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The Armor Network:
Medieval Prostheses and Degenerative Posthuman Bodies

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Raymund Papica

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Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Andrea Denny-Brown, Chairperson

Dr. John M. Ganim

Dr. James Tobias

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The Dissertation of Raymund Papica is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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To my grandmother,
Crescencia S. Papica
A quest fulfilled

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

Raymund Papica

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
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Dr. Andrea Denny-Brown, Chairperson

By studying depictions of armor in *The Canterbury Tales*, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, and *The Faerie Queene*, and by seeing how these works help us understand medievalism in contemporary media, this dissertation investigates how armored bodies function as a way to think through the problematics of posthuman transformations. This project repositions the way in which premodern masculine identity was often predicated upon how bodies were constructed with, and connected to, multiple objects, nonhuman figures, and fluctuating interpretations of machinic evolution. Furthermore, this study of armor is concerned with the degeneration of bodies damaged by war and contagion, as well as the instability and inadequacy of the body's boundaries. Armor can be fragmented, assembled, and remixed with other armorial pieces and materials. Through an interdisciplinary approach, this project performs the task of tracing a longer history concerned with armored bodies, faulty ideologies, and technological anxieties. Studying the fictionalized use of armored bodies across literary history pushes us to question the results of technological augmentation. Each chapter studies the processes in which a body transforms into an armored posthuman. Armor, this project argues, can be thought of as

part of a posthuman assemblage that collects and develops various narrative strands about prosthetic transformations.

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Introduction

If the knight is the man of becoming, then there are all kinds of knights.

— Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari

The armored body is a recurring figure in medieval and early modern European narratives, and its presence helps readers understand the anxieties concerning the boundaries of the human body in both premodern and modern cultures. By studying depictions of armor in *The Canterbury Tales*, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, and *The Faerie Queene*, and by seeing how these works help us understand the use of medievalism in digital media, we can unravel how armored bodies in Western cultural narratives function as a way to think through the problematics of posthuman transformations. Each chapter studies the processes through which human bodies transform into armorial assemblages when introduced to nonhuman forms. Specifically, the armored knight, as a representation of the hyper-masculine chivalric ideal, shows how bodies degenerate and regenerate within a cyclical process of becoming. My study of medieval and medievalizing armor raises concerns about the instability of the body's liminal spaces, about the inadequacy of the body's defensive borders, and about the corporeal degeneration of bodies damaged by war and contagion.

Studying the fictionalized use of armored bodies across literary history pushes our understanding of individual bodies as multiple bodies, and it makes us question the consequences of technological augmentation in our contemporary world, positioning these developments as part of a much longer cultural fascination with heroic masculinity, knightly armor, and what Katherine Biddick describes as “cyborg history,” a history

marked by “temporal disjunctures, its spatial commensurabilities, and the material hybridity of its historical desire.”¹

Cyborg history does not necessarily begin in 1960 when the “cyborg” was first coined as a way to think of hybrid bodies that could survive the cold of space.² Cyborg history, and the concept of the posthuman, I would argue, finds its beginnings in the premodern period, and specifically, in the nexus of knight and armor. Medieval and early modern knights exist in relationship with what I call “rhizomatic” armor. This armor mediates our understanding of how the body is constructed, connected, transformed, and transmitted through various media. I describe this armor as “rhizomatic” because a rhizome, in Deleuzian terms, ceaselessly establishes “connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and the circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles.”³ Rhizomatic armor is not simply attached to the body; it is an entity that can function separately from the body that “wears” it, and that, perhaps against common perception, makes connections with multiple bodies. Like our bodily relationships with cellular phones or automobiles, rhizomatic armor is not always worn. Yet it is still intrinsic to the body and influential in how the body is shaped, perceived, and understood. Rhizomatic armor, this dissertation demonstrates, can function as either a

¹ Katherine Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1998), 167.

² Nathan S. Clines and Manfred Clynes, “Cyborgs and Space,” *Astronautics* (September 1960): 26-76.

³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 7.

companionate prosthesis or a wearable technology, and as such it suggests a close kinship between two specific kinds of bodies: armored knights and automata. This study does not trace the interrelated historical developments of armored bodies and automata so much as it studies the way writers *imagined* them to be connected—often through their mechanistic developments, such as their dependence on smaller prosthetic attachments to properly function.

Through the concept of rhizomatic armor, we can consider the evolution of armored bodies in connection with the rise of metal automata found in the courts and literature of the late medieval and early modern period. In terms of aesthetics and function, the development of automata parallels the development of armor between the late fourteenth and sixteenth century. E.R. Truitt notes that the production of advanced automata was not common in Europe until the very end of the thirteenth century when small mechanisms like the escapement and the toothed gear emerged.⁴ Tellingly, like automata, armor became more advanced, both technologically and aesthetically, during the beginnings of the fourteenth century, a transitional moment in which armor evolved from chainmail and surcoats to overlapping plates of steel.⁵ Like automata, plate armor

⁴ E.R. Truitt, “‘Trei poete, sages dotors, qui mout sorent di nigromance’: Knowledge and Automata in Twelfth-Century French Literature,” *Configurations* 12.2 (2004): 170.

⁵ Carolyn Springer, *Armour and Masculinity in the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 5. She demonstrates the ways that European armor became more advanced between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. The synchronized development of armor and automata would continue to flourish in the preceding centuries. The evolution of armor I discuss here was part of the overarching developments throughout Europe. Different locations have different armorial histories, shaped by the variables—religious, political, economic—within their respective regions.

relied on a microcosmic network of smaller components—rings, straps, rivets, and other small connective prostheses—in order to be worn. As the century progressed, more fragments of plate armor were added to the armored body, so by the start of the fifteenth century, those who could afford a full set of plate armor encased their entire body in plated steel, while chainmail became an accessory and supplementary defensive layer.

Because of the reliance on miniaturized prostheses, armor and automata can be grouped together as “armored assemblages” that enact a “metal performance.”⁶ According to Steve Dixon, cyborgian performances include human bodies and metal prostheses, and together both underscore an anxiety and a fascination with machinic bodies: metal performance “relates equally to a common resistance to, and a common belief in, metal as symbolic of a desirable evolutionary process via cyborgism to ultimate machinic embodiment.”⁷ As I argue in this dissertation, ultimately, in the case of armored knights in medieval narratives, self-fashioning through “metal performance” demonstrates either resistance to corporeal fragmentation, or a way to regulate a knight’s willingness for his body to degenerate. The late medieval and early modern periods were marked with exhaustive violence and recurring plague outbreaks, and arguably, these traumatic encounters influenced how Chaucer, Malory, and Spenser’s respective texts redefined the armored body. *The Canterbury Tales*, *Le Morte D’Arthur*, and *The Faerie*

See also Scott Fliegel, *Arms and Armor: The Cleveland Museum of Art* (New York: Abrams, 1998).

⁶ Steve Dixon, “Metal Performance: Humanizing Robots, Returning to Nature, and Camping About,” *The Drama Review* 48.4 (2004): 15-16.

⁷ See note 6 above.

Queene reveal a fascination with moments when liminal boundaries are violated and redefined. Armored bodies in these texts represent desirable, and undesirable, processes of transformation responsible for the posthuman assemblage. For instance, ‘bismotered’ knightly bodies in *The Canterbury Tales* find strange corollaries with ‘rusted’ monsters that attack pristinely armored knights in *The Faerie Queene*. Armored bodies in *Le Morte D’Arthur* strive for the unification of opposing knights, but many of them are brutally dismembered as a result of betrayal, incest, and fratricide.

In addition to studying the evolutionary and protective elements enacted by medieval armor’s metallic and machinic properties, my examination of armored bodies hinges on the interdisciplinary coupling of *cyborg history* with fashion theory. The works of Anne Hollander and Carolyn Springer make clear that any discourse on armored bodies eventually intersects with specific theories of fashion, which demonstrate how gender and identity construction are highly dependent on prosthetic attachments. Anne Hollander suggests that the origin of modern male fashion, and how we define the ideal male body, is located in the medieval past, specifically in the early formulations of plate armor.⁸ Carolyn Springer reminds us that while armor fashions masculinity through symmetry and closure, we cannot ignore the fact that more prominent armors emphasize

⁸ Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits* (New York: Knopf: 1994), 41. Male fashion mimicked the new forms created by armorers, who Hollander suggests were the first tailors of Europe. Armor, she observes, “was designed to enhance the articulated beauty of complete male bodies [...] and unearthly-looking strength.”

disfigured designs.⁹ Armor can be assembled, fragmented and remixed with other armorial pieces and materials, processes that are on the one hand technological and practical, and on the other, aesthetic and ideological.¹⁰

Through the examples I discuss in this dissertation, we can reconceptualize what it is to wear armor as a prosthesis. We often think of clothing as objects that are worn on the body, but the ability to wear anything, from the most quotidian vest to the most ornamental armor, is in itself a limiting concept. In fact, the action of *wearing* is problematic. The concept of wearing clothes and wearing armor is unnecessarily narrow; rather, the act of *wearing* is, in the grand scope of this project, something increasingly blurred and interchangeable with acts of *attaching-detaching-reattaching*, even *riding* and *using*. As an example, the Middle English verb *dressen* is not simply the act of putting on clothes, but according to the *Middle English Dictionary*, it is also a verb with militaristic undertones and used to describe interactions with objects: “to arrange [...] put in order, adjust; straighten; put (a shield, spear, armor) in position.” Perhaps more importantly, the verb has also been associated with the ability to move, the ability to

⁹ Springer, *Armour and Masculinity*, 37. Springer makes a distinction between Classical armor, the perfected male thorax, and sacred and grotesque armors, rife with demonic and other monstrous designs.

¹⁰ Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter, *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 217. Armor redefines and embodies multiple meanings by crossing beyond bodily and temporal thresholds, but despite its variations, armor held a significant sociopolitical impact in the courtly space; fragmented metal helmets, like the grotesque helm given by Maximilian I to Henry VIII, were fashion accessories used by patrons to sustain sovereignty through masculine pageantries.

mend or repair, and the ability to guide and control, as in a horse or a ship.¹¹

Armor suggests *putting on*, but as my examples from Chaucer, Malory, and Spenser will show, armor need not be put on to fulfill its defensive, reconstructive, and transformative capabilities. Rather, how “armor” is positioned in proximity to other bodies also determines its function. For instance, Chaucer’s brass steed and Spenser’s Talus are examples of “sentient armor” but they are never “worn.” Instead, they function independently and separate from their owner’s body. Talus accompanies Artegall on his quests; the brass steed is guided into court and displayed as a technological wonder. Despite differing historical and literary contexts, the brass steed and Talus serve as companionate prostheses that protect the bodies they serve. Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* enables a re-articulation of the metamorphic potentials of both male bodies and the armor that defines their chivalric identities. In an act of mutual becoming, a fusion of fragmented armor with a fragmented body, within the court or the battlefield, initiates a connective hybrid state between the body the armor conceals (the interior body of flesh), and the body the armor displays (the artificial construct).

Masculinity is malleable, and according to Gail Weiss and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, the malleable body is “a crossroads, a space of limit as possibility.”¹² Prosthetic devices too, inhabit the liminal space of potentiality, a space that occupies what Allon White calls

¹¹ “dressen (1a – 11a),” *Middle English Dictionary*, University of Michigan, 24 April 2013. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>.

¹² Gail Weiss and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Thinking the Limits of the Body* (New York: State University of New York Press: 2003), 4.

a “disturbing middle ground” that makes it uncertain where the body ends and the artifice begins.¹³ Armor, as an object that produces both an individual fashion statement and a collective assemblage of social agency, crosses boundaries and reassembles the intersections between things and bodies within what Bruno Latour describes as networked relations.¹⁴ Perhaps the most prevalent assemblage in medieval romance was the horse-armor-man hybrid. Such a hybrid merges different ontologies and epistemologies, creating, according to David Williams, a third being: “the temporary creation of a third composite assemblage much greater than the sum of its parts: equestrianism as a becoming-centaur for both rider and horse.”¹⁵ The concept of rhizomatic armor, as an assemblage, is a medium that resists rigidity and disrupts fixed meanings of humanness by breaching the walls that divide humans, nonhumans, and inanimate objects. Likewise, bringing armor and automata together as part of a related cyborg history and cyborg imaginary provides a compelling reminder that the human body has never been an isolated, organic thing.¹⁶ The armored assemblage responds to

¹³ Allon White, “Prosthetic Gods in Atrocious Places: Gilles Deleuze/Francis Bacon,” *Carnival, Hysteria, and Writing: Collected Essays and Autobiography* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 173.

¹⁴ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford University Press: 2005), 43. Latour states, “Some assemblages are built out of social stuff.”

¹⁵ David Williams, “The Right Horse, the Animal Eye—Bartabas and Theatre Zingaro,” *Performance Research* 5.2 (2000), 33.

¹⁶ Jasbir Puar, “‘I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess’: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory,” *philoSOPHIA* 2.1 (2012): 57. Jasbir Puar states, “Along with a de-exceptionalizing of human bodies, multiple forms of matter can be bodies—bodies of water, cities, institutions, and so on. Matter is an actor.”

the limitations of the flesh by creating potential cyborgian bodies. In this way the assemblage of the armored body accords with Donna Haraway's classic definition of the cyborg: a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction."¹⁷

While I highlight the intersections of what might initially seem like disparate interests, the interdisciplinarity of this project raises a number of important questions about masculinity, the body's connection to prosthetic technologies, and the appropriation of the medieval in modern spaces. This project is not necessarily concerned with general queries about what a set of armor represents. Instead, it asks: where does armor fit in the construction of a body that becomes unstable when merged with nonhuman bodies? What are we to make of the cyclical nature of the armorial assemblage, a posthuman body in a continuous state of cyclical degeneration and regeneration? What tidal forces govern its movement? How might we use the trope of armor to trace and unravel the intersecting relationships between the realities and fictions of chivalric culture, cyborg histories, cyborg imaginations, and anxieties concerned with the posthuman body's sovereignty? The following chapters will attempt to answer these questions by reading armor not only as a fusion of prostheses and reconstituted bodies, but also as a physical archive of cultural memory, a repository for the past that manages to anticipate, and fashion, a premodern posthuman body. The first three chapters in this project attempt to trace the development of armored bodies in a collection of literary

¹⁷ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 151.

works that span the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The last chapter examines how medievalism shapes our understanding of armored posthuman bodies in millennial film and video games.¹⁸ By implementing a focused look at how an armored body functions as an assemblage in its own historical and literary context, as well as in later renditions, we can trace specific connections that cross beyond conventional, historical, and temporal boundaries. This interdisciplinary approach can perform the important task of mapping a longer history concerned with armored bodies, faulty ideologies, and technological anxieties.

The first chapter, “Chaucer’s Knight and Squire: Equine Prostheses, Armorial Augmentations, and Masculine Degenerations,” focuses on how the Squire’s brass steed, and its regenerative properties, becomes the counterexample to the Knight’s rusted armor. The contrasts between the Knight and the Squire demonstrate the instabilities of premodern masculinities and Chaucer’s ambivalence toward chivalry, an ideology shown to be in considerable flux in this period. More specifically, the Squire demonstrates the potential for transformation via technological fusions of armor and automata, while the Knight, his father, represents historical, albeit degraded, notions of chivalric identity.

