It is not a new observation that in late medieval Europe – and especially in the francophone areas of western Europe – a cult of chivalric heroism emerged. That is not to say that there had not been admiration of chivalric exploits in previous times; but it seems that from the late fourteenth century onwards this admiration found itself new objects. In addition to the heroes of older literary traditions like romances or chansons de geste, we increasingly find contemporary knights presented as chivalric heroes, mainly, but not exclusively, by means of a new literary genre named "chivalric biography" by the French scholar Élisabeth Gaucher. Examples are French and Burgundian knights like Bertrand du Guesclin, Jean II le Meingre, called Boucicaut, or Jacques de Lalaing, but also counts, dukes and princes were styled as chivalric heroes – such as Edward of Wales (later called “The Black Prince”), Louis II de Bourbon, or Gaston IV de Foix.

This cult of chivalric heroism has to be seen in the context of social and political change in the late Middle Ages. Although the thesis of a late medieval crisis of the nobility cannot be maintained any longer, it must be acknowledged that from the fourteenth century onwards there were developments which put the nobility (and especially its lower strata) under increasing pressure to adapt to newly emerging circumstances (Contamine). Princely service and a military vocation had traditionally been the most important resources of noble status, economically and ideologically. In the late Middle Ages, the increasing power of princely and monarchical rule seemed to turn against noble autonomy and noble status; the study of late medieval German principalities has revealed striking examples for this (Konzen). At the same time, military change did not displace noble knights from the battlefields, but forced them to arrange with new techniques, new practices and new actors on the military field (Keen).

In this situation, the cult of chivalric heroism mirrors an undiminished worship of martial traditions among the nobility. At the same time, noble claims to autonomy and the indispensability of noble military service for the maintenance of princely rule are asserted. A key concept in this context was the notion of the common good (Kempshall). This concept originated in ancient philosophy and influenced medieval political theory. Medieval thinkers often stressed the role of princes and kings in maintaining the common good and public order. The concept could thus be used to legitimate monarchical power. In those late medieval chivalric biographies which were written by and aimed at non-princely nobles, the notion of the common good is reinterpreted from the perspective of the non-princely nobility. These texts assert that the claim of princes and kings to be the champions of the common good relies essentially on martial service rendered to them by the nobility. On the one hand, this implies that the traditional martial vocation of the nobility is in no way outdated, even in view of military change which is far from being denied in these texts; and on the other hand, that it is actually the nobility who are the true keepers of the common good, not the princes (who are, in fact, sometimes depicted as entirely dependent on noble help).

The preceding remarks try to shed light on chivalric heroism from a socially and politically contextualised point of view. The aim of the present essay is to widen this focus by pointing to another perspective on the phenomenon which may be regarded not so much as an alternative but rather as complementary. By this, I am referring to the perspective of gender. There are obvious links between a striving for outstanding chivalric deeds in war and other martial contexts and that “hypermasculinity that combined aggressiveness with pride in birth” (Karras 39) which has been ascribed to the medieval aristocracy.
While it has been assumed that this hypermasculinity “did not always sit well with the political structures of medieval Europe” (ibid.), the above remarks suggest different evidence. A closer look at some of the chivalric biographies and didactic literature as suggested above seems to reveal that chivalric heroism is, in most cases, not equivalent to a justification of political anarchy, but rather linked to a discussion of social order and the contribution the aristocracy might make to it.

Due to reasons of space, the aim of this essay cannot be to investigate this in depth. As a first approach, it may suffice to touch upon the question how constructions of gender contribute to shaping chivalric heroes and then to consider how these constructions may be related to political contexts in late medieval history. I will do this in four sections: In the first section, I will draft some basic theoretical assumptions on medieval chivalric masculinity. In a second step, I will broaden my scope to look at the analogy between medieval models of chivalric heroism and aristocratic “hypermasculinity” with a short side-glance on the role of honour. The two final sections are dedicated to giving examples from late medieval chronicles and biographies.

