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Chivalry and Courtesy: A Comment on Richard McCoy, *The Rites of Knighthood*

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Where rites and ceremonies of the Elizabethan age are concerned, which are given expression in literary texts, inductive analyses of historical and phenomenological data (now frequently going by the name of New Historicism) have furthered our understanding; i. e. proceeding from one text or group of texts and taking into consideration the immediately telling historical and sociological background. Richard McCoy's study on *The Rites of Knighthood*, published by The University of California Press in Stephen Greenblatt's "The New Historicism" Series,[1] takes up Elizabethan texts which celebrate the rituals of medieval knighthood, examining them for hidden political "sub-texts."

Proceeding from the fact that "Elizabeth's reign fostered a spectacular revival of chivalric ideals and practices" (14-15) McCoy convincingly demonstrates how ambitious noblemen such as Leicester, Sidney and Essex made use of chivalric "rites" in order to further what they considered their political "rights." Under the mask of veneration of the monarch, the texts accompanying chivalric spectacle reveal the noblemen's strong claim for autonomy. Seemingly harmonious forms of spectacle, such as Leicester's famous Kenilworth entertainments (42-45) or Sidney's *Four Foster Children of Desire* (58-65) are shown to contain meaningful ambivalences and ample signs of political conflict. These ambivalences—between the poles of loyalty and submission on one hand, and proud chivalric independence on the other—McCoy also detects in Samuel Daniel's *Civil Wars*, in the story of the knight Amphialus in Sidney's *Arcadia*, and in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. McCoy further establishes links between this literary treatment and the practice of chivalric tournaments. That these were much more than just playful shows is demonstrated by the fact that the noblemen who participated

in the Essex revolt in 1601 had been known for their feats in chivalric entertainments such as the yearly Accession Day tilt (81-82). McCoy argues that the various chivalric tournaments helped to keep up a "chivalric compromise," i.e. a balance of power between self-asserting members of the nobility on one hand and the Queen with her Privy Council on the other (9-27).

On the one hand McCoy's interpretations of the texts chosen are quite plausible and do indeed illustrate an important area of Elizabethan cultural life. One may, however, hesitate to adopt the implied thesis that chivalry is not just one manifestation of the Elizabethan political philosophy but *the* dominating source of metaphor for the ongoing power struggles. McCoy's study says nothing about the many anti-chivalrous texts of the Elizabethan Age. Neither does he mention texts which propagate codes of behaviour different from the code of chivalry.

To exemplify the one-sidedness of McCoy's approach I propose to examine his discussion of Sidney's *(New) Arcadia*, and to look at the competing "cultural metaphors" found in this novel. McCoy comments on the ineffectiveness of "the protagonists' martial prowess and chivalric heroism" in book II (69) and the "inconsistencies" of "Amphialus' justification of rebellion" in book III (70), pointing out that while Sidney "deliberately strips away the glorious facade of chivalry . . . the *New Arcadia* remains bound by the conventions of chivalric romance" (71). By his insistence on "conflicting impulses" and "contradictions . . . unsolved" (73) McCoy implicitly contradicts those interpretations which are based on the assumption that Sidney intended to create ideal harmony which is in some way (e.g. by instruction through delectation) transmitted to the reader.[2] While it may be conceded that these traditional interpretations need qualification it seems surprising that McCoy hardly glances at those parts of the *Arcadia* which deal with the pastoral existence of Pyrocles and Musidorus, only saying that the "postures" of melancholy and pastoral withdrawal are "part of the chivalric repertoire" (67).

Now it is certainly true that these postures belong to the repertoire of Renaissance poetic motifs, but I cannot see that they are in any way "chivalric." On the contrary: in the *New Arcadia* the shepherds' life is juxtaposed with the world of knighthood as a way of pursuing a

"journey's end," which is in some respects its exact opposite: Knights-at-arms are supposed to be, as McCoy points out himself (16-18), proud, active and ostentatiously masculine. Shepherds, on the other hand, are humble, passive and non-violent, mixing with women on terms of equality. In the respective literary traditions, the ends of chivalric and pastoral endeavour can be much the same: winning the love of a lady. The strategies to achieve this end can be seen to indicate the respective concepts of human perfection.