¹⁸ Because this work is grounded in the late medieval and early modern period, and seeks to understand how techno-cultural relations from these centuries eventually inform our understanding of armored bodies in the postmodern world, this project bypasses the Enlightenment and the Romantic period, long considered the golden age of automata and Victorian Neo-medievalism. Other works focus on the Enlightenment and the Golden Age of Automata. See Allison Muri, *The Enlightenment Cyborg: A History of Communications and Control in the Human Machine, 1660-1830* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2007), and Minsoo Kang, *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines* (Harvard UP, 2001). Muri’s work is interesting, though her problematic view that the Enlightenment established the prehistory of cyborg bodies disregards cyborgian hybrids in medieval literature.

Building on medieval physiognomy, this chapter further demonstrates how the steed's brass components are utilized "medicinally" to defend the sovereignty of posthuman bodies. Both Knight and Squire have companionate prosthesis, but the brass steed becomes a metaphor for masculine agency, and its form, function, and how it is exchanged—from knight to king, then from father to son—is a demonstration of sovereign power.¹⁹

In the second chapter, "Smiting, Cleansing, and Becoming-Sacred: Embracing Bloody Degeneration in *Le Morte D'Arthur*," I examine the complexities and contradictions of armored bodies in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*. More specifically, Malory depicts how armored bodies hinder a knight's ability to communicate with others, a failure that often results in tragedy. By going incognito through their armorial doubleness, for example, knights like Balin, Lancelot, and Arthur can gain multiple identities, but the schizophrenic element that grows from the use of sacred armor ultimately leads to civil strife and fratricide. While there are no automatons in Malory's work, armor becomes a silent, miscommunicating symbiote attached to bodies. And through the text's excessive violence, knights in armor become more mechanical and are inevitably "dismantled" into the earth. In other words, in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, armor is doomed to fail, but it is also necessary for a knight's degenerative process. Malory's work demonstrates how armored bodies are in continuous need for enclosure, but knights

¹⁹ Chris Hables Gray, *Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Posthuman Age* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2. Gray discusses the sovereignty of the cyborg body politic and suggests that "cyborgs do not have to be part human, for any organism / system that mixes the evolved and the made, the living and the inanimate, is technically a cyborg."

are willing to shed their blood in order to purify a land torn asunder by war. This chapter seeks to rearticulate notions of degeneration into what we can read as an initial step towards a kind of regeneration that “fixes” the conflicts devastating the Arthurian realm.

In the third chapter, “Armored Knights and Armored Automaton: The Legend of Justice and the Triple-Bodied Assemblage,” I explore how Book V in *The Faerie Queene* uses armored bodies to understand the processes that turn armorial doubleness into what I call a “triple-bodied assemblage” between Artegall, Britomart, and their mediator, Talus. Talus, an automaton, provocatively functions like the “body without organs” theorized by Deleuze and Guattari.²⁰ In Book V, Talus’s extreme, mechanical violence is the only viable response to transgressive threats, and his actions hint at how the institutions of courtly love and chivalry were appropriated and integrated into the English war machine.²¹ Artegall and Britomart can dispatch Talus to go where they cannot, and to commit to a kind of brutality that human knights are incapable of.²² Talus destroys transgressive male bodies— Talus strips, then beats, the comical braggart and false-knight Braggadochio, and he mutilates the shapeshifter Malengin so that “all his bones

²⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 34. According to Deleuze and Guattari, a body without organs is not an empty body stripped of organs, “The body without organs is not a dead body, but a living body all the more alive [...] and populated by multiplicities.”

²¹ Jane Watson, “Intimacy without Domestication: Courtly Love in A Thousand Plateaus,” *L'Esprit Créateur* 44.1 (Spring 2004): 86-87.

²² William Oram, “Spensarian Paralysis,” *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 41.1(2001): 64.

[...] He broke, and did his bowels disentrayle.”²³ In this way, Talus embodies violent policies of sixteenth century England. More importantly, Talus sustains idealized masculinity by also becoming an “Eros” figure who mediates the union between Artegall and Britomart, an act that blurs the line between imagined histories and chivalric romance.

Chapter four, “Digital Armor and Becoming-Medieval: Simulated Medievalisms and Learning How to Die,” analyzes simulations of armored bodies and their processes of degeneration and regeneration. Here, the project disrupts the demarcations of linear temporality to bring medieval studies into a more intimate relationship with contemporary film and video game studies. This final chapter examines the intertextual appropriations of the armored assemblage in films like *Iron Man* and *Edge of Tomorrow*, as well as the science fantasy video game *Destiny*. This chapter also considers how each work relies on an instructive push to propel their respective narratives forward. The media presented in this chapter demonstrate the obsessive construction and deconstruction of the armored male body, but they also respond to historically specific anxieties concerned with the promises that come with new technologies. The medievalism located in these narratives form virtual constructed histories and hyperreal simulations where audiences witness and also experience first-hand how medieval garniture functions within atemporal, dystopian, and multinational boundaries.

Armor, as a prosthesis, is presented in Western literature in complex ways, but these prostheses produce meanings that go beyond their immediate historical moments;

²³ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (New York: Penguin, 1987). V.ix.19, lines 4-5.

as Carolyn Springer states, armorial pieces are “relics that radiate a cultural charge in excess of any aesthetic value or antiquarian interest.”²⁴ This project repositions the way in which masculine identity in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was often predicated upon how bodies were constructed with, and connected to, multiple objects, nonhuman bodies, and fluctuating interpretations of machinic evolution. Armor, this project suggests, can be thought of as part of a posthuman assemblage that collects and develops various narrative strands about prosthetic transformations.

²⁴ Carolyn Springer, *Armour and Masculinity*, 4.

Chapter 1

Chaucer's Knight and Squire: Equine Prostheses, Armorial Augmentations, and Masculine Degenerations

A nail holds a horseshoe, a horseshoe holds a horse, a horse holds a man, a man holds a castle, a castle holds a city, a city holds a land, a land holds a kingdom.

— Maximilian I¹

He was a verray, parfit gen\til knyght.
But for to tellen yow of his array,
His hors were goode, but he was not gay.
Of fustian he wered a gypon
Al bismotered with his habergeon,
For he was late ycome from his viage,
And wente for to doon his pilgrimage.

—Chaucer's Knight in the *General Prologue*.

Sets of armor, as indicated in the introduction, do not simply replace the frailties of the human body with protective prostheses. Armor is at the center of a complex network where culture and materiality intersect with the economies, temporalities, and discourses concerned with the body's potential for transformation. Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is a narrative network that shows how fourteenth-century armorial prostheses are, in many respects, responses to physiological fragility and to degenerative contagion, which in many instances are used as a metaphor for moral and spiritual decay. More specifically, Chaucer's narrative provides a discourse on armor through the paternal

¹ For further context about this quote, see Larry Silver, "Shining Armor: Emperor Maximilian, Chivalry, and War," *Artful Armies, Beautiful Battles: Art and Warfare in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Pia Cueno (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2002): 61-75.

relationship between two figures from *The Canterbury Tales*— the Knight, and his son, the Squire.

The Knight and Squire's relationship is not established in a traditional, linear narrative. Rather, their relationship is mediated by, and best understood through, how they are described in the *General Prologue*, and by the stories they tell to their fellow pilgrims. By focusing on what they wear and what they ride, we can approach how the Knight's and Squire's prostheses shape our understanding of chivalric identity and medieval male bodies in relation to fourteenth-century technology. For the Knight, his rusted armor and old horse signifies his degeneration; for the Squire, his tale of the brass steed, a hybrid of both armor and horse, signifies his potential for growth and his resistance to the very degeneration his father embodies. Moreover, as an assemblage, the man-armor-horse body exemplifies attempts at self-fashioning; the rusted armor and the brass steed function as material expressions of the fragmented chivalric self.

Historically, both armored equine bodies and armored human bodies were understood not as a whole, but as fragmented parts. Equestrian armor was composed of at least a dozen parts—from the chafron (head armor) to the crupper (rear-body armor). Likewise, human armor could be composed of at least twenty-two parts—from the helmet to the greaves.² Every body part, every opening, was considered vulnerable, and from the eleventh century onwards, knights covered their chargers in trappings of fabric or chainmail. By Chaucer's death in 1400, full steel plate armor for horses and knights

² Scott Fliegel, *Arms and Armor: The Cleveland Museum of Art* (New York: Abrams, 1998), 43. Fliegel's work offers an exhaustive array of visuals depicting various pieces of equestrian and human armor.

was developed. However, while both horse and man had their individual pieces of armor, it was the stirrup, the harness, and the saddle that was shared between bodies, and ultimately rendered the horse-rider as a proto-cyborgian assemblage whose very form was predicated on attachable and detachable prostheses.

The interrelationship between armor, knight, and horse is essential to the process of constructing masculine identity, and it has been understood by medieval culture at an allegorical level. For instance, medieval writers such as Ramon Llull have established that the horse has been the metaphor for the male body and its passions. More specifically, the bridle becomes a metaphor for temperance, and the tester, equine head armor, represents the virtue of reason.³ These are significant distinctions: just as the knight's body is contained by his armor, so too is the horse contained within its own prostheses that mediate the horse-man hybrid. It is the horse's prosthetic body, from the tester to the spurs, which symbolize its temperance and reason, not the horse's biological parts. When stripped of these prosthetic devices, a knight becomes vulnerable, and the horse degenerates back into an uncontrolled beast: obedience turns to defiance, reason turns into madness.

³ Ramon Llull, *The Book of the Order of Chivalry*, trans. William Caxton. ed. F.S. Ellis (Barrie, Canada: Sovereign Press Canada, 2009), 63-69. Ramon Llull explores the meaning of the bridle: “a hors is gyuen a brydel, and the raynes of the brydel ben gyuen in the hondes of the Knyghtm by cause that the Knyght may at his will hold his hors and refrayne him. And thus sygnefyeth that a Knyghte oughte to refrayne his tongue and hold that speke no fowler wordes ne false [...] in his hardynesse he have reason and attemperaunce” (68). Of the tester, Llull writes: “To his hors is gyuen in his hede a testiere ti sygnefyeth that a Knyght ought to do none armes without reason [...] And al in lyke wyse as the testier kepeth and defendeth the hede of the hors, ryght so reason kepeth and defendeth a Knyght fro blame and shame” (69).

Just as superheroes have sidekicks, knights have their horses. Both the Knight and the Squire demonstrate an intriguing relationship between man, armor, and beasts, primarily horses, in the formulation of the male body.⁴ Chaucer's Knight is a "centaurian" composition of man, rusted armor, and old horse, and both armor and horse reveal significant elements of the knight's degeneration, identity, and role in fourteenth century Europe. The horse that the Squire rides reflects his youth and energy, but it is the Squire's story of the brass steed that is more relevant because the steed is a reinterpretation of the man-armor-horse body. The brass steed presents a closer look at medieval technology and the rise of the automata as an augmentative prosthesis. The brass steed's "regenerative" abilities protect its rider, and it is a counterexample to the Knight's degenerative rust, which acts like a contagion that consumes not just armor, but the very bodies that the armor is meant to protect.

Recent scholarship concerned with the Knight and the Squire has proven useful in how we currently read Chaucer's work. Marc S. Guidry explores the rhetorical and

⁴ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "The Inhuman Circuit." *Thinking the Limits of the Body*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 179. Examples of inhuman circuits are seen in other works. For instance, in the *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda*, Odin's mobility is enhanced by his eight-legged horse, Sleipnir; moreover, Odin's ravens, Huginn and Muninn, function prosthetically by enhancing his sight and compensating for his missing eye. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain is fragmented, tested, and degenerated through the course of the alliterative poem, but he has his sturdy warhorse, Gringolet. Even in the sixteenth century, the heroic knights in *The Faerie Queene* are, at least initially, inseparable from their steeds. By the early seventeenth century, Miguel de Cervantes arms his old hero, Alonso Quijano, not just with a barber basin for a helm and the knightly name, Don Quixote de la Mancha, but also a frail, weary horse, Rocinante. The horse, as a hybrid of technic and biological armor, is significant to the chivalric body because so much of masculine agency is dependent on the man-armor-horse relationship.

political contexts in the *Knight's Tale*, particularly its use of parliamentary language that makes readers aware of "powerful patronage networks."⁵ Joshua R. Eyler and John P. Sexton's reading of the Knight focuses on the motif of chaos. For Eyler and Sexton, the spaces of battle, particularly the grove, give Chaucer an "arena in which to work out ideas of the violence inherent to life and the chaos that results from trying to impose symbolic resolutions to create order."⁶ Celia M. Lewis approaches Chaucer through historical paradigms and sees his work as a liminal site of Muslim-Christian contact. Lewis reads the Knight as a model-crusader, and together with the *Monk's Tale* and the *Man of Law's Tale*, Chaucer presents a "mirror where Christians drawn to violence by faith might find reflected their Muslim counterparts."⁷ While the Knight is fictional, she argues, the events alluded to in his portrait represent actual crusading campaigns.⁸ Furthermore, contrary to the negative connotation of the Knight as a mercenary, Lewis suggests that crusading was a respectable occupation.⁹

Perhaps the most compelling scholarship of the *Knight's Tale* is presented by Sachi Shimomura, whose analysis parallels my own study to an extent. Not unlike my

⁵ Marc S. Guidry, "The Parliament of Gods and Men in the Knight's Tale," *The Chaucer Review* 43.2 (2008): 141.

⁶ Joshua R. Eyler and John P. Sexton, "Once More to the Grove: A Note on Symbolic Space in the Knight's Tale," *The Chaucer Review* 40.4 (2008): 436.

⁷ Celia M. Lewis, "History, Mission, and Crusade in the Canterbury Tales," *The Chaucer Review* 42.4 (2008): 354.

⁸ Lewis, "History, Mission, and Crusade," 355.

⁹ Lewis, "History, Mission, and Crusade," 356.

take on degeneration versus regeneration, her reading of Chaucer's work effectively demonstrates the concept of stasis versus non-stasis in the *Knight's Tale*. Her criticism focuses primarily on Arcite and Palamon, and she calls both kinsmen "the walking dead" because they exist in the liminal stasis between life and death, action and inaction.¹⁰ Shimomura further suggests that the Knight and his tale represent the "unstable stasis" linked with chivalry, a flawed ideology that nonetheless "surpasses historical change."¹¹ Shimomura briefly compares the Knight's story with the Squire in her concluding pages: if the Knight represents stasis, the Squire represents the end of stasis. Chivalry, in this regard, is a liminal ideology torn between the past and the future.

While earlier criticisms of *The Squire's Tale* tended to concentrate on the narrative's fragmentary form and ambiguous structure, recent critics have focused on the tale as a locus of exchange, whether of animals, commodities, or literary allusions. For example, Lesley Kordecki provides a reading of the tale's nonhuman bodies and "controlled animality," insisting the tale is a narrative experiment that must "inevitably fail."¹² Others, such as Craig Berry, read the Squire and his tale through its literary traditions, pointing out that critics are quick to seize on the brass steed's intertextual

¹⁰ Sachi Shimomura, "The Walking Dead in Chaucer's Knight's Tale," *The Chaucer Review* 48.1 (2013):1.

