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

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When asked to describe medieval literature, most individuals would be quick to cite knights in shining armor, grandiose battles, and chivalry. While large battles and knights are very prevalent images in the contemporary understanding of medieval times, oftentimes we lack a clear concept of chivalry – the code of honor guiding these endeavors. In a sense, chivalry has devolved into a commonplace term; in a social context, many individuals claim that “chivalry is dead.” Yet, such phrases ignore the rich and complicated notions of chivalry, particularly as established by medieval literature. By first examining prominent scholarship concerning definitions of chivalry, this paper will seek a functional definition of the notion, and then draw a larger connection between its application in both medieval and twentieth-century American texts.

In order to examine how medieval texts define chivalry, it is important to gain a larger sense of what the term means in its development and secular usage. Maurice Keen’s *Chivalry* remains a foundational text for the study of chivalry, examining the concept through its links to the martial world, the church, and medieval romantic texts. Chivalry is “an ethos in which martial, aristocratic, and Christian elements were fused together” (16). Keen views the elements of this ethos as “fused,” because there is great difficulty in separating one element from the others. He asserts that chivalry is “not a word that can be pinned down clearly and succinctly in a dictionary definition” (2). Moreover, with such extensive links in various aspects of life, and a notable discrepancy between real life events and the life presented in romance, chivalry remains a nebulous term. While traditional scholarship links the term, both in secular life and textual references, to the late medieval period, Keen’s discussion allows for a link between chivalry and earlier Anglo-Saxon works. In fact, Keen notes that a tripartite ordering of society in terms of martial, aristocratic, and Christian elements appears “very early, indeed long before any such word as chivalry had been coined” (3). Alfred the Great’s translations of Boethius, written in the

890s, make reference to the notion. Moreover, Keen speculates that the origins are “undoubtedly” older still (4).

Building on the origins of chivalry, one must also look to the crucial role of the warrior and the genre of romance in order to understand the greater development of chivalry. The notion of the warrior played a crucial role in establishing a definition of chivalry. Keen attempts to clarify the notion of chivalry as framed by romance, stating, “From a very early stage we find the romantic authors habitually associating together certain qualities which they clearly regarded as the classic virtues of good knighthood: *prouesse*, *loyauté*, *largesse* (generosity), *courtoisie*, and *franchise* (the free and frank bearing that is visible testimony to the combination of good birth with value)” (2). As I argue in this essay, the medieval texts throughout this paper assess these same core values, inviting us to apply the notion of chivalry beyond this chronological period. In fact, in his work, Keen does mention works predating the conventional period of chivalry; he analyzes the “liberality, loyalty, and courage” present in *Beowulf*, as well as “the view of youth as a testing time” (53). In making this connection, Keen opens up new ways to examine chivalry, outside of the conventional period. As Keen posits, “a way of life is a complex thing, like a living organism...there is plenty left to explore” (17). In this paper, I will use Keen’s definitions as a foundation to explore chivalry as it applies to medieval texts and can be productively applied to twentieth-century American texts, focusing on the martial aspect of chivalry in particular.

Although war still plays a crucial role in chivalry, the relationship shifted in the sixteenth century. Traditionally regarded as a hereditary profession, war became more mechanized and technologically advanced, and public involvement grew (239). Regardless of the circumstances of the call to war, the basic notion of a code of chivalry still exists. The essential code of chivalry

prescribes that the warrior should protect the faith of Christ against nonbelievers, defend his lord, and protect the marginalized groups: women, the weak, widows, and orphans (9).

Such an examination of chivalry is not wholly lost in translation to American literature. Keen's analysis allows links with other periods, including Anglo-Saxon texts, which this paper will then expand to discuss modern war narratives. Twentieth-century American authors Ernest Hemingway and Tim O'Brien use contemporary wars to examine masculinity; in their respective texts, *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Things They Carried*, they raise questions concerning the definitions of man, warrior, and courage. This paper will begin by analyzing medieval works, in order to establish a functional definition of chivalry and the medieval concept of masculinity, and then examine how these definitions apply to twentieth-century American literature. While masculinity and chivalry are not interchangeable terms, there is an inherent link; throughout medieval literature, chivalry guides the warrior – a task assigned solely to men.

Although many seek to debunk the prevalent images of knights in shining armor that dominate the public perception of medieval literature, to do so would be a bit overzealous. Such images do appear frequently in the bulk of medieval texts, yet the flaw in this perception is that it ignores the depth of examination present in the texts. These are not merely whimsical tales; rather, each of the texts addressed in this paper present and also challenge some aspect of chivalry and, consequently, masculinity.

Throughout medieval literature, authors laud the warrior, the man of courage and honor. Yet, as this paper will demonstrate, there is also a sense of dissatisfaction with the notion of chivalry. In practice, chivalry seems to only exacerbate the problems of the warrior. By

examining Old English texts such as *Beowulf*,¹ tenth-century *The Wanderer*, and *The Battle of Maldon*, written sometime after August 991, and Middle English texts such as late fourteenth-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, one can come to a clearer understanding of chivalry and its implications. Then, one can productively apply the notion of chivalry to an examination of the twentieth-century American texts *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Things They Carried*.

To begin an analysis of chivalry in the medieval battle motif, it may be beneficial to proceed in chronological order, with *Beowulf*. This anonymous text chronicles the battle of Beowulf, the hero, and Grendel, a monster of mythic proportions. In the text, Beowulf is glorified; in a textual interplay of pagan and Christian themes, he is the ordained hero. In his battle with Grendel, Beowulf is God's "chosen instrument" (Bloomfield 546). Throughout the text, regardless of the interaction of pagan and Christian elements, the author emphasizes "the purity of his motives and the nobility of his role" (Bloomfield 557). Moreover, Beowulf's victory is considered pre-destined; the poet writes "Beowulfe wearð/ guðhreð gyfeþe" (ll. 818-19).² Beowulf plays a clear and celebrated role in the text; after each successful endeavor, the speaker commends Beowulf's rightful action.

