

JEFFERSON

EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

MEN IN CRISIS: CLASS, DESPAIR, AND POLITICS

Chivalry is Dead: Long Live Medieval Masculinity

By Megan Maldonado
March 2025

Editor's note: Following is the second in a series of articles focusing on modern men and the social crisis that has resulted in many men succumbing to despair. Gannon University Professor Jeff Bloodworth is coordinating the monthly series, which includes several writers.

Wracked with loneliness, financially deficient, underemployed, and void of purpose, modern men face a slew of convergent crises.[1] Few people who could do something about these issues on a grand scale don't seem in a hurry to do so,[2] although there are important exceptions.[3] Armed mainly with their own means, these beleaguered men turn to higher profile, higher achieving male figures for guidance on how to work, talk, flirt, exercise, invest, eat, and live.[4]

Advice from these figures runs the gamut, and these male celebrities — often most famous online — vary enormously in terms of backgrounds and messaging. An unexpected throughline in their diverse messaging does surface when we track the aesthetics and even ethical foundations from which certain advisers dispense their guidance. For some reason, a lot of online advice about how to be a man today aspires backward toward the medieval.[5]

Whether it's Andrew Tate extolling the benefits of wielding a sword while at home, [6] Dr. Jordan Peterson analogizing self-actualization with stories of dragon-slaying or finding the Holy Grail,[7] or the many anonymous X[8] and YouTube accounts promoting medieval (and classical) imagery accompanied by aphorisms,

such as “Reject Modernity Embrace Masculinity,”^[9] this very modern brand of “medieval masculinity” pervades the internet.^[10]

On its face, this phenomenon seems intuitive. Medieval stuff looks cool. Being a valorous and respected knight sounds pretty good. Yet, if we dig past the superficial appeal, this messaging starts to make less sense. It becomes hard to imagine how a fabulously wealthy man like Tate, who advocates the avoidance of marriage, denies belief in Christianity and benefits from radical social mobility, could hold much in common with most European medieval men.^[11]

Nevertheless, something about medieval masculinity — real or imagined — holds great appeal for men today. If we can better understand this appeal, it could clarify how online medieval masculinity content serves as an aspirational remedy for the crises facing today’s men. In turn, we can consider solutions to these crises that men will find appealing.

Why might today’s men turn to the Middle Ages as a source of masculine inspiration? It could be because yesterday’s men turned to the Middle Ages for guidance. Even in the later English Middle Ages, some viewed medieval chivalric romance — works of fiction — as inspiration for real-world social ethics. William Caxton, a 15th century English writer and printer, believed that reading Thomas Malory’s “Le Morte d’Arthur” could inspire social cohesion among the factions of knights who fought in the Wars of the Roses.^[12] English Renaissance poets and playwrights enjoyed tropes of their nearer medieval past, whether to contextualize the journey of an invented hero or to dramatize the lives of historical kings.^[13]

Victorian Englishmen and women embraced an Arthurian revival that adapted medieval romance and its examples of chivalric ethics into an etiquette praxis suitable for the period.^[14] Twentieth-century medievalists like J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis arguably renewed interest in the period and its literature for the contemporary public, leaving their mark in popular and academic circles.^[15] In short, we in the English-speaking Western world are used to turning to the Middle Ages for entertainment and inspiration.

Yet this answer does not address the pronounced male reliance on medievalism as a source of guidance.^[16] Although medieval kings and knights might be more familiar figures in the English-speaking world, as my cultural genealogy suggests, their ambient familiarity does not explain why a generation that is much less inclined to practice marriage, procreation, or religion than its forebears^[17] would turn to a period that witnessed prioritization of these (then) norms.^[18]

As an example of how medieval masculinity content can expose issues that men face, we can analyze Tate’s semi-comic advice to wield a sword in one’s home. Tate, sword in hand, explains this principle by offering a hypothetical response to the prospect of having sex with a woman on hormonal contraception: “I have no

interest in having sex with these females unless I breed them, because I need sons. It is my interest only to expand my dynasty and my bloodline so that the future Matrix has to deal with the Andrew Tates of 2030, 2040, and 2050. I must have a lineage of warriors who are unafraid of slavery...”[19] Here he invokes the discourse of a patrilineal socioeconomic structure with words such as “dynasty,” “bloodline,” and “lineage,” despite their discordance with modern inheritance laws of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Romania. Tate, a British-American man who currently resides in Romania, likely knows this.