¹¹ Shimomura, "The Walking Dead," 3.

¹² Lesley Kordecki, "Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*: Animal Discourse, Women, and Subjectivity," *The Chaucer Review* 36.3 (2002), 279, 288.

allusions and historical roots as the source of its meaning.¹³ Kathryn Lynch and Alan Ambrisco's respective works identify the significance of the tale's non-Christian characters and exoticized, yet familiar, setting, suggesting that the newfound appreciation of *The Squire's Tale* is the result of more medievalists examining precolonial discourses of Orientalism.¹⁴ Finally, Patricia Clare Ingham and Britton Harwood hone in on the enchantment and innovation in Khan's court and the practice of gift giving.¹⁵ My inquiry into the meaning of the brass steed takes into special consideration its role as a crafted material object meant to accessorize a knight. The brass steed represents the potential for crafting the masculine self, and as a thing of artifice, the brass steed is essential to both the Squire and the diegesis he constructs. On the one hand, this process of self-fashioning is material; as Scott Lightsey states, "The production of manmade marvels is every bit as important as fashion and other sumptuary matters in the projection of courtly prerogatives."¹⁶ On the other hand, agreeing with E.R. Truitt, I would argue that the brass

¹³ Craig Berry, "Flying Sources: Classical Authority in Chaucer's Squire's Tale" *ELH*. 68.2 (2001), 287.

¹⁴ Alan Ambrisco, "It lyth nat in my tonge": Occupatio and Otherness in the Squire's Tale," *The Chaucer Review*, Volume 38.3 (2004) 205-228.

¹⁵ Britton J. Harwood, "Chaucer and the Gift (If There Is Any)," *Studies in Philology* 103.1 (Winter 2006), 26-46.

¹⁶ Scott Lightsey, *Manmade Marvels in Medieval Culture and Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 8. Lightsey's work is one of the most recent, and useful, studies of medieval automata. His work establishes contextual insights to the history of automata, particularly in Ricardian England. As impactful as automata were during the twelfth century, they were never fully realized beyond the drawn page. Examples of these constructs are difficult to locate, and only during the fourteenth century did they become more prominent and proficient in their function.

stead, like other literary automata, is a narrative device essential to the storyteller's own construction of identity—in this case, both the Squire's and Chaucer's.¹⁷

The man-armor-horse body in the *Canterbury Tales* can be approached from two directions. First is the Knight's description within the *General Prologue* and how his rusty armor correlates with the degradation of the chivalric body in *The Knight's Tale*. Second is the Squire's description of the brass steed in the Squire's respective tale. The Knight is described in idealized, lofty terms; the Knight has the honor of being the first story teller in the pilgrim's game, and the first pilgrim to be described at length in the *General Prologue*. The narrator describes the Knight as a world traveler who has been to the farthest reaches of Christendom. The Knight, according to the narrator, has fought in fifteen battles, and has fought for the values of chivalry: truth, honor, freedom, and courtesy.¹⁸ In fact, *The Knight's Tale* attempts to focus on these chivalric and courtly values amidst civil and fraternal violence. The tale follows two captive knights, Arcite and Palamon who fall in love with a beautiful maiden, Emelye. Chivalric oaths of loyalty

¹⁷ E.R. Truitt, "'Trei poete, sages dotors, qui mout soient di nigromance': Knowledge and Automata in Twelfth-Century French Literature," *Configurations* 12.2 (2004): 172. Truitt states, "As creators of imaginary, mimetic worlds, intended to surpass in splendor, wealth, wonder, and courtliness the world that the poets and their audiences inhabited, the fictional automata become an instrument of self-fashioning on the part of the poets." In this essay, Truitt primarily discusses examples of automata in the romances; in her longer dissertation, *From Magic to Mechanism: Medieval Automata, 1100-1550*, she discusses other kinds of automata. See also Linda M. Strauss, "Reflections in a Mechanical Mirror: automata as Doubles and as Tools," *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present* 10 (1996): 194. She notes automata "exist at the margins of everyday existence."

¹⁸ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), lines 43-78.

fail, and Arcite and Palamon, who are cousins, fight for Emelye. The duel between the two kinsmen leads to Arcite's tragic death. These events demonstrate the inevitable degeneration of the chivalric male body. Likewise, the Knight's armor, as a result of his many engagements, is the weather-worn, fragmented, and rusted antithesis of the ideal knightly body enclosed from all external dangers.

Whereas the Knight is aged and experienced, the Squire is described as a playful, singing bachelor with youthful features.¹⁹ Fittingly, the Squire's unfinished tale focuses on unity, life, and regeneration. The tale begins with King Cambyuskan's birthday, and with the gifts bestowed on the Eastern king by a nameless knight.²⁰ In honor of the king's life, a series of magnificent gifts are offered, but the one that attracts the most awe from a courtly audience is the brass steed. While each gift augments human abilities in its own respective way—a ring that allows the wearer to speak to birds, for example—the wonder of the brass steed, as an armored automaton, provides the most compelling example of augmentation and protection. Those who ride the steed can traverse vast distances quickly, similar to the concept of teleportation usually found in Science Fiction. While the Squire's story optimistically moves forward, the Knight's exhaustive tale leads to the finality of death.

¹⁹ Chaucer, *General Prologue*, lines 79-100.

²⁰ Cambyuskan is also known by the more familiar name, Genghis Khan, the Mongol emperor who ruled much of Eurasia during the late twelfth century.

“The Rusting Disease” and the Mercenary-Knight

Rust, and other forms of corroded, fragmented metal, function as a subtle yet powerful aesthetic foil that undermines the idealized conceptions of “shining” knights in the medieval and early modern canon. While rusty armor is presented in other works, Chaucer’s rusty Knight marks an important point of origin for later examples of rusty figures in literature.²¹ For instance, besides paste boards and barber basins, Don Quixote wears rusty armor: “He cleaned an old suit of armour, which had belonged to some of his ancestors, and which he found in his garret, where it had lain for several ages quite covered over the mouldiness and rust.”²² Quixote’s accoutrements— the old horse, Rocinante, and his rusted armor— signal both the uselessness of the chivalric ideal and his continually degenerating state: his feeble age, his physical frailties, and his unstable mental faculties.

In Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, a clear dichotomy is presented: while each respective hero dons armor that is either dismantled or dented, the monstrous villains they conquer are affiliated with rust. Rust, and its associations with disease, are introduced with the rusty dagger wielded by Wrath in Book I of Spenser’s work:

²¹ *Four Middle English Romances: Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Eglamour or Artois, Sir Tryamour*, trans. Harriet Hudson (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications), <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/hudson-four-middle-english-romances>. In *Octavian*, a fourteenth century romance, rust functions as an adjective to describe armor: “Ane hawberke abowne lete he falle, /Full rysty [rusty] weren the mayles alle, /And alle his atyre bydene.” In the works presented below, rust becomes more than an adjective and holds specific meanings that deepen each respective narratives.

²² Miguel Cervantes, *Don Quixote De La Mancha*, trans. Tobias Smollet. (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1986), 30.

Bitter despight, with rancours rusty knife,
And fretting grieffe the enemy of life;
All these, and many euils moe haunt ire,
The swelling Splene, and Frenzy raging rife,
The shaking Palsey, and Saint Fraunces fire:
Such one was Wrath, the last of this vngodly tire.²³

Rust continuously recurs as a rusty knife or “rusty blood” in multiple books in *The Faerie Queene*.²⁴ But in more fascinating instances, rust is part of the monstrous anatomy:

Redcrosse's Great Dragon of Book I has metallic scales, iron swords for teeth, and black and red spots that indicates a burned, rusted effect.²⁵ When Guyon encounters Mammon in Book II, the demon of greed is described as having an “yron coate all ouergrowne with rust.”²⁶ The Blatant Beast that terrorizes Books V and VI is a grotesque hell hound whose ravenous maw is composed of a thousand tongues:

For that beastes teeth, which wounded you tofore,
Are so exceeding venemous and keene,
Made all of rusty yron, rankling sore.²⁷

If being bitten by the beast's rusty teeth is to be inflicted with incurable, festering sores, the beast demonstrates, like Spenser's other monstrous antagonists, the strongest connections between rust and contagion. The text emphasizes the juxtaposition between the defiled, rusted demons and the heroic, armored knights who must destroy them to

²³ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*. (New York: Penguin, 1978), Book I, lines 38-43.

²⁴ *The Faerie Queene*, Book I, line 33.

²⁵ *The Faerie Queene*, Book I, canto XI.

²⁶ *The Faerie Queene*, Book II, line 4.

²⁷ *The Faerie Queene*, Book VI, line 9.

ensure the sanctity of Fairyland. Rusted bodies represent a mode of bodily deterioration, but it is unlike the dented armors of various Spenserian heroes. In a discussion of medieval armor in contemporary film, Carl James Grindley reminds us that in medieval narratives, regardless of whether it is a fourteenth century text or a twentieth century film, “a filthy, dented, or incomplete suit of armor sometimes indicates moral superiority.”²⁸ Dented armor might be associated with experience and survival, but it does not mean it is rusted; instead, degenerative rust is a contagion of the monstrous and corrupt.

A more thorough discussion of Spenser’s work occurs in the third chapter of this project; Spenser, like Chaucer, utilizes the rust motif to show chivalric masculinity’s susceptibility to corruption. In fact, rusty armor is antithetical to principles of chivalry. Chaucer’s narrative demonstrates that traditional medieval hierarchy constantly stands at the threshold of discordance, instability, and penetrative disruptiveness, as seen in the surprising, and many times rude and comical, transitional interruptions during pilgrims’ tales. While the pilgrims’ communal dynamics demonstrate a series of attempts to negotiate their purpose and social position on the road to Canterbury, a specific commonality interweaves within the series of narratives. Chaucer’s Knight, like the other pilgrims, is part of a literary tradition where sin manifests itself as a physical contagion. For example, in medieval sermons and poetry, the sins of pride and lust are linked with

²⁸ Carl James Grindley, “Arms and the Man: The Curious Inaccuracy of Medieval Arms and Armor in Contemporary Film,” *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, Volume 36.1 (2006), 15.

diseases like melancholia and leprosy.²⁹ Contagion, it seems, is a recurring trope that seeks to destabilize friendship, loyalty and communal tranquility. In this light, rust is a fitting knight's "disease" because of how it spreads and deteriorates armor.

The most interesting aspect of the Knight's physical description occurs when the narrator states the Knight is "Al bismotered with his habergeon."³⁰ The 'bismotered' image is continuously recognized as a mark of spiritual corruption, and this degradation is manifested by a physical erosion, not unlike the marks of disease we attribute to the Cook's festering leg wound and accursed breath. According to the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED), 'bismotered' is an ambiguously interpreted term exclusive to Chaucer's Knight.³¹ To be 'bismotered' is to be bespattered and spoiled, and Larry Benson, in his edition of *The Canterbury Tales*, glosses the 'bismotered' line as "stained by (rust from) his coat of mail."³² Further research in the MED supports a link between "bismotered" and the Middle English synonyms for rust. As the MED archive demonstrates, "rust" is a corruptive force that indicates moral, spiritual, and physical

²⁹ Bryan Lee Grigsby, *Pestilence in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 80. See also Holly Johnson, "A Fifteenth-Century Sermon Enacts the Seven Deadly Sins," *Sin in Medieval and Early Modern Culture: The Tradition of the Seven Deadly Sins*, ed. Richard G. Newhauser and Susan J. Ridyard (Suffolk, UK: York Medieval Press, 2012), 112. While there is no mention of armor, these works discuss how sins were attributed to specific diseases. Grigsby in particular translates medieval French texts that illustrate the sin/disease dichotomy.

³⁰ *The General Prologue*, line 76.

³¹ "bismotered (A76)," *Middle English Dictionary*, University of Michigan, 24 April 2013. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>.

³² Larry D. Benson is the editor of *The Canterbury Tales* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 6.

corrosion.³³ Moreover, rust is associated with “freten,” a verb analogous to the act of consumption and destruction, specifically the kind caused by diseases that mortify the flesh.³⁴ Interestingly, the term also functions on a surface level we can attribute to armor— to scrape away at the surface or destroy.³⁵

The Knight’s ‘bismotered’ attire is not just a sign of humility and piety, but a signifier of potential moral corruption. In fact, it is too simple to think of the Knight's spoiled attire as a metonym of the pilgrim’s imperfect soul, one whose moral stain cannot be removed even when great deeds are accomplished. For instance, Paul Strohm suggests Chaucer’s Knight is willing to spoil his body and armor to reach spiritual transcendence.³⁶ Strohm’s reading of the Knight essentially defends the traditional view that the Knight is an ideal figure of modesty, wisdom and meekness. For Strohm, if the Knight is on a penitential journey, his fragmented appearance represents the removal of the material aspects of his crusade for the sake of his pilgrimage. This is a logical conclusion, but his reading only scratches the surface. I argue the Knight's rusted armor represents the degeneration of chivalry, and he becomes the antithesis to western culture’s idealization of the knightly figure. Chaucer’s depiction of the Knight is not idealistic nor cynical; rather, Chaucer’s Knight is perhaps the most realistic depiction of

³³ “rust (d4.6030, e1.4),” *Middle English Dictionary*, University of Michigan, 24 April 2013. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>.

³⁴ “freten (1a – 5a),” *Middle English Dictionary*, University of Michigan, 24 April 2013. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>.

³⁵ See note 34 above.

³⁶ Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 85.

the medieval knight. The Knight might be modest and courteous in speech, but his rusted appearance acknowledges the intrinsic violence of chivalry. The rust, therefore, is a representation of his physical, and arguably moral, degeneration.

Terry Jones' exhaustive reading of Chaucer's Knight provides a foundation for understanding the pilgrim. Jones argues that the Knight is a medieval mercenary experienced in foreign battlefields rather than an idealized figure in shining armor. Jones' focus on how history informs our understanding of the Knight provides a critical and relevant analysis of the Knight's presence in Chaucer's work. More specifically, Jones suggests that traditional imaginings of the Knight are not based on a medieval understanding— they are based on the neomedievalisms of the nineteenth century that romanticized knights as shining, moral, heroic lovers. Like armor in need of cleansing from rust, Jones states that “there are many layers of eighteenth-century gilt, Victorian enamel and the twentieth-century brown paint to be scraped off before we can see the pure metal of Chaucer's meaning, shining as bright as the day he wrote the lines.”³⁷ Chaucer's Knight, therefore, is not simply a warrior of Christendom, but a complex figure whose appearance and tale constructs a realistic view of what chivalric violence entailed in the Middle Ages. *The Knight's Tale* itself, as Jones dramatically describes, is a “hymn to tyranny” that reduces Arcite and Palamon into beastly hybrids who have no choice but to enact raw violence against each other.³⁸ Arguably, given the evidence, the

³⁷ Terry Jones, *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary* (London: Methuen, 1985), xi.

³⁸ Jones, *Chaucer's Knight*, 232.

violence the Knight describes in his tale is the same violence he may have enacted in his campaigns on foreign soil.

