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**A View Of Society In Europe, In Its Progress From  
Rudeness To Refinement: Or, Inquiries Concerning The  
History Of Law, Government, And Manners**

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**Edinburgh, 1778**

Section IV. Arms, Gallantry and Devotion. The origin of Knighthood and the Judicial Combat, of Torneaments and Blazoury. The Sources of Chivalry.

**urn:nbn:de:gbv:45:1-1563**

of judgment the justice committed in a court, the right of the  
 case or of buying in a certain thing, the tax on duties, the  
 the privilege of electing members, or of a market, office  
 of null and of VICE, SECTION IV, but must be

the profits of a right, the things in it, the alterations, and  
 persons and other rights and positions in it, which is  
*Arms, Gallantry, and Devotion. The origin of Knighthood and  
 the Judicial Combat, of Torneaments and Blazonry. The Sour-  
 ces of Chivalry.*

**W**HEN the inhabitants of Germany sallied from their  
 woods, and made conquests, the change of condition  
 they experienced produced a change in their manners. Nar-  
 row communities grew into extensive kingdoms, and petty prin-  
 ces, and temporary leaders, were exalted into monarchs. The i-  
 deas, however, they had formerly entertained, and the customs  
 with which they had been familiar, were neither forgotten nor  
 neglected. The modes of thought and of action which had been  
 displayed in their original seats, advanced with them into the  
 territories of Rome, continued their operation and power in this  
 new situation, and created that uniformity of appearance which  
 Europe every where exhibited. Their influence on the forms  
 of government and polity which arose, was decisive and exten-  
 sive; and, it was not less efficacious and powerful on those in-  
 ferior circumstances which join to constitute the system of man-  
 ners,

ners, and to produce the complexion and features that distinguish ages and nations.

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The inclination for war entertained by the Germanic states, the respect and importance in which they held their women, and the sentiments they had conceived of religion, did not forsake them when they had conquered. To excel in war was still their ruling ambition, and usages were still connected with arms. To the sex they still looked with affection and courtesy. And their theology was even to operate in its spirit, after its forms were decayed, and after Christianity was established. Arms, gallantry, and devotion, were to act with uncommon force; and, to the forests of Germany, we must trace those romantic institutions, which filled Europe with renown, and with splendour; which, mingling religion with war, and piety with love, raised up so many warriors to contend for the palm of valour and the prize of beauty.

The passion for arms among the Germanic states was carried to extremity. It was amidst scenes of death and peril that the young were educated: It was by valour and feats of prowess that the ambitious signalized their manhood. All the honours they knew were allotted to the brave. The sword opened the path to glory. It was in the field that the ingenuous and the noble flattered most their pride, and acquired an ascendancy. The strength of their bodies, and the vigour of their counsels, surrounded



surrounded them with warriors, and lifted them to command (1).

But, among these nations, when the individual felt the call of valour, and wished to try his strength against an enemy, he could not of his own authority take the lance and the javelin. The admission of their youth to the privilege of bearing arms, was a matter of too much importance to be left to chance or their own choice. A form was invented by which they were advanced to that honour.

The council of the district, or of the canton to which the candidate belonged, was assembled. His age and his qualifications were inquired into; and, if he was deemed worthy of being admitted to the privileges of a soldier, a chieftain, his father, or one of his kindred, adorned him with the shield and the lance. In consequence of this solemnity, he prepared to distinguish himself; his mind opened to the cares of the public; and the domestic concerns, or the offices of the family from which he had sprung, were no longer the objects of his attention (2).

To this ceremony, so simple and so interesting, the institution of *knighthood* is indebted for its rise. The adorning the individual with arms, continued for ages to characterise his advancement to this dignity. And this rite was performed to him by his sovereign, his lord, or some approved warrior. In conformity,



mity, also, to the manners which produced this institution, it is to be observed, that even the sons of a king presumed not to approach his person before their admission to its privileges; and the nobility kept their descendants at an equal distance. It was the road, as of old, to distinction and honour. Without the advancement to it, the most illustrious birth gave no title to personal rank (3).