The future inheritance of which he speaks — again, with sword in hand — is an actively curated invention, one that leans on the aesthetic and rhetoric of medieval men and “warriors” to advance a personal goal of maximizing male progeny among a plurality of baby mamas to advance a loosely defined resistance ideology. This hybrid aesthetic, medieval and modern, shows a revulsion for modern contraception that, by extension, exhibits disgust for modern sexual practice that prioritizes pleasure without consequence for women *and* men. Although viewers may get distracted by the animalistic description of women as breeding material, the fundamental target of Tate’s advice is that the man who has sex merely for his own pleasure avoids the responsibility of parenthood, and does not think of his future or that of his family.

Tate’s lesson on sword-wielding is that the man who leans into an invented medieval aesthetic will also naturally lean into an invented medieval patrilineal ethos. Such a man will have the courage and discipline to face his future, as well as the virility to father as many sons as he pleases. To look and sound like a medieval man is to become like him, at least a little bit, at least how we imagine him to be.

Tate is an easy example to pick apart due to his immense international popularity and how frequently he shares his thoughts with his over 2 million subscribers on Rumble and over 10 million followers on X. However singular Tate may seem as an internet phenomenon, though, the topics of sex and virility are hardly unique to him. Sex is, for today’s men especially, a fraught topic and an increasingly more difficult activity to access. A little over half of adult American men under 30 are single.[20]

Single men who are *not* looking to date are “about twice as likely” as their female counterparts to cite pessimism about their chances on the dating market as their reason for avoiding it altogether.[21] “Gen Z” in general is having less sex than previous generations, yet a survey conducted by UCLA in 2021 showed that among California’s young adults (roughly ages 18-30), more men than women went without any sexual partners in the year prior to the survey.[22] Celibacy (voluntary or not) had been trending upward in California in the decade prior to the pandemic.[23]

Men still consume more pornography than women by far, and recent research has demonstrated a strong correlation between pornography addiction and poor mental health, including issues of “stress, anxiety, and depression” as well as dissatisfaction with one’s own body and a difficulty navigating real, interpersonal relationships.[24] Given this despairing and solitary erotic landscape, it is no wonder why Tate’s sword-wielding wisdom on how to have sex with many women, and simultaneously practice sexual self-discipline, attracts a large male audience.

Although the average medieval man was likely not fathering innumerable sons by many women without marrying any of them, there is a resonant theme of desiring to have sex with (generally) fertile women with an active desire to have children who will continue a patrilineal legacy. Tate’s invented medieval masculinity is about having more sex and kids, yes, but it is also a prescription for a kind of self-mastery — at least in his view — that does not crave and covet pleasure for its own sake. Medieval masculinity in this example functions as a balm of (barely chivalric) virtue that a man can use to remedy his painful and, perhaps, disordered erotic desires.

Although Dr. Jordan Peterson is a dramatically different voice in the online conversation about medieval masculinity, he also asks men to look at their own actions as primary means of effecting positive change in their own lives (albeit, mercifully, without referring to women as breeders). Peterson speaks to a sizable online audience, with 8.6 million YouTube subscribers and 6 million followers on X. His life advice does not explicitly target men, but he asked the public shortly after his rise to popularity in 2017 why 91% of his YouTube audience was male.[25] In an old lecture he gave to his students at the University of Toronto, clips of which he and others have republished in recent years, Peterson describes stories of dragon-slaying as a collective metaphor for overcoming obstacles in one’s life:

