



the Joust

"If I could win a lady...by vaulting into my saddle with my armor on my back."

—Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Act V, Scene 2

THE EXCITEMENT OF THE JOUST REACHES ACROSS THE CENTURIES TO FORCIBLY ENGAGE EVEN OUR MODERN IMAGINATIONS. The blare of the trumpet, the thundering hooves, and the clash of metal and muscle and bone, the glint of sunlight on steel...A joust has all the excitement and action of any competitive sport, where an athlete pits his own skill and prowess against that of his opponent, and it has more. The Tournament's romance, spectacle, chivalry, its ritual and pageantry speak to a deep part of us, for we know that these jousters battle not for personal gain or fame but for truth, justice, honor—the chivalric ideal. They fight for what they feel is right—prepared to die on the field defending an idea. Although in its later years jousting became more or less restricted to sport on the tournament field, we should remember that it began, and for many years continued, as trial by combat.

Trial by combat was certainly common in many early cultures, but the first recorded reference to the custom is the declaration of the Burgundian King Gundebald in 501 A.D.: "Wherever two Burgundians are at variance...it shall be lawful for them to decide the issue by dint of sword;" the idea being that, since God would naturally fight on the side of Truth, whoever lost such a contest must be the liar, or at fault.

Many kings followed Gundebald's example, and the Tryel by Battel became a legal institution throughout Europe. In most countries an elaborate ritual developed, varying in detail from country to country, but basically similar in format:

The Accuser or Challenger would appear with the Defender at the appointed time and place before the King or local Authority, and each would state their case, proclaiming their willingness to defend their relative positions *by dint of sword*. The Authority would signal assent, and the two would fight, either to the death or until one *asked quarter* or *yielded*.

Throughout the Middle Ages, those of higher rank who fought in the trial by combat increasingly fought on horseback. With the ascendancy of the Lance in the early 14th century, the Joust as we know it was born.

By the 15th century, tournament jousting as a sport had become an accepted part of life, and special suits of armor, called Tilting or Tournament Armor, were constructed to minimize possible injury to the combatants. This is the armor most people visualize a "knight in armor" wearing: those lobster-shells of heavy metal plates, some of which would leave a fallen knight helpless to get up again, like a turtle on its back.

A full suit of tournament armor might weigh over a hundred pounds, with another hundred pounds or so of Barding, or horse armor. Armor for serious battle, rather than sport, tended to be much lighter—fifty to eighty pounds.

not significantly heavier than a modern soldier's full field kit. A knight in War Harness could, in fact, be quite nimble. Froissart gives an account of Sir John Assueton leaping fully armed into the saddle, and there are other accounts of similar feats.

Both the tournament for sport and the trial by combat were governed by a rigid set of rules and regulations, the Code of Chivalry. This Code set forth both the ceremonial forms of such engagements and a standard of behavior for those who would be knighted and fight in the lists. Beside skill at arms, the candidate had to display:

- ♦ Willingness to defend the Church
- ♦ Respect for the weak, and defense of them
- ♦ Love of country
- ♦ Refusal to retreat before the enemy
- ♦ Strict obedience to the feudal lord
- ♦ Loyalty to Truth and pledged word
- ♦ Generosity in giving
- ♦ Championship of the Right, and the Good, in any Place and at all times, against the Forces of Evil

When the lance began to lose its prestige as a weapon during the first half of the 16th century, tournaments rapidly went into decline. After Charles IX of France was wounded in a fight with the Duke of Guise in 1591, tournaments were outlawed in France, and soon after, many other European countries followed suit.

With the decline of tournament jousting, the trial by combat survived, but as a private affair, rather than a legal institution, and indeed, what we have come to know as the Duel of Honor was highly illegal in most countries, even in its heyday. Certainly the duel had a romance of its own, but the Jousts of the Chivalric Knights would never again be matched for their grandeur and spectacle, their ritual and pageantry, and their pure theatrical fun.