

2017

Riders, Chivalry, and Knighthood in Tolkien

Thomas Honegger

Department of English, Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena, Germany, tm.honegger@uni-jena.de

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch>

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Medieval Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Honegger, Thomas (2017) "Riders, Chivalry, and Knighthood in Tolkien," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol4/iss2/3>

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Library Services at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Tolkien Research by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

Riders, Chivalry, and Knighthood in Tolkien

Cover Page Footnote

A much shorter version of this paper was presented at the IMC Leeds on 5 July 2017.

RIDERS, CHIVALRY, AND KNIGHTHOOD IN TOLKIEN

Thomas Honegger
Friedrich-Schiller-University, Jena (Germany)

IMRAHIL'S VAMBRACE

Tolkien scholars know that it is often a single word or a detail in a description that contains the potential answer to the reader's questions. One such detail, which is linked to a rather unusual word, occurs in the chapter 'The Battle of the Pelennor Fields'. The situation is as follows: The Rohirrim have come to the rescue of the besieged City of Minas Tirith and though their first attack against Sauron's armies was successful, Théoden was killed and Éowyn severely wounded. Éomer, believing the unconscious and wounded Éowyn to be dead, orders their bodies to be brought to Minas Tirith while he again rejoins the battle. On their way to the city, the men carrying the bodies encounter Imrahil, Prince of Dol Amroth, who inquires about their burden and alights from his horse to pay his last respect to the late king of Rohan. He then turns towards the unconscious Éowyn:

Then the prince seeing her beauty, though her face was pale and cold, touched her hand as he bent to look more closely on her. 'Men of Rohan!' he cried. 'Are there no leeches among you? She is hurt, to the death maybe, but I deem that she yet lives.' And he held the bright-burnished vambrace that was upon his arm before her cold lips, and behold! a little mist was laid on it hardly to be seen. (*LotR* 845)

The crucial word is *vambrace*. The meaning and the etymology are clear. *Vambrace* came into the English language via the Anglo-Norman *vauntbras*, which is an aphetic¹ form of Old French *avantbras*, denoting a piece of defensive armour for the (fore-)arm. The problems start when we try to establish the material of Imrahil's vambrace and what it implies. Michael Martinez, in a blog entry from 1 August 2016 entitled 'Was Imrahil's Vambrace Made of Metal?', addressed this question and gives the following answer:

Imrahil's metal plate vambrace is merely a product of wishful thinking on the part of people who have convinced themselves there must be some sort of full plate armor in Middle-earth. They are probably heavily influenced by all sorts of art, not the least of which would be John Howe's. (Martinez 2016)

His main point is that the textual evidence in *The Lord of the Rings* does not support an interpretation of the passage as depicting a *plate* vambrace and argues that even a burnished leather vambrace would work for Imrahil's first-aid check on Éowyn.

¹ Aphesis designates the loss of the initial unstressed vowel of a word. In our case, the *a* in the original French *avant* ([be]fore) is lost. So *avantbras* translates as *(be)fore & arm = forearm*.



bright-burnished metal vambraces



bright-burnished leather vambraces

So if a leather vambrace would do the job as well and if we do not have any other evidence in favour of a plate vambrace, then the popular interpretations of the Knights of Dol Amroth, and of Prince Imrahil in particular, as being clad in plate armour, would be wrong – and the depiction of Imrahil, as in the Games Workshop interpretation below, would indeed belong into the realm of ‘fantasy’.



Games Workshop figure of Prince Imrahil

Searching the text of *The Lord of the Rings* for further passages that may help to answer the question of Imrahil's armour, we find the following description of his entry into Minas Tirith:

And last and proudest, Imrahil, Prince of Dol Amroth, kinsman of the Lord, with gilded banners bearing his token of the Ship and the Silver Swan, and a company of knights in full harness riding grey horses; and behind them seven hundreds of men at arms, tall as lords, grey-eyed, dark-haired, singing as they came. (*LotR* 771)

The crucial expression here is *in full harness*. Again, it remains tantalizingly ambiguous since *harness*, adopted into Middle English from OF *harneis*, can mean either the “defensive or body armour of a man-at-arms or foot-soldier; [or] all the defensive equipment of an armed horseman, for both man and horse; [or] military equipment or accoutrement” (*OED* 2.a. *harness* n.). Of course, Tolkien must have meant “all the defensive equipment of an armed horseman, for both man and horse”, but this does not help us any further with the question of how to visualize the Knights of Dol Amroth, and different artists have opted for different solutions, as can be seen in the illustrations below.



Left: ‘Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth’ by Abe Papakhian.
Right: ‘Imrahil findet seinen verwundeten Neffen’ by Anke Eissmann.

Abe Papakhian is obviously in favour of the ‘plate armour’ interpretation and depicts his Knights of Dol Amroth as clad in the heavy plate armour of the Renaissance period. Anke Eissmann, by contrast, opts for an armour that consists mainly of chain mail yet with added bright-burnished plate vambraces. This brings the Knights of Dol Amroth into close proximity to the Rohirrim, whose body armour seems to consist of helmet and chain mail, too – but no vambraces. This is of interest since Tolkien did comment on the body armour of the Rohirrim in a letter to Rhona Beare, dated 14 October 1958: “The Rohirrim were not ‘mediaeval’, in our sense.² The styles of the Bayeux Tapestry (made in England) fit them well enough, if one remembers that the kind of tennis-nets [the] soldiers seem to have on are only a clumsy conventional sign for chain-mail of small rings” (*Letters* 280-81). Anke Eissmann’s rendering of the encounter between the ‘Three Hunters’ and Éomer’s riders nicely illustrates this parallel.

² Tolkien obviously wanted to avoid his readers to make a simplistic equation of Rohirrim = Anglo-Saxons on horseback. See Drout (2011) and Honegger (2011 ‘Rohirrim’) on the ‘problem’ of the Rohirrim.



Left: ‘Rohirrim’ by Anke Eissmann. Right: Detail from the 11th century Bayeux Tapestry.

However, if we take Tolkien’s statement concerning the similarity of the Rohirrim’s body armour with that of the 11th century Normans and Anglo-Saxons as depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry at face value, then we have a problem concerning the ‘cultural-technological distance’ since, as Tolkien writes, the Rohirrim are “a simpler and more primitive people living in contact with a higher and more venerable culture, and occupying lands that had once been part of its domain” (‘Appendix F: On Translation’, 1136, footnote 1). This distance is clearly visible in the architecture of the two cultures and I assume that Tolkien would have depicted the Knights of Dol Amroth, as representatives of this “higher and more venerable culture”, in armour that expresses their cultural-technological superiority, which would indeed tend towards (partial) plate armour.

We have yet another indication that Tolkien was thinking in direction of (partial) plate mail armour in his choice of the two key-terms *vambrace* and *harness* to describe Prince Imrahil and the Knights of Dol Amroth. The *OED* lists the following quotes for the earliest occurrences of *vambrace* and *harness* respectively:

c1330 R. MANNYNG *Chron. Wace* (Rolls) 10030 Vaumbras & rerbras³, wyþ
coters of stel.

1385–6 in J. T. Fowler *Extracts Acct. Rolls Abbey of Durham* (1898) I. 133, ij
palets, j brestplat, vambras.

c1330 R. MANNYNG *Chron.* (1810) 309 Norreis & Surreis..With hors & herneis
at Carlele mad samnyng.

1470–85 MALORY *Morte d’Arthur* IX. xl, Youre harneis & horses haue ben
fayre and clene kepte.

1489 CAXTON tr. C. de Pisan Bk. *Fayttes of Armes* I. i. 2 To make harnoys of
yron and steel.

Please note that they all belong to the 14th or even 15th centuries, which means that the vambraces and harnesses referred to are very likely (metal) plate armour, and even though the terms can be used to designate other types of armour, they seem to connote primarily the plate armour variety. If an author like Tolkien, who is very much aware of the history of words,

³ *rerbras* = *rere-brace*: armour for the upper arm from shoulder to elbow.

uses exactly these terms, then there is a strong likelihood that he intended or at least would accept associations with 14th century plate armour. Vambraces and harnesses had been around centuries before the words *vambrace* and *harness* came into the English language, and if Tolkien had wanted to avoid associations with plate armour, he would have found a way to do so. Yet as we have seen, he also avoided an explicit identification with plate armour. There are, to my mind, two reasons for Tolkien's intentional vagueness. First, he wants to steer clear of cultural allegory and to give us rather cultural applicability. By suggesting plate armour, he has his readers automatically establish the right cultural distance between the Rohirrim and the Gondorians, yet without specifying the exact nature of the higher and more venerable culture and without imposing his view. The sometimes heated debates focussing on these aspects prove that Tolkien succeeded in securing "the freedom of the reader" and to avoid the "domination of the author" indeed (*LotR* xxiv). Second, he is very critical towards the concept of chivalry, which brings us to the next section.

