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Édition électronique
URL : http://journals.openedition.org/peme/9487
DOI : 10.4000/peme.9487
ISSN : 2262-5534

Éditeur
Société de langues et littératures médiévales d’oc et d’oil (SLLMOO)

Référence électronique
Pauline Pilote, « "This Rude Chivalry of the Wilderness": Chivalry and Native Americans in Cooper’s and Irving’s American Novels », Perspectives médiévales [En ligne], 37 | 2016, mis en ligne le 01 janvier 2016, consulté le 18 janvier 2018. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/peme/9487 ; DOI : 10.4000/peme.9487

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“This Rude Chivalry of the Wilderness”: Chivalry and Native Americans in Cooper’s and Irving’s American Novels

Pauline Pilote

Then comes Sir Walter Scott with his enchantments, and by his single might checks this wave of progress, and even turns it back; sets the world in love with dreams and phantoms; with decayed and swinish forms of religion; with decayed and degraded systems of government; with the sillinesses and emptinesses, sham grandeurs, sham gauds, and sham chivalries of a brainless and worthless long-vanished society. He did measureless harm; more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any other individual that ever wrote. [...] There, the genuine and wholesome civilization of the nineteenth century is curiously confused and commingled with the Walter Scott Middle-Age sham civilization; and so you have practical, common-sense, progressive ideas, and progressive works; mixed up with the duel, the inflated speech, and the jejune romanticism of an absurd past that is dead, and out of charity ought to be buried. [...] Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war.¹

¹ Mark Twain’s idea of a “Sir Walter disease” that would go on to be responsible for the American Civil War gives an idea of Walter Scott’s tremendous influence in the United States, and of Ivanhoe in particular, which was published in December 1819 and was...
immediately shipped to America. The “romance,” as it is subtitled, was considered a breakthrough by Walter Scott’s contemporaries, since it is the first of the Waverley Novels to deal with the English Middle Ages, as the author takes the themes he had broached in the previous novels further back into the past. Actually, Walter Scott started out his career as a writer using medieval matter: The Lay of the Last Minstrel and The Lady of the Lake were published respectively in 1805 and 1810. These, however, read as poetry and Ivanhoe is the first of the Waverley Novels to deal with the Middle Ages. Later, he goes back to the same period in Quentin Durward (1823), The Talisman and The Betrothed (1825), Anne of Geierstein (1829), and Count Robert of Paris (1832). However, it is Ivanhoe, as the first to be published and the most successful of those books, that probably most affected nineteenth century attitudes towards the Middle Ages. Even though some kind of medieval revival had been going on for centuries, Walter Scott was considered by his contemporaries as the one who fostered it and who brought it back into fashion. According to Alice Chandler, “Scott brought this interest to a focus by creating a completely believable medieval world, which he portrayed so vividly and attractively that many of his readers took it for historical truth rather than historical fiction.” Nevertheless, the upsurge in interest in the feudal past was already well under way by the beginning of the 19th century: Thomas Johnes translated Froissart’s Chronicles between 1803 and 1805 and the three quarto volumes of the first edition were so popular that they were immediately republished in pocket-size edition. Similarly, Southey’s translation of Amadis de Gaul, Palmerin of England and Chronicles of the Cid came out in 1803, 1807, and 1808 respectively; re-editions of Malory were released in 1816 and 1817 – the latter edited by Southey himself – and Charles Mills published his History of the Crusades in 1820 and his History of Chivalry in 1825. We can actually trace this popularity earlier, back to the eighteenth century, with the “Graveyard poets” and Gothic novelists on the one hand, and antiquaries and ballad collectors in the wake of Percy’s Reliques of Ancient English Poetry, on the other.

Walter Scott draws on the idea, common at the time among historians, that the story of the Middle Ages began in the forests of Germany, Scandinavia, or the British Isles. 19th century historians Joseph Strutt, Robert Henry, Gilbert Stuart, or Sharon Turner find the origins of chivalry in that same place and usually divide the period into the Germanic, the chivalric, and the decadent phases. “Dr Henry” and “Mr Sharon Turner” are themselves referred to in the “Dedicatory Epistle” which serves as a preface to Ivanhoe, and according to Alice Chandler, Scott plagiarises Robert Henry in his own Essay on Chivalry that he wrote as a supplement to the 1815-1824 editions of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. In this, as in Ivanhoe, the point of view he provides on the values of chivalry sounds like an echo of the general notions that prevailed in the 19th century, and it goes hand in hand with some kind of idealisation of the chivalric code.

