Military Courage and Fear in the Late Medieval French Chivalric Imagination

Craig Taylor
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Abstract: Chivalric literature offered a powerful celebration of courage and denunciation of the shame of cowardice. This article explores the relationship between late medieval French debates on this subject and the military reality of the period.

Résumé: La littérature chevaleresque offre une célébration forte du courage et une dénonciation de la honte que représente la lâcheté. Cet article explore le lien entre les débats français sur ce sujet à la fin du Moyen Âge et la réalité militaire de l’époque.

Medieval chivalric literature celebrated courage and bravery as defining characteristics of the worthy knight.¹ The central importance of courage and bravery often suggested that losing a battle or even one’s life was preferable to the shame of cowardice.² In *La Chanson de Roland*, the eponymous hero called upon his men to fight bravely in the battle of Roncesvalles so that no one would sing a shameful song about them afterwards. Moreover Roland was true to his own advice, even refusing to blow his horn to summon aid when the tide of the battle turned. Though his refusal to act led to the death of both himself and his men, the Christians ultimately won the battle and Roland himself was carried to heaven by Saint Gabriel.³ The bravery and self-sacrifice of Roland and Olivier became one of the touchstones of chivalry. In *Les Vœux du héron* (c. 1346), Jean de Hainault, count of Beaumont, accused his fellow knights of believing that they were the equals of Oliver and Roland.⁴ Not long afterwards, the *Chanson de Bertrand du Guesclin* (c.1380)


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reported that the Constable of France had earned more honour than any “chevaliers puis le temps de Rolant” and repeatedly compared Bertrand with his illustrious predecessor.  

Amongst late medieval knights, perhaps the epitome of chivalric bravery was Jean of Luxembourg, king of Bohemia, who died while fighting for King Philip VI at the battle of Crécy on 26 August 1346. In Jean Froissart’s famous account, the blind Bohemian king rode into battle, led on either side by his retainers. Together they fought most bravely but all died and were found the next day lying around their leader, their horses still bound together. Of course, Froissart neglected to mention that the Bohemian king may have had a very personal reason for sacrificing his life, as he sought to redeem himself after he had abandoned the field at the battle of Vottem against the Liègeois on 19 July 1346, just a month before Crécy.

Chivalric writers were unequivocal about the shame of cowardice. In Lancelot do Lac, the Lady of the Lake declared that knights should be more afraid of suffering shame than of dying, and Lancelot agreed that the only thing preventing a man from being valorous was indolence, because courage came from the heart alone. Jean Froissart was deeply scornful of those who fled from the battlefield. For example, he reported the story of Wauflars de la Croix who shamefully abandoned Sir William Balliol and their men, and fled into a marsh where he was discovered by his enemies who killed him, refusing to ransom such a coward.

During the night of the 22 December 1439, the English army boldly relieved Avranches, putting the French garrison to flight. The anonymous Bourgeois of Paris reported that the French “firent lever le siege a grant deshonneur”, while the account in the Chronique d’Arthur de Richemont, the commander of the French force, claimed that the Constable had wished to hold firm but was persuaded to retreat because so many of his soldiers had broken ranks “sans ordennance”. Georges Chastelain reported on the public shaming by duke Charles the Bold of Bishop Louis de Bourbon and the lord of Boussu for their cowardice in abandoning Huy to the army of Liège in

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September 1467. Boussu came in for particular scorn because he had been charged with the defence by duke Charles the Bold, but left at the behest of the bishop. In the Livre de chevalerie, Geoffroi de Charny advised young men-at-arms who wanted to be strong and of good courage, to fear shame more than death: “gardez que vous prissiez moins la mort que la honte”. He believed that the root of cowardice was the fear of dying. Those who loved comfort and wealth feared death, unlike real men of worth who had no fear of either suffering or death. In the Lay de vaillance, Eustache Deschamps praised the Romans who never ran away or retreated but preferred to die at their posts, thereby winning true renown. In Le Livre des quatre dames, written in the immediate aftermath of the disastrous battle of Agincourt in 1415, Alain Chartier presented four ladies who were overwhelmed with grief for their lovers who had taken part in the encounter. The final lady could take no consolation in the fact that her lover had survived the battle, because he had been a coward who had fled from the field. Her grief and shame at her lover’s behaviour served as ample commentary on the thousands of soldiers who had broken ranks, saving their own lives at the expense of their fellow Frenchmen. Indeed, Chartier viewed this failure as ample evidence of a crisis in chivalry itself, as he made a direct link between their cowardice on the battlefield and their faithlessness in love, arguing that one kind of treason led to another.

