitions of church reformers) and is valued accordingly.⁹

A knight's nobility or worth is proved by his hearty strokes in battle. Seeing Oliver cut a pagan in half, for example, Roland sings out 'The Emperor loves us for such blows.'¹⁰ Seeing Rainouart in *Aliscans* throw a squire who has tormented him against a pillar, breaking all the young man's limbs at once, William of Orange says in admiring wonder, 'By St Denis, he's to be respected.'¹¹ Wounded by Hector in a tournament, in the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, Lancelot at first promises repayment (causing Hector to blanch in fear), but soon forgives Hector and tells him he loves him more for his hard blow: 'But ever the betyter love I thee, / Such a dint that thou can smite.'¹² Kay and Bedevere, Arthur's court officials, hit so hard in battle in *The Story of Merlin* that their Roman opponents cry out, 'God, what a seneschal! . . . God, what a constable! Here are goodly ministers for a king's court!' Gawain (called here by his affectionate diminutive, Gawainet) makes a similar estimate of the status of the warrior who is in fact the Saxon king Brandon:

And when Sir Gawainet saw what he was doing and the great slaughter of his people, he was certain that he was a highborn man of mighty stock, and he showed by the way he fought that he was a king or a prince; Sir Gawainet highly esteemed him, and would have been very glad if he had been a Christian.¹³

In one of his earliest combats Lancelot 'admired the prowess of the man who had just dealt him the best blow that he had ever received'.¹⁴ Later, a kind host who takes in Lancelot (temporarily fallen into madness) knows him to be a noble knight because of the blow he receives: 'he dealt me a blow on my helmet, the like of which I never received from any man since I was knighted. For that reason I'm sure he used to be a good knight and of noble condition.'¹⁵

Malory tells us in the *Morte Darthur* that when Lamorak's strokes fail to defeat his opponent (a disguised King Mark) quickly, he 'doubled his strokys, for he was of the nobelyste of the worlde'.¹⁶ As Lancelot and Gawain fight near the end of the *Mort Artu*, 'whoever could have seen the blows given and

⁹ See classic expressions of Turpin's prowess in Brault, ed., tr., *Chanson de Roland, laisses* 114, 121, 155, and in Newth, ed., tr., the *Song of Aspremont*, especially 202-3, 222.

¹⁰ Brault, *Chanson de Roland*, l. 1377.

¹¹ Ferrante, ed., tr., *Guillaume d'Orange*, 231; Wienbeck et al., eds., *Aliscans*, 184.

¹² Benson, ed., *Morte Arthure*, ll. 464-500.

¹³ Pickens, tr., *Story of Merlin*, 409, 385; Sommer, ed., *Vulgate Version*, II, 438, 394.

¹⁴ Rosenberg, tr., *Lancelot Part I*, 93; Sommer, *Vulgate Version*, III, 174-5; Elspeth Kennedy, ed., *Lancelot do Lac*, I, 225. Lancelot is, in fact, sorry that he has killed the man, putting his lance right through his 'insides'.

¹⁵ Carroll, tr., *Lancelot Part VI*, 320; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, VI, 211.

¹⁶ Vinaver, ed., *Malory. Works*, 355.

received would have realized that the two men were of great nobility.¹⁷ An exceptionally strong and able lance thrust or sword stroke, in fact, often reveals a hero's identity despite his attempt at disguise by wearing unaccustomed armour. Lancelot's great prowess regularly puts him in this situation. Tristram and others have the same problem.

Galahad delivers what may be the ultimate sword blow in the complex fighting between incognito knights in the Post-Vulgate *Quest*. Bors, unhorsed by Galahad, challenges him to a sword fight: 'Come test me with the sword, and then I will see that you are a knight.' He gets more than he bargained for. Galahad's blow

cut through his shield, the pommel of his saddle, and the horse's withers, so that half the horse fell one way and half the other in the middle of the road, and Bors was left on foot, holding his naked sword, and half his shield, the other half having fallen in the road.

A badly frightened Bors calls out, 'I see by this blow you're the best knight I ever saw.'¹⁸

To be the best knight in the world, as we can read time and again in chivalric literature, means not to be the greatest landlord but to show the greatest prowess. The wise Merlin tells Arthur, about to choose new knights for the Round Table:

King, choose from all the land the fifty best knights you know, and if you know any poor knight, valiant in person and courage, do not fail to include him because of his poverty. And if anyone who is nobly born and of high lineage wants to be included, but he is not a very good knight, take care not to let him be included. For a single person who is not of such great chivalry would shame and degrade the chivalry of the whole company.¹⁹

Of course acquiring land and wealth is assumed to follow naturally, and is welcomed as an enhancement of honour. Any deep gulf between the acquisition of wealth and the practice of chivalry is a modern myth; gold and glory in fact made a fine amalgam in the medieval knightly view. William Marshal was taught that lesson early in his model chivalric career and he was long troubled by the slight reward in terms of land that his great prowess had earned him. In time, of course, it won him fiefs almost beyond his dreams. Moreover,

¹⁷ Cable, tr., *Death of King Arthur*, 179–80; Frappier, ed., *La Mort*, 196. The French term, in fact, is *preudomes*. This general sentiment appears repeatedly and again in the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles.

¹⁸ Asher, tr., *Quest*, 137; Bogdanow, *Folie Lancelot*, 119–20. Kay and Gawain soon second this sentiment. Hector later receives a similar blow from Galahad, and comes to the same conclusion, as does the watching Sagramore: Asher, *ibid.*, 189; Bogdanow, *ibid.*, 356–7.

¹⁹ Asher, tr., *Merlin Continuation*, 223; Roussineau, ed., *Merlin*, I, 201.

prohess is the quality hymned without cease in his biography, and in every other piece of chivalric literature. Lancelot's grandfather, as we learn in the *Lancelot*, was not a king's son, but he was chosen as king 'because of his prohess'.²⁰ Lancelot himself later declares, when he sees Bors in battle, that this young knight should be given lands—he would defend them so well.²¹

In fact, in chivalric literature prohess can come close to conveying the meaning of a man's life, or even of life itself. In the *Perlesvaus* God stops the fight between Perceval and Gawain because he did not want those good knights to kill one another; his wish was that each 'should know the other's worth'.²² The Lady of the Lake tells Guinevere she raised the young Lancelot 'because of the great prohess that was to manifest itself in this knight'.²⁴ Hearing of a great deed of prohess after a period of captivity, the mature Lancelot hopes to God that the valiant knight who is talked of will appear, 'Because, sir,' he tells Galehaut, 'we have been imprisoned here for a very long while, and it has been a long time since we saw jousting or knightly deeds, and we are wasting our time and our lives. As God is my true witness, if he comes, I shall fight with him.'²⁴ In the *Chevalier de Papegau*, a work of very different tone and quality, the same sentiment appears; the parrot (an enthusiastic and frequently heard voice for prohess) explains that to be lacking in valour is the worst prison for a knight.²⁵ Gawain is reluctant to kill Nascien who will not surrender although defeated (in a tournament turned deadly): 'I do not want to kill you,' said Sir Gawainet. 'That would truly be a shame, for you are most worthy.'²⁶ His worth has, of course, been demonstrated by prohess. Boson, boasting in *Girart de Roussillon* about the prohess of the men on Girart's side in his war with the king, proudly declares that none of their fathers died in their beds.²⁷ King Arthur, holding the severed head of Lamorat in his hands, laments the knight in the classic formula: 'Indeed, it's too bad that he is dead so soon, for had he lived a long time he would have surpassed in chivalry all those of his lineage.'²⁸ In Malory's 'Tale of Arthur and Accolon', the Damsel of the Lake saves Arthur in his fight with Accolon because she saw 'how full of

²⁰ Carroll, tr., *Lancelot Part VI*, 239; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, V, 123.

²¹ Asher, tr., *Merlin Continuation* 306; Micha, *Lancelot*, VI, 111.

²² Bryant, tr., *Perlesvaus*, 129; Nitze and Jenkins, eds, *Perlesvaus*, 197, emphasis supplied. Equating prohess with worth is common. A wise dwarf tells a questing Tor he need not fear delay by accepting a joust: 'a valiant man cannot lose by delay,' he assures Tor, 'and here you can find out if you are worth anything'. Asher, *Merlin Continuation*, 234; Paris and Ulrich, eds., *Merlin*, II, 102.

²³ Carroll, tr., *Lancelot Part II*, 232; Elspeth Kennedy, ed., *Lancelot do Lac*, I, 556.

²⁴ Corley, tr., *Lancelot of the Lake*, 359; Elspeth Kennedy, *Lancelot do Lac*, I, 531.

²⁵ Vesce, tr., *Knight of the Parrot*, 33; Heuckenkamp, ed., *Chevalier du Papegau*, 32.

²⁶ Pickens, tr., *Story of Merlin*, 336; Sommer, ed., *Vulgate Version*, II, 304.

²⁷ Meyer, ed., tr., *Girart de Roussillon*, 401.

²⁸ Asher, *Merlin Continuation*, 82; Bogdanow, 'Folie Lancelot', 80.

prouesse his body was' and has pity lest 'so good a knyght and such a man of worship sholde so be destroyed'. The view of Sir Outlake is similar: 'that is grete pyté that ever so noble a man as ye ar of your dedis and prouesse, that ony man or woman myght fynde in their hertes to worche ony treson aghenst you'.²⁹

Great prowess so expresses the meaning of life that after an unsurpassed day of battle the sated, triumphant knight may yearn for death to close his career on such a high point. In the war to recover Lancelot's inheritance from Claudas, young Claudin, his son, knows that he has fought so magnificently, that he tells a companion, 'Truly, dear friend, were it not for my father's great loss, I wouldn't care if I died in this battle, for I believe I'll never again accomplish what we've done today, you and I'.³⁰ Near the end of the *Lancelot do Lac*, King Yder, wonderfully successful on the battlefield, hopes that God will 'give him death, for he would never again have such an excellent day'.³¹

Certainly, prowess is the prominent virtue, and sometimes nearly the exclusive virtue, in the summing-up of a great man's life at its close. Mourning her dead husband, King Bors, early in the *Lancelot*, Queen Elaine twice laments 'the great acts of prowess of her lord (*les granz proesses son seignor*)'. Only his prowess and his (unspecified) kindnesses merit mention in the queen's lament.³² When Gawain is shown a badly wounded knight in a castle hall, he comments on how unfortunate his condition is, since the man is so handsome. 'You would truly say it was a misfortune', says the lady caring for the knight, 'if you knew how great his prowess was'.³³ When later in this text Lancelot goes mad because of his imprisonment in Saxon Rock, Queen Guinevere laments the apparent end of 'his feats of arms, his jousting, his swordsmanship'.³⁴ The maiden, whose knowledge of herbs saves the poisoned Lancelot later in this cycle, tells her worried brother, 'I can assure you that if God grants that he come through strong and healthy, he'll yet deliver many fine blows with sword and lance'.³⁵ The queen, fearing that she has lost Lancelot's love, in the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, hopes that she will still hear of his deeds of prowess.³⁶ An untrue report of Arthur's death, when he is under the power of

²⁹ Vinaver, ed., *Malory. Works*, 87, 89.