Valour, humanity, courtesy, justice, honour, were the characteristics of chivalry; and to these we may add religion, which, by infusing a large portion of enthusiastic zeal, carried them all to a romantic excess, wonderfully suited to the genius of the age, and productive of the greatest and most permanent effects both upon policy and manners. War was carried on with less ferocity, when humanity, no less than courage, began to be deemed the ornament of knighthood, and knighthood a distinction superior to royalty, and an honour which princes were proud to receive from the hands of private gentlemen; more gentle and polished manners were introduced, when courtesy was recommended as the most amiable of knighthly virtues, and every knight devoted himself to the service of some lady; and violence and oppression decreased, when it was accounted meritorious to check and to
punish them. A scrupulous adherence to truth, with the most religious attention to
the performance of all engagements, particularly those between the sexes, as more
easily violated, became the distinguishing character of a gentleman; because
chivalry was regarded as the school of honour, and inculcated the most delicate
sensibility with respect to that point. And valour, seconded by so many motives of
love, religion, and virtue, became altogether irresistible.

This definition comes from William Russell’s *History of Modern Europe* which he published
in 1786 and which went through various stages of republication throughout the 19th
century. Walter Scott takes up this idea almost verbatim in his “Essay on Chivalry”:
“valour is held in esteem [...] the greater respect is paid to boldness of enterprise and
success in battle. But it was peculiar to the institution of chivalry, to blend military valour
with the strongest passions which actuate the human mind, the feelings of devotion and
those of love.” The same notions are translated into *Ivanhoe*: “expose your life by lonely
journeys and rash adventures, as if it were of no more value than that of a mere knight-
errant, who has no interest on earth but what lance and sword may procure him.”

Echoes are, in fact, numerous between the two texts: “He [the Preux Chevalier] was bound
by his vow to seek out adventures of risk and peril [...] Enterprises the most extravagant
in conception, the most difficult in execution, the most useless when achieved, were
those by which an adventurous knight chose to distinguish himself” becomes in *Ivanhoe*
“the usual expedient of knights-errant, who, on such occasions, turned their horses to
graze, and laid themselves down to meditate on their lady-mistress, with an oak-tree for a
canopy [...] sufficiently occupied by passionate reflections upon her beauty and cruelty, to
be able to parry the effects of fatigue and hunger, and suffer love to act as a substitute for
the solid comforts of a bed and supper.” This further recalls in the “Essay on Chivalry”
“[i]t was essential to his character that he should select, as his proper choice, a lady and a
love,’ to be the polar star of his thoughts, the mistress of his affections, and the directress
of his actions. In her service, he was to observe the duties of loyalty, faith, secrecy, and
reverence.” Walter Scott also insists on the ideal of the knight: “[g]enerosity, gallantry,
and an unblemished reputation [were] necessary ingredients in the character of a perfect
knight” and he adds later: “[a]mid the various duties of knighthood, that of protecting
the female sex, respecting their persons, and redressing their wrongs, becoming the
champion of their cause, and the chastiser of those by whom they were injured, was
presented as one of the principal objects of the institution.” This quotation actually
strongly recalls the subplot that concerns Ivanhoe and Rebecca in Scott’s romance, as
Ivanhoe clearly abides by those characteristics when he comes to rescue her at the hands
of Brian de Bois-Guilbert and appears as her champion. Indeed, it is via a conversation
between those two characters in which they both discuss chivalry that Scott lays out the
more clearly Ivanhoe’s own views on the subject:

The love of battle is the food upon which we live – the dust of the ‘melee’ is the
breath of our nostrils! We live not – we wish not to live – longer than while we are
victorious and renowned – Such, maiden, are the laws of chivalry to which we are
sworn, and to which we offer all that we hold dear."

"Alas!" said the fair Jewess, "and what is it, valiant knight, save an offering of
sacrifice to a demon of vain glory, and a passing through the fire to Moloch? – What
remains to you as the prize of all the blood you have spilled – of all the travail and
pain you have endured – of all the tears which your deeds have caused, when death
hath broken the strong man’s spear, and overtaken the speed of his war-horse?"

"What remains?" cried Ivanhoe; "Glory, maiden, glory! which gilds our sepulchre
and embalms our name."

"Glory?" continued Rebecca; "alas, is the rusted mail which hangs as a hatchment
over the champion’s dim and mouldering tomb – is the defaced sculpture of the
inscription which the ignorant monk can hardly read to the enquiring pilgrim – are these sufficient rewards for the sacrifice of every kindly affection, for a life spent miserably that ye may make others miserable? Or is there such virtue in the rude rhymes of a wandering bard, that domestic love, kindly affection, peace and happiness, are so wildly bartered, to become the hero of those ballads which vagabond minstrels sing to drunken churls over their evening ale?"

"By the soul of Hereward!" replied the knight impatiently, "thou speakest, maiden, of thou knowest not what. Thou wouldst quench the pure light of chivalry, which alone distinguishes the noble from the base, the gentle knight from the churl and the savage; which rates our life far, far beneath the pitch of our honour; raises us victorious over pain, toil, and suffering, and teaches us to fear no evil but disgrace. Thou art no Christian, Rebecca; and to thee are unknown those high feelings which swell the bosom of a noble maiden when her lover hath done some deed of emprize which sanctions his flame. Chivalry! – why, maiden, she is the nurse of pure and high affection – the stay of the oppressed, the redresser of grievances, the curb of the power of the tyrant—Nobility were but an empty name without her, and liberty finds the best protection in her lance and her sword."

