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Arthurian Chivalry and War in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries: History and Fiction
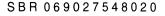
Generations of scholars have tried to define and date the Golden Age of Chivalry and the reasons for its decline[1], but even today the prospects of achieving agreement are not favourable. Consensus of opinion may, however, be reached concerning the consequences of the Hundred Years' War on the ideal of chivalry. The discrepancy between ideal and reality, claim and fulfilment, in short, between chivalry and war, was clearly revealed by the traumatic events of war which was far removed from the earlier idealistic conceptions of knighthood.

As source materials we can draw on history and fiction, genres which, according to C. S. Lewis, cannot and should not be distinguished when applied to medieval literature and its reception.[2] Both genres contain products of imaginative fancy as well as historic reality; and both contain contemporary assessments and commentaries on actual problems, tendencies, and events of the time. The treatment of chivalry and war is particularly revealing in works of the so-called Alliterative Revival. Three interconnected poems of this group provide us with apt sources of information on literary attitudes towards the subject, namely the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and the related romances *Awntyrs of Arthur* and *Golagros and Gawain*.[3]

I.

On the 22nd of July, 1339, King Edward III sent a letter to the King of France offering him three alternatives by which to settle the war between England and France: knightly single combat of both kings, battle of both kings with a hundred chosen knights on each side, and finally battle of the entire armies against each other.

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[1] For an important discussion of the problem, see Larry D. Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 137—201. A very useful bibliography on chivalry and war during the Middle Ages is by Robin Higham, *A Guide to the Sources of British Military History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971).

[2] C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 179—82.

[3] Valerie Krishna, ed., *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition* (New York, 1976); Ralph Hanna III, ed., *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyn* (New York and Manchester, 1974); Francois Joseph Amours, ed., „The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawane", in *Scottish Alliterative Poems in Riming Stanzas* (Edinburgh and London, 1897; rpt. New York, 1966), STS 27.38, pp. 1—46.

This is not only a listing of the possible prototypes of decision by combat, but at the same time a kind of summary or abstract of the chronological development of the strategy of war: from knightly single combat to mass warfare. Single combat as war *en miniature* existed throughout the entire Middle Ages.[4] It functioned as a substitute for armed warfare or could be a by-product of it in battles and in sieges. Cornish and other historians give us ample evidence for such single combats. Throughout the entire Middle Ages, they followed the same ritual: a knight would leave the battle formation and challenge an opponent to single combat. The challenge was accepted, and both sides ceased fighting for a time to observe the result of the duel. First, the knights charged with lances on horseback. Having lost or broken their lances, they dismounted and concluded the battle by the sword „to the utteraunce".

The list of such single combats during the fourteenth century is enormous. Nearly every chronicler reports on this type of single combat. But in the fourteenth and particularly in the fifteenth century, they convey an almost antiquated impression.[5] When seen against the background of the brutal reality of war, our „good chivalrous knights" impress their modern audiences as predecessors of Don Quixote, their military goals being less to serve their King and Fatherland than to gain the favour of noble ladies or simply to win honour. These single combats lacked any significance whatsoever as to the outcome of the battle, and ultimately that of the war.

Knightly practice of battle, however, did not disappear overnight. It went into a gradual decline and became an antiquated, politically irrelevant form of combat. In the fourteenth century, this decline was only noticed by particularly clear-sighted observers; Froissart for instance did not recognize what had taken place at Crécy. He reported the battle as if the defeat of the French had been an unfortunate coincidence, completely divorced from the nexus of cause and effect:

> ... the erle of Alenson, and therle of Flaunders, fought valyantly, every
> lorde under his owne baner; but finally, they coude nat resyst agaynst the
> puyssaunce of the Englysshemen, and so ther they were also slayne, and dy-
> vers other knyghtes and squyers. Also therle Lewes of Bloyes, nephue to the
> Frenche kyng, and the duke of Lorayne fought under their baners, but at last
> they were closed in among a company of Englysshmen and Walsshemen, and
> there were slayne, for all their prowes. Also there was slayne the erle of Aus-
> ser, therle of saynt Poule and many other. In the evenynge the Frenche
> kynge, who had lefte about hym no mo than a threscore persons, one and
> other, wherof sir John of Heynalt was one, who had remounted ones the

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[4] Cf. F. Warre Cornish, *Chivalry* (London and New York, 1901), pp. 88—89.

[5] Warre Cornish, *Chivalry*, p. 79; cf. A. H. Burne, *The Crecy War: A Military History of the Hundred Years' War from 1337 to the Peace of Bretigny, 1360* (London, 1955), and his *The Agincourt War: A Military History of the Latter Part of the Hundred Years' War from 1369 to 1453* (London and Fair Lawn, N. J., 1956); H. J. Hewitt, *The Black Prince's Expedition of 1355—57* (Manchester, 1958) and his *The Organisation of War under Edward III, 1338—62* (Manchester and New York, 1966).

kynge, for his horse was slayne with an arowe; than he sayde to the kynge,
Sir, departe hense, for it is tyme; lese nat yourselfe wylfully; if ye have losse
at this tyme, ye shall recover it agayne another season.[6]

In Froissart's eyes, chivalry and heraldry were immutable values and ideals,
something completely different from the art of war. He had not recognized that
the outcome of war was no longer dependent on individual knights, but was now
decided by the archers and common soldiery. Nor was he conscious of the fact that
a new age had begun, one that would no longer bear the stamp of chivalry.