After Beowulf literally disarms Grendel by tearing his limb from the socket, the speaker writes, "Hæfde East-Denum/ Geatmecga leod gilp gelæsted,/ swylce oncyþðe ealle gebette/ inwidsorge þe hie ær drugon/ ond for þreanydum þolian scoldon,/ torn unlytel."³ Heroes are revered for their ability to fulfill boasts; in fact, in a later text, the *Wanderer* warns that "Beorn sceal gebidan, þonne he beot spricedð,/ oppæt collenferð cunne gearwe/ hwider hreþra gehygd

¹ *Beowulf* was composed no later than 1000 AD, which is the date of the manuscript. For a useful summary of the state of the dating controversy, see R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, eds., *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), cixii-clxxx, esp. cixii-cixiv.

² "Beowulf was granted by fate triumph in battle" (ll. 828-33). All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

³ "The Geat man had fulfilled his boast to the East-Danes [and] also made good all grief and sorrow that they had endured and had to suffer for the dire necessity, no little affliction" (ll. 70-2).

hweorfan wille.”⁴ Medieval authors place great significance on the warrior’s ability not only to convey a great promise to the people, but to follow through on such a promise. In ridding the hall of Grendel, Beowulf fulfills his promise to the Danes and also lives up to the nearly mythological tales of his feats of strength mentioned throughout the poem. Moreover, in each of Beowulf’s battles, the speaker not only describes his sword, armor, and other physical elements, but also heroic qualities such as courage (ll. 825, 1529, 1531-2, 1536). Beowulf epitomizes chivalry; he comes from afar with the noble purpose of saving the Danes and does this on a grand scale. While Beowulf ultimately dies, his actions are praised and revered. His death might leave the East-Danes vulnerable once again, but he is still honored with a burial at sea complete with riches. Thus, the text encounters the great paradox of chivalry in medieval literature: chivalrous actions often lead the hero into great harm, yet these actions are encouraged.

While *Beowulf* addresses chivalry in battle, *The Wanderer* deals with the implications of chivalry after the battle; for the Wanderer, chivalry prescribes a tremendous degree of loyalty. The Wanderer describes his fantasies of never having lost his lord, despite his current condition of being “wintercearig,” or “winter-sad” (l. 24). The Wanderer reflects, “Þinceð him on mode þæt he his mondryhten/ clyppe ond cysse ond on cneo lecge/ honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ær/ in geardagum giefstolas breac.”⁵ Within this anecdote, the speaker places himself in an obviously subservient position, but with the utmost joy and reverence. The loss of his lord leaves the narrator in utter exile – “wineleas” or “without a friend” – and the Wanderer is left to contemplate his memories of time spent with his lord despite the impact of the loss (l. 40). Throughout the work, the Wanderer depicts immense heartache through physical imagery. He no

⁴ “A warrior must wait when he utters a boast/ until he knows fully stout-hearted/ where his mind’s thoughts will turn.”

⁵ “It seems in his mind that he embraces and kisses his lord and lays hand and head on his knees, just as he used to enjoy the gift throne in the days of old” (ll. 41-4).

longer has any ties to other individuals or to any physical location; quite literally, he wanders the earth, lamenting the tremendous loss of his lord. In contrast to the days spent at the gift throne, the Wanderer is now resigned to stir ice cold seas with his hands (l. 4).

The Wanderer's emotional loss manifests itself in a physical exile. For critic Marijane Osborn, the vision of sea birds within the poem offers a correlative to the Wanderer's emotions (122). With the bird imagery, the poet connects emotions and physical being. Osborn asserts this "outward/inward" link, stating "In both classical and Germanic traditions the souls of men regularly appear as birds, but even today the particular tradition that seagulls are the spirits of dead seafarers retains vitality" (122, 123). The poet builds upon the general experience of having sorrow as one's only companion, developing a clear connection between the seabirds and the concept of soul. As Osborn concludes, "The birds are nothing more than birds, but it was the momentary expectation of something more that raised the wanderer's hopes and then renewed his sorrow as those hopes were dashed" (124). After the loss of his lord, sorrow is the Wanderer's only companion.

While *The Wanderer* does not take place during a battle, it does reflect upon the traumatic end of a battle and the close ties of loyalty that called him to fight. As the Wanderer reflects on the decline of the lord and his men during battle in the mead hall, he transitions to a discussion of the wise man and warrior. In listing attributes of a proper wise man and warrior, the Wanderer avoids extremes; to cite some examples, he warns against being too fearful, too joyful, too greedy, and too weak (ll. 65-69). There is a resonating note of sorrow as the Wanderer insists that "ne mæg wearþan wis wer ær he age/ wintra dæl in woruldrice."⁶ Building upon the Anglo-Saxon notion of counting years using winters as a marker, the Wanderer posits that wisdom requires experience. Even in describing positive attributes of a warrior, which align with

⁶ "A man cannot become wise before he has had a deal of winters in this world" (ll. 64-5).

codes of chivalry, the Wanderer's tone is marked by sadness and loss. Chivalry, and loyalty in particular, ultimately leaves the Wanderer alone in the world, yet he still lauds such qualities. As in the other medieval works, the text celebrates chivalry, despite the fact that chivalry is the root cause of the protagonist's suffering.