³⁰ Carroll, tr., *Lancelot Part VI*, 304; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, VI, 103-4.

³¹ Corley, tr., *Lancelot of the Lake*, 385; Elspeth Kennedy, ed., *Lancelot do Lac*, I, 550.

³² Rosenberg, tr., *Lancelot Part I*, 8; Elspeth Kennedy, *Lancelot do Lac*, I, 14-15; Sommer, ed., *Vulgate Version*, III, 14.

³³ Elspeth Kennedy, *Lancelot do Lac*, I, 414; Sommer, *Vulgate Version*, III, 313; Carroll, tr., *Lancelot Part II*, 172-3.

³⁴ Carroll, *Lancelot Part II*, 231; Micha, *Lancelot*, VIII, 455.

³⁵ Kibler, tr., *Lancelot Part V*, 147; Micha, *Lancelot*, IV, 137.

³⁶ Benson, ed., *Morte Arthur*, ll. 752-9. Even after his conversion to the religious life as a hermit, his death elicits from Bors this lament and summation: 'The beste knight his life hath lorn / That ever in stour [battle] bestrode steed!' ll. 3892-3.

the False Guinevere, causes the queen to cry out, 'Dear Lord God, now all prowess is gone and all joy turned to sorrow.'³⁷ A knight, who has heard a similar rumour about Lancelot, cries out for his own death: 'I have no desire to live any longer now, when the knight who was supposed to surpass all earthly prowess has died.' As he carries Galehaut's dead body to burial at the Dolorous Guard, a weeping Lancelot laments his great friend's 'prowess and valour'.³⁸ A lady falsely informed by Sir Gawain that her lover, Sir Pelleas, has been slain, intones the formula: 'that is grete pyté for he was a passynge good knyght of his body'. She adds that any lady should love Gawain, since he is well born and of such prowess.³⁹

Perhaps the most striking instance appears, however, late in Malory's *Morte Darthur*. The king, learning finally beyond doubt of the liaison between Lancelot and the queen, is told how they were taken together, how Lancelot escaped by fighting his way out against numerous would-be captors:

'Jesu mercy!' seyde the kynge, 'he ys a mervaylous knyght of proues. And alas,' seyde the kynge, 'me sore repentith that ever sir Launcelot sholde be ayenste me, for now I am sure the noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table ys brokyn for ever, for wyth hym woll many a noble knyght holde. An now hit ys fallen so,' seyde the kynge, 'that I may nat with my worship but my quene muste suffir dethe,' and was sore amoved.

Without diminishing our sense of the king's feelings, or of the deeply moving prose with which Malory sets forth this crisis in the story of Arthurian knight-hood, we can only note that Arthur comments here first on Lancelot's great prowess, second on the impending collapse of the great fellowship of knights, and third on his ineluctable judgement on his queen. As he says shortly after, it is the loss of the knights, not the loss of the queen, that makes him sorry.⁴⁰

Identification of Chivalry with Prowess

Only after reading scores of works of chivalric literature can we fully appreciate the utterly tireless, almost obsessional emphasis placed on personal prowess as the key chivalric trait.⁴¹ Not simply one quality among others in a list of virtues, prowess often stands as a one-word definition of chivalry in these texts.⁴²

³⁷ Rosenberg, tr., *Lancelot Part III*, 266; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, VII, 114.

³⁸ Krueger, tr., *Lancelot Part IV*, 61, 83; Micha, *Lancelot*, II, 218, 309.

³⁹ Vinaver, ed., *Malory. Works*, 102.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 682, 685.

⁴¹ My impression is reinforced by the careful study of Burgess, 'The Term "chevalerie"'. Burgess finds the term is specific, rather than abstract, and generally refers to deeds of prowess and the *mentalité* which produces them. I owe thanks to Alan Lupak for this reference.

⁴² Emphasized even when a knight's other qualities are disreputable. Bliobleris, in *Le Bel Inconnu*, is described as harsh, cruel, proud, and wicked, 'but no one ever saw a better knight':

This identification appears regularly in *chansons de geste*. Folchers rides out into battle ‘seeking great chivalry’ in *Girart de Roussillon*. He achieves it, putting his lance through the heart of ‘the valliant Count Routrou’.⁴³ Characters in the *Chanson de Roland* link chivalry with deeds of prowess, as, for instance, does Ganelon (a great knight, even if a traitor) when speaking with Marsilion. If the pagan leader can kill Roland, he assures him, ‘then you will have done a noble feat of arms [literally a noble act of chivalry, *gente chevalerie*].’⁴⁴ William, in the *Chanson de Guillaume*, observes Rainouart smash a Saracen’s head into four fragments: ‘You should be a knight’, he shouts approvingly.⁴⁵

Statements linking chivalry with prowess in the vast Vulgate and Post Vulgate cycles almost defy sampling.⁴⁶ In a tournament at Pomeglai,

[Lancelot] drew out his sword like an expert swordsman and delivered heavy blows to the right and to the left, felling knights and horses with blows of the sword blade and by the hilt. He grabbed men by the hoods of mail and by the edge of their shields; he pulled helmets from heads; and he hit and shoved and pounded and struck with his limbs and his horse, *for he was very skilled in doing all that a great knight must do*.

Those who witness Lancelot’s work with edged weapons regularly pronounce him ‘the flower of chivalry’. Arthur, for example, declares that Lancelot has earned the status of best knight after a tournament at Camelot, and a defeated Gawain agrees; the stump of Lancelot’s spear has just been extracted from his side, and he is beginning a month of recuperation.⁴⁷

A knight who has seen Lancelot perform in a tournament (in the *Lancelot*) can scarcely find words sufficient to praise his prowess:

[I]t takes a lot more to be a worthy man than I thought it did this morning. I’ve learned so much today that I believe there’s only one truly worthy man in the whole world. I saw the one I’m talking about prove himself so well against knights today that I don’t

Fresco, ed., and Donagher, tr., *Renaut de Bâgé*, ll. 36–41. At the opening of the *Lancelot do Lac* we meet Claudas, ‘a king, and an excellent knight’ who was ‘very clever and very treacherous’: Elspeth Kennedy, ed., *Lancelot do Lac*, I, 1; Corley, tr., *Lancelot of the Lake*, 3. Of many cases in Malory, note Helyus and Helake who ‘were men of grete prouess; howbehit that they were false and full of treason, and were poore men born, yet were they noble knyghtes of their hondys’: Vinaver, ed., *Malory. Works*, 437. For examples from a *chanson*, *Girart de Roussillon*, see Mary Hackett, ‘Knights and Knighthood’.

⁴³ Meyer, ed., tr., *Girart de Roussillon*, laisse 159, particularly ll. 2744–5.

⁴⁴ Brault, ed., tr., *Chanson de Roland*, 38–9.

⁴⁵ Muir, tr., *The Song of William*, 193; Suard, ed., *Chanson de Guillaume*, 197–8.

⁴⁶ In addition to the passages quoted below, see, e.g., Krueger, tr., *Lancelot Part IV*, 34; Kibler, tr., *Lancelot Part V*, 180, 203, 204, 215; Carroll, tr., *Lancelot Part VI*, 280, 312; the corresponding passages in Micha, ed., *Lancelot* are II, 115, IV, 273–4, 385, 387; V, 36; and VI, 8, 138.

⁴⁷ Krueger, *Lancelot Part IV*, 30, 32, 38; *Part V*, 204–5; Micha, *Lancelot*, II, 99 (emphasis supplied), 107, 129–30; IV, 389–91.

believe any mortal man since chivalry was first established has done such marvellous deeds as he did today.

He explains explicitly what these marvels were:

I could recount more than a thousand fine blows, for I followed that knight every step to witness the marvellous deeds he did; I saw him kill five knights and five men-at-arms with five blows so swift that he nearly cut horses and knights in two. As for my own experience, I can tell you he split my shield in two, cleaved my saddle and cut my horse in half at the shoulders, all with a single blow. . . . I saw him kill four knights with one thrust of his lance . . . if it were up to me, he'd never leave me. I'd keep him with me always, because I couldn't hold a richer treasure.⁴⁸

In a tournament at Camelot (fighting, by Guinevere's wish, against the proud knights of the Round Table), Lancelot again displays his prowess:

Lancelot put his hand upon his good sword, striking left and right like a man to whom it was more natural than a raptor pursuing its prey. He began killing knights and horses and striking down whatever he met in his way. . . .

Then were the great marvels of his prowess, which had been testified to in many places, shown to be true, for he split knights and horses and heads and arms and lances and shields, and beat down knights to the right and left; he did so much in so little time that all those who had been pursuing others stopped on his account . . . to watch him and see the marvels he performed.⁴⁹

Other heroes perform wonders of prowess, highly praised as the essence of chivalry. The *Mort Artu* refers repeatedly to acts of prowess as 'deeds of chivalry' or 'feats of chivalry'; the link between the two is often apparent.⁵⁰ Once he has seen Morholt defeat Yvain, in the *Merlin Continuation*, Gawain almost foams with praise: 'Oh, God! what greatness there is in a valiant man! God, how powerful this man is; how effective he is, and how much he can do! God! what a fool and how guilty of excess would he be who pressed such a man to battle, unless he had a good reason!'⁵¹

Hector does so well in the war against Claudas that Gawain looks on with rapt admiration:

Hector threw down his shield, took his sword with both hands and began to slay knights and horses and clear the space around him so wondrously that there was no one so bold as to dare to put out a hand to stop him. Looking at him Sir Gawain said to himself, 'My God, what a knight we have here! Who would have thought that such a young man had such prowess in him?'⁵²

⁴⁸ Kibler, tr., *Lancelot Part V*, 161–2; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, IV, 198–9.

⁴⁹ Kibler, *Lancelot Part V*, 197; Micha, *Lancelot*, IV, 359–60.

⁵⁰ Cable, tr., *Death of King Arthur*, 36, 139; Frappier, ed., *La Mort*, 17, 144.

⁵¹ Asher, tr., *Merlin Continuation*, 272; Roussineau, ed., *Merlin*, II, 374–5.

⁵² Carroll, tr., *Lancelot Part VI*, 303; Micha, *Lancelot*, VI, 96–97.