The traditional attributes of both knighthood and pastoralism are present in Sidney's *Arcadia*. Sidney does, however, transgress the confines of the two 'paradigms' by having his two heroes, Pyrocles and Musidorus, achieve chivalric fame and disguise themselves as a woman and a shepherd, alternately. But then the transformations of the two knights are obviously intended to constitute a fundamental breach of the chivalric pattern of behaviour. When Musidorus realizes that his friend Pyrocles has dressed up as a woman, calling himself/herself Zelmane, he is scandalized:[3]

> But by that time Musidorus had gathered his spirits together, and yet casting a ghastful countenance upon him as if he would conjure some strange spirit, he thus spake unto him:
>
> 'And is it possible that this is Pyrocles, the only young prince in the world formed by nature and framed by education to the true exercise of virtue? Or is it indeed some Amazon that has counterfeited the face of my friend in this sort to vex me? For likelier sure I would have thought it that any outward face might have been disguised than that the face of so excellent a mind could have been thus blemished . . . .' (132)

Musidorus reminds Pyrocles of the "excellent things" he has done, the "fame" he has won as a knight, which are likely to be "overthrown" by his dressing up in women's clothes. Musidorus, however, will later, in chapter 18, shock his friend in a similar way by his appearance in "shepherdish apparel" (169), i.e. an identity change of his own:

> . . . she [Zelmane/Pyrocles] plainly perceived that it was her dear friend Musidorus; whereat marvelling not a little, she demanded of him whether the goddess of those woods had such a power to transform every body, or whether, as in all enterprises else he had done, he meant thus to match her in this new alteration.

> 'Alas,' said Musidorus, 'what shall I say, who am loth to say, and yet fain would have said? I find, indeed, that all is but lip-wisdom which wants experience. I now (woe is me) do try what love can do.' (169-70)

The reason for the transformation is the same in both cases: the knights are in love, love being the "journey's end . . . most fair and honourable" which excuses the use of "foul" ways (174). Their disguises will enable them to gain access to the Arcadian princesses Philoclea and Pamela. While their knighthood has earned them fame, it hinders their freedom of movement: ". . . the court [of Arcadia] could not be visited, prohibited to all men but to certain shepherdish people" (109); and while Arcadia is no country for knights, its inhabitants are characterised by "right honest hospitality" (171). In their disguises the two knights do indeed manage to make friends with the princesses. Nevertheless, their disguises cause Pyrocles and Musidorus a profound uneasiness: before his own transformation Musidorus laments his friend's "bewitchment," his loss of "virtue" and "the use of reason," and finally his "thraldom" (171). The latter term obviously refers to Pyrocles' loss of chivalric autonomy. Soon afterward, however, Musidorus meets Pamela and finds himself in the same sorry state: ". . . the very words returned back again to strike my soul" (171). He realises that it is better to "yield" to love than to resist it (172). With this passive attitude, he flatly contradicts the chivalric concept of "passionate activism" (McCoy 73), of forcing one's destiny.

The ensuing love plots also reveal a profound sense of ambiguity concerning the conflicting attitudes of chivalry and pastoralism, activity and passivity. Their disguises may have enabled the two friends to gain access to the Arcadian court; in order to win the love of the ladies, however, they have to reveal themselves for what they are: Only when Philoclea becomes aware of "Zelmane's" true sex can she admit the true nature of her affection for him. Only when Pamela realizes the identity of the foreign shepherd with the famous knight Musidorus does she consider him worthy of her love. Musidorus reveals himself to Pamela indirectly, by telling his own story in the third person. In the course of his narrative he excuses himself for the "baseness" he voluntarily undergoes:

> . . . he clothed himself in a shepherd's weed, that under the baseness of that form he might at least have free access to feed his eyes with that which should at length eat up his heart. In which doing, thus much without doubt he hath manifested that this estate is not always to be rejected, since under that veil there may be hidden things to be esteemed. And if he might with taking on a shepherd's look cast up his eyes to the fairest princess Nature in that time created, the like, nay the same desire of mine need no more to be disdained or held for disgraceful. (230)

