

ROSS THE CUSTOM OF THE CASTLE

The Custom of the Castle

From Malory to Macbeth

Charles Ross



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The Custom of the Castle

For Clare

ULPIAN, *Duties of Proconsul*, book 4: When it appears that somebody is relying upon a custom either of a *civitas* or of a province, the very first issue which ought to be explored, according to my opinion, is whether the custom has ever been upheld in contentious proceedings.

HERMOGENIAN, *Epitome of Law*, book 1: But we also keep to those rules which have been sanctioned by long custom and observed over very many years; we keep to them as being a tacit agreement of the citizen, no less than we keep to written rules of law.

Justinian¹

Then Sir Tristram and Sir Dinadan rode forth their way till they came to the shepherds and to the herdmen, and there they asked them if they knew any lodging or harbour there nigh hand.

“Forsooth, sirs,” said the herdmen, “hereby is a good lodging in a castle; but there is such a custom that there shall no knight be harboured but if he joust with two knights, and if he be but one knight he must joust with two. . . . [I]f ye beat them ye shall be well harboured.” “Ah,” said Sir Dinadan, “they are two sure knights.” . . . And to make a short tale, Sir Tristram and Sir Dinadan smote them both down, and so they entered into the castle and had good cheer as they could think or devise. And when they were unarmed, and thought to be merry and in good rest, there came in at the gates Sir Palomides and Sir Gaheris, requiring to have the custom of the castle. “What array is this?” said Sir Dinadan. “I would have my rest.” “That may not be,” said Sir Tristram. “Now must we needs defend the custom of this castle.”

Thomas Malory²

We may never know how much of our sense of history is due to the presence in Europe of systems of customary law, and to the idealizations of the concept of custom which took place towards the end of the sixteenth century. To it our awareness of process in history is largely owing.

J. G. A. Pocock³

ABBREVIATIONS

- Curtis *The Romance of Tristan*. Trans. Renée Curtis. World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- FQ Edmund Spenser. *The Faerie Queene*. Ed. A. C. Hamilton. New York: Longmans, 1977.
- Grail *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. Trans. Pauline Matarasso. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.
- L *Lancelot: Roman en prose du XIIIe siècle*. Ed. Alexandre Micha. 9 vols. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1978-83.
- L2 *Lancelot do Lac: The Non-Cyclic Old French Prose Romance*. Ed. Elspeth Kennedy. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980.
- MD Thomas Malory. *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Ed. Janet Cowen. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.
- OF Ludovico Ariosto. *Orlando Furioso. Opere*. Ed. Adriano Seroni. Milan: Mursia, 1970.
- OI Matteo Maria Boiardo. *Orlando Innamorato*. Trans. with Introduction and Notes by Charles Stanley Ross. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

- Perceval* Chrétien de Troyes. *Le Roman de Perceval ou le conte du graal*. Ed. William Roach. Geneva: Droz, 1959.
- T* *Le Roman de Tristan*. Ed. Renée Curtis. 3 vols. 1963, 1976; Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985.
- T₂* *Le Roman de Tristan en prose*. Ed. Philippe Ménard. 6 vols. Geneva: Droz, 1990.
- Y* Chrétien de Troyes. *Yvain. Le Chevalier au lion*. Ed. Mario Roques. Paris: Champion, 1971.
- Vinaver *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*. Ed. Eugène Vinaver. 2d ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Unless otherwise noted, all Shakespeare references are to the *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

I usually cite from the modern version of Malory for the convenience of the reader, but I retain Caxton's spelling of the title *Morte Darthur*. The forms Tristan, Iseut, Brunor, and Galehaut refer to the French texts. The forms Tristram, Isode, Breunor, and Galahalt refer to Malory's work in English. I use the spelling Guenevere throughout. Translations are my own, except where noted.

PREFACE

Renaissance romances often include seemingly fantastic stories about castles that impose strange, mostly evil customs on traveling knights and ladies. Conceived by Chrétien de Troyes in the twelfth century and widely imitated in medieval French romance, the “custom of the castle” flowered again when Italian and English authors, during the century before Shakespeare’s plays and the rise of the novel, adopted this well-known motif to serve serious social purposes.

Where previous studies have dismissed the convention or conceived it as no more than a heroic test or a common expression of an ideology of court, this study uses the changing legal and cultural conceptions of custom in France, Italy, and England to uncover a broader array of moral issues. The book concentrates on single scenes, common to a series of epics, in order to show how nuanced narratives explore the social limits of order, violence, justice, civility, and political conformity in Renaissance masterpieces by Sir Thomas Malory, Matteo Maria Boiardo, Ludovico Ariosto, and Edmund Spenser. The book demonstrates, for the first time, the impact on Shakespeare’s plays, particularly *Macbeth*, of an earlier way of thinking about the strengths and weaknesses of social customs.

Chivalric romances may be regarded from two perspectives, that of the individual and that of society. Some romances seem no more than a

series of adventures that test the prowess of individual knights. Yet knights also uphold standards and values, often those associated with King Arthur's court. They take on a social role, especially when their superior strength seems to predetermine their success.

