



The Evolution of Social Standards: How the “Ideal” Man in the Middle Ages Deviated from Roman Times

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Throughout history, the world has seen the rise and fall of countless empires. After each empire falls, a new system always emerges. Among the most famous empires was the Roman Empire. It incited a sense of fear and excitement that was rooted in both the adventure and risks associated with war and expansion. But as we reflect on history, we can observe a pattern: that nothing ever lasts forever. The Roman empire did eventually begin to dwindle. Raids and attacks upon Rome increased, and when the gaps that poked into the empire could not be filled, Rome as it was before fell. Continental Europe began to approach a period now called the Middle Ages. Here, society became more restrictive and controlling. The rise of the Catholic Church meant a period of clerical domination of the people. We hear this from Craig Nakashian, who in *Christianity and Warfare in the Medieval West*, states, “As the bishops of Rome asserted their roles as the ecclesiastical heads of Christianity, they worked with and against secular rulers to establish church governance throughout Europe” (Nakashian). Societal standards had to be adhered to, for fear of excommunication and exile. The texts *Aeneid* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* highlight the standards set for prominent figures in the Roman Era and the Middle Ages. Roman warriors were disciplined to rely on their physical, dominating capabilities to completely obliterate the enemy. On the other hand, medieval knights relied on intellectual abilities and logistics. They were held to their respective obligations, where they focused on doing what was morally right rather than what they could accomplish with their might. Within the upper class, violence was frowned upon, something that Nakashian mentions when saying, “Clerics also sought to regulate violence in society more broadly, especially to restrain the warfare of a fractious nobility” (Nakashian).

Since the Roman Empire was constantly fighting and expanding, leaders needed men that could withstand the conditions of the battlefield for a long period of time. Warriors from the Roman era were valued for their physical strength. Since the empire was constantly fighting and expanding, leaders needed men that could withstand the conditions of the battlefield for a long period of time. The more fit they were, both physically and mentally, their chances of glory and recognition would be higher and their chances of survival both personally and to ensure the continuity of the state were greatly increased. This idea is exemplified throughout the *Aeneid*, by highlighting the strength of Aeneas. Early on in the text it says, “...hurled about endlessly by land and sea, by the will of the gods, by cruel Juno’s remorseless anger, long suffering also in war, until he founded a city and brought his gods to Latium.” On countless occasions, Aeneas faced difficulties that were almost impossible to overcome. Although most of the elements in this text are mythical, it showcases the true and utter strength held by Roman warriors. Aeneas was the blueprint. He was the model for glory, power, and all other traits that warriors desired. Because he was strong and capable, he overcame these challenges and founded one of the most influential empires in the history of mankind, according to the mythology. Virgil continues to expand on the sheer might that Aeneas holds. His wartime skills are shown while he and his men are stuck on the Libyan coast. The text reads, “He halts at this, and grasps in his hand his bow and swift arrows, shafts that loyal Achates carries, and first he shoots the leaders themselves, their heads, with branching antlers, held high, then the mass, with his shafts, and

drives the whole crowd in confusion among the leaves.” Even if Aeneas is bulky, his precision is yet another one of his abilities. The fact that he possesses both fine and gross motor skills shows how versatile his strengths are. And this ability broadcasts how Aeneas once again represents this ideal warrior from Roman times. Aeneas also carries himself with a sense of power. He strives to make himself known, showing the signs of a strong leader. While addressing Queen Dido and her people, he says, “I am here in person, Aeneas the Trojan, him whom you seek.” Aeneas’s confidence also contributes to his strength. Not how physically strong he is, but mentally. Because he makes himself appear powerful, his mentality shifts to actually believe it. In her piece *Birth, Death and Survival: Sources of Political Renewal In the Work of Hannah Arendt and Virgil’s Aeneid*, Catherine Frost suggests a compelling connection to the norms of the Roman and pre-medieval eras. She says, “Accounts of founding, be they myth or theory, must first and foremost serve the needs of survival” (Frost 350). The key difference between the Roman era and the medieval period was the fact that Romans were much more focused on survival, and all other things came second. In the medieval period, this idea of survival clearly did not dissipate, but society began to revolve around the Church. The Romans, on the other hand, were religious, but religion did not dictate their society the way survival did. Roman warriors didn’t just need physical strength, they needed to be mentally capable as well in order to survive. And if they managed to grasp power, it was through their hardships that they could secure their position.