The English armies marching into war were no longer largely composed of
bands of knights.[7] The national militia (the Anglo-Saxon *fyrd*) played hardly
any rôle by the fourteenth century. The reason is less to be sought in the intro-
duction of *scutage,* which enabled nobles and knights to buy off the obligation of
military service, but rather in a gradual undermining of the entire system of feu-
dal loyalty and interdependencies.

The feudal system was no longer suitable for the recruitment of armed forces
for the military campaigns of the king. Edward III introduced the so-called in-
denture system. This consisted in the enrolment of soldiers on a long-term contract
basis. Individual commanders were authorized by the king to recruit mercenaries:
men at arms, archers, spear fighters, miners, artisans, physicians and field chap-
lains. The contract was generally for one year. The soldiers were dependent on
their wages, and therefore much easier to discipline than the old feudal armies. In
a sense, the English army under Edward III was a mercenary force. Even the
Black Prince was on the pay-roll at the rate of one pound a day.

Literary works reflect this development from feudal knighthood to mercenary
armies to a far greater extent than has been recognized so far. Thus in the *Alliter-
ative Morte Arthure*[8], knightly single combat still plays a prominent rôle; in the
central episode, the Saracen Priamus is confronted by Gawain, the most famous
knight of the Round Table, and the two engage in single combat.[9] The entire
episode takes place in a kind of *hortus seclusus,* completely divorced from any
military reality. Here we find the entire array of elements of knightly romance,
including the miraculous healing waters from the springs of paradise.

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[6] *The Chronicle of Froissart. Translated Out of French by Sir John Bourchier, Lord
Berners, Annis 1523—25,* intro. William Paton Ker, 6 vols. (London, 1901—03; rpt. New
York, 1967), vol. 1, Cap. CXXVIII—CXXX, pp. 300—01.

[7] Cf. A. E. Prince, „The Payment of Army Wages in Edward III's Reign", *Speculum,*
vol. 19 (1944), pp. 152—53, and also John Schlight, *Monarchs and Mercenaries: A Reap-
praisal of the Importance of Knight Service in Norman and Angevin England* (Bridge-
port, Ct.: Conference on British Studies at the University of Bridgeport, distrib. New
York Univ. Press, 1968).

[8] A very useful annotated bibliography on the *Alliterative Morte Arthure,* including
all materials appearing in the period 1950—75, is by Michael Foley, „The *Alliterative
Morte Arthure:* An Annotated Bibliography, 1950—75", *Chaucer Review,* vol. 14 (1979),
pp. 166—87; see also the author's edition of a collection of critical essays, *The Alliter-
ative Morte Arthure: A Reassessment of the Poem* (Cambridge, 1981).

[9] Cf. Krishna, *The Allit. Morte Arthure,* ll. 2501 ff. (pp. 108 ff.).

And yet, the central position of this knightly combat in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* should not mislead us into regarding the romance as the pivotal point of the whole poem. This single combat is obviously reduced *ad absurdum* by being embedded in a detailed account of the French war with all its atrocities. In spite of his exaggerated knightly features, the noble pagan Priamus is nevertheless clearly a mercenary captain. Without plausible motives, he changes side, going over to the enemy in the midst of the battle. As a sign of his turncoat behaviour, he seizes his pennon („penown"), reverses it, and joins the knights of King Arthur. The entire revenue of Priamus changes sides as well. „As sheep pouring out from the fold in the wake of their ram, they desert the ranks and gather about Priamus" — these are the slightly disparaging words of the poet. They send their former overlord a messenger with the following message:

> We hafe bene thy sowdeours this sex ȝere and more;
> We forsake þe todaye be serte of owre lorde;
> We sewe to oure soueraynge in sere kynges londes.
> Vs defawtes oure feez of þis foure wyntteres:
> Thow arte feble and false and noghte bot faire wordes.
> Oure wages are werede owte and þi werre endide;
> We maye with oure wirchipe weend whethire vs lykes.
> I red þowe trette of a trewe and trofle no lengere,
> Or þow sall tyne of thi tale ten thosande or euen.   (ll. 2925—33)

Thereupon the duke curses them as a pack of dogs who should go to the devil:

> ... Siche sowdeours as ȝe I sett bot att lyttill,
> That sodanly in defawte forsakes theire lorde.   (ll. 2938—39)

The subtle perspective through which the action is seen cannot disguise the fact that this is a negative commentary on the army of King Arthur, the typological representative of Edward III. References and innuendos of this kind must have been evident to any contemporary audience.

II.

Mercenaries, that is to say soldiers paid for military service, existed long before the fourteenth century, of course.[10] Not only kings, but also bishops, abbots, and other nobles recruited professional men-of-arms for the protection of their persons and property. We find particularly apt examples in the *Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond*.[11] It contains a long and detailed report on a marshalling (AD 1200)

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[10] For many useful details, though altogether a polemic overstatement of the case, see Terry Jones, *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary* (Baton Rouge, La., 1980); see also John Barnie, *War in Medieval Society: Social Values and the Hundred Years' War, 1337—99* (London, 1974).