The standards they represent bear scrutiny, as do all social values. The custom of the castle topos serves this purpose by providing a narrative means of thinking about society. One of the things narrative can organize for our perception is the moral problem created when the standards of one society or group clash with the customs of others. A story raises concerns analogous to those of jurisprudence, which asks, What is the origin and function of a law or custom? How do we recognize good laws? What are the biases and values that dwell within them? What are the duties and responsibilities of those who maintain the institutions that support them? Jurisprudence recognizes that justice is a value that depends on a social order and its goals.

Later romances redeployed Chrétien's latent social allegory of the mysterious power of custom. They did so in ways that reflect changing conceptions of the law. Boiardo and Ariosto use the topos to talk about the politics of power; Spenser uses it to start each legend of *The Faerie Queene* that concerns a social virtue; and Shakespeare inherited this long tradition of imagery. The chapter on Malory's Weeping Castle reveals how a foul custom and its endurance reinforces the moral authority of the past. Malory's *Morte Darthur* (1485) smooths the rupture between the Platonic narrative form of romance and that increasing awareness of social identity that Shakespeare will later explore in his dramas: the struggle for orientation, in a world of love and death, against the effects of the past and the moral weight of social convention.

The Italian poet Boiardo, a near-contemporary of Malory, guides readers to question the adequacy of their moral response to violence. The Castle Cruel episode of his *Orlando Innamorato* (Orlando in Love, 1482, 1495) tells how the knight Rinaldo is caught up in a system of ritual sacrifice presided over by a deranged woman who justifies her conduct by telling a gruesome tale of adultery and revenge. The result is a

humanist reading of the power of local customs, an allegory designed to give one pause in accepting two social features that most trouble anthropologists who attempt to justify the behavior of others: the sacrifice of innocents and the deliberate infliction of pain.

Even more than Boiardo, Ariosto made the instability of the moral imagination the main theme of another variation on the custom of the castle topos. As a young man, Ariosto spent five years studying civil law before he abandoned it in favor of poetry. In the wake of the sack of Rome in 1527, Italy's greatest Renaissance poet enlarged the final edition of his masterpiece, *Orlando Furioso* (1532), by adding two versions of the custom of the castle. The female warrior Bradamante cannot enter the Tower of Tristan, the first of these additions, until she meets the custom of jousting designed to promote a certain social order. As in the later Marganorre episode, Ariosto uses gender bias to exemplify problems of social inflexibility.

To trace the custom of the castle topos from Chrétien to Spenser is to see that the problem of the "vile custom" poses a certain moral dilemma in a way that begins as a conflict between individual desire and the community. By the time of *The Faerie Queene* this dilemma has been broadened into a conflict between a vision of a civil society and the inability of any community to sustain that vision. The continued strength of the form depends on the power of customs to represent the constraints of institutions as well as the distant past. Well versed in medieval romance, including the *Morte Darthur*, and a close student of Ariosto's *Furioso*, Spenser frequently adopted the narrative convention of the custom of the castle. Overlooked by previous critics, the topos serves as a model of moral uncertainty. Spenser's legend of courtesy, Book VI of *The Faerie Queene* (1596), makes the point that courtesy is characterized by imprecision and vagueness. Sir Calidor therefore properly enters a world of romance, pastoral woodlands, and pirates, whose surface hides practical reasoning. Moreover, a general understanding of courtesy sheds light on Spenser's experience in Ireland.

A similar problem of moral bewilderment occurs in Shakespeare's

plays. Although the setting of *Hamlet* (ca. 1601) is not recognizably that of epic romance, the moral problem of following prescribed custom is comparable to those examples of the custom of the castle where the power of local tradition depends not just on a veneration for the past but a genuine fear of offending the ghosts of one's ancestors, a fear whose grip on human activity is as powerful as vanity, sex, and hunger. If *Hamlet* questions the forms of activity suitable to civil society, *Macbeth* (ca. 1604) suggests the need to forget the horrors of the past in order to formulate a strong social future. The haunting death of his wife makes Macbeth realize that the only way to end his own foul custom is to abandon his castle at Dunsinane: his demise derives from his best qualities, bravery and insight, in a properly tragic fashion.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, castles were relics of the past. Those Don Quixote entered were really country inns. Spenser's castle at Kilcolman had been burned in 1596 during a local insurrection. I have used a nineteenth-century sketch of its ruins as a frontispiece for this volume that reconstructs the sense of an image that once flourished.

A version of chapter 2 appeared previously, as "Malory's Weeping Castle" (*Chaucer Yearbook*, 2 [1995]: 95-116); chapter 3, as "Justifying Violence: Boiardo's Castle Cruel" (*Philological Quarterly* [1994]: 31-51); and chapter 4, as "Ariosto's Fable of Power: Bradamante at the Rocca di Tristano" (*Italica* 68 [1991]: 19-39).

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Some may be interested to know that my connection with the works studied in this book is personal, not ancestral. Or that I was teaching *Hamlet*, a remarkably consoling play, when my father died. He was a selfless and generous person. He paid for me, as my mother prays for me, and would have approved of my giving the last word to Slaney and Sam.

In memoriam: Ira Stanley Ross (1914-1981).

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PART ONE

The French Model