CHIVALRY, EXCESS, AND COURTLY LOVE

In a letter to Milton Waldman (ca. 1951), Tolkien explains why he feels that the Arthurian world is not suitable material for his 'mythology for England'⁴ project:

Of course there was and is all the Arthurian world, but powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalized, associated with the soil of Britain but not with English; and does not replace what I felt to be missing. For one thing its 'faerie' is too lavish, and fantastical, incoherent and repetitive. For another and more important thing: it is involved in, and explicitly contains the Christian religion. (*Letters* 144)

Tolkien thus points out correctly that the Arthurian legends and romances are Celtic and not English in origin and spirit. Furthermore, the Christian elements, such as the legend of the Holy Grail, are too prominent in the Arthurian world to make it the basis for a pre-Christian mythology. What Tolkien does not mention in this letter, yet which could also be included in the list of points that renders the (late) Arthurian tales unsuitable for adaptation, is the dominance of the chivalric ideal(s). This may come as a surprise, but Tolkien took a very critical view of the basically French-derived concept of (late) medieval chivalry and what it implies. This attitude becomes explicit in Tolkien's essay-cum-dramatic dialogue 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son' (1953), where he discusses the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*. The poem relates the events leading up to the historical battle of the same name in AD 991 and ends with the defeat and death of Beorhtnoth,⁵ the Ealdorman of Essex and as such the leader of the Anglo-Saxon troops, and his loyal retainers. In the third section of his essay, entitled 'Ofermod', Tolkien famously criticizes Beorhtnoth for having allowed the enemy to cross from the island to the mainland unopposed and to let the Vikings join battle with his men. The narrator, in short comment in line 89, argues that Beorhtnoth did so *for his ofermode*, which Tolkien translates as "in his overmastering pride" ('Homecoming' 13). He then contrasts it negatively with the northern heroic courage shown by Beorhtnoth's retainers, with whom "[p]ersonal pride was [...] at its lowest, and love and loyalty at their

⁴ The term "a mythology *for England*" (*Bio* 97, italics in the original) is not Tolkien's but goes back to Carpenter, who uses it in his *JRR Tolkien: A Biography* (97). See Stenström (1996) for a discussion of the origin and meaning of the term, and Hostetter and Smith (1996) on the Englishness of Tolkien's mythology.

⁵ In order to avoid confusion, I use Tolkien's forms *Beorhtnoth* and *Beorhtwold* throughout – in contrast to the West Saxon forms of the names *Byrhtnoth* and *Byrhtwold*, as found in the surviving text of *The Battle of Maldon*.

highest” (‘Homecoming’ 14) and goes on to discuss the likely reasons for Beorhtnoth’s fatal mistake:

Yet this element of pride, in the form of the desire for honour and glory, in life and after death, tends to grow, to become a chief motive, driving a man beyond the bleak heroic necessity to excess – to *chivalry*. ‘Excess’ certainly, even if it be approved by contemporary opinion, when it not only goes beyond need and duty, but interferes with it. (‘Homecoming’ 14; my emphasis)

Tolkien locates a similar flaw in Beowulf, the hero of the eponymous Old English poem, who, in his old age, decides to confront the dragon that attacks his kingdom on his own. While risking his life fighting monsters, as he did with Grendel and Grendel’s mother, is admissible or even expected heroic foolhardiness from a young man without responsibilities, it is no longer so for a king and must be seen as an expression of overmastering pride. Again, Tolkien chooses his words carefully:

Yet [Beowulf] does not rid himself of his *chivalry*, the excess persists even when he is an old king upon whom all the hopes of a people rest. He will not deign to lead a force against the dragon, as wisdom might direct even a hero to do; [...] He is saved from defeat, and the essential object, destruction of the dragon, only achieved by the loyalty of a subordinate. Beowulf’s *chivalry* would otherwise have ended in his own useless death, with the dragon still at large. (‘Homecoming’ 14-15; my emphasis)

Interestingly, Tolkien then contrasts Beowulf’s and Beorhtnoth’s Dark Age and 10th century chivalry respectively with that of the late fourteenth century “Sir Gawain, the exemplar of chivalry” (‘Homecoming’ 16-17), who is the protagonist of the Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1385). While Tolkien is, of course, correct to draw attention to the continuation of the concept of honour and pride from Anglo-Saxon England (*Beowulf*, *Battle of Maldon*) to the late fourteenth century (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), there are also differences both in culture and literary genre. Most prominent among those differences are probably the presence and role of women. While female protagonists like Wealhtheow, the wife of the king of the Spear Danes, or Grendel’s nameless mother, play active and important roles both in the society depicted and in the development of the narrative, they are of little importance for the male main protagonist’s heroic identity. The typical female protagonist of the epic-heroic tradition stays in the background and even if there exists a love-relationship between the lady and the central hero, it has little influence on the motivation of the hero’s deeds and does not take a prominent place in the overall narrative. A typical example of such an ‘epic’ love-relationship can be found in the eleventh century *Chanson de Roland*, which focuses mostly on the exploits of Roland, Charlemagne’s nephew. He is the commander of the rearguard of Charlemagne’s army during their retreat from Spain and as such he and his companions are treacherously attacked by the Saracens. Roland at first refuses to blow his horn Olifant and only when almost all his companions have been killed does he call for help. At the centre of attention are Roland’s loyalty to Charlemagne, his heroic valour, and his friendship with Oliver, his brother-in-law *in spe*. Roland’s fiancée Aude, by contrast, plays a minor role⁶ and makes an appearance only towards the end of the poem when she receives the news of Roland’s death, swoons and then dies in the arms of the emperor Charlemagne.

⁶ Harrison (1981) discusses in detail the role of women in the *Chanson de Roland*.



Left: 14th century illustration of Roland assisting Oliver to die.

Right: Roland's fiancée Aude swoons and then dies after receiving the news of Roland's death in battle.

Tolkien chooses a similarly epic approach for his *magnum opus*. While we have a variety of pairings providing some love-interest on different levels and in a variety of ways – the homely love between Sam and Rosie, the ‘epic’ love between Aragorn and Arwen, Éowyn’s infatuation with Aragorn, and the courtly love veneration of Galadriel by Gimli – the main focus is on instances of male friend- and comradeship, with Frodo and Sam at the centre.⁷ Although we have an epic fairy-tale happy ending in form of Arwen and Aragorn’s wedding, the ‘romance’ part of their relationship has been banished to the Appendices.⁸ Peter Jackson, with a keen eye for a modern movie-audience’s predilections and expectations, has not only transformed the epic and flat book-Aragorn into a more attractive ‘round character’ who is haunted by self-doubts,⁹ but he has also rescued and re-integrated the ‘Tale of Arwen and Aragorn’ into the main story. Interestingly, the only pair that fits the courtly love pattern is that of Gimli and Galadriel, with the dwarf venerating the Elven Queen as his courtly lady. Tolkien’s relegation of this central element of chivalric romance to a touching but nevertheless marginal sideshow proves his deep-seated scepticism towards the courtly love complex – not least since he may have been influenced in his views by his friend and colleague C. S. Lewis, whose *Allegory of Love* (first published 1936) proved influential for the scholarly reception of the concept.

Although I am not at all concerned with a new definition of ‘courtly love’¹⁰ – a task that must be left to more competent critics – it is necessary to say a few words on the development of the term and the way it is employed in the context of our discussion of chivalry. The first use of the critical term itself can be dated quite precisely. Gaston Paris, in his essay on Chrétien de Troyes’s romance *Lancelot (Le chevalier de la charrette)*, published 1883 in the scholarly journal *Romania*, uses the term ‘amour *courtois*’¹¹ to label the love between Lancelot and the queen. Paris (1883: 518-519) characterises it as follows:

⁷ See Brückner (2006) for a fascinating analysis of the different levels and varieties of love in Tolkien’s work.

⁸ See Appendix A (v) ‘Here Follows a Part of the Tale of Aragorn and Arwen’ (*LotR* 1057-1063).

⁹ See Flieger’s (1981) classic study on Aragorn, and Veugen (2005) for a discussion of how Aragorn is presented in the different media.

¹⁰ For an in-depth presentation of the critical debate around ‘courtly love’, see, to list only a few studies, Wollock (2011), Burnley (1998: 148-175), Schnell (1991), Schnell (1985: 77-181), and Boase (1977).

¹¹ The first time Paris uses the term ‘amour *courtois*’ (Paris 1883: 519), he puts ‘courtois’ in italics. Yet in the consecutive passages he no longer writes the term in italics (see Paris 1883: 520 and 532) and seems to use

1. It is illicit and furtive.
2. The lover is in a subordinate position and the lady behaves capriciously towards him.
3. In order to be worthy of the lady's affection, the lover tries to fulfil every feat of prowess imaginable.
4. Love is an art, a science, and a virtue that has its rules just like chivalry or courtliness.

Furthermore, he observes that it appears in no French work prior to *Le chevalier de la charrette*. 'Amour courtois', as defined and used by Gaston Paris, does not designate a concept that is valid for works other than those analysed by him, nor does it imply the existence of a codified system of 'courtly love'. It was C.S. Lewis's influential study *The Allegory of Love* (1936) that popularised the term 'courtly love' in the English speaking world.¹² Lewis's study is of particular interest for us since it is likely that his views have influenced Tolkien's interpretation of the phenomenon. Lewis (1936: 2) characterises the sentiment of the love found in the troubadour lyrics as "love of a highly specialized sort, whose characteristics may be enumerated as Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love." He (1936: 3) claims that "an unmistakable continuity connects the Provençal love song with the love poetry of the later Middle Ages, and thence, through Petrarch and many others, with that of the present day" – and uses 'courtly love' as a generally valid concept characterised by the four qualities mentioned above. Lewis's portrayal of 'courtly love' implies an important shift away from the originally specific concept based on the relationship of one (adulterous) couple in a French romance to a pervasive quality originating in Provençal lyrics. 'Courtly love' had thus become a disturbingly vague term, so that in the 1950s the monolithic character of 'courtly love' was questioned and the pendulum swung in the direction of stressing the individual characteristics of love in the works of different poets.¹³ This led to a critique of and attempts to redefine the concept of 'courtly love' as understood by Lewis and his successors. Critics like John F. Benton (1968) and D.W. Robertson Jr. (1968) argued against the use of the term since, as Robertson (1968: 17) puts it, the "subject has nothing to do with the Middle Ages, and its use as a governing concept can only be an impediment to our understanding of medieval texts." Although 'courtly love' has survived as a critical term, scholars have become increasingly aware of the necessity of further research into the socio-historical background of the troubadour lyrics and of the need for a careful reassessment of the textual evidence. As a result, some of the characteristics that have traditionally been considered essential to 'courtly love', such as the adulterous nature of the relationship, the exalted social position of the beloved lady,¹⁴ and her inaccessibility,¹⁵ proved to be merely *accidentia*. More recent approaches (e.g. Dinzelsbacher 1986: 77 or Schnell 1985) no longer consider 'courtly love' to be a codified set of rules with clearly recognisable characteristics and the critical debate of the last fifty years has left its mark and the term 'courtly love' is often used with inverted commas – in order to differentiate the 'new' use of the term from that of the pre-1950 generation. The more recent scholars try and re-

'amour courtois' synonymously with 'amour chevaleresque'. Other scholars or authors have used different terms, yet whether one decides in favour of 'courtly love', 'bon amors', 'fin'amors' (see Burnley 1980) or any other term, the basic problem of defining the assumed underlying concept remains the same.

¹² The term 'courtly love' is first attested for 1896. See entry 2b 'courtly love' under the headword 'courtly' in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

¹³ See Pollmann (1966) and Frappier (1959).

¹⁴ These two cardinal tenets of received literary history have been proved wrong, for example, by Press (1970; against adulterous nature) and Paden (1975; against adulterous nature and superior social rank).

¹⁵ Sigal (1996), in her in-depth study on dawn songs, argues against 'inaccessibility of the lady' as a typical characteristic of 'courtly love' poetry.

conceptualise ‘courtly love’ as possessing a conceptual kernel to which various additional elements may attach themselves. Schnell (1985: 135) summarises his findings as follows:

In my view, there exists neither a codex nor a systematic theory that could provide the basis for ‘courtly love’. What we have is a collection of recurring motifs and ideas that are loosely connected with each other and constitute an ‘open system’ with a clearly recognisable conceptual kernel that comprises the following elements: honesty, faithfulness, constancy in matters of love, patiently expecting the gift of love, and voluntary sexual surrender; love is believed to be a valuable and delightful experience.¹⁶

Recent findings in neurobiological, anthropological, and ethnological research support this view. ‘Romantic love’, as is becoming increasingly clear, is a complex phenomenon based on a (most likely) universal neurobiological human predisposition that is “mediated by a set of distinct social institutions and cultural values that shape it in culturally specific ways.”¹⁷ ‘Courtly love’, then, may be interpreted as one possible cultural face of this basic predisposition; a face that varies its expression according to the changing cultural and social circumstances.

Tolkien, however, would not yet know about all of this. For his generation, as C.S. Lewis’s study proves, the typical representative texts of courtly love would still be Chrétien de Troyes’s *Lancelot (Le chevalier de la charrette)*, ca. 1177-1181) and the lyrics of the troubadours. The latter focus predominantly on the beauty of the venerated lady and sweet (or not so sweet) torments of love-longing and as such seem to have been of little interest to Tolkien, whose temperament and aesthetic predilection favoured a somewhat different tradition.¹⁸ Tolkien’s treatment of the Matter of Britain, i.e. the Arthurian world, in his posthumously published *The Fall of Arthur* (2013),¹⁹ includes a section about Lancelot and the pre-history of his banishment from Britain, yet concentrates not so much on the amorous feelings of Lancelot or Guinevere, but, following Malory’s and earlier English recension of the Arthurian story,²⁰ on the epic elements of honour, duty, and loyalty. I can imagine that the ethos of Chrétien’s *Lancelot* must have incurred Tolkien’s disapproval on several levels. First, the action is set into motion by an instance of typically courtly or, as Tolkien may have called it, chivalric excess: the unnecessary, even foolish, granting of a favour by King Arthur which then led to the abduction of the queen by the rogue-knight Meleagant. Second, we have a relatively prominent and explicit treatment of Lancelot’s emotions for the queen and their adulterous relationship, which comes at times close to the psychologizing presentation of protagonists found in modern novels. And third, as a direct consequence of the first two points, the romance rambles on after the successful liberation of the queen and unlike

¹⁶ German original: “Meines Erachtens gibt es keinen Kodex, auch keine systematische Theorie, die der ‘höfischen’ Liebeskonzeption zugrundeliegt. Vielmehr setzt sich diese aus einigen immer wiederkehrenden Motiven und Gedanken zusammen, die in lockerer Verbindung zueinander stehen und ein ‘offenes System’ bilden, insgesamt aber doch so etwas wie einen Kern ‘höfischer’ Liebesauffassung erkennen lassen: gefordert werden Aufrichtigkeit, Treue, Beständigkeit in der Liebe, Warten auf die Liebesgunst der begehrten Person, Freiwilligkeit der sexuellen Hingabe; Liebe erscheint als Wert und beglückende Erfahrung.”

¹⁷ A. Hinton, quoted in Jankowiak (1995: 4).

¹⁸ Tolkien’s view on women could be very realistic, to say the least. See his rather explicit letter to his son Michael (6-8 March 1941) on the subject of marriage and the relations between the sexes and his relationship with his wife Edith (*Letters* 48-54). See also his tale ‘Aldarion and Erendis: The Mariner’s Wife’ (*UT* 223-280) for a maybe unexpectedly realistic depiction of an estranged couple.

¹⁹ Tolkien began working on the poem in the early 1930s, yet never finished it.

²⁰ Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* (1474) is generally considered to be the summa Arthuriana that concludes the medieval tradition. Malory adapts considerable sections from the Middle English *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (ca. 1400), a text that was also one of Tolkien’s direct inspirations for his alliterative *The Fall of Arthur*.

Chrétien's other, probably slightly earlier romances such as *Yvain* or *Érec et Énide*, it does not reach an organic conclusion. Chrétien probably realized that he had written himself into a corner and finally abandoned the poem so that it had to be completed by another writer. Interestingly, Chrétien had already dissociated himself from the plot and content in the prologue by pointing out that he was merely following the wishes of his patroness, the Countess Marie de Champagne.



Early 14th century French manuscript illustration showing Lancelot and Guinevere.

Examples such as *Lancelot* showed Tolkien that the 'courtly love' theme was presenting a risk for a heroic narrative, not least since the knight would eventually have to choose between his honour and his love – as Lancelot had to, to the detriment of either and with the long-term effect of bringing about the destruction of the Round Table. As a consequence, the image of the knight in shining (plate) armour as the typical representative of the chivalric courtly tradition remained tainted with the stain of adultery and betrayal, and Tolkien would be wary to introduce such a figure into his heroic narrative.

The love-relationships depicted in his works vary in their nature – one scholar argued that they may be best interpreted according to C.S. Lewis's categories presented in his *The Four Loves* (1960)²¹ – yet none could be labelled as one of 'courtly love'; aspects of the 'courtly love tradition' are usually combined with more realistic and down-to-earth elements and, most importantly, lack the lyrical and self-centred emotionality typical of courtly love poetry. Aragorn's unwavering devotion to Arwen and his long and arduous way to earn her hand in marriage are, in this sense, not so much courtly as rather epic in nature and interspersed with folk-tale elements. Beren and Lúthien's relationship, too, does not follow the courtly blueprint but is indebted to the folk-tale tradition, and Thingol's sudden and utter falling in love at first sight with Melian has the quality of a metaphysical rapture – which, however, leads to marriage. Thingol and Melian, like Beren and Lúthien or Aragorn and Arwen, are thus reminiscent rather of Yvain and Laudine in Chrétien's *Yvain*, than of Lancelot and Guinevere.

All of Tolkien's relationships are (more or less) 'socially integrative', i.e. their final, long-term aim is the integration of the lovers as a couple into society. Obstacles may have to be overcome first, but the relationship is never socially destructive per se, as most adulterous relationships are. Tolkien's lovers thus stand in opposition to many of the courtly lovers of the

²¹ Nicolay (2014: 4-5)

lyrical tradition, whose love is self-centred, often in conflict with the (moral) norms of society, and thus tending towards the isolation of the lovers (cf. Tristan and Iseud).

The only ‘relationship’ that comes close to being ‘courtly’ is the one growing from Gimli’s devotion to Galadriel, the Lady of the Golden Wood. The fact that Galadriel is an Elf (and thus a member of a race that has severed relations with the dwarves for some time), that she is of outstanding beauty and of high social standing makes her an ideal ‘courtly love’ object for a warrior’s admiration and veneration. Tolkien’s decision to cast the surly dwarf-hero in the role of the courtly lover may strike readers as ironical. Yet Tolkien is, in my mind, not so much interested in the gentle comedy arising from the ‘mismatch’, but rather in presenting the original and valuable impulse behind ‘courtly love’: the confrontation with (divine) beauty (even if once or twice removed) and the selfless subordination to it. He thus cuts right through the lyrical verbiage and the verbose sophistication that has accrued around courtly love and turned it into a vain and empty pastime for the members of a courtly-literary elite. Gimli is no wordsmith and though Galadriel inspires him to spurts of (relative) rhetorical mastery, his reaction to her is spontaneous and true.

Medieval (neo-platonic) philosophers and theorists on love agree that (true) beauty attracts us because it is a reflection of divine beauty (cf. Thingol and Melian). Falling in love with a beautiful woman is thus, in its purest form and philosophically speaking, an act of worship. It is therefore not surprising to find at a very early stage religious lyrics in praise of the Virgin Mary imitating the ‘courtly love tradition’. Mary becomes the ‘courtly lady’ whom the narrator (resp. his soul) serves in order to win her ‘grace’. In the secular tradition, the admixture of baser elements in most cases impairs the original impulse, so that the alloy known to us as ‘courtly love’ is a curious and fascinating mixture of metaphysical and erotic attraction. It also suffers from a serious confusion of categories in so far as the lady is idolatrised and no longer seen as a reflection of divine beauty, but as a divinity herself.

Tolkien was very well aware of these complications and his inclination was clearly towards the religious and metaphysical tradition. He therefore avoided the extreme lyrical egotism and the amoral stance of the sophisticated lyrical type and safeguarded his ‘courtly love’ relationship by placing it clearly in the metaphysical tradition. His (partial) identification of Galadriel with the Virgin Mary (cf. his letter to Deborah Webster 1958, *Letters* 288) strengthens such an interpretation. All in all, Tolkien’s depiction of love-relationships is closer to Middle English romances and the narrative genres than to the Continental (mostly Provençal and French) lyrical tradition. The latter is more aristocratic in tone and often borders on social, moral and emotional autism, whereas the former is less exclusive and socially integrative, often concluding with marriage as the typical happy ending.

CHIVALRY, KNIGHTS, AND RELIGION

The chivalry of the high Middle Ages is also strongly linked to the Christian faith and to the Catholic Church in particular, as becomes visible in the changes in the ceremony of dubbing. Maurice Keen, in his classical study *Chivalry* (1984), sketches the development and evolution of this ritual in his chapter on ‘The Ceremony of Dubbing to Knighthood’ (Keen 1984: 64-82). The historian shows how the originally secular and feudal ceremony, not unlike the marriage ceremony, drifted more and more into the Church’s sphere of influence. This development parallels the Church’s other attempts to transform and harness the power of knighthood and to use it for its specific purposes. The most obvious products of these efforts are, on the one hand, the monastic chivalric orders such as the Knight’s Templar²² or the

²² The key text rendering explicit the nature of this new ideal is the early 12th century *Liber ad milites Templi: De laude novae militiae* (‘In Praise of the New Knighthood’) by the Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux.

Knights of Malta and the concomitant predominance of the crusading ideology and, on the other, the quest for the Holy Grail in the later Arthurian romances.²³ These developments belong mostly to the twelfth and later centuries and thus to the classical and late phases of chivalry.



Left: A Knight Templar, representing Bernard de Clairvaux's 'ideal new knight'. Right: The Holy Grail.

Since Tolkien, in *The Lord of the Rings*, consciously tries to avoid depicting any explicitly religious elements, he does his best to avoid associations with the classical chivalric period and harks back to a simpler, more primitive and above all more secular form of chivalry. The degree to which the Church has succeeded in making the ritual of dubbing in the 13th century a religious ceremony can be seen, for example, in Ramon Llull's description from his *The Book of the Order of Chivalry* (original title *Llibre qui es de l'ordre de cavalleria*). Ramon Llull (1232-1316), a Franciscan scholar and philosopher, wrote this treatise in Catalan between 1274 and 1276. He outlines the origin, function, ethics and rituals of chivalry and aimed at creating and codifying the rules for a unilateral Order of Chivalry. The work enjoyed immediate and lasting success all over Europe and, about two centuries later, reached an English audience via William Caxton's translation from 1484.²⁴ The following passage is from Chapter V 'A Squire Receives Chivalry' and describes the ritual of dubbing. I quote it at length since it sketches not only the individual steps but stresses the spiritual-religious dimension of the ceremony.

At the beginning that a Squire ought to enter into the order of chivalry, it behooves him that he confess of his faults that he hath done against God. And if he be clean out of sin, he ought to receive his savior.²⁵ For to make and dub a knight it appertaineth the day of some great feast as Christmas, Easter, Whitsuntide, or on such solemn days because by the honor of the feast assemble much people in that place where the squire ought to be dubbed a knight, and God ought to be adored and prayed that he give to him grace for to live well after the

²³ See Barber (2004) for an accessible study of the Grail myth.

²⁴ William Caxton, *The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry or Knyghthode* (1484). However, Caxton did not base his translation on Llull's original and thus contains numerous deviations from the Catalan text. A new modern English translation based on Llull's original has been prepared by Noel Fallows (2013).

²⁵ 'to receive his savior' means to receive the consecrated host.

order of chivalry. The squire ought to fast the vigil of the same feast in honor of the saint of whom the feast is made that day, and he ought to go to the church for to pray God and ought to wake the night and be in his prayers and ought to hear the word of God and touching the faith of chivalry. For if he otherwise hear janglers and ribalds that speak of whoredom and of sin he should begin then to dishonor chivalry. On the morn after the feast in the which he hath been dubbed, it behooves him that he do a mass to be sung solemnly and the squire ought to come to fore the altar and offer to the priest which holdeth the place of our Lord to the honor of whom he must oblige and submit himself to keep the honor of chivalry with all his power.

The prince or baron who intends to conduct the dubbing likewise ought to possess in himself the virtue and Order of Chivalry, for if the Knight who makes Knights is not virtuous, how may he give to others what he does not have himself? Such a Knight is worse than the plants, for they, at least, have the power to pass on their medicinal virtues. Such a Knight is evil and false who will, without regard to propriety, multiply his Order. He is wronging chivalry itself. Then, if it should happen sometime that the squire who has received chivalry from such an evil lord is not so much strengthened by the grace of Our Lord as he would have been had he been suitably initiated, the squire will be no better than a fool. And the same will be true of all others who have received the Order of Chivalry from this kind of foul Knight.

The squire then ought to kneel before the altar and lift up his bodily and spiritual eyes and his hands to Heaven, and the presiding Knight should gird him with his sword, in the sign of chastity, justice and charity. The Knight ought to kiss the squire and lay his palm on him so that the squire may remember what he has received and promised and the great obligation to which he is bound by the honor of the Order of Chivalry. Afterwards, when the spiritual Knight – that is, the priest – and the earthly Knight have done their duties with regards to the dubbing of a new Knight, the new Knight ought to ride through the town and show himself to the people so that all will know and see his new circumstances. When all have seen that he is obliged to uphold and defend the high honor of chivalry, he will have an even greater reason for shunning evil, for he will be ashamed for the people to know that he has broken such vows. On the same day, it behooves the new Knight to hold a great feast and to give fair gifts and to joust and sport and do other things that pertain to the Order of Chivalry. Also, he should endow heralds and kings of arms with gifts, as has long been customary. Similarly, the lord who has sponsored him ought to present him with a gift, which should be reciprocated by the new Knight. For whoever has received such a noble gift as is the Order of Chivalry does not suitably acknowledge his Order unless he reciprocates according to his ability.²⁶

²⁶ The text is taken from Ramon Lull, *The Book of the Order of Chivalry or Knighthood*, translated by William Caxton; http://www.rgle.org.uk/Llull_B_C.htm



Medieval illustration of the knighting ceremony: the putting on of new clothes, the girding with the sword, and the putting on of the spurs.

In *Llull*, the secular elements of the ceremony are basically reduced to the girding of the sword²⁷ while most of the other elements such as the confession, fasting, keeping vigil, praying, kissing, and laying on of the hand, are strongly reminiscent of the ordination to priesthood. The original simple oath of fealty has been taken over by the Church and transformed into an elaborate and spiritualized *rite de passage*. Interestingly, Tolkien's 'knights' seem to acquire their new status without any comparable ceremony – if the career of Merry and Pippin are representative. Pippin, at the feast on the Field of Cormallen where they serve their companions, points out: “We [Merry and Pippin] are knights of the City and of the Mark, as I hope you observe” (*LotR* 955). The crux of the matter is, of course, how to define ‘knight’ in this (and also other) context(s). Does it always refer to a mounted warrior? Merry was at first given a sturdy pony to keep up with the Rohirrim on their way to Dunharrow and then rode with Éowyn on her horse to Minas Tirith, yet this does not make him a ‘rider’ or *chevalier*. Nor is Pippin, as a soldier of Gondor, any better with horses. ‘Knight’ may here simply refer back to its etymological root *cniht*, which means in Old English still “A boy or lad employed as an attendant or servant” or “A military servant or follower (of a king or some other specified superior)” (*OED* knight 2 and 3) – which is exactly what they have been ever since they had entered the service of Denethor and Théoden respectively. Of course, the use of ‘knight’ would also draw attention to their new military status and their valiant behaviour in the armed conflicts, yet without evoking the full associations with the late medieval term. Tolkien is treading a very thin line here, and again it is advisable to pay close attention to his use of words. The term *knight* occurs for the very first time in *The Return of the King* in the chapter ‘Minas Tirith’ (*LotR* 771) where the narrator describes Imrahil and the knights and soldiers of Dol Amroth entering the city.²⁸ In the following *knight(s)* is used eleven times, mostly (eight times) in the sense of a “military servant or follower (of a king or some other specified superior)” (*OED* knight 3) without necessarily implying any specific ‘chivalric’ qualities.²⁹ The remaining three instances can be divided into two groups. One comprises two

²⁷ The girding of the sword and the donning of the spurs were the two central elements in the ‘secular’ ceremony of knighting.

²⁸ See Blackwelder (1990: 133, knight + knights).

²⁹ Théoden to Aragorn about the Dunedain who joined them: “thirty such knights will be a strength that cannot be counted by heads” (*LotR* 775). Théoden leads the attack and “[a]fter him thundered the knights of his house, but he was ever before them” (*LotR* 838). Reference to the same: “for seven of the king’s knights had fallen there” (*LotR* 844). Denethor to Gandalf [referring to Beregon, who sprang forward and set himself before Faramir]: “Now thou stealest the hearts of my knights also, so that they rob me wholly of my son at the last” (*LotR* 854). About the soldiers who guard Théoden’s body: “twelve guards, knights both of Rohan and Gondor” (*LotR* 861). On the Field of Cormallen: “As they came to the opening in the wood, they were surprised to see knights in bright mail and tall guards in silver and black standing there” (*LotR* 953). Éomer comes to the City, “and with him came an *éored* of the fairest knights of the Mark” (*LotR* 975). Aragorn to

references to ‘mail-clad knight(s)’, the other ‘knight’ as an indication of rank. The former occur in an exchange between Imrahil, the Prince of Dol Amroth, and Gandalf during their discussion of how to divert Sauron’s attention away from Frodo and Sam. Imrahil comments on their plan to march on Sauron with the words: “So might a child threaten a mail-clad knight with a bow of string and green willow!” to which Gandalf replies: “There are names among us that are worth more than a thousand mail-clad knights apiece” (*LotR* 882). The picture evoked is clearly that of a seemingly weak and inexperienced opponent (child) challenging a well-protected and experienced fighter. For a medievalist and devout Catholic such as Tolkien, this general image must have evoked associations with two famous examples of a *cild* (late Old English for ‘youth, young man’) facing an overwhelmingly superior opponent: the Old Testament story of David versus Goliath (Samuel 17), and the encounter between the young and naïve Perceval with the Red Knight in the 12th century romance *Perceval*. The episode of David and Goliath stresses the weight and massive solidity of the Philistine warrior’s armour and contrasts it with David’s lack of the same and his youth:

5 And he [Goliath] had an helmet of brass upon his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of brass. 6 And he had greaves of brass upon his legs, and a target of brass between his shoulders. [...] 40 And he [David] took his staff in his hand, and chose him five smooth stones out of the brook, and put them in a shepherd’s bag which he had, even in a scrip; and his sling was in his hand: and he drew near to the Philistine. [...] 42 And when the Philistine looked about, and saw David, he disdained him: for he was but a youth, [...] (*King James Version*, Samuel 17: 5-42)³⁰

In Chrétien de Troyes’s *Conte du Graal* (aka *Perceval*), we have a similar situation with the country bumpkin Perceval who confronts and kills a fully armoured knight with his hunting javelin (l. 1074ff).³¹ All these secondary associations may not make the ‘mail-clad knight’ in Imrahil’s example into a knight ‘clad in plate-armour’, but we are talking most likely of a representative of this new warrior caste and not just an average “military servant or follower”.



Left: Medieval illustration of David challenging Goliath. Right: Perceval/Parsifal challenging the Red Knight.

Pippin: “For do not forget, Peregrin Took, that you are a knight of Gondor, and I do not release you from your service” (*LotR* 982).

³⁰ See 4-King James Version, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Samuel+17&version=KJV>

³¹ See the edition prepared by P. Kunstmann at <http://txm.ish-lyon.cnrs.fr/bfm/pdf/PercevalKu.pdf>

Another qualitative shift takes place when Éowyn petitions her brother Éomer, the new king of the Rohirrim, to “make him [Merry] a knight of the Riddermark, for he is valiant” (*LotR* 868). What Éowyn asks for is a promotion within a clearly defined hierarchy of (military) ranks. King Théoden made Merry an “esquire of Rohan” (*LotR* 777), which is traditionally the rank immediately below the knight, and he should now be rewarded with a new rank in recognition of his valorous deeds on the Pelennor Fields. All of these elements constitute a conceptual and etymological anomaly, since the Rohirrim are definitively ‘Anglo-Saxons on horseback’ (Honegger 2011) and the word *esquire*, which was adopted into the English language in the 14th century from the Old French *esquire* (shield-bearer), is as much an anachronism as the idea of the ‘chivalric caste’.³² However, Tolkien stops short at describing or even mentioning the actual ceremony of knighting and leaves it to the reader’s imagination to picture how Merry and Pippin have been made “knights of the City and of the Mark” (*LotR* 955). What we do get twice and in some detail are the oaths of fealty that establish the foundation for the later elevations of Merry and Pippin to knights. First comes Pippin who offers his service to Denethor:

The old man laid the sword along his lap, and Pippin put his hand to the hilt, and said slowly after Denethor: ‘Here do I swear fealty and service to Gondor, and to the Lord and Steward of the realm, to speak and to be silent, to do and to let be, to come and to go, in need or plenty, in peace or war, in living or dying, from this hour henceforth, until my lord release me, or death take me, or the world end. So say I, Peregrin son of Paladin of the Shire of the Halflings.’

‘And this do I hear, Denethor son of Ecthelion, Lord of Gondor, Steward of the High King, and I will not forget it, nor fail to reward that which is given: fealty with love, valour with honour, oath-breaking with vengeance.’ Then Pippin received back his sword and put it in its sheath. (*LotR* 756)

Pippin’s oath of fealty and interaction with Denethor differs considerably from the simpler, genuinely loving and affectionate offer of service by Merry to Théoden:

Filled suddenly with love for this old man, he knelt on one knee, and took his hand and kissed it. ‘May I lay the sword of Meriadoc of the Shire on your lap, Théoden King?’ he cried. ‘Receive my service, if you will!’

‘Gladly will I take it,’ said the king; and laying his long old hands upon the brown hair of the hobbit; he blessed him. ‘Rise now, Meriadoc, esquire of Rohan of the household of Meduseld!’ he said. ‘Take your sword and bear it unto good fortune!’

‘As a father you shall be to me,’ said Merry.

‘For a little while,’ said Théoden. (*LotR* 777)³³

As Tom Shippey (2000: 99) has pointed out, it “is probably fair to say that the scene between Merry and Théoden makes much the better impression, kindlier, more causal, and with more concern for the feelings of the junior party.”³⁴ Yet whatever the difference between the two

³² Stephen Jaeger, in his *The Origins of Courtliness – Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals 939-1210* (1985), provides an illuminating discussion of the establishment of this ‘knightly caste’ and its concomitant ideology.

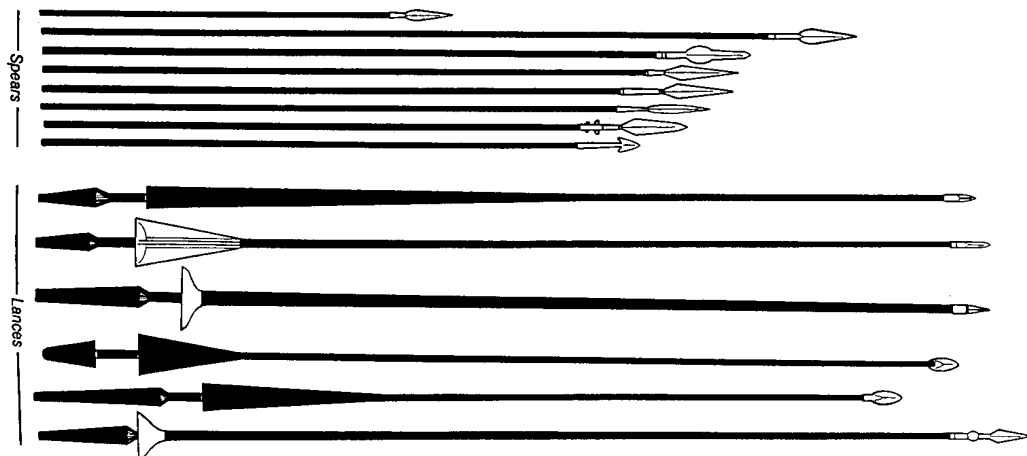
³³ See Hammond and Scull’s *Reader’s Companion* (2005: 517-18) for a discussion of these two interactions and the likely inspirations for Merry’s offer of service.

³⁴ This contrast between more formal versus more casual forms of interaction and perceptions of relationships can also be noticed in how Éomer and Imrahil respond to Aragorn’s plan at the council after the battle of the Pelennor Fields: “‘I [i.e. Éomer] have little knowledge of these deep matters; but I need it not. This I know, and it is enough, that as my friend Aragorn succoured me and my people, so I will aid him when he calls. I

scenes, they share a complete lack of references to metaphysical powers or to anything that could be called ‘religion’. Furthermore, the mutual obligations established by these rather ‘private’ ceremonies are personalized and secular. It is not yet an abstract nation state or a political office to which they pledge their allegiance nor do the ceremonies involve priests or a large crowd as witnesses. So this is as far as Tolkien seems willing to go down the road of chivalry. The hobbits’s later promotion to knights is established by means of Pippin’s reference to their new status, but we are given no description of how and this happened. Was it a lavish ceremony with a large audience or would a simple exchange of oaths like before be sufficient? We don’t know, and are left ignorant intentionally.

CHIVALRY, KNIGHTHOOD, AND NORTHERN COURAGE

Before reaching a provisional conclusion, we have to discuss one further instance of *knighthood*, namely as the first element in the term *knighthood*. The narrator describes the attack of Théoden and his riders against the Haradrim on the Pelennor Fields with the following words: “But the white fury of the Northmen burned the hotter, and more skilled was their knighthood with long spears and bitter” (*LotR* 839). *Knighthood* obviously refers in this context to their fighting skills “with long spears and bitter”. Please note that Tolkien was consciously using the older native word (*long spear* and not the more recent chivalric term *lance*.³⁵



Spears (top) vs. (couched) lances (bottom)

This philological detail supports the argument that in this instance *knighthood* is not simply used as a synonym for the larger concept of *chivalry* with its moral, ideological and religious implications. Both *knighthood* and *spear*, as words with an Old English origin, underline the Rohirrim’s ‘Anglo-Saxonness’. However, as we have seen in our discussion of *The Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf*, Tolkien did not shy away from an anachronistic use of terms like *chivalry* if he deemed it appropriate and thought that he needed it to achieve terminological accuracy. So his use of the term *knighthood* is likely to signal an intentional contrast with his use of *chivalry*, since the Rohirrim are not tainted by the (excessive) desire for glory and fame, which Tolkien linked to *chivalry* in his critique of both Beorhtnoth and Beowulf.

will go.’ ‘As for me,’ said Imrahil, ‘the Lord Aragorn I hold to be my liege-lord, whether he claim it or no. His wish is to me a command. [...]’” (*LotR* 880).

³⁵ *Lance* is generally used to refer to a spear used by a mounted warrior and though we find alterations in the design to adapt the spear to its new function, for which the *couched lance* (see illustration) is a good example, the use in medieval texts seems not very consistent.

Equally important is the fact that Tolkien refers to the Riders of Rohan as *Northmen* – a term that occurs otherwise only in Appendix A (*LotR* 1045-46) to designate the ancestors of the Rohirrim. This way Tolkien, on the hand, heightens the contrast and opposition between Southrons, i.e. Southerners, and their antagonists from the North. On the other, the term is likely to evoke associations with *Northern Courage* and the northern heroic spirit. The term *Northern Courage* refers to a shared common Germanic ethos, which finds expression in some of the Old English poems as well as in the actions and behaviour of the Rohirrim. The Riders of Rohan become the embodiment of the ‘northern heroic spirit’, which Tolkien had identified as the motivating force behind the brave last stand of some retainers at the battle of Maldon. The words uttered by Beorhtwold in the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon* are usually seen as the finest (verbal) expression of this spirit. Beorhtwold is a veteran warrior and belongs to the household of the Ealdorman Beorhtnoth, who has led his troops into a pitched battle against the invading Vikings – with disastrous results. Beorhtnoth has fallen and the greater part of the Anglo-Saxon army has either fled or been killed. Only Beorhtwold and a few loyal retainers, after having rejected the Vikings’ appeal to lay down their weapons and save their lives, gather around the body of their leader for a last and desperate stand. Beorhtwold now utters the following lines:

*Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
mod sceal þe mare þe ure maegen lytlaf.*

‘Will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder,
spirit the greater as our strength lessens.’
(‘Homecoming’ 3)

Tolkien, in his poem-cum-essay ‘The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth’, identifies Beorhtwold’s words as an almost pure manifestation of the northern heroic spirit. Beorhtwold and his companions could have purchased their lives by either deserting or by yielding to the overwhelming enemy force – either of which would render them faithless cowards. They thus choose to try and avenge their leader and, if necessary (and likely), to follow him into death.³⁶ Yet this northern heroic spirit is hardly ever encountered in its pure form – neither in historical nor in literary reality. Tolkien was well aware of this, as his comment on *The Battle of Maldon* shows:

For this ‘northern heroic spirit’ is never quite pure; it is of gold and an alloy. Unalloyed it would direct a man to endure even death unflinching, when necessary: that is when death may help the achievement of some object of will, or when life can only be purchased by denial of what one stands for. But since such conduct is held admirable, the alloy of personal good name was never wholly absent. (‘Homecoming’ 14)

The creation of a fictional people such as the Rohirrim, then, provides Tolkien with the unique opportunity to illustrate this northern heroic spirit in its unalloyed form. As an author of fiction, he is no longer obliged to remain within the narrow framework of historical facts. However, Tolkien uses this creative freedom responsibly and his deviations from historical fact serve a purpose. The Rohirrim are, on the one hand, an informed speculative answer to the question of what would have happened if the Angles, Saxons and Jutes had not crossed

³⁶ Fili and Kili’s death in the Battle of the Five Armies follows this pattern. Sam, on the Pass of Cirith Ungol, also briefly feels the temptation of dying in heroic defence of body of his master rather than putting aside personal heroic aspirations and continue with the mission. See Woolf (1976) and Frank (1991) for a (critical) discussion of the dissemination of the ideal of dying with one’s lord.

over to Britain, but struck east and settled the wide plains of Eastern Europe. On the other, they represent an even more idealised version of those Germanic peoples Tolkien had first encountered in Old English poetry. The Riders of Rohan may know the concept of posthumous fame, yet this is not their primary motivation for heroic deeds – at least not as presented in *The Lord of the Rings*. Théoden, for example, addresses Aragorn before their desperate sortie from the Hornburg with the following words:

‘The end will not be long,’ said the king. ‘But I will not end here, taken like an old badger in a trap. [...] When dawn comes, I will bid men sound Helm’s horn, and I will ride forth. Will you ride with me then, son of Arathorn? Maybe we shall cleave a road, or make such an end as will be worth a song – if any be left to sing of us hereafter.’ (*LotR* 539)

Tolkien might as well have given him Beorhtwold’s lines from *The Battle of Maldon*. It becomes clear that Théoden does not undertake this hopeless last attack for the sake of posthumous fame,³⁷ but from a deep-seated conviction that to fall in open battle is the only fitting end for a king of the Rohirrim – and he is not the only example. Éomer, who succeeds Théoden after his death on the Pelennor Fields, proves likewise heroic of heart and mind. Surrounded and cut off from re-inforcements after having been carried too far the impetus of the initial attack, he rallies his men to a last stand:

Stern now was Éomer’s mood, and his mind clear again. He let blow the horns to rally all men to his banner that could come thither; for he thought to make a great shield-wall at the last, and stand, and fight there on foot till all fell, and do deeds of song on the fields of Pelennor, though no man should be left in the West to remember the last King of the Mark. So he rode to a green hillock and there set his banner, and the White Horse ran rippling in the wind.