Similarly, *The Battle of Maldon* examines the paradox of lauded yet precarious chivalry; however, while *The Wanderer* reflects on the aftermath of a battle, *The Battle of Maldon* reflects upon the paradox amidst the gore and action of battle. *The Battle of Maldon* melds a historical account with an examination of chivalry. The battle marks a particularly poor example of military strategy. In the battle, the Anglo-Saxon leader Byrhtnoth is convinced by the Viking messenger's false flattery to allow the Vikings passage onto land. The messenger appeals to his sense of honor, which is prescribed by tenets of a chivalric code, although this not the same formal code of behavior that the romances will solidify. Once on land, the Vikings overcome the Anglo-Saxons; in essence, an adherence to honor results in destruction. Moreover, once the Vikings overcome the Anglo-Saxons, many of the Anglo-Saxon soldiers flee – a decision very much looked down upon by the poem's speaker. According to critic George Clark, despite the regrettable decision to allow the Vikings on to the shore, "the poem leaves no room for doubt on the cause of the English defeat, and that cause was not Byrhtnoth's chivalry, folly, or pride;" rather, the cause of defeat was the flight of Byrhtnoth's men (258). Thus, while it was not a particularly wise strategy to allow the Vikings passage onto land, the true condemnation lies with those who chose to run rather than fight.

It is beneficial to examine the critical debates concerning Byrhtnoth's decision to allow the Vikings passage onto land. Some critics consider the decision to be the result of Viking deception, while other critics assert that Byrhtnoth is sarcastic, proving "beyond a doubt that he

had no intention of being fooled by Viking promises” (Elliott 57). Regardless of one’s judgment of these actions, there is an implication of pride. Whether Byrthnoth was beguiled by the false flattery of the Vikings or his own boasts of Anglo-Saxon ability, his actions reflect a chivalric code. J. R. R. Tolkien deems this a heroic “excess;” regardless, Byrthnoth’s actions echo a sense of obedience to the call of honor (qtd. in Elliott 59). Clark focuses on this call of honor rather than viewing Bryhtnoth’s actions as a demonstration of heroic excess. He writes, “Nothing in the text makes concrete a possibility the Bryhtnoth could refuse the Viking request without failing in his duty” (258). Tolkien asserts that such a notion of heroic duty is molded by “‘aristocratic tradition,’ enshrined in tales and verse of poets now lost save for echoes” (qtd. in Clark 263). As a whole, *The Battle of Maldon* places great significance “upon oaths needing to be kept and boasts waiting to be made” (Elliott 59). In allowing the Vikings passage onto land, Byrthnoth does not execute a wise military strategy, but he does act in order to buttress his oaths and boasts.

Anglo-Saxons warriors died at the end of Viking spears, and other Anglo-Saxon warriors grew tired and weary, yet chivalric codes remain vital. In fact, despite the category of historical narrative, the *Maldon*-poet places little emphasis on specifics about the setting in relation to the speeches and battle cries. According to critic Ralph W. V. Elliott, “Everything in the poem – every speech, every action, every allusion – is directed to the stating and illustration of the central theme of heroic obedience” (56).

The focus of the poem is the expression and examination of chivalric ideals. Byrhtwold, an elder, speaks to the warriors, pleading with them to continue on the basis of chivalric code. He boldly exhorts, “Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,/ mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað./ Her lið ure ealdor eall forheawen,/ god on greote. A mæg gnornian/ se ðe nu fram þis

wigplegan wendan þenceð.”⁷ In this speech, Byrhtwold calls upon the warriors’ sense of honor. Even though the outcome of the battle is likely grim, the men must still fight and honor the men who have already died, especially their leader. Not only must the men continue to fight, but even amidst strife and diminished strength, their courage must grow. Byrhtwold presents deceased leader Byrhtnoth as an example of heroism; the men who choose to turn and run will regret their decision to not align themselves with such fateful acts of heroism. Thus, the speech supports this call of honor and obedience, even though these chivalric ideals are ultimately fatal.

While *The Battle of Maldon* frames an examination of codes of chivalry within a historical account of battle, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* constructs a fictional narrative that is not meant to be based in any historical facts or figures with the express purpose of challenging its protagonist. As critic J.J. Anderson asserts, “The poet allows the unfolding of the story to lead us to look beneath the attractive surface of chivalry – a Chaucerian method. Comment from the poet-narrator is kept to a minimum, and one is not aware of a strong narratorial personality” (338). The story, rather than a narrative voice, guides the reader’s analysis of chivalry. Based on the various tests that Gawain encounters, the reader is able to assess both Gawain and the role of chivalry in Gawain’s unfortunate predicament.

In the text, Sir Gawain volunteers to battle the Green Knight on behalf of King Arthur; in doing so, he takes on a much bigger challenge than he realizes. The Green Knight establishes a larger test for Gawain, extending beyond the assumptions of the initial confrontation. In Fitt 3, Gawain’s trial intensifies; when Gawain lodges in the lord’s castle, he accepts the lord’s promise

⁷ “[Your] intention must [be] the firmer, [your] heart [must be] the braver, /[your] courage must [be] the greater, as our strength diminishes./ Here lies our leader all cut down,/ a good [man] in dust. He will [for]ever have cause to regret, [he]/ who now thinks to turn away from this battle-play” (ll. 312-16).

to swap “Quether, leude, so lympe, here other better.”⁸ The lord seems to imply that something will fall to Gawain’s lot, despite his days of leisure within the castle. Otherwise, the promise would only benefit Gawain, not the lord.

Regardless, Gawain accepts the promise, and unknowingly puts himself in a precarious situation. Each day, once the men leave for the hunt, the lord’s wife attempts to seduce Gawain, alternating between questioning his sense of chivalry and flattering him. Gawain’s feelings about their interactions vacillate as well; he must navigate between a chivalric code which asserts that he must please the lord’s wife and his desire not to “be traytor to that tolke that that teld aght.”⁹ If he adheres to honesty and the terms of the lord’s promise, Gawain would need to report each of the lord’s wife’s kisses. On the other hand, in being chivalrous, he is required to please the wife, and not mar her image. Gawain ultimately navigates between the two; he passes on to the lord the kisses he received, he simply omits their source. When the lord’s wife offers Gawain the green gilded belt, however, his will power wanes. According to Anderson, Gawain’s ideal of courtesy is brought up against “two powerful physical drives. Against the first of these, sexual attraction, it survives with difficulty; but the second, fear of death, overcomes it” (350). Gawain’s fear of death overcomes his adherence to chivalric code.