Violence and Degeneration in *The Knight's Tale*

Fittingly, Arcite and Palamon function as representations of the Knight's degenerative state. Despite being stripped of armor when they are captured by Theseus, the young knights are nevertheless contained within what can be considered metaphorical “architectural armor,” the confines of an imprisoning tower. This kind of architectural armor and iconography is linked with the ritualistic process of adorning the vulnerable body with both physical and spiritual defenses. Susan Crane notes an interesting pattern— if genre conventions emphasize the knight’s close link with the accoutrements that adorn his body, arming scenes detail a ritualization that progresses from augmentation to bodily sacrifice and destruction. The “ritual” begins with

an impressive series of pieces buckled, latched, and laced on the knight, one by one, until at last he mounts his horse and lifts his lance. Combat scenes typically reverse the process: knight’s first break lances and fall or descend from their horses, to be rendered step by step more vulnerable, as shields are smashed, hauberks pierced, and flesh sliced. These paradigmatic scenes assemble and dismantle the mounted knight to establish a continuum from body parts to pieces of equipment, and from the destruction of equipment to the wounding of the flesh.³⁹

This pattern is presented in the Knight’s tale where the degeneration of the chivalric male body is signaled by the loss of both crafted and organic prostheses. Wounding the biological body parallels the destruction of mechanized parts— knights and horses alike

³⁹ Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 145.

are constructed, sacrificed and then dismantled to preserve the chivalric ideal. Thus, when Arcite and Palamon fight, we witness the violent fragmentation of chivalric man-horse bodies when both of their companies collide:

In goon the speres ful sadly in arrest;
In gooth the sharpe spore into the syde.
Ther shyveren shaftes upon sheeldes thikke;
He feeleth thurgh the herte-spoon the prikke.
Up spryngen speres twenty foot on highte;
Out goon the swerdes as the silver brighte;
There helmes they tohewen and toshrede;
Out brest the blood with stierne stremes rede;
With myghty maces the bones they tobreste.
He thurgh the thikkeste of the throng gan threste.⁴⁰

This passage is significant because it highlights the process in which armor fails and bodies are dismantled. This process, as indicated in the alliterative language, emphasizes penetration first and bodily destruction second. The first six lines, for instance, focus on the image of spears rending armor and flesh. The battle sequence is enhanced by the descriptive words, as well as the constant “s” sounds that create a “swooshing” movement in a scene where spears stab and swords shred. Movement leads to finality, and the last four lines emphasize how bodies in armor are destroyed; helmets provide little defense against a sword strike, and maces penetrate through armor and bones. Penetration leads to a destructive entanglement of opposing forces, and the unrestrained entanglement of combat leads to the eventual disentanglement of the accoutrements that define knightly bodies. The unraveling of bodies reminds us that while armor represents

⁴⁰ Chaucer, *The Knight's Tale*, lines 2602-12.

the seemingly impenetrable chivalric body, it does not guarantee protection. Likewise, chivalric ideology can be weakened, dismantled, and subjected to contradictions.

Arcite and Palamon demonstrate how degeneration leads to a further physical metamorphoses: when the prostheses that link both man and horse and armor are separated, the disconnect leads to a bestial change. Once Arcite and Palamon are isolated from their equine counterparts, their bodies degenerate further, and the Knight describes how they transform into uncontrollable, ravenous beasts. Chivalry has been associated not just with armor, but by the heraldic beasts emblazoned on the armor, especially lions and tigers.⁴¹ Behind the chivalric knight, it seems, lies an enclosed beast:

Unhorsed hath ech oother of hem tweye.
Ther nas no tygre in the vale of Galgopheye,
Whan that hir whelp in stole whan it is lite,
So crueel on the hunte as is Arcite
For jelous herte upon this Palamon
Ne in Belmarye ther nys so fel leon,
That hunted is, or for his hunger wood,
Ne of his praye desireth so the blood,
As Palamon to sleen his foo Arcite.⁴²

Ultimately, Arcite wins the battle. Ironically, however, due to the divine interventions of Pluto and Saturn, the same prosthetic technologies utilized to win the battle (by once enhancing his body) turn against him—his horse becomes uncontrollable and crushes Arcite: “His brest tobrosten with his sadel-bowe.”⁴³ Interestingly, this line does not

⁴¹ A.C. Fox-Davies, *A Complete Guide to Heraldry* (New York: Skyhorse, 1909): 172. According to Fox-Davies, the most common heraldic symbol is the lion, followed by the tiger.

⁴² Chaucer, *The Knight's Tale*, lines 2625-33.

⁴³ Chaucer, *The Knight's Tale*, lines 2686-91.

emphasize the horse; it is the prosthetic saddle that crushes Arcite. The great fears of armor-wearers are realized in this passage; once armor technologies corrode in battle, they are rendered useless, and they fail to protect him. The body becomes “permanently encased” in armor— both organic and crafted prostheses construct the tomb that encases Arcite. As we will later see, Arcite's death by armor and horse is the antithesis of the Squire's brass steed, an automaton that protects knightly bodies.

The passages that describe Arcite's battle and death are significant because the Knight describes Arcite's injuries at a physiological level. When both organic and crafted armor fail, Arcite's injuries are described as an untreatable contagion that consumes the body:

Swelleth the brest of Arcite, and the soore
Encreesseth at his herte moore and moore.
The clothered blood, for any lechecraft,
Corrupteth, and is in his bouk ylaft,
That nether veyne-blood, ne ventusyng,
Ne drynke of herbes may ben his helpynge.
The vertu expulsif, or animal,
Fro thilke vertu cleped natural
Ne may the *venym* voyden ne expelle.
The pipes of his longes gonne to *swelle*,
And every lacerte in his brest adoun
Is shent with *venym and corrupcioun*.⁴⁴

Given the passage's deliberate repetition of corruption, venom, and swelling, death comes like a corruptive disease that infiltrates Arcite's body through a festering wound. In fact, as the above passage indicates, the emphasis on “swelle” and “swelleth” suggests infection, rather than physical injury, all medical care cannot heal. According to the

⁴⁴ Chaucer, *The Knight's Tale*, lines 2743-54. [italics mine]

Middle English Dictionary, “swelle” is defined as the “morbid swelling in the body” and was a term most commonly found in medieval medical discourse.⁴⁵

Interestingly, the alternative use of “swelle” is linked with the deadly sins, namely pride.⁴⁶ Swelling, in the context of medieval Europe, was seen by many as sins manifesting as diseases. According to Holly Johnson, “leprosy is likened to pride because leprosy makes the flesh swell up, so pride does likewise.”⁴⁷ Arcite’s death is also a consequence of the pride that comes with his fleeting victory. He wins the battle, then dies unexpectedly. Moreover, Arcite’s death shows where the language of war and the language of contagion intersect. Both war and disease are associated with penetration, invasion, and corruption, and such language is used when bodies unravel.⁴⁸ Similar to the spears penetrating armored bodies during Arcite and Palamon’s battle, a contagion, like a weapon, can invade the body’s defenses. The violence of war becomes a metaphor for infection. Once penetrated by a disease, the body deteriorates, and the very armor meant to protect the body fails and becomes the reason for the body’s destruction. Given his tale, the Knight’s own corroded, rusted armor can be associated with real infections; tetanus

⁴⁵ “swelle a54b/b,” *Middle English Dictionary*, University of Michigan, 24 April 2013. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>. The MED cites *An Interpolated Middle English Version of the Anatomy of Guy de Chauliac* as an example: “Men leten blode for diseses of þe y3en, of þe veines þat ben aboute þe y3en, and off þe tunge, ffor bocches and swelles [L flegmonibus] þat ben aboute þe parties of þe necke.”

⁴⁶ “swelle 6c 30/17,” *Middle English Dictionary*, University of Michigan, 24 April 2013. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>.

⁴⁷ Johnson, “Seven Deadly Sins,” 112.

⁴⁸ This will be explored further in Chapter Two.

seems fitting, since it has long been linked with rusted metals. Once a rusty nail penetrates the skin, for instance, an infection begins: muscle spasms lead to the inability to breathe, and the body convolutes and degenerates.

Rust and Chivalry's 'Staged Inauthenticity'

Arcite's destruction, or deconstruction, in *The Knight's Tale* highlights the failure of armor to defend chivalric bodies from contamination, not just by rusting disease, but by new ideas, new fashions, and new technologies that open once enclosed chivalric bodies and make them more susceptible to degeneration. Moreover, the Knight's narrative reinforces how we are to understand his appearance in the *General Prologue*. For Gerald Morgan, the Knight's fashion is a "reminder that the Knight has spent his life at the sharp end of war, for the presence of rust is a realistic detail that focuses at once on the reality of campaigning."⁴⁹ The Knight's excursions to Alexandria and Russia were immediately followed by the pilgrimage to Canterbury the moment he stepped foot on English soil, "For he was late ycome from his viage."⁵⁰ In other words, the Knight is 'bismotered' because he simply does not have the time to cleanse his equipment between travels. To believe that the Knight is pious neglects the significance of rust as contagion, and I contend that the addition of rust— as a "disease" infecting the Knight's armor— undermines the concept of the Knight as a simple, humble figure. The Knight's rusted

⁴⁹ Gerald Morgan, "The Worthiness of Chaucer's Worthy Knight," *The Chaucer Review* 44.2 (2009), 141.

⁵⁰ Chaucer, *The Knight's Tale*, line 77.

armor offers a more complex reading of the Knight and the historical and cultural relevance of his appearance.

In the *General Prologue*, the Knight is described as “meeke as is a mayde.”⁵¹ For Jones, the Knight’s seeming humility does not indicate true modesty, and when coupled by constant reminders of his travels, the Knight’s ‘been-there-done-that’ attitude demonstrates a sense of stolen valor, self-righteousness and an acute awareness that image and presence lends to a validation of power.⁵² This level of machismo is what Springer calls “staged inauthenticity” used during the utilization of armor for masculine performance.⁵³ Chivalric masculinity relies on staged inauthenticity, and uses fashion as a theatrical, and at times deceptive, method for social and political advancement. Chaucer’s Knight is a representation of the international, cross-cultural English mercenary, and his appearance and status is defined by his movements across various geopolitical boundaries.

Building his argument on A.A. Dent’s reading of the Knight’s warhorse as illustrated in the Ellesmere Manuscript, Jones suggests the horse (and therefore the Knight) came from expeditions in Germany or the Italian city-states. The branding mark “M” on the horse’s rear leg is the first clue. “M” might stand for Munster or Mecklenburg, locations known for horse breeding, or the brand might stand for

⁵¹ Chaucer, *General Prologue*, line 40.

⁵² Jones, *Chaucer’s Knight*, 167.

⁵³ Carolyn Springer, *Armour and Masculinity in the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 20.

Marienburg, the headquarters of the Teutonic Knights. Likewise, the “M” brand could represent the Italian city-state of Milan, a chief employer of English mercenaries, and a city Chaucer visited to negotiate with the infamous English mercenary, John Hawkwood.⁵⁴ If the warhorse is of German-Italian origin, then we can surmise that both the Knight's illustration in the Ellesmere Chaucer, and his description in the *General Prologue*, are also constructed by the aesthetics of various geopolitical areas, particularly Germany.

The illustration of the Knight in the Ellesmere Manuscript does not provide the idealized image of his body: any semblance of armor is “hidden” by his fustian; weapons are absent, save for a dagger painted with rusted, reddish hues. If the Knight’s overall dark and reddish color scheme arguably illustrates rust, it is a sharp contrast to his bright, strong and sprightly horse: “His hors were goode, but he was not gay.”⁵⁵ Interestingly, this line demonstrates an odd de-synchronization between the horse and Knight. This is disturbing, since the noble knight is meant to be in perfect symbiosis with his noble steed. In the Ellesmere Chaucer, it is only the Knight's horse who can be visually identified with the heraldic insignias branded onto its skin. If armor can easily be lost and gained, and if the horse can be considered armor, we are left questioning if the horse truly belonged to the Knight.

⁵⁴ Jones, *Chaucer's Knight*, 29. See also A.A. Dent, “Chaucer and the Horse,” *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society*, ix (1959).

⁵⁵ Chaucer, *The General Prologue*, line 74.

Interestingly, roughly around a century after Chaucer's death, Germany became the homeland of the infamous mercenaries known as the Landsknecht. According to Springer, the mercenary fashion from Germany was influential in how soldierly attire was redefined:

The puffed-and-slashed style derived from the costume of the Landsknecht, the Germany mercenary soldier. [...] These soldiers had an unsavory reputation and were conspicuous due to their elaborate dress; their doublets were deliberately slashed in the front, back, and sleeves. [...] The slashes seem to have been intended to represent battle scars that these mercenaries earned in the field; they are an ironic and improvised variation on the insignia of regular troops, a brash display of a particular style of machismo which their contemporaries found both fascinating and repellent.⁵⁶

The mercenary's armor simulates maiming, penetrating and defiling a body that is scarcely armored. these mercenaries became a prominent fixture during the fifteenth century, and functioned as shock troops for Maximilian I. It is not a far stretch to ask if the Knight's segmented attire, as depicted in the Ellesmere Manuscript, might influenced the German mercenary fashions that symbolically underscored the decline of chivalry through openness and extravagance.

Historically, the mercenary-knight was useful in times of war and civil strife, but they often became threats to the very order they were meant to protect. For example, when the Great Schism of 1054 tore the Church asunder, knights— once purveyors of justice and faith— contributed to the civil strife that put Christian against Christian. The violence of the Great Schism and the Crusades, the first of which began in 1096 when

⁵⁶ Springer, *Armour and Masculinity*, 77.

internal church conflicts were ongoing, was subject to close scrutiny by those who argued that their wars did not contribute to Christendom.⁵⁷ It was better to convert heathens and pagans not simply because they were human, but perhaps more importantly to Church fathers, they were potential Christians. Moreover, as F. Donald Logan points out in his study of medieval religious institutions, conversion during both crises also became a matter of kings, and converting non-Christian royalty opened pilgrim routes that ironically yielded more economic and militaristic opportunities across geopolitical boundaries.⁵⁸ In the twelfth century, for instance, the Crusades led to the creation of the Knights Templar, a group meant to protect pilgrims. Ironically, despite taking “vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience [...] they grew in numbers and acquired considerable wealth.”⁵⁹ By the 1378, another Schism tore Christian Europe apart, and religious lines became national and political allegiances based on “confusion, suspicion, distrust, even hatred.”⁶⁰ With Europe in discord, the conversion of heathens, and the subsequent need for the “protection” of pilgrims, became part of a network that relied on traveling knight-mercenaries. Chaucer’s Knight is an example of such warriors. As the *General Prologue*

⁵⁷ Jones, *Chaucer’s Knight*, 36.

⁵⁸ Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 121.

⁵⁹ Logan, *History of the Church*, 128.