*Out of doubt, out of dark to the day’s rising
I came singing in the sun, sword unsheathing.
To hope’s end I rode and to heart’s breaking:
Now for wrath, now for ruin and a red nightfall!*

These staves he spoke, yet he laughed as he said them.
(*LotR* 847)

Interestingly, the more desperate the situation gets, the more Anglo-Saxon the Rohirrim become. In dire need they no longer rely on their horsemanship or on orchestrated cavalry-attacks, but alight from their horses and put up a shield-wall, the classic Anglo-Saxon formation for battle – which, at the same time, is the obvious choice for a defensive stance.

³⁷ Théoden, in contrast to Beorhtnoth, turns ‘heroic’ only after having done all he could to save his people.



Drawing of a scene from the Bayeux Tapestry, depicting Norman knights attacking the Anglo-Saxon shield-wall.

And the narrator once more stresses the fact that they are determined to do deeds of song though no man should be left in the West to sing them. Tolkien, on the one hand, consciously alludes to the Germanic-Anglo-Saxon tradition of keeping the fame of the deceased alive by songs of praise. On the other, he contrasts this sort of heroic motivation with Éomer's determination of doing the deeds even if there is no one left who will remember them. Éomer's motivation is not explicitly given, but we can infer from the songs of Rohan that, like his maternal uncle and predecessor Théoden, it was the oaths taken that made him act as he did.³⁸ The young king of Rohan simply tries to honour the obligations of solidarity and friendship with Gondor in the idiom of his people – without questioning the deeper meaning and import of current events on a meta-historical level.³⁹ He does the deed at hand, so to speak, implicitly trusting in the ultimate meaningfulness of the universe.

GREEN KNIGHTS AND CHEVALIERS: SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Tolkien's use of the term *knight* as well as his references to the concept of knighthood are somewhat problematic. For most of the book he avoided associating any of his peoples with the popular concept of (late) medieval chivalry and consciously shunned the core symbols of chivalric ideology, which are the mounted knight in plate armour, castles, and the courtly ladies.⁴⁰ The Secondary World created within the seven hundred pages up to the chapter 'Minas Tirith' was one of Dark Age Europe, which would find its culmination in Aragorn Elessar's Charlemagne-style *restauratio imperii*. However, with the entry of Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth, who dwells "in his castle in Dol Amroth by the sea" (*LotR* 750), and his knights in full harness (*LotR* 771) we see the arrival of the chivalric fairy-tale element and the concomitant 'chivalric contamination', so that even epic-heroic figures like Théoden and his niece Éowyn start using terms such as *esquire* or begin to think in feudal categories (squire vs. knight) respectively.

The Lord of the Rings does not, maybe cannot resolve these contradictions. It seems as if the appearance of Imrahil functioned as a catalyst that set in motion the transformation of the epic-heroic world in direction of a 'chivalric' one. This development parallels the one in primary world literature where we have also an evolution from epic-heroic *chanson de geste* (e.g. the late 11th century *Le Chanson de Roland*) to courtly romance (e.g. Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain, Erec et Enide*, or *Lancelot*, all after 1160) as the dominant genre. It would

³⁸ See the lines in the songs of Rohan praising Théoden: "*Fealty kept he; / oaths he had taken, all fulfilled them*" (*LotR* 803).

³⁹ Éomer's words at the council after the battle of the Pelennor Fields support such an interpretation: "I have little knowledge of these deep matters; but I need it not. This I know, and it is enough, that as my friend Aragorn succoured me and my people, so I will aid him when he calls. I will go" (*LotR* 880).

⁴⁰ See Sternberg (2011: 233).

also fit in with the general direction in which Middle-earth is heading: the Fourth Age as the Age of Man, the rise of chivalry, and the implied dwindling of Faëry. The reasons for Tolkien's avoidance of chivalry are easier to guess. For one, as we have seen, he would try and steer clear of the (for him) unwanted associations with religion, the obsession with honour and courtly love and, as a consequence, the protagonist-centred psychologising of the narrative. Furthermore, as Martin Sternberg (2011) has persuasively argued, Tolkien also wanted to avoid identification of his knightly protagonists with the 'allegorized' knights that have become the symbol for the Victorian (and later) virtue in general (as exemplified by St George, the prototypical knight in plate armour, on the Boy Scout certificate) and the gentleman in particular.⁴¹ Especially the stress laid on fair play, honour, and excessive generosity would lead to "an inflationary preparedness for sacrifice in which sacrificing oneself for an ideal provides the seal of chivalry, something exemplified in paintings like George Frederic Watts's *The Happy Warrior*" (Sternberg 2011: 232).



Left: Boy Scout Certificate. Right: George Frederick Watts, *The Happy Warrior* (1884).

Taking these contemporary views into account, we can understand why Tolkien would criticize the behaviour of Beorhtnoth and Beowulf by using the anachronistic term *chivalry*. Their downfall was brought about exactly by a combination of the key elements constituting chivalry, namely honour, excessive generosity, and a misguided desire for fair play.

Furthermore, Tolkien also identified the problem making the morally right choice among competing claims as the central theme in the late 14th century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which he had edited together with E.V. Gordon back in 1925. In his essay on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written almost three decades later and during the period when he also prepared 'Homecoming' for publication, he addresses once more the problem of the different, often mutually exclusive and conflicting claims of chivalry, but this time within a late medieval setting and with a focus on the moral implications of chivalric behaviour. Tolkien locates the nub of the poem in the third fit, i.e. the temptation of Gawain by the beautiful lady in Castle Hautdesert and the confession on the day before his departure. By means of a close reading of central passages Tolkien identifies the main aim of the poet as an exploration of "the problems that so much occupied the English mind: the relations of Courtesy and Love with morality and Christian morals and the Eternal Law" (MC 105). He

⁴¹ See Mark Girouard's fascinating study *The Return to Camelot. Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (1981).

argues that the testing of Gawain took place on three distinct (and hierarchically differing) levels. On the lowest plane we find jesting pastimes, such as the “exchange of winnings” compact with his host. On the next higher level we have the rules of courtesy “as a code of ‘gentle’ or polite manners” (MC 95), which comprise the morally dangerous game of courtly lovemaking. Last and highest are the “real morals, virtues and sins” (MC 95). The central problem is thus how to deal with the advances of the lady on the one hand, and how to treat the gift of the (allegedly magical) girdle on the other. Tolkien’s answer is clear: Gawain is bound to follow the moral precepts in all cases, which is why his “breach of courtesy” when rejecting the explicit sexual advances of the lady is not only pardonable but the only morally correct solution. Keeping the girdle for himself and not even mentioning it is, by contrast, merely a breach of the compact with his host and thus preferable to a breach of courtesy towards the lady.

In the section on ‘Of ermod’ in his essay-cum-dramatic-dialogue ‘The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth’, Tolkien creates an explicit connection between the poets of *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

We have two poets that study at length the heroic and chivalrous, with both art and thought, in the older ages: one near the beginning in *Beowulf*, one near the end in *Sir Gawain*. And probably a third, more near the middle, in *Maldon*, if we had all his work. It is not surprising that any consideration of the work of one of these leads to the others. (‘Homecoming 16’)

His claim that the study of one poem would lead naturally to the study of the others is somewhat disingenuous and tries to distract from the fact that he is comparing works from across the great cultural, political and linguistic divide of the Norman Conquest. To compare and contrast *Beowulf* with the somewhat later *The Battle of Maldon* needs not much justification. Yet to link these two pre-Conquest heroic poems with the late medieval *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* must have struck his original readers, at least at first, as a surprising and rather novel idea, especially since Gawain’s temptation is not ‘heroic’ but moral. To put it in a nutshell: *Beowulf* and *Beorhtnoth* prove their heroism by facing certain death, whereas Gawain, the paragon of late medieval English chivalry, proves his mettle by avoiding adultery – and is thus implicitly contrasted to his Continental counterpart Gauvain/Gawan on the one hand, and to Sir Lancelot on the other. The gentle and sophisticated intertextual comedy of the (attempted) seduction scenes may not obliterate the more serious moral issues at stake – issues shared with the earlier poems – yet it makes *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* a work that is quite different in tone. And though I believe that Tolkien admired the sophistication, formal artistry, and high moral tone of this Middle English romance, I am convinced that the older heroic-epic poems appealed to him more strongly and that he would, as a consequence, chose a similar heroic-epic mode for his own approach to the problem of heroism and chivalry – or should we rather say *knighthood*? Even the English language seems to help Tolkien with his differentiation between his riders and the late medieval knights. Next to referring to the cavalry of the Rohirrim as ‘riders of Rohan’, he would also, as we have seen, use the term *knights*. Tolkien was, of course, very well aware that English, in contrast to other European languages, had not selected the habitual word for a man on a horse (*rider*) to designate the representative of chivalry, but that the English used instead the Old English *cniht*. Tolkien’s armoured riders are indeed *knights*, and not *chevaliers*.

List of Abbreviations

- ‘Homecoming’ Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. ‘The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm’s Son.’ *Essays and Studies* (NS) 6 (1953): 1-18. London: John Murray.
- Letters* Carpenter, Humphrey (ed. with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien). *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. 2000. First published 1981. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- LotR* Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. *The Lord of the Rings*. 2004. First published 1954-55. 50th anniversary one-volume edition. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- MC* Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. *The Monster and the Critics and Other Essays*. 1997. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins.
- UT* Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. *Unfinished Tales*. 2000. First published 1980. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins.

Bibliography

- Barber, Richard. *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief*. 2004. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Benton, John F. ‘Clio and Venus: An Historical View of Medieval Love.’ In F.X. Newman (ed.). *The Meaning of Courtly Love*. 1968. Albany: State University of New York Press, 19-42.
- Blackwelder, Richard E. *A Tolkien Thesaurus*. 1990. New York and London: Garland.
- Boase, Roger. *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love: A Critical Study of European Scholarship*. 1977. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Brückner, Patrick. ‘Tolkien on Love: Concepts of ‘Love’ in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*.’ In Thomas Honegger and Frank Weinreich (eds.). *Tolkien and Modernity 2*. 2006. (Cormarë Series 10). Zurich and Berne: Walking Tree Publishers, 1-52.
- Burnley, David. ‘Fine Amor: Its Meaning and Context.’ *Review of English Studies* (NS) 31 (1980): 129-148.
- . *Courtliness and Literature in Medieval England*. 1998. (Longman Medieval and Renaissance Library.) London and New York: Longman.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. *J.R.R. Tolkien. A Biography*. 1995. First published 1977. London: HarperCollins.
- (ed. with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien). *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. 2000. First published 1981. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Caxton, William. *The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry or Knyghthode*. 1484. (Translated and printed at Westminster by William Caxton from a French version of Ramon Lull’s *Le libre del ordre de cauayleria*. Facsimile reprint 1976. The English Experience 778. Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum.)
- Dinzelbacher, Peter. ‘Sozial- und Mentalitätsgeschichte der Liebe im Mittelalter.’ In Ulrich Müller (ed.). *Minne ist ein swaerez spil. Neue Untersuchungen zum Minnesang und zur Geschichte der Liebe im Mittelalter*. 1986. (Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik 440.) Göppingen: Kümmerle, 75-110.
- Drout, Michael D.C. ‘The Rohirrim, the Anglo-Saxons, and the Problem of Appendix F.’ In Janice M. Bogstad and Philip E. Kaveny (eds.). *Picturing Tolkien: Essays on Peter Jackson’s The Lord of the Rings Film Trilogy*. 2011. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 248-263.

- Flieger Verlyn. 'Frodo and Aragorn: The Concept of the Hero.' In Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbaro (eds.). *Tolkien: New Critical Perspectives*. 1981. Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 40-62.
- Frank, Roberta. 'The Ideal of Men Dying with Their Lord in *The Battle of Maldon*: Anachronism or *Nouvelle Vague*.' In Ian Wood and Niels Lund (eds.). *People and Places in Northern Europe 500-1600. Essays in Honour of Peter Hayes Sawyer*. 1991. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 95-106.
- Frappier, Jean. 'Vues sur les conceptions courtoises dans les littératures d'oc et d'oïl au XIIe siècle.' *Cahiers de la civilisation médiévale* 2 (1959): 135-156.
- Girouard, Mark. *The Return to Camelot. Chivalry and the English Gentleman*. 1981. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Hammond, Wayne G. and Christina Scull. *The Lord of the Rings. A Reader's Companion*. 2005. London: HarperCollins.
- Harrison, Ann Tukey. 'Aude and Bramimunde: Their Importance in the Chanson de Roland.' *French Review* 54.5 (1981): 672-679.
- Honegger, Thomas. 'The Rohirrim: "Anglo-Saxons on Horseback"? An Inquiry into Tolkien's Use of Sources.' In Jason Fisher (ed.). *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources: Critical Essays*. 2011. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 116-132.
- Hostetter, Carl F. and Arden R. Smith. 'A Mythology for England.' In Reynolds, Patricia and Glen H. GoodKnight (eds.). *Proceedings of the J.R.R. Centenary Conference. Keble College, Oxford, 1992. Mythlore* 80 / *Mallorn* 30. 1996. Milton Keynes and Altadena CA: The Tolkien Society and The Mythopoetic Press, 281-290.
- Jaeger, C. Stephen. *The Origins of Courtliness – Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals 939-1210*. 1985. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Jankowiak, William R. (ed.). *Romantic Passion. A Universal Experience?* 1995. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Keen, Maurice. *Chivalry*. 1984. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Lewis, Clive Staples. *The Allegory of Love. A Study in Medieval Tradition*. 1936. (Reprinted 1958.) Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Llull, Ramon. *The Book of the Order of Chivalry*. 1274. Translated by Noel Fallows (2013). Woodbridge: The Boydell Press.
- Martinez, Michael. 'Was Imrahil's Vambrace Made of Metal?' *Middle-earth and J.R.R. Tolkien Blog*. 01 August 2016. Accessed 26 January 2017 at <http://middle-earth.xenite.org/2016/08/01/was-imrahils-vambrace-made-of-metal/>
- Newman, F.X. (ed.). *The Meaning of Courtly Love*. 1968. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Nicolay, Theresa Freda. *Tolkien and the Modernists. Literary Responses to the Dark New Days of the 20th Century*. 2014. Jefferson NC: McFarland.
- Paden, William D. 'The Troubadour's Lady: Her Marital Status and Social Rank.' *Studies in Philology* 72 (1975): 28-50.
- Paris, Gaston. 'Lancelot du Lac.' *Romania* 12 (1883): 459-535.
- Pollmann, Leo. *Die Liebe in der hochmittelalterlichen Literatur Frankreichs*. 1966. (Analecta Romanica 18.) Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann.
- Press, Alan R. 'The Adulterous Nature of *fin'amors*: a Re-examination of the Theory.' *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 6 (1970): 327-341.
- Robertson, D.W. Jr. 'The Concept of Courtly Love as an Impediment to the Understanding of Medieval Texts.' In F.X. Newman (ed.). *The Meaning of Courtly Love*. 1968. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1-18.
- Schnell, Rüdiger. *Causa Amoris: Liebeskonzeption und Liebesdarstellung in der mittelalterlichen Literatur*. 1985. Bern and Munich: Francke.

- . ‘Die ‘höfische Liebe’ als Gegenstand von Psychohistorie, Sozial- und Mentalitätsgeschichte.’ *Poetica* (München) 23 (1991): 374-424.
- Shippey, Tom A. *J.R.R. Tolkien. Author of the Century*. 2000. London: HarperCollins.
- Sigal, Gale. *Erotic Dawn-Songs of the Middle Ages*. 1996. Gainesville FL: University Press of Florida.
- Stenström, Anders. ‘A Mythology? For England?’ In Reynolds, Patricia and Glen H. GoodKnight (eds.). *Proceedings of the J.R.R. Centenary Conference. Keble College, Oxford, 1992. Mythlore 80 / Mallorn 30*. 1996. Milton Keynes and Altadena: The Tolkien Society and The Mythopoetic Press, 310-314.
- Sternberg, Martin. ‘The Middle Ages Tolkien Shunned. Tolkien and Chivalry.’ *Hither Shore* 8 (2011): 228-240.
- Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. *The Fall of Arthur*. 2013. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins.
- . ‘The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm’s Son.’ *Essays and Studies* (NS) 6 (1953): 1-18. London: John Murray.
- . *The Lord of the Rings*. 2004. First published 1954-55. 50th Anniversary one-volume edition. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- . *Unfinished Tales*. 2000. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. First published 1980 by George Allen & Unwin. London: HarperCollins.
- and Eric Valentine Gordon (eds.). *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. 1967. (Second edition edited by Norman Davies. First edition 1925.) Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Veugen, Connie. ‘‘A Man, lean, dark, tall’: Aragorn Seen Through Different Media.’ In Thomas Honegger (ed.). *Reconsidering Tolkien*. 2005. (Cormarë Series 8). Zurich and Berne: Walking Tree Publishers, 171-209.
- Wollock, Jennifer G. *Chivalry and Courtly Love in the Middle Ages*. 2011. Santa Barbara CA: Praeger.
- Woolf, Rosemary. ‘The Ideal of Men Dying with Their Lord in the *Germania* and in *The Battle of Maldon*.’ *Anglo-Saxon England* 5 (1976): 63-81.

About the author:

Thomas Honegger holds a Ph.D. from the University of Zurich (Switzerland) where he taught Old and Middle English. He is, since 2002, Professor for English Medieval Studies at the Friedrich-Schiller-University, Jena (Germany). Homepage:

http://www.iaa.uni-jena.de/Institut/Mitarbeiter%2Ainnen/Honegger_+Thomas-p-228.html

Contact: Tm.honegger@uni-jena.de