[11] *The Chronicle of Jocelyn of Brakelond: A Picture of Monastic Life in the Days of Abbot Samson,* ed. Sir Ernest Clarke (London, 1903), pp. 82, 96—100.

„of the knights of St. Edmund and of their fees, whereof their ancestors had been infeoffed"[12].

But the situation in the fourteenth century is a different one insofar as the entire conduct of war was centred upon the use of mercenary armies. In the case of Edward III, we can scarcely speak of a national army, since Scots, Irish, French, Germans and Italians fought in the ranks. Their wage was the only factor they all shared in common. Military leaders could no longer rely on knightly loyalty. In all the countries of Europe, armies had become multinational and often developed into autonomous entities with their own inner laws. After the end of the campaign it was hardly possible to reintegrate them, and thus they continued to do battle in the form of free companies.

In Italy, the word „Englishman" came to mean the equivalent of plunderer and freebooter. The Englishman Sir John Hawkwood, in Italy known as Giovanni Acuto, became particularly notorious. For many years he waged war in the service of prelates and bishops, princes and kings. At the instigation of Cardinal Roberto Count de Geneva, legate of Pope Gregory XI, he ordered the massacre of the population of Cesena (1377). The chronicler of Rimini claims that five thousand citizens were killed on a single day. On the ransacking of the town, he has the following to say:

> As many men, women, and nurselings as they found, they slaughtered, all
> the squares were full of dead. A thousand drowned themselves in trying to
> cross the moats — some fled by the gates with the *Bretons* pursuing, who
> murdered and robbed and committed outrages, and would not let the hand-
> somest women escape, but kept them as spoil; they put a ransom on a
> thousand little boys and girls; neither man nor woman remained in
> Cesena.[13]

One could, perhaps, object that it was not the knights but rather the soldiers, archers, *condottieri*, who committed such crimes, who were guilty of plunder and of murder. In reality, however, it must have been knights (Hewitt even speaks of the „knightly class") who were responsible for these atrocities. Bonet in his *Tree of Battles* (1387) says:

> That way of warfare does not follow ordinances of worthy chivalry or of
> the ancient custom of noble warriors who upheld justice, the widow, the or-
> phan and the poor. And nowadays it is the opposite that they do everywhere,
> and the man who does not know to set places on fire, to rob churches and to
> usurp their rights and to imprison the priests, is not fit to carry on war. And
> for these reasons, the knights of today have not the glory and praise of the
> old champions of former times.[14]

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[12] *Jocelin of Brakelond*, pp. 183—85.

[13] John Temple-Leader and Giuseppi Marcotti, *Sir John Hawkwood: The Story of a Condottiere*, trans. Leader Scott (London, 1889), p. 122; cf. *Saint Catherine of Siena as Seen in Her Letters*, trans. and ed. Vida D. Scudder (London, 1905), pp. 101—02, „Letter to Messer. John, The Soldier of Fortune".

[14] *The Tree of Battles: An English Version*, trans. George W. Coopland (Cambridge,

Bone's commentary is not surprising, but rather the fact that other chroniclers are not prepared to connect the atrocities of war with the knightly class. But it would be wishful thinking, contrary to fact, to assume that knigths devoted their time to saving damsels in distress while the common soldiers were busy robbing and plundering. It was the knights who bore the responsibility for the organisation and execution of military campaigns. Thus, the poet of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* was not merely indulging in poetic license when he said that all the people living between Spain and Prussia were horrified by Arthur's behaviour:

> Fro Spayne into Spruyslande the worde of hym sprynges,
> And spekynngs of his spencis — disspite es full hugge.   (ll. 3162—63)

The payment of mercenary troops for military service apparently also had moral consequences. Wherever we hear of the decline of knighthood in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it is „coveitise", *covetousness,* that plays a rôle.[15] Most of the soldiers were only interested in booty and plunder, and what is more, did not refrain from robbing churches and monasteries. Even the altars were not spared as we can gather from the statutes of war. Henry V, for instance, demanded that churches and altars be protected and not plundered: „... and yf Any be founde wiche wythoute cause Approuyd by the constable of our hooste presume to take Away from Any churche, chappell, or monastery, Any of theyr goodes ... they be forthwyth hangyd therefore."[16]

III.

The decline of knighthood during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, so often described and so often deplored, was not least caused by the changing factors of military warfare, in particular by the introduction of new strategies and tactics.[17] The courage and prowess of the individual knight came to be less and less

Mass., 1949), p. 189; cf. H. J. Hewitt, *The Organization of War,* pp. 134—35; Raymond L. Kilgour, „Honoré Bonet: A Fourteenth Century Critic of Chivalry", *PMLA,* vol. 50 (1935), pp. 352—61; Thomas Erskine Holland, ed., *Tractatus de bello, de represaliis et de duello by Giovanni da Legnano* (London, 1917). This last volume is Bonet's main source.

[15] Cf. Vincent John Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1971), pp. 308 ff.

[16] *The Essential Portions of Nicholas Upton's De Studio Militari before 1446, Translated by John Blount, Fellow of All Souls (ca. 1500),* ed. Francis Pierrepont Bernard (Oxford, 1931), p. 34.

