History of the Chivalric Tournament: A New Approach

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Some sixty years ago, Ruth Harvey – in her study, *Moriz von Craûn and the Chivalric World* – boldly declared that the tournament "has always been reckoned the most typical and absolute manifestation of the chivalric outlook" (Harvey 1961: 112). This statement, though in a work sometimes deemed authoritative, raises several major problems. The very word 'tournament' comprised many different types of activity throughout its history. How long is 'always'? And it is hard to know what the 'chivalric outlook' might have been, or how the 'tournament' was its typical and absolute manifestation. Yet writers on chivalry, from the seventeenth century onwards – with the notable exception of Kenelm Digby – have countenanced notions of this kind. For Richard Barber "the tournament may be fairly described as the central ritual of chivalry" (1980: 155); for Larry Benson it was "the most characteristic expression of chivalric ideals" (1980: 1); and for Maurice Keen its popularity and the way it brought knights together from far and wide made it a "powerful force towards generalising both the standards and the rituals of European chivalry" (1984: 82). Certainly it is in studies of chivalry that we most frequently encounter embryonic histories of the 'tournament' and of the various modes of mock combat associated with it. This is because it is much easier to write a brief generalized survey of almost any subject, however complex it may be, than to pursue all its ramifications, incongruities and complexities in a book[1].

Even before the advent of the printing press, and long afterwards, heralds and other interested parties were busy gathering information about mock combats. When dealing with some specific aspect of their work (such as the Orders of Knighthood, armorial bearings, or the tournament itself) they evidently felt a compulsion not only to set it within an historical framework but more especially to establish how it began. This appetite for discovering antecedents – rather akin to the zeal of modern genealogists – was voracious and uncritical. In 1555, for example, Jean Le Feron's book on the institution of the heralds scarcely ever reached anything more modern than the age of Charlemaigne because the author was an archetypal seeker after origins. For the men largely responsible for organizing tournaments it was a major preoccupation to establish who had 'invented' them. Could it have been the ancient Greeks, the Trojans or the Romans? Perhaps Uther Pendragon or his son King Arthur deserved the honour? Or an Angevin baron Geoffrey de Preuilly, active in the mid-eleventh century, who was sometimes thrust forward as the inventor. But eventually it was the German king Henry the Fowler (*c.* 876-936) who won the most support, and this was thanks to the printing press. Henry's claims were advanced by Georg Rüxner whose popular *Thurnierbuch* was first published in 1530. Rüxner went further by including a plausible account of 36 major German 'national' tournaments between 939 and 1487 which were accepted as genuine and cited by many later writers. Unfortunately, more than half of these tournaments were fabrications but, as the sports historian Joachim Rühl has observed, Rüxner must have

> earned a fortune by entering the antecedents of families of noble descent who were only too proud to see their famous ancestors, along with hitherto unknown progenitors, listed in his book (1990: 166).

An interesting alternative view of the origins of the

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tournament was later suggested by the historian Claude Fauchet who maintained that, from about the beginning of the eleventh century, romances came into vogue and inspired knights to defend the weak and oppressed; and it was, he argued, in imitation of those ancients, that knights in the courts of contemporary princes more willingly made profession of valour and virtuous strength. But, because the knights were not always engaged in wars, the great kings and lords sometimes published abroad "*des assemblees d'armes: appellez Tournois*" (1606: 9v). On this view the inspiration was deemed to be both romantic and military: but the *ne plus ultra* of romanticism came with Charles Mills in his *History of Chivalry* (1825) when he assured his readers that all their "most delightful imaginings of chivalry are associated with the tournament" where they would see

> in fancy's mirror the gay and graceful knight displaying on his plumed steed the nobleness of his bearing, and the lady of his affections smiling upon his gallant skill, while the admiring people in rude and hearty joy shout their loud acclaims (1825: I, 259).