**Basic Assumptions**

Much has been written about medieval masculinities, and although much research has focused on the gender identity of clericals, there are studies of chivalric masculinity in the Middle Ages as well. Much of this work reflects the central insight that male gender identities are not in the first place defined in contrast to femininity but rather as a result of negotiation among men. Darrin Cox noted that “classifying masculine relationships [...] provides a greater degree of clarity regarding the hierarchy of masculinity rather than a straightforward, binary comparison with women” (Cox 210). Marianne Ailes has shown that in the French literature of the high Middle Ages, being friends, brothers-in-arms, uncle and nephew, liege lord and vassal, etc. seems to be much more important to who men are and how they act than the concept of courtly love which has absorbed the attention of generations of scholars. For Ailes, it seems even possible that the notion of courtly love, to a significant extent involving the language and imagery of feudal relationships, was in fact “drawing upon the tradition of male friendship” (Ailes 226-227).

These observations provide important insights into the structure of medieval aristocratic and martial masculinity, but one should not underestimate the role of opposition and competition among men in this context. Ruth Mazo Karras writes that in the case of medieval knights, masculinity was defined in a struggle among men for dominance in which women played merely the role of one asset among others which men tried to achieve in order to impress other men (Karras 11, 20-66, especially 47-57). Karras’ position reflects the stance taken by Pierre Bourdieu in his essay on “masculine domination”. Bourdieu noted a “primordial investment in the social games (illusio), which makes a man a real man”, thus stressing the agonal character of masculinity (Bourdieu 48. Emphasis in original). These “social games”, Bourdieu said, are exclusively played by men: “Like honour – or shame, its reverse side, which we know, in contrast to guilt, is felt before others – manliness must be validated by other men, in its reality as actual or potential violence, and certified by recognition of membership of the group of ‘real men’.” (Bourdieu 52, emphasis in original)

This agonistic vision of masculinity was taken up by the German sociologist Michael Meuser who, following the work of Georg Simmel, showed in more detail that Bourdieu’s “social games” are structured as competitions (Meuser). Drawing on material from present-day ethnography, Meuser said that in all-male groups there is very often a constant competition about rank, revolving essentially around notions of masculinity. Who or what is regarded as male is negotiated in playful situations of contest. While, according to Meuser, these contests put their participants against each other as competitors, they stabilize the values and norms of male groups and ensure that they are incorporated into a male habitus, which in turn gives coherence and stability to individual behaviour. In this perspective, masculinity is to a significant extent shaped in agonistic settings in all-male groups.

**Heroism, Hypermasculinity, and Honour**

What does this mean with respect to the masculinity of late medieval knights? First of all, we may draw attention to a remarkable analogy between the theoretical considerations of the previous paragraph and late medieval chivalric literature, in particular Geoffroi de Charny’s *Livre de chevalerie*. Although this work should be carefully situated in its historical context, it is, as Richard Kaeuper has stressed, a valuable document of what late medieval nobles thought about chivalry (Kaeuper 20). Hence, it is a good starting point for examining the role notions of gender
played in this context. Charny was a member of the lower nobility of Burgundy who took service with the King of France and finally rose to the position of the royal standard-bearer in the battle of Poitiers in 1356, where he died. His book, like his other writings, was presumably written for the knights of the royal Order of the Star, founded in 1352. It has to be situated in the rather critical political atmosphere in France after the defeat of Crécy in 1346 in which a reform of the knighthood as a remedy to the crisis was envisaged at the royal court.

