

SCORING MASCULINITY: THE ENGLISH TOURNAMENT AND THE JOUSTING CHEQUES OF THE EARLY SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Emma Levitt
University of Huddersfield

Recent work on knighthood contends that chivalry remains an elusive term, which could and did mean different things to different people at different times. Craig Taylor has most recently argued that there is a modern temptation to simplify the chivalric ethos into a simple coherent code and brush over the complexity and even contradictions of the ideal.¹ However, within the setting of tournaments I would contend that knighthood was defined by a concise and coherent set of rules that informed a definite scoring system, and thus, within this context, both chivalry and manhood, can be precisely computed. I will highlight the role of the score cheque as a unique source that was used to record the scores of each of the knights that took part, in order to show how contemporaries assessed and quantified chivalrous activity.

In a culture that favoured knightly deeds over genealogical inheritance as an estimation of an individual's manhood, the joust was a vital way in which chivalry could be effectively and publicly measured. It is often argued that sixteenth century England gave rise to a new type of courtier: the professional man whose expertise was found in the practice of law rather than in that of arms. Yet the career of one leading courtier of Henry VIII's reign, Charles Brandon, the duke of Suffolk, demonstrates that chivalry remained both a key element of the ethos of manhood in the early sixteenth century and also a vital means of socio-political advancement. Having studied the score cheques for the reign of Henry VIII in detail, Brandon stands out as having dominated the lists. Brandon's career proves that men who were not born for high office could achieve high status manhood in this period.

Tournaments were central to the world of chivalry as training grounds for knights in the achievement of prowess, honour and renown. The joust was fought between two individuals, the knights riding from opposite ends of the lists to encounter each other with lances. The joust became a more formalised competition as rules were introduced, including score cheques and prizes. John Tiptoft, earl of Worcester, had formulated the rules by which a knight's performance was to be assessed in 1466 at the request of King Edward IV.

In the 1460s there was a major revival of the tournament under the kingship of Edward IV, with the joust becoming a regular court activity for the first time since the reign of Richard II. Tiptoft's ordinances make it clear that the correct way to assess a joust and therefore a knight's performance was to count the number of lances, or spears, he managed to break on his opponent. There are several copies of

¹ Craig Taylor, *Chivalry and the Ideals of Knighthood in France during the Hundred Years War* (Cambridge, 2013) p.6.

Tiptoft's rules surviving.² From the frequency with which heralds copied out the rules formulated by Tiptoft in 1466, it is possible to deduce that they set the general pattern for tournaments held in England for over a century.

Score cheques are the only class of record specifically created by the tournament in England. The scores were marked in strokes by a king of arms, on a scoring tablet, termed a cheque. The scoring board itself was in the form of a parallelogram; with three horizontal lines with the middle line showing the number of courses run (usually between two and eight). The attainments were noted on the top line and they were often differentiated as hits on the body or head, which had a different value in the table. The middle line inside the parallelogram represented the number of lances broken and the bottom line recorded any faults or points disallowed.³ There are only half a dozen score cheques that survive from the reign of Henry VIII held in the College of Arms.⁴ Only a few scholars such as Charles Ffoulkes and Sydney Anglo have written much about the cheques, but they offer a purely technical interpretation of the results.⁵ Steve Gunn suggested that the jousting cheques could help to shed further light on the courtiers at Henry VII's court, although he has not employed them in this way himself.⁶ I approach the score cheques as a measure not just of technical skill, but also of masculinity because the scores can tell us much about the correlation between the men who displayed expertise in the tiltyard and those who achieved high status manhood in the political sphere.

Our sense of knighthood and chivalry and how it was judged is generally rather abstract, but the score cheques reveal that there was a clearly quantifiable dimension. We can set the score cheques alongside narrative sources such as Hall's chronicle to gain a more developed sense of how contemporaries perceived and measured knighthood and manhood in this context. Hall's chronicle (1542) constitutes an eyewitness account for the reign of Henry VIII and includes accounts of a number of tournaments.⁷ For example Hall regularly provides a lively description of Brandon's performances in the tournament:

'The noble duke of Suffolke charged his course met right valiantly hys counter parte

² There are two copies preserved in the College of Arms MS. M.6, and MS. L.5 bis. Another two editions are found in the British Library. A fifteenth century copy is found in Harley MS. 2358, whilst a sixteenth century copy is found in Add MS. 46354 and an early seventeenth century copy in Add MS. 33735.

³ It occurs, for example, twice in the cheque for Feb. 13th 1511, but is not found in the other Henrician cheques at the College.

⁴ College of Arms collection formerly in Box 37: now in a portfolio holds score cheques for the reign of Henry VIII.

⁵ Charles Ffoulkes, '[Jousting Cheques of the Sixteenth Century](#)', *Archaeologia Journal*, 63 (1912) pp. 34-39, Sydney Anglo, 'Archives of the English Tournament: Score Cheques and Lists', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, II (1962) pp.153-162.

⁶ Steve Gunn, 'Tournaments and Early Tudor Chivalry', *History Today*, 41, 6 (1991) pp.15-21.

⁷ Edward Hall, *Hall's chronicle: containing the history of England, during the reign of Henry the Fourth, and the succeeding monarchs, to the end of the reign of Henry the Eighth, in which are particularly described the manners and customs of those periods* (London, 1809) p.511.

and furnished the .v. courses right nobly together like good men of armes.’⁸

It is particularly important to get a sense of how those participating in tournaments judged each other. It was the men who followed the rules, achieved high scores, and beat their opponents that justly gained the chivalric reputation, which in turn advanced their status. By taking a gendered approach and using score cheques as evidence of his astonishing achievements in the tiltyard, I aim to shed additional light on one revealing episode.

In May 1516, jousts of honour were held at Greenwich to celebrate the visit of Henry’s sister Margaret Queen of Scots. This was an elaborate spectacle that involved two days of jousts in which Henry, Brandon, Henry Bouchier earl of Essex and Sir Nicholas Carewe were the challengers.⁹ On the other side the answerers were Sir William Kingston, Henry Pole, Sir Edward Neville and Sir Giles Capell amongst others. There are two separate versions of scoring cheques for this event, which show very different results.¹⁰ The cheque held in the Heralds College supports Hall’s claims that Henry managed to unhorse Sir William Kingston, an older knight already aged forty when he competed against the King.¹¹ A jousting cheque found in the Harley MS. 69 does not support Hall’s account that Henry beat Kingston; it shows that Henry did not actually tilt against Kingston, on that day, let alone unhorse him. Perhaps Hall confused this joust with another, but it has the result of showing Henry as victor. Consequently in examining the two different score cheques together, it suggests that there is a possible alternative to the established narrative of Henry’s victory.

This brief discussion gives some idea of how a source overlooked in the past as a merely technical report can be used to further our understanding of the practise and ethos of chivalric manhood in the early sixteenth century. By comparing the surviving score cheques with contemporary chronicles we have a means of gauging not only who took part, but exactly what they had to accomplish in order to succeed. This approach also sheds further light on how the participants judged both themselves and their competitors in tangible terms. An important aspect of masculinity was sporting competition, which was central to demonstrating prowess and martial skill and establishing a hierarchy of manly achievement, made evident through the score cheques.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5920/pph.2014.1153>

Article copyright: © 2014 Emma Levitt. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



⁸ Hall, p.586.

⁹ LP II. 1893.

¹⁰ CA, SC 19 May 1516 ‘Justs at Grenewyche’ and Harley MS. 69, f.16b ‘Juste at Greenwich’.

¹¹ Hall, p.585.