In the seemingly endless battles with the Saxons the Round Table knights' prowess is constantly praised: 'open displays of knightly prowess could be seen by all', we learn; Arthur's men 'slaughtered knights and horses, they sent shields flying from necks and helmets from heads, they chopped off feet and hands and they did such wonders that scarcely anyone could believe the great slaughter of the Saxons they did'. Merlin enthusiastically promises them more of the same, in words that almost define prowess: 'Today we'll see who has prowess in him. Today we'll see who can fight boldly with sword and lance. Today the great and worthy knighthood of the Kingdom of Logres [literally, 'the great acts of prowess of the Kingdom of Logres', *'les grans proesses del roialme de Logres'*] will be displayed.'⁵³

Even Galahad, for all his spiritual qualities, attracts similar eulogies. Arthur the Less, wonders at the 'great prodigies' performed by Galahad in battle against King Mark's knights, for, the text says, 'he reached no knight, no matter how well armed, whom he did not lay on the ground dead or mortally wounded or crippled'. Such work elicits fulsome praise from Arthur the Less:

Oh God! What can I say of this man? By my faith, no mortal man could do what he's doing. Truly, all the other knights in the world are nothing compared to him, for if everyone else in the world were a knight and he faced them all in one place, I think he would defeat them all, for it doesn't seem to me, from what I've seen, that he could grow weary from striking during the lifetime of one man. Now may I have ill fortune if I don't from now on call him the best of all those who now bear arms, for I see well that he deserves it.⁵⁴

Prowess was thought to bring other qualities in its train (as we will see), and these qualities may have more appeal for most modern readers than prowess itself;⁵⁵ but we will radically misunderstand the medieval view and the

⁵³ Pickens, tr., *Story of Merlin*, 386, 387, Sommer, ed. *Vulgate Version*, II, 397–8. The phrase about open displays of knightly prowess, reads, 'si peust on ucoir apertes cheualeries faire darmes'. Even the voluble Parrot in the *Knight of the Parrot* sings praises for the 'chivalries' Arthur has 'done'. Vesce, *Knight of the Parrot*, 54; Heuckenkamp, ed., *Chevalier du Papegau*, 52. Physical strength may take forms modern readers (incorrectly) suspect are parodic. William of Orange struts with such vigour in the royal hall (in the *Charroi de Nîmes*) that he bursts the uppers of his Cordovan leather boots. He similarly leans on his bow with such vigour that it shatters. Price, tr., *The Waggon Train*, 62–3; McMillan, ed., *Charroi de Nîmes*, 61, 64. In the *Chanson de Guillaume* even his vigour in eating shows he is a man of prowess; the Saracens eat men like ripe apples: Muir, tr., *Song of William*, 152, 159, 165, 193; Suard, ed., *Chanson de Guillaume*, 72, 94, 113, 198.

⁵⁴ Asher, tr., 'Quest', 246. A few pages earlier Galahad has 'struck to the left and right and killed all those he reached, and he performed so many marvels among them that no one who saw him would have thought him mortal man but some strange marvel': p. 237.

⁵⁵ The 'worthy man' tells Arthur: 'no one recognizes a man of worth so well as a man rooted in great prowess': Corley, tr., *Lancelot of the Lake*, 242; Elspeth Kennedy, *Lancelot do Lac*, I, 287. Hervi of Rivel, attending at Arthur's table when a monk comes with messages from the queens of Gaunes and Benoic, tells Arthur that the man is trustworthy, as a former knight of prowess:

medieval reality if we push the bloody, sweaty, muscular work done with lance and sword swiftly and antiseptically to the side and hasten on to speak of more abstract, more appealing qualities. What is at issue is less a set of idealized abstractions than what Malory called 'dedys full actual'. Such deeds leave combatants 'waggyng, staggerynge, pantyng, blowyng, and bledyng'.⁵⁶

But is this all merely literary artifice? Did knights actually hack so heroically and endure so resolutely? Historical accounts, it is true, do not generally follow lance thrusts and sword strokes in anatomical detail; in the confusion of most battles it could scarcely have been possible. Usually they praise heroes more simply by enumerating foes slain.⁵⁷

Yet time and again a chronicler or biographer assures us he wants to record the great deeds of his subjects, just as a writer of *chanson* or romance might. No less than imaginative literary texts, historical sources show us single great men turning the tide of battle by their prowess, cutting paths through their enemies, who fall back in stunned fear. Perhaps this is not merely flattery and topos; given relatively small numbers, close fighting with edged weapons, and the sudden surges or panics so often described, one unusual man might well tilt the balance.

In the pages of the biography of William Marshal chivalry often becomes prowess pure and simple. At the siege of Winchester, for example, we are told that groups of knights sallied forth each day 'to *do* chivalry (por *faire* chevalerie)'.⁵⁸ The knight can *do* chivalry just as he can *make* love: it has this

My lord, believe whatever this man tells you, for kings and princes should heed his words. Be assured that with his great courage and prowess he so far outshone any other knight in God's creation that in dire need I would confidently have turned to him to defend my honour and preserve my head.

Rosenberg, tr., *Lancelot Part I*, 25; Elspeth Kennedy, ed., *Lancelot do Lac*, 55; Sommer, ed., *Vulgate Version*, III, 46.

⁵⁶ Vinaver, ed., *Malory Works*, 23, 198. John Barbour's chronicle has men at least 'stabbing, stocking and striking': McDiarmid and Stevenson, eds., *Barbour's Bruce*, bk. XVII, l. 785. Malory's characters describe fierce fighting as 'noble knyghthode': Vinaver, *Malory Works*, 277. Sir Kay cites prowess as the quality that earns Gawain a seat at the Round Table: 'He is beste worthy to be a knyght of the Rounde Table of ony that is rehersed yet and he had done no more prouesse his lye dayes': *ibid.*, 80. Tristram thinks himself unworthy to be a knight of the Round Table until his 'dedys' win him a place: *ibid.*, 300. Unhorsing Kay and matching Lancelot allows the young Gareth similarly to believe he can 'stonde a preved knight': *ibid.*, 181. Blamour fears Tristram 'May happyn to smyte me downe with his grete myght of chevalry': *ibid.*, 253. Sir Darras, whose three sons Tristan did 'smyte downe', agrees Tristan acted 'by fors of knyghthode': *ibid.*, 338. Lionel defeats and kills Calogrenant who tries to intervene in his fight with Bors, 'for thys sir Lyonell was of grete chevalry and passing hardy': *ibid.*, 575.

⁵⁷ The chronicler of Richard the Lion-Heart's crusade praises Geoffrey of Lusignan as a successor to Roland and Oliver for despatching ten Muslims with an axe at the siege of Acre: Hubert tr., and La Monte, *Crusade of Richard Lion-Heart*; Gaston Paris, *L'Histoire de la guerre sainte*, ll. 4662–70.

⁵⁸ Meyer, ed., *Histoire*, I, l. 176; my italics. As Burgess points out, this phrase appears frequently in twelfth-century Old French imaginative literature with just the meaning suggested here: 'The Term "Chevalerie" '.

dimension as a physical process. At the battle of Lincoln, writes the biographer, the French did not have to look far to ‘find chivalry’, the quality here again clearly equated with prowess on the battlefield. Knighting the young king, the eldest son of Henry II, William asks God to grant him prowess and to keep him in honour and high dignity. We are also told that it was right for William to be the ‘master’ of the young king while he prepared for this day because William increased his pupil’s prowess.⁵⁹

Most readers of Marshal’s biography, however, will better remember the vivid visual evidence of prowess. In the classic instance William receives the news that he has won a tournament with his head on the blacksmith’s anvil where the deep dents in his helmet are being sufficiently hammered out to allow him finally to pull the battered iron off his head.⁶⁰

If Geoffroi de Charny knew this story (more than a century later), he must have laughed in hearty approval. In his *Livre de chevalerie* this renowned knight lauds prowess unceasingly and urges his contemporaries to invest their lives and their bodies in the honourable following of arms, in individual jousts, in tournaments, and above all in war. ‘For I maintain’, Charny writes, ‘that there are no small feats of arms, but only good and great ones, although some feats of arms are of greater worth than others.’⁶¹

Describing the battle of Methven (1306), John Barbour says Bruce’s men ‘Schewyt thar gret chawalry (showed their great chivalry)’; they ‘swappyt owt swerdis sturdyly / And swa fell strakys gave and tuk / Yat all ye rank about yaim quouk (They whipped out swords boldly and gave and took such grievous strokes that all the ground around them shook).’⁶²

Such sword blows are highly prized. Gerald of Wales obviously esteems the knight Meiler Fitz Henry’s fighting against the Irish:

[S]urrounded by the enemy on every side, [he] drew his sword and charging the band, boldly cut his way through them, chopping here a hand and there an arm, besides hewing through heads and shoulders and thus rejoined his friends on the plain unhurt, though he brought away three Irish spears stuck in his horse, and two in his shield.

He states explicitly the value he finds in John de Courcy: ‘He who had seen how John of Courcy wielded his sword, with one stroke lopping off heads, and with another arms, must needs have commended him for a most valiant soldier.’⁶³

⁵⁹ Meyer, ed., *Histoire*, II, ll. 16830–3, I, 2088–9, 2635–6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, I, ll. 3101–44.

⁶¹ Kaeuper and Kennedy, *Book of Chivalry*, 86–7; Charny’s ideas are explored in detail in this work. cf. Chapter 13, below.

⁶² McDiarmid and Stevenson, *Barbour’s Bruce*, bk. II, 366–8.

⁶³ Wright, ed., tr., *Historical Works*, 256, 279. In Welsh border fighting, a recipient of such a blow, Ranulf Poer, sheriff of Herefordshire, is cut through the windpipe and veins of the neck and only manages by signs to summon a priest before he dies: p. 369.

Richard the Lion-Heart regularly chops his enemies' skulls down to the teeth.⁶⁴ Richard Marshal (second son of the famous William) with one mighty stroke cut off both hands of the man reaching for his helmet in a close encounter. With an even mightier blow he cut a knight down to the navel.⁶⁵ Finding a young clerk who has taken revenge on three royal serjeants who robbed him—piercing one with a crossbow bolt, with a sword cutting the leg off the second, and splitting the head of the third to the teeth—Louis IX takes the young man into his service 'pour vostre proesce', though he tells him such prowess has closed off the road to the priesthood.⁶⁶ Joinville, who tells the story, later admires three fine blows delivered by a Genoese knight in an expedition to Jaffa: one enemy is run through with a lance, one's turbaned head is sent flying off into the field, one lance-wielding enemy arm is cut off with a swift back-handed sword stroke, after dodging the foe's lance.⁶⁷ Lancelot could scarcely have done better. Robert Bruce, we learn, could hack off an arm, or arm and shoulder, or ear, cheek, and shoulder at a single sword stroke.⁶⁸

If Robert Bruce's most noted feat of prowess was to split the head of Henry de Bohun at the opening of the battle of Bannockburn, he also defended a narrow river ford alone, against a large body of English knights who could only come at him singly.⁶⁹ 'Strang wtrageous curage he had', Barbour proclaims proudly, as the number of bodies in the water mounts; after Bruce has killed six men, the English hesitate, until exhorted by one of their knights who shouts that they must redeem their honour and that Bruce cannot last. Yet he does. When his own men finally appear, they count fourteen slain. Barbour breaks into fulsome praise:

A der God quha had yen bene by
& sene hove he sa hardyly
Adressyt hym agane yaim all
I wate weile yat yai suld him call
Ye best yat levyt in his day.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Many examples in Hubert tr., and La Monte, *Crusade of Richard Lion-Heart*; Gaston Paris, *L'Histoire de la guerre sainte*.

⁶⁵ Described in Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare*, 1–2. The chronicle of the crusade of Richard the Lion-Heart tells of a knight whose right hand is cut off in battle; he is praised for shifting his sword to his left hand and fighting on: Hubert and La Monte, *Crusade of Richard Lion-Heart*, ll. 5777–86; Gaston Paris, *L'Histoire de la guerre sainte*.