His ultimate failure to adhere to the codes of chivalry demonstrates a unique characteristic of Gawain in relation to the other characters: his idealism. For Gawain, failure in one aspect of chivalry crumbles the integrity of chivalry in its entirety. Critic Gordon M. Shedd asserts that this failure is a positive product of the work; he writes, “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* succeeds as a work of art where many medieval narratives do not, because despite its traditional invocation of the marvelous it does not falsify the truth about man” (4). Critic Victoria

⁸ ““Whatever falls to our lot, worthless or better”” (l. 1109, text and translation from *Broadview Anthology of British Literature*).

⁹ ““Treacherously betray the lord of the castle”” (l. 1775).

L. Weiss supports this assessment, stating, “Chivalry is an institution of men – not supermen but real men” (187). Both critics point to an important aspect of the narrative; in using games and trials, the narrator does not intend to entirely strike down chivalry, but rather to frame chivalry within the human condition. The idealized notions of the chivalric code prove to be unattainable; even the idealistic Gawain cannot maintain each tenet. In the end, the Green Knight lauds Gawain, despite his frailty, in a ceremony reminiscent of a medieval knighting. Thus, even though Gawain fails, and his attempts at chivalry seem to place him at greater risk, the notion of chivalry is still glorified; the *Gawain*-poet simply asserts the presence of human fault in the quest to achieve the ideals of chivalry.

Each of the texts addressed in this paper present some aspect of chivalry, particularly as it fails in application. As critic Michael Stroud asserts, “Since the inception of knighthood... knights had rarely (if ever) fulfilled their ideals” (324). These failings, while they do reflect somewhat on the individual warriors, illustrate the problematic nature of the chivalric ideals themselves, as they were often contradictory and always impossible to fulfill. Perhaps the largest failing in chivalry – and thus, knighthood – rests with the ideals themselves rather than those practicing them. As evidenced throughout texts such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, chivalry is quite difficult to maintain. Notions of respect, honesty, boast-fulfilling, loyalty, and flattering women seem to come into consistent conflict with notions of self-preservation. In fact, chivalry acts as an unattainable ideal which brings the chivalrous into greater turmoil. For instance, Beowulf faces great peril in battle with Grendel in order to meet the requirements of chivalry; moreover, even though Beowulf rids the East-Danes of their immediate concern, Grendel, he ultimately leaves the Danes vulnerable to attack after his death outside the dragon’s lair.

As for structure, each of the texts uses narrative, with minimal commentary, to examine chivalry. In medieval texts, the plot seems to speak for itself; there is little to no narratorial commentary on the actions of the characters. In several texts, loyalty and courage in battle, prescribed by chivalric code, prove fatal and this is evident, even without overt commentary. Beowulf takes on the monster on behalf of the citizens of a far-off land, and ultimately dies as a result of another such act of heroism. *The Wanderer* presents an example of brutal isolation – the aftermath of the loss of a lord in battle. In *The Battle of Maldon*, Byrhtnoth allows the Vikings passage onto land, however unwisely, in order to display the courage prescribed by chivalry. The *Maldon*-poet uses historical events as a vehicle to present chivalry, particularly in light of human frailty. The *Gawain*-poet, however, creates trials which shake the foundation of Gawain's idealized notions of chivalry by placing him in great peril at the fault of chivalry. Regardless of the decision to frame the narrative in the aftermath of battle, as with *The Wanderer*, or amidst the action of battle – historical or constructed – as with the other medieval texts examined in this paper, there is little sense of overt commentary. The authors present situations in which chivalry proves dangerous, and allow the audience to assess the shortcomings of these idealized notions of “man” and “warrior.” While the authors value some aspect of chivalry, they also recognize it as an ideal which might not be attainable for any real man. Gawain, Beowulf, and their counterparts serve as the ideal in terms of strength and honor, amongst other characteristics; if these men are unable to meet the requirements of a chivalric code, then it seems quite unlikely that any man would be able to live up to such a code in real life.

Earlier, this paper asserted the validity of applying chivalry to Anglo-Saxon works in addition to the traditionally accepted late medieval applications. Using similar logic, one can apply these notions of chivalry across many centuries, to twentieth-century texts. American

works do not abandon these questions concerning codes of chivalry and masculinity. In fact, twentieth-century American authors Ernest Hemingway and Tim O'Brien dedicate a majority of their respective works to confronting issues of masculinity. Moreover, as Keen's explanation of chivalry allows for shifts in martial conduct and practices, even within the traditionally accepted period of chivalry, it appears reasonable to examine larger changes over time and apply chivalry to twentieth-century literature. By examining one text from each author, this paper will analyze the author's approach as well as the author's conclusion. As I will demonstrate, chivalry as a notion itself becomes more contested in the modern works. While the warrior is still idealized, there are further complications; authors begin to question the foundation and intent of such idealized notions.

Ernest Hemingway's works celebrate a spirit of machismo, complete with alcohol, war, and women. In Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, protagonist Frederic Henry enters the war as a way to reinforce a masculine identity, yet finds that the war does not adequately perform this function. According to critic Charles Hatten, the economic and political shifts of the World War I era created a "crisis of masculinity" (79). Social trends shifted toward a new notion of gender division, complete with "a compensatory middle- and upper-class idealization of sport and war as a source of secure masculinity, a trend that, given his obsession with violent sports and war, is clearly a major influence on Hemingway" (80). Thus, war became an outlet through which Hemingway's characters could express masculinity since, with the influx of women in the work force, the economic and political spheres denied men the "traditional" non-military outlets of masculinity. As in medieval literature, battle acted as a demonstration of masculinity; at war, men could assert their masculinity through the physicality of battle.