[17] Cf. C. T. Allmand, ed., *War, Literature, and Politics in the Late Middle Ages* (Liverpool, 1976); Keith Ellis, *Warriors and Fighting Men* (London, 1971); A. Vesey B. Norman and Don Pottinger, *Warrior to Soldier, 449—1600: A Brief Introduction to the History of English Warfare* (London, 1966), pp. 56, 69; Charles Oman, *A History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages,* 2 vols. (2nd rev. ed., New York, 1959), vol. 2, p. 54, and also his *The Art of War in the Middle Ages, A. D. 378—1515,* rev. and ed. John H. Beeler (Ithaca, N. Y., 1953), especially his comments on siegecraft, pp. 68—71. See also Eugène Vinaver, ed., *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (Oxford, 1967), vol. 2, p. 667: „What is a knyght but whan he is on horsebacke? For I sette nat by a knyght whan he is on foote, for all batayles on foote are but pyllours in batayles, for there sholde no knyght fyghte on foote but yf hit were for treson or ellys he were dryvyn by forse to fyght on foote ..."

significant than, for instance, the adequate use of archers. The knights themselves
were aware of what was going on. At Crécy, the Genoese crossbowmen failed
because their ropes had become wet in a heavy shower. The French knights were so
bitter about this that they slaughtered their own footmen *en masse* prior to being
massacred in their turn by the English archers. This, by the way, was not the first
or the only time that impatient knights cut down their own footmen to free their
way to their opponents.[18]

The knigths were frustrated because their prowess and their knighthood had
become insignificant. A particular rôle in this development was played by castles
and fortified cities which became increasingly decisive factors in medieval war-
fare.

Not until the latter part of the fourteenth century do chroniclers give us detail-
ed reports on the defence, siege and capture of castles and fortifications. Far more
is to be found in imaginative literature, particularly in the works of the Revival,
in which the motif of siege, defence and assault of fortified places plays a surpris-
ingly large rôle.[19]

In the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, for example, there is an extensive account of
the capture of Metz (ll. 3032—66). Arthur's besieging troops surround the city
and draw up the siege engines. The great catapults cast enormous stones into the
city, destroy monasteries and hospitals, churches and chapels, houses with chimneys
and large inns: „The pyne of þe pople was peté for to here“ (l. 3043).

The individual knight had almost no function in this process. Even the noblest
and bravest warrior can be shot down from a distance. Arthur himself tests the
location of siege engines to be set up before the city of Metz. Crossbowmen gather
upon the wall and shoot at him. The King does not react to their volley, neither
does he ask for a shield. For this reason he is admonished by Sir Ferrer[20]:

> „Sir“, said Sir Ferrer, „a foly thowe wirkkes,
> Thus nakede in thy noblaye to neghe to þe walles,
> Sengely in thy surcotte, this ceté to reche,
> And schewe þe within, there to schende vs all.
> Hye vs hastylye heynne, or we mon full happen,
> For hitt they the or thy horse, it harmes for euer.“
>
> <div align="right">(ll. 2432—37)</div>

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[18] Philip Warner, *Sieges of the Middle Ages* (London, 1968), p. 171.

[19] A large number of works dealing with sieges appeared by the end of the fourteenth
century, as for example: *The Destruction of Troy* (EETS, OS 39); *The Laud Troy Book*
(EETS, OS 121, 122); *The Siege of Jerusalem* (EETS, OS 188); *Lydgate's Siege of Thebes*
(EETS, ES 108, 125); *The Siege of Melayne* (EETS, OS 35); *The Wars of Alexander,
Fragment C* (EETS, ES 47); J. A. Herbert, ed., *Titus and Vespasian, or The Destruction of
Jerusalem in Rhymed Couplets* (London, 1905).

[20] Interesting parallels to the Ferrer-Arthur episode are to be found in the report on
Richard I's capture of the castle Chaluz. Richard exposed himself intentionally to the
shots of the crossbow-men. Bertrand de Gourdon killed the king with a single arrow. See
Warner, *Sieges*, p. 124.

Arthur answers in an outbreak of rage:

„Ife thow be ferde," quod the Kyng, „I rede thow ryde vttere,
Lesse þat þey rywe the with theire rownnd wapyn!
Thow arte bot a fawntkyn — no ferly me thynkkys,
þou will be flayede for a flye þat on thy flesche lyghttes.
I am nothyng agaste, so me Gode helpe: ..."

(ll. 2438—42)

This outbreak of rage indicates the extent of Arthur's foolish pride. The audience was well aware, both from history and literature, that shot and arrow would have no regard for birth or rank.

The accounts which have been preserved of the siege and capture of fortified cities and castles show us that victory and defeat were becoming less and less dependent upon personal bravery than upon the strategic use of weapons.[21] Fortifications and towns were destroyed at the beginning of the fifteenth century by cannons. A Greek emperor is supposed to have said that the introduction of slings and rams had been the ruin of virtue and valour.[22] With even greater justification the same could have been said of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The opponents fought each other *par distance;* they used projectiles which could be fired from a great distance, and they defended themselves from behind palisades and walls. Knighthood, so the poets say, was the loser. In *The Wars of Alexander* the author writes:

It contraries kniʒthede . ʒe knaw wele ʒour-selfe
To any wiʒt werriours . in wallis þam to close.
For he þat kid is & kene . & couettis a name
will feʒt fersely in fild . his famen agayns.

(ll. 2205—08)[23]

IV.