Drawing upon the advice of Vegetius in the Epitoma rei militaris, Christine de Pizan advised that retreating before the battle had been joined was dishonourable for two reasons: “l’une, que il ait paour et que couardie le meut ; l’autre, que petite fiance a en sa gent. Et avecques ce donna hardement aux ennemis”. She called upon noblemen to be courageous on the battlefield, emphasising their duty to sacrifice their blood or life for the sake of the prince, the country and the “chose publique”, but also the penalty of death and dishonour for fleeing from the battlefield out of fear. Jean de Bueil argued that the virtue of courage or “force”

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was found in those “qui aymoient mieulx mourir en combatant que fuyr a leur deshonneur”.\textsuperscript{17}

In the \textit{Enseignements paternels}, written in the 1430s by Hugues de Lannoy, the narrator warned his son that it was better to die honourably than to be shamed by cowardice, and therefore urged his son to accept death in battle rather than come back in shame.\textsuperscript{18} Lannoy cited Valerius Maximus, Livy, Lucan, Orosius, Sallust and Justin as authors who provided examples of men who faced death both for the sake of the public weal and to preserve their own reputations. He also recounted the story of the Burgundian Louis Robessart, who had died on 27 November 1430 when he and his men had encountered a force of French and Scottish soldiers near Amiens. Robessart had preferred to face death rather than take shelter in a castle, though he did order his men to withdraw when the battle was lost.\textsuperscript{19} Instrumental in his decision may well have been his obligations as a member of the Order of the Garter, especially so soon after Sir John Fastolf had left his fellow members of the Order, Talbot and Scales, to be captured at the battle of Patay on 18 June 1429.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, Louis de Châlon and Jean de Montagu-Neufchatel had also been expelled from the Order of the Golden Fleece after abandoning the field at Anthon on 11 June 1430.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{Chivalric Culture and Military Reality}

Many military historians have been optimistic about the effectiveness of chivalric narratives and culture as a means to instil bravery and a willingness to endure injury and even death in battle, rather than incur the shame of cowardice. Jones has argued that chivalric “tales did not serve as a diversion from war, or an idealization of it. Rather they formed an exemplar, a scale of values, that was as important in practice as in the imagination of the reader.”\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, one school of military historians has emphasised the central importance of culture in warfare, shaping the expectations that soldiers had of warfare and of behaviour in battle.\textsuperscript{23}

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\item\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Œuvres de Gilbert de Lannoy : voyageur, diplomate et moraliste}, éd. C. Potvin, Louvain, Lefever, 1878, p. 460; also \textit{ibid.}, p. 456-7, along with B. Sterchi, “Hugues de Lannoy, auteur de l’\textit{Enseignement de vraie noblesse}, de l’\textit{Instruction d’un jeune prince} et des \textit{Enseignements paternels}”, \textit{Le Moyen Âge}, 110, 2004, p. 79-117.
\item\textsuperscript{20} See footnote 99 below.
\item\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Registres de la Toison d’Or}, t. I, fol. 2\textsuperscript{v}, cited in M. H. Keen, \textit{The Laws of War in the Late Middle Ages}, London, Routledge, 1965, p. 108.
\item\textsuperscript{23} This approach is particularly associated with the work of John Keegan and Victor Davis Hanson, and for debates about this in regard to the medieval period, see for example R. Abels,
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Military Courage and Fear...

Medieval writers certainly claimed that their chivalric stories were powerfully effective. Jean Froissart famously presented his *Chroniques* as a means to instil courage in young men. The preface famously stated:

> Et ce sera à yaus matère et exemples de yaus encouragier en bien faisant, car la memore des bons et li recors des preus atisent et enflament par raison les coers des jones bacelers, qui tirent et tendent à toute perfection d’onneur, de quoi proèce est li principaus chiés et li certains ressors.24

Within the pages of the *Chroniques*, there were plenty of inspirational figures for a young squire, including Edward of Woodstock, the Black Prince, who successfully earned his spurs in 1346 at the battle at Crécy, in front of his father Edward III.25 Even more blunt about the power of such stories was Jean de Montreuil in his treatise *A toute la chevalerie*. Writing on the eve of Henry V’s invasion of France in 1415, Montreuil provided an inventory of the great French heroes and successes of the past, addressed to the “chevalerie de France” so that the text might encourage them to “mettre a cuer la prouesce et vaillance de vos bons predecessors”.26

Yet chivalric narratives rarely paid attention to the psychological reality of fear occasioned by real military encounters.27 If they did discuss such matters, it was indirectly, either through reports of heavily unbalanced casualty figures that suggested that one side had panicked, or through their reports of pre-battle orations.28 Few writers discussed the fear or stress that warfare might bring, and hence engaged with the notion that courage represented a personal triumph over fear. In other words, chivalric courage and cowardice were usually represented externally, in terms of behaviour, rather than internally and psychologically. Chivalric courage was performed and witnessed by others rather than a triumph over fear or a character trait.29

The fact that chivalric narratives rarely examined the real emotions of soldiers on the battlefield is perhaps not surprising given that the writers had

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28 In 360 orations recorded in 92 chronicles written between 1000 and 1250, “The authors plainly thought it essential to show leaders pleading with knights not to run from battle.” J. R. E. Bliese, “When knightly courage may fail: battle orations in medieval Europe”, *The Historian*, 53, 1991, p. 504.

extremely limited experience of warfare and were inevitably influenced by their own agendas and inhibitions when writing about martial activities. Their accounts of courage and cowardice were not simple mirrors to the society around them, but rather active attempts to champion an idealized model of heroic, virtuous courage. Chivalric tales were influenced by genre, literary stylings and cultural expectations, and therefore produced simplistic and even unrealistic narratives.