Despite Hemingway's concentration on war as a means to reaffirm masculinity, as previously mentioned, the war does not fulfill this function for Frederic Henry. While war is usually marked by vigor, Frederic Henry lacks enthusiasm and does not engage in the war past a certain level of superficial participation. Amongst the other soldiers, he must deal with matters of life and death and issues of celibacy, but he does so half-heartedly. In conversation with his fellow soldiers, Frederic Henry continues to offer only evasive answers "suggesting that the answer is too close to the core of his personality to be easily expressed...[this] hint[s] that Henry entered the army simply to establish his manhood through the quintessential masculine activity of war" (Hatten 83). The protagonist enters the war to affirm his masculinity, yet remains detached from the task; he notes, "It evidently made no difference whether I was there to look after things or not" (Hemingway 16). Due to this detachment, Henry's effort to reaffirm masculinity through war is a failed effort.

As the brutality of war fails to meet Frederic Henry's needs, the novel presents sexual experience as a means to secure masculinity, dividing these experiences into two main categories: on the one hand, there are interactions with prostitutes, and on the other, there is the relationship between Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley. Cut off from their accustomed social spheres, men were still able to assert masculinity and sexual autonomy through sexual experiences. Yet, this new type of sexual interaction still does not allow Frederic Henry, or the other soldiers for that matter, to assert masculinity by holding authority above women. In fact, Rinaldi, a fellow soldier, frequents places of prostitution and treats the women with insensitivity. He objectifies women in order to assert his masculinity, yet this still proves unsuccessful as the women become familiar. Initially, Rinaldi describes his interactions with "girls;" however, his perceptions shift, and he begins to refer to the prostitutes as "old war comrades" and "friends"

(Hemingway 65). Hatten asserts that by partaking in sexual desire, the women “have entered into a characteristically male experience and must be treated as equals” (89). Sexual autonomy – particularly as demonstrated through loose sexual behavior – is typically classified as a part of the male experience. Yet, in this context, male characters fail to exert sexual dominance over women. Thus, sexual dominance is ineffective in asserting masculinity; if women can also partake in loose sexual behavior, then the behavior can no longer be considered masculine.

The other category of sexual experience – Frederic Henry’s relationship with Catherine Barkley – renders this notion of reified sexuality ineffective. Frederic Henry initially describes his relationship with Catherine Barkley as strategic, stating, “This was a game, like bridge, in which you said things instead of playing cards” (Hemingway 30). For Frederic Henry, the relationship is initially a game of strategy, rather than an expression of emotion. He enters the relationship for the same reason he entered the war – as a means to reinforce his masculine identity. The relationship evolves as Frederic Henry develops feelings for Catherine, and it no longer serves to reinforce his masculinity. In fact, one could argue that within the construct of their relationship, Catherine Barkley assumes the masculine role. One major component of such an assertion is the concept of passivity versus activity. Passivity is most commonly considered to be a feminine trait, while action and risk characterize masculinity. According to Hatten, “Barkley, having joined [the sexual relationship] willingly in the experience of reified desire that makes her ‘like a whore,’ is unwilling to accept the passive position that the allusion offers her” (94). In willingly calling herself a “whore” during a discussion of their stay in a hotel, Catherine verbally asserts her control over their sexual relationship (Hemingway 152).

Furthermore, Catherine shows no interest in society’s rules; rather, she is preoccupied with sexual desire, depriving her partner of the “masculine position of sexual initiator” (Hatten

95). In professing her feelings for Frederic, Catherine tells him that she wishes to cut her hair, explaining, “I want you so much I want to be you too” (Hemingway 290). In making this statement, Catherine seeks to eliminate the divide of gender by becoming the same as the man she loves. Frederic Henry holds no real masculine authority within the relationship; thus, the relationship, like the war and loose sexual behavior, does not serve to reinforce masculinity.

Catherine’s masculinity extends beyond her command of sexuality. She also demonstrates a great deal of autonomy, which Hemingway noted as a masculine ideal. In the final chapter, the setting shifts from the life and death scenario of war to that of the birth of Catherine and Frederic’s baby. This crucial scene subverts gender; Frederic demonstrates vulnerability as he repeatedly pleads, “God please do not make her die. I’ll do anything you say if you don’t let her die” (Hemingway 330). There is a clear sense of vulnerability and desperation in Frederic’s refusal to accept his wife’s fate. Catherine calmly accepts her own death, reassuring Frederic, “Don’t worry darling...I’m not a bit afraid” (Hemingway 330). Hatten argues, “In dying bravely – she confronts the ultimate fear-inducing situation of death and masters it – in a feminine version of a battlefield, she achieves exactly the sort of heroic stature that persistently eludes Henry” (96). Catherine is a woman, yet she is the only character who is able to assert a stable masculinity.

This “undermining of war as a masculine preserve” does not thwart the masculine ideal; rather, Catherine “becomes the key mechanism for the successful articulation of a masculine experience” (Hatten 96-7). Hemingway celebrates masculinity; perhaps ironically, the only character capable of articulating true masculinity is the female protagonist. Through the protagonist Frederic Henry, Hemingway depicts the frailty of masculinity. For Frederic Henry, the war does not reaffirm masculinity; rather, the war exposes his vulnerability. Thus, for

Hemingway, the war acts as a way to examine masculinity, with a different end. While Hemingway certainly celebrates bravery and autonomy, he grants these masculine traits to the female protagonist; the war subverts, rather than reinforces, the allocation of masculinity to the warrior. Such a manipulation or subversion of the norms of gender is a unifying theme amongst Hemingway's female characters and the calculating wife of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and will also play a role in O'Brien's text. Throughout these works, women are not limited to passive roles; rather, they actively construct their own sexual identity to either achieve pleasure or as a means to test the honor of the hero, as in *Gawain*.