A new feature of war in the late fourteenth century is the policy of territorial warfare. Campaigns were no longer exclusively directed against enemy armies — military combat was partially even avoided, and the purpose now became the destruction of entire territories. Some campaigns of the Black Prince, for instance, had the explicit goal of destroying certain portions of the countryside such as the county of Armagnac.[24]

[21] Cf. Christine de Pisan, *The Book of Fayttes of Armes and of Chyualrye,* trans. William Caxton, ed. A. J. P. Byles, Early English Text Society, OS 189 (London, 1937), pp. 134 ff., and Edgar Prestage, *Chivalry: A Series of Studies to Illustrate Its Historical Significance and Civilizing Influence* (London and New York, 1928). See also Warre Cornish, *Chivalry.*

[22] *The Celestial Worlds Discover'd: Or, Conjectures, Concerning the Inhabitants, Plants, and Productions of the Worlds in the Planets.* Written in Latin by Christianvs Huygens, and inscrib'd to his Brother Constantine Huygens, Late Secretary to his Majesty K. William (London, 1698), Book I, pp. 95 ff.

[23] In *The Wars of Alexander,* ed. Walter W. Skeat, Early English Text Society, ES 47 (London, 1886), p. 127.

[24] Cf. Hewitt, *Black Prince's Expedition,* p. 100.

In the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* we can clearly follow the process of degener-
ation from knightly combat at the beginning to this type of territorial warfare.
Arthur's troops wage war with particular cruelty in Tuscany. Cities are plunder-
ed and then reduced to ashes. All the men are killed, the city walls and towers are
razed, and the countryside ravaged. The author says:

> And all he wastys with werre, thare he awaye rydez,
> Thaire welthes and theire wonny(n)ges, wandrethe he wroghte.
> Thus they spryngen and sprede and sparis bot lyttill,
> Spoylles dispetouslye and spillis theire vynes,
> Spendis vnsparely þat sparede was lange, . . .
>
> (ll. 3156—60)

Arthur's army has degenerated from a feudal army into a band of marauding
mercenaries.

Statements on historical events of this kind are to be found in chronicles and
records, both for the campaigns of the English and the French. The new strategic
principle was called „devastation"[25]. It demanded neither personal prowess nor
any military skills, and, of course, there could be no question of winning fame and
honour. According to the chroniclers, burning and pillaging were the main activi-
ties of the soldiers.[26] Even from a distance of six hundred years, it is easy to
recognize what the goal of this new strategy was and who its victims were to be.

It was directed against the civilian population, the non-combatants, as they
were later to be called. The destruction of entire portions of the countryside corre-
sponds to what we call the „scorched earth" policy and was used intentionally to
achieve certain political aims. When military power was insufficient to occupy
cities and territories, commanders were likely to use the strategy of devastation in
order to destroy the resources of the enemy and thus weaken him.

It is hardly surprising therefore that by the fourteenth century the problem of
civilian suffering in war was treated extensively. Honoré de Bonet asks in his
Tree of Battles:

> Why should someone have to suffer in war who has absolutely nothing to
> do with it and never will? No man should have to pay for the sins of an-
> other . . . Why then should the poor English suffer for the errors of their lord
> and sovereign? No man should incur blame for a business in which he takes no
> part . . . In the matter of deciding war, of declaring it, or of undertaking it,
> poor men are not concerned at all, for they ask nothing more than to live at
> peace. If this is taken into account, for what reason should they be at-
> tacked?[27]

For Bonet, the situation is absolutely clear. Brave and wise knights should do
everything in their power to prevent simple and innocent people from having to

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[25] Cf. Hewitt, *Organization of War*, pp. 110—18.
[26] Hewitt, *Organization of War*, p. 114.
[27] Bonet, *Tree of Battles*, p. 154.

suffer from war. They should only fight against those „who make and propagate war and flee peace"[28].

Bonet knows that in reality this is not the case. It is actually the poor labourers who have to suffer most in war:

> ... the poor labourers who cultivate lands and vineyards, and, under God, give sustenance to all by their toil. And my heart is full of grief to see and hear of the great martyrdom that they inflict without pity or mercy on the poor labourers and other, who are incapable of ill in word or thought; who toil for men of all estates; from whom Pope, kings and all the lords in the world receive, under God, what they eat and drink and what they wear. And no man is concerned for them ...[29]

Philippe de Mézières was no less outspoken in his condemnation of the suffering of the civilian populace in war.[30] And yet, it is not war he damned. With the thoughtlessness, that is to say the inconsistency common at his time, he condemned only the excesses of war. If the English fall upon France and plunder the country, this might well be within the realm of divine providence.[31] In this case, the English would be seen as the instrument of divine punishment. It is in this light that Philippe sees the English as a needle of iron. In my opinion this is an obvious innuendo, a pun on the name of Giovanni Acuto given to John Hawkwood because he had been a tailor in England and had been given the nickname „needlepoint" Acuto. In Italy, he was seen as the thorn or spur which was so sharp that it had pushed many souls into hell.

Philippe de Mézières himself says that the black boars, that is to say Edward and his son the Black Prince, have been so merciless against their Christian brethren as to whet their tusks against the capitals of France and Spain. Under the pretext of knightly honour they treated the civilian populace in a most brutal fashion. And yet, all the successes in the world would come to no avail since the boars are only a means of divine punishment in the overall plan of God, and certainly not destined to be conquerors and overlords. According to Philippe they have invaded the country „to punish iniquity and not in order to obtain full lordship"[32].

