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Chivalry: Dead or Alive?

By Max Mintz, 16, Staff Writer

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Is chivalry dead? If not, should it be? I've been thinking a lot about this question recently. But let me start at the beginning.

I was raised an ardent feminist, with a deep respect for equal rights between women and men. So, to me, actions that most people consider chivalrous are just polite: holding doors open, being courteous, slaying dragons...little stuff like that.

After we get past the small stuff, I start running into problems. As I said before, I believe that women have more rights than a doormat. So when I see heterosexual teens following a dating code that says that guys must be the ones to ask girls out, and that guys must meet the girls' parents and be approved, I see drastic inequalities between men and women in relationships.

It's not right for women to be powerless in starting relationships—look at it; it sets the wrong tone from the start.

Let's consider where this kind of thing can lead us. We've got the guy being the one who's supposed to take charge in the relationship, so shouldn't it follow logically for him to take charge in other parts of the relationship as well? I'm sure you can see where I'm going with this. It can end up with guys not respecting girls' role in the relationship, or, as we see more often, guys pressuring girls into having sex when they're not ready.

Courtly Love

But there's more to chivalry than just holding doors open and following dating codes. To get a different perspective on it, I went to back to the 12th century to

The Art of Courtly Love, by Andreas Capellanus, the original work on the subject.

Capellanus lays out 31 rules for chivalry in romance. I find his rules still relevant (for the most part). Here are ones that apply:

- Being obedient in all things to the commands of ladies, thou shalt ever strive to ally thyself to the service of Love.
- In giving and receiving love's solaces, let modesty be ever present.
- Thou shalt be in all things polite and courteous.
- In practicing the solaces of love thou shalt not exceed the desires of thy lover.

Now, once we get past the somewhat confusing Elizabethan English, we can see that the rules of chivalry are really about respect. That's great! That is just what I was looking for. So, the chivalry of the past wasn't about putting women down, it was about raising them to new heights.

But wait a minute: Isn't that just as dangerous? On the surface this vision of chivalry looks much better. But really, what's going on is that men are idealizing women. Plus, men still have the responsibility of starting the relationship. So, we still don't have equality going on here.

True Equality

In effect, the rules of chivalry are about protecting women's honor. That doesn't seem right to me. In principle, these rules are all right, but they are incomplete. By leaving out the rights and responsibilities of the woman, they are creating the same type of problem we had when we first looked at the modern version of chivalry: Women are still not treated equally.

But there's something to be said for ancient chivalry. The rules do try to prevent abusive relationships.

All about Respect

So, is chivalry dead, or should it be? I don't think so, but we do need to think about the difference between being courteous to our partner in a respectful way—holding doors open, being polite, etc.—and treating him or her like a piece of property.

We have to use the respectful parts of chivalry to treat the ones we love like equals. Because when we start treating each other like property, we lose something precious.

When you're truly being chivalrous or courteous, you're really just expressing your love for someone else. And love is all about communication—sharing what you need and expect from your partner, and learning what makes your partner happy.

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