This is very much in accord with parallel narratives written in other warrior societies. Classical Roman heroic tales paid no attention to the “complex and elusive psychology of courage” and did not attempt to recreate the mind-set of ordinary soldiers in war.\textsuperscript{30} Indeed, such tales have rarely attempted to consider the real emotions of warriors. William Ian Miller has argued that

No one doubts that soldiers are afraid. There have been, through time, different views as to whether it was acceptable for them to admit openly that they were, but fear was clearly always a gloomy and tormenting omnipresence. Those few who qualify as genuine berserks aside, the dominant passion in battle, the one each party expects its comrades and its opponents to be intimately involved with, is fear. We might see all heroic literature as a desperate attempt to keep it at bay. One pays homage to it by working hard to deny it in oneself and to insult one’s opponent with it.\textsuperscript{31}

Of course, the people with the most reason to hide the reality of the emotions of war would have been military veterans, who were unlikely to admit to having felt fear or despair, not only to save their own honour but also to shield their families from the real horrors of war, especially the young boys who still had to face their own tests in battle. There was a great difference between remembering for oneself and for those who had experienced war, and representing the experience to others who had never seen battle.

It is only in recent history that first-hand military memoirs, letters and diaries have exposed the deeper emotions occasioned by warfare, submerged underneath the conventions of heroic narratives.\textsuperscript{32} The authors of these modern records may not have been completely objective witnesses, their memories distorted or reshaped for consumption by a wider audience, and as writers, they were liable to take a more intellectual approach to the experience of war than their former comrades in arms. Nevertheless, such sources, when read with appropriate care, offer insight into the experience of soldiers dealing with the challenges of warfare, from the terror of the battlefield to the deep emotional burden of ending the life of another human being. In contrast, the individuals represented in heroic narratives are usually presented in more simple terms, as unfailingly brave and stoic men or as cowards. Such tales offer such a stark polarization that there is little room for either a more complicated


\textsuperscript{31} W. I. Miller, “Weak legs : misbehavior before the enemy”, \textit{Representations}, 70, 2000, p. 41.

vision of bravery or a proper analysis of the emotions of panic, fear or trauma that battle must have elicited in the minds of warriors. Taylor has argued that a need to cover up weakness and fear is always inherent in military culture, which in turn means that the stories told by and about soldiers encourage bravery and courage rather than revealing weakness and insecurity.33

Reflecting on his experience of the Vietnam war, Tim O’Brien admitted that “It is more difficult, however, to think of yourself [...] as the eternal Hector, dying gallantly. It is impossible. That’s the problem. It’s sad when you learn you’re not much of a hero.”34 This raises important questions about the influence of heroic constructions of courage upon soldiers facing the reality of the battlefield psychology. During the age of chivalry, did the bravado of cultural representation of courage and cowardice have a direct and genuine impact upon the emotions of medieval soldiers? When chivalric narratives and chivalric culture in general valued actions over emotions, presented a polarized dichotomy between courage and cowardice, and paid little attention to complex psychology and emotion, did this actually limit the emotional landscape for soldiers?

Many scholars assume that human reactions to battle and warfare have been consistent throughout history. For example, Chrissanthos has argued that “Even though ancient and modern soldiers are separated by great gulfs in time, culture, and technology, warfare had a dramatic effect on those in combat and, despite the above differences, human beings generally respond in similar ways to what in many respects were similar military experiences. Therefore when some human beings are subjected to extremely difficult living conditions and the trauma of combat, certain responses are ‘predictable’ due to ‘biochemical and physiological’ factors.”35 Yet historians of emotions have increasingly emphasised the importance of social and cultural conditioning. Cognitive psychology holds that emotions are the response to stimuli that combine not only physiological reactions but also cognitive evaluations, appraisals and perceptions. Though emotions are universal, the way in which they are triggered, experienced and displayed may be affected by cultural norms and individual personality. Public emotions like courage and cowardice will be particularly susceptible to social and cultural norms. As a result, emotions and the display of emotions are not human constants, but are rather formed and shaped by society, community and culture, and therefore vary according to place and time.36

Such notions might suggest that the celebration of courage within chivalric culture could have been a powerful influence upon contemporary men-at-arms.

Of course, it is important to emphasise that the discussion of martial fear was not a completely taboo subject within chivalric culture. Writers did engage with the subject, usually within *chansons de geste* and romances that dealt with more distant events and contexts, and therefore did not challenge contemporary behaviour and actions. Moreover, military veterans were often direct about the fear inspired by the battlefield. For example, Jean de Wavrin recollected that at Verneuil in 1424, there “nestoit homme tant feast hardy ou assure que ne doubtast la mort” during the most fierce battle that the chronicler had ever seen. Geoffroi de Charny graphically described the horror of the battlefield in the *Livre Charny*, calling upon his audience to imagine the enemy advancing towards them with their lances lowered and their swords ready, while arrows and crossbow bolts rained down, and the bodies of friends lay upon the ground all around. Faced by such horrors, Charny suggested, a man-at-arms would draw strength from the greater fear of dishonouring himself by running away, but also because he could imagine himself to be on the verge of martyrdom. Returning to the same theme in his *Livre de chevalerie*, Charny urged men-at-arms not to think of defeat, flight or the risk of capture when advancing into battle, but instead to focus on what they would do to the enemy. He advised them that in order to find courage, they should fear shame and hate cowardice more than death. Less well-known is the advice that King Duarte of Portugal offered on the fear that might beset a jouster, as he bore down on his opponent in the lists. In his fifteenth-century Portuguese handbook on jousting and knightly combat, Duarte graphically described the emotions that affected the jouster whose fear might commonly cause him to close his eyes during combat.