The *Aeneid* additionally demonstrates the ideal of power along with its consequences. A good leader did not live without suffering, and faced misfortune at one point in their life to get them to their peak. This has been emphasized by Catherine Frost when she says, “The *Aeneid* is a work primarily concerned with sacrifice, suffering and death, and it highlights the losses that must be endured, the disorientation to be overcome, before renewal arrives” (Frost 350). How leaders managed to overcome their troubles was subjective to each individual, but the general concept of a well-rounded leader who experienced difficulties throughout their lives is exemplified in the *Aeneid*. Specifically, it says in the text, “So he speaks, and feeds his spirit with the insubstantial frieze, and his face wet with his streaming tears.” Aeneas is undoubtedly a warrior. Here, he is recollecting the Trojan War, which ended terribly for him and his fellow Trojans. He fought mercilessly, yet the entire encounter moved him to tears. After the war, Aeneas had regained his strength on his journey, *yet he cannot forget what he had endured, a clear sign of power and the sacrifices made to gain it*. While the entire war demonstrated a general hardship for Aeneas, Virgil further expands on a more personal issue for him. This is demonstrated in the text when, “Aeneas truly heaves a deep sigh, from the depths of his heart, as he views the spoils, the chariot, the very body of his friend, and Priam stretching out his unwarlike hands.” The most personal attack on Aeneas’ soul was viewing the body of his friend, whom Virgil implies had been killed during the battle. While the entire war was a devastation, the final blow had been seeing the destruction around him, specifically the loss of an individual close to him. Even though Aeneas escaped, and fought against Juno’s wrath, the memory is always there with him, as a constant reminder. No matter how strong and powerful he becomes, it will be built on his suffering. To reiterate on the journey of the remaining Trojans in search of asylum, Virgil emphasized all the trouble they had faced to reach Libya. Ilionius, one of those Trojans, said, “We unlucky Trojans, driven by the winds over every sea,” then he followed with some requests to ease their past troubles, “Spare a virtuous race and look more kindly on our fate.” Even after the brutal loss in Troy, the remaining individuals, including Aeneas, could not

seem to escape disaster. Although Aeneas would go on to accomplish more than he could've imagined, he had a constant reminder of the sacrifice and suffering it took for him to get there. Just to seek asylum, he and the other Trojans were bombarded and tossed around the seas in their attempt to gain refuge. Ilionius specifically used the word 'unlucky.' Up to this point, Aeneas had been unlucky. He was seeking a chance to turn his life around, but had little to no luck. The Aeneid embodies a more somber and serious tone throughout the piece. Nevertheless, Romans weren't expected to be uniform, unlike the more rigid and controlling medieval period that followed.

Roman warriors exhibited significant brutality and yearned for bloodshed. The moral portrait of medieval knighthood finds a deviation in earlier Roman times. Medieval knights held their morality tightly. Their place in society was defined by their 'masculinity' as stated by Kaci McCourt in *Masculinity and Chivalry: The Tenuous Relationship of the Sacred Masculinity and Chivalry: The Tenuous Relationship of the Sacred and Secular in Medieval Arthurian Literature and Secular in Medieval Arthurian Literature Conversely*. According to McCourt, medieval masculinity "is meant to denote a social construction" (McCourt 21). In *Sir Gawain*, the author demonstrates to readers the reality of knighthood in the medieval period as a paradox between one's passion and their moral obligations and duties, which were key to ensuring their greatness. The moral duty of a knight is influenced by his internal sense of loyalty, which the author emphasizes in *Gawain*, stating, "There good Gawain was set at Guinevere's side, with Agravain a la Dure Main on the other side seated, both their lord's sister-sons, loyal-hearted knights." The relationship between the knights and their superiors is clear, with the knights holding a sense of loyalty in their hearts and souls rather than it being a formal rule or regulation. This shows the passionate nature of a knight, with the internal feeling of duty. The author of *Sir Gawain* exemplifies a knight's moral duty. This is presented when Gawain asks Arthur to, "Grant me leave to go on the morrow! For the appointment approaches that I pledged myself to." Despite the comfort that Gawain is currently basking in, he hasn't forgotten his "appointment," and he further shows his emotionless moral obligation to complete a task with his usage of the word "pledge." He knows that regardless of how he feels deep down, he has a task that he must fulfill. Richard Hamilton Green, who had previously analyzed the piece, claims, "the poet transforms a suspect magical sign into an emblem of perfection to achieve the simultaneous suggestion of greatness and potential failure" (Hardman 86). This adds to the continuing internal struggle of knighthood, to become what is expected of them. The poem consistently displays this central contrast between the passion and moral duty of a knight. Their sense of moral duty came partly from their place in society, as they were seen as models of good behavior. In order to keep the respect that they had earned, they had to adhere to the norms of their community.