⁶⁰ Logan, *History of the Church*, 123.

indicates, the Knight fought in Alexandria, Russia, Lithuania, Spain, Morocco, Granada, and Turkey.⁶¹

The conflation of the noble knight with traveling vagabond was in part a socioeconomic issue in the Middle Ages. Ramon Llull's chivalric text indicates that men of all ranks can be chivalrous knights, but it was just easier for those who were of noble upbringing to follow the chivalric code. Simply put, a man of means can afford the armor and equipment that would define him as a knight. Llull, however, makes a key distinction about potential knights:

Chyvalry may not be mayntened withoute harnoys whiche apperteyneth to a Knyght, nor without thonourable costes and dispences which apperteyne to Chyvalrye. By cause a Squyer beyng withoute harnoys, and that hath no rychesse for to make his dispences, yf he be made Knyght, hym shold peraventure happe for nede to be a robbour, a theef, traitre, lyar or begylour, or haue some other vyces whiche brn contrary to Chyvalry.⁶²

While not the most ideal path, for Llull, the knight can rely on mercenary tactics to acquire the accoutrements of chivalry. However, doing so places the idealized concepts of chivalry on unstable ground, opening the chivalric body to interpretation and appropriation. So much of what makes a man a knight relies on pieces of equipment, but ironically, these fragments of chivalric identity are never fixed. These prostheses are prone to corrosive rust and theft, ownership is never guaranteed, and identity is fickle and easily lost.

⁶¹ Chaucer, *The General Prologue*, lines 51-62.

⁶² Ramon Llull, *The Book of the Order of Chivalry*. trans. William Caxton. ed. F.S. Ellis (Barrie, Canada: Sovereign Press Canada, 2009), 50.

Knightly Fashion and Chivalric Texts

Despite the instability of knighthood during this period, Chaucer's Knight is still described in the loftiest terms: "Ful worthy was he in his lordes ferre, / As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse, / And evere honoured for his worthynesse."⁶³ If the Knight is a mercenary, as Terry Jones argues, it was arguably a time-honored, profitable, and recognized form of knighthood. For instance, Geoffroi de Charny, a fourteenth century French knight who wrote the treatise *Livre de Chevalerie (The Book of Chivalry)*, describes the kind of respect that should be given to knights, like Chaucer's Knight, who traveled and experienced the world: "One should honor and respect such men who subject themselves in this way to physical danger and hardship in order see these strange things and make distant journey."⁶⁴ For Charny, mercenary work and plunder are an inevitable part of knighthood. In fact, Charny recognizes the courage of plundering knights; one section in *The Book of Chivalry* is devoted to "those that are brave, but too eager to plunder."⁶⁵ Given that Charny continuously admonishes the virtues of chivalry, readers might think that Charny disdains "eager plunder." Charny does state that plunder is disgraceful— but he does not cite moral grounds. Charny simply points out that "eager

⁶³ Chaucer, *The Knight's Tale*, lines 47-49.

⁶⁴ Geoffroi de Charny, *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny: Text, Context, and Translation*, ed. Richard W. Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy (University of Pennsylvania Press: 1996), 51.

⁶⁵ De Charny, *The Book of Chivalry*, 55.

plunder” is a foolhardy action that can leave knights vulnerable, or dead. Charny, like Ramon Llull, deems plunder necessary, since it funds the idealized visions of chivalry and masculine agency constructed by the equipment they obtain. But at the same time, Charny is critical of chivalry's stylistic costumes. Charny deplores excessive attention to one's own appearance; in fact, he devotes a chapter in *The Book of Chivalry* to the perils of self-fashioning: “A Good Man-at-Arms Should Not Pamper His Body.”⁶⁶ Here, Charny laments and condemns the current fashions that emasculate men and degrade the chivalric ideal on a sumptuary level.

Using the sumptuary laws of military attire already established in the 1285 Statute of Winchester, Jones claims that Chaucer's Knight “has not been wearing the legal minimum required by English law.”⁶⁷ The Knight's appearance subverts the sumptuary codes of chivalry because he is improperly clad with fragments of armor, not a complete armor set. More specifically, rather than following standard procedure, the Knight wears his fustian outside the armor. The fustian, usually made of a thick layer of cotton or wool, was an undergarment that provided an additional, practical defense, and was inextricable from the construction of the armored body. These undergarments, interestingly enough, became vogue during the fourteenth century. But conservative advocates of chivalry, like Charny, deemed these fashions subversive to the hierarchal order for two reasons. First, the fustian was initially reserved for armored knights in warfare, but these styles were appropriated by lower class servants and courtiers who wore them, not as hidden

⁶⁶ De Charny, *The Book of Chivalry*, 68-9.

⁶⁷ Jones, *Chaucer's Knight*, 132.

undergarments, but as a carnivalesque, outward display. For Charny, this appropriation undermined the knightly class. Second, the appropriation of the fustian can arguably emasculate the masculine theater of war, an act that consequently replaced the image of the seasoned warrior with a feminized dandy. Essentially, as Richard Keuper notes in his translation of Charny's work, Charny just wanted his contemporaries to be “dressed in the good old styles.”⁶⁸ Chaucer's Knight seemingly ignores the old style, and the rusted habergeon is indicative of the decline of chivalric, feudal ideals.

Moreover, how the Knight wears his armor is a demonstration of “staged inauthenticity,” one that relies on new fashion trends. This new fashion underscores the transgressions and dangers of the open, emasculated male body, the antithesis of the enclosed knightly form. Chaucer was clearly familiar with how armor was traditionally worn, as indicated by the ritual arming of Sir Thopas:

And next his sherte an aketoun,
And over that an haubergeoun
For Percyng of his herte;
And over that a fyn hawberk
Was al ywroght of Jewes werk,
Ful strong it was of plate;
And over that his cote-armour
As whit as is a lilye flour,
In which he wol debate.⁶⁹

The diminutive Sir Thopas dons armor in a specific, ritual sequence, and this demonstrates an apotropaic action meant to protect the male body against all evil. Despite being a foolhardy and farcical figure, Sir Thopas, at least, follows the chivalric dress

⁶⁸ De Charny, *The Book of Chivalry*, 35.

⁶⁹ Chaucer, *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, lines 860-8.

code. However, wearing armor properly does not necessarily mean that Chaucer praises Sir Thopas. Arguably, Sir Thopas is ridiculed for his stature and lofty ideals because the character represents the faults of chivalry's staged inauthenticity. Sir Thopas might appear as a knight because he knows how to put on armor, but it does not mean he has the battle-hardened experience we associate with Chaucer's Knight. While Chaucer's Knight represents what the historical knight did and how chivalric ideology has degraded, Sir Thopas's enthusiasm for knighthood is an anti-chivalric parody of romance. However, unlike Sir Thopas, Chaucer's Knight is incapable of a complete enclosure. In the Knight's description in *The General Prologue*, there is no mention of a shield, helmet or heraldic device, fragments of chivalry essential to the construction and defense of knightly identity. While the lack of arms and armor is befitting one who is on a pilgrimage, knights tended to be an exception to the rule. Templars, for instance, "did not give up their arms but were armed monks."⁷⁰

Chaucer's intentional omissions of the Knight's identity validate the reading of the Knight as mercenary. More importantly, the sense of lack underscored by the Knight's incomplete chivalric body reminds us that the dismantled, rusty body is analogous to the body contaminated by contagion—both are open, vulnerable, degenerative bodies that are easily unraveled and fragmented. Hardly a representation of purity and cleanliness, the Knight is neither an idealized pilgrim nor an allegorically soiled, imperfect figure whose sins must be absolved through the ritual, spiritual cleansing of pilgrimage. The

⁷⁰ Logan, *History of the Church*, 128.

Knight demonstrates a certain level of complexity and malleability. In fact, we can never be sure as to the knight's true identity nor his loyalties. This, however, might have been an intentional move for Chaucer: as Sarah Gordon states, “changing the colors of one's armor and remaining nameless provide opportunities for altering the objective construction of identity that the society furnishes.”⁷¹ Chaucer's Knight, arguably, might represent the Free Companies infamous for their recorded atrocities, and the uncertainty of the Knight's character might lend to an open critique of the mercenary-knights' constructed, malleable identities.⁷² According to Claire Sponsler, mercenary groups like the Free Companies “create their own patterns of life and define themselves through their distinctive institutions, beliefs and customs, social relations, and the uses of objects, thus developing symbolic systems that give expressive form to their social and material life-experiences.”⁷³

While Sponsler focuses primarily on medieval relics and theories of cultural appropriation, her theorizations are resonant with chivalric practices, and can be applied to how mercenary-knights appropriate the accoutrements, codes, and semiotics of chivalry to justify acts of rape, pillage and slaughter. Chaucer's Knight might, according to the narrator, love chivalry and its principles of truth, honor, freedom, and courtesy, but only because these are principles that fuel the violence that guarantees the mercenary-

⁷¹ Sarah Gordon, “The Man With No Name: Identity in French Arthurian Verse Romance,” *Arthuriana* 18.2 (2008): 70.

⁷² Jones, *Chaucer's Knight*, 2.

⁷³ Claire Sponsler, “In Transit: Theorizing Cultural Appropriation in Medieval Europe,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32.1 (Winter 2002): 21.

knight's livelihood and income. In fact, while Ramon Lull and Geoffroi de Charny write that a knight's ultimate goal is peace, notions of peace are antithetical to a soldier who makes a living through violence. Chaucer's Knight, in his rusted accoutrements, represents eroded chivalric values, but he seemingly has other roles. On one hand, the knight is not only a leader, but also a mediator, as seen in his symbolic kiss that helps mediate peace between the Pardoner and Host. On the other hand, the pilgrims supplement the representation of the aristocracy the Knight is meant to represent.⁷⁴

The mercenary-soldier utilizes chivalric principles in ways that corrode what the idealized male body once represented. Interestingly, however, the Squire resists his father's degenerative stage. The antithesis to the Knight's rusted, fragmentary image, degeneration, and age is physically manifested as the Squire's brass steed. Just as the mercenary supplants the obsolete, idealized knight, so armor, either ridden or worn, is always supplanted by new technologies. Armor, as Carolyn Springer has proven, is already "born" obsolete and continuously attempts to catch up to new offensive powers.⁷⁵ Just as chain mail was useless against the longbow, plate mail was useless against the cannon. The Knight's horse, as a form of armor, and the rusted armor worn to contain the male body, demonstrate that technology can be easily lost, easily corroded, and can easily turn on its user.

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Scala, "Yeoman Services: Chaucer's Knight, His Critics, and the Pleasures of Historicism," *The Chaucer Review* 45.2 (2010): 197.

⁷⁵ Springer, *Armour and Masculinity*, 6.

The Squire's Prosthetic Automata

The Squire attempts to rectify the Knight's flaws through a narrative that combines romance with technological wonder that, while fictional, reflects medieval culture's fascination with automata. Recent work on the late medieval court has demonstrated that technological change permeated Europe, especially during the fourteenth century, through the spectacle and allure of the metal automata who became focal points of technological innovation.⁷⁶ Automata such as the mechanical cock of Strasbourg or the automated astrolabe, or the imagined renderings of other mechanical creatures in manuscripts, relied on a cultural system of exchange that produced a reconfigured sociotechnical network between bodies and things. According to E.R. Truitt, "Automata are found at liminal spaces—thresholds, bridges, or tombs. Their functions are surveillance and discipline, which signal not only the liminal status of the automata themselves, but also the ways in which they enforce boundaries of epistemological legitimacy and morality."⁷⁷ Automata reflected elite cultural tastes for sumptuous spectacle, often blurring the lines between playful entertainment and strategic political—as well as material—tool. Read in the context of innovations in a related technology, namely knightly armor, the medieval automaton, like the Squire's brass steed, reminds us that the relationship between male bodies and technology, within the culture of chivalric masculinity, is in continuous flux. The Knight is in a downward trajectory towards degeneration and death, despite the countless attempts to stall the process by armoring the

⁷⁶ Lightsey, *Manmade Marvels*, 3.

⁷⁷ Truitt, "Knowledge and Automata," 172.

bodies that embody the chivalric ideal. The Squire, however, provides a counterexample to the Knight by merging wearable technology, armor, with technological spectacle, the automaton. The Squire's brass steed is thus a heightened fusion of armor and automata that attempts to surpass inferiority and finality.

Because surviving medieval automata are rare, illustrated schematics and various narratives are some of the only evidence of their potential existence.⁷⁸ The brass steed embeds Chaucer's tale within a continuous dialogue on technological marvels in both eastern and western literature. As an intertext, *The Canterbury Tales* attempts to negotiate with similar concerns found in figures like the metal bowmen of *Le Roman d'Eneas*, or the golden army and copper guards in *Le Roman d'Alexandre*, and even sets the stage for armored automata like the 'yron' Talus in *The Faerie Queene*.⁷⁹ To some extent, these metal bodies are metaphorical devices that demonstrate the consequences of flesh conjoining with metal.⁸⁰ The brass steed is also part of a literary tradition of magical horses that crosses beyond cultural and linguistic boundaries—for example, the story of the Ebony Horse in *A Thousand and One Nights*, is also capable of flight.⁸¹ The

⁷⁸ Many of the imagined renderings of automata reside in manuscript form. The few remaining artifacts that have survived the test of time reside in museums. The Strasbourg mechanical cock, for example, currently resides in the Musees des Arts Decoratifs de Strasbourg.

⁷⁹ Talus will be discussed at great length in the third chapter of this project.

⁸⁰ Wendy B. Hyman, *The Automaton in English Renaissance Literature* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), loc: 253. Kindle Edition. Hyman suggests automata are embodiments of an emerging technological revolution, and mechanistic fusion, of human bodies with various technologies that shaped a growing ontological discourse concerned with man and matter.

Orientalism of *The Squire's Tale* seems deliberately to point us in the direction of narratives that travel across cultural boundaries, becoming commodified as they cross one threshold to another. No matter how alien the brass steed seems on the surface, it demystifies one of the most familiar characters of medieval literature and culture, the armored knight in its various masculine iterations. The *Canterbury Tales* in particular provides a miniscule, if not focused, glimpse at the development and deployment of automata in the courts of late medieval Europe. Chaucer's tale reminds us that automata and armor "accessorize" bodies and spaces, and suggests the relationship between the male body, animal forms, and metal is never a simple convergence.

Unlike the Knight's complete narrative about Arcite and Palamon, Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* is an incomplete story about augmented transformation, hybridity, and prosthesis that counter the degenerative tendencies presented by the Knight and his tale. The Squire's story begins as a sweeping romance with promises of a grand adventure, an exotic setting, and magical objects that enhance those who wield them. It is these objects that make the Squire's narrative compelling. While a subplot of *The Squire's Tale*, the story of Canacee and her hawk, is equally noteworthy, it is the main story of a nameless knight, and the spectacle of the brass steed and other enchanted devices, that is relevant for our purposes.⁸² The tale begins as the nameless knight rides Cambyuskan's exotic,

⁸¹ *The Arabian Nights: Tales from a Thousand and One Nights*, trans. Richard Burton (New York: The Modern Library, 2009), 78. The tale, "The Ebony Horse," is similar to *The Squire's Tale's* narrative; the ebony horse is presented to a king in his court, and the steed is also capable of flight.