Their appetite for war, and their predatory life, taught the Germans to fancy that the gods were on the side of the valiant. Force appeared to them to be justice, and weakness to be crime (4). When they would divine the fate of an important war, they selected a captive of the nation with whom they were at variance, and opposed to him a warrior out of their own number. To each champion they presented the arms of his country; and, according as the victory fell to the one or the other, they prognosticated their triumph or defeat. Religion interfered with arms and with valour; and the party who prevailed, could plead in his favour the interposition of the deity. When an individual was called before the magistrate, and charged with an offence, if the evidence was not clear, he might challenge his accuser. The judge ordered them to prepare for battle, made a signal for the onset, and gave his award for the victor (5).

Nor was it only when his interest and property were at stake, that the German had recourse to his sword. He could bear no

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stain on his personal character. To treat him with indignity or disdain, was to offend him mortally. An affront of this kind covered him with infamy, if he forgave it (6). The blood of his adversary could alone wipe it away; and he called upon him to vindicate his charge, or to perish.

In these proceedings, we perceive the source of the *judicial combat*, which spread so universally over Europe, and which is not only to be considered as a precaution of civil polity, but as an institution of honour (7).

These nations, so enamoured of valour, and so devoted to arms, courted dangers even in pastime, and sported with blood. They had shows or entertainments, in which the points of the lance and the sword urged the young and the valiant to feats of a desperate agility and boldness; and in which they learned to confirm the vigour of their minds, and the force of their bodies. Perseverance gave them expertness, expertness grace, and the applause of the surrounding multitude was the envied recompense of their audacious temerity (8).

These violent and military exercises followed them into the countries they subdued, and gave a beginning to the *jousts* and *torneaments*, which were celebrated with so unbounded a rage, which the civil power was so often to forbid, and the church so

loudly



loudly to condemn; and which, resisting alike the force of religion and law, were to yield only to the progress of civility and knowledge (9).

Unacquainted with any profession but that of war, disposed to it by habit, and impelled to it by ambition, the German never parted with his arms. They accompanied him to the senate-house, as well as to the camp, and he transacted not without them any matter of public or of private concern (10). They were the friends of his manhood, when he rejoiced in his strength, and they attended him in his age, when he wept over his weakness. Of these, the most memorable was the *shield*. To leave it behind him in battle, was to incur an extremity of disgrace, which deprived him of the benefit of his religion, and of his rank as a citizen (11). It was the employment of his leisure to make it conspicuous. He was sedulous to diversify it with *chosen colours*; and, what is worthy of particular remark, the ornaments he bestowed, were in time to produce the art of *blazonry* and the occupation of the herald. These chosen colours were to be exchanged into representations of acts of heroism. Coats of arms were to be necessary to distinguish from each other, warriors who were cased compleatly from head to foot (12). Christianity introduced the sign of the cross; wisdom and folly were to multiply devices; and speculative and political men, to flatter the vanity of the rich and great, were to reduce to regulation and system what had begun without rule or art.

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It is thus I would account for knighthood, and the single combat, for torneaments and blazonry; institutions which were to operate with an influence not less important than extensive. And, in the same distant antiquity, we meet the source of that gallantry and devotion, which were to mount them to so wild a height.

To the women, while he was yet in his woods, the German behaved with respect and observance. He was careful to deserve their approbation; and they kept alive in his mind the fire of liberty, and the sense of honour. By example, as well as exhortation, they encouraged his elevation of sentiment and his valour. When the Teutones were defeated by Marius, their women sent a deputation to that commander, to require that their chastity might be exempted from violation, and that they might not be degraded to the condition of slaves. He refused their request; and, on approaching their encampment, he learned, that they had first stabbed their infants, and had then turned their daggers against themselves (13). To some German women taken in war, Caracalla having offered the alternative of being sold or put to the sword, they unanimously made choice of death. He ordered them, notwithstanding, to be led out to the market. The disgrace was insupportable; and, in this extremity, they knew how to preserve their liberty, and to die (14). It was amidst this fierceness and independency, that gallantry and the point of honour grew and prospered. It was the reproach of these women, which,





on the banks of the Rhine and the Danube, filled the coward with the bitterest sorrow, and stained him with the most indelible infamy. It was their praise which communicated to the brave the liveliest joy and the most lasting reputation. *Hi*, says Tacitus, *cuique sanctissimi testes, hi maximi laudatores* (15).