Rebecca here stands well ahead of her time as she questions Ivanhoe’s values and puts into perspective his ideas. Yet, the notions of chivalry Scott’s contemporaries saw in Ivanhoe were those of an idealised Middle Ages replete with romantic artefacts – knights-errant, damsels in distress, code of honour, fortified castles, tournaments, etc. Those were indeed the features that dazzled Scott’s American contemporaries, considering the favourable reception Ivanhoe underwent in the recently independent United States of America. James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving took up Scott’s vision of the English Middle Ages and translated it onto American soil, thus turning their Native Americans into knights of yore and the wilderness into a land of romance.

"Here are no ‘gorgeous palaces and cloud capped towers’": Ivanhoe in America

Ivanhoe was a particular success in America. It is actually relevant to note that the article from the Edinburgh Review from January 1820 with the often quoted sentence from Sidney Smith: “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?” actually follows in the same issue a review of Walter Scott’s novels which tellingly quotes as striking examples of his worth lengthy extracts from Ivanhoe. West of the Atlantic as well, The Port Folio from 1822 – to give but one example among many – also acknowledges the popularity of the book: “we [...] express our unfeigned praise of the extensive research, the playful vivacity, the busy and stirring incidents, the humorous dialogue, and the picturesque delineations, with which ‘Ivanhoe’ abounds.” The novel was also praised for its historical rendering of the period and it is striking to read such articles as “The History of the Jews,” published in The North American Review of January 1831, that should also praise the romance in passing:

The character of the Jews has remained nearly the same to the present day, only varying with the times, not by any wide and decisive change in the prosperity or improvement of the race. But it is needless to dwell upon this period, since it has been set before the public eye in the splendid panorama of Ivanhoe; where we see at a glance the sufferings to which they were exposed, and the fortitude with which they stooped to meet them,—the contempt and hatred with which they were universally regarded, and the power which they contrived to gain notwithstanding,—the low avarice to which they descended, and the traditional enthusiasm inspired...
by the remembrance of their religion and their holy land. In the delightful vision of Rebecca, perhaps the loveliest portrait the imagination ever drew, we see the gentle firmness formed by long exposure to danger, contrasted in Rowena with the superiority of one, who had breathed nothing but the incense of chivalrous adoration; and we fear, that one touch of this celestial pencil has done more for this injured race, than justice and humanity in the last thousand years. It is well for the world, that this supernatural power of genius resides in such a conscientious and honorable hand.26

Ivanhoe went through a series of reeditions and adaptations in America, which were more numerous than those for any other of the Waverley Novels. Such a flourishing of digests was a common thing at the time, and in particular in America where paper was scarce, shorter texts were thus cheaper and circulated more easily through the continent. Abridgements and rewritings flowered as soon as it was published in England. Plays were performed as early as 182027, as well as operas, such as Maid Marian or the Huntress of Arlingford, of which the title page states: “Some of the Incidents taken from the Romance of Ivanhoe.” In the late 1820s, we even note a renewed interest among Philadelphia readers, which was probably due to a rumour that spread at the time that the character of Rebecca was actually modelled upon Rebecca Gratz28, who was also a Jew and a resident of the town for some time as she became one of the founding members of the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society in 1819.

As was hinted at in Twain’s indictment, Ivanhoe was also particularly popular in the South: indeed, although only five of the Waverley Novels were set in the Middle Ages, the South considered Scott as primarily a romancer of chivalry.29 In the 1840s, tournaments were even reproduced, of which a South Carolina newspaper announced that they were copying “closely in dresses and arrangements […] those that Ivanhoe witnessed.”30 The values of chivalry and in particular “personal freedom,” which appears at the top of Walter Scott’s list of values in his Essay on Chivalry, could well appeal to American readers: “the love of personal freedom, and the obligation to maintain and defend it in the persons of others and in their own, was a duty particularly incumbent on those who attained the honour of Chivalry.”31 In Ivanhoe in particular, Cedric and the other Saxons’ appeals to a time “when England was free” (44) could well entice American readers in the decades that followed Independence.

As appealing as it proved to American readers, Ivanhoe was indeed of particular importance to the American book market and, as such, is considered a breakthrough. According to James Green, Ivanhoe marks a turning point in the way books were published in America. Between 1815 and 1819, six novels by the then anonymous “Author of Waverley” appeared, one every year, and each was reprinted two or three times in America32. In 1820, however, Ivanhoe was released and was followed by The Bride of Lammermoor and A Legend of Montrose, and in 1821 The Monastery and The Abbot came out. Each of those was reprinted for a total this time of no less than twenty-six editions. In addition to that, the previous six Waverley Novels were all reprinted again in another twenty editions. As James Green puts it, “the novel that precipitated the tidal wave of 1820 was Ivanhoe.”33 On top of this, Ivanhoe also marks a turning point in the American book market. Before 1820, Scott’s novels were reprinted almost simultaneously by various booksellers in the main towns of the East Coast. With Ivanhoe, however, Mathew Carey, in order to reach out to a wider audience, paid Scottish printers $ 100 to get advance copies of the new Scott novels – Ivanhoe, The Monastery, and The Abbot. In doing so, Carey set a precedent in the sense that he obtained with his payment a de facto copyright on the
novels by Walter Scott. Yet, *Ivanhoe* proved so popular that J. & J. Harper from New York set on to rival the Careys of Philadelphia and reprinted the book despite Carey’s launching of a second edition and *Ivanhoe* can thus be said to have fostered early competition among prominent American booksellers.