⁸² The Story of Canacee and her hawk is an incomplete subplot in the Squire's story. Cambyuskan gives his daughter, Canacee, the ring that enables the wearer to speak with

eastern court. This courtly setting serves as a collision point between Asiatic and European cultures:

In at the halle dore al sodeynly
Ther cam a knyght upon a steede of bras,
And in his hand a brood mirour of glas.
Upon his thombe he hadde of gold a ryng,
And by his syde a naked swerd hangyng.⁸³

The entirety of the tale's first fragment occurs during a feast and a pageantry of magical artifacts. As the nameless knight speaks with the lofty language we have associated with Chaucer's Knight, he narrates, in 110 lines, how each prosthesis augments the body. The mirror augments sight, the gold ring allows its wearer to speak with birds, and the sword can heal the body. Built on medieval court culture and the traditions of romance, this first fragment is concerned with the homosocial exchange between the nameless knight (explicitly compared to Gawain), and Cambyuskan, the Tartar king commonly known as Genghis Khan. This narrative fragment follows the conventions of courtly performance and pageantry, and yet, *The Squire's Tale* is one of future-oriented wonder built on the backbone of fantastical narratives. The tale has many magical devices, but the brass steed is the locus of wonder, rode into the courtly feast by a nameless knight and presented as a gift to celebrate Cambyuskan's birthday.

birds. Canacee meets a female falcon whose mate, a hawk, leaves her for a kite, another bird of prey. Canacee nurses the falcon back to health, but the tale is cut short. What is interesting about this tale is how a ring mediates the relationship between human and animal.

⁸³ Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, lines 80-84.

Chaucer's knowledge of European courts is widely known, and his work's cosmopolitan display of diversity is analogous to historical courtly processions and pageantry. Chaucer displays his knowledge of courtly spectacle through the Squire's "steede of bras," an equine automaton capable of crossing genres and categories, and of redefining multiple social practices and relations. Described by the Squire as the hallmark of courtly display and pageantry, the brass steed demonstrates how external objects associated with knights can negotiate complex relationships between man, armor, animal, object, and the shared environment they inhabit. Like Cambyuskan's court, the steed is itself also a liminal junction, and is thus loaded with enfolded meanings that simultaneously come into play as soon as it enters the courtly space. The brass steed is another iteration of the man-armor-horse assemblage, but when the nameless knight introduces the automaton, a significant portion of the steed's description is devoted to its function, rather than its form. More specifically, the steed's speed and flight are described in seventeen lines, but the steed's physical description is minimal.⁸⁴ Similar in stature to a warhorse, the steed is "lyke the Pegasee,/ The hors that hadde wynges for to flee; / Or ells it was the Grekes hors Synon, / That brought Troie to destruccion."⁸⁵ The steed is imagined as the fusion between a mythical beast, Pegasus, and the Trojan Horse, a war machine that infiltrates a city through theatrics and deception. Both Pegasus and the Trojan Horse enable those who use them to traverse difficult spaces. Bellephrone, with

⁸⁴ Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, lines 115-131. In these lines, the nameless knight describes the steed's power to fly.

⁸⁵ Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, lines 207- 210.

the help of Pegasus, destroys the chimera; the Greeks hide inside the Trojan Horse so they can breach the walls of Troy and defeat the Trojans.

Furthermore, the lengthy instructions required to operate the steed compel us to imagine a completely metallic equine body adorned with brass parts, levers, buttons, and pins, all of which control its otherworldly abilities. For instance, one ability allows the steed to shine as brightly as the sun, and the emphasis on luminescence reinforces the positive effects of warmth and regeneration.⁸⁶ But most importantly, the Squire tells the other travelling pilgrims that the steed can take its rider to any location within a day: “In the space of o day natureel [...] Beren youre body into every place / To which youre herte wilneth for to pace.”⁸⁷ The language, moreover, suggests the steed can fly, even if it lacks wings: “Or, if yow lyst to fleen as hye in the air / As dooth an egle whan hym list to soore, / This same steede shal bere yow evere moore.”⁸⁸ By the end of the first fragment of the Squire’s narrative, we learn that the steed is also capable of vanishing.⁸⁹ As part of the literary tradition of helpful horses, the brass steed’s enhanced speed and ability to fly augment the rider’s movement across vast distances.

Together with the power of speedy flight and implied invisibility, the steed is the ultimate, fantastical embodiment of the man-horse assemblage so intrinsic to fourteenth-

⁸⁶ Chaucer, *The Squire’s Tale*, line 170.

⁸⁷ Chaucer, *The Squire’s Tale*, lines 116-120.

⁸⁸ Chaucer, *The Squire’s Tale*, lines 122-124.

⁸⁹ Chaucer, *The Squire’s Tale*, line 328.

century discussions of masculinity. The Squire associates the brass steed with the horses of Lombardy and Apulia, regions in Italy renowned for their coursers, and we are reminded that the brass steed's prowess is what makes it so uncanny.⁹⁰ The steed is also the embodiment of a kind of mobility that resembles teleportation. Its "powers" defy all boundaries, including time and space, as well as the boundaries between animal, machine and human: "Nature ne art ne koude him nat amende / In no degree, as al the people wende."⁹¹ The steed's body neither belongs to the world of nature nor the world of man, nor can it be categorized. It inhabits an unstable liminal space between science and magic. The steed is an atemporal, proto-scientific entity, whose abilities and brass steampunk aesthetics fit nicely with both medieval literature and science fiction.

The Brass Steed as Assemblage

Like the arms and armor worn and carried by the medieval knight, the brass steed is itself an assemblage, or mechanical interspecies, that combines and simulates organic functions through prosthetic parts. If the male body is meant to be the physical embodiment of the chivalric ideal, chivalry itself must be, according to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, reconfigured as an "identity machine" that constructs the knight's armored body as a posthuman hybrid between man and horse. Chivalry, argues Cohen, is a composition

⁹⁰ Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, lines 189-197. See also Ann Hyland, *The Warhorse 1250-1600* (London, Sutton Pub. Ltd. 1997), 95-97. Her work gives a complete account about the warhorse in the Middle Ages.

⁹¹ Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, 197-198.

of multiple augmentations, a “medieval technology of the self that relies on a similarly complex assemblage capable of catching up human, animal, objects, and intensities into what might be called a nonhuman body.”⁹² Using the insights of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to rethink chivalric romance, Cohen formulates the idea of a Deleuzian assemblage that demonstrates that the armored body is never entirely human, but rather “a network of meaning that includes the inanimate and the inhuman.”⁹³ The body is in a constant state of degeneration and becoming, and the armor, as part of the inhuman circuit, functions at a cartographic level, mapping the limits of the human body by underscoring its posthuman potentialities. Chivalry is not merely a code of masculinity, but a technological system predicated on the potential hybridism of man with nature.

Interestingly, this convergence of bodies relies on the impact of smaller prosthetic augmentations—the stirrup, saddle, and spurs—that unites the equine body with the human. The brass steed, therefore, can be seen as another piece of the armor network prosthetically used to simultaneously enhance the nameless knight and the tale-telling Squire as bodies that not only wear armor, but also tell stories about that armor. For Cohen, the assembly of objects can be considered “a network of meaning that includes the inanimate and the inhuman.”⁹⁴ The brass steed, considered together with the other objects—the sword, the mirror, and the ring—is part of a network of technological

⁹² Cohen, “The Inhuman Circuit,” 173.

⁹³ Cohen, “The Inhuman Circuit,” 179.

⁹⁴ Cohen, “The Inhuman Circuit,” 179.

identity markers, or in Katherine Biddick's terms, "technologies of memory."⁹⁵ *The Squire's Tale* is so invested in nonhuman bodies and both animate and inanimate objects that human characters become secondary to the technological pageantry. For example, the Squire finds it easier to describe objects than people—he states that he cannot describe Canacee's beauty, yet he describes Cambyuskan's riches in intimate detail, as well as the aesthetic qualities of the brass steed and other magical things.⁹⁶ The Squire's focus on objects rather than the human body, however, is not necessarily negative. Rather, in comparison to the Knight, the Squire represents the promises and progress associated with youth; the Knight, with his rusted armor and old horse, is an artifact of the past.

Susan Crane suggests that the self can reside in any representation, any object, or any substitution, and divides medieval prostheses into two categories—crafted and organic.⁹⁷ When applied to a knight's body, the prostheses associated with the knight can be divided into wearable "crafted" prosthesis, the armor, and the rideable "organic" prosthesis, the steed.⁹⁸ Armor, essentially, does not have to be worn to function

⁹⁵ Katherine Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1998), 170.

⁹⁶ Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, lines 34-41. Canacee's beauty and the Squire's inability to describe her is located in lines 34-41. By line 58, the Squire details Cambyuskan's riches and vestments.

⁹⁷ Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 145. She devotes her sixth chapter to the knight and horse, and makes a useful distinction between organic and crafted prostheses.

⁹⁸ Crane, *Animal Encounters*, 144.

defensively. Chaucer's Knight and Squire demonstrate a relationship with external objects, Crane argues, because knighthood relies on what is the "embodiment and materiality in constituting the chivalric self."⁹⁹ However, while knights and squires can successfully enhance their bodies with armor and horses, enhancement is always temporary, interchangeable, and exchangeable. The desire for enhancement underscores the knight's vulnerability when those technologies are not present. The Knight and Squire require the coordinated performance and pageantry of horse and armorial fashion within their narratives, and within the very pilgrimage they are on.

These multiple levels of performativity remind us that the body cannot survive independently from the material world around it. If male identity is perpetually embattled, then the Squire's identity, and those of his male characters, require the brass steed as a prosthetic armor to sustain their masculinities. In other words, as a representation of the incomplete medieval male body, the Squire requires the acquisition and utilization of horse and armor to become a knight.¹⁰⁰ In his tale, various objects, including the brass steed, demonstrate that the body is understood through multiple mechanistic parts. Thus, the sacredness of the kingly and knightly body is not natural, not divine, but constructed from the collected artifacts of masculinity. The deconstruction of

⁹⁹ See note 98 above.

¹⁰⁰ Crane, *Animal Encounters*, 139. Crane builds on Donna Haraway's work, and notes "postmodern versions of the self, embedded in materiality and open to integration with other species of being, both organic and mechanical, would look more familiar to a medieval knight." See Donna Haraway's fascinating discussion of cyborgian identities intermixing with other biological species in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Chaucer's Knight and Squire, combined with their integration with crafted and organic prostheses, shifts our perception toward a posthuman understanding of the male body that is not just mechanical, but a hybrid cross-species between man and horse.

If the brass steed can be read as a kind of armor, then arguably it is of the Lacanian kind. For Lacan, the mirror stage constructs “a succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image [...] to the assumption of the armour of alienating identity.”¹⁰¹ Interestingly, Cohen’s work, concerned with armor and alienated identities, stipulates that heroic masculinity must also:

acknowledge its artificiality, its constructedness, its adoptability. Heroism organizes the masculine ‘body in pieces’ into a cultural coherence represented as invulnerable (because it must not fail) and always in danger of decapitation, dismemberment, and fragmentation [...] Society requires heroes, so it constructs them.¹⁰²

Heroic masculinity is constructed by exterior, physical objects like armor. The connections between heroism and masculinity are not easily transparent, but the brass steed is an apparatus that both constructs and sustains the malleable identity of the Squire, Cambyuskan, and the nameless knight. When the Squire first introduces the nameless knight, we are given a description predicated not on the knight’s identity, but by the collection of artifacts: “a steede of bras,” “a brood mirour of glas,” “of gold a ryng,” and “a naked swerd hangyng.” “Al armed,” the figure is identified as a noble knight through his accoutrements. Likewise, his speech and countenance, according to the

¹⁰¹ Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” *Ecrits* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977): 34.

¹⁰² Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Armour of Alienating Identity” *Arthuriana* 6.4 (1996): 2.

Squire, was so stylized, that even “Gawayn, with his olde curteisye, / Though he were comen ayenyn out of Fairye, / Ne koude hymn at nat amende with a word.”¹⁰³

This introduction of the strange knight makes it clear that his gendered identity is predicated on his body’s performance with prosthetic technologies. According to Sarah Gordon, knights have a tendency to be rendered nameless and incognito unless their identity is constructed by the society around them.¹⁰⁴ Gordon contends that because knights use multiple pieces of arms and armor to construct their identities, their identities are continuously shifting and unstable, thus reinforcing the notion that masculinity is constructed, hidden, and malleable. Individuality and agency might still exist, but identity, gender, titles, names and reputations are “furnished by society.”¹⁰⁵ The Squire’s nameless knight appears at a crucial moment in the courtly celebration, and his ability to give gifts, namely the brass steed, is a demonstration of his willing fragmentation to display power. In the Squire’s story, as well as *The Knight’s Tale*, premodern masculinity is an assemblage inextricably tied to war and martial prowess. *The Squire’s Tale*, however, emphasizes that premodern masculinity, already intrinsic to the chivalric ideal, is also measured through the performance of gift-giving. The Squire describes gift-giving as a ritualistic spectacle: the nameless knight unseats himself from the companionate

¹⁰³ Chaucer, *The Squire’s Tale*, lines 95-97.

¹⁰⁴ Sarah Gordon’s: “The Man With No Name: Identity in French Arthurian Verse Romance.” *Arthuriana*. 18.2, (2008), 70.

¹⁰⁵ See note 104 above.

prosthesis, the brass steed, and gives the automaton to Cambyuskan. This act of “detachment” allows the knight to fulfill his chivalric duty of loyalty and courtesy.

The presence of the brass steed in Chaucer’s work suggests that the reception of newfound technologies may have been conditioned by romance narratives rife with armored bodies and wondrous automated mechanisms. Arguably, in terms of aesthetics and function, the development of automata paralleled the development of armor, and both technological constructs were embedded into the sociopolitical world of late medieval courts. In this way, the brass steed, with its multiple mechanized functions tied to tiny knobs and switches, maps the development and consequences of automated and armorial technologies in the late medieval period. The Knight and his tale, however, do not focus on development; rather, the Knight and his narrative represent past technologies and what chivalry *was*. The brass steed, as a liminal body, represents what chivalry *is*, and what it can become with newfound technologies.

Brass v. Iron

The Knight and the brass steed’s metallic composition can be categorized through a proto-scientific mineralogies: the metaphor of degeneration, the rusted armor, is associated with the Knight through his “bismotered” attire and his accelerated age, whereas his youthful son, the Squire, is associated with the brass, known for brilliance and vitality.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, because of its composition, the brass steed arguably functions

¹⁰⁶ Chaucer, *The General Prologue*, line 47. The Knight is described as having rusted armor. Rust can arguably be seen as a disease of the armor and slowly corrodes it. The

as a kind of rehabilitative technology. Brass was an omnipresent resource, especially in England, and as in classical thought, brass was imbued with medicinal properties.¹⁰⁷

When the nameless knight arrives at Cambyuskan's court, the Squire states that spectators clamored to see the steed and other devices and delivers an interesting line: "They speken of sondry hardyng of metal, / And speke of medicynes therwithal."¹⁰⁸

While the passage is associated with the magical sword that can injure, yet heal, bodies, the healing qualities of metal are also associated with the brass steed. For example, we can consider the brass steed's function:

This same steede shal bere yow evere moore
Withouten harm, til ye be ther yow leste,
Though that ye slepen on his bak or reste,
And turne ayeyn with writhing of a pyn.¹⁰⁹

The juxtaposition of the steed's hardened metallic body with the comfort of slumber is an interesting disjunction, and perhaps the ability to sleep on the steed's back connotes therapeutic, even medicinal properties akin to a healing bed, or even the horse-drawn ambulance.