The history of the chivalric tournament poses some seemingly inextricable problems. As I have stated elsewhere, the metamorphosis "from violence to variety show", although a pan-european phenomenon, did not proceed at the same pace in all countries nor always in the same ways. In France it evolved into the *Ballet du Cour*; in England into the court masque; and in Italy into the opera. Even more problematic is the fact that the sources available at different periods and in different places are often so divergent in type and quantity that we must ask whether it is even *possible* to put together a coherent general history of the tournament? Certainly these difficulties have been tacitly recognised by scholars who have, since the seventeenth century, largely proceeded by writing essays on specific aspects of the subject; by researching local history; by concentrating on regional activities; by publishing and commenting on primary sources; and by delimiting the period under scrutiny. In this way, the subject has been broken up into myriad fragments; and the modern tendency has been to deal with such historical complexities by organising conferences and then publishing the individual contributions as a collection. Much of this work is erudite and interesting, but it is generally very disparate. Even such a well-known volume as Fleckenstein's *Das ritterliche Turnier im Mittelalter* (1985) is simply a miscellany. It is often cited and it has been described by one otherwise-reliable scholar as "***the*** book on the European tournament". But it is difficult to see how this can be the case when it is wholly confined to the Middle Ages and – of its 20 chapters – 16 relate to Germany. Similarly, the fashionable and very weighty exhibition catalogues which purport to offer a solution to the problem of diversity do no such thing. Any readers who work their way through these handsome compilations might be forgiven for thinking that tournaments were an exclusively German phenomenon. Indeed, the only exhibition (and its associated catalogue) which made a serious attempt at international coverage was Lena Rangström's *Riddarlek och Tornerspell. Tournaments and the Dream of Chivalry* (Stockholm, 1992) in which the essays were necessarily brief. There have, of course, also been some important monographs by scholars such as Martina Neumeyer, Évelyne van den Neste, and Noel Fallows – but they invariably deal with a particular period, area, or type of source; and they do not have the space to pursue the subject as it moves away from the lists and towards the theatre. Given the range, bulk and disparity of the sources involved and the impossibility of organising them into a coherent narrative, it is not surprising that, within the last century, there have been only three attempts to write what purport to be general histories of the tournament. The first was Francis Henry Cripps-Day's *The Tournament in England and France* (1918) which – though limited geographically and despite ending with a cursory chapter on the sixteenth century – remains useful for its solid annotation and appendices of documents and calendars. A year later Richard Coltman Clephan published *The Tournament. Its Periods and Phases* which is one of the most disjointed works ever written on its subject but included German material which was not, at the time, easily found in English sources. And finally, seventy years further on, Richard Barber and Juliet Barker published their *Tournaments. Jousts, Chivalry and Pageants in the Middle Ages* which tackles the intransigent subject by devoting separate chapters to different geographical areas and to some specific topics such as the dangers of tournaments, spiritual condemnation, and tournaments as social occasions. The book ranges

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widely but is uneven, sometimes inaccurate and – because it ventures only timidly beyond the fifteenth century – leaves unresolved too many issues concerning the history of ideas.

An Alternative Strategy

These fragmented and partial studies bring me to the principal question. Is it even *feasible* to write a general history of the tournament? Is there any way to harmonize chronology, place, style, the tempo of change, and all the other divergent components of the subject? Perhaps not. But it might still be possible to achieve a more satisfactory result than hitherto if we were to proceed by way of the changing types (and quantities) of evidence available, while relating these to surviving pictorial and artefactual sources.

If we turn first to the 'pre-history' of tournament historiography (that is to the greater part of written material produced prior to the mid-eighteenth century), it is obvious that what we have are, for the most part, haphazard collections of materials compiled mainly by the officials who would themselves generally be called upon to organise such events – that is by heralds. Thus we have numerous copies of challenges and formularies from different parts of Europe: "Cries for Jousts of Peace"; "Cries for a tournament"; and "Proclamations for the award of prizes" – augmented by miscellaneous descriptions of individual combats. Such manuscripts relating to what we loosely term 'tournaments', together with rules and regulations for judicial combat and single combats of honour, survive in abundance from the early fourteenth century onwards; and these were often gathered together by later scholars and bound up as miscellaneous volumes. For example, some of the richest collections of original challenges and related materials were put together in the seventeenth century by antiquaries such as François-Roger Gaignières: but they are not arranged systematically. Each is really an independent *omnium gatherum* compiled from whatever documents a particular herald (or antiquary) might have been able to lay his hands upon and each may, therefore, contain unique challenges, responses, and narratives. They are not histories. They are simply materials from which a scholar might have started to write some sort of history, if he had thought of it. Other manuscript collections comprise documents which have been copied, and re-copied, one from another and thus form clusters (or families) of miscellanea. These, again, constitute an ample class of record; and one of the best-known English examples is Lansdowne MS 285 put together for Sir John Paston from around 1468 and scrupulously analysed, many years ago by G. A. Lester. This manuscript contains many texts relating to the officers of arms, their duties and their fees; to public ceremonial such as knightly creations and coronations; to the proclamation of jousts, along with specific letters of challenge, rules, regulations, and detailed narratives. For scholars, it is a wonderful thesaurus: even though a good many of the items contained therein may be found both in earlier and later manuscripts.