⁶⁶ Wailly, ed., *Joinville*, 50–2. The good king has a second motive, as he explains: he will never support royal officials in evildoing.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 230–1.

⁶⁸ McDiarmid and Stevenson, eds., *Barbour's Bruce*, bk. III, ll. 114–5; bk. VI, 625–31, 644.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, bk. XII, ll. 51–61. The blow was delivered by axe rather than sword.

(Dear God! Whoever had been there and seen how he stoutly set himself against them all, I know well he would call him the best alive in his day.)⁷⁰

Here, two centuries earlier, is Richard the Lion-Heart in action while on crusade:

Never did man such mighty deeds;
 He charged among the miscreant breed
 So deep that he was hid from sight . . .
 Forward and back he hewed a swath
 About him, cutting deadly path
 With his good sword, whose might was such
 That everything that it could touch,
 Or man or horse, was overthrown
 And to the earth was battered down.
 I think 'twas there he severed
 At one stroke both the arm and head
 Of an emir, an infidel
 Steel-clad, whom he sent straight to hell,
 And when the Turks perceived this blow,
 They made broad path before him.⁷¹

Froissart gives us Sir Robert Salle, confronted outside Norwich by English rebels in 1381, who want to force him to be their military leader. His refusal leads to mortal combat:

[Sir Robert] drew a long Bordeaux sword which he carried, and began cutting and thrusting all around him, a lovely sight to see. Few dared to come near him, and of those who did he cut off a foot or a head or an arm or a leg with every stroke he made. Even the boldest of them grew afraid of him. On that spot Sir Robert gave a marvelous display of swordsmanship. He was himself overwhelmed soon, however, and dismembered.⁷²

The biographer of Don Pero Niño records his hero's fight with a famous opponent named Gomez Domao, who used his shield so well that no disabling blow could reach him, and who returned such blows that Pero reported

⁷⁰ McDiarmid and Stevenson, eds., *Barbour's Bruce*, bk. VI, ll. 67–180; l. 315 notes that fourteen were slain 'with his hand'.

⁷¹ Hubert tr., and La Monte, *Crusade of Richard Lion-Heart*, ll. 605–26; Gaston Paris, ed., *L'Histoire de la guerre sainte*. Cf. ll. 6478–530, or ll. 7349–61, where Richard 'cut and smote and smashed / Through them, then turned about, and slashed / And sheared off arm and hand and head. / Like animals they turned and fled. / But many could not flee.' The author (ll. 10453–66) assures his readers he is not flattering; an entire throng witnessed Richard's blows, splitting his enemies to their teeth with his brand of steel. In ll. 10494–8 we learn the crusading knights 'lopped off hands and heads and feet, / Split eyes and mouths with many a wound.'

⁷² Brereton, tr., *Froissart*, 222–4.

later that sparks flew from his eyes when they struck his helmet. Finally, the great Castilian knight 'struck Gomez so hard above the shield, that he split it for a hands-breadth and his head down to the eyes; and that was the end of Gomez Domao'. Pero went forward later in that fight with lance stubs in his shield, an arrow binding his neck to his armour, and a crossbow bolt lodged in his nostrils (driven deeper by sword blows that struck it in the close fighting). His shield was cut to bits, his sword blade was notched like a saw and dyed with blood. 'And well do I think that until that day Pero Niño never had been able to glut himself in an hour with the toil he craved.'⁷³

In fact, both imaginative literature and the historical accounts of their lives picture knights enjoying a privileged practice of violence; it suggests that they found in their exhilarating and fulfilling fighting the key to identity.⁷⁴ It would otherwise be hard to explain the thousands of individual combats and mass engagements that fill page after page in each major category of chivalric literature: *chanson de geste*, romance, vernacular manual, chivalric biography, chronicle. Marc Bloch called these interminable combats 'eloquent psychological documents'.⁷⁵ Clearly, the personal capacity to beat another man through the accepted method of knightly battle—in fact the actual physical process of knocking another knight off his horse and, if required, hacking him down to the point of submission or death—appears time and again as something like the ultimate human quality; it operates in men as a gift of God, it gives meaning to life, reveals the presence of the other desired qualities, wins the love of the most desirable women, determines status and worth, and binds the best males together in a fellowship of the elect. Many writers also recognized it as a power akin to fire: if noble, necessary, and useful, such violence requires much care and control.

The ideal chivalric figure is not, of course, a latter-day Viking berserker, driven by what modern evaluation might call overactive glands or psychopathic personality. Granted, Arthurian society might well have recognized such a comparison in Sagremore the Unruly, but he surely stands at the rough end of the scale. When he is imprisoned, in the *Lancelot*, his captor, the lord of the Castle of the Narrow March, admits that he released him lest Sagremore 'go

⁷³ Evans, tr., *The Unconquered Knight*, 36–8. In a later battle he splits the iron cap and skull of a knight who grabs his horse's reins. From this battle he sent his notched sword, 'twisted by dint of striking mighty blows, and all dyed in blood' to his ladylove: pp. 195, 196.

⁷⁴ Chivalry regularly means either deeds of prowess or the body of knights on some field in both Barbour's chronicle and Sir Thomas Gray's chronicle: Maxwell, tr., *Scalacronica*; McDiarmid and Stevenson, *Barbour's Bruce*. Pope and Lodge, eds, *Life of the Black Prince*, note that the emphasis of the work is on prowess and piety. Keen notes that to the combatant in the Hundred Years War '[t]he *ius militare* meant . . . the law of chivalry . . . the law of a certain privileged class, whose hereditary occupation was fighting': *Laws of War*, 19.

⁷⁵ Bloch, *Société Féodale*, II, 294.

mad because he is in an enclosed place, and he wanted to engage in battle and fight with my knights'. Sagremore is justly called the Unruly, this lord says, 'for he showed no trace of reason in what he did, and never in all my life have I seen a single knight perform as many feats of arms as he did'. He was, the text announces, 'never much of a knight nor very confident until he was thoroughly worked up. Then he feared nothing and gave no thought to himself.'⁷⁶ In *Merlin Continuation* he is characterized as 'a very good knight and so unruly when he was upset that his chivalry was highly esteemed'.⁷⁷

Yet even if we grant that the knights are so much more than berserkers, there is, nevertheless, behind great prowess an element of rage and sheer battle fury. It is hard to imagine the one without the other. We can, of course, see this not only in such ambivalent figures as Raoul de Cambrai, but in great idols such as Lancelot and the other Round Table knights. To read much chivalric literature is to find admired knights regularly feeling rage as they fight; their blood boils; when honour is challenged, they nearly lose their minds.⁷⁸ As the tournament held to celebrate Arthur's wedding becomes more heated, Gawain can scarcely be stopped, 'for he was hot with anger and bent on inflicting pain'.⁷⁹ In battle against the Irish and Saxons, 'Lancelot's prowess was demonstrated, for he cut through Saxons and Irishmen, horses and heads, shields and legs and arms'. The author tells us '[h]e resembled an angry lion that plunges among the does, not because of any great hunger it might have, but in order to show off its ferocity and its power.' Lionel tries to restrain him, asking, the most pragmatic questions about prowess: 'Do you wish to get yourself killed in a spot where you can perform no act of prowess? And even if you did perform some act of prowess, it would never be known. Haven't you done enough?' At this suggestion of restraint Lancelot threatens Lionel with 'some harm', and is finally stopped only by an admonition in the name of the queen.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Carroll, tr., *Lancelot Part II*, 187, 210; Elspeth Kennedy, ed., *Lancelot do Lac*, 448–9, 506.

⁷⁷ Asher, tr., *Merlin Continuation*, 51; Sommer, ed., *Zeitschrift*, 131–2: 'moult a prisier de cheualerie'.

⁷⁸ E.g. William of Orange and his opponents in Hoggan, tr., 'Crowning of Louis', 39, 40, 43, 53; Langlois, ed., *Couronnement de Louis*, 86, 87, 94, 113. Raoul feels 'all his blood boil', is 'unbridled in his wrath', goes 'mad with anger', and burns nuns in a 'rage', etc. (examples in Kay, ed., tr., *Raoul de Cambrai*, *laisses* 32, 62, 68). Lancelot feels rage in his first tournament: Rosenberg, tr., *Lancelot Part I*, 95; Elspeth Kennedy, *Lancelot do Lac*, 231. Lancelot and even Galahad feel rage as they fight each other, incognito, just to test prowess: Bryant, tr., *Perlesvaus*, 92–3; Nitze and Jenkins, eds, *Perlesvaus*, 140–1.

⁷⁹ Pickens, tr., *Story of Merlin*, 336; Sommer, ed., *Vulgate Version*, II, 307.

⁸⁰ Carrol, *Lancelot Part II*, 234–5; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, VIII, 469–474. Yvain tells him he should not have gone on: 'doing so would not have been boldness, but rather folly'. Yvain similarly holds back the impetuous Lancelot, at the time of Gawain's capture by Caradoc, swearing, 'By the Holy Cross, my lord! You can't go ahead like that! You mustn't rush in so wildly to show your prowess! It would be a lost cause. . . . Prowess should be shown only where it can work!' Rosenberg, *Lancelot, Part III*, 281; Micha, *Lancelot I*, 178–9.

Rage in battle is not limited to imaginative literature. Joinville describes the Comte d'Anjou as mad with rage during a fight along the Nile on St Louis's crusade.⁸¹ The Chandos Herald's *Life of the Black Prince* tells of Sir William Felton charging into action 'come home sanz sens et sanz avis, a chevall la lance baissie'.⁸² John Barbour reports that at Bannockburn the Scots fought as if in a rage, 'as men out of wit'. He describes Sir Thomas Murray, a Bruce supporter, fighting in Ireland 'as he war in a rage'. Robert Bruce, to the contrary, managed to use reason to control such impulses, inherent in chivalry: 'And with wyt his chewelery / He gouernyt . . . worthily'.⁸³ Froissart says that when Philip VI saw the English in battle formation at Crécy, 'his blood boiled, for he hated them'.⁸⁴ Saladin, in Richard the Lion-Heart's crusade chronicle, is pictured admiring his opponent, but exclaiming,

With what rashness doth he fling
Himself! Howe'er great prince I be,
I should prefer to have in me
Reason and measure and largesse
Than courage carried to excess.⁸⁵

The frequent praise of *mesure*, restraint, balance, and reason in all forms of chivalric literature can surely be read as countering a tendency that was real, and dangerous. At a minimum, we know that knights in historical combat frequently found it hard to restrain themselves and sought release in impetuous charges, disregarding some commander's plan and strict orders.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Wailly, *Joinville*, 88. Joinville was grateful that the man was 'hors dou sens' and 'courouciez', because his actions spared Joinville and others.

⁸² Pope and Lodge, *The Black Prince*, 84–5.

⁸³ McDiarmid and Stevenson, *Barbour's Bruce*, III, bk. XIII, l. 143; bk. XVI, l. 199; bk. IX, ll. 373–6. The association of chivalry with a mental state requiring governance is notable. McKim, 'Ideal of Knighthood', emphasizes Barbour's deliberate contrast between the *mesure* of James Douglas as ideal knight and the foolhardiness that cost Edward Bruce victories and, finally, his life.