Moreover clerical writers also warned that heroic tales might instil a false sense of bravado that would quickly evaporate as soon as the warrior faced real danger and fear in battle. Peter of Blois drew attention to those knights who painted great battle scenes on their shields but then ran away from battle to protect themselves and their works of art. John of Salisbury criticized those men who boasted before and after battle, presenting themselves as Achilles and other heroes of the Trojan war, but carefully hid themselves away from any real combat. He

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claimed that such men recast their cowardice into dazzling tales of their glory that were to be passed on by their descendants.\footnote{1}

This theme was most famously dramatized in the \textit{Vœux du héron}, a French poem probably written around 1346 by an anonymous writer from the Low Countries. The work was almost certainly written as a criticism of Edward III and the English aristocracy for the brutal war that they had waged in the Cambrésis. The villain of the piece, Robert of Artois, carefully manipulated the English king and his closest companions into taking up arms against King Philip VI, shaming them into making extravagant and often chilling promises to commit acts of great brutality in France. At the climax of the event, Jean de Hainault, count of Beaumont denounced the boasting of his fellow knights:

\begin{quote}
Mes de tant de paroles me vois moults mervillant.
Vantise ne vaut nient qui n'a achievement.
Quant sommes es tavernes, de ches fors vins boevant,
Et ches dames de les, qui nous vont regardant,
A ches gorgues polies, ches coheres tirant,
Chil oeil vair resplendissent de beaté sourriant,
Nature nous semont d'avoir cœur desirant
De contendre, a le fin de merchi atendant ;
Adont conquerons nous Yaumont et Agoultant,
Et li autre conquerent Olivier et Roland.
Mais quant sommes as camps sour nos destriers courans,
Nos escus a no col et no lanches baissans,
Et le frodure grande nous va tous engelans,
Li membre nous effond[rent], et derrier et devant,
Et nous anemis sont envers nous aprochant,
Adont vauremies estre en un chelier si grant
Que jamais ne fuissons veü ne tant ne quant.
De si faite vantise ne donroie .i. besant !\footnote{2}
\end{quote}

This speech offered a sophisticated and extremely rare analysis of bravery within chivalric culture. First and foremost, Hainault accused his fellow knights of wishing to emulate the deeds of the heroes of chivalric literature like Roland and Olivier, thereby acknowledging the power of such tales. Yet it is less the influence of such heroic stories than direct peer pressure that inflamed Edward III and his knights. Robert of Artois had carefully stage-managed a great chivalric feast, with alcohol flowing liberally and young ladies present to magnify the pressure of the situation. It was this context that gave such power to the chivalric tales and boasts, as the knights wished to impress each other and the women present, and to avoid the shame of being accused of cowardice. In other words, it was not solely the chivalric


\footnote{2} \textit{The Vows of the Heron}, p. 52, and A. Coville, "Poèmes historiques de l’avènement de Philippe VI de Valois au traité de Calais (1328-1360)\", \textit{Histoire littéraire de la France}, 38, 1949-50, p. 262-82, together with footnote 4 above.
tales that inspired the protagonists in the poem, but rather the wider chivalric culture which placed so much pressure on the participants.

Secondly, the *Vœux du héron* drew stark attention to the difference between the bravado of knights in courtly contexts like the great feast of the heron, and the reality of the medieval battlefield. There was an important difference between inspiring an individual to sign up for war while he was safe amongst friends at court, and then maintaining his morale during a long, arduous campaign or enabling him to overcome his fear at a battle or siege. Faced by such horrors and grave dangers, suggested Jean de Hainault, it is difficult to imagine that courage found ed upon a desire to emulate Roland and Olivier would last long. Indeed, the *Vœux du héron* offered a rare glimpse behind the curtain on the frightening reality of the medieval battlefield and dared to expose the emotions of real war, in Hainault’s effort to show that bravado at court was not the same thing as having the true courage to master fear on the battlefield.

**Courage, Cowardice and Rashness**

Lurking behind the analysis of chivalric courage offered in the *Vœux du héron* was a sophisticated debate about bravery and fear by medieval theologians and clerics who were concerned with courage within a moral and virtuous framework, given that it was one of the four Christian cardinal virtues. Bravery was invaluable not merely for soldiers risking their life in war, but also for all Christians struggling to find strength (*fortitudo*) in the face of all manner of challenges to their faith, and which was most clearly exemplified by the saints and martyrs rather than by chivalric heroes.