The dragon is this terrible thing, it’s this terrible predatory thing that lives forever and is very very wise, and it lives underground, and it’ll kill you, it’ll burn you up in a second. But it hoards gold. And so you have to go there into the dragon’s lair if you’re gonna get the gold. And that’s a representation of people’s paradoxical relationship with reality ...you don’t get the gold without the dragon.[26]

This advice fits well within the context of a lecture on “how archetypal/mythological themes permeate popular culture,” delivered through Peterson’s characteristically Jungian approach, and the advice does not, on its face, direct medievalism at an exclusively male audience.[27] Given his (apparently) majority male viewership, however, we may ask why so many men would resonate with this message. A superficial explanation is that men fulfill the role of the dragon-slayer in many stories. As such, they may relate to that narrative trope more than the story of Sleeping Beauty or another female figure.

Yet a closer consideration of this analogy's emphasis on fear offers more fundamental insight into the lecture's popularity.

Peterson, in this cited portion of the lecture, reiterates the awfulness of the dragon much more than he highlights the desirability of the gold. He tells us twice that the dragon is "terrible," and describes this terrible creature as "very very wise" (another double emphasis) to clarify the beast's intellectual and physical superiority, assuring that the dragon could kill quickly in two ways with apparent ease. Conversely, he refers to gold without much rhetorical flare. His comparatively emphatic description of the dragon's dangers reads like a blunt acknowledgment of life's difficulties. He acknowledges the terror felt by many men who face everyday reality.

Despite the relative lack of attention to this issue, anxiety is "often the first mental health disorder young men experience" and is "the most prevalent mental health disorder experienced by men."^[28] Moreover, men who experience anxiety may have an increased risk of suicidality^[29] — and male suicide rates in the United States are roughly four times that of their female counterparts.^[30] Peterson's analogy affirms the fears men can experience when encountering life's difficulties while also using medieval dragon-slaying narratives as evidence that dragons, and therefore obstacles in life, *can* be defeated. Medieval masculinity with Peterson looks different than with Tate, yet both figures invite their viewers to imagine themselves as medieval heroes in order to conquer their present troubles.

Scholars like Richard Reeves have highlighted the many struggles of today's Western men and have offered public policy solutions for those in the United States. Reeves also notes that young men face "a deep cultural problem" as much as they do an "economic or a social or a political" problem.^[31] I leave it up to those far more literate in public policy to consider the potential efficacy of Reeves' (or others') proposals. In addition to whatever policy proposals we might pursue, I submit for our collective consideration the inescapable importance of a cultural approach to these crises of masculinity that will appeal to the men in question without needing to wait for government intervention.

To cultivate positive adult masculinity, we must look to the Middle Ages for culturally oriented advice, albeit in ways that get these men offline. Historical male mentorship took place in structured and duty-oriented contexts. Fraternities, despite their present connotations with binge drinking and "toxic" behavior, can be rebuilt outside the university setting by virtually anyone. Religious fraternities, trade guilds, and other male-exclusive clubs that meet in-person can help men escape the online echo chamber of incel-ridden pessimism. I anticipate a criticism that such groups could be, and have been, used to exclude women from advancement in certain fields. To use this reason as a means of tossing out fraternal organizations altogether is to throw the baby out with the bath water.

Men with ill-intent will invariably find spaces to meet, even if they are only online. Indeed, these online spaces are more consequentially vitriolic than any physical space due to the former's allowance for near-complete anonymity. Better to encourage young men to meet in person and be mentored by their older peers, with everyone sharing a set of virtues and being held accountable to them.

Similarly to fraternal organizations, there is a need for new rites of passage into masculine adulthood. Events like a first drink, first date, getting a driver's license, or going to college have worked as gender-neutral markers of adulthood (or its near advent) for many decades, but male-specific rites of passage shaped by that community's values could help boys enter manhood with greater confidence and sense of masculine identity. Skill mastery, service-based work, a literary curriculum, and/or physical challenges curated by the boy's community — or even his family unit — could all prepare a boy for adult manhood.

