

## Conception of Knighthood and Fifteenth-Century Chivalric Manuals\*

**Tsuyoshi Mukai**  
mukai@fwu.ac.jp

(For a final version of this article, see *Studies in English Language, Literature and Teaching: Essays in Honour of H. Tetsumura and Y. Soeda* (1993))

Chivalric writings like chronicles, romances and military handbooks, either in manuscript or in print, were popular and widely read in the latter half of the 15th century. This was exactly when 'the age of chivalry was gone' and nearly at the threshold of the Renaissance. To illustrate the chivalric decadence, a few passing references to the plight of the contemporary knights will suffice: Lydgate's description of the knights who delight in merchandise; William Worcester's criticism of the knights who forget their noble blood and who are engaged in singular civil practices by learning law and customs of land; and Christine de Pisan's satirical words of her contemporary knights who have learnt nothing but pride, lechery and gay clothing at their service in King's court.<sup>1</sup> In this chivalric deterioration, these writings on knighthood were issued and received as a means of chivalric rehabilitation.

What was presented in these manuals as an ideal image of knighthood was quite unlike the upcoming Renaissance conception. The knight in the new era must be not merely a fighter but also a thinker with foresight, and he should give precedence to a national advantage rather than to his natural lord's. William Segar's *The Booke of Honor and Armes* (1590) explicates the image of a nationalistic soldier-scholar as follows:

... the commendation due vnto learning is of no lesse desart,  
tha[n], that which belongeth to Martiall merit. And indeed  
very rarelie doth any man excell in Armes, that is vtterlie  
ignorant in letters (Book 5, Chapter 25)<sup>2</sup>

and

... ye shall neuer fight against this mightie and excellent  
Prince that bestoweth the order of Knighthood vpon you,  
vnlesse ye shall be occasioned so to doo in the seruice of  
your owne King and naturall Prince: ... it shall bee lawfull  
for you to serue against him, without reproach or offence to  
all other companions in Armes. (Book 5, Chapter 4)

But the 15th-century chivalric manuals, such as *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry, Knyghthode and Bataile*, *The Boke of Noblesse*, and *The Book of Fayttes of Armes and of Chyuarye*, were written more or less from a romantic and medieval viewpoint.<sup>3</sup> Though having varied emphasis on each respect, they concertedly regard chivalry as a combination of religion, war and gallantry. As is prescribed in the *Ordre of Chyualry*, knights are chosen to fulfil these offices: 1) to maintain and enhance the holy faith; 2) to defend their secular lord; 3) to keep justice and work for a common profit; 4) to protect the weak or the helpless.<sup>4</sup> The ideal image of knight is thus presented as an ecclesiastically elaborated form of the original community-defender by arms.

Chivalry, to the authors of the *Ordre of Chyualry* and the *Knyghthode*, is a 'high order' instituted and ordained by God, and to the author of the *Fayttes*, it is a military order (a social caste of military elites).<sup>5</sup>

As for the function of chivalry in the governing system, unlike the Renaissance view, the

manuals still maintain a traditional spirit that arms bring peace and are indispensable to the government of the world.<sup>6</sup> But in fact, the contemporary knights were shifting their interest from military practices to civil affairs, and the knightly class was losing its exclusive function in the governing system of the society. The knights of the Paston family are typical examples: they took military services in times of need, while their main concern was in domestic affairs and pleasure-loving.<sup>7</sup>

As for the conception of loyalty, the *Knyghthode* and the *Fayttes* have no explicit mention, but the *Ordre of Chyualry* still upholds a feudalistic idea: the knight must be loyal in any circumstances to his natural lord who has dubbed him a knight. But in those days there must have been growing a patriotic, humanistic attitude that knights are legally allowed to act against their natural lord as long as it is for the benefit of the king or the country. John Tiptoft, the Constable to Edward IV, who sentenced John Grey in 1464 for remaining loyal to his lord rather than to the sovereign, is a forerunner with such thought.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, the 15th century produced a new conception of worship and fame: knightly honour began to be conferred on the knights who won a battle for a national benefit. In this fresh conception, success or failure in battle is a vital problem, and the means employed is a secondary one. As Arthur Ferguson pointed out, Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, is a perfect example of an honourable knight in a modern sense<sup>9</sup>. Beauchamp's tactics on the field of battle were those of the mercenary rather than those of chivalric knights, and yet he was honoured and respected as a most worshipful knight. The *Ordre of Chyualry* agrees to this practical trend of the 15th century when the book says that knights can avoid their bodily and spiritual damage by using prudence, or when it says that by using wit and strategy knights can make successful battles.<sup>10</sup> But the dominant tone in the manual is still traditional, because the manual recommends knights to choose death rather than dishonour, and because it argues that honour is most easily won among perils.<sup>11</sup>

