

## Writing Chivalry: The *Lettrure of Armes* in Late Medieval England

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**Objectives:** The project consists of four main parts:

1. A survey of the various kinds of chivalric writing in circulation in England during the late Middle Ages (roughly 1275-1475) based on printed catalogues and indices and secondary literature.
2. A more detailed survey of certain parts of this corpus using the original documents in sources including the British Library, the Bodleian, and the College of Arms.
3. An analysis of crucial moments where the chivalric texts can be seen as directly coercive or seen influencing specific people.
4. An analysis of contemporary attitudes to chivalry as reflected in fan fiction on works such as *Game of Thrones* through the use of topic modelling.

**Context:** Paul Fussell, in his classic study *The Great War and Modern Memory*, attributes the initial enthusiasm for the war in 1914 to “an essentially feudal language” drawn from medievalizing poets such as Tennyson, a language in which the enemy is the foe, the dead are the fallen, soldiers are warriors, and to die is to perish. Medieval moral critics also on occasion noted the dangers of inflated chivalric language and the way it could be used to coerce men into rash actions. More often, however, those connected to chivalric culture celebrated the ways in which writing could be used to promote male courage. A vast body of writing was devoted to this purpose. In the contemporary world, where nearly seventeen and a half million people are said to have watched the premiere of season eight of *Game of Thrones*, stories of sword play continue to maintain their appeal, but with crucial differences in the treatment of gender roles.

### **Initial Stage: Mapping the Medieval Material**

The body of chivalric writing in circulation in late medieval England included sustained narrative sources, *chansons de geste*, romances, and chronicles; allegories; sustained prose treatises and commentaries on chivalry; and a large number of shorter genealogical and heraldic texts, often copied as rolls rather than books, as well as formal oaths for heralds and short reports on victories. It is a large and diverse body of material.

The first step in the project is to get a clearer sense of the range of surviving chivalric writing that circulated in Britain. This survey will be the basis for a checklist, somewhat along the lines of P. S. Jolliffe’s *Checklist of Middle English Prose Writings of Spiritual Guidance*. Initially we plan to focus on major collections, e.g. the Ashmolean manuscripts in the Bodleian, and on types of writing, such as the oaths of heralds or short reports on battles, that have been often been overlooked.

**Conclusion:** Overall, the project will contribute to our understanding of the long history of the celebration of male violence, our understanding of the ways members of the chivalric class, often dismissed or celebrated as primitive and semi-literate, interacted with writing to shape their identities, and our understanding of the way chivalric stories continue to shape identity today.