

Chasing the Seven Knightly Virtues

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Modern reenactors of medieval history, and even medieval historians, are enamored with the idea of the Seven Knightly Virtues, a list of ideal traits that knights, in any age, should aspire to. There is broad agreement about several of the virtues, such as Prowess and Courage. However, if you ask three knights of the Modern Middle Ages to list the seven virtues, you are likely to hear five different lists. A cursory search through my meager library showed that there seems to be similarly little consensus on what the knights of old thought on the matter. Direct sources, including Geoffrey de Charny and Chretien de Troy, give us very few distinct lists of the virtues suited to knighthood; if they speak of virtues at all it is most often to highlight a particular trait, or set of traits, in a protagonist. Why, then, does the idea of Seven Knightly Virtues, as a whole and intentional list, continue to persist in popularity? The choice of seven virtues is evocative of the seven deadly sins and their lesser known seven virtues, which has been a formal list in the Catholic tradition since Pope Gregory I in the sixth century, but convenient numerology does not grant relevance. I took it upon myself to trace the virtues as far into the past as could be done. What I found was that there *are* Seven Virtues that can be traced, cleanly, into antiquity which were adopted, at least to some degree, by the chivalric culture of the west. The virtues in themselves do not, however, pertain particularly to knights or knightly endeavors.

Modern Lists									
Chiv Today	Courage	Justice	Mercy	Generosity	Faith	Nobility	Hope		
Vitus	Courage	Justice	Mercy	Generosity	Loyalty (Faith)	Nobility	Hope		
Garick	Courage		Mercy	Generosity	Faith	Franchise (Nobility)	Hope	Prowess	Loyalty

There are many modern lists of chivalric virtues; in the online resources of my own kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, it is mentioned that “the Seven Knightly Virtues are much written about and there is no single authoritative list of them.” The page goes on to list seventeen virtues that pertain to knighthood. Scott Farrell on his popular website, *Chiv Today*, lists the seven virtues as Courage, Justice, Mercy, Generosity, Faith, Nobility and Hope; though he does not ascribe a source for these selections. My own knight, the great warrior-poet Sir Vitus von Atzinger, in his self-published work *Seven Virtues*,

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chooses Courage, Justice, Mercy, Generosity, Hope, Nobility, and Loyalty. These two lists are, in effect, identical as Sir Vitus claims that “Loyalty is our Faith”. John Chamberlain, Count Sir Garick von Kopke, in his essay *Of the Vertues that Apperteyne to Chyvalry* speaks of eight chivalric virtues: Prowess, Courage, Honesty, Loyalty, Generosity, Faith, Courtesy and Franchise, which he refers to as “consistent Nobility” or “Noble Bearing”. Clearly these lists are closely related, with the substitution of Hope for Honesty and the addition of Prowess being the only notable divergence between the first two and the last. The most exciting difference, for our purposes, is that the good Sir Garick cited his source! He is taking his cues from *Libre del Orde de Cauayleria* (The Book of the Order of Chivalry), by Raymon Lull and *Le Ordene de Chevalrie* (The Ordination of Knighthood), by an anonymous French poet. The anonymous work is essentially a primer for the dubbing ceremony and as such, while it implies idealized traits such as willingness to sacrifice and a close connection to Christian customs, it does not prescribe a list of virtues per se. Raymon Lull is not as subtle.

Raymon Lull is known by several names: Raymon, Raymund, Raymundus, Ramon, as well as, Lull, Lul, Lull and Lully. His father was in the military in what is now Spain and he was likely born into the lower rungs of the nobility there. He wrote and published works on horsemanship and warfare; if he was not knighted, in fact, one can assume he was still quite familiar with the chivalric culture of his time. In 1263 he had a series of mystical visions which led him to abandon his former life and devote his time to spreading Christianity as an apologist and missionary. Sometime around 1280, well after his religious epiphany, Lull wrote *The Book of the Order of Chivalry*. It is a short work for him and modern Lull scholars hardly mention it, when commenting on his prolific writings. It is difficult to tell how popular the work was in Lull’s own time, but by the 15th century it appears on the required reading list for the warrior classes. Maurice Keen, in his seminal book, *Chivalry*, notes that even the lower rungs of chivalric nobility likely had some learning, to better fit into the courtly circles that were their lifeline. He also states that intellectual knights of the time, such as Geoffrey de Charny and others, drew heavily on Lull. While not every soldier or knight would own a copy of the book, most would have been familiar with its content. Lull’s objective with this work was to provide a literary guide for those on the path to knighthood. He laments that the religious orders have schools and books to draw on, but that the



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chivalry are lacking such clear and consistent direction. To remedy the inconsistency of instruction, he provides advice on how to train, how to act around nobility, and the essential duties of a knight. In a chapter titled "The Virtues and Good Habits of a Knight" he provides us with this gem:

Every Knight ought to know the seven virtues which are the source and root of all good habits and are the path to everlasting heavenly glory. Of these seven virtues, three are called "theological" or "divine" while the remaining four are "cardinal."