Another salient departure from the realities of the contemporary society is that, in the *Ordre of Chyualry* and the *Knyghthode*, noble birth is stressed as an essential qualification to knighthood.<sup>12</sup> The fifteenth-century new interpretation of knightly honour in the context of national interests or pragmatic philosophy even makes it possible for the leader of the mercenary to become as worshipful as a gently-born knight. Actually, Caxton's epilogue to the *Ordre of Chyualry* implies the disorderly situation of humbly- and gently-born knights in the late medieval society. Caxton, deploring the decline of chivalry and inspiring the knights to valorous actions, advises the readers to emulate Arthurian heroes like Lancelot, Galahad and Tristram, and then he adds to say:

And loke in latter dayes of the noble actes syth the  
co[n]quest/ as in kyng Rychard dayes cuer du lyon/ Edward the  
fyrste/ and the thyrd/ and his noble sones/ Syre Robert  
knolles/ syr Iohan Hawkwode/ Syr Iohan chau[n]dos/ & Syre  
gaultier Mannyre rede froissart/ (p. 122, l. 16- p. 123, l. 4)

As exemplary knights, Caxton, probably unconsciously, ranks Sir Robert Knowlles and Sir John Hawkwood, captains of the mercenary, with King Edward III and The Black Prince, royal personages. As Froissart's chronicle shows us, Knowlles and Hawkwood were humbly-born soldiers and they were promoted and knighted solely for their martial merits.(!! DNB) Caxton's mingled admiration like this does reflect the contemporary situation that one did not need to make a distinction between a mercenary knight and a chivalrous knight.

In contrast to his contention in the epilogue, however, Caxton, in translating the text, puts more emphasis on the feudal requirement of noble birth than the original. Ramon Lull's *Le Libre*

del Ordre de Cauayleria admits that any man of new lineage can enter the order of chivalry if he is gentle and honourable:

Pour ce donqs lordre de cheualerie consent par tres nobles coustumes et fais et par noblesse de prince, quelle puist auoir en cheualerie aucun homme de nouuel lingage honnourable et gentil.<sup>13</sup>

(For this [reason], therefore, the order of chivalry consents by very noble customs and deeds and by [the] nobility of [the] prince, that it can have in chivalry any man of new lineage honourable and gentle.)

Alternatively, Caxton emphasises the gentle breed by excising the concession of the original text:

Thus in the same wyse thordre of Chyualry is more couenable and moche more syttyng to a gentyl herte replenysshed with al vertues than in a man vyle and of euyl lyf. (p. 59, ll. 10-13)

The same aristocratic stance is also found in the *Knyghthode*, a late 15th-century verse translation of Vegetius's *De Re Military*. The clerical translator, a parson at Calais, emphasises noble lineage as a primary condition to knighthood and invites the readers' attention to it by adding the *nota bene* 'Nobiles sint milites' and 'Ignobiles non sint milites'.<sup>14</sup>

From a historical perspective, the undue accentuation on ancestry is a regress. To late medieval readers, Chaucer was there as a witness to show the philosophical situation concerning this problem. The poet himself was concerned in and dwelled on it, and he developed his view of the question of gentle breed to knighthood in his works. Chaucer's early idea of chivalric requirements can be detected in Arcite's eulogy of Palamon, his rival knight for Emely, in the *Knight's Tale*:

To speken of a seruaunt proprely,  
With alle circumstances trewely --  
That is to seyen, trouth, honour, knyghthede,  
Wysdom, humblesse, estaat, and heigh kynrede,  
Fredom, and al that longeth to that art --  
So Jupiter have of my soule part,  
As in this world right now ne knowe I non  
So worthy to ben loved as Palamon,  
That serveth yow, and wol doon al his lyf.  
(I 2787-95; emphasis mine)<sup>15</sup>

Chaucer is expounding on knightly virtues as a love-servant, and it is noteworthy here that, along with fidelity, prowess, prudence, humility and liberality, social position and high kindred are counted among knightly requirements. However, this qualification of gentle breed is not vital in his later view and the well-known proposition on gentility is asserted in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*:

And he that wole han pris of his gentrye,  
For he was boren of a gentil hous  
And hadde his eldres noble and vertuous,

And nel hymselfen do no gentil dedis  
Ne folwen his gentil auncestre that deed is,  
He nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl,

...

For gentillesse nys but renomee  
Of thyne auncestres, for hire heigh bountee,  
Which is a strange thyng to thy persone.  
Thy gentillesse cometh fro God allone.