Like Hemingway, twentieth-century American author Tim O'Brien dedicates much of his work to dealing with issues of war and masculinity, but O'Brien enriches his works with a larger discussion of truth and narration. The bulk of O'Brien's works take place during or in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is a particularly interesting and relevant text in the discussion of masculinity in the battle motif for several reasons. Many individuals did not agree with the Vietnam War and, consequently, did not respect the returning soldiers. Even though proponents of the Vietnam War faced harsh criticism and a lack of acceptance, other groups applied to deserters the label of "coward." Thus, O'Brien embeds his work within a challenging setting. Furthermore, Tim O'Brien engages in direct discussion of the nature of story-telling. O'Brien plays with the nature of truth and biography within his works; he aims to create a true experience rather than depict actual events for the sake of accuracy. He writes, "Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth" (83). Thus, as O'Brien posits, truth speaks more to small events which build a larger sense of the experience than to whether certain events actually occurred. O'Brien's works challenge the reader to step outside of the intentional fallacy, or the

notion of looking to the work to learn more about the author's life. This was not necessarily an issue for readers of the anonymous medieval texts addressed earlier in the paper, as without a known author, the reader is unable to link the content of the text with the author's biographical information. In this sense, O'Brien's works introduce a new layer to the discussion of war narrative.

For O'Brien, war is a "deliberate violence that in turn provokes narrative deliberation" (Wesley 2). O'Brien uses some traditionally accepted war narrative structures, but further complicates matters of military involvement in order to achieve a different end than the traditional war narrative. According to Tobey C. Herzog, "the traditional theme of the initiation of a military protagonist into the depravity of war dominates central texts of literature on Vietnam, a premise O'Brien's fiction significantly complicates" (qtd. in Wesley 9). War is a personal experience, yet it also speaks to larger national and societal perspectives. Thus, O'Brien's approach is appropriate as it accounts for not only the personal experience of war but also the imposition of interpretation on the collective experience. O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is notable because of his attempts to address the "divergence of values – the contradiction between a standard of literary authority and the project of moral evaluation" (Wesley 2). For O'Brien, "truth" is not merely factual reporting of events; rather, O'Brien addresses conflicting representations and the problematic nature of the Vietnam War.

The claim that O'Brien's work diverges from the traditional tropes of war narratives is not one-dimensional. In fact, O'Brien's work seems to challenge the accepted war narrative at every level. To begin, it is imperative to address notions of masculinity and chivalry. As established previously, chivalry and masculinity share an inherent link in the identity of the warrior. O'Brien, like Hemingway, does not cite war as a successful means to reinforce

masculinity. Critic Wesley notes O'Brien's denial of traditional tropes, which "have been turned into formulas through which violence is encoded as a desirable course of action that presents war experience as male, agent-less intensification – the chief social activity through which 'winners' are determined" (2).

Courage, a major component of chivalry as defined in this paper, is a focus for O'Brien. For O'Brien, courage is not a simple value; in fact, "the only certainty was moral confusion" (40). In "On the Rainy River," O'Brien situates his analysis of courage within his decision to answer his call to the draft. For O'Brien, this decision, although it is twenty years in the past at the time he wrote the text, is a source of deep embarrassment and turmoil. He begins by explaining his initial views of courage; he writes, "Courage, I seemed to think, comes to us in finite quantities, like an inheritance, and by being frugal and stashing it away and letting it earn interest, we steadily increase our moral capital in preparation for that day when the account must be drawn down" (O'Brien 40). Such an image is comforting, yet it denies the challenges of real decision-making. When O'Brien is forced to decide between entering the war and dodging the draft, he realizes the complexities of courage. O'Brien classifies himself as a liberal and calls upon the powerful image of the meatpacking plant in describing the brutality and mechanics of war.

For O'Brien, neither decision is ideal or a clear demonstration of courage. If he were to fight in the war, he would be courageous in answering his call of duty and accepting the physical dangers of war; however, he would also be fighting in a war that he opposed. On the other hand, if he were to flee to Canada, he would be courageous in risking a prison sentence and never seeing his family and friends again in order to be faithful to his beliefs; however, he would also fit into the group of Vietnam deserters, who were generally considered to be cowards.

Ultimately, O'Brien buries the protracted discernment process in his memories with great embarrassment and answers his call to the draft. Yet, it is crucial to note that O'Brien would not classify his decision as a grand realization of courage. In fact, he concludes the short story by stating, "I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war" (61). For O'Brien, intention is important; in deciding to go to war, he did not act out of courage – he acted out of embarrassment and fear. This example demonstrates O'Brien's capacity to challenge conventional thinking and values, particularly as they relate to notions of masculinity and chivalry.

In "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," O'Brien transposes the archetypal tale of a young man's initiation into the masculine world of physicality and violence into the story of a young girl, Mary Anne. In Rat Kiley's account, soldier Mark Fossie accomplishes an incredible feat when he flies his girlfriend, Mary Anne from the United States to his location in Tra Bong. Mary Anne is "an attractive girl" with "terrific legs, a bubbly personality, and a happy smile," yet her experience in Vietnam changes her (95). She begins to ask questions about the war and weaponry and, soon enough, entrenches herself with six Green Berets, a particularly brutal division of the armed forces in Vietnam. As Rat Kiley explains, "she wasn't even the same person no more" (107).