⁸⁴ Brereton, tr., *Froissart*, 88.

⁸⁵ Hubert tr., and La Monte, *Crusade of Richard Lion-Heart*, ll. 12146–52; Gaston Paris, ed., *L'Histoire de la guerre sainte*.

⁸⁶ On Richard I's crusade two knights, despite his careful plan for counterattack, cannot take the ignominy of enduring provocative attacks from the Muslims; they charge the enemy and bring about a general assault, joined by the Bishop of Beauvais. The resulting fight, with lances through bodies, could almost come from the *Song of Roland*: see ll. 6421–60 in Hubert tr., and La Monte, *Crusade of Richard Lion-Heart*; Gaston Paris, *L'Histoire de la guerre sainte*. A Templar similarly breaks ranks and puts his lance through an enemy's body. The author says his chivalry made him do this: ll. 9906–46. Miles de Cogan, who cannot stand the delay during a parley over the fate of Dublin, leads an attack which takes the city, along with much loot: Orpen, ed., tr., *Song of Dermot*, ll. 1674–711. Joinville tells a number of such stories of impetuosity from the crusade of Louis IX, including one in which the Master of the Temple cries out, 'For God's sake, let's get at them! I can't stand it any longer!' His charge provokes a general action unintended by the French king: Wailly, ed., *Joinville*, 78. Froissart says the royal plan of battle at Crécy could not be carried out because French lords wanted no restraint and pressed forward to show their power: Brereton, *Froissart*, 86.

All this violence was effected by a knight's own skilled hands; chivalry was not simply a species of officership more distanced from the bloody work with swords and spears. This is no argument that the medievals knew no generalship; we have been taught how skilfully medieval knights could carry out impressive tactical and strategic plans.⁸⁷ But we must also note that chivalric literature emphasizes personal might, courage, and skill in hand-to-hand fighting.⁸⁸

Summing up hundreds of years of this tradition, Malory refers time and again to the wondrous work done by his knights' hands, firmly gripping their weapons.⁸⁹ We are assured that Lancelot has won Joyeuse Garde, his refuge, 'with his owne hondis', that Arthur 'was emperor himself through dignity of his hands', that he awaits a tournament where '[the knights] shall . . . preve whoo shall be beste of his hondis'. We hear Outelake of Wentelonde proudly stating his claim to a lady: 'thys lady I gate be my prouesse of hondis and armys thys day at Arthurs court'. Such hands wield a lance or sword well. Seeing King Pellinore cut Outelake down to the chin with a single sword stroke, Meliot de Logurs declines to fight 'with such a knyght of proues'.⁹⁰

Chronicle and biography speak the same language and show the same emphasis. John Barbour praises Edward Bruce as 'off [of] his hand a nobill knyght', and assures us that Robert Bruce slew all the fourteen Englishmen at the ford, noted above, 'vif [with] his hand'.⁹¹ In his first fight Don Pero Niño, as his biographer tells us, 'accomplished so many fair feats with his hands that

⁸⁷ See Gillingham: 'Richard I'; 'War and Chivalry'; and 'William the Bastard'.

⁸⁸ Gerald of Wales is capable of clearly distinguishing between personal, knightly valour and generalship. For his description of these qualities in John de Courcy, see Wright, tr., *Historical Works*, 281, 318.

⁸⁹ Many other writers could be cited widely. In the Post-Vulgate *Merlin Continuation* a poor knight asking a lady's hand of her father, promises that 'If in one day I can't bring . . . ten knights to defeat *with my own hands*, and you afterwards—all knights renowned for prowess—I don't want you to consider me a knight.' Asher, tr., *Merlin Continuation (end)*, 64; Bogdanow, ed., 'Folie Lancelot', 33; emphasis supplied. Inverse cases—fears of the work done by knights' hands—like-wise appear in this work; see Asher, *ibid.*, 100; Bogdanow, *ibid.*, 127.

⁹⁰ The examples in Malory almost defy citation. Vinaver, ed., *Malory, Works*, 415–16, 111, 72–3. Malory draws on long-held belief. The vast Vulgate cycle, written more than two centuries earlier, repeatedly emphasizes hands-on prowess. Lancelot, learning of the defeat of so many Arthurian knights at the Forbidden Hill, declares, 'he who defeated them can truly say that there is great prowess in him, if he defeated them with his own hands.' Carroll, tr., *Lancelot Part VI*, 232; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, V, 96. There is a similar statement from Lambeuge in Krueger, tr., *Lancelot Part IV*, 71; Micha, *Lancelot*, I, 260. In a later crisis Guerrehet's valour saved the day, 'for he killed four of them with his own hands and wounded six, including the first whose arm he had severed': Kibler, tr., *Lancelot Part V*, 118; Micha, *Lancelot*, IV, 21. In the Middle English *William of Palerne*, the hero in his first battle does wonders 'wip his owne hond', killing six prominent enemies and overcoming the enemy leader: Bunt, ed., *William of Palerne*, ll. 1195, 1230–54. In the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (Benson, ed., tr., 52), Arthur greets Cadore after a battle with the words, 'You have done well, Sir duke, with your two hands.'

⁹¹ McDiarmid and Stevenson, eds., *Barbour's Bruce*, II, bk. IX, l. 486; bk. VI, l. 313.

all spoke well of him'. The biographer is proud that 'none did so much with their hands as he'.⁹²

This hands-on work of chivalry was very bloody. The young Arthurian heroes in *The Story of Merlin* (Sagremore, Galescalin, Agravain, Gaheriet, Guerrehet) have fought so well in a battle against the Saxons 'that their arms and legs and the heads and manes of their horses were dripping with blood and gore'. They are described as having done 'many a beautiful deed of knighthood [*mainte bele cheualier*] and struck many a handsome blow, for which everyone should hold them in high esteem'.⁹³

Similarly, in his biographical chronicle John Barbour stresses the bloody character of such fighting: grass red with blood, swords bloody to the hilt, heraldic devices on armour so smeared with blood they cannot be read.⁹⁴ Gerald of Wales unforgettably characterized Richard I of England as not only 'fierce in his encounters in arms', but 'only happy when he marked his steps with blood'.⁹⁵ The historian of the Lion-Heart's crusade more than once records Richard hewing off enemy heads and displaying them as trophies, or riding into camp after a night of skirmishing with more Muslim heads hanging from his saddle.⁹⁶ Such trophies were not limited to crusading; after the bloody battle of Evesham in the English civil war of Henry III's reign, the head and testicles of the defeated Simon de Montfort were sent as a gift to Lady Wigmore.⁹⁷

The incident might not be too gruesome for romance. A maiden whose rights Bors defends in *Lancelot* has given him a white banner to attach to his lance. After combat with her enemy, Bors 'saw that the banner which had been white before, was scarlet with blood, and he was overjoyed'. A little later in the same text an opponent evaluates Sagremore in revealing terms:

He noticed that his shield had been completely destroyed by lances and swords, and he saw that his hauberk was broken in several spots; he looked at Sagremore himself, bloodied with his own blood and with the blood of others. He had great respect for him, for he thought no knight deserving of greater esteem.⁹⁸

⁹² Evans, tr., *The Unconquered Knight*, 30.

⁹³ Pickens, tr., *Story of Merlin*, 268; Sommer, ed., *Vulgate Version*, II, 185. Heroes are so covered by gore that their heraldic devices can scarcely be recognized.

⁹⁴ McDiarmid and Stevenson, *Barbour's Bruce*, bk. II, 366–70; bk. X, l. 687; bk. XIII, ll. 183–5.

⁹⁵ Wright, ed., *Historical Works*, 160.

⁹⁶ Ll. 7439–40, 8964–79 in Hubert tr., and La Monte, *Crusade of Richard Lion-Heart*; Gaston Paris, *L'Histoire de la guerre sainte*.

⁹⁷ Maddicott, *Simon de Montfort*, 344.

⁹⁸ Krueger, tr., *Lancelot Part IV*, 42–3, 78; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, II, 148–9, 291. For a parallel case to the bloody banner in a Middle English text (*Blanchardyn and Eglentine*), see Gist, *Love and War*, 148.

An old hermit who is a former knight tells Yvain (in the *Lancelot*) that the custom at Uther Pendragon's court was that no knight could be seated unless he had been wounded.⁹⁹

Even Lancelot's great work—often powered by his love for the queen—necessarily involves hacking and chopping, great bloodshed, frequent decapitations, and regular eviscerations. He was filled with rage as he rescues a maiden from other knights:

[Lancelot] struck the head off one, who fell dead to the ground; he took aim at another and struck him dead. When the others saw this they were afraid of being killed themselves and scattered this way and that to save their lives. Lancelot pursued them, hacking and eviscerating and slaying them as if they were dumb animals; behind him were the somber traces of more than twenty slaughtered men.¹⁰⁰

Hector and Perceval, who meet and (as is so often true of knights in chivalric literature) fail to recognize each other, fall at once to combat:

At every moment they were so quick and so aggressive that it was a wonder to behold; in great anguish they endured great and terrible wounds that each inflicted on the other in quick succession, like knights of great prowess, hacking apart their shields and helmets with their swords and making the blood gush forth on every side.¹⁰¹

It is worth remembering that no great cause, no great love, is at stake in this fight; the knights meet in the woods; they fight. So near to death are they both brought that only the appearance of the Grail preserves their lives.

Given its centrality, such prowess must get an early start in the young knight's career.¹⁰² Accounts of youthful origins of heroes stress just this precocious display of commendable violence, a harbinger of things to come. In the *Chanson de Aspremont* the young Roland and his companions, kept from battle by an overly solicitous Charlemagne, severely beat the porter guarding the door of their chamber, and escape. They acquire the horses they need by beating up the keepers who conduct them to the battlefield. Roland encourages the others: 'Young Roland says: "We'll have these four—come on! / Nor

⁹⁹ Kibler, tr., *Lancelot Part V*, 174; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, IV, 248. Here, one of the occasional notes of ambiguity can be heard, for he adds that the custom was ended in Arthur's day, but replaced by one equally 'unpleasant'—that no knight be seated at a high feast who has not sworn on relics that he has defeated a knight 'by deeds of arms' within the past week.

¹⁰⁰ Kibler, *Lancelot Part V*, 191; Micha, *Lancelot*, IV, 328.

¹⁰¹ Carroll, tr., *Lancelot Part VI*, 327; Micha, *Lancelot*, VI, 200–1.