The Livre de chevalerie begins with a rather long list of chivalric activities. Charny mentions deeds of arms in tournaments, in jousts, in wars at home and abroad, deeds of arms undertaken for reward, be it booty or the love of a lady, deeds of arms undertaken for their own sake, and so on. Charny says that deeds of arms in wars are more honourable than those in tournaments and jousts. Charny speaks of young knights who take part in the latter but who, when they hear that more honour is to be gained in wars, do not hesitate to find out more about war and participate in it:

[Et de plus en plus leur acroist leur connoissance tant qu’il voient et cognoissent que les bonnes gens d’armes pour les guerres sont plus prissiez et honorez que nul des autres gens d’armes qui soient. Dont leur semble de leur propre connoissance que en ce mestier d’armes de guerre se doivent mettre souverainement pour avoir la haute honnour de proesce [...]. (Charny 100-102)]

Charny thus proposes a chivalric way of life consisting of tournaments as well as of activity in war, and he stresses that those participating in this way of life, i.e. knights and men-at-arms, should always prefer more honourable deeds to others that are less so. According to his view, chivalry should be a constant aspiration to the highest honour which is achieved by the greatest deeds of arms. It is essentially this what Charny says at the very beginning of his text:

[...] toutes telz choses [i.e. chivalric deeds] sont assez honorables, combien que les unes le soient assez, et les autres plus, et adés en plus, jusques au meilleur. Et toujours la meilleur voie seurnonte les autres; et cilz qui plus y a le cuer va toujours avant pour venir et attaindre au plus haut honnour [...]. (Charny 84)]

Furthermore, in his list of chivalric activities, Charny repeats the refrain-like statement that “qui plus fait, miex vault” – “he who does more is of greater worth” (e.g. Charny 86, 92, 94, 96, 98). This clearly implies a notion of competition.

Charny implicitly urges his chivalric audience always to “do more” in order to surpass other knights, thus establishing the notion of a constant contest of everyone with and against everyone:

[Et a qui il en chiet le miex de y [in battles] estre souvent et de y bien faire son devoir en son pay's et en autres, tant vaulx il miex des autres qui mains avroient fait. Et li de-baz de deux bons est es honorables, que li uns vaille miex que l'autre, et chascun bon de cest mestier d'armes doit on priser et honorer [...]. (Charny 104)]

Taking these observations together, it is by no means surprising that Charny finally enters into a discourse about heroism, if we consider a hero in Charny’s sense a knight who “did most” of all and who managed to prevail in the competition for the highest honour. Charny refers to the tradition of the so-called Nine Worthies when he presents Judas Maccabeus as an example of such a knight. According to Charny, Judas Maccabeus had all virtues required for a perfect knight, among which martial qualities (like courage, prowess, endurance) seem to rank highest for him. He underlines that Judas Maccabeus can serve as an example to all those striving for the highest honour. Heroism in this case is not so much about styling a certain person as a hero, but it rather functions as an appeal to Charny’s chivalric audience to do as best as they can:

[...]. (Charny 162)]

The structural analogy of Charny’s considerations with the theoretical approach by medievalists and sociologists towards masculinity is obvious. In both cases, the status of the individual is determined by his performance in contest-like interactions. In both cases, the individual has to assert himself against others, but by measuring himself against them, his status remains also firmly linked to theirs. In Charny, the contest between two “bons” is not a contest between two different principles because, although both try to be better than their opponent, they subscribe to the same martial ethos. Thus, we can say that Charny’s agonistic vision of chivalry is in its very essence informed by the structures and dynamics of male homosocial groups. This is no surprise in that knights spent the most part of their lives in the company of other men, and the masculine habitus which was formed in this context naturally left its mark on Charny’s ideas on chivalry.
The crucial notion by which this analogy seems to operate is honour. Honour “in the Middle Ages was a heavily gendered concept” (Karras 60), and Bourdieu had also stressed the close link between honour and “manliness”. Because masculinity has to be asserted against and before other men, it is closely linked to how a man is seen by his peers and to his reputation (Bourdieu 52). The quotes given from Charny’s Livre de chevalerie illustrate that he is constantly preoccupied with honour. In this text, honour is the central criterion for measuring chivalric deeds and, by consequence, the ‘worthiness’ of those who perform them. It is thus the basis for what has been called Charny’s “scale of prowess” (Kaeuper 33). This ties in neatly with the observations of the anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers in his classic, if somewhat dated, essay on honour in Mediterranean societies, in which he notes that “honour is the basis of precedence” (Pitt-Rivers 23), thus outlining the notion of a “hierarchy of honour” which is established by competition (ibid. 23-24).