Thus considering the general enthusiasm for *Ivanhoe* among American readers and book sellers, Scott’s text could not fail to become food for thought for the American readers, who appropriated the story and hence the values it upheld. It therefore reveals a keen interest in the English Middle Ages, despite the ongoing discourse in the decades that followed the Independence that called for a severing from the shared British past. This idea, prevalent at the time which asked for the creation of a separate history focusing on American matter may explain the wish to transfer the romantic notions of chivalry onto American soil.

“A last foothold left for a remnant of chivalry in the wild life of the Far West”34: The Chivalrous Way of Life of American Indians

As it turned out that Native Americans appeared as fit candidates to represent the American past, the notions of chivalry were projected onto them. Indeed, in the novels that were published in the aftermath of Independence, Native American characters were almost always found to be living an archaic way of life that was fast disappearing in the face of conquering settlers. Most of all, Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper endeavoured to portray those fading customs:

> We here close our picturings of the Rocky Mountains and their wild inhabitants, and of the wild life that prevails there; which we have been anxious to fix on record, because we are aware that this singular state of things is full of mutation, and must soon undergo great changes, if not entirely pass away. The fur trade itself, which has given life to all this portraiture, is essentially evanescent. Rival parties of trappers soon exhaust the streams, especially when competition renders them heedless and wasteful of the beaver. The furbearing animals extinct, a complete change will come over the scene; the gay free trapper and his steed, decked out in wild array, and tinkling with bells and trinketry; the savage war chief, plumed and painted and ever on the prowl; the traders’ cavalcade, winding through defiles or over naked plains, with the stealthy war party lurking on its trail; the buffalo chase, the hunting camp, the mad carouse in the midst of danger, the night attack, the stampede, the scamper, the fierce skirmish among rocks and cliffs—all this romance of savage life, which yet exists among the mountains, will then exist but in frontier story, and seem like the fictions of chivalry or fairy tale.35

It is striking to note that both authors, when dealing with Native Americans, resort to a vocabulary derived from the lexical field of chivalry which had been brought back into fashion by Scott. Both authors were well versed in Walter Scott’s novels: Cooper would read every Scott book that would come out of the packet boats arriving from Liverpool36 and Irving went to Abbotsford in order to visit Scott himself and acknowledges in his journal, *Abbotsford and Newstead Abbey*, “when I consider how much he has thus contributed to the better hours of my past existence, and how independent his works still make me, at times, of all the world for my enjoyment, I bless my stars that cast my lot in his days, to be thus cheered and gladdened by the outpourings of his genius.”37 Thus considering the tremendous popularity of *Ivanhoe* on the one hand and both authors’
acknowledgements of their indebtedness to Walter Scott on the other, it seems fair to assume that they both derive their feudal conception of the Native American way of life from that same source.

This chivalric depiction of the Native American way of life was what Irving's contemporaries actually perceived to be the purpose of his Narratives: an anonymous review of The Rocky Mountains (The Adventures of Captain Bonneville) for the New York Review from October 1837 reads: “He has shown us that here, in these worn-out times of the world, there is a last foothold left for a remnant of chivalry in the wild life of the Far West.” The conclusion of Washington Irving's The Adventures of Captain Bonneville is indeed telling in that respect. The text narrates the expedition of Captain Bonneville across the American continent to the Rocky Mountains and back to reconnoitre both the land and the various Native American tribes that inhabit it, and it tellingly finishes with the words “the savage ‘chivalry of the mountains’” to designate collectively the Native Americans that he had come across during his journey. Here, as in the quotation above mentioned, the comparison is made explicit, and this portrait of Indian life appears as worthy of incorporating tales of chivalry. Indeed, the term chivalry is very often used by Washington Irving to deal with his Native American characters and is repeated over and over again throughout the text: the conclusion of The Adventures of Captain Bonneville echoes its very beginning and the introduction to the expedition:

Having thus given the reader some idea of the actual state of the fur trade in the interior of our vast continent, and made him acquainted with the wild chivalry of the mountains, we will no longer delay the introduction of Captain Bonneville and his band into this field of their enterprise, but launch them at once upon the perilous plains of the Far West.