Then there are challenges and responses to challenges which survive from at least the thirteenth to the late seventeenth century (and even beyond), and these yield information not only on rules, regulations, and scoring, but also on changing purposes and social attitudes[2]. And the way that such challenges become increasingly allegorical (and concerned to establish a dramatic setting for a *wholly rehearsed and choreographed* combat) enables us to follow tournaments from open field to theatre – throughout Europe.

The habit of amassing documents continued with the advent of the printing press. In 1535, for example, there appeared *Le fondement et origine des Tiltres de Noblesse* which, though quite short, still manages to include an account of empires, kingdoms, duchies, counties, and other lordships; the manner of creating officers of arms; and miscellaneous information on such subjects as blason, single combat, jousts, the *Bouhort,* the *Pas ou Barriere*, the award of prizes at tournaments, and the organization of a royal funeral. In other words, the author was putting into print precisely the kind of manuscript miscellany heralds had habitually compiled for themselves. With regard to the tournament itself, the greatest example of this agglomerative approach is in the first volume of Marc Vulson de la Colombière's *Le Vray Théâtre d'Honneur* (1648), compiled when the old forms of contest had finally been transformed into quite different activities.

Another evolution may be traced in what may loosely described as literary sources. Certainly

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for the earliest chivalric mock combats the documentary and financial records are so limited that we are forced to rely on what are known as romances, and we have largely to gamble on their value as evidence of what really happened when knights met in tournaments. Whatever their literary merits the early romances are a hard and stoney soil for the historian to till, even though some episodes of combat are evidently based upon first-hand observation. Indeed Léon Gautier, the industrious nineteenth-century historian of chivalry, was able to reconstruct a credible composite account of an early tournament on the basis of details selected from several romances. On the whole, though, these poems remain proportionately more the products of imagination than of experience and their principal value is, paradoxically, for providing sources for the themes of later tournaments when the contests were evolving as dramatic entertainments. Even a sophisticated study such as that by Ruth Harvey on *Moriz von Craûn* does not, in fact, provide a clear idea either of chronology or of what early tournaments were really like.

On the other hand some poems purport to be biographical and have encouraged extrapolation by historians although they should not inspire the confidence of anyone who has ever had dealings with eye-witness reports - especially as recorded decades later by a third party. The exploits of William the Marshal, for instance, tell us something about tourneying in the twelfth century but, as Larry D. Benson observed, many years ago:

> Since the tournaments described by Jean the Minstrel had taken place more than half a century before, and since these accounts were based largely on William's recollections as passed on to the poet by his son and Jean d'Erlée, we must approach this record with considerable caution (1980: 7).

Even this caveat is an understatement and, biographically-speaking, we are not on firmer ground until we reach descriptions of the feats of warriors such as Jacques de Lalaing, Gaston de Foix or Bayard in the lists.

In the same way – apart from remote precursors in the poetic accounts recorded in the *Roman du Hem* and the *Tournoi de Chauvency* towards the end of the thirteenth century – significant narratives of specific tournaments are rare until the fifteenth century when we have detailed descriptions of the *pas d'armes* of René d'Anjou and the series of Burgundian festivals so fully described by Olivier de la Marche and Matthieu d'Escouchy.

As for fiction? Well some later writers – Spenser for example – are well-nigh useless, apart from demonstrating all too clearly what they *cannot* tell us; but there are others, like Antoine de la Sale in the fifteenth century, and Sir Philip Sidney in the late sixteenth, who are extremely knowledgeable and circumstantial, and convey a good deal of technical information for the historian of chivalric combat. Literary sources cover tournaments from the beginning to the end of their history but are scattered and sporadic. By contrast, treatises on fighting techniques (and lance-play in particular) are very informative but only become prolific from the mid-fifteenth century - after which there is a long sequence of texts (in Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, German, and French) which take us well into the seventeenth century. These text-books were written by men of considerable practical experience – such as Duarte King of Portugal, Ponç de Menaguerra, Juan Quixada de Reayo, Federico Ghisliero, and several others – and allow us to understand a good deal about jousting and foot combat which we cannot find in literary sources. They demonstrate dramatically the changing nature of the combats as they move away from physical danger to the safety of the horse ballets, as we may see exemplified in treatises on horsemanship culminating in Pluvinel's *Le Maneige royal* (1623). Similarly, the works of Bartolomeo Sereno, Giovan' Battista Gaiani, and Bonaventura Pistofilo underline the increasing gentleness of barriers and foot combats as these exercises approximated increasingly to the dance.

A comparative study of the artefacts associated with all the different modes of fighting can also provide valuable information about changes of purpose and habits: from violent conflict until the final transformation into pure theatre: from metal to pasteboard; or from heavy metal-tipped lances to blunted flimsy staves baked in ovens to ensure that they would be brittle enough to shatter at the slightest impact. Unfortunately, apart from inventories and some brief observations in manuscript, there is little analytical treatment of arms and armour in relation either to real warfare or to tournaments until René d'Anjou's *Traicté de la forme et devis d'ung tournoy* composed around 1460. Then again there is almost nothing until

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the more comprehensive, though unillustrated, *De exercitiis* of Pero Monte in 1509; followed by the *Inventario iluminado* of the Real Armeria of Madrid; and then, in 1568 by Jeremias Schemel's monumental and magnificently illustrated, *Turnierbuch* manuscript copies of which are preserved in Vienna and Wolfenbüttel. However, what can be done with such sources and with the imaginative examination of surviving artefacts has been demonstrated by scholars such as Boccia, Riquer, and Gamber.

The same is true of factual narratives which become increasingly informative – both in relation to challenges, responses, rules, organization, and the actual combats fought – with some of the fifteenth-century sources being well-nigh exhaustive. I am thinking here, for example, of such chroniclers as Saint Remy, Olivier de la Marche, and Matthieu d'Escouchy; and also of Rodriguez de Lena's extraordinary eye-witness account of the *Passo Honroso* in 1434. But, in these narratives – for all their detailed concentration on arms, armour, and on the fighting itself – there is also an increasing attention to detail on costume, procedure, *mise-en-scène*, and theatrical performance. And many descriptions of contestants 'entering the lists' might just as accurately be described as simply 'listing the entries': with long processions of flashily-clad knights riding in ever-more fantastic and elaborate pavilions and pageant cars. The passage from manuscript to print enables us to trace this aspect of the history of tournaments far into the seventeenth century and even beyond; and some of the published narratives of later combats (enhanced with magnificent engravings) are substantial presentation volumes. Here we can document *with precision* the transformation of the chivalric tournament into pure spectacle; the ways in which they were choreographed as entertainment; and the increasing role of music, dance, and scenography, especially in France, Italy and Germany.

Finally, as I have already suggested, the volume and quality of graphic illustration grew enormously: and pictorial sources merit particular scrutiny. They reveal changing styles and preoccupations in perhaps the most effective manner available to the historian of European tournaments – ranging from crude but suggestive stereotypical manuscript illustrations of the mêlée and joust to masterly representations of mock, choreographed battles such as the seven engravings illustrating the principal scenes of *the Discordia Superata. Torneo combattuto in Ferrara* in 1635 – a brilliant tournament conceived wholly as a theatre spectacle with a poetic text by Ascanio Pio di Savoia, music composed by Antonio Goretti, and stage machinery created by the architect/engineer Francesco Guitti. The chivalric tournament had come a long way.

A history not merely based upon such materials but using them as a structure would cover the entire history of the subject. It would illuminate the whole of Europe. It would clarify both relationships and irrelation. And it would enable us to understand exactly what we know and what we do not know since, for example, a gap in our knowledge of one geographical area which appears when we use one type of source might be filled simply by considering a different kind of evidence. Certainly, the long journey of the tournament from violent combat to theatrical performance, would be more completely documented and far more subtly gradated than hitherto. But they are neither as mysterious nor unbridgeable as they might at first seem. From the standpoint of the historian of ideas – of chivalry, of the transformation of knights into gentlemen, and of the development of court ballet and opera – the job is well worth doing.

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Notes

1 See Bibliography under Fauchet; Vulson; La Curne de Saint-Palaye; Gassier; Mills; James; Roy; Roy; Warre-Cornish.
2 See, for some examples, Anglo: 1962.