He gives the three theological virtues as Faith, Hope, and Charity and the cardinal virtues as Justice, Prudence, Temperance, and Fortitude. We again see that there is much overlap in Lull's list with the more modern ones. As we can equate Generosity and Charity we have the "theological virtues" mirrored with decent fidelity in the modern lists. In his description of Fortitude, Lull uses the terms Courage and Fortitude interchangeably which makes his list all but identical to the modern ones. At the end of his section on the virtues Lull states that "Courtesy... Loyalty, Truth, Hardiness, Generosity, Decency, Humility, Mercy and other similar virtues are also essential to chivalry". Clearly Lull himself would not limit "Knightly Virtue" to just seven traits. This rhetorical turn lies in this not being an original list. Lull's primary seven virtues are borrowed from Thomas Aquinas' masterwork *Summa Theologica* and translated into chivalric terms to fit his purpose and his intended audience.

Thomas Aquinas was a 13th century theologian and philosopher who was sainted for his teachings. His master work was the *Summa Theologica* which was a massive compilation of church teachings and an attempt to consolidate Christian theology with philosophical reasoning. The work is broken into questions and articles. The section that pertains to our discussion is found in the *First Part of the Second Part*, in the Treatise on Virtues, Questions 61 and 62. In the second article of question 61 Aquinas names the four Cardinal Virtues as: Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude. He claims that Prudence is the clearest expression of Virtue and that the other three are related with how to deal with the common challenges of life; Justice for making changes in the world, Temperance for avoiding untoward passions, and Fortitude for not giving into the kinds of passions that would keep one from doing good, such as fear of pain or toil. To these he adds three Theological Virtues: Faith, Hope and Charity. These he pulls directly from scripture and defines them in theological terms that are not relevant to our current discussion. So here we see the perfect mirror of Lull's Seven Virtues and a clear causal chain. However, we can go further still! Aquinas himself borrowed his four Cardinal Virtues from a much older source, Plato and his student Aristotle; the very founders of virtue ethics.

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Tracing virtue as a philosophical topic in western culture, back to its very beginnings, you find stories of Socrates written by his star pupil, Plato. While there is discussion around how much of Plato's work is regurgitation of Socrates and how much is original, he is widely considered to be the founder of Western philosophy. In his best-known work, *The Republic*, Plato examines what an ideal city-state would look like. In book four of the work, he examines the four virtues a city-state should have and then posits that a virtuous man would share the same traits. His four are, Wisdom, Courage, Temperance, and Justice. The only slight difference from Aquinas' list, barring the Courage/Fortitude synonym, is the substitution of Prudence for Wisdom. This could be an issue of translation and word choice, but there is evidence it was an intentional change. Plato's philosophical successor was Aristotle, who wrote extensively on the virtues; if Plato is the father of Western philosophy then Aristotle is the father of virtue ethics proper. Aristotle developed a much more nuanced discussion of the virtues in his works than Plato had. Throughout his most renowned work on ethics, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle uses the term Prudence rather than Wisdom to discuss similar ideas. While Aristotle does not ascribe to a strict number of virtues, like Aquinas does, it is clear that Aquinas is more influenced by Aristotle than Plato. Aquinas refers to Aristotle in his work as "the philosopher" and cites his book of ethics for both of the Questions, 61 and 62, mentioned above. Here we see the end of the chain of the Seven Knightly Virtues: Plato, through Aristotle, to Aquinas, and then Lull, and finally to the wider chivalric audience.



Virtues Displayed on Garment

Given the pagan and theological origins of the Seven Knightly Virtues it is fair to say they are less "Knightly Virtues" than they are universal to all people of every station. The concept that there are particular virtues that a perfect knight should possess is as old as the concept of knighthood itself. My hope is that when squires are asked to recite the Seven Virtues, when knights are adorning their regalia and when speeches on chivalry are written, those of us who walk the path of knighthood will understand a little better that any such list is abstracted, abbreviated and subjective. Perhaps the lists should be personally meaningful; made up of those virtues we hold most dear or those we find the hardest to follow. It would do us well to remember that even the most knightly proponent of the Seven Virtues, Lull himself, could not make a definitive list!

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Virtues Displayed on Tourney Lists

Pictures provided by Dame Marissa von Atzinger

Aquinas picture found in wikicommons, in the public domain

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