Not only is the term recurrent in The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, but in the other Western Narratives as well: the Osage camp in A Tour on the Prairies is described as “the wild chivalry of the prairies” and Arickara Indians as they sally out of their village in Astoria are referred to as “the savage chivalry of the village.” In the latter case, the comparison is actually extended as the Indian warriors come back victorious from their feud with the neighbouring Sioux. Hunt, one of the leaders of the expedition, then describes the ensuing celebrations: “[t]he pageant had really something chivalrous in its arrangement” and continues by portraying the various bands of warriors marching into the village with their ensigns, and then moves on to evoking the “rude music” and even “minstrelsy” that accompanies the procession, the presentation of the trophies to the remnant of the tribe, the war feasts, and the heralds promulgating the events of the battle and recounting the exploits of the warriors. This account is strongly reminiscent of chivalrous pageants, and the word “pageant” itself as used by Irving brings to mind medieval undertones from the start.

The associations between Native Americans and medieval customs is common currency in both Cooper's and Irving’s texts. Cooper repeatedly uses “chivalry” and its derivatives to portray his Indian characters: The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish speaks, for instance, of a “chivalrous scalp-lock” and in The Prairie, Cooper speaks of “the high and chivalrous sentiment, which, among the Indians of the Prairies, renders it a deed of even greater merit to bear off the trophy of victory from a fallen foe, than to slay him.” The term “chivalrous” recurs frequently and countless examples could be found in both The Leatherstocking Tales and Irving’s Western Narratives. Irving, for his part, also uses the word “gallant” when referring to some of his Indian heroes. Strikingly, the same word also
appears in Ivanhoe but Scott uses it only to describe certain characters in particular: Ivanhoe, Robin Hood, and for a single occurrence, the army of King Richard during the Crusades. Washington Irving takes up the adjective in The Adventures of Captain Bonneville mostly, in particular when dealing with the Kansas chief White Plume of whom the narrator further evokes “his native chivalry as a brave.” Therefore, the way of life that is delineated here is less medieval than knightly, as Native Americans are compared to aristocratic characters – “gentlemen” of yore. For instance, in the preface to the first edition of The Last of the Mohicans, the Indians are explicitly compared to “feudal princes of the old world.” In Astoria, Irving further develops this association when he portrays the Chinooks. He mentions them twice in the book, describing the tribe as a “royal family” surrounded by a “court,” full of “nobles” and “princes.” Earlier on in the narrative, he even speaks of “liege subjects.” The theme resonates throughout Astoria, as Irving continues to depict his Native American characters as ancient noblemen. In one instance, though, they are turned into the vassals of equally medieval settlers: at the very beginning of Astoria, Irving recalls the history of the North West Company and tells how the French supremacy has been undone by British people. He speaks of the “aristocratical character of the Briton” only to correct himself and change it to “the feudal spirit of the highlander.” He then goes on describing the fur company and how some Indians actually joined it: “Such was the North West Company in its powerful and prosperous days, when it held a kind of feudal sway over a vast domain of lake and forest” and then mentions the practices of “baronial wassailing.” Native Americans are here depicted on an equal footing with ancient Britons in general. Even further into the narrative, Irving describes a council in an Indian village and notes that “[t]he pipe was passed from mouth to mouth each one taking a whiff, which is equivalent to the inviolable pledge of faith of taking salt together among the ancient Britons.”

Eventually, not only are the Native Americans purposefully described as “ancient Britons” but the whole world around them is seen in this light. The Adventures of Captain Bonneville evokes “caparisoned” horses, Cooper describes the Teton’s tent as “emblazoned with the history of his own boldest and most commended exploits,” and then mentions the practices of “baronial wassailing.” Irving elsewhere mentions the “light coat of mail” of some Indians, and Cooper, as Natty Bumppo in The Deerslayer returns to the Indian encampment after his furlough, says that “we shall call [it] the lists.” It is therefore a whole universe of romance that is revealed in those texts. Surprisingly, Natty Bumppo himself words the principle of chivalry explained by Scott in his “Essay on Chivalry” as a blend of military valour and devotion to a lady in a conversation with Jasper Western: “[t]he man that deals unfairly by a woman can be but a mongrel, lad, for the Lord has made them helpless on purpose that we may gain their love by kindness and service (sic).” In this instance, Natty Bumppo endorses the role of knight-servant – just as he is Elizabeth’s “champion” in The Pioneers – and Mabel is turned into a damsel in distress: “The Sarjeant’s (sic) sweet child must be saved,” which is repeated again and again word for word in the whole chapter, along with a variation, “The Sarjeant’s (sic) daughter must be protected.” Similarly, the naming of his weapon by Natty Bumppo strongly recalls the medieval legends and brings the Leatherstocking hero onto an equal footing with the great legendary kings of yore, the King Arthur of the Legend of the Round Table, the Charlemagne of the Song of Roland, etc. The idea of a “code of honour,” as evoked in Astoria – “the code of honor prevalent beyond the frontier” – also belongs to the list of medieval stereotypes brought back into fashion in the 19th century. The whole imagery of the fair wooing of the lady is also summoned in Irving’s Western Narratives, as in The Adventures of Captain Bonneville when
the narrator adds, as an aside, in the substory of a trapper and his Indian wife: “The free trapper, while a bachelor, has no greater pet than his horse; but the moment he takes a wife [is] a sort of brevet rank in matrimony occasionally bestowed upon some Indian fair one, like the heroes of ancient chivalry in the open field.”