The social problems which arose as a result of war add a new perspective to the literature of this time. From a modern point of view, it sounds unrealistic, perhaps even naive, when theoreticians demand that non-combatants should be left alone because war is a business of lords and masters. In truth, it was the poor above all who had to suffer from war. From 1340 onwards, the chroniclers mention more frequently that it is the simple people who bear the brunt of war. Thus, in a tribute to Bertrand du Guesclin, Eustace Deschamps writes, „When he came there was

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[28] Bonet, *Tree of Battles*, p. 154.

[29] Bonet, *Tree of Battles*, p. 153.

[30] Philippe de Mézières, *Letter to King Richard II: A Plea Made in 1395 for Peace between England and France,* trans. George W. Coopland (Liverpool, 1975).

[31] de Mézières, *Letter,* p. 14.

[32] de Mézières, *Letter,* p. 14.

desolation, war and tribulation in the whole kingdom, but by his foresight he
consoled the nation and the lesser folk":

> Toute desolacion,
> Guerre et tribulacion
> Fut ou regne a sa venue,
> Mais en consolacion
> Mist par sa provision
> Le peuple et la gent menue;
> La guerre leur a tollue
> Et gardé d'oppression,
> Dont toute leur orison
> Estroit par lui espandue.   (ll. 213—222)[33]

War itself is for most of the chroniclers and theoreticians not inherently evil; it
is only that evil things can and will happen in war. Most of us would hesitate to
call a position like this humane or even progressive. But for the fourteenth cen-
tury, it almost certainly meant a widening of the horizon: namely, the added con-
sideration for a class, walk of life, or an estate, which had not been deemed
worthy of literary treatment so far. Particularly in the late fourteenth and early
fifteenth centuries we find a sudden abundance of literary treatments of the
suffering of the poor (e. g., *The Song of the Husbandman, The Alliterative Morte
Arthure, The Awntyrs of Arthur, Piers Plowman, The Three Dead Kings,* etc.).

V.

The atrocities described in such works of imaginative fiction are thus by no
means pure fancy but rather a reflection of historical realities. There is ample
documentation that such crimes were actually committed. According to Philippe
de Mézières, for example, the law of war no longer had anything to do with
the code of chivalry: „. . . countless cruelties . . . occur in war against and outside
the laws of chivalry."[34] War has its own laws. Once begun, it draws princes into
its wake. Even victories have devastating consequences for the minds of conquer-
ors: they spread corruption. Philippe is more explicit on this point than most
medieval authors:

> . . . as St. John Chrysostom says, it is, in practice, impossible that a great
> lord, placed in the seat of honour, and with many temporal victories to his
> credit, should not be assailed by vainglory, just as a lusty young man, often in
> the company of a fair young maid sometimes looks at her with eyes of carnal
> desire.[35]

Philippe expresses clearly here what numerous authors tried to express in the
form of romances. Again and again appears the impressive symbolic image of the

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[33] *Oeuvres Completes de Eustache Deschamps,* ed. Marquis de Queux de Saint-Hilaire,
11 vols. (Paris, 1878—1903; rpt. New York, 1966), vol. 2, p. 331.
[34] de Mézières, *Letter,* p. 53.
[35] de Mézières, *Letter,* p. 51.

goddess of fortune, who places the mighty of this world upon her wheel, and raises them to the height of fame and success, only to cast them down eventually into the abyss. The poet's intention is clear: the same inevitable law that rules the movement of the wheel is also responsible for the process of rise and fall.[36] He who places his destiny at the mercy of fortune will be ruled by the laws of *casus*. This was the medieval concept of *tragedie;* poets saw in tragedy not only the downfall of power, but also implications of moral degeneration. The intrinsic law of war leads inevitably to the downfall of chivalry. War and chivalry are mutually exclusive.

The heroes of some of the best Middle English romances exemplify the corrupting power of war. Not only do they lose their heroic features; they also lose their characters in the process. This law applies not only to the heroes of individual romances, but also to the figure of heroes in cycles, a phenomenon which has been called „epic degeneration"[37].

The entire *Alliterative Morte Arthure* can be seen as an illustration of the hypothesis of the degenerative and corruptive power of war just delineated. King Arthur is at first seen as a rational, reflective, critical sovereign who intends to determine the distribution of right and wrong. In particular, he is concerned with the problem of the feudal sovereignty of Rome over Britain as well as with the legal consequences of onetime British sovereignty over Rome. But the decision in this important question is taken out of Arthur's hands by his impetuous knights. For various reasons, they all plead for war. Arthur's authority is thus undermined, and yet he thanks his Knights for their readiness to fight and for their loyalty.[38]

In war itself, King Arthur degenerates morally through his rise to imperial power. Thereby he loses not only his honour and esteem, but also his moral stature.[39] It is true that according to the poet he will remain in the eyes of posterity the greatest king who ever ruled over Britain; but this is only an expression of the ambiguous attitude towards King Arthur and his Table Round.