I do not argue that such rituals would prove one's existence as a male of the human species. Rather, I argue to curate new, context-specific rites of passage that would prepare boys mentally, emotionally, and physically to become competent adult men.

Many of today's boys and men have shown us what appeals to them about masculinity. Rather than mock or dismiss their medievalisms as silly, sexist, or historically incorrect, we can note their invented solutions for crises of masculinity and adapt them to encourage the cultivation of positive masculinity in person, in real life. Actual medieval chivalry might be dead, but adaptations could work wonders for the living. Most critically, the cultural programs I have recommended must be created and sustained by boys and men as much as possible for the work to be organic and of continued interest to fellow men. A modern man can still be a kind of knight in shining armor. The first person he must rescue from the problems of modern life, however, is himself.

References

[1] For lists that include these problems and others faced by American men today, as well as the data to demonstrate these issues, see Richard Reeves, *Of Boys and Men* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2022); Warren Farrell and John Gray, *The Boy Crisis* (BenBella Books, 2019); and Leonard Sax, *Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men*, revised edition (Basic Books: 2016).

[2] Political commentators have posited that the Democrats' resounding loss in the 2024 presidential election was partly a result of losing male voters, either through insufficient outreach during the campaign season or due to a dismissive posture towards men's concerns altogether. See Samuel Lovett, "The Democrats have a problem with young men. Can they fix it?". *The Times*. <https://www.thetimes.com/world/us-world/article/the-democrats-have-a-problem-with-young-men-can-they-fix-it-bf8wp7xl>; Jess Bidgood, "John Fetterman Wants Democrats to Stop Freaking Out". *The New York Times*. Nov. 27, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/27/us/politics/john-fetterman->

[democrats.html](#); and Kathryn Watson, “Democrats are losing Latino men. Ruben Gallego has advice on winning them back.” CBS News. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ruben-gallego-next-senator-arizona/>.

[3] See the recently developed American Institute for Boys and Men (founded in 2023 by Reeves).

[4] For lists of online male influencers in general, with both positive and negative perspectives on their presence, see the following: Ade Onibada, “‘My Brother Is So Far Gone’: How Male Influencers Turned The Men In These People’s Lives Toxic”. BuzzFeed News. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adeonibada/andrew-tate-fresh-fit-podcast-kevin-samuels-toxic-male>; and “Niche of the Week: Men’s Health Influencers”. Socially Powerful. June 14, 2024. <https://sociallypowerful.com/post/mens-health-influencers>.

[5] Although the periodization markers “medieval” and “Middle Ages” have been used to describe regions throughout the globe, I shall use them to describe the European Middle Ages, since the term originates as a designation of the “middle” period between the fall of the Roman Empire and its Renaissance in, mainly, Europe. I avoid the term “premodern” here in order to denote specifically the European context to which I and my other sources refer.

[6] Tate’s sword monologue has been clipped and republished multiple times. Tate and his brother Tristan republished the clip and expanded upon Andrew’s original point in a longer video via Rumble. Andrew Tate and Tristan Tate, “EMERGENCY MEETING EPISODE 52 – DO YOU HAVE A SWORD?”. Rumble. <https://rumble.com/v4wxajn-emergency-meeting-episode-52-do-you-have-a-sword.html>. Relevant content starts at 37:29.

[7] Dr. Peterson’s original, two-hour lecture that features this content was published to YouTube in 2017 and boasts over one million views (see “2017 Maps of Meaning 04: Marionettes and Individuals (Part 3)” on YouTube). I shall, however, cite a more recent clip from this lecture – also published by Dr. Peterson – for ease of reference. Jordan B Peterson, “You Don’t Get the Gold Without the Dragon”. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=io5IsuoLHuc>.

[8] Examples of relevant accounts on X with six- or seven-figure follower counts include (at the time of writing) @trad_west_, @Culture_Crit, @thinkingwest, and @glass_zealot. Many more accounts of varying sizes are prevalent on the app, including (at the time of writing) @MedievalScholar, @Ancient_Masc, and @HistoriesDaily.