Therefore, not only are Native Americans endowed with chivalrous outfit, but the whole world around them is imbued with medieval stereotypes, as though medieval features were transplanted into the American wilderness, thereby turning the New World into a proper land of romance.

“A region fruitful of wonders and adventures: Knight-errantry in “the Forest of Ill Fortune”

Just as Amadis of Gaul stands as the emblem of the knight-errant wandering in the forest from adventure to adventure, the American wilderness and its unlimited woodlands appears as a fit stage for knightly deeds, which seem to be directly transferred onto the American continent. In The Prairie, the Pawnee Hard-Heart and the Teton Mahtoree engage in a duel, which Cooper describes at length. It starts with a volley of arrows from each part, which ends when the quivers are emptied; is followed by a joust on horseback while each warrior is aiming at the other with his “lance” and ends with the dismounting of Hard-Heart, who however reverses the odds and throws a “blade” into Mahtoree’s chest, who staggers back to “the edge of the sands” before dying in the river. The words emphasised here intrinsically recall medieval accounts of champion warfare. In The Pathfinder, it is a whole tournament which is described in chapter XI. Nonetheless, contrary to the duel of heroes in The Prairie, which borrows vocabulary from the medieval romances, the tournament works here as a transposition of medieval stereotypes. Although it is referred to as a “passage of arms” by the commander of the garrison at Oswego, the tournament is actually a shooting tournament, where arrows are replaced by rifles and muskets. To choose the winner between the best marksmen, the tournament is closed by throwing in the air a potato that Mr. Muir and Pathfinder have to shoot:

As the sort of feat we are about to offer to the reader, however, may be new to him, a word in explanation will render the matter more clear. A potato of large size was selected, and given to one who stood at the distance of twenty yards from the stand. At the word "heave!" which was given by the marksman, the vegetable was thrown with a gentle toss into the air, and it was the business of the adventurer to cause a ball to pass through it before it reached the ground.

As underlined by Commander Lundie, it is an actual transposition to the realities of the wilderness that goes on here: “You’re Scotch, Mr. Muir, and might fare better were it a cake or a thistle; but frontier law has declared for the American fruit, and the potato it shall be.” We can see here at work the transposition of a medieval commonplace onto the American wilderness, where the general outline is that of a traditional tournament while the devices are adapted to the modern reality of the New World.

Moreover, from this example, it looks as though the white settlers who live alongside Native Americans share this chivalrous attitude, as though it was the wilderness itself and its atmosphere that were calling for this way of life. For instance, in A Tour on the Prairies, the young count as he associates himself with the young Osage Indian is compared to a “preux chevalier” and his Indian companion is described first as “his esquire” and later as “the young Osage, who was to act as esquire to the Count in his knight-errantry on the
prairies.” Actually, the whole world that Irving describes is marked by this archaic texture. Not only Native Americans but the trappers are similarly endowed with the medieval undertones that push them further into the past. The exact same words that were used to describe Native Americans actually pass onto their white counterparts: just as the Kansas chief was “gallant,” so is the leader of free trappers, “a gallant leader from Arkansas, named Sinclair,” the old squatter that the expedition encounters at the beginning of A Tour on the Prairies is described as a “knight errant of the frontier”; and in Astoria, Irving describes the men of the North West Company as “the chivalry of the Fur trade,” which is taken up in The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, when the narrator says of the mountaineers and trappers of the West that they lead a “wild, Robin Hood kind of life” or in A Tour on the Prairies, where the honey camp of rangers is described as “a wild bandit, Robin Hood scene.”