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[36] Cf. Howard Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1927; rpt. New York, 1967); Alfred Doren, „Fortuna im Mittelalter und in der Renaissance", *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg,* 1922—23, vol. 2, Part 1, pp. 71—144 (Berlin, Leipzig, 1924); K. J. Höltgen, „König Arthur und Fortuna", *Anglia,* vol. 75 (1957), pp. 35—54; F. Kiefer, „Fortuna and Providence in the ‚Mirror for Magistrates' ", *Studies in Philology,* vol. 74 (1977), pp. 146—64; K. Hammerle, „Das Fortunamotiv von Chaucer bis Bacon", *Anglia,* vol. 65 (1941), pp. 90—100; Howard R. Patch, „The Tradition of the Goddess Fortuna", *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages,* vol. 2 (1922), pp. 131—235.

[37] Cf. Viktor M. Žirmunskij, *Vergleichende Epenforschung,* vol. 1 (Berlin, 1961), pp. 27 ff.

[38] The poem may also be seen as an illustration of Kant's apodictic statement that political power corrupts the reasoning faculties, that „Besitz der Gewalt das freie Urtheil der Vernunft unvermeidlich verdirbt".

[39] Cf. Gratia F. Murphy, „Arthur as King: A Reading of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* in the Light of the *Fürstenspiegel* Tradition" (Diss. Kent State Univ., 1976); and M. E. Mercer, „A Violent Order: Moral Vision in the Late Arthurian Romance, 1215—1500" (Diss. Syracuse Univ., 1974).

More important is the representation of Arthur's *casus*. His fall from the wheel of fortune is his own fault. In few other works of the Revival is it made so clear that war and bloodshed must inevitably lead to crime and punishment and thereby to utter ruin. In this sense, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* is a *Fürstenspiegel*, a mirror for magistrates. As such it is psychologically, aesthetically and pedagogically both impressive and convincing.

This tendency is even more evident in the *Awntyrs of Arthur* because of its stronger didactic intention. Gawain takes advantage of the appearance of a ghost from the underworld to enquire as to the essence and purpose of chivalry:

,How shal we fare', quod þe freke (Gawain)
         ,þat fonden to fight,
And þus defoulen þe folke on fele kinges londes,
And riches ouer reymes withouten eny right,
Wynnen worshipp and wele þorgh wightnesse of hondes?[40]

This is proof of the fact that he already knows the answer and does not need the oracle from the sea. If the essence of knighthood consists of wrongdoing, and if war is always an unjust war, then this is no way to win worship. Thus Gawain anticipates the answer by admitting that the use of force is unjust, and that honour thus won is dishonour. Yet, the ghost does give an answer, one quite in keeping with the preceding moral lesson, where mercy, pité and charité have been recommended to Gaynor:

Mekenesse and mercy, þes arn þe moost,
And haue pité on þe poer, þat pleses Heuenking.
Siþen charité is chef, and þew of þe chaste,
And þen almessedede ouer al oþer þing. (ll. 250—53)

In a very similar way the conqueror King Arthur is warned against the sin of greed („Your king is to couvetous", l. 265). Covetousness is equated with power and luxury and thus belongs to the revenue of *Superbia*. The symbolic expression of this major sin in the poem itself is the high seat on the wheel of fortune. King Arthur has attacked France, has defeated Brittany and Burgundy, has killed Frollo and his followers, has conquered the French doucepers, and killed all the people in Guienne. He has not yet reached the peak of his power, so the ghost says, for he has yet to conquer Rome and to allow his Table Round to plunder her. This is an interesting view of future developments, because this part of the prophecy is not to be fulfilled: Arthur will never reach Rome. The wheel of fortune is not at rest for long. The man who is to betray Arthur, usurp the crown and to destroy Arthur's army on the coast of Cornwall is still a boy playing ball at Arthur's court.

In the second part, the abstract didactic lesson is demonstrated by a concrete example. A certain knight named Galerone brings charges against Arthur because

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[40] *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, ll. 261—64.

the King has taken away his lands and has given them to Gawain. Gawain offers
to fight him „In defence of my riȝt" (l. 467). Arthur's fear that Gawain could
suffer harm in the combat is refuted by that worthy with the assurance: „God
stond with the riȝt!" (l. 471). Gawain could not possibly feel justified on the basis
of concepts of the just war common at the time; the episode is evidently to be seen
in connection with the first part, i.e., as a negative example.

Also Guinevere's interference on behalf of the wronged Galerone can only be
understood as a consequence of the ghost's warnings. In contrast to Gawain, Gui-
nevere has learnt her lesson. She begs Arthur to put an end to the combat. Arthur
asks Gawain to surrender his legal rights to Galerone, and, in compensation,
grants him the territory of Wales and makes him a duke. Arthur returns Galerone
his territories but makes one condition: namely that the Scotsman become a mem-
ber of the Table Round.

A similarly critical and reflective attitude towards the code of chivalry and
knightly virtues, and at the same time towards knightly combat and warfare, is to
be found in *Golagros and Gawain.* Just as in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and
in the *Awntyrs of Arthur,* the position of the poet is ambiguous. Here, too, the
poet succumbs to the fascination of knightly combat with the sword and the lance.
These retain a significance similar to their rôle in the old romance and seem to
overshadow the basic didactic tenor of the poem.