(III 1152-62)

Chaucer utterly denies the 'estaat' and 'heigh kynrede', which have been considered to be essential to an honourable knight, and now he comes to his mature definition that 'he is gentle that dooth gentil dedis'(1170).

To recapitulate the ideal conception of knighthood specified in the chivalric manuals, it was not the kind of chivalry which adjusted itself to the actual situation of knighthood in the days; rather, it was the kind of chivalry which distanced itself from the realities of the society. The authors (or translators) of the manuals still tended to envisage the knighthood as a secular order aimed to maintain law and justice of the society, but the social settings were too different to revive the traditional chivalric system. What attracted the knightly audience instead was the ethical aspect of knightly virtues encapsulated in the manuals. As Sir John Paston's 'grete boke' suggests,<sup>16</sup> the knights in the late 15th century enjoyed chivalric manuals and romances and thus aspired to the exemplary manners and practices.

Professors Haruo Tetsumura and Yutaka Soeda deserve the title of academic knight in a Chaucerian sense. They have acted out 'gentil dedis' both on and outside the campus, which always moved their colleagues and students to emulate their scholarly life-style. On their sixtieth birthday, we express our gratitude to them for having guided us so far and wish them a fruitful and healthy future.

\* This is a revised version of a part of my paper delivered at the symposium 'Chivalry in Medieval Literature and Life' during the 3rd Congress of the Japan Society for Medieval English Studies, held at Waseda University, in November 1987. Thanks are due to Hiroko Okuda, Setsuko Haruta, Toshiyuki Takamiya and Richard Barber for their valuable comments.

#### Notes

1. See *The Minor Poem of John Lydgate, Part II*, ed. Henry N. MacCracken, EETS os 192 (London, 1934), Poem 77, ll. 25-32, Worcester's *The Boke of Noblesse*, ed. John Nicols (London, 1860), p. 77, and Pisan's *The Book of Fayttes of Armes and of Chyualrye*, ed. Alfred T. Byles, EETS os 189 (London, 1932), p. 29.

2. William Segar, *The Booke of Honor and Armes*, Facsimile Reproduction with an Introduction by Diane Bornstein (New York, 1975).

3. Bornstein examines the character of military manuals and classifies them as follows: Vegetius's *De Re Militari* and *The Boke of Noblesse* are imperialistic and nationalistic in spirit; and *Fayttes of Armes and Knyghthode* are dominated by Christian and chivalric spirit. See her 'Military Manuals in Fifteenth-Century England', *Mediaeval Studies*, 37 (1975), 469-77.

4. For these knightly duties, see *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, ed. Alfred T. Byles, EETS

os 168 (London, 1926), pp. 24-25, 29, 30, and 38 respectively.

5. See Bornstein *ibid.*, 477.

6. The new conception of governance is defined as follows: in the Booke of Honor and Armes, And although it cannot be denied that Empires and Kingdomes are both wonne and kept as well by force and manhood, as by wisdom and policie; yet is the chief of that policie attained vnto by lerning. (p. 67, ll. 16-20)

in the Ordre of Chyualry,

Chyualry is an honourable offyce about alle offyces/ ... And thordre of chyualry is moche necessary/ as touchyng the gouerneme[n]t of the world/ (p. 115, ll. 4-8)

and in the Fayttes,

And therefore saith thautour that of al artes or craftes in a lande more to be comended/ is the arte of fighting in exersice of werre For by that is the fredom of the lande place or contrey surely kept/ and the dignite of the prouince is ther by encreaced/ (p. 28, ll. 9-13)

7. See Arthur B. Ferguson, *The Indian Summer of English Chivalry* (North Carolina, 1960), p. 197 and H. S. Bennett, *The Pastons and their England* (Cambridge, 1932).

8. See Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, 1984), pp. 175-76, and Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 29-39.

9. See Ferguson *ibid.*, p. 19.

10. See Ordre of Chyualry, pp. 95 and 96.

11. See Ordre of Chyualry, pp. 62 and 37.

12. See Ordre of Chyualry, p. 57, ll. 10-16 and p. 59, ll. 10-13, and Knyghthode, stanzas 27 and 28. Concerning these two stanzas, R. Dybosky comments that 'the translator emphasizes the feudal qualifications of birth rather than the moral ones, on which Vegetius laid chief stress' (p. xxix).

13. Lull's text is taken from the footnotes to the Ordre of Chyualry, p. 59.

14. See Knyghthode, the marginalia at ll. 271 and 278.

15. Chaucerian quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987).

16. See G. A. Lester, *Sir John Paston's 'Grete Boke'* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 50-51.