As Maurice Evans remarks in the note to this passage in his Penguin edition of the book (855), the "veil" refers to the allegorical level of meaning traditionally found in pastoral writing. Renaissance pastoral can usually be seen as a "veiled" representation of courtly life.[4] This particularly applies to the *Arcadia*, where Sidney, according to Sukanta Chaudhuri, "has in mind a distinctive idea of 'pastoral' excellence . . . . It is not a genuinely pastoral ideal but the perfection of a courtly one. The pastoral contributes that touch of perfection, a pristine or unspoiled version of the standard courtly virtue."[5] In the light of this literary tradition McCoy's assumption that to Sidney the pastoral world denotes a "withdrawal" from the court (63-64) is obviously mistaken. If the court is criticised from a pastoral point of view—as in *As You Like It*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*—this is usually due to the fact that the court is corrupt, whereas the true courtly values are preserved in an ideal green world. While McCoy minutely examines the political connotations of chivalric motifs in Elizabethan life and literature, he apparently fails to see the political relevance of the pastoral: in the *Arcadia* the two heroes become aware of the fact that pastoral (and courtly) submissiveness can be more successful than knightly valour. This obviously corresponds to the political ideology of Elizabeth who, as she could not be an absolute ruler, preferred her courtiers to beg for favours and promotion submissively, and with displays of love, like shepherds, rather than by shows of strength, like knights.[6] In her famous speech at Tilbury she maintained that she put her "chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and good will" of her subjects.[7]

These remarks concerning the pastoral in Sidney's *Arcadia* do not invalidate McCoy's theses concerning the political meaning of Elizabethan pageantry. Chivalry, however, turns out to represent only one of the

several political "options" struggling with one another during the reign of the Virgin Queen. McCoy's theses should also be qualified in that these struggles are not confined to politics, but refer to fundamental philosophical issues concerning the nature and the achievement of perfect virtue. I should like to argue that by juxtaposing the two literary (and cultural) traditions of chivalry and pastoralism Sidney offers the reader two distinct models of behaviour which might lead to this ideal, trying to achieve a *discordia concors* of two conflicting attitudes (or "discourses"). McCoy points to *discordia concors* in connection with Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (129, 160) but in calling it a "chivalric ideal" he fails to see the full range of "discords" contained in this "harmony."

Discordia concors also seems to be implied in Sidney's famous surname "the Shepherd Knight." McCoy discusses this "figure" embodying "the 'exact image of quiet and action'" (77) without giving proper attention to the paradoxical nature of this appellation. In the passages quoted from the *Arcadia* the basic incompatibility of chivalry and the "pastoral way of life" is quite obvious: only the excuse of Musidorus' great love can save him, in his eyes, from the charge of being "disgraceful." Like Sidney himself, Musidorus means to achieve a synthesis of opposites in order to reach perfection.

The female attire of his friend Pyrocles presents the reader with another visual correlative to the lovers' passive, non-violent attitudes: in order to succeed in a courtly community, a nobleman has to give up his "manhood." The lack of "virilitie" is a charge Samuel Daniel levels at the Tudor dynasty in his dedication prefatory to *The Collection of the History of England* which McCoy discusses at length (9, 103-26). It is also a charge which was sometimes levelled at court life in general, as well as at the first and foremost virtue of any courtier: courtesy.

In his *Cortegiano* (1528), translated by Thomas Hoby in 1561, Castiglione several times sees fit to defend courtesy against the charge of being a means to make men "womanish" (89).[8] McCoy quotes Castiglione only once, to characterise the equilibrium between "play" and "earnestness" in chivalric tournament (24). As "the recommended bible of the gentleman" (Kelso),[9] *The Courtier* should also be noted for its manifest anti-chivalrous tendencies: while the courtier should be a good soldier when serving his prince at war, he should not brag of his exploits.

Whereas the nourishing of their pride and the quest for honour had been among the main traits of medieval knights (as well as some of their Elizabethan successors, such as Leicester and Essex, discussed by McCoy), Castiglione's courtier may be obliged to forego the gratification of these wishes:

> Yet will we not have him for all that so lustie to make braverie in wordes, and to bragge that hee hath wedded his harnes for a wife, and to threaten with such grimme lookes, as wee have seene Berto [a buffoon] doe often times. (36)

Gentlemen who display their pride in their prowess are dismissed as braggards, even though they may be valiant warriors. Castiglione cites the negative example of a gentleman who "When to entertaine a gentle woman whom he never saw before, at his first entring in talke with her . . . began to tell how many men he had slaine, and what a hardie felow hee was, and how hee coulde play at two hand sword" (97).

Methods of male self-assertion customary to medieval knighthood tended to make a Renaissance courtier ridiculous. The courtier was, in contrast, supposed to modestly adapt himself to the dispositions of other courtiers, and in particular to the ladies at court. As Castiglione says, he should be "pliable" in order to win the estimation of his equals. The pleasure of the greatest ladies forms some sort of yardstick. Castiglione mentions the Duchess of Urbino as the head of the courtly assembly:

> . . . everye man conceived in his minde an high contentation [contentment] every time we came into the Dutchesse sight. And it appeared that this was a chaine that kept all linked together in love, in such wise that there was never agreement of wil or hartie love greater betweene brethren, than there was betweene us all.
>
> The like was betweene the woman, with whom we had such free and honest conversation, that everye man might commune, sitte, dallye, and laugh with whom hee had lusted.
>
> But such was the respect we bore to the Dutchesse will, that the selfe same libertie was a very great bridle. Neither was there any that thought it not the greatest pleasure he could have in the world, to please her, and the greatest griefe to offende her. (20)

Castiglione also considers courtesy as a means for a man to declare his love to a lady in an honourable way. The honour of a woman can be enhanced rather than lessened by her receiving a declaration of love:

> . . . to doe honour to the woman he talketh withal, seeming to him that to declare to love her, is a witnesse that she is worthie of it, and that her beawtie and worthinesse is such, that it enforceth everie man to serve her. (236)

The passive role of the courtier is particularly conspicuous in the behaviour recommended to him in love affairs. According to Castiglione, the lover as the "servant" of the lady he loves, is to "observe" her inclinations and find out her pleasure, rather than to take any active measures:

> . . . he that taketh in hande to love, must also please and apply himselfe full and wholy to the appetites of the wight beloved, and according to them frame his own: and make his owne desires, servants: and his verie soule, like an obedient handmaiden. (245)

Another point mentioned by Castiglione concerns the use of courtesy for career planning. The modesty and pliability required of the courtier rule out an open pursuit of any personal ambition. Ambition is indeed, according to Stefano Guazzo, one of a courtier's deadly sins:[10]

> . . . ambition, which altogether bereaveth them of rest, which set no staye to their restlesse desires: which filleth them full of pensive care, blindeth their understanding, rayseth them aloft, to the intent to throw them downe headlong, to breake their neckes, and bring them to destruction. And thereupon it is saide, that Lucifer through pride and ambition fell from heaven, desiring rather to commaunde, then obey. (1: 99)

Behaving submissively to the prince, however, the courtier can "get him favor" (*The Courtier* 106) and hope for promotion. In careers, as in love, restraint is considered to be more effective than chivalric forms of self-assertion. This very much corresponds to what Pyrocles and Musidorus experience, somewhat to their dismay, at the pastoral court of Arcadia. Musidorus' main concern is to get access to "the prince's presence," as he hopes that "having gotten the acquaintance of the prince, it might happen to move his heart to protect [him]" (172). Basilius, the Arcadian king, does indeed appreciate Musidorus' "goodly shape and handsome manner" (181). He later declares his love "with the most submissive behaviour that a thralled heart could express" (227). When he delivers a love letter "with trembling hand" (250), Pamela is "about to take courtesy into [her] eyes" (250-51). Musidorus' courtly behaviour will get its reward.

As indicated before, courtly submissiveness also seems to correspond with what we can grasp as the ideology of the English Court of Queen Elizabeth. In the light of this form of "courtliness," Sidney's retreat from Court could be interpreted in a way diametrically opposite to that suggested by McCoy (63-68): Far from being a retreat from chivalry, it could be a step away from courtly submissiveness back to chivalric independence.

It is here that the limitations of the inductive method as understood by New Historicism become evident: like other New Historicists McCoy concentrates on one "discourse" while disregarding other cultural productions and "discourses" even though they may be contained in the same literary work. While McCoy explores the politics of chivalry with great thoroughness, he obviously fails to recognise the politics of pastoralism, and of courtesy. On the one hand McCoy convincingly states that Queen Elizabeth disapproved of much of the chivalric display by the ambitious noblemen of her court, on the other he does not say what the alternative to chivalry consisted of.

Looking at the entertainments presented at the Court of Elizabeth, one realises that pastoral, and courtly, poetry and drama was given preference to chivalric spectacle. In Lyly's *Endimion* (1585), an "allegorical drama of Court-life"[11] the cult of male passivity with regard to a superior female object of love reaches a climax: being told of Endimion's passion, Cynthia, the moon goddess, graciously allows him to continue loving her, and though she does not return this love, rewards it with her favour. Her words to Endimion closely echo some of Elizabeth's proclamations:[12] "*Endimion*, this honorable respect of thine, shalbe christned loue in thee, & my reward for it fauor. Perseuer *Endimion* in louing me, & I account more strength in a true hart, then in a walled Cittie" (5.3.179-82). It cannot be assumed that the noblemen present would have felt much sympathy with Endimion's attitude, which in the play itself is initially called a "dotage no lesse miserable then monstrous" (1.1.24-25). Endimion precisely lacks that virility the assertion of which has been, according to McCoy, one of the aims of Elizabethan chivalric display. Endimion's effeminacy, however, could find acceptance because it corresponded to the doctrines of courtesy as outlined in Castiglione's *Cortegiano*. The political usefulness of a loving courtier is obvious. Cynthia both "comforteth" by her

"influence" and "commaundeth" by her "authoritie" (1.2.30-31). In these courtly activities she in some respects resembles both Castiglione's Duchess of Urbino and Queen Elizabeth. In order to be favoured, male followers have to adopt a courtly attitude, as chivalrous pride would be of little avail.

However, the courtly dramatist most consistently anti-chivalrous is Shakespeare in his comedies:[13] In *Twelfth Night*, for example, knighthood is represented by Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who calls himself a "true knight" (2.3.54).[14] He has come to Illyria in the course of his quest to win the love of Lady Olivia. He is, however, utterly unfamiliar with courtly manners: When told to "accost" Maria (1.3.48), his inability to sustain a courtly conversation is ridiculed, as is his ignorance of French (1.30.90-93), the knowledge of which can certainly be considered a typical courtly accomplishment. Sir Andrew's linguistic (and courtly) incompetence is again revealed by his attempt to word a challenge to "Cesario" with "vinegar and pepper in't" (3.4.146). Sir Toby does not deliver this challenge, as he judges Cesario "to be of good capacity and breeding" (3.4.186-87), i.e. to possess exactly those courtly qualities which Sir Andrew lacks. When wounded by Sebastian, his utter uncourtliness is emphasised in his wish: "I had rather than forty pound I were at home" (5.1.175-76). It is Viola and Sebastian who prove to be successful by courtly submissiveness: Valentine tells "Cesario" that "he" is favoured by the Duke and "like to be much advanced: he hath known you but three days, and already you are no stranger" (1.4.2-4). In sixteenth-century conduct books being accepted at a strange place was considered a hallmark of courtliness,[15] as it is in Sidney's *Arcadia*. By courtly behaviour Viola and Sebastian "win" the love of Olivia, without even intending to.

In Orlando in *As You Like It* Shakespeare creates a character who achieves happiness by his courtly manners after his chivalrous heroism has failed. When he appears before the banished courtiers in the Forest of Arden, he exclaims, with his sword drawn: "Forbear, and eat no more" (2.7.88). The Duke, however, teaches him good manners: "What would you have? Your gentleness shall force,/More than your force move us to gentleness" (2.7.102-03). Courtly behaviour will be more successful than chivalrous strength. Later on, Rosalind will teach Orlando courtly manners in the field of love.

As has often been stated, Shakespeare's political attitudes seem to conform with the ruling ideology.[16] If this is so, chivalry as described by McCoy appears to represent the attitude not of the English nobility in general but of one faction of it; it turns out to be an opposing force to the ruling world picture and political ethics. While McCoy is certainly right in stressing the political importance of literary and cultural representations of chivalry, I should like to argue that to assess its position in the power struggles (and moral debates) of the Elizabethan age one has to take the "competing" cultural traditions into account as well: pastoralism and courtliness.

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NOTES

[1]Richard McCoy, *The Rites of Knighthood: The Literature and Politics of Elizabethan Chivalry* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989).

[2]Lothar Černy, for example, points out that by creating the 'image' of an ideal world of beauty and virtue Sidney intends to move the characters as well as the reader to "virtuous action"; *Beautie and the Use Thereof: Eine Interpretation von Sir Philip Sidneys* Arcadia (Köln: Böhlau, 1984) 2, 343-44 *et passim*.

[3]Sir Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, ed. Maurice Evans (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

[4]Cf. Sukanta Chaudhuri, *Renaissance Pastoral and its English Developments* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 1-6 *et passim*.

[5]Chaudhuri 302.

[6]Elizabeth was "opposed to activist policies of any kind" and was obsessed with "her reputation as a woman of clemency"; Paul Johnson, *Elizabeth I: A Study in Power and Intellect* (London: Weidenfels and Nicolson, 1974) 151 and 291. See also Johnson's account of the careers of Sir Christopher Hatton and Sir Walter Raleigh, 213-21. What Johnson calls Elizabeth's "feminine tricks" (130) and her "meretricious façade of vanity" (443), could be interpreted as a calculated display of courtesy. According to Francis Bacon, Elizabeth "allowed herself to be wooed and courted, and even to have love made to her; and liked it . . . these dalliances detracted but little from her fame and nothing from her majesty, and neither weakened her power nor sensibly hindered her business"; quoted from Louis Adrian Montrose, "'Shaping Fantasies': Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture," *Representing the English Renaissance*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988) 31-64; 53. Pastoral metaphors for Elizabeth's royal power are discussed by Montrose, "'Eliza, Queene of Shepheardes,' and the Pastoral of Power," *ELR* 10 (1980): 153-82.

[7]Quoted from Johnson 320.

[8]Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, translated by Sir Thomas Hoby, ed. W. H. D. Rouse (introduction), Drayton Henderson (critical notes), Everyman's Library (London: Dent, 1928).

[9]Ruth Kelso, *The Doctrine of the English Gentleman in the Sixteenth Century*, University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, vol. 14, 1-2 (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1929) 13.

[10]*The Civil Conversation of M. Steeven Guazzo*, ed. Sir Edward Sullivan, Bart., 2 vols., The Tudor Translations (London: Constable, 1925).

[11]John Lyly, *The Complete Works*, ed. R. Warwick Bond, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1902), Introduction to *Endimion*, 3: 9.

[12]Apart from the Tilbury address quoted above, the most famous example is certainly the "Golden Speech" delivered in 1601 to the Members of Parliament: "There is no jewel, be it of never so rich a price, which I set before this jewel: I mean your love. For I do esteem it more than any treasure or riches; for that we know how to prize, but love and thanks I count invaluable . . ."; quoted from Johnson 417.

[13]For a more comprehensive account of Shakespeare's attitude towards chivalry see my book on *Abschied, Reise und Wiedersehen bei Shakespeare: Zu Gestaltung und Funktion epischer und romanhafter Motive im Drama* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1989) 244-51.

[14]Quotations and line numbers are from the respective Arden editions of Shakespeare's plays.

[15]See, for example, *The Civil Conversation of M. Steeven Guazzo* 1: 229: ". . . it shalbe the part of a straunger, being in another mans house, not to take upon presumptuously, but to behave himselfe so modestly, that every man may love and favour him . . . ."

[16]See, for example, Stephen Greenblatt's assertion that Shakespeare "approached his culture . . . as a dutiful servant, content to improvise a part of his own within its orthodoxy," *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 253.