¹⁰² For overviews of education in arms, see Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, 181–91; Chris Given-Wilson, *English Nobility*, 2–7. Patterson notes that 'The biographers of both du Guesclin and Boucicaut stress the violence of their heroes' *enfances* as evidence of their single-mindedness': *Chaucer*, 176. On the other hand, the education proposed for the knight by Christine de Pisan in *L'Épître d'Orbèa à Hector*, as Willard notes, was 'moral rather than military': 'Christine de Pisan', 512.

shall we ask them first for what we want!” / His friends reply: “With the blessing of God!”’ When the news comes to King Salemon, the owner of the horses, that the lads have ‘killed’ the porter, stolen the horses, and beaten his men, he laughs in warm appreciation of their valour.¹⁰³

Rainouart, another hero of *chanson*, was angered as a boy by a beating from his tutor; he responded by hitting the man so hard that his heart burst.¹⁰⁴ A tutor who fails to appreciate noble largesse and ‘who wished to dominate him’ likewise causes the young Lancelot trouble in the *Lancelot do Lac*. Lancelot endures his slap in brave silence, but when the tutor strikes a greyhound he has just received, he breaks his bow into pieces over the man’s head. Angered at the man for his broken bow, he then beats him soundly and tries to kill the tutor’s helpers; they all run for safety. When he tells his patroness, the Lady of the Lake, that he will kill the tutor anywhere but in her household, ‘she was delighted, for she saw that he could not fail to be a man of valour, with God’s help and her own’.¹⁰⁵ But the most striking case of early promise of prowess comes from Tristram, in Malory’s tale. Tristram’s mother, dying as he is born, says he is a young murderer and thus is likely to be a manly adult.¹⁰⁶

Competition

This obsession with prowess stands behind the seemingly numberless tests the chivalrous undergo in this literature to determine who is the best knight in the world. Marvellous swords can be grasped, or pulled from a stone, or drawn from a wondrous scabbard only by the best knight in the world. Shields may only be borne by, beds may only serve the finest knight in the world. We even learn of a magical chess board which defeats all but Lancelot.¹⁰⁷

But the supreme honour of being the best is determined primarily by fighting everyone else who wants that same honour. Anthropologists and historians regularly conclude that any society animated by a code of honour will be highly competitive; it will much value the defence of cherished rights and the correction of perceived wrongs through showy acts of physical violence. In a classic formulation, the anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers argued:

¹⁰³ Newth, ed., tr., *Song of Aspremont*, 34–5; Brandin, ed., *Chanson d’Aspremont*, 42–3.

¹⁰⁴ Ferrante, ed., tr., *Guillaume d’Orange*, 272; Wienbeck et al., eds, *Aliscans*, 496–7.

¹⁰⁵ Corley, tr., *Lancelot of the Lake*, 36–7; Elspeth Kennedy, ed., *Lancelot do Lac*, I, 45–7; cf. p. 98; also see Rosenberg, tr., *Lancelot Part I*, 29; Sommer, ed., *Vulgate Version*, III, 55.

¹⁰⁶ Vinaver, ed., *Malory. Works*, 230: ‘A, my lytyll son, thou haste murderd thy modir! And therefore I suppose thou that arte a murtherer so yonge, thow arte full lykly to be a manly man in thyne ayge.’

¹⁰⁷ Kibler, tr., *Lancelot Part V*, 205; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, IV, 393.

Respect and precedence are paid to those who claim it and are sufficiently powerful to enforce their claim. Just as possession is said to be nine-tenths of the law, so the *de facto* achievement of honour depends upon the ability to silence anyone who would dispute the title.¹⁰⁸

Writing about the problem of violence in early modern England, the historian Mervyn James similarly points to ‘the root of the matter’ in the concept of honour, ‘emerging out of a long-established military and chivalric tradition . . . characterized above all by a stress on competitive assertiveness’. As he notes concisely, ‘Honour could both legitimize and provide moral reinforcement for a politics of violence.’¹⁰⁹

We will find ample evidence for investigating the politics of violence; the fierce physical competitiveness so characteristic of what anthropologists have called honour cultures could scarcely be better illustrated than by extensive reading in chivalric literature.¹¹⁰ As a code of honour, chivalry had as much investment in knightly autonomy and heroic violence as in any forms of restraint, either internal or external. Asked why there is strife between the queen’s knights and the knights of the Round Table, Merlin answers in plain terms: ‘You should know . . . that their jealousy has done that, and they want to test their prowess against one another.’ In the tournament held to celebrate the wedding of Arthur and Guinevere, the knights ‘began hitting roughly, although they were playing, because they were good knights’.¹¹¹ The tournament turns into a virtual battle, as do so many tournaments in chivalric literature.

Seeing unknown knights appearing prominently on another battlefield earlier in this same work, Yvonet the Great and Yvonet the Bastard wonder who they can be. Aces of Beaumont gives them answer in hard, stirring words: ‘If you want to know who they are, ride over to them and fight so well that they ask *you* who *you* are! For it is by their valiant feats of arms that people know who the worthies are.’¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Pitt-Rivers, ‘Honour and Social Status’, 24.

¹⁰⁹ Mervyn James, ‘English politics’, 308–9.

¹¹⁰ Hostility is assumed when an unknown knight appears. E.g. Rosenberg, tr., *Lancelot Part I*, 93; Carrol, tr., *Lancelot Part II*, 153; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, VII, 383; VIII, 145.

¹¹¹ Pickens, tr., *Story of Merlin*, 379, 335; Sommer, ed., *Vulgate Version*, II, 382, 302. When Arthur rebukes the knights they say that ‘they could not resist it, and they did not know where the urge came from’. Similarly, Arthur the Less defends his competitiveness in the *Post Vulgate Quest*; chastised by Palamedes for going about, attacking knights and considering that courtesy, Arthur replies,

You shouldn’t blame me if I go around attacking you and the other good knights, for I’m a young man and a new knight who needs to win praise and acclaim, and if I don’t win them now, when will I win them?

Asher, tr., 242; Magne, ed., *Santa Graal II*, 221.

¹¹² Pickens, *Story of Merlin*, 273; Sommer, *Vulgate Version*, II, 194. Cf. Pickens, *ibid.*, 232, 259, 287, 317, 359; Sommer, *ibid.*, 119, 168, 220, 272, 347.

Intense competition is sometimes shown, only to be criticized. Milun, in Marie de France's lay by that name, is so jealous of the much-praised prowess of a young knight sweeping the tournament circuit that he searches him out and engages in a fight 'in order to do some harm to him and his reputation'; though he thinks he will afterwards look for his long-lost son, he is, of course, defeated in the joust by that very son.¹¹³ Knightly competition has edged out affection and nearly brought tragic results. Chivalric competition in Marie's lay 'Le Chaitivel' does end tragically. When four knights in love with a lady fight in a tournament, three are killed and one is castrated by a lance thrust.¹¹⁴

Yet competition and its results are usually accepted or even highly regarded. A real man of prowess will bear the marks of other men's weapons on his body for life. Running nearly naked in the woods, mad, when he thinks he has lost the queen's love, Lancelot is recognized as a man of worship by those who see him simply in terms of the scars left on his body from his ceaseless combat.¹¹⁵

Almost from the beginning of the classic Arthurian story, as told and retold in the Vulgate Cycle, the Post-Vulgate Cycle and Malory's *Morte Darthur*, the rivalries and jealousies among the knights foreshadow the break-up of the Round Table. Much of this strife originates, of course, in the fierce hatreds caused by so much killing (and a certain amount of sex) within a restricted group of warriors and their ladies. Here, in Malory's words, is Gawain's view, at one point:

Fayre bretherne, here may ye se: whom that we hate kynge Arthure lovyth, and whom that we love he hatyth. And wyte you well, my fayre bretherne, that this sir Lamerok woll nevyr love us, because we slew his fadir, kynge Pellynor, for we demed that he slew oure fadir, kynge Lotte of Orkenay; and for the deth of kynge Pellynor sir Lamerok ded us a shame to our modir. Therefore I wolle be revenged.¹¹⁶

Of course, Gawain and his brothers are revenged and the destructive feud between the houses of Lot and Pellinore rolls on.

But the factionalism and competition in Arthurian stories often result from simple and immediate jealousy, from resentment that someone else has won worship. Gawain, while on the quest of the white hart, encounters two brothers fighting, as one of them explains, 'to preff which of us was the bygger knyght'.¹¹⁷ Tristram, or Lancelot, both of whom invariably ends up being 'the

¹¹³ Hanning and Ferrante, trs, *Marie de France*, 171-4; for their comments, see pp. 177-80, and Rychner, ed., *Marie de France*, 136-40.

¹¹⁴ Hanning and Ferrante, *Marie de France*, 183-4; Rychner, *Marie de France*, 145-7.

¹¹⁵ Vinaver, ed., *Malory. Works*, 499.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 375.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 64. In the *Merlin Continuation* (Asher, tr., 228-9, Paris and Ulrich, eds., *Merlin*, II, 81-3) Gawain strongly denounces their fight as foolish and gets them, as a favour, to promise peace in the future. Malory has Gawain more simply say that brother should not fight brother and then threaten them with force if they disagree.

bygger knyght', provoke endless jealousy, which is openly discussed.¹¹⁸ On the queen's urging, Lancelot is anxious to fight the Round Table in tournament: 'he was filled with joy, for he had often wanted to test himself against those knights who had tested their own prowess against all comers'.¹¹⁹ Having just witnessed Lancelot kill Tarquin, in the *Morte Darthur*, Gaheris pronounces Lancelot the best knight in the world: he has just eliminated the second best.¹²⁰ After Lancelot decapitates the wicked Meleagant with a great sword stroke in the *Lancelot*, Kay similarly proclaims Lancelot's well-earned status: 'Ah, my lord, we welcome you above all the other knights in the world as the flower of earthly chivalry! You have proved your valour here and elsewhere.'¹²¹

In the *Lancelot* Bors meets a knight (who turns out to be Agravain) who stoutly asserts Lancelot is not the knight Gawain is. Their argument over who is best fighter is, of course, settled by fighting. Bors unhorses his opponent, and hacks him into a disabled state on the ground. When he refuses to surrender ('you will take nothing more of mine away'), Bors hammers his head with his sword pommel until blood spurts, pulls away the armour protecting the knight's throat, and prepares to deliver the fatal blow. Agravain, with an ugly grimace, agrees Lancelot is the better knight.¹²²

Bademagu leaves court in a huff when Tor gets a seat at the Round Table before he does. Balin, during his brief perch on the top rung on the ladder of prowess, wins so much worship that it generates reaction; after he alone can pull the wondrous sword from its scabbard, Launceor, for example, 'had grete despite at Balin for the enchevyng of the swerde, that any sholde be accompted more hardy or more of prouesse'. Balin and his brother Balaan, when setting out to fight King Rion, intend to 'preve oure worship and prouesse upon hym'. Worship is won by prowess which is of necessity done unto others.¹²³

Danger, mounted and armed, lance at the ready, thus lurks along every forest path, in every glade, at every river ford. Knights must ride encased in their metal as soon as they venture forth from the castles or hermitages in which they shelter for the night; they must assume hostility from any other knights whom they may meet. In the prose (Didot) version of the *Perceval*, the hero's sister describes this environment plainly:

Dear brother, I have great fear for you who go thus, for you are very young and the

¹¹⁸ See, for example, Vinaver, ed., *Malory. Works*, 411.

¹¹⁹ Kibler, tr., *Lancelot Part V*, 196; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, IV, 352–3.

¹²⁰ Vinaver, *Malory. Works*, 159. Numerous statements of this sort appear in the pages of Malory.

¹²¹ Krueger, tr., *Lancelot Part IV*, 32; Sommer, ed., *Vulgate Version*, IV, 225.