Both Indian and trappers’ lives therefore appear as fodder for romance plots. Irving makes this point clearly in the introduction to Astoria: “the stories [of the men of the North West Company] made the life of a trapper and fur trader perfect romance to me.” Similarly, The Adventures of Captain Bonneville opens with the list of the names of the heroes of the expedition across the continent, “whose adventures and exploits partake of the wildest spirit of romance.” “Romance” would no doubt call to mind the subtitle of Ivanhoe, just as it would relate to romantic plot, as was common association at the time. In that sense indeed, one can read the “romantic incident of Loretto and his Indian bride,” as it is told further into The Adventures of Captain Bonneville: the young Mexican Indian took a Blackfoot woman as his captive, made her his wife, and gave her a child. However, some time later, he meets a band of Blackfeet among whom stands the brother of the woman, and she is taken back by her people during the fight that ensues. She struggles to go back to her child and, as he hears her cries, Loretto rushes headless of danger through the enemy’s ranks and brings the baby to her. She stays with her people and he later joins her in her own tribe. The story is taken to be romantic in the second sense, but the fact that Loretto’s rash move is described as a “noble deed” may relate it to some chivalrous act on his part. The story of Blackbird in Astoria similarly partakes of the two meanings of romance. Indeed, the narrator says of him that he was the subject of “savage and romantic stories.” The one he chooses to tell is that of a powerful warlord, who “fearless in battle, and fond of signalizing himself, […] dazzled his followers by daring acts,” who gained his beautiful wife in battle – herself referred to as “this beautiful damsel” – and killed her in a fit of temper. Those stories that are introduced within Irving’s more historically grounded narratives give them an undertone of tales, be they folk tales or more novelistic matter. Irving himself recounts, for instance, the story of Kosato in The Adventures of Captain Bonneville and gives it, contrary to the others that are treated as mere anecdotes, the full length of a whole chapter. Kosato is a Blackfoot renegade who fled to live among the Nez Percés with his wife, who was actually his chief’s wife. He killed the chief and they eloped through the woods. As a conclusion to the tale, the narrator notes: “Such was the story of Kosato, as related by him to Captain Bonneville. It is of a kind that often occurs in Indian life; where love elopements from tribe to tribe are as frequent as among the novel-read heroes and heroines of sentimental civilization, and often give rise to bloody and lasting feuds.” Here, the tale is not related to medieval romance but to more contemporary novels. Cooper, on the other hand, has no such inserted romantic stories to tell in the Leatherstocking saga. However, one can trace undertones of a chivalrous romance in the subplot of Chingachgook and Wah-ta!-Wah in The Deerslayer. The story starts with Chingachgook and Hawkeye on their way to rescue
Wah-ta-Wah who has been taken captive at the hands of Mingo Indians. Natty Bumppo
sums up the whole story in a very simple manner:

You must know that Chingachgook is a comely Injin, and is much look’d upon and
admired by the young women of his tribe, both on account of his family and on
account of himself. Now, there is a chief that has a darter (sic) called Wah-ta-Wah,
which is interpreted (sic) into Hist-oh-Hist, in the English tongue, the rarest gal
among the Delawares, and the one most sought a’ter and craved for a wife by all the
young warriors of the nation. Well, Chingachgook, among others, took a fancy to
Wah-ta-Wah, and Wah-ta-Wah took a fancy to him.86

Chingachgook abides by the rules of chivalry: “he is of the family of great chiefs;”89 he
strides the warpath in quest of adventures with his companion – “Chingachgook and his
pale face friend set forth on their hazardous and delicate enterprise”90 – and, as is
summarised by the narrator, “[w]e all love the wonderful, and when it comes attended by
chivalrous self-devotion and a rigid regard to honor, it presents itself to our admiration.”
91 The tale is turned into one of star-crossed lovers when it jumps onto the next
generation in The Last of the Mohicans with Uncas and Cora. Indeed, the plot itself of
The Last of the Mohicans calls for knightly deeds, most of the action revolving around
the rescue of two captive maidens, recalling the subplot of Chingachgook and Wah-ta-Wah in
The Deerslayer, yet on a grander scale: two damsels in distress – Cora and Alice – and two
young heroic rescuers – Uncas and Heyward, where the Indian hero sometimes outdoes
the latter in their chivalric regard for the ladies92. In that volume of the Leatherstocking
series in particular, the tale lapses into legend at the conclusion of the narrative: “Years
passed away before the traditinary tale of the white maiden and the young warrior of
the Mohicans, ceased to beguile the long nights and tedious marches.”93 As the
protagonists lose their name and as the story of the chivalrous Indian and his damsel
becomes a tale told at night, the wilderness is endowed with the legendary depth
Cooper’s and Irving’s contemporaries deemed as lacking from the American territory.

As American authors started using the whole paraphernalia of chivalry that Walter Scott
brought back into fashion, a plethora of associations were brought to the minds of 19th
century American readers, who were for the most part well-read in English literature and
well aware of the contents of the Waverley Novels. Thus recalling medieval romances
might be a device to help the authors to picture more easily for their readers what is
happening in the uncharted world of the Far West, which would then appear to them as a
land deemed for chivalrous feats, a worthy setting for knightly deeds. The primeval
wilderness would be provided in the process with a depth of romantic associations and
the supposed matter-of-fact reality of the New World would give way to the image of a
land of “wide and wild peregrinations, [...] hunting exploits, [...] perilous adventures and
hair-breadth escapes among the Indians.”94

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1837, p 439-440.