[9] ItsEndy, “Reject Modernity Embrace Masculinity”. <https://youtu.be/edWooLhbs7M?feature=shared>.

[10] YouTube and X (formerly Twitter), the platforms on which these examples can be found, both have a higher percentage of male users than female users, particularly among users in the 25-34 age bracket. For global demographic data, see Stacy Jo Dixon, “X/Twitter: distribution of global audiences 2024, by gender,” Statista, May 22, 2024. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1287137/youtube-global-users-age-gender-distribution/#:~:text=YouTube%3A%20distribution%20of%20global%20audiences%202024%2C%20by%20age%20and%20gender&text=As%20of%20July%202024%2C%2012.1%20users%20of%20the%20same%20age>; and Laura Ceci, “YouTube: distribution of global audiences 2024, by age and gender,” Statista, September 2, 2024. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1287137/youtube-global-users-age-gender-distribution/#:~:text=YouTube%3A%20distribution%20of%20global%20audiences%202024%2C%20by%20age%20and%20gender&text=As%20of%20July%202024%2C%2012.1%20users%20of%20the%20same%20age>. For demographic data pertaining to the US, see Jeffrey Gottfried, “Americans’ Social Media Use,” Pew Research Center, January 31, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/01/31/americans-social-media-use/#other-demographic-differences-in-use-of-online-platforms>. Note that in the US, a near equal percentage of men and women surveyed claimed to use YouTube, though male Twitter (X) users in the US still outnumber their female counterparts.

[11] I highlight Tate here – and will again – due to his enormous popularity with online male audiences and his self-fashioning as a masculinity advisor for his male audience. I also recognize that Judaism and Islam are significant religions in the period, although Christianity was by far the dominant religion in medieval Europe. For evidence of his marital avoidance, religious beliefs, and social mobility, see the following: SOSCAST w/ Adam Sosnick, “Andrew Tate Explains Why Men Should NEVER Get Married”. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koX9YoorKho>; Sana Noor Haq, “Andrew Tate’s Muslim

fanbase is growing. Some say he's exploiting Islam for internet popularity". CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/16/world/andrew-tate-muslim-men-manosphere-intl-cmd/index.html>; and Tate Speech by Andrew Tate, "Andrew Tate and Social Mobility". <https://rumble.com/v3spb35-andrew-tate-on-social-mobility.html>.

[12] Kenneth Hodges, *Forging Chivalric Communities in Malory's Le Morte Darthur* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005): 11.

[13] Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is a prime example of a stylized pseudo-medieval romance. William Shakespeare, whose enduring popularity hardly needs elaboration, wrote multiple "history plays" that dramatize the lives of medieval English kings: *King John*, *Richard II*, *Henry IV pt. 1*, *Henry IV pt. 2*, *Henry V*, *Henry VI pt. 1*, *Henry VI pt. 2*, *Henry VI pt. 3*, and *Richard III*.

[14] For a history of this phenomenon, see Inga Bryden, *Reinventing King Arthur* (London: Routledge, 2016); and Rosemary Mitchell, "Knights on the Town? Commercial and Civic Chivalry in Victorian Manchester," in *Chivalry and the Medieval Past*, ed. Katie Stevenson and Barbara Gribling (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2016).

[15] See *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, ed. Michael D.C. Drout (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Robert Boenig, *C.S. Lewis and the Middle Ages* (The Kent State University Press, 2012).

[16] "Medievalism" denotes a thing that is not of the historical Middle Ages but is in some way inspired by the history or cultures of the period.