¹²² Krueger, *Lancelot Part IV*, 51; Micha, *Lancelot*, 179–82.

¹²³ Vinaver, *Malory. Works*, 81, 42, 44.

knights who go through the land are so very cruel and wicked, and be sure that if they can they will kill you in order to win your horse; but if you trust me, dear brother, you will leave this endeavour upon which you are entered and will dwell with me, for it is a great sin to kill a knight, and also you are each day in great danger of being killed.¹²⁴

The author of the *Perlesvaus* suggests that after Perceval's failure to ask the right questions in his moment of trial, 'all lands are now rent by war; no knight meets another in a forest but he attacks him and kills him, if he can'.¹²⁵

But is winning all? Is not fighting well just as honourable? The medieval response to such questions seems somewhat unstable. Sometimes a text specifies that the honour of the loser has not been sullied. Palomides tells Gareth, beaten in a joust in the tournament at Lonezep, that he has lost no honour: 'And worshypfully ye mette with hym, and neyther of you ar dishonoured.' No less an authority than Queen Guinevere declares flatly, in Malory's words, that 'all men of worshyp hate an envyouus man and woll shewe hym no faviour'.¹²⁶

In fact, chivalric literature may declare it an honour to die from the blows of a man of great prowess. Owein, dying in the *Quest for the Holy Grail* after Gawain (not recognizing him) has put a spear into his chest, regards his death as fitting: '“Then I set my death at naught,” said he, “if it comes at the hand of so fine a knight as you.”'¹²⁷ Yvain the Bastard, similarly skewered by Gawain in the Post-Vulgate *Quest*, dies with the same sentiment on his lips. An unidentified knight in this text demands a gift of Galahad: he wants Galahad to kill him so that he can die by the hands of the greatest knight in the world.¹²⁸ In the *Lancelot*, one of the opponents Lancelot defeats in the judicial combat concerning the False Guinevere tells him, 'I want to die by your hand, because I couldn't die by a better one.' Lancelot obliges him with a powerful sword stroke cutting through helmet and skull, and down into the man's spine.¹²⁹

Yet winning is undoubtedly better, for all the fair words given to trying one's best and losing like a gentleman. As Malory observes, 'for oftetymes thorow envy grete hardyness is shewed that hath bene the deth of many kyd knyghtes; for thoughe they speke fayre many one unto other, yet whan they be in batayle eyther wolde beste be praysed.'¹³⁰ Experienced knights such as

¹²⁴ Skells, tr., *Perceval in Prose*, 28–9. When (p. 30) her hermit uncle sees her coming with Perceval, he assumes that this knight has seized and robbed her.

¹²⁵ Bryant, tr., *Perlesvaus*, 27; Nitze and Jenkins, eds., *Perlesvaus*, 38.

¹²⁶ Vinaver, ed., *Malory Works*, 444, 466.

¹²⁷ Matarasso, tr., *Quest*, 168; Pauphilet, *Queste*, 153–4. Gawain is, of course, practising the wrong kind of chivalry in the view of this text. But the sentiment expressed by Owein (in Pauphilet, he is called Yvain) the Bastard retains its interest.

¹²⁸ Asher, tr., *Quest*, 155, 125; Magne, ed., *Demanda*, I, 211, 57.

¹²⁹ Rosenberg, tr., *Lancelot Part III*, 272; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, I, 140.

Charny and Malory know that even the most capable must expect to suffer defeat in some fights.¹³¹ If all bruises can thus be poulticed in defeat with the knowledge of having fought well, however, winning decisively eliminates the need. So many knights must have agreed with Malory's Palomides, who frequently appears weeping and lamenting that when a great hero such as Lancelot or Tristram is on the field he can never win 'worshyppe'.¹³²

Characters who have been defeated in the initial, mounted fight with lances, often declare that they have been 'shamed', and want a chance to win worship on foot with sword and shield.¹³³ At one point in the *Lancelot* no fewer than sixty-four knights of the Round Table are forced by Arthur to admit that they have been defeated by Lancelot in a tournament; equally bad, put on oath, none can claim to have defeated him. Having been beaten by the best does not soften their feelings, heightened by Arthur's praise of Lancelot. The author tells us: 'These words of King Arthur so embarrassed the knights of the Round Table that ever afterwards they hated Lancelot with a mortal hatred.'¹³⁴ The hatred of the defeated is similarly directed against Bors, who has overcome fourteen of Arthur's court at the Forbidden Hill:

they were much more dismayed than before by the fact that they had been defeated by Bors, who was but a youth, whereas some of them were old, experienced knights of great strength; every one of them felt great sorrow and resentment in his heart because they had been defeated by him, and that was one of the things for which they bore the greatest rancour against Lancelot's kindred.¹³⁵

It is true that many knights in chivalric literature find the choice between honourable defeat and death an easy decision; one after another saves his life at the last moment as the victor stands over his prostrate body, sword ready for the final, decapitating stroke. Yet the truly heroic prefer to die without ever yielding, without ever once having said 'the loath word' of surrender. Blamour speaks in just these terms to the triumphant Tristram, who has just defeated him:

Sir Trystrames de Lyones, I requyre the, as thou art a noble knyght and the beste knyght that ever I founde, that thou wolt sle me oute, for I wolde nat lyve to be made lorde of all the erthe; for I had lever dye here with worshyp than lyve here with shame. And nedis, sir Trystrames, thou muste sle me, other ellys thou shalt never wynne the fylde, for I woll never sey the lothe worde.

¹³⁰ Vinaver, ed., *Malory. Works*, 133–4.

¹³¹ For Charny, see Kaeuper and Kennedy, *Book of Chivalry*, 130–3; Vinaver, *Malory. Works*, 318. Malory's Sir Dynadan gives the maxim, 'he rydyth well that never felle'.

¹³² E.g. Vinaver, *Malory. Works*, 325, 419.

¹³³ E.g. *ibid.*, 355. Mark says to Lamerok, 'I woll fyght wyth a swerde, for ye have shamed me with a speare.'

¹³⁴ Kibler, tr., *Lancelot Part V*, 206; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, IV, 397.

¹³⁵ Carroll, tr., *Lancelot Part VI*, 236; Micha, *Lancelot*, V, 112.

Blamour's brother, Bleoberis, agrees that 'though sir Trystrames hath beatyn his body, he hath nat beatyn his harte, and thanke God he is nat shamed this day'.¹³⁶ In this view defeat rests in the fallible body, but shame is locked out of an infallible heart.

A knight whom Tor defeats in the *Merlin Continuation* takes just this line: 'Certainly, I'd rather die a hundred times, if that were possible,' he declares, 'than one single time to say or do something that looked like cowardice.' He repeats his stand even after Tor flattens him, driving the links of mail into his head, even after Tor beats his head with the pommel of the sword, so that 'he made the blood flow all down his face'.¹³⁷

Conclusion

A conversation between the Lady of the Lake and the young Lancelot (in the *Lancelot do Lac* and *Lancelot* of the Vulgate Cycle) may well be, as Elspeth Kennedy has suggested, the fountainhead for all later discussions about balance between prowess and other qualities in chivalry. Responding to his lady's Socratic questions, Lancelot says:

It seems to me that a man can have the qualities of the heart even if he cannot have those of the body, for a man can be courteous and wise and gracious and loyal and valorous and generous and courageous—all these are virtues of the heart—though he cannot be big and robust and agile and handsome and attractive; all these things, it seems to me, are qualities of the body, and I believe that a man brings them with him out of his mother's womb when he is born.¹³⁸

Here the ideal qualities of the chivalrous are pressed to the fore, and prowess—competitive, bloody work with edged weapons—is veiled in softening and restraining virtues, as it is, again, when the Lady of the Lake tells Lancelot about the origins of chivalry. Each of the first knights, she says, knew:

[that he] should be courteous without baseness, gracious without cruelty, compassionate towards the needy, generous and prepared to help those in need, and ready and prepared to confound robbers and killers; he should be a fair judge, without love or hate, without love to help wrong against right, without hate to hinder right in order to further wrong.

¹³⁶ Vinaver, ed., *Malory Works*, 256.

¹³⁷ Asher, tr., *Merlin Continuation*, 236–7; Roussineau, ed., *Merlin*, I, 247–8. The sentiment is bold, but the defeated knight suddenly loses resolve. A maiden appears to whom Tor grants a favour: she wants the knight's head; Tor (though the knight now pleads for his life from the maiden) swings so stoutly that the man's head flies six feet from his body.

¹³⁸ Quotation from Corin Corley, tr., *Lancelot of the Lake*, 51; Elspeth Kennedy, ed., *Lancelot do Lac*, I, 141. Cf. Rosenberg, tr., *Lancelot Part I*, 59; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, VII, 248.

‘A knight’, she says, summing up, ‘should not, for fear of death, do anything which can be seen as shameful; rather he should be more afraid of shame than of suffering death.’ She then proceeds elaborately to explain the significance of knightly arms and armour in terms of desirable qualities, especially protecting the Holy Church.¹³⁹

All of the great issues, all of the tensions and paradoxes, lie just out of sight in this splendid discourse—just beneath the surface here and echoed in famous books by Geoffroi de Charny and Ramon Llull.¹⁴⁰ Knights are presented as the righteous armed force of Christendom, the practitioners of licit force, the fair judges in society, wise men motivated and restrained by high ideals, bravely avoiding shame. Courtesy, generosity, the strong helping the weak against robbers and killers—such ideals resonate as much today as they did eight centuries ago.

Yet we need to remember how much these are reform ideas, prescriptive rather than descriptive. We know they do not describe how knights actually behaved. The evidence as a whole shows a core ideal of prowess, belief in sheer aptitude with arms, animated by courage, mildly, ideally, tempered by reason, wise restraint, and strategic pragmatism.

After he has seen Lancelot perform on the battlefield, Galehaut finally manages to meet him for the first time, and to ask him who he is. Lancelot replies: ‘Good sir, I am a knight, as you can see.’ ‘Indeed’, said Galehaut, “a knight you are, the best there is, and the man I would most wish to honour in all the world.”¹⁴¹ Galehaut has seen prowess personified. It has manifested itself in almost miraculous work with ashen lance and sharp-edged sword. The battlefield is strewn with slashed and mangled bodies lying in bloody proof. The vast body of literature about Lancelot regularly takes just such work as its focus—not all of the other fine qualities so praised by the Lady of the Lake. We are tirelessly shown Lancelot thrusting lance and swinging sword, not Lancelot defending the personnel and tithes of Mother Church or playing the fair judge. What other characters in the romances praise repeatedly is his awe-inspiring fighting, not abstract ideals.¹⁴²

We have already considered evidence showing the fear inspired by the estate of medieval warriors, often expressed with prudent indirection. Open devalu-

¹³⁹ Corley, tr., *Lancelot of the Lake*, 52–6; Elspeth Kennedy, ed., *Lancelot do Lac*, I, 142–5; Rosenberg, tr., *Lancelot Part I*, 59–61; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, 248–58.

¹⁴⁰ See discussion in Kaeuper and Kennedy, *Book of Chivalry*, 67, 69–74.