King Arthur has gone to Tuscany with his courageous knights and will set off
from there on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.[41] And yet the King is by no means
depicted as a pious and ascetic pilgrim. The pilgrimage as the point of departure is
in clear opposition to the major motifs and motivations of the world of Arthur,
particularly his brutal and inconsiderate greed for power and his covetousness.
The author is far more concerned to show the results and consequences of the per-
version of chivalry. In particular, he asks for the justification and the mode of
wielding power over other princes, men, and countries. He thus challenges the very
basis of the feudal system. The pivotal question seems to be: Is it justified to
attack and subjugate other princes under the pretext of chivalry? And is allegiance
to be gained by force?

King Arthur goes through a development. The conflict with Golagros makes it
clear to him that there is an enormous risk in knightly combat („Perell", ll. 1305
and 1307). He realizes that nearly everything is at stake.

> He did the conquerour to knaw all the cause quhy,
> That all his hathillis in that heir, hailly on hight,
> How he wes wonnyn of wer with Wawane the wy,
> And all the fortoune the freke befell in the fight;
> The dout and the danger he tauld him quently.

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[41] In the tradition of Geoffrey of Monmouth, the battles between Arthur and Lucius
are set north of the Alps — Arthur never reaches Italy. But in the *Alliterative Morte,*
Arthur crosses the St. Gotthard Pass on his way to Tuscany. Tuscany is also mentioned
twice in the *Awntyrs of Arthure.*

Than said Arthur him seluin, semely by sight:
„This is ane soueranefull thing, be Ihesu! think I,
To leif in sic perell, and in sa grete plight;
Had ony preiudice apperit in the partyce,
It had bene grete perell;
Bot sen the lawte is lell,
That thow my kyndes wil heill,
The mare is thi price."   (ll. 1298—1310)[42]

He also recognizes that greed is in opposition to true chivalry, and that his am-
bitions must be towards friendship and loyalty. Thus he releases Golagros from
vassallage and makes him: „Fre as I the first fand" (l. 1361). The poet is a moral-
ist, whose main concern is the moral connotation of chivalry and the feudal
system. He does not stop with the *exemplum malum* but points the way towards a
constructive and peaceful resolution of feudal relationships.

VI.

No less revealing than the direct commentaries on concrete problems of medie-
val historians are the irresolute, vacillating and ambiguous statements of the poets,
for example the adulation of King Arthur as one of the greatest knights of all
times and at the same time his moral condemnation. This very ambiguity is a key
to our understanding of an age that found the moral evaluation of war a major
problem. Thus in the romances, as through a glass darkly, we see the reflection of
the spiritual physiognomy of an age and therewith the motivating principles be-
hind historical events and developments.

During the Middle Ages, we cannot speak of genuine pacifism. To reject war as
a work of the devil would have been heretical, for: „War had its origin in divine
law."[43] Gower came very close to a pacifist attitude when he condemned all
military conflicts, including the crusades, in his *Confessio Amantis*.[44] In his poem
„In Praise of Peace", however, he criticises those princes who are only too ready
to wield the sword in worldly matters and not for the sake of Christ: „Ther ben
the swerdes and the speres dulle."[45] Wyclif has also occasionally been called a
pacifist; but he not only justifies the crusades as a work pleasing to God, but war
in general, as long as it is waged for love of God and one's neighbour: „. . . conce-
ditur igitur quod licet regi pugnare in causa ecclesiæ contra infideles in intencione
honorificandi Cristum, proficiendi ecclesie eciam hominibus quos expugnat, et
aliter non licet."[46] The author of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* is far more ex-

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[42] „The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawane", p. 44.
[43] *Tractatus de bello*, p. 224: „. . . Universal Corporeal War had its origin in Divine
Law."
[44] *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck (New York, 1968; rpt. Toronto, 1980), Book
3, ll. 2481—2546.
[45] John Gower, „In Praise of Peace", *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C.
Macaulay, 2 vols, EETS ES 81, 82 (Oxford, 1900; rpt. 1957, 1969), vol. 2, p. 487, l. 207.
[46] Lowrie John Daly, *The Political Theory of John Wyclif* (Chicago, 1962), p. 138.

plicit in his condemnation of war, but he couches his message in extremely complex and subtle literary devices which have not yet been fully appreciated.[47] The main concern of the poet is the corrupting force of war: chivalry and war are mutually exclusive. War is usually waged for greed and the ambition for power, flaws which inevitably lead to downfall. The poets of *Golagros* and *Gawain* and *Awntyrs of Arthur* are more optimistic and for this very reason aesthetically less convincing; they give the king the opportunity to recognize his fault and to mend his ways.

Thus it appears to me that the problems of war and chivalry, so controversial long ago, have not yet been solved. Cornish, the author of an important work on chivalry from 1901, came to the following conclusion: „We feel that the game of war, thus played, is a noble sport which increases the dignity of humanity."[48]

Dinadan, in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, was puzzled at the claim of his challenger that he wanted to fight with him for love. Dinadan's answer was: „Hit may well be ... but ye proffyr me harde love whan ye wolde juste with me wyth an harde speare."[49]

Just so! Human dignity that can be enhanced by war and war's atrocity would be a very strange one, a very „harde" one indeed — as authors of romances began to realize in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

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[47] Göller, *Alliterative Morte*, passim.
[48] Warre Cornish, *Chivalry*, Conclusion.
[49] Vinaver, *Malory*, p. 372.