[17] On the decline of marriage and even cohabitation with a romantic partner, see Richard Fry and Kim Parker, "Rising Share of U.S. Adults Are Living Without a Spouse or Partner". Pew Research Center. October 5, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/10/05/rising-share-of-u-s-adults-are-living-without-a-spouse-or-partner/>. For data on declining U.S. fertility rates, see CDC, "U.S. Fertility Rate Drops to Another Historic Low". Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. April 25, 2024. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2024/20240525.htm. On the deprioritization of religious practice in the U.S., see Jeffrey M. Jones, "Church Attendance Has Declined in Most U.S. Religious Groups". Gallup. March 25, 2024. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/642548/church-attendance-declined-religious-groups.aspx>.

[18] For a brief introduction on the importance of family and religious life in the Middle Ages, as well as a list of sources that can provide detailed information on specific regions and/or time periods, see Jacqueline Murray, "Family Life in the Middle Ages". *Oxford Bibliographies* (Oxford University Press: June 27, 2017). DOI: [10.1093/obo/9780195396584-0236](https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195396584-0236).

[19] "EMERGENCY MEETING EPISODE 52 – DO YOU HAVE A SWORD?": 41:45-42:05.

[20] Anna Brown, "Nearly Half of U.S. Adults Say Dating Has Gotten Harder for Most People in the Last 10 Years". Pew Research Center (2020). <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/08/20/a-profile-of-single-americans/>.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Hannah Fry, "A 'failure to launch': Why young people are having less sex". *Los Angeles Times*. Aug. 3, 2023. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-08-03/young-adults-less-sex-gen-z-millennials-generations-parents-grandparents>.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Michal Privara and Petr Bob, "Pornography Consumption and Cognitive-Affective Distress". *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0000000000001669>.

[25] Jordan Peterson (@jordanbpeterson), “91% of those who view my videos are male. Why? Why so few women?” Twitter (now X), March 3, 2017, 1:37PM EST. <https://x.com/jordanbpeterson/status/837733610157387779>.

[26] “You Don’t Get the Gold Without the Dragon”: 7:33-54, 8:16-18.

[27] Quote pulled from the description of the original video from 2017 (found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bV16NEWld8Q&list=PL22J3VaeABQAT-0aSPq-OKOpQIHvR4k5h&index=4&t=os>).

[28] Krista Fisher, Zac E Seidler, Kylie King, John L Oliffe, Steve Robertson, and Simon M Rice, “Men’s anxiety, why it matters, and what is needed to limit its risk for male suicide”. *Discover Psychology* (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44202-022-00035-5>.

[29] Ibid.

[30] CDC, “Suicide Data and Statistics”. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/facts/data.html>.

[31] Richard Reeves, interview by Geoff Kabaservice, September 28, 2022, transcript and recording, Niskanen Center, “Why men and boys are falling behind, with Richard V. Reeves”. <https://www.niskanencenter.org/why-men-and-boys-are-falling-behind-with-richard-v-reeves/>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Megan Maldonado is a Ph.D. candidate in English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. Her dissertation focuses on Middle English romance and its pattern of overlapping of devotional modes and magical phenomena. She has published work on medieval romance and a forthcoming publication on Shakespeare and race. Her wider academic interests include: medieval Insular and Continental romance; medieval and early modern vernacular Christian theologies; theories of race-making in English-Saracen or Moor encounters; and the embodiment of masculinity and chivalric virtues. Beyond the academy, Megan produces medieval studies content on social media to make an (often) oblique academic field accessible and interesting for the public.

[Subscribe to JES Publications Mailing List!](#)

[Support JES | Donate](#)

In Case You Missed It

[Building Community and Social Infrastructure](#) written by Lavea Brachman, JC, MCP, and Meriem Hamioui

[JCLA Report | 'It's Broken, so Let's Fix It'](#) written by 2024 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy Cohort

[Truth in Love | Rosa Parks: Resolute Leader America Needed](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Parris Baker

[The Wider World | Foreign Aid – Where Has it Gone?](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Diane Chido

[On the Waterfront | View-Master: Lots of Local Connections](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. David Frew

[Russia-Ukraine War Series | 5 Recommendations for Trump Regarding War in Ukraine](#) written by Lena Surzhko-Harned

[Book Notes #200 | Why Black History Is Important – Part I](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