These notions did not perish when the Germans had made conquests. The change of air, and of situation, did not enfeeble this spirit. The women were still the judges of personal merit; and, to some distinguished female, did the valorous knight ascribe the glory of his achievements. Her smile and approbation, he considered as the most precious recompense; and, to obtain them, he plunged into dangers, and covered himself with dust and with blood. *Ab! si ma Dame me voyoit!* exclaimed the knight when performing a feat of valour (16).

Nor were arms and the attachment to women the only features of importance in the character of the German. Religion, which, in every age and in every nation, gives rise to so many customs, mingled itself in all his transactions. He adored an invisible being, to whom he ascribed infinite knowledge, justice, and power (17). To profit by his knowledge, he applied to divination (18); to draw advantage from his justice, he made appeals to his judgment (19); and to acquire, in some degree, his power, he had recourse to incantation and magic (20). The elements and the visible parts of nature, he conceived, at the same time,

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to be the residence of subordinate divinities, who, though the instruments only of the agency of the supreme intelligence, had a great superiority over men, and were entitled to their attention and reverence (21). Every tree and every fountain had its genius; the air, the woods, the water, had their spirits. When he made a step, or looked around him, he felt an impulse of awe and of devotion. His anxiety, his amazement, his curiosity, his hope, and his terror, were every moment excited. The most ample scope was afforded by this theology for the marvellous. Every thing, common as well as singular, was imputed to supernatural agents. Elves, fairies, sprites, magicians, dwarfs, enchanters, and giants, arose (22). But, while the lesser divinities of these nations attracted notice, it was to the supreme intelligence, that the most sincere and the most flattering worship was directed; and this god, amidst the general cares which employed him, found leisure to attend more particularly to war, and valued his votary in proportion to his courage. Thus religion and love came to inflame, and not to soften the ferocity of the German. His sword gained to him the affection of his mistress, and conciliated the favour of his deity. The last was even fond of obeying the call of the valiant; he appeared to them in battle, and fought by their side (23). Devotion, of consequence, was not less meritorious than love or than valour (24). Christianity did not abolish this usage. It descended to the middle ages. And, to love *God* and the *ladies*, was the first lesson of chivalry (25).

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But, though arms, gallantry, and devotion, produced the institutions of chivalry, and formed its manners, it is not to be fancied, that they operated these effects in a moment; and that, immediately on the settlements of the barbarians, this fabric was erected. The conquerors of Rome continued to feel and to practise in its provinces, the instincts, the passions, and the usages to which they had been accustomed in their original seats. They were to be active and strenuous, without perceiving the lengths to which they would be carried. They were to build, without knowing it, a most magnificent structure. Out of the impulse of their passions, the institutions of chivalry were gradually to form themselves. The passion for arms, the spirit of gallantry, and of devotion, which so many writers pronounce to be the genuine offspring of these wild affectations, were in fact their source; and it happened, by a natural consequence, that, for a time, the ceremonies and the usages produced by them, encouraged their importance, and added to their strength. The steps which marked their progress, served to foster their spirit; and, to the manners of ages, which we too often despise as rude and ignoble, not to political reflection or legislative wisdom, is that system to be ascribed, which was to act so long and so powerfully in society, and to produce infinite advantage and infinite calamity.

It is to those only who apply to rude societies the ideas of a cultivated aera, that the institutions of chivalry seem the production

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tion of an enlightened policy. They remember not the inexperience of dark ages, and the attachment of nations to their ancient usages. They consider not, that if an individual, in such times, were to arise of a capacity to frame schemes of legislation and government, he could not reduce them to execution. He could not mould the conceptions of states to correspond to his own. It is from no pre-conceived plan, but from circumstances which exist in real life and affairs, that legislators and politicians acquire an ascendancy among men. It was the actual condition of their times, not projects suggested by philosophy and speculation, that directed the conduct of Lycurgus and Solon.

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