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NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 501.
4. It is also considered a breakthrough in the sense that it was the first of Scott’s novel to be printed as an octavo on pricey post paper and in a new smaller type, instead of the duodecimo demy paper of its predecessors. (See on the subject, Jane Millgate, “Making It New: Scott, Constable, Ballantyne, and the Publication of Ivanhoe”, Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, 34-4, 1994, p. 798.)
6. Ibid., p. 12.
8. The popularity has actually been waxing and waning even since the Elizabethan period (Alice Chandler, A Dream of Order, op. cit., p. 2.)
9. Alice Chandler, “Sir Walter Scott and the Medieval Revival,” Nineteenth Century Fiction 19-4, 1965, p. 315. The revival not only takes place in literature but in other fields as well, in particular in architecture and painting with notably Benjamin West’s series, and his portrait of Edward III meeting with the Black Prince at the Battle of Crecy, in which the young knight is surrounded with the whole paraphernalia of chivalry – standards, war-horses, crests and helmets, etc. (Mark Girouard, op. cit., p. 19)
10. Alice Chandler, “Chivalry and Romance: Scott’s Medieval Novels”, Studies in Romanticism 14-2, 1975, p. 188.
19. Ibid., p. 10.
22. Some actually read *Ivanhoe* itself as questioning the values of chivalry. Indeed, the only true “knight-errant” is King Richard himself who is depicted in the book as a rather irresponsible and reckless ruler. On the other hand, Ivanhoe, despite the notions that he vehemently upholds, is a rather poorly knight: he sleeps during the whole main battle and as he turns up as a champion in the lists of Templestowe, appears as a weary knight on a shabby horse: “A champion! a champion!” And despite the prepossessions and prejudices of the multitude, they shouted unanimously as the knight rode into the tiltyard. The second glance, however, served to destroy the hope that his timely arrival had excited. His horse, urged for many miles to its utmost speed, appeared to reel from fatigue, and the rider, however undauntedly he presented himself in the lists, either from weakness, weariness, or both, seemed scarce able to support himself in the saddle.” (*Ivanhoe*, op. cit., p. 390) See on that subject Kenneth M. Sroka, “The Function of Form: *Ivanhoe* as Romance”, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 19-4, 1979.
33. *Ibid*.
51. Ibid., p. 252.
53. Ibid., p. 192.
54. Ibid., p. 193.
55. Ibid., p. 345-346.
61. As Cooper digs further into his youth in The Deerslayer, he foresees for his character that role of a hero: "Such was the commencement of a career in forest exploits, that afterwards rendered this man, in his way, and under the limits of his habits and opportunities, as renowned as many a hero whose name has adorned the pages of works more celebrated than legends simple as ours can ever become." (James Fenimore Cooper, The Deerslayer, op. cit., p. 593).
64. Ibid., p. 74.
66. Here again, the cult of the horse among all Indian tribes that are introduced in both Cooper’s and Irving’s narratives strongly recalls the popular stereotypes usually linked with the images of chivalry.
72. Ibid., p. 169.
73. Ibid.
74. Washington Irving, A Tour on the Prairies, op. cit., p. 32.
75. Ibid., p. 36.
83. Ibid., p. 707.
84. Ibid.
86. In that sense, as a ruler, he strongly recalls the Richard of Ivanhoe, all the more so since he started out in the same way: “His career had begun by hardships, having been taken prisoner by the Sioux, in early youth. Under his command, the Omahas obtained great character for military prowess, nor did he permit an insult or an injury to one of his tribe to pass unreavenged”, Ibid., p. 312.
89. Ibid., p. 612.
90. Ibid., p. 754.
91. Ibid., p. 946.

RÉSUMÉS


“This Rude Chivalry of the Wilderness”: Chivalry and Native Americans in Cooper’s New World

In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?” This oft-quoted sentence actually comes from a review written by Sidney Smith in January 1820 for the *Edinburgh Review* of Adam Seybert’s book, *Statistical Annals of the United States of America*. Yet this text also follows, in the same issue, an article reviewing the whole of Scott’s texts that had been so far published and which quotes lengthy excerpts from the latest romance, *Ivanhoe*. This book in particular, which takes medieval England as its background, was probably one of the most widely read of the *Waverley Novels* in America. The enthusiasm of the American readership in the early decades of the 19th century seems to reveal a general attraction for the European Middle Ages. Indeed, Scott’s American contemporaries resort to the medieval apparatus that was brought back into fashion by *Ivanhoe* – stereotypes of knight-errantry, damsels in distress, code of honour, etc. – to describe the Native Americans that people their narratives. Both Cooper – the “American Scott” – and Washington Irving thus transplant medieval features onto the wilderness, thereby presenting the New World as a land calling for chivalric feats, paradoxically endowing that supposed pristine landscape with a general atmosphere of romance.
INDEX

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Mots-clés : Amérindiens, chevalerie, États-Unis-d’Amérique, réception, sauvagerie


Keywords : Native American, United States of America, reception, wilderness

indexmodernes Cooper (James Fenimore), Henry (Robert), Irving (Washington), Johnes (Thomas), Mills (Charles), Percy (Thomas), Russell (William), Scott (Walter), Smith (Sidney), Southey (Robert), Strutt (Joseph), Stuart (Gilbert), Turner (Sharon), Twain (Mark)

Parole chiave : nativo americano, Stati Uniti d’America, ricezione, selvatichezza

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