Medieval thinking about courage was heavily influenced by the careful and nuanced approach offered by Aristotle (384-327BC) in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle believed that true courage could only be demonstrated when the goal was noble and when facing one’s fears for the right reason. The truly brave man would act for what was right and honourable, rather than out of lesser motivations such as a desire for civic honours, fear of pain and punishment, confidence in one’s training and skills, instinct, anger, optimism or just plain ignorance of danger. Such moralizing was of great significance for medieval theologians, even if the rejection of lesser motivations for fortitude did risk undermining some practically useful ways to encourage martial bravery. Nevertheless, the Aristotelian emphasis upon acts of courage performed in service to others did provide an important adjunct to a wider Valois rhetoric of public service. Around 1375, Nicole Oresme presented King Charles V of France with *Le Livre de Éthiques d’Aristote*, a French translation of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Oresme translated

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*Delumeau, *La Peur en Occident*, op. cit.*

*Nicole Oresme, *Le Livre de éthiques d’Aristote*, ed. A. D. Menut. New York, Stechert, 1940. Aristotle’s ideas were also well-known in late medieval France thanks to other works such as the *De regimine principum* of Aegidius Romanus (Giles of Rome), translated into French by Henri de Gauchi, *Li Livres du gouvernement des rois*, ed. S. P. Molenaer, London, Macmillan, 1899.*
Aristotle’s comments on the range of motivations for courage, including concern for personal honour and fear of either shame or punishment. Yet Oresme agreed with Aristotle that only courage in service to the common good was truly worthy and merited honour:

Car autre chose est ouvrer principalment pour honneur et autre chose est ouvrer pour bien honnesté, pour lequel est deü honneur. Semblablement, autre chose est ouvrer pour fuir vitupere et autre chose pour fuyr pechié, pour lequel est deü vitupere. Et pour ce, vraye fortitude est principalment pour honnesté obtenir ou pour pechié fuyr. Et ceste fortitude civile est principalment pour honneur querir ou pour blasme fuyr. Mais elle est prochainne a la vraie vertu, car qui aime honneur c’est conseqüent lors que il aime bien honnesté pour lequel est deü honneur. Et ne convient furs que il prefere bien honnest a honeur et que il mue l’ordre de ceste amour que il ama vertu. Et a ce est disposé celui que a fortitude civile, et par continuer et acoustumance il peut legierement venir a vraie fortitude. Et semblablement peut on dire de la haine de vitupere et de la haine de pechié.

In his glosses, Oresme repeatedly emphasised the importance of courage in service to the common good, and argued that the best contexts in which the courageous and worthy man faces peril are “ceuls qui soustiennent peril de mort en bataille pour le bien commun. Car c’est un peril tresgrant et tres bon”.

Similarly, Honorat Bovet argued that true fortitude depended upon proper motivation. A knight who was fighting in a just war and defending a just cause had no fear of the danger to life and limb, and was displaying true fortitude:

il a tout son plaisir et tout son delit à aller en armes et en justes guerres et à defendre toutes justes causes, querelles et saintes raisons [... et] voit le grant mal et le grant peril qui pourroit venir de faire telle guerre ou de maintenir telle querelle, mais ja pourtant il ne lairra son propos ne pour paine ou travail ne doubtera de exposer son corps en franche force et en justice droituriere.

Other warriors might be ‘bien hardy’, on the battlefield, but Bovet did not regard as virtuous those who were fighting for honour, out of fear of being captured, out of habit instilled by training, out of trust in their equipment, horses or leaders, or even out of anger or sheer ignorance. The only virtue belonged to those who were truly courageous, understanding and fighting for reason and justice.

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50 Ibid., p. 210-1.
51 Ibid., p. 211.
52 Ibid., p. 206.
53 Ibid., p. 205.
55 Ibid., p.76.
The point, of course, was that for medieval intellectuals, inspired by Aristotle, the true training necessary for war was the same as for life in general, that is to say reflection on virtue and morality. The goal was to develop a moral, even intellectual courage. Such a view was no doubt a difficult concept for knights who aiment trop souvent la bataille pour elle-même, et non pour la cause qu’ils y défendent. Le vieux barbare des forêts germaines frémit encore sous leurs vêtements de mailles. A leurs yeux, c’est un charmant spectacle que le sang rouge coulant sur le fer de l’armure. Un beau coup de lance les transporte au ciel.56

Nevertheless, the Aristotelian discussion did offer a far more practical concept of courage for medieval chivalry. Aristotle had famously argued that true courage or andreia was the mean between the extremes of fear (deilia in Greek or timor in Latin) and over-confidence (thrasutēs in Greek or audacia in Latin). True courage lay in conquering not just fear and cowardice, but also the over-confidence that would lead to rash, foolish choices.57 In other words, Aristotle avoided a simplistic polarization of courage and cowardice, and instead emphasised that true bravery lay not merely in overcoming fear, but also in avoiding hasty, impulsive, reckless and thoughtless action.

Aristotle’s views were influential on theologians like St Thomas Aquinas who argued that fortitudo was the firmness of mind to accomplish virtue in general, and more specifically the virtue to face up to every danger without allowing fear to divert us, but also without rashness and audacity leading us to actions that will be equally unprofitable.58 Moreover, Aristotle’s ideas directly influenced key French intellectual debates on the subject of courage. In his glossary to Le Livre de Ethiques d’Aristote, Oresme explained that the cardinal virtue of “fortitude” was “la vertu moral par laquelle l’en se contient et porte deüement et convenablement vers choses terribles en fais de guerre”.59 Following Aristotle, Oresme defined “fortitude” as the proper mean between the two extremes of cowardice and rashness, “paours et hardiesces”.