¹⁴¹ Carroll, tr., *Lancelot Part II*, 135; Elspeth Kennedy, ed., *Lancelot do Lac*, I, 320. This formula is repeated in the Post-Vulgate Quest of the Holy Grail. Tristan, who has seen Galahad’s prowess in a tournament, asks him to identify himself. ‘I’m a knight’, Galahad says simply. ‘I know quite well that you’re a knight’, Tristan responds, ‘and you’re the best in the world’: Asher, tr., *Quest*, 217; Bogdanow, ed., *Version Post-Vulgate*, 484.

ations of prowess are rare, indeed, but a writer like Walter Map is capable of at least declaring it morally neutral. 'Goodness only makes a man good', he writes; 'prowess makes him either.'¹⁴³ An intensely religious knight such as Sir John Clanvowe could stand traditional chivalric values on end:

ffor byfore God alle vertue is worsshipe and alle synne is shame. And in pis world it is euene þe reuers, ffor þe world holt hem worsshiful þat been greete werreyours and fighteres and þat distroyen and wynnyn manye loondis.

(for in God's sight all virtue is worship and all sin is shame. But the world always reverses this, for the world holds as worshipful those who have been great warriors and fighters who destroy and win many lands.)¹⁴⁴

The tension between sheer prowess and the restraint of reason or wisdom animates major texts, most famously in the *Song of Roland*. 'Roland is full of prowess, Oliver of wisdom', sings the author of that text, as he unfolds for his audience the complex consequences.¹⁴⁵ *Raoul de Cambrai* more than once warns that 'an unbridled man passes his days in sorrow'.¹⁴⁶ Near its end *The Story of Merlin* pointedly praises a Roman leader as 'a very good knight, worthy and bold', who 'knew how to fall back and turn about, and . . . knew how to storm in among foes'.¹⁴⁷ Malory, through Sir Tristram, says that 'manhode is nat worthe but yf hit be medled with wysdome'.¹⁴⁸ The wise Pharian tells his nephew, Lambegue, in *Lancelot*, 'almost never do we see great intelligence and great prowess lodged together in a youth. And it is true that for your age you have unusual prowess, enough, in fact, to dim your view of wisdom'.¹⁴⁹ Yet we should note that he goes on to urge unbridled prowess in the right situations, matched by quiet restraint in council:

¹⁴² The household of two hermits term Lancelot 'the valiant man, who by his chivalry made all the world tremble before him': Asher, tr., *Merlin Continuation*, 69; Bogdanow, ed., 'Folie Lancelot', 45. Earlier, the ladies on the Island of Joy witnessed Lancelot unhorse a good challenger so forcefully that the man's neck is nearly broken and he faints in agony. Their response is to bow, sing, and dance before his shield, and proclaim him the best knight of the world. Asher, 78; Bogdanow, 70. A maiden late in the *Perlesvaus* tells her lady he is 'the violent Lancelot who killed your brother. It is no lie that he is one of the finest knights in the world, but because of the vigour and worth of his chivalry he has committed many an outrage.' Bryant, tr., *Perlesvaus*, 201; Nitze and Jenkins, eds., *Perlesvaus*, 312.

¹⁴³ M. R. James, ed., tr., *Walter Map*, 416–17.

¹⁴⁴ Scattergood, ed., *Sir John Clanvowe*, 69.

¹⁴⁵ 'Rollant est proz e Oliver est sage', the opening line of *laisse* 87, in Brault, ed., tr., *Chanson de Roland*.

¹⁴⁶ Kay, ed., tr., *Raoul de Cambrai*, *laisse*s, 24, 104; and see the related sentiment in *laisse* 90.

¹⁴⁷ Pickens, tr., *Story of Merlin*, I, 406; Sommer, ed., *Vulgate Version*, II, 434.

¹⁴⁸ Vinaver, ed., *Malory. Works*, 428.

¹⁴⁹ Rosenberg, tr., *Lancelot Part I*, 36; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, VII, 151–2. Cf. Meyer, ed., *Girart de Roussillon*, 94ff: Girart says to his nephew, 'Beau neveu, vous êtes preux; votre ardeur juvénile serait bonne, si vous aviez la sagesse.'

in battle or combat or in lists where the finest knights are gathered, take care to stand aside for no one, whether younger than yourself or older, but spur your horse on before all the others and strike the best blow you can. When it comes to arms, you see, no man need yield to young or old to gain fame and honor; but in important deliberations young men should attend to their elders. The truth is that there is great honor in dying boldly and bravely in combat, but only shame and reproach can come from foolish speech and thoughtless counsel.¹⁵⁰

King Bademagu takes another corrective line on prowess as he tells his evil son Meleagant, jealous of Lancelot and anxious to fight, that 'size of body and limbs is not what makes a good knight, but greatness of heart'.¹⁵¹

Even in those passages that praise some hero's prowess interesting elements of doubt, or at least cautionary lines of thought, put in an appearance. Gawain twice fails to have a transforming experience (in the *Lancelot*) when the Grail comes into his presence: once he cannot keep his eyes off the beautiful maiden carrying it and, in recompense, is not served; the second time he is so worn out with fighting a mysterious knight in the hall of the Grail castle that he is lying, wounded and almost in a stupor on the floor. Through the very presence of the Grail heals his wounds, he fails to recognize it. A hermit tells him later that his failure was '[b]ecause you were not humble and simple'.¹⁵²

In the *Lancelot* five sons of a duke, fighting their father, convince Lancelot by lies to join their side. He characteristically goes to work 'killing whatever he hit', and wins the day, even sending the duke's head flying with one of his great sword strokes. He is greeted with the usual effusive celebration in the winner's castle as 'the best knight in the world'. Yet, the text tells us, this victory was a pity, for Lancelot has been fighting on the wrong side, against members of the Round Table who were aiding the duke.¹⁵³

We can only wonder at the way in which, with or without conscious intent, authors give us curiously shaded descriptions of Lancelot and other heroes in full battle fury. Lancelot is not only compared to a raptor, a wolf, or lion, but more than once to an 'evil demon', 'the Devil himself', 'Death itself'. Bors and even Perceval can likewise be termed 'demon'.¹⁵⁴ William of Palerne is described by enemies who feel the force of his chivalry as 'sum devel degised pat doþ al þis harm (some disguised devil who does all this harm)'.¹⁵⁵

Balain's great prowess likewise produces deep ambivalence. The *Merlin Continuation* asserts that Balain was the most praised knight on a battlefield, for 'he practised a chivalry so expert, wherever he went, that everybody

¹⁵⁰ Carroll, tr., *Lancelot Part II*, 36; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, VII, 151–2.

¹⁵¹ Rosenberg, tr., *Lancelot Part III*, 260; Micha, *Lancelot*, I, 87.

¹⁵² Krueger, tr., *Lancelot Part IV*, 100–2; Micha, *Lancelot*, II, 376–88.

¹⁵³ Kibler, tr., *Lancelot Part V*, 152–3; Micha, *Lancelot*, IV, 159–64.

watched him marvelling'. Wondering observers, however, say he is no mortal, but a 'monster' or 'devil'. Even King Arthur said that 'he was not a knight like other mortal knights, but a man born on earth for human destruction'.¹⁵⁶

Those who would reform chivalry knew that they had to come to terms with prowess. They all hoped to channel or change the force and energy of this great virtue. Some even harboured futile hopes of substituting another quality in the uppermost slot. But prowess holds centre stage; it is essential to the chivalry with which the reformer must deal, however he or she wants to channel or change it. A layman lacking prowess might show other qualities in the textbook chivalric list; but at least in the realm of chivalric literature no one would particularly notice, because no one would particularly care. The chief virtue must come first. It is probable that complex figures in chivalric literature, such as Roland himself, or even darker figures, such as Raoul in *Raoul de Cambrai*, Claudas in the *Lancelot do Lac*, or Caradoc in *Lancelot*, were so interesting to their contemporaries in medieval society because of the tension between their admirable prowess and other qualities warped or missing in them.¹⁵⁷

We must recognize how strongly chivalric literature acknowledges the impulse to settle any issue—especially any perceived affront to honour—by couching the lance for the charge or swiftly drawing the sword from the scabbard. Force is regularly presented as the means of getting whatever is wanted, of settling whatever is at issue.¹⁵⁸ Accusations of a more or less judicial nature, of course, lead to a fight, as does assertion of better lineage. But so does assertion that one's lady is fairer than another knight's lady, a request for a knight's name or even an answer to the question, 'Why are you so sad?' Of course, as often as not the fight is over no stated question at all, but simply seems a part of the natural order of the imagined world of chivalry: two knights meet in the

¹⁵⁴ Kibler, tr., *Lancelot Part V*, 160, 198, 204; Micha, ed., *Lancelot*, IV, 193, 359–61, 388; VI, 150, 160, 195–6; Carroll, tr., *Lancelot Part VI*, 315, 317, 326; Asher, tr., *Merlin Continuation*, 104; Bogdanow, ed., 'Folie Lancelot', 139.

¹⁵⁵ Bunt, ed., *William of Palerne*, I, 3888.

¹⁵⁶ Asher, *Merlin Continuation*, 197; Roussineau, ed., *Merlin*, I, 107–8.

¹⁵⁷ Claudas, has, for example, given up love and shows no interest in largesse; his loyalty clearly leaves something to be desired. Yet he is elaborately praised by Pharian as the finest knight in the world. Rosenberg, tr. *Lancelot Part I*, 34; Elspeth Kennedy, ed., *Lancelot do Lac*, 78. Caradoc is described as 'the cruelest and most disloyal of all men who had ever borne arms'. Yet he is also 'of great prowess and strength beyond measure'. Rosenberg, tr., *Lancelot Part III*, 282. Micha, *Lancelot*, I, 182–3. *Raoul de Cambrai* will be discussed in Chapter 11.

¹⁵⁸ Honoré Bonet provides an instructive list of foolish reasons why knights fight: over which country has the best wine or the most beautiful women, which country has the best soldiers, which man has the better horse, the more loving wife, the greater success in love, more skill in dancing or fighting: see Coupland, ed., tr., *Tree of Battles*, 207.

forest, they fight.¹⁵⁹ The vast and complex literature of chivalry celebrates knightly violence even as it attempts to reform or deflect it into channels where it would produce less social damage.

¹⁵⁹ Classic examples from Malory: Sir Pelleas 'wente theas the lady Ettarde was and gaff her the cercler and seyde opynly she was the fayreste lady that there was, and that wolde he preve uppon only knyght that wolde sey nay': Vinaver, ed., *Malory. Works*, 100. Sir Gareth asserts to the Black Knight that he has a higher lineage, 'and that woll I preve on they body!' (p. 185). The King of Ireland, summoned to Arthur's court on a charge of treasonous murder, decides 'there was none other remedy but to answere hym knyghtly' (p. 252). Pellinor, wanting to know Tristram's name, decides he will 'make hym to telle me hys name, other he shall dye therefore' (p. 314). Sent by Arthur to discover why a passing knight is sorrowful, Balain tells this knight, 'I pray you make you redy, for ye muste go with me othir ellis I muste fyght with you and brynge you by force' (p. 50).