Knight's description— he is not completely enclosed and arguably resist sumptuary law— further suggests that the rust has seeped into his undergarments as well.

¹⁰⁷ Stephen J. Herben, "Arms and Armor in Chaucer," *Speculum* 12.4 (October 1937): 475. At the historical and cultural level, brass has had a strong presence in medieval culture. Of all the European countries, England retained large quantities of dated monumental brasses from the medieval period. Its focus on historical artifacts is useful. Interestingly, the artifacts demonstrate the development of military costume since the thirteenth century.

¹⁰⁸ Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, lines 243-44.

¹⁰⁹ Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, lines 122-128.

According to Marijane Osborn, the steed's brass components are analogous to other brass artifacts, and she reads the steed as an "astrolabic" horse.¹¹⁰ The ability to "trille a pyn" behind the steed's ear is, to Osborn, like setting the coordinates of map so the steed can, regardless of distance, take its rider to a desired location within a day.¹¹¹ If we consider the steed's maker "wayted many a constellacuion / Er he had doon his operacion" to activate the steed, we can surmise the steed functions very much like an astrolabic guide whose movement is based on the mapping of celestial bodies.¹¹² In medieval culture, tracing the movement of celestial bodies had potential physiological ramifications, since the act could determine one's fate, spiritual health, and deterioration as the body progresses from youth to old age.¹¹³ The steed's body, it seems, is partially built on the fusion of medical and astrological knowledge. When the Squire introduces the steed, he emphasizes two key features: the steed as an effectively fast transport, and the steed as a viable defense of the rider's body, like armor: "Withouten wem of yow, thurgh foul or fair."¹¹⁴ The steed, says the nameless knight, can take anyone through any

¹¹⁰ Marijane Osborn, "The Squire's 'Steed of Brass' as an Astrolabe: Some Implications of The Canterbury Tales," *Hermeneutics and Medieval Culture* (New York: University of New York, 1989), 121-131. See also Minsoo Kang, *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines: The Automaton in the European Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 68. Kang briefly discusses the brass steed, with an emphasis on its liminal presence between magic and science.

¹¹¹ Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, line 316.

¹¹² Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, lines 129-130.

¹¹³ E.R. Truitt, "Celestial Divination and Arabic Science in Twelfth-Century England: The History of Gerbert of Aurillac's Talking Head," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 73.2 (April 2012): 214.

danger without harm. The steed is not just a prosthetic automaton that enhances its rider's identity; the steed is, because of its mechanized brass components, a defense of the male body, resistant to any threats that can destroy the flesh. The steed, it can be said, is the antithesis to the Knight's rusted, aged, and vulnerable body.

This reading is further supported by the fact that, according to medieval medical theories, certain metals became health remedies when tempered by fire and mixed with other alchemical ingredients. In Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, combinations of dissimilar ingredients with metals benefited the body.¹¹⁵ For example, metals like chrysocolla, when mixed with wax oil or honey, became a detergent for wounds. The copper compounds of Corinthian brass, a metal considered more valuable than silver, were considered remedies for swelling and dullness of hearing. Likewise, copper, when mixed with vinegar or milk, was a useful medieval remedy for ulcers. One of the few scholars to acknowledge armorial resistances to contagion, Geraldine Heng notes that the

¹¹⁴ Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, line 121.

¹¹⁵ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. John Bostock Crane and Gregory R. Hastings, (United Kingdom: Delphi Classics, 2015), Kindle Edition. See specifically Books XXXIII and XXXIV both titled "The Natural History of Metals". Chapter 28, Book XXXIII focuses on Chrysocolla. Book XXXIV discusses brass and copper. Chapter 25 describes 47 remedies utilizing copper. Oddly enough, Chapter 43, focuses on the prevention of rust while chapter 45 discusses remedies derived from rust. Chapter 44, moreover, describes seven remedies derived from iron. The medical practices utilizing metal archived in *Natural History* run the gamut of experimentation and proto-scientific theory to magic and superstition. For instance, the section focused on remedies derived from iron describe multiple cures: one remedy requires the tracing of a circle around a body three times with an iron object to protect the body from "noxious influences." Iron nails extracted from a tomb can, when hammered into a doorway's threshold, protect against nightmares.

dissection of armor “scrutinizes the masculine body, since armor, even more than clothing, counterfeits the body and projects a surrogate body piece by piece.”¹¹⁶ The act of concealing the body, she implies, is significant because the act is shaped by the cultural memory of contagion: “Plague epidemics decimated perhaps a third of the population of Europe and distressing visions of corporeal infection, decay, and death were common, [and] necessarily involved a consciousness of the body’s vulnerability, its ease of disintegration, and its capacity for sudden disruption and death.”¹¹⁷ If metals, particularly brass, have healing abilities, the brass steed, as defensive prosthesis, would have a twofold protection.¹¹⁸ It is fitting then to describe the steed’s brazen skin as armor, or “virtual anesthesia,” for as a surrogate prosthesis, armor attempts to prevent pain, disfigurement, and death.¹¹⁹ The brass steed’s medicinal powers suggests it is analogous to the pilgrim’s destination, Canterbury Cathedral and Thomas Beckett’s shrine, which is believed to heal illness.¹²⁰ The steed is a hybrid body resistant to the very decay

¹¹⁶ Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 168.

¹¹⁷ See note 116 above.

¹¹⁸ Christoph Espirito Santo, et al, “Contribution of Copper Ion Resistance to Survival of *Escherichia coli* on Metallic Copper Surfaces,” *Applied Environmental Microbiology*. 2008 February; 74(4): 977–986. Also see J.O. Noyce, et al, “Potential use of Copper Surfaces to Reduce Survival of Epidemic Meticillin-resistant *Staphylococcus Aureus* in the Healthcare Environment,” *Journal of Hospital Infection* (2006), 289-297. Interestingly, medieval proto-science have utilized recent medical journals have emphasized the actual medicinal benefits of metals. Alloys, like brass, have anti-germicidal properties, information already known in the fourteenth century.

¹¹⁹ Springer, *Armour and Masculinity*, 45.

¹²⁰ Chaucer, *The General Prologue*, lines 16-18.

embodied by other pilgrims, like the Cook and his festering sore, the Wife with her deaf ear, or the Squire's father and his rusted armor.

Fashioning the Posthuman Body

When the Squire narrates the story of the brass steed, the story not only functions as a kind of foil for his curiously unarmored father, the Knight, it also shapes the Squire into a kind of posthuman hybrid in his own right. Essentially, as parts of the collective whole, the steed and the other assembled technologies on display—the mirror, the ring, and the sword—have a prosthetic function: they re-fashion and transform the knightly body into something equine, mechanical, and secretive. This transformation is first suggested by the close association between the Squire's body and the steed's. In his *General Prologue*, Chaucer describes the Squire's proportions: "Of his stature he was of evene lengthe, / And wonderly delyvere, and of greet strengthe."¹²¹ The brass steed is described similar ideal proportions: "For it so heigh was, and so brood and long, / So wel proporcioned for to been strong."¹²²

Peter Corrigan's work, which demonstrates the three dimensions of clothing, enable us to redefine the brass steed as a fashion accessory. In fact, through Corrigan's dimensions of clothing, we can trace the steed's posthuman metamorphosis. The brass steed fulfills the first "socializing dimension" by establishing a connection between the

¹²¹ Chaucer, *The General Prologue*, lines 82-3.

¹²² Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, lines 191-93. Also see Crane, *Animal Encounters*, 150. She notes that the horses bred in Lombardy were considered the ideal warhorses by medieval standards.

nameless knight and Cambyuskan as a relationship reserved for the elite. The steed fulfills the second dimension— that of being “an object to which things happen”— by becoming a “thing” that can move between the public and the private domains of the court. The steed is to be kept, like a treasure in a vault or a robe in a closet, and it exerts a sense of power for both the owner and the gift giver.¹²³ This is where the steed transitions into the third dimension: clothing in the private, genealogical domain of family. The steed is passed down, like an heirloom, from one generation to another, and in privacy. This “passing down” movement of fashion-objects functions at a genealogical level, and shows us fashion-objects are predicated more on “kin and gift relations rather than on nonkin and commodity relations.”¹²⁴ Interestingly, while the exchange of the steed from knight to king is, initially, a public display of power, the brass steed is really passed from the nameless knight to Cambyuskan in secrecy behind closed doors when the knight reveals the secrets of the steed: “Whan yow list to ryden anywhere, / ye mooten trille a pyn, stant in his ere, / Which I shal yow tell bitwix us two.”¹²⁵ The nameless knight repeats himself behind closed doors, as he demonstrates to Cambyuskan how to work the steed’s mechanisms:

¹²³ Peter Corrigan, “Interpreted, Circulating, Interpreting: Three Dimensions of the Clothing Object,” *The Socialness of Things: Essays on the Socio-Semiotics of Objects* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994), 433.

¹²⁴ See note 123 above.

¹²⁵ Chaucer, *The Squire’s Tale*, lines 314-17.

Trille this pyn, and he wol vanysse anoon
Out of the sighte of every maner wight [...] /
Whan that yow list to clepen hym ageyn /
In swich gyse as I shal to yow seyn /
Betwixe yow and me, and that ful soone.¹²⁶

Both knowledge and power are abstract and intangible, yet the steed becomes the physical manifestation of both. These passages in the narrative imply that knowledge and power, like precious fashion accessories or heirlooms, can be passed down; and as a form of authority, it is reserved only for a select few away from the prying eyes of courtiers.¹²⁷ While the audience knows to “trille the pyn” behind the steed’s ears, the steed’s other secrets, its ability to be summoned after it vanishes, for instance, are understood only by the knight and the king. The brass steed is Cambyuskan’s new fashion accessory, and it demonstrates that a kingly body’s assimilation of an object, to become a posthuman hybrid, requires both an inner-outer, public-private metamorphosis.

Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass suggest that clothes and fashion accessories demonstrate the power to construct a uniquely hybrid individual.¹²⁸ In the span of medieval and early modern culture, dressing and undressing, constructing and unraveling, consistently remind us that clothes were significant in defining malleable bodily forms: “Textiles, armor, jewels, far from being supplements to a preconceived

¹²⁶ Chaucer, *The Squire’s Tale*, lines 328-33.

¹²⁷ Craig Berry, “Flying Sources: Classical Authority in Chaucer’s Squire’s Tale,” *ELH* 68.2 (Summer 2001): 295.

¹²⁸ Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 2.

self, were the material forms out of which a hybrid subject was fashioned.”¹²⁹ Bodies are defined by auxiliary prosthetic devices where “the gendered body is absorbed into the play of those devices,” and they touch upon an idea similar to Katherine Biddick’s “technologies of memory”—that armor is a visual memory system.¹³⁰ When armor was not worn, “the clothed body of the elite was a body memorialized through the markings of heraldry, armor, and letters. These were the prostheses that transformed the naked body into an identifiable person. Stripped of these prostheses, the body returned to shameful anonymity.”¹³¹ In Chaucer’s description of the Knight, the pilgrim’s outward display of the fustian signals the degenerated body, which by extension, represents the failures of chivalry. The openness of the once enclosed Knight is a metaphor for the vulnerability and malleability of the knightly body and the ideology it represents.

The brass steed is the augmentative prosthesis, a fashion accessory, that refashions sovereign masculinity into a posthuman man-horse hybrid. In Derridian terms, masculine identity and agency depended on a “prosthetic body” that was also an “institutional body,” and the brass steed secures male sovereignty for both knight and king by being attached to both bodies.¹³² In Michel de Certeau’s work, *Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau looks at fashion and clothing in terms of its materialistic

¹²⁹ Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, 59.

¹³⁰ Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, 214.

¹³¹ Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, 270.

¹³² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 158.

relationship to the human body. He argues that bodies, or how bodies are perceived, are determined by the exterior items that are *attached* to them. To add or to detach from the body is essential to discourses on prosthesis. The steed, like an article of clothing, is a fantastical prosthetic technology that defines and regulates how bodies are meant to connect with other bodies and objects. Techno-fashion shapes subjectivity and perception, and can be applied to seemingly different technologies: “the automobile, like a corset, also shapes [...] and reshapes the physical ‘portrait’ in their own ways.”¹³³ Both horse and car are not necessarily worn like armor, but they protect the rider who harnesses their constructed body through analogs; for the horse, it is the stirrup, the bridle, the harness, and the saddle. For the car, it is the steering wheel, pedals, brakes, and knobs.

While the brass steed has a bridle, it requires its owner to interact through a mechanistic interface. As the directions go: “trille a pyn, stant in his ere.”¹³⁴ The simple twist of a pin, perhaps similar to the act of buttoning an article of clothing, becomes a significant act of initiating the animation and “life” of an object. Given its composition and function, the brass steed is an armorial fashion accessory—a glorified ‘proto-codpiece’—meant to demonstrate and sustain masculine identity through the defense of the physical body, and by extension, virility.¹³⁵ According to Will Fisher in his analysis

¹³³ Michael De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press 1984) 67.

¹³⁴ Chaucer, *The Squire’s Tale*, line 316.

¹³⁵ I read the steed as a ‘proto-codpiece’ because while codpieces were utilized even in the Classical period, the English codpiece, as we know it, did not become prominent until

of prosthetics, recent discourses have established that prosthetics are “items that do not fit into the binary rubrics that structure much of our thinking about identity formation and subjectivity: it is neither clearly nature or culture, essential or constructed, body or artifact, self or other, inside or outside.”¹³⁶ Fisher suggests prostheses are not simple modifications since these technological constructs actually reconstitutes the entire entity which it attaches to.

Fisher’s states that once the body itself is called into question, so too can the concept of prosthesis, which enables us to associate the brass steed as a proto-codpiece under the category of prosthetic device.¹³⁷ If the steed is also reconceptualized as an armored codpiece meant to protect the dynastic, genealogical ambitions of Cambyuskan’s court, it becomes a displayed defense that sustains lineage. Lineage underscores a different kind of movement, one predicated on bloodlines carried through time by Cambyuskan’s heirs. The spectacle and spectators in Cambyuskan’s court demonstrate that masculine identity is not just predicated on technological things, but is also partly “contingent on community.”¹³⁸ It is one thing to use and own a prosthetic assemblage as

the fifteenth century when men’s fashion changed and required a more adequate concealment, and defense, for the genital area.

¹³⁶ Will Fisher, *Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006) 26.

¹³⁷ Fisher, *Materializing Gender*, 28. Fisher’s introduction is useful and provides a succinct discussion of prosthesis.

¹³⁸ Cohen, “Armour of Alienating Identity,” 9. Likewise, Gordon notes “Individual identities in romance may be developed over the course of a quest or constructed by the gaze of spectators [...] the hero’s identity and public selfhood are constructed objectively by the society around him and, on another level, the audience.”

unique as the brass steed, but it is another thing to display the brazen body to mediate relationships. To walk is to be a servant; to ride a horse is to be idealized as a knight. But to own and operate the brass steed, to harness its speed, its flight, its ability to vanish, its recuperative properties—like the nameless knight does, or as Cambyuskan is promised to do— is to be more than human.