The same argument was presented in the Arbre des batailles by Honorat Bovet, who argued that fortitude was a cardinal virtue, the strength of soul and the will to withstand any tribulation or temptation.60 In a military context, fortitude

59 Oresme, Le Livre de ethiques d’Aristote, p. 544.
60 Ibid., p. 203, and also see p. 208 and 217.
61 Honorat Bovet, L’Arbre des batailles, p. 75-7.
prevented one from being overwhelmed by the cowardly desire to flee from a dangerous situation and the rash temptation to charge headlong into the enemy, an equally vicious and reprehensible action. In other words, fortitude was the virtuous mean between the two vices of “paour” and “hardiesse.” Bovet even argued that there could be circumstances in which it would be an act of fortitude to run away from a battle:

Et se ung seul chevalier en vouloit attendre cent encore l’on ne diroit jamais que ce fust selon la vertu de force, ne de hardement, et pour ce en ceste vertu il y a trois choses, l’une est assaillir, l’aultre attendre et l’aultre fuir. Mais entre elles fault aucunes fois prendre le parti de fuir. 62

Oresme made the same argument in his translation of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, adding in the gloss:

Item, les assaillans ou emprenans se reputent plus fors et doivent mieulx savoir ce qui il ont a faire, et quant et comment, que les actendans ou defendans; et ainsi est ce plus fort de soy bien defendre par quy il appert que ceste vertu est plus principally en defendant que en assaillant, ceteris paribus. 63

The crucial issue was that fortitude and courage was essentially about self-control, a rational process by which the individual understands whether it was more appropriate to fight, to stand or simply to run away. The knight should deliberate carefully on the wisdom of their course of action, rather than rush into action out of anger or without true consideration of the risks that they are running in charging headlong at the enemy or suicidally facing up to an unbeatable enemy. As Oresme argued, “les fols hardis” are impetuous and eager but when danger actually arrives, they fall apart:

Et la cause est que il ne sont pas meüs de l’abit de vertu qui est reglé par raison. Mais sont meüs de passion, de chaleur et esmouvement de folle hardiesce, autrement que raison ne desire. Et pour ce sont il au commencement impetueus et emprenans. Et après quant vient as perilz et leur premier mouvement est passé et refroidie ou destaint comme une legiere flambe ou comme une fumee, adonques le cuer ou le pouoir leur fault et se departent ou deslaissent a ouvr. 64

These concerns were taken up in turn by Christine de Pizan in *Le livre du corps de policie*. She advised the aristocracy that courage ought to be based on reason, temperance and moderation. The truly brave warrior would limit his actions to the possible, avoiding foolhardiness that was not honourable. 66 She repeated the


argument in her _Livre des fais d’armes et de chevalerie_, declaring that “hardiesce face a blasmer quant elle est folle”.

This rational attempt to separate true courage from the twin dangers of cowardice and rashness echoed the practical realities of the medieval battlefield. As Kaeuper has noted, “knights in historical combat frequently found it hard to restrain themselves and sought release in impetuous charges, disregarding some commander’s plan and strict orders.”

Soldiers who were more intent on proving their own bravery than serving the collective cause represented a danger to the army as a whole. Despite the celebration of individual deeds of arms in chivalric narratives, battles were not won by the such acts, but rather through discipline and collective action. Thus Honorat Bovet emphasised that knights should be punished both for acts of cowardice and acts of false courage. He upheld the importance of martial discipline and the punishment of any knight who led an attack against the order of the constable or marshal of the army, whether or not the individual was successful.

Chroniclers did consistently draw attention to the rashness and over-confidence of soldiers. For example, Froissart reported that Philip VI was so angry with the English that he would not delay the attack at Crécy, despite advice from Le Moine de Bazeilles who had scouted the enemy position. Froissart also blamed the French men-at-arms for being rash at Crécy, as did the _Chronique des quatre premiers Valois_ which argued that the French lost the battle “par hastiveté et desarroy.”

The Burgundian chronicler Jean Le Fèvre, reported that at Agincourt in 1415, the French men-at-arms flooded across the battlefield as if entering a tournament. Moreover, Duke Antoine de Brabant arrived late and was so impatient to join the fray that he raced ahead of his company, used a banner as a surcoat and then was quickly killed by the English archers. In the _Chronique de la Pucelle_, Guillaume Cousinot, chancellor of the duke of Orléans, charged young French aristocrats and the Scottish troops led by Earl of Douglas with pushing for battle at Verneuil in 1424, describing them as hasty youths who rashly called for battle against the advice of the wise counsel of the elder figures on the council.

Nevertheless, chivalric chroniclers were usually more entranced by bold actions on the battlefield than the patient courage required to implement the

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70 Ibid., p. 81-2. Note that Charny warned prospective knights and men-at-arms to plan their enterprises cautiously but carry them out with boldness, to avoid both the despair caused by cowardice that was worse than death, but also the foolish over-confidence that could lead a man to throw away his life. Geoffroi de Charny, _The Book of Chivalry_, éd. cit., p. 128.
71 Jean Froissart, _Chroniques_, éd. cit., t. III, 1342-6, p. 172-4. Philip had earlier given a speech in Paris expressing his desire to fight (ibid., p. 150) and had also been angry that Edward had managed to cross the Somme and temporarily escape him. (ibid., p. 162-4)
defensive battlefield tactics of the English men-at-arms, or even the simple perseverance to withstand the constant risks and dangers of the military campaign. Bovet observed that a young knight would receive more praise for attacking than for a successful defence against an assault, even though it was braver and more praiseworthy to hold one’s ground:

\[\text{vraiment bien attendre est plus vertueuse chose, plus forte et plus difficile que ce n’est de assaillir, car elle est de plus grande deliberation et plus froidement voit les perils de mort que ne fait celui qui assaill, lequel en son courage a déjà prins ire par laquelle il ne peut coignoistre les perils où il se boute.}\]

Indeed, the rational approach to courage encouraged by intellectuals was particularly important in relation to the difficult line between cowardice and sensible tactical restraint. Despite Léon Gautier’s blanket claim that the refusal to retreat from an enemy was one of the ‘ten commandments’ of chivalry, there were clearly circumstances in which avoiding battle or even fleeing would be logical and sensible. As Verbruggen argued “Men knew from experience that a lost battle did not necessarily mean a lost war, which would have been the case if they had all let themselves be killed; the absolute concept of honour had to be reconciled with the interests of society and of human safety.” Joinville reported that at the battle of Mansourah in 1250, Erard de Siverey was concerned that he would be shamed if he rode to get help, so the chronicler had persuaded Erard that he would win great honour if he did manage to save their lives. While King Wenceslas accepted death in the battle of Crécy, Froissart reported that his son, Charles of Bohemia, left the battlefield when he saw that the tide was turning, as did Philip VI, though many chronicles did emphasise his attempts to rally his army and also suggested that he was led from the battlefield by Jean de Hainault.

There were countless times during the Hundred Years War when two armed lined up, banners unfurled, without either side taking the initiative so that a battle was effectively lost or “manquée”. In 1347, Philip VI challenged Edward III to abandon his camp outside Calais and meet them on open ground, which the English king declined. In 1424, Bedford and the French had agreed to fight outside Ivry on 15th August, but when the French withdrew, Bedford was willing to take them on at Verneuil, a sight that was less favourable for him. Five years later, neither the encouragement of Joan of Arc nor the momentum created by previous victories at

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77 Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe During the Middle Ages*, p. 57.
Orléans, Beaugency and Patay could ensure that battle was joined with the English at Montépilloy in August 1429. Yet military decisions about when to engage with an enemy or when to withdraw from the battle where influenced not merely by practical issues of strategy and tactical advantage, but also an awareness on the part of a commander that his actions would be judged both by posterity and the troops under his command. The chronicler Jean Le Bel dramatized the early years of the Hundred Years War as a struggle between the brave King Edward III, a worthy warrior in the Arthurian tradition, and the cautious and even cowardly King Philip VI. The French king repeatedly refused to accept battle under unfavourable conditions, until he finally launched an assault against the English forces at Crécy in 1346. Philip’s decision finally to accept a battle must have been influenced by an awareness of the need to act bravely in front of his own troops, especially when they enjoyed such a numerical advantage:

When Philip VI mustered a royal host […] he was opening Pandora’s box. His actions, the strategy he adopted for the campaign, and the tone of his leadership would be closely watched and discussed […] Caution in the face of the enemy, however sound the reasons underlying it, could carry a political price. A prolonged stand-off would test the strength of the bonds that held the army together. Tensions and rivalries could arise among the nobility.

For a commander like Philip VI, there was a very difficult balance between making a sensible military decision, and impressing an aristocracy brought up on notions of chivalric courage. Was it better to emulate the reckless but heroic courage of Roland in facing death, or the sound judgement of “sage” Oliver?

Geoffroi de Charny declared in the Livre de chevalerie that young men-at-arms should learn a range of practical skills, including how and when to make an honourable and safe withdrawal. He had explored the fine line between cowardice and a reasoned tactical withdrawal from battle in Les Demandes pour la joute, les tournois et la guerre. In the third section that concerned warfare, Charny posed seven questions relating to flight from a battle or a challenge, four of them directly asking whether a knight could either leave the battlefield or surrender with honour, questioning whether the enemy would be more encouraged by knights who fled the battle without striking a blow, or by others who surrendered without fighting. It seems likely that the Company would have frowned upon any attempt to leave a

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83 Jean Le Bel, Chronique.
85 See footnote 3 above.
86 Geoffroi de Charny, The Book of Chivalry, éd. cit., p. 102 : “du beau retraire seurement et honorablement quant il en est temps”.
battlefield, judging by their oath not to flee from battle, as a result of which more
than eighty members died at the battle of Mauroy in Brittany in August 1352. 88

Military success or failure was the ultimate determinant of the wisdom of a
commander’s decision. Winning a great victory might well wipe away any potential
charge of rashness in engaging in a battle against the odds, as frequently happened
when the English fought the French. In 1391, Hawkwood was trapped deep within
Milanese territory and only escaped by indicating that he would do battle with the
enemy army led by Jacopo dal Verme, and then running away under cover of night.
Chroniclers contrasted his “prudence” with the rashness of his allies, led by Jean III,
count of Armagnac, who rushed rashly and incautiously into battle with the
Milanese forces of Jacopo dal Verme and were wiped out. 89

Of course, the repeated French military failures during the Hundred Years
War encouraged the re-evaluation of the chivalric impulse to throw caution to the
wind and to tackle a militarily superior enemy. Following the great defeats at Crécy
and Poitiers, the French deliberately shunned battle against the English for large
periods of time, while successive kings also gave up their role as leader of the army
following the humiliating defeat and capture of King Jean II at Poitiers in 1356. This
disaster forced a profound shift in French thinking on royal military leadership:
Jean de Montreuil applauded Philip VI for having wisely fled the battlefield of
Crécy and criticized Jean VI for failing to do the same at Poitiers. 90

The changing military circumstances may partially explain the overwhelming
popularity of the simple common sense advice offered by the the Roman author,
Vegetius, in the Epitoma rei militaris. 91 Vegetius had been alive to the great dangers
of warfare and hence the need to take a very carefully and considered view before
committing to any military encounter. 92 Moreover, he emphasised the importance of
courage or virtus for the soldier, as a matter of real, practical importance because of
his principle that bravery and morale were more important than numbers in
determining the outcomes of battles: Amplius iuvat virtus quam multitud. 93 Indeed,
he advised a commander never to lead a hesitant and frightened army into a pitched
battle. 94

Christine de Pizan accepted that the presence of the king could give heart to
the army, but argued that the ruler should avoid battle except against rebellious
subjects, lest he be captured, dishonouring him, his blood and his subjects, and also

88 Jean Le Bel, Chronique de Jean le Bel, II, p. 206-7, discussed in D”A. J. D. Boulton, The
Knights of the Crown: the Monarchical Orders in Later Medieval Europe, 1325-1520,
Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, 1987, p. 182 and also p. 196.
89 W. P. Caferro, “John Hawkwood: Florentine hero and faithful Englishman”, The Hundred
90 Jean de Montreuil, Opera, t. I, Epistolario, éd. E. Ornato, Torino, G. Giappichelli, 1963,
p. 327.
91 Vegetius, Epitoma rei militaris, and C. T. Allmand, The De Re Militari of Vegetius. The
Reception, Transmission and Legacy of a Roman Text in the Middle Ages, Cambridge,
92 See the debate about the “Vegetian style of warfare” in the Journal of Medieval Military
History, 1, 2002.
93 Vegetius, Epitoma rei militaris, p. 117.
94 Ibid., p. 86-7.
causing great harm to his country. Charles V therefore deserved praise for reconquering lands without moving from his throne. The king could retreat in the face of a route, because it was better to lose a battle than a monarch. Thus, Charles VII did well to abandon his original plan to lead the French army that fought the English at Verneuil in 1424, even if this did handle a moral advantage to the rival commander, the Regent Bedford.

Conclusion

It would be dangerous to make too strong a comparison between debates about courage in late medieval France and late medieval England. Yet it is striking that the mounting sophistication of the French debate about courage, rashness and cowardice was rarely matched across the Channel during the Hundred Years War. A rare exception appeared in the Boke of noblesse, dedicated in 1475 to Edward IV by the English writer William Worcester. In a marginal note, Worcester reported that his patron, Sir John Fastolf, had advised young knights and nobles to heed the example of the ‘manly’ man who relied upon caution and good sense, rather than the “ardy” man who was courageous but far too rash, foolhardy and “bethout dicrecion of good avysement”.

Yet Worcester’s defence of the manly man was undoubtedly written, in part, as a defence of his own master’s supposed cowardice. In the aftermath of the French relief of Orléans in May 1429, Fastolf argued for a cautious and defensive strategy, but was overruled by the more aggressive Lord Talbot. The English army suffered a devastating defeat at the battle of Patay in June 1429, when the unmounted rearguard led by Lord Talbot and Lord Scales were captured. The remnants of the army escaped, led by Sir John Fastolf. The Burgundian chronicler, Jean de Wavrin, defended Fastolf’s retreat at Patay in 1429, reporting that the commander had had no fear of death or capture but was persuaded to withdraw by his captains. Of course Wavrin had served under Fastolf’s command in this engagement, and clearly had a stake in defending him. The same cannot be said of Jean de Bueil, whose subsequent account in Le Jouvencel praised Fastolf for saving his company.

Yet in England, Fastolf was briefly suspended from the Order of the Garter and accused of cowardice by Talbot. Their difference of opinion over the tactical responses to the engagement at Patay, the obligations of membership of the Order of the Garter, and from a wider perspective of chivalry itself, underpinned a brutal personal dispute that lasted for over a decade. The charges were echoed in a suit

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before the Parlement of Paris shortly afterwards, when Thomas Overton described his former master, Fastolf, as a “chevalier fuitif”. In response, Fastolf declared that the accusation of cowardice was “la plus grant charge qu’on puist dire d’un chevalier” and roundly defended himself as “saige, vaillant et preux”. He claimed that that he had exercised tactical good sense and this argument carried the day, albeit it was only thirteen years later that Fastolf was reinstated into the Order of the Garter. His reputation never fully recovered.100 Meanwhile, John Talbot met his end at the battlefield at Castillon on 17 July 1453, when he refused to abandon the field against a French force equipped with artillery.101

Craig Taylor
Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York, England