The personal balancing of passion and morality influences the reputation of a knight through established norms. Knights were key figures in medieval society. They were subjects of the king and their nations, and they were renowned in society, beloved by the people, and expected to abide by social norms and manners to protect their reputation. The poem says, "The knights most renowned after the name of Christ." This line exemplifies just how much knights were truly valued in society. While kings ruled their vast lands and expansive territories, knights were the individuals that many Europeans looked up to, just after Christ. The purpose of including this is to show just how influential knights were at the time. They were models in



society, perfect examples of how people should strive to be. Not only did the common folk admire knights, but kings, who had the crown and all the power, did too. This is shown by the king's actions towards Gawain and his fellow knights. For example: "To consult the knights draw near, and this plan they all support; the king with crown to clear, and give Gawain the sport." While Gawain is weighing his decisions, he is aided by the king himself. The king admires his nobility, his internal urge to do the right thing. He trusts Gawain and has faith in his ability to complete his journey. Knights held themselves to a certain standard, by always striving to do what was right rather than what was easy. Gawain himself shows this when he says: "But teach me the true way, and tell me what men call thee, and I will apply all my purpose the path to discover." Gawain has committed himself to accomplishing his task. As someone with a high societal status, this is what is expected of Gawain and of all other knights. In *Unstable Kinship: Trojanness, Treason, and Community in Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, Gawain's tendency to adhere to proper mannerisms that were expected of him is highlighted by Schiff. He writes that "Gawain here conjoins cultural and biological notions of self: both impeccable manners and noble ancestry ground his public being" (Schiff 81). Medieval standards were strict, and knights had been trained and shaped to oblige. If they couldn't control themselves, then they couldn't be models of the "ideal" behavior that individuals in the Middle Ages strived for. The schema of "ideal" behavior stemmed from the positive stereotypical traits that were correlated to knighthood.

Knighthood in *Gawain* is commonly associated with trustworthiness and loyalty. The author highlights this by saying, "There tourneyed many a time the trusty knights." Arthur's knights were cherished for their trustworthiness that made them honorable. They were respected by the citizens for their trustworthiness. In contrast to how the perception and sense of trustworthiness was critical for knights, their practical ability to make decisions was also central to their identity. When Gawain is about to embark on his journey, towards his fate, he says, "I must set forth to my fate without fail in the morning." Gawain is determined, a perfect example of traditional medieval knighthood. He isn't the most fond of the journey, but he holds onto his beliefs in persevering. He cannot afford to fail, because as a knight, it has been drilled into him to uphold his standards. Not only were knights loyal to others, but they also stayed true to the decisions that they made. Dishonor was not an option. Their admirable traits, especially their trustworthiness, made them important figures in decision-making, as seen in the text when Gawain is conflicted. This leads into the widely known stereotype of knights and adventure. Part of what made them so honorable was their ability to accomplish difficult tasks. The text reads, "He first were apprised of some strange story or stirring adventure, or some moving marvel that he might believe in of noble men, knighthood, or new adventures." Their bravery was also linked to the stereotype of knights constantly living a life of adventure. Even centuries later, the first thing that comes to mind when medieval knights are mentioned are their thrilling, action-packed lives. The average knight had a busy life, and their 'adventures' led to the interpretation and belief that knights were courageous and could tackle the impossible.

A societal norm is a natural, evolving phenomenon as time goes by. In the past few centuries, the world has slowly become progressive. So that leads to the big question. Have we, globally, truly left behind the backwardness of the past? If we reflected on what society would have been like in the Middle Ages, it would seem like an utter nightmare. Society was rigid, strict, and harsh to those who did not conform. Women were silenced, and weren't even seen as



human beings, just property of their husbands or fathers. Conditions were not significantly better during the Roman Era, but there was no church dictating society. But, if we were to compare these aspects of the past to our current society, we would certainly see some parallels that have not faded away as the world began to embrace modernity. Religious authority, while not inherently harmful, is abused and used as a reason to dictate everyday life. The rise of modern conservatism has created trends among social media platforms, promoting a 'traditional' lifestyle, rejecting what *some* individuals deem 'leftist propaganda'. A new fashion trend has emerged in recent years, claiming to encompass the 'old money' style, referencing traditional clothes worn by people with generational wealth. Riots have broken out in numerous Western nations due to an outrage against immigration. They yearn for a society that mirrors how it was a century ago, with populations being composed of mainly natives to the area. These 'trends' that push for a conservative, traditional society show how the idea of social conformity is very much alive in the world. While there is an ongoing debate about the impact of a 'traditional' versus 'modern' lifestyle, one thing is undoubtedly clear. To answer the 'big question', I can confidently say that while we have not left behind all aspects of the traditional lifestyle, what individuals now have is a choice. The creation of democracies established the right of each person to choose how they would like to live their own life. *That* is how we have evolved from the past into modern society.



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