Taking all these considerations together, it becomes clear that the aristocratic and chivalric culture as expressed in Charny’s Livre de chevalerie revolves around the closely interrelating concepts of masculinity, honour, competition, and hierarchy which at the same time distinguishes (male) individuals and links them together on the basis of shared norms and values. Charny’s text shows that this dynamic structure tends towards a discourse on heroism, the chivalric hero exemplifying the highest level a knight can aspire to. Chivalric heroism in this sense is not so much about transgression of social norms (as is the case, for example, with some heroes from antiquity, like Achilles) but rather about outdoing them. Charny’s text seems to be intended as an appeal to every knight to reach for “la plus haute honneur”, the greatest deeds leading to the greatest fame and renown. Although by definition, not everyone can be a hero, this discourse on heroism can be understood as a means of mobilization of chivalric groups in a certain historical situation. This chivalric heroism appears as the epitome of masculinity as implicated in aristocratic and chivalric culture, and it may indeed be termed hypermasculinity.

It is important to note that we are here dealing with a ‘discourse’ on heroism or, respectively, hypermasculinity. Being cultural constructs, neither of these concepts should be understood in an essentialist way. In the following paragraphs, we shall see how the link between masculinity, chivalry, and chivalric heroism is validated in late medieval narrative sources.

The Female Gaze on Heroes

We have seen that the aristocratic culture of chivalry in the late Middle Ages is deeply informed by the concepts of competition, masculinity, and honour, and that the discourse on chivalric heroism does emerge from this culture as an almost necessary consequence. While we have so far looked at a late medieval didactic treatise, Geoffroi de Charny’s Livre de chevalerie, we may now turn our attention to how notions of masculinity, honour, and chivalric heroism were formulated in other genres, notably in late medieval chronicles and biographies. Although these texts were intended for the instruction of their audience, too, they permit another perspective on the phenomena in question. They show how the norms and values of the martial aristocracy were used to describe and interpret actual or at least plausible behaviour of nobles. The aim of this kind of historiography was, apart from instruction, to establish an authoritative version of history which would shape the image of the persons involved in the eyes of present and future generations. Thus, these texts can convey insights into the values and modes of (self-)representation medieval aristocrats felt to be appropriate and binding for themselves.

A good example in this context is the Burgundian knight Jacques de Lalain. He was a descendant of an old noble family from Hainaut which in his time belonged to the Duchy of Burgundy. Lalain was successful as a courtier in that he became an advisor to Duke Philip the Good, but his greatest renown stemmed from his achievements in the Burgundian army as well as in tournaments and pas d’armes; he was also active in the ducal diplomacy, completing missions to the Iberian Peninsula and the Holy See in Rome. He famously died in the conflict between the Duke and the city of Ghent, being hit by a cannon ball during the siege of the fortress of Poeke in July 1453 (de Win).

In the following, we will focus on two of the most important sources on Lalain and how he was seen in Burgundian court and noble circles: First, his biography, probably commissioned around 1470 by Jacques’ father or other close relatives, earlier attributed to Georges Chastelain and published in his collected works, but now assumed to be for the most part a compilation of older materials by an unknown writer. Second, the memoirs of Olivier de la Marche, an influential courtier under the last Valois dukes of Burgundy and later instructor to Philip the Fair; la Marche began his memoirs in the early 1470s.
One interesting trait of Jacques de Lalaing as recorded in these texts was his physical beauty. Both texts mention that Jacques was fair, tall, and strong, and moreover had an aura which, as the historiographers claim, left hardly anyone unaffected. Perhaps the most striking example for this is from la Marche’s memoirs, conveying an immediacy of impression which is astonishing in view of the fact that la Marche noted these words at least twenty years after Lalaing’s death: “Et quant ledit messire Jaques eut empoigné l’estoc, se me sembla l’ung des beaux et fiers hommes d’armes que onques je veissé, et plus beau, sans comparaison, que jamais ne l’avoye veu.” (La Marche 2:189) By describing his own impression in superlatives, la Marche here clearly suggests an exceptional status of Lalaing manifested in his outward appearance. The biography does so, too, highlighting especially Lalaing’s appeal to women:

> [I]l avoit le viaire frais et coloré, et jeune de vingt-deux ans, et n’avoit encore barbe, ni grenon; il estoit blond, avoit les yeux vairs et riants, et si plaisans, qu’il n’y avoit celle [dame ou damoiselle] qui à ce jour n’eust bien voulu que son mari ou ceux qu’elle aimoit le plus eussent esté semblables à luy. Et pour vérité dire, moy acteur de ce présent traictié, en mon temps n’avois vu plus beau jeune chevalier, ni qui mieux semblast homme de haut affaire. (Chastellain 8:117)

Both sources seem to use topical ways of describing the physical appearance of men and male beauty, but the way these topoi are used here is nevertheless striking. It is noticeable that Lalaing’s radiant appearance is said to have had its impact on men as well as on women (cf. Karras 48-49). La Marche and the biography seem to link beauty to military ability or, more generally, to social and political influence and importance, while the biography ascribes a more or less eroticized reaction to women which in aristocratic culture may have been an expected female response to the aspect of power and military virtues (cf. e.g. Karras 54).

Although the description quoted is most likely stereotyped, it should be noted that the exceptional masculinity ascribed to Lalaing relies to a significant extent on the reference to women and especially on the female gaze on men. In the context of Lalaing’s joust against the Sicilian knight Giovanni di Bonifacio, which took place in 1445 in the city of Ghent, the biography continues in this vein:

> Sy vint [Jacques de Lalaing] chevauchant par les rues; mais scâchez pour vérité, que les fenestres et huis des maisons qui estoient sur les rues par où il passoit, es-

Again, Jacques’ status as an outstanding knight relies significantly on female reactions to his appearance. This is suggested by the evocation of a spacious urban setting reverberating with the enthusiasm he excites, but also by the performative response ascribed to the women. By mentioning that they try to influence the outcome of the joust in favour of Jacques by their prayers, the author allows them at least a small part of agency, contrary to their usually passive role.

Passages like these must be situated in the context of an “elaborate love game, played by one man against another with women as the counters” (Karras 56): Speaking about the positive impression a man makes on women served to exalt his reputation with the audience which consisted of men, but also of women subscribing to the hegemonic masculinity at stake here. Reference to female admiration is used as a means to enhance male honour, but another passage in the biography shows how close this kind of discourse comes to misogyny. Here we are told, maybe jestingly, that the ladies marvelling at Lalaing did not wish their husbands and lovers to be ‘like’ him, but wished in fact to ‘exchange’ them for him (Chastellain 8:105). Implicitly, female admiration is here dismissed again by associating it to infidelity. Thus, the aristocratic discourse on masculinity, chivalry, and honour remains ambivalent towards the role of women within chivalric culture.

### Gender and Politics

Of course, in the sources from Valois Burgundy there is also plenty of evidence for masculinity being constructed in performative, competitive interactions between men. In fact, the court culture of fifteenth-century Valois Burgundy was known for its indulgence in chivalric display which, to a great extent, revolved around various forms of mock combat, as, for example, jousts, pas d’armes, and emprises. These can be seen as examples for Bourdieu’s “social games” in which masculinity was validated by martial performance of (noble) men against and in front of other (noble) men. (These fights could of course also be attended by noble women as well as non-nobles of both sexes, at least if taking place in public urban spaces, as they often
One might also say that they provided an ideal basis for the production of the heroic hypermasculinity touched upon above. They could serve as a stage for male performance which might then be forged into a heroic narrative. The case of Jacques de Lalaing is a good illustration for this. Already in his lifetime, he seems to have been especially renowned as a champion in mock combat, the most famous example certainly being the pas d’armes de la fontaine des pleurs of 1449-50, held for an entire year near Chalon-sur-Saône. The chivalric performance on occasions like this was inextricably linked to the construction of noble masculinity. In Lalaing’s case, it was also a basis for his posthumous heroization in his biography, a great part of which is formed by a rather lengthy description of that pas d’armes (Chastellain 8:188-251).

Olivier de la Marche provides another example for the link between aspirations to noble masculinity and martial display, and for the role quasi-heroic fame played in this context. La Marche says that in 1452, a tournament was prepared on ducal orders in Brussels; prior to the event, the 18-year-old heir of the Duchy, Charles, count of Charolais, later called Charles the Bold, was to fight his first joust.

Et pour ce que que c’estoit la premiere fois que le noble conte avoit mis la lance en l’arrest, ne porté le harnois pour exeucucion, environ trois jours avant la feste l’on feist essayer le conte; et, par delibération des seigneurs et des dames de la court, fut ordonné que le conte, nouvel homme d’armes, courroit sa premiere lance contre messire Jaques de Lalain.

(La Marche 2:214)

This joust is obviously intended as a ‘ritual of passage’, a ritual of initiation, signalling that Charles is henceforth to be regarded as a fully fledged homme d’armes. Within noble society, the ability and the permission to bear arms was obviously linked to masculinity, as only men were allowed to do this. Charles’ chivalric masculinity is validated in a strongly competitive setting involving one of the most famous tournament champions at that time. La Marche’s text also underlines the role of gender in this context by focussing on the reaction of Charles’ parents. When in the first round Lalaing fails to hit the count, the Duke suspects him of deliberately sparing the novice and admonishes him to fight properly. In the next round, both jousters break their lances to pieces which causes the Duchess to worry while the Duke bursts out laughing. La Marche comments laconically on these clearly gendered reactions: “ainsi estoient le pere et la mere en diverse opinion. L’ung desiroit l’espreuve et l’aультre la seureté” (ibid. 215).

It is interesting to see how on this occasion, Lalaing’s heroic hypermasculinity is employed to validate the not yet-heroic if social superior masculinity of the young count. According to the deliberation of the “lords and ladies of the court”, he was to act as a kind of touchstone for Charles’ aspiration to adult masculinity. The Brussels joust of 1452 relates back to Lalaing’s prior chivalric achievements. Chivalric heroism is not staged in the sense that a scene is set from which it is to emerge, but it is part of the setting itself, forming the backdrop for Charles’ chivalric coming of age. In a way, Lalaing, who was then in his early thirties, was here acting as a personification of his own chivalric renown, and it is tempting to consider that only a year and a few months later, he was dead.

This leads to a final point: That is, how the construction of chivalric heroism and masculinity can be related to politics. It has long been noted that in Valois Burgundy, chivalric display had an eminently political function (Jourdan). This is true of the Brussels joust, too. In the years before 1452, the relations of the Duke towards the city of Ghent had severely deteriorated because of a new tax planned by Philip in 1447; as no peaceful arrangement was found, Philip declared war on the city in late March 1452. The armed conflict began shortly thereafter. Henri Dubois notes:

Si, comme il semble, cette joute a bien eu lieu au début de mars 1452, elle est peut-être liée aux événements de Gand, car, à cette date, Philippe sait bien qu’il va devoir combattre les insurgés. Il était important pour lui que son fils, âgé de dix-huit ans et demi, eût reçu le baptême des armes et fait la preuve de son courage et de ses aptitudes militaires. (Dubois 39)

The meaning conveyed by Charles’s first joust is clear. It was to show that the ducal dynasty and the Burgundian nobility was ready for any challenge that might come. It signified that, although the Duke was in his fifties, there was a young and able successor who perfectly fit into the traditional image of the chivalric prince, standing his ground against one of the most famous knights of the time. Thus, the display of martial masculinity, even of a heroic hypermasculinity shortly before the outbreak of the war, can be interpreted as a political message. Concluding from the sparse documentation of the joust in contemporary sources, it remains doubtful whether it was intended for anyone outside the court circles whose perspective is given by la Marche. However, even if only these inner circles could and should take note of it, it may still have served to build confidence among the courtiers and thus to secure the Duke their support in the upcoming war.
The display of chivalric masculinity was also used on a quasi-public scale. We have mentioned above the mock duel of Jacques de Lalaing against the Sicilian knight Giovanni di Bonifacio which took place in Ghent in December 1445. Although Lalaing’s biography tries to give the impression that Bonifacio was travelling all over Europe as a chevalier errant, neither date, place, nor the choice of the opponents seem to have been a coincidence. Olivier de la Marche reveals that the fight was immediately preceded by the seventh chapter of the Order of the Golden Fleece in the same city (la Marche 2:96). It was in this very chapter that King Alfonso V of Aragon was admitted to the Order of the Golden Fleece (Protokollbücher 1:93). Bonifacio, in turn, is described as a member of Alfonso’s household (Chastellain 8:69 and 79). These circumstances strongly suggest that the fight between Lalaing and Bonifacio had a political context. In the chapter before the fight, a closer relationship was established between the Duke of Burgundy and the King of Aragon. The duel made this connection visible to a larger public. It took place on the so-called Friday market, the central square of the city (la Marche 2:96), where it could be witnessed by a copious crowd of noble and non-noble spectators; one could almost speak of something coming close to a public relations coup.

The relationship established between Duke Philip and King Alfonso by the admission of the latter to the Order was rather complex as Philip was the sovereign but could hardly dare to give orders to a King clearly socially superior to him; this is reflected by the various exceptions from the rules of the Order granted to Alfonso in the Ghent chapter (Protokollbücher 1:98-102). The duel of the champions reduced this complex relationship to a handy formula: It showed two noblemen fighting each other, afterwards shaking hands, parting as friends and even brothers, as knights fighting each other, afterwards shaking hands, parting as friends and even brothers, as heroes. héros.

Some Observations on Chivalric Culture in the Late Middle Age

A glance at Charny’s Livre de chevalerie has shown that the late medieval discourse on chivalry is heavily informed by the competitive structure of homosocial male groups. The discourse on heroism which characterizes not only Charny’s book but also other parts of late medieval chivalric writing can be viewed as a consequence of this structural predisposition to contest. Our examples have shown how chivalric heroism is created in these sources with regard to the role both of women and male homosocial competition. This construction of a heroic masculinity can and perhaps should be related to other aspects of the historical context, as was shown with regard to fifteenth-century Burgundy where male performance and chivalric display were made to serve purposes of political communication.

Gero Schreier is a former Research Associate of the Collaborative Research Centre 948 in Freiburg, Germany. He completed his doctoral dissertation on chivalric heroism in late medieval France, Burgundy, and Germany in 2016.

1 In this paragraph, I briefly summarize some of the results of my doctoral thesis entitled “Ritterhelden. Konstruktionen adliger Exzeptionalität und ihre Kontexte im deutschen und französischen Spätmittelalter”.

2 Seminal work in this field includes the books by Hadley (ed.) and Karras. Both contain material on chivalric masculinity. Cox’s book on aristocratic masculinity in early modern France centres on the changing relationship of the knight and the courtier as different kinds of masculinity. The present essay, while also dealing with aristocratic masculinity in fifteenth-century francophone areas, has a different focus as it seeks to call attention to the role gender constructions played in the late medieval discourse on chivalric heroism. I thank Vanina Kopp, Guillaume Bureaux and Constanze Buykens for discussing an earlier version of this paper with me in the context of their project on “The Performance of Games and Play in Medieval Society” at the German Historical Institute in Paris. Matthias Herm has commented on the present text, which is gratefully acknowledged. Errors and mistakes are my own.

3 It is important to note that descriptions like this one are far from unique in late medieval chivalric literature (cf. Karras 47).

4 See la Marche 2:104: “par commandement [du duc] touchèrent ensemble et se partirent de la lice comme freres”. It should be noted that this ritual of fraternization is not specific to this case; on the contrary, it is regularly highlighted in Burgundian reports of mock combat: see Boussmar 78, note 7.

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