Initially characterized by her "culottes and this sexy pink sweater," Mary Anne appears in "a bush hat and filthy green fatigues, her face "black with charcoal," and ultimately adopts a "necklace of human tongues" (O'Brien 90, 102, 110). She shifts from dreaming about a future with Mark on Lake Erie to the grotesque; the necklace of tongues represents the brutality of war, a far shift from Mary Anne's original appearance and persona. When Mark attempts to bring Mary Anne back to camp, she resists; while he brought her to Tra Bong, she now considers him

an outsider to the experience of warfare. Mary Anne is strategic and autonomous – she embodies the typified masculine persona, standing in contrast to Mark Fossie. For O’Brien, the transposition of the tale of initiation across the binary line of male and female acts as a vehicle for greater interpretation. As Wesley articulates, “in a single stroke, O’Brien demolishes the masculine mystique of the violence of war as the litmus test for manhood” (11). Within a short visit, Mary Anne immerses herself in the experience of war – a radical shift from the superficial and feminine to the brutal and masculine. Again, as with Hemingway’s Catherine Barkley, the female prostitutes, and the sexually manipulative wife of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a female character, Mary Anne, commands an ability to be a part of the grit and strategy of the battle that is equal to that of her male counterparts. In fact, O’Brien might take the notion of female engagement further, as Mary Anne seems more involved and adept in the mechanisms and brutality of war than the male soldiers. Mary Anne’s transformation extends beyond that of the actual soldiers. Moreover, if Mary Anne is capable of such a transformation – perhaps even more so than her male counterparts – then the foundation of war as a successful means for the reinforcing of masculinity is shaken.

O’Brien’s rhetoric and narrative forms do not allow for easy conclusions; rather, the reader is forced to challenge notions of conflict and resolution as established in other texts. Traditionally, war narratives serve to inform the collective experience; those who have not experienced active combat or a particular war seek fiction as a means of understanding. Thus, authors of war narratives often employ a particular narrative structure in order to impose the desired perception on public consciousness. For Tim O’Brien, the traditional war narrative form does not allow the reader to confront the cause-effect binary. Rather than chronicle the transition

of a protagonist from innocence to the depths of the brutality of war, O'Brien's narrative juxtaposes various images throughout his story cycles in order to disallow notions of causality.

To illustrate O'Brien's confrontation of binaries, it is most effective to look to an example of juxtaposition. O'Brien's "How to Tell a True Story" demonstrates the efficacy of such a juxtaposition in thwarting the reader's desire to assign labels of cause and effect. In the short story, O'Brien depicts the death of fellow soldier Curt Lemon. He describes how "the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms," how "he took a particular half step, moving from shade into bright sunlight, and the booby-trapped 105 round blew him into a tree" (O'Brien 70, 83). The passage contains beautiful imagery, which readers would not expect in the description of a soldier being blown apart by an artillery shell. O'Brien goes on to explain the gore of cleaning Lemon's remains from the tree, clearly demonstrating the lifelong impact of the imagery. Then, O'Brien depicts the massacre of a baby buffalo. He writes, "[Rat Kiley] stepped back and shot it through the right front knee. The animal did not make a sound. It went down hard, then got up again, and Rat took careful aim and shot off an ear...It wasn't to kill; it was to hurt. He put the rifle muzzle up against the mouth and shot the mouth away. Nobody said much" (O'Brien 78-9). The events seem to align, as both victims are innocent. The death of the buffalo seems to offer a method – though ineffective – of avenging or coping with the death of their fellow soldier.

A traditional war narrative would allow for such a cause and effect connection, as it cleanly ties up loose ends. In the traditional narrative, the massacre of the buffalo would have acted as a resolution or means of justice against the evils of Vietnam. O'Brien, however, does not allow for a simple resolution. After this juxtaposition of scenes, Dave Jensen makes a joke about the missing hand of a dead man's corpse; this joke incapacitates the reader's ability to

assign labels of cause and effect, as it callously distracts from the emotional content of the preceding events. For O'Brien, the goal of the war story should be to "replace certainty with confusion" (Wesley 8). O'Brien does just that; he does not allow the reader to simply accept binaries.

According to Wesley's assessment, the traditional war narrative allows for "uncritical manipulation" of events; the texts looked for simplicity and closure in conflict-resolution (13). By juxtaposing contrasting scenes and prohibiting a sense of closure, O'Brien creates a challenging and powerful narrative. Wesley asserts, "For it is only through the unflinching willingness to evade the consoling simplicity built in to the formulaic war narrative process that genuine responsibility can be attempted" (13).

In addition to narrative structure, O'Brien uses rhetoric to engage his reader – a technique which moves away from the more covert, plot-centered techniques of the medieval texts addressed in this paper. O'Brien does not seek to simply relate tales of his own experiences; rather, he wants to engage the reader in a more powerful way. O'Brien uses the second person rather than always relying on the "I" of the first person narrative. In using the second person, O'Brien builds upon the correlative of shared experience of the reader and narrator. He also uses "careful translation" to prevent the outsider-insider binary. In describing place names, he relates the sights to something the reader would have seen in daily life; for example, the average reader would be more apt to recognize an athletic field over a field of combat in Vietnam. Thus, the reader is unable to separate him or herself from the narrative; the reader can find some semblance of a shared experience within O'Brien's work.

O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* plays with the notion of truth and what O'Brien deems "story-truth." "How to Tell A True War Story" holds a two-fold significance. First, the

story demonstrates how O'Brien inserts essays and reflection within a narrative. Second, the story delves into the nature of metafiction, a staple of Tim O'Brien's writing. O'Brien declares, "A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe" (78). The truth is not a generalization, and sometimes, the truth may contradict itself. Whereas the medieval texts examined in this project are anonymous works and thus not much can be gathered by way of the intentional fallacy, O'Brien, however, embeds himself within his works, so biographical information does play some role in examining the work. The merger of O'Brien the narrator and O'Brien the author is yet another metafictional technique; the narrator and the author are not necessarily one cohesive unit. While O'Brien the author did in fact fight in the Vietnam War, not every detail of his life aligns with that of his narrator. He does not allow readers to simply accept one truth; rather, he calls upon readers to challenge truth.

For twentieth-century American authors Ernest Hemingway and Tim O'Brien, war offered a medium which allowed them to confront conventional notions of masculinity and chivalry. While the authors take varied approaches to the task, each finds fault with the notion of using war as a means to secure masculinity. Both Hemingway and O'Brien place women – Catherine Barkley and Mary Anne, respectively – into the role of the innocent being initiated into the cruelties of war. In doing so, the authors prove the inadequacy of war as a means to reinforce masculinity; if women can succeed in the war zone, then war cannot be a singularly masculine experience. Moreover, the twentieth century introduces a new dimension to the medieval warrior narrative. In examining texts with known authors, the intentional fallacy comes into play. The reader wants to compare Hemingway and O'Brien's lives to their respective works, but this might not be the most effective means of analysis. Critic Trevor Dodman asserts, in regards to Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, that the principal concern should not be "the text

or the trauma of Hemingway's life but rather the text of his narrator's trauma" (250). Fitting with Dodman's assertion, readers must seek an understanding of these texts beyond their relation to actual events of their authors' lives.

In comparing these twentieth-century American texts to their medieval counterparts, one could certainly assert that the twentieth-century texts are more overt in their confrontation of masculinity and chivalry. The authors are more apt to interject opinions, perhaps as a result of their acknowledgement of the intentional fallacy which is inherent in any work with a known author. O'Brien recognizes and plays with the intersection of O'Brien as narrator and O'Brien as author. For instance, O'Brien blends narrative action and "lectures on the postmodern tests of a true war story" (Wesley 8). The twentieth-century American texts offer a greater sense of discussion and guidance; they openly lead readers to confront challenging questions, but do not give any blatantly obvious or easy answers. Medieval texts, as they are anonymous, do not have this overt sense of reflection; rather, the texts examine masculinity and chivalry in terms of plot structure. The *Gawain*-poet does not directly reference chivalry, but instead places the protagonist in a series of trials that serve to challenge codes of chivalry. Similarly, the Wanderer experiences the physical hardships of loneliness due to the loyalty prescribed by chivalry. The audience experiences the shortcomings of chivalry in application alongside the protagonist.

Additionally, the medieval texts – while challenging the ideals of chivalry – still offer some glorification in terms of imagery. Warriors appear gallant in shining armor and deal with ornate green-girdled belts. In the twentieth-century American texts, however, the only beautiful images are the pictures of women from home. O'Brien and Hemingway describe the desolation of mud and rain and the gore of battle. The corpses and gaping wounds do not clutter the scenery of medieval texts; the medieval texts shelter the audience from such brutal imagery. In both

commentary and imagery, Hemingway and O'Brien take a more overt and graphic approach to the battle motif than their medieval counterparts.

Yet, medieval and twentieth-century American texts are not wholly disparate in their assessment of masculinity in chivalry, particularly as these notions relate to the battle motif. Rather, the same paradox abounds throughout the medieval and twentieth-century American texts; while both periods challenge notions of chivalry and masculinity, they appear to still glorify the warrior class. Even centuries later, authors still grapple with similar questions about chivalry and masculinity.

Moreover, each of the texts presented in this project reflects some level of trauma, from the loss of a lord in *The Wanderer* to physical injury in *A Farewell to Arms*. War, prescribed by notions of masculinity, leaves a lasting mark on the individual and society, and it is and will continue to be an issue for returning veterans. Currently, pressing questions about the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to reflect critical interrogations of these literary works; individuals seek to understand the necessity of war and the perception of the warrior and heroism. As Daniel Lieberfeld asserts, "The morality, politics, memory, and even the sensory experience of war are all contradictory, complex, and ambiguous" (571). By examining multiple texts about war, one can gather a better understanding of the experience, as well as its aftermath. Moreover, one can assess the social and cultural foundations of war. As good literature about war is "nuanced," one must delve beneath the surface of each of these texts, recognizing the author's intention in writing as well as the culture and politics inherent in the work. There is a clear contrast between "the mythology typical of nationalistic and propagandistic conceptions of war, and the lived experience" (Lieberfeld 572). Challenging this contrast offers opportunities for greater understanding of the experiences of others, politics, culture, and gender, amongst other things.

In terms of gender issues, these texts point to the seemingly inherent link between war and masculinity. Such a link, though problematic, still pervades literature and society. Each of the selected texts shows the failings of a male protagonist. Readers must reevaluate notions of masculinity, perhaps more aptly framing these notions in terms of what is actually attainable. From medieval texts to the twentieth-century American texts, authors present a challenge to typified masculine and chivalric ideals.

As O'Brien writes, "And in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war" (85). Such is certainly the case for the bulk of literature examined throughout this paper. War is not simply a means to address actual events and physical brutality; rather, war offers an opportunity to discuss larger themes in challenging circumstances. Various war narratives allow readers to confront notions of chivalry and masculinity, amongst other topics. Moreover, at a textual level, war narratives raise questions of narrative intent, structure, and definitions of truth. As for larger implications and relevance, it is crucial to examine war narratives, as they inform the collective perspective. Especially as the United States is still working through the repercussions of the Iraq War, it is necessary to confront this idea of a warrior identity. As readers – and as citizens – it is important to assess the notion of the warrior, as well as why the masses hold the warrior in such high regard, despite views of any specific war. Moreover, one must examine the link between masculinity and the warrior motif. The construction of masculinity, as portrayed throughout the various texts in this paper, proves to be problematic, yet society continues to laud a certain sense of machismo.

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