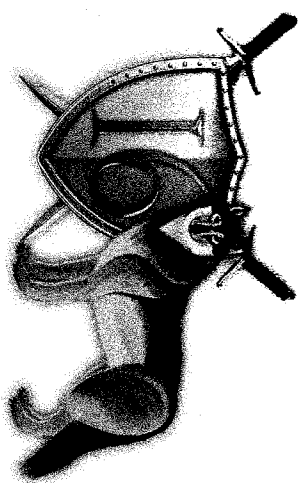


and, we need to keep an open mind about other cultures' practices, even if we have a difficult time accepting them. We do not have to go so far as to adopt another culture's ethical codes, but neither should we be dogmatic about our own. This is especially true when we are confronted with a strange and mysterious world like the one we find in *A Game of Thrones*. There's a difference, however, between accepting that different cultures have different moral practices and a moral relativist's claim that we should therefore be tolerant of *all* differences we encounter. In the end, we must reject moral relativism. No matter what culture we are in, some actions are wrong. Which actions are those? Eating people? Rape? Murder? Sibling incest? Maybe—depends on the circumstances. Rape? Definitely.

NOTES

1. George R. R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), p. 103.
2. James Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism," in *Philosophy for the 21st Century*, ed. Steven Cahn (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), p. 595.
3. George R. R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), p. 328.
4. George R. R. Martin, *A Storm of Swords* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), p. 444.
5. Jesse Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), p. 224.
6. There may also be a biological disinclination toward interest. See Prinz, *Emotional Construction*, p. 255, for discussion.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 188 and 189.
8. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, p. 485.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 833.
10. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, pp. 497–498.
11. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), many nations do not have active laws in place to prevent illegal sex trafficking, which suggests that the practice is less morally blameworthy there than in other nations. <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/index.html>.
12. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, p. 103.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 668.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 670.



"THERE ARE NO TRUE KNIGHTS": THE INJUSTICE OF CHIVALRY

Stacey Goguen

The Dark Side of Chivalry

"It is chivalry that makes a true knight, not a sword. Without honor, a knight is no more than a common killer."

—Ser Barristan Selmy¹

"Hodor doesn't like those much. . . . He likes the stories where the knights fight monsters."

"Sometimes the knights are the monsters, Bran."

—Bran Stark and Meera Reed²

Chivalry as an idealization and an ethical code is a strong theme in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Sansa Stark, a highborn girl, is the primary embodiment of this idealization; she of all the characters in the series most thoroughly believes

(at first, at least) in the valor, the romance, and the justice of chivalry.

Sansa's journey, however, from her home in Winterfell to the capital of King's Landing and then to the isolated Eyrie in the Vale represents another theme: the darker side of chivalry, where fully armored adults hit defenseless children, kings rape their queens, and anointed "knights" are not knights at all. Sansa, a teenager, starts off *A Game of Thrones* by being betrothed to a prince—her dream come true; however, by the end of *A Feast for Crows* she is smuggled away to a remote corner of the continent, the (arguable) kidnap victim of a man old enough to be her father, who has more than a familial interest in her.

Although Sansa, with her auburn hair, looks much more like her Southron mother from the Riverlands, she shares an important personality trait with her Northern father: naiveté in thinking that honor runs the world. But as we see Sansa's naive worldview crumble book by book, we also see that her flaws and the corrupt ethics of others are not the only cause of tragedy; chivalry itself holds something dark within its songs of strong knights and beautiful ladies.

Chivalry Is Misguided

"In the name of the Warrior I charge you to be brave.
In the name of the Father I charge you to be just. In
the name of the Mother I charge you to defend the
young and innocent. In the name of the Maid I charge
you to protect all women."

—Knighting Ceremony³

Sansa interacts frequently with a bodyguard named the Hound, who hates knights and knighthood as much as Sansa loves them. He tells her, "There are no true knights, no more than there are gods. If you can't protect yourself, die and get out of the way of those who can. Sharp steel and strong arms rule this world, don't ever believe any different." Sansa gives

a standard teenage reply to this, shouting, "You're awful!" The Hound merely retorts: "I'm honest. It's the world that's awful."⁴ Unfortunately for Sansa, the world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* sides with the Hound.

It's no coincidence that the Hound's brother, who is possibly the most ignoble, sociopathic character in the series (an impressive claim, given some of the other characters!), is also a knight. Sansa claims of Ser Gregor, "he was no true knight," but she must say the same of Ser Meryn Trant, who slaps her across the face at the behest of her king and betrothed, Joffrey Baratheon. And what of the Kingsguard of the Mad King Aerys—the most honored knights in the land, sworn to protect the royal family—who stood outside the king's door and did not stir as the queen screamed? Their duty was to protect her . . . but not from the king? There have been enough false knights throughout the history of the Seven Kingdoms to fill every castle from Dorne to the Wall.

So are we seeing systematic disregard of a moral code, or is the moral code itself part of the problem? Are there true chivalric knights who uphold justice, or is chivalry itself flawed as a moral code? There are upstanding men and women in Westeros, no doubt, and the irony should not go unnoticed that the knight who arguably adheres most to an ethical standard of knighthood is a woman—Brienne, the Maid of Tarth. A few virtuous knights, however, are not enough to save chivalry, for it does indeed fail as an ethical code.

Chivalry falls short in two main ways. First, it fails to accomplish what it sets out to do: protect those who cannot protect themselves. Knights are supposed to protect a lady's honor, but by focusing on protection as the paramount moral duty, chivalry exalts the sword that protects and (unconsciously) devalues the body that cannot protect itself, which leads to moral vulnerability. Chivalry explicitly claims that it does the opposite: it raises up the "fairer sex" on a pedestal of moral reverence. However, as the activist Gloria Steinem once pointed out

"a pedestal is as much a prison as any small, confined space."⁵ The denizens of Westeros might put it: a pedestal is only three walls away from being a Sky Cell, and a prison counts as "protection" only in a twisted sense of the word.

Second, the injustice is not just that chivalry is an imperfect way of accomplishing a worthy goal; chivalry picks a flawed goal to begin with. It aims to protect the weak instead of empowering them to protect themselves. Moreover, since chivalry picks out women as a whole class of people who are in need of perpetual protection—even as adults—chivalry does not help people lead fuller, more flourishing lives. Instead, it creates rigid social roles that not only punish people when they try to step outside them but also cheapen social relations, turning them into caricatures. At the end of the day, chivalry treats many adult women like children, overvalues the role able-bodied men play as eternal protectors, and even slips in assumed heterosexuality here and there as part of the roles knights and ladies play.

Therefore, chivalry itself is unjust—regardless of the high moral standing of some people who adhere to it. It's not merely that some knights abuse the power given to them, but rather that the code of chivalry requires an unequal balance of power from the start. It propagates the vulnerability of women and further propagates oppressive frameworks of social relations and romantic love.

Some might object that in Westeros we see chivalry functioning within a homophobic, sexist, classist society. By this account, chivalry itself could be separated from these less savory social prejudices and distilled into a truly just ethical code. However, while the chivalry of Westeros has been influenced by its larger social values, we shouldn't forget that it also helps shape those values. Chivalry doesn't just soak up sexism; it inherently endorses and promotes it.

Moreover, this critique of chivalry extends well beyond Martin's fiction. The Western world—albeit somewhat different

from Westeros—is not unacquainted with the ideal of modern "kighthood." A knight is a man who holds open doors for his lady, who woos her with romance, and who protects her. A good man is commonly described as a knight in shining armor or Prince Charming. But chivalry is as much a misguided ethical code in our world today as it is in Westeros. It too narrowly conceives the moral roles each person should play and, furthermore, fixes certain people into a status of vulnerability, which ultimately forces on them a status of inferiority. As Sansa learns, along with Martin's readers, chivalry does not promote human flourishing. There are no true knights because a knight adhering to chivalry is inherently being unjust.

Sansa and her Songs

"Life is not a song, sweetling."

—Petyr Baelish⁶

At the beginning of the series, Sansa thinks life is like a song. While various characters chide her for her naiveté, they rarely suggest that listening to such songs day in and day out is somehow inappropriate. Several characters remark that music is appropriate for girls, but girls alone. Petyr "Littlefinger" Baelish and the Hound come the closest to criticizing Sansa's upbringing. Littlefinger warns her, "Life is not a song, sweetling. You may learn that one day to your sorrow."⁷ The Hound mocks Sansa for being like a little bird that sings songs to please other people; however, he also acknowledges that she has been taught these songs and trained to sing in this way. He derides her for being childish, but she has been encouraged to be childish in this manner. Then again, Sansa really is still somewhat of a child, and as the royal princess Myrcella is once pointed out, "We're children . . . we're *supposed* to be childish."⁸ But are even adult ladies supposed to be childish? According to chivalry, the answer in a sense is yes.

Chivalry treats (highborn) women as having a childlike status and then assumes that that status is a natural trait. Just as Sansa has been taught and encouraged to take on certain childish traits, chivalry encourages women to be vulnerable and dependent. It also encourages other people (especially knights) to treat women as if they are in a perpetually vulnerable state.

The postcolonial feminist philosopher Gayatri Spivak can help us here. Pointing out how imperialism and sexism can interact with one another, Spivak argues that when people from one country try to help people from another country, they run the risk of treating those people like children, even if they don't mean to. She argues that this problem often arises when people think they have a duty to right the wrongs befallen on others, while doubting that those others will ever be able to stand up for themselves and right their own wrongs. These "saviors" end up becoming oppressors; they start treating the people they're helping as forever dependent and vulnerable—subhuman and childlike. Perhaps not coincidentally, Spivak claims, "we reproduce and consolidate what can only be called 'feudalism.'"⁹ Just as feudalism turns some countries and people into vassals, chronically dependent on their lieges for protection, anyone trying to help someone else can fall into this pattern of unconsciously treating them like children.

Spivak, however, isn't arguing that we shouldn't help people. Helping people is good. Helping people because it's your duty is also good. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), for example, argued that morality stems from duty. So thinking you have a duty to help other people is not the problem. The problem arises, as Spivak says, when you think you are responsible for someone else because they are not responsible for themselves. The problem occurs when you perceive your role not as dutiful temporary guide but as dutiful eternal babysitter.

Knights do not perceive their guardian role as temporary. For instance, when fired, Ser Barristan proclaimed that he lived as a knight and thus would die as a knight. Furthermore, the

people of Westeros do not perceive women as outgrowing their need for protection. For instance, Catelyn slit a man's throat and pried a dagger away from her own by grabbing the blade with her hands and biting her attacker, yet people still considered her as vulnerable as any other woman. Men and women are held to the ideals of knight and lady—the protector and the protected—regardless of an individual's need for such protection.

In her landmark work of feminist philosophy, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) discussed how social customs can be confused and entangled with physical facts. We consider many customs to be grounded in some fact that justifies them. To make this point, Beauvoir quoted George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) on racism: "The white American relegates the black to the rank of shoe-shine boy; and then concludes that blacks are only good for shining shoes."¹⁰ Likewise, chivalry relegates ladies to their pedestals, then from this concludes that ladies are fit only to stand on pedestals and not get their dresses dirty. The custom creates the narrative from which it was supposedly derived.

Some might object that women really are physically weaker than men. Most women just don't have the muscle mass to protect themselves against a hostile man, so women need knights for physical protection. To debunk this idea, consider Petyr "Littlefinger" Baelish, a man of small stature. He was even smaller as a teenager, when he tried to fight Catelyn's betrothed one-on-one for her hand in marriage. He lost. Badly. And yet Petyr is more than capable of protecting himself. He knows there is more than one way to skin a cat, and there is more than one way to overpower your enemies. He points out to Ned Stark (poetically while in a brothel) that since he can't win by fighting his enemies, he will fuck them (over) instead ("You Win or You Die"). Similarly, when Syrio Forel is teaching Arya sword-fighting, he points out that the "knight's dance" of using brute force is not the only way to fight. Strength and

muscle mass are not the only ways to protect yourself; agility, speed, cunning, intelligence, and stealth (the Water Dance) will also do the trick. No one has ever denied that women can excel at these things, least of all fucking people over. It is said in Westeros that poison is a woman's weapon, and Cersei points out to Sansa that crying and sex are also weapons for manipulating people.

And yet, chivalry sets women up as an entire group of people who, by virtue of being women, need protection. Always. For example, Grand Maester Pycelle discusses the "frailty" of the female sex in reference to Cersei, the queen regent, who is as ruthless and ambitious a leader as any. Or again, when Lord Stark finds Arya's sword Needle he remarks, "This is no toy for children, least of all for a girl," even though she had disarmed Prince Joffrey, who was not only bigger than she, but better trained.¹¹ In the HBO series, when his sons make fun of Bran for being a bad shot, Lord Stark asks which of them were marksmen at ten. Meanwhile, Arya, only slightly older than Bran, scores a perfect bull's-eye. Yet no one seems to consider what Arya could do if she had been given formal training like her brothers.

On the issue of power and vulnerability, consider the riddle Varys poses to Tyrion in *A Clash of Kings*: Between a king, a rich man, and a septon, who will a sellsword fight for? Does power ultimately rest in wealth, legal status, or social/religious status? Does power ultimately lie within sellswords, or within the person who commands them? The Spider concludes, "Power resides where men believe it resides. No more, no less."¹² The issue with chivalry is that it does not encourage anyone to believe it could reside within a woman, unless she was, like Arya, Brienne, or Daenerys, truly exceptional. But even then, an exception as such does not disprove the rule.

Within Sansa's songs, all knights are gallant, maids are always beautiful, the season is always summer, and honor always rules. Chivalry is unproblematic because no one is unhappy

with their role. There are no Aryas or Briennes or Daeneryses in the songs; there are only Sansas—women who want nothing more than to be the ideal lady.

But life is not a song, and thinking this way does not help women flourish. Even Sansa realizes this eventually. After she suffers a severe beating from the Kingsguard at her King's command, a kind maester patches her up and tries to comfort her. Before, Sansa would have taken these gentle words to heart, as when her Septa told her, "A lady's armor is courtesy."¹³ At this point, though, Sansa disregards this coddling as worthless prattle in the face of real injustice. She realizes how vulnerable she is when there are no "true knights" to protect her. When the maester tells her, "Sleep a bit, child. When you wake, all this will seem a bad dream," she thinks to herself before passing out, "No it won't, you stupid man."¹⁴ Sansa has come full circle from thinking that chivalry dictates the proper role each person should play. Now she concludes of the men around her, "They are no true knights . . . not one of them."¹⁵

The Death of Modern Chivalry: Good Riddance

"I like dogs better than knights. . . . A hound will die for you, but never lie to you. And he'll look you straight in the face."

—The Hound¹⁶

Homosexual love is another thorn in chivalry's side. Martin approaches this topic mostly through Renly and Loras, who are knights and lovers. Overall, though, not much commentary is made on homosexuality throughout the series, and that is precisely the point. The people of Westeros often forget that homosexuality exists, and when they are reminded, they often remark that it is strange, or abnormal, or very rare. The chivalric love stories are always about knights and ladies.

Knights and ladies play specific romantic roles; the knight who wins a tourney places a laurel on the lap of the woman he crowns the Queen of Beauty. Loras crowned Sansa, who swooned at the romantic gesture, but in the TV series, we see Loras has eyes only for Renly. Loras could not, however, crown Renly King of anything in the tourney because a knight is supposed to woo a lady, as Florian wooed Jonquil. It is known.

Medieval chivalry was homophobic, sexist, classist, ableist,¹⁷ and probably racist, too. This is one reason why chivalry, as it has been historically construed, is not a just ethical code. The chivalry of Westeros also adopts many of these problematic ideologies from its culture at large. One might think, however, that "modern-day chivalry" is able to avoid these oppressive pitfalls and be an honorable code of ethics.

Modern-day chivalry promotes rigid expressions of sexuality as well, though. Chivalry dictates gender roles, and heterosexuality is woven throughout the chivalric interpretation of gender. Even if someone claims that being nice to other people or defending those who can't defend themselves is a chivalrous ideal, we should recognize that the ideal comes at a price. Modern-day chivalry is invoked primarily as an ethics for how people romantically attracted to each other should interact. How people should act depends on their gender, however. Additionally, chivalry specifies rules only for interacting with someone of the opposite gender. For instance, if two women were out on a date, chivalry couldn't dictate who should pay for the meal, or whether one should hold a door open for the other. Likewise, if two men were in a relationship, *chivalry* would be unable to explain how the two men should support each other. Modern chivalry presents itself as a universal code of ethics, but really, it offers guidance only for heterosexual men and women.

Simone de Beauvoir argued that modern chivalry wove itself into the heterosexual narrative of romance that many French girls in the 1940s imagined for themselves. In this

narrative, men played a specific, chivalrous role: "He [a man] is the liberator; he is also rich and powerful, he holds the keys to happiness, he is Prince Charming. She [the girl] anticipates that in his caress she will feel carried away by the great current of life."¹⁸ Girls imagine a specific role for themselves: waiting for Prince Charming to carry them away. Girls who dream of a "Princess Charming" find these dreams and desires ignored and unacknowledged.

Clearly, George R. R. Martin understands that people are not always satisfied with the roles their society encourages or dictates. Arya claims that she will not grow up to be a lady, and Brienne was so dissatisfied with her role as a highborn lady that she asserted that no one could marry her until they bested her in combat. (No one ever did.) Likewise, Daenerys proclaimed herself Khaleesi and Queen even though neither Westeros nor the Dothraki were accustomed to having women leaders. Each of these women had to struggle against social norms in order to live the kinds of lives they wanted for themselves.

This is not to argue that societies shouldn't be in the business of helping people understand and choose different social roles. The argument against chivalry isn't an argument for social anarchy. The Southern religion in Westeros, for instance, worships the Seven: the Father, the Mother, the Smith, the Warrior, the Maiden, the Crone, and the Stranger. Focusing on these as seven societal roles/positions is not necessarily unjust or oppressive, since the roles are distinct but not mutually exclusive. A person can be a father and a smith. A single woman could be maiden, mother, and crone in her life. Therefore, it's possible for Catelyn to see the image of her maiden daughter Arya in the warrior. When she does, Catelyn muses on a piece of theology: "Each of the Seven embodies all of the Seven. . . . There was as much beauty in the Crone as in the Maiden, and the Mother could be fiercer than the Warrior."¹⁹ Societal roles can help us form identities, build communities, and understand our strengths and weaknesses.

Societal roles are not oppressive unless groups of people are categorically denied access to roles of value (like being a warrior, valiant and honorable). Bran's case is a little more complicated; he is crippled and so cannot fulfill his dream of being part of the Kingsguard. This fact in itself isn't oppressive; the oppression comes when Bran thinks he will not be able to fulfill any valuable role in life. His father's bannermen encourage this thought by whispering that it would be more honorable for Bran to kill himself. It is not until Jojen comes along that Bran realizes being a knight is not the only way to be a hero—cripple and hero are not mutually exclusive categories.

Recognizing that people do not function in only one social role their whole lives can help us understand the extent to which our societies encourage us to take on different roles, to explore and change our social identities. Chivalry missteps when it presumes to know which roles are best for us based on our gender and based on its presumption of our sexual orientation. In this way, chivalry is akin to a well-meaning but too-restrictive parent. It needs to let its children grow up and find their own way in the world.

Women, Not Wards: What Has Humanity Made of the Human Female?

Beauvoir argues that even if there are biological differences between men and women, it is cultures and societies that put certain values and meanings on those differences. Gender has primarily a cultural meaning (not a biological one), and so if we want to see why Beauvoir thinks that "one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman,"²⁰ then we must ask ourselves "what humanity has made of the human female."²¹

Chivalry has made the human female into a Lady. Well, historically, it made certain women into ladies (specifically, highborn European women). Even if we try to strip chivalry of its classist and ethnocentric trappings, it still clings to its

sexist framework. The chivalric lady is a kind of ward and not an autonomous human adult. This is not to say that it's unjust to have anyone ever be a ward under someone else's protection; many people consider their children to be their wards. However, children eventually outgrow their roles as wards. The problem is having someone as a ward permanently when they are able to function as an autonomous person.

Feminist philosophy, therefore, sees chivalry as oppressing women by formulating a specific role that not all women want for themselves, and, further, by devaluing the role that women are supposed to play. Of course, some women fit naturally with the ideal of what being a "lady" entails, but many don't. By propping up the lady as the best and most proper image of a woman, chivalry silences many other forms of womanhood demanding that all "proper" women look and act a certain way. Under chivalry, a lady can be seen as honorable, but never quite as honorable as a knight, since a knight can help other besides himself. The ward is never as valuable as the sword that protects him or her, or as the man who wields the sword. Men are also limited by chivalry; being a "knight (in shining armor)" or a "prince (charming)" may offer a bit more breathing room to express one's personality, but not if a man wants to do anything ladylike, such as singing, dancing, or—heave forbid—sewing.

Some might object that thinking of chivalry along gender roles is too simplistic. Even in Westeros there are myriad subcultures in which gender roles are tweaked and changed. For instance, in Dorne, it is not out of the ordinary for a woman to have martial training. The Dornish were descended from the Rhoynar and their warrior-queen Nymeria, after a. However, this means that other regions of Westeros categorize women from Dorne based on their ethnicity. Dornish women are known for being not quite like "regular" women of Westeros. For instance, when Tyrion is asked about the strangest thing he's ever eaten, he asks if a Dornish

counts. Ethnic exceptions exist for gender roles, but in being exceptions, they leave the rule untouched.

In the end, power dynamics can be hidden in how we conceive of ourselves as men, women, citizens, adults, children, and nations. As a result, we can imprison people when we believe we are actually helping them. Instead, we should examine the cultural connotations of what being a knight or a lady means, and try to understand that if we are seeking a just ethical code, chivalry is not a good choice. If a knight is a follower of chivalry who upholds justice and promotes human flourishing, then "there are no true knights."

NOTES

1. George R. R. Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* (New York: Bantam Books, 2011), p. 878.
2. George R. R. Martin, *A Storm of Swords* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), p. 339.
3. George R. R. Martin, "The Hedge Knight," in *Legends*, ed. Robert Silverberg (London: Voyager, 1998), p. 518.
4. George R. R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), p. 757.
5. "Women's History: Gloria Steinem Quotes," *About.com*, accessed June 2011, womenhistory.about.com/cs/quotes/a/qu_g_steinem.htm.
6. George R. R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), p. 473.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, p. 47.
9. Gayatri Spivak, "Righting Wrongs," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 (2004), p. 542.
10. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 2009), p. 12.
11. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, p. 220.
12. Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, p. 132.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 490. In a small way, a lady's courtesy can be her armor; Sansa's composure and politeness do save her from beatings in a handful of circumstances; however, it's not foolproof armor. As polite as Sansa is, Joffrey is sometimes just in a foul mood and so for a king to hit his lady . . . himself.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 490.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 288.
17. "Ableist" refers to manifestations of a discriminatory attitude toward people who are not considered able-bodied, that is, people with disabilities. When the bannermen

in Winterfell whisper that Bran would have more honor if he killed himself rather than living as a cripple—that's ableist.

18. Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, p. 341.
19. Martin, *A Clash of Kings*, p. 497.
20. Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, p. 283.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 48.