

## CHIVALRY

Alumni Prize Essay, read by Joseph Monaghan at the  
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In looking over the history of the great institutions which flourished in Eurpoe during the Middle Ages, we find that the three greatest were the Catholic Church, Feudalism and Chivalry. The first, the Catholic Church may well be regarded as the Nursing Mother of the other two; for Feudalism and Chivalry could never have succeeded as they did, had they lacked her aid and protection. That institution which comprised the best of the customs and habits of the Middle Ages is commonly known as "Chivalry." To state briefly what Chivalry is, we might say that it is that body of sentiment and practice, of law and custom, based upon the military and territorial system of the European nations, which prevailed among the dominant classes in the greater part of Europe between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries; and which was so universal that many of its usages are still in vogue among the nations of Western Europe.

Although many writers give different versions of the origin of Chivalry, it is most commonly believed that it originated with the early German tribes. Tacitus, the great authority on the early history of the Germans, describes at great length the ceremonies with which the young men were admitted into the ranks of the warriors. In the presence of all the inhabitants of the district the aspirant's qualities were considered, and then, if found worthy, he was presented with a shield and lance by the Chief as a token of his admittance into their ranks. So great indeed, was the honor and esteem with which these knights were regarded that, among some of the tribes, even the princes of the Royal household were excluded from the King's table until they had been knighted.

During the Middle Ages the Church was engaged in a continual struggle aganst the violence of the age,—against the savage customs of the feudal warriors who were using brute-force. The outcome of this conflict was the foundation of the Chivalry of the Middle Ages.

Chivalry, as an institution, has three distinct phases: the military, the social and the religious. Considering it from the military stand-point, Chivalry was the heavy

cavalry of the Middle Ages composed of knights and squires. The knight was the professional soldier of the time and, as his career was very expensive, generally only a man of independent means could devote himself wholly to this profession.

The education of the young candidate for knighthood began in the court of some knight or baron. Here he was sent early in life, perhaps at the age of twelve, and developed himself by performing such duties as attending on the ladies of the court, and learning the intricacies of horsemanship so necessary to him in later years. Thus the first step towards knighthood, that of the page, was, as we see, certainly one of obedience and humility; and, no doubt, generally developed his character in a purely Christian way, though at times his moral education was so sadly neglected that disastrous results followed.

Advancing in years and experience the young page was promoted to the second stage of knighthood—that of the Squire. During this period his chief duty was to render personal service to the knights, especially in those things pertaining to battle.

The third and highest stage in the military aspect of Chivalry was that of Knighthood; and, as a general rule, this was not conferred until the candidate completed his twenty-first year. The ceremony used in conferring it was almost entirely religious in its nature, the aspirant preparing himself by prayer and penance, and by the reception of the Sacraments. Religious rites were performed, and then the knight-elect, having solemnly promised to be faithful to his trust, to protect the weak and defenceless, to defend the Church, and to be honorable and upright in all his actions, received a slight tap on the shoulder with the flat of the sword. This ceremony was known as "Dubbing."

The religious character of Chivalry is readily apparent in all these ceremonies. The knight, it is true, devoted his life mainly to warfare, but his sword was blessed by the Church, and in him, in a manner, the military profession was consecrated, and arms and Religion were reconciled. His time was spent in battle; but, due to the guiding influence of the Church, his sword was used to defend the right; his arm was ever raised to protect the weak and defenceless; women and



children were the object of his special care, and, to do all this, he pledged himself by vow.

We see, then, what a powerful influence Chivalry had in producing a favourable change in the manners of Society during the ages in which it existed. War was prevalent in Europe when Chivalry began to develop, and war it surely was in the worst sense of the word. Men were fighting in almost total barbarism, and the chief feature of all the bloody wars was brutality. When, therefore, Chivalry began to shoot forth and impress itself on mankind, what a favourable influence it must have had on all classes; what a soothing ointment it was to heal the wounds of Society! Humanity was now introduced to a more humane warfare. Men began to think, to consider and to realize what they were about. Thereafter they became milder, and tried to enkindle in their inhuman hearts a love of mankind and moderation in their conflicts.

When we consider the vows of the Knight, we cannot fail to perceive what a softening influence they must have produced on him; how they instilled into his youthful mind a high sense of honor and a true appreciation of virtue. We know that the chivalrous knight was required, at all times, to be valiant and honourable in all his deeds and never to stoop to slander or lies. We learn that, besides infusing into the knight a strong Christian character, Chivalry produced in him also the most delicate feelings and a most respectful devotion to the female sex; and it is probable that, after the Catholic Church, no other institution did more to elevate the social status of woman than did Chivalry. Men now did not act toward one another like uncouth savages; they became civilized, refined and cultured, possessing a sense of honor and of duty hitherto all too rare.

Generally speaking there are four periods in the history of Chivalry: the foundation, the period during the Crusades, the period after the Crusades and the final stages. We have already seen its foundation—the period of the ‘Truce of God;’ how it came into force, not instantaneously, but gradually—from the solemn handing of arms to the young knight up to the time of the Crusades when Chivalry reached its most glorious height. It remains for us to see how it succeeded in later years.

History relates the development of the Crusades

and their effect on the people of the time. To those knights, who went on such expeditions, many advantages were offered, such as remission of all penances imposed upon them and dispensation from the jurisdiction of the secular courts. Naturally there was a great influx of young men into the knightly ranks during this time, and so great was their valour that this period is generally known as 'The Golden Age of Chivalry.' Chivalry now became a highly religious institution and many noble young men pressed forward to the Holy Land burning with zeal and enthusiasm, to wrest it from the hands of the Infidel. Many were the honourable and distinguished deeds of the knights, whose names will go down in history among the greatest heroes of all time. This was the age when that noble institution shone forth in all its brilliancy and splendour, and with its powerful rays softened or deadened the cruelty of Barbarism. This was the period when the germ of Chivalry burst forth into full life and produced its greatest fruits.

But history has shown us, time and time again, that the greatest human institutions have their days of adversity as well as of prosperity, and we find that, after the Crusades, even Chivalry began to fall gradually into decay. It is worthy of note, however, that, not until it lost its religious character, did vice begin to creep in and then its decay was all too rapid. There were now no laws to restrict the knight in his deeds of war and triumph. With the spirit of religion gone he had nothing to which he might look forward. Chivalry was fast degenerating!

Dwindling to a shadow of its former self Chivalry became, in its last stages, nothing more nor less than a mere court service. The Knight of old, renowned for deeds of valour, had disappeared and in his place was found the oft-times spineless creature whose usefulness was restricted to the pomp and ceremony of the court. He still took vows, but the true meaning of their obligations was forgotten; and the religious ceremony, which accompanied them of old, gave place to the revels of the banquet-hall. The lofty principles of former days had vanished. The Crusades, which had been such an incentive to deeds of valour, had also disappeared. Respect for woman was replaced by her degradation on the one hand, and by a false appreciation of her rights on the other. Thus this great institution, so fruitful of good in the days of its glory, became, in the



period of its decadence, a mere cloak to shield the crimes committed in its name.

But the spirit of Chivalry is not yet dead! It lives on in the hearts of mankind; for, if we look around us in the world to-day, we still find a multitude of noble souls, strong, tender and true; men and women whose education has been developed morally as well as intellectually; people whose lives are guided by the dictates of conscience and who would choose to die rather than to stoop to an unworthy action. These are the Knights of our time: as truly deserving of the title as were the noblest of those whose deeds illuminated that glorious period which history has honoured with the name of "The Golden Age of Chivalry."