Conclusion: Equine Assemblages as a Resistance to Finality

The Knight's Tale, like other romances, heavily emphasizes sequences of lack where signifiers of heroic masculinity are violently taken away. *The Squire's Tale* emphasizes gain, augmentation, and promises of adventure where signifiers of heroic masculinity are received. Arcite dies because chivalry fails. His armor fails to defend him, and he is crushed by a horse meant to augment his status and appearance. Cambyuskan's kingship is augmented by objects that "attach" to Cambyuskan's body. Through its assemblage of objects, namely the brass steed, *The Squire's Tale* resists the traumas of loss and finality through continuous attachments and reattachments. The Squire states that if his story was completed, it would have branched into two directions. The first narrative branch would have focused on the threat of civil strife and the act of incest between Cambyuskan's youngest children, Cambalo and Canacee. The second narrative branch would center on Algarsif, Cambyuskan's eldest son, and how he won Theodora's hand in marriage with the help of the brass steed.¹³⁹ The tale abruptly ends,

¹³⁹ Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, lines 661-610.

but the threat of incest and fratricide lingers as a threat to Cambyuskan's genealogical prestige. However, we are also left with the promise that the brass steed will save Cambyuskan's court. After all, the brass steed's body is an assemblage that represents the antithesis to degeneration associated with the Knight and his tale. The steed signifies a promise of renewal, protection, and procreation. The Knight and Squire tell stories about how premodern masculinity is inextricable from chivalric ideology, but it also shows how this kind of hyper-masculinity is in a perpetual state of tension. The brass steed secures Cambyuskan's agency; the steed is passed down from Cambyuskan to Algarsif like an heirloom, and the steed helps secure Algarsif's wife. Detaching from one body and reattaching to another is a hallmark of the prosthetic assemblage.

Masculinity changes with the times; however, what has stayed consistent is the dependency on external objects to defend, augment, and sustain that masculinity. Ultimately, both the Knight and the Squire rely on the animal-knight-machine assemblage, and their narratives force a reconceptualization of knightly identity through notions of technology, artifice, and mechanisms of prosthesis. Their narratives become a part of what Katherine Biddick calls "cyborg history."¹⁴⁰ For Biddick, memory can be reconfigured as a physical archive represented by a multitude of objects. She suggests that "rememorative remembering" is part of cyborg history because it marks the temporal, spatial and physical disjunctions between bodies and things.¹⁴¹ The armored equine automaton, and its ability to facilitate male relations, informs this cyborg history.

¹⁴⁰ Katherine Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism*, 167.

¹⁴¹ See note 140 above.

Similar to Donna Haraway's account of how the cyborgian body absorbs the technological and the animalistic, both the Knight and the Squire demonstrate how a medieval male body merges with exterior objects, like a horse and a set of armor, to become a knight. The court performance between the nameless knight and Cambyuskan, mediated by technological constructs, demonstrates that multiple bodies are needed to remind, and reconstitute, a chivalric body, one that becomes a posthuman resistance to traumatic degeneration. By using the brass steed and other devices, *The Squire's Tale* is not simply a simulation of imperial power in front of subordinate courtiers, it is a display of virility and homosocial unity that prevents the deterioration of sovereign bodies and courtly spaces.

Both the Knight and Squire represent the fluctuations and instabilities of chivalric masculinity. If the Knight's rusted and degenerated armor represents the decay of chivalry, then the Squire's youth, and his tale of a brass steed's regenerative properties, becomes the Knight's antithesis. Medieval knights utilize multiple pieces of arms and armor to construct their bodies and identities, so their sense of agency is continuously shifting. Such bodies can be constructed, but they are in perpetual mutability. If knightly bodies represent the chivalric ideology, then the ideology itself, along with everything linked within the armor network, is in flux. The ambivalence of chivalry is represented by the Knight and the Squire. Their tales establish chivalry as a tug-of-war discourse between a father and a son, between a master and his apprentice, between a past resistant to change and a future filled with potential. The Squire tells a tale of progress and adventure, and the brass steed saves its rider. The Knight tells a tale of betrayal and

degeneration, and the horse kills the rider. Chivalric premodern masculinity can become unstable, and as and we will see in the next chapter, such instability leads to large scale fratricide and the destruction of kingdoms.

Chapter 2

Smiting, Cleansing, and Becoming-Sacred: Embracing Bloody Degeneration in *Le Morte D'Arthur*

Chaucer demonstrates how chivalry is an unstable ideology, one where degeneration is inevitable and can lead to a tragic clash of kinsman. Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* shows that the willingness to degenerate, that is, to sacrifice one's body for the chivalric ideal, is necessary for heroic triumphs against false knights and other corruptive forces. But what makes Malory so fascinating is his emphasis on the ritualism of brutal combat and how armor mediates the degeneration of the knightly body. *Le Morte D'Arthur* intensifies what we glimpse within *The Knight's Tale*: the consequences of a full-scale civil war where brothers kill brothers, fathers kill sons, and sons kill mothers. Often, in Malory's work, the explicit violence enhances the process in which a knight's body degenerates. The construction of the chivalric body is part of a process; Malory's depiction of chivalry requires the inevitable dismantling of armor and the shedding of knights' blood as an act of willing sacrifice.

Le Morte D'Arthur can be read as Malory's attempt to interrogate the failures of knighthood and the contradictions of chivalry. With the exception of Galahad, who is considered the purest knight, all of Arthur's knights veer into uncontrollable, inescapable, and excessive violence that destroys more than it defends. Balin and Balan are brothers, yet they inevitably commit fratricide. Launcelot, long considered Arthur's greatest knight, breaks his oaths and destabilizes the realm by sleeping with the queen he is meant to protect. The final battle is not fought between opposing countries, but by Arthur against his son-nephew, Mordred, who, as a product of incest, is the physical

manifestation of Arthur's failure to protect his kingdom. For me, the contradictions of chivalry further manifest itself as the expected failure of armor. In Malory's work, the type of armor specifically evoked is "sacred armor." According to Carolyn Springer, "This armour evokes the image of the sacred body and expresses an identification with Christ that implies not the completion and perfection of the human form but the prospect of its sacrifice."¹ Scenes in Malory's work show how armor is a prosthesis meant to temporarily defend the knight's flesh, but it is also a catalyst that leads to the knight's degeneration. This degeneration, I argue, is inevitable but necessary. More specifically, the failing of sacred armor is just the first step in a complex cyclical process that involves violence and bloodshed inspired by a sense of religious conviction. Malory's knights become willing participants in their own degeneration precisely because sacrifice initiates redemption and regeneration.

Malory evokes a version of hyper-masculinity where *all* knights must be wounded in battle to prove their worth. Scholars have questioned whether a knight's degeneration can be read as the feminization of the hyper-masculine body. The potential for feminization does exist, and knights in literature have been known to cross-dress in women's garments.² Molly Martin argues *Le Morte D'Arthur* is Malory's attempt at "defining and valorizing the male community male and its specific version of romance masculinity," and she highlights how visibility alters how we read bodies and behavior in

¹ Carolyn Springer, *Armour and Masculinity in the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 37.

² This complex shift in garments will be studied further in Chapter 3. In Book V of *The Faerie Queene*, Artegall is stripped of his gear and forced to wear women's clothing.

Le Morte D'Arthur.³ Martin further argues: "The dual fissures of sightlines and masculinity complicate medieval ideologies of gender, and the strict associations of male with masculine and female with feminine break down as the blurred lines unsettle social expectations of gender."⁴ Martin's work enables a discourse about how armor impacts the way we understand the body. In terms of "sightlines" and visibility, for instance, various configurations of armor pieces alter how readers visualize the knightly body. In "Malory's Body Chivalric," Kathleen Coyne Kelly suggests that in the midst of battle, a male knight is feminized the moment his armor breaks and his body is injured. Kelly notes: "at the precise moment that we expect the male body to be revealed most fully, the body is transformed and feminized."⁵ For Kelly, "spears and swords" are metaphors of the "phallus and penis."⁶ Kelly understandably associates the penetrating, wounding power of swords and lances with forcible rape, and it makes sense to read violence of this magnitude through gender paradigms. A knight without armor is more open and vulnerable to physical wounds, and to think of wounding as the feminization of the male body is a useful start, but it does not adequately respond to the complexities that come with the malleability of chivalric masculinity. Much of the argument presented in this chapter builds on the work of Kenneth Hodges, who, in his analysis of medieval

³ Molly Martin, *Vision and Gender in Malory's Morte Darthur*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010.

⁴ Martin, *Visions and Gender*, 175.

⁵ Kathleen Coyne Kelly, "Malory's Body Chivalric," *Arthuriana* 6.4 (Winter 1996): 53.

⁶ Kelly, "Malory's Body Chivalric," 62.

wounding, states: “wounds increase masculine worth, and to claim that the masculine ideal is invulnerability is to disrupt the whole system of meaning that makes masculine combat significant.”⁷ Hodges’ argument suggests that the fantasy of being impervious to injury fosters a dependency on wearable technology—a knight’s armor, the sheath, the shield. This dependency is misleading, and Malory consistently reminds us that armor inevitably fails each knight.

Malory’s world is not picturesque; *Le Morte D’Arthur* is a tragedy with chivalric failings and a high body count. Scholars too have made similar observations about Arthur’s fall. The contradictions of chivalry are discussed by Richard Kaeuper, who observes how chivalric literature tends to critique disorder and violence while simultaneously praising knightly honor, combat, and victory.⁸ Maurice Keen also recognizes how “chivalry had always been aware that it was at war with a distorted image of itself.”⁹ Lisa Robeson reads Malory’s depiction of war as a destructive continuation of honorable duels, thus calling to mind the realities, and problems, of the chivalric ideal when entrenched in public warfare: “In Malory, war in the last two tales initially refers to

⁷ Kenneth Hodges, “Wounded Masculinity: Injury and Gender in Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*,” *Studies in Philology* 106.1 (Winter 2009): 17.

⁸ Richard W. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 35.

⁹ Maurice Hugh Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 234.

worshipful combat to maintain honor. Through family and chivalric loyalties, war between individuals grows into war between groups.”¹⁰

Likewise, Felicity Riddy notes how the last battle between Arthur and his nephew/son, Mordred, is “a symbol of the chivalric world turning its nihilistic energy upon itself, and destroying its own possibility of continuity.”¹¹ According to Meredith Reynolds, “The system Arthur puts in place, the chivalric code, with his Pentecostal Oath and his endorsement of shared fellowship and worship, is fundamentally flawed. A society cannot exist in a vacuum, and the sheer diversity of individuals involved in the community—with their personal motivations, private quarrels, and secret aspirations—practically guarantees social failure.”¹² Laura Bedwell argues that while Arthur’s knights are known to dispense justice, they fail to uphold justice consistently and the kingdom inevitably falls through injustice, namely the kind that comes with the interrelated crimes of outrage (wicked behavior), murder, and treason.¹³ Malory’s narrative, Bedwell observes, shows that Gawain, Gaheris, Aggravain, and Mordred are guilty of these crimes, and had Arthur punished these knights, further bloodshed would have been prevented and the kingdom would have been saved. For me, this failure to uphold justice

¹⁰ Lisa Robeson, “‘Noble Knights and ‘Michievous’ War: Rhetoric of War in Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*,” *Arthuriana* 13.3 (Fall 2003): 24.

¹¹ Felicity Riddy, “Contextualizing *Le Morte D’Arthur*: Empire and Civil War,” *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and Anthony Stockwell (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 72.

¹² Meredith Reynolds, “Interior Monologue in Malory,” *Arthuriana* 24.3 (Fall 2014): 93.

¹³ Laura K. Bedwell, “The Failure of Justice, the Failure of Arthur,” *Arthuriana* 21.3 (Fall 2011): 7-8.

is, to an extent, evidence of chivalry's contradictions and failures. In an act of nepotism, Arthur saves his oath-breaking kinsmen from condemnation, but family loyalty, an extension of the chivalric virtue of friendship, diminishes the social structure of the very system they serve.

Friendship is a chivalric virtue, but according to Christine Chism, it becomes a precursor to political, national, and cultural failings. For Chism, chivalric friendship is a "disastrous problematic" that provides "a way of thinking through the faultlines within the governance of its own political milieu."¹⁴ While Chism focuses her study on the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, we find parallels in Malory's text as well as other chivalric romances. For Chism, the oath of friendship works as a "legitimizing ritual that expresses, sanctifies, and monogamizes highly charged and renegotiable bonds between knightly careerists, turning them into more discrete, and more powerfully lasting ones. Sworn friendship [...] codes intense chivalric relations of affiliation and competition while exalting the most intimate male-male affections into the exercise of a seemingly limitless and very culturally attractive virtuous nobility."¹⁵ As idealistic and enticing as such oaths are, promises are easily broken, and betrayal, fratricide, and civil war becomes all the more tragic.

¹⁴ Christine Chism, "Friendly Fire: The Disastrous Politics of Friendship in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*," *Arthuriana* 20.2 (Summer 2010): 69.

¹⁵ Chism, "Friendly Fire," 80.

Armorial Doubleness: A Religious Context

In medieval culture, Christ was imagined as the knightly paragon of chivalric virtue who heroically died for humanity. The image of Christ as a knight is not new. In the Old English dream poem, “The Dream of the Rood,” Christ is portrayed as a hero who willingly sacrifices himself for humanity:

Geseah ic þa Frean mancynnes
efstan elne mycle, þæthe me wolde on gestigan. climbbon
þær ic þa ne dorste ofer Dryhtnes
Bugan oððe berstan, þa ic bifian^o geseah
eorðan sceatas. Ealle ic mihtethesurface
feondas gefyllan, hwæðre ic fæste stod.

[Then I saw the lord of mankind hasten with great courage because he wanted to climb on me. I dared not then bow or break against the lord’s word, when I saw the surface of the earth tremble. I could have felled all enemies, nevertheless I stood fast.]¹⁶

Interestingly, these are not the speaker’s lines, nor are they Christ’s. This section of the poem recounts the crucifixion story from the perspective of a personified Cross. In depictions of the Passion, the Cross is the ultimate symbol of Christ, and it is arguably his central “prosthesis” that accompanies him to his death and is subsequently “attached” to his body through nails. In this poem, the Cross functions as a sentient prosthesis, not unlike the Squire’s brass steed or the automaton, Talus, in *The Faerie Queene*. In the lines presented, the Cross speaks like a warrior who stands ready to smite Christ’s

¹⁶ Allen J. Frantzen, *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 31. Here, I reference Allen Frantzen’s excerpt and translation of the poem. Interestingly, while Frantzen focuses on how the use of medievalism impacted World War I, he devotes the first half of his book to understanding the intricacies of medieval chivalry.

enemies. Christ's death serves as a model for Arthurian knights and justifies chivalric violence. Like the Cross in the Old English poem, knights must be steadfast and ready to fight. The endgame for many of these knights, it seems, is not the construction of chivalric masculinity, but degeneration, then martyrdom. According to Allen Frantzen, "Knights could see themselves as sacrificial victims; they were encouraged to cultivate this identity because the church assured them that all those who willingly died for the faith would win salvation."¹⁷

Moreover, the personification of the Cross in "The Dream of the Rood" sets the precedent for understanding how sacred armor functions in Malory's work. There are no automatons in *Le Morte D'Arthur*, and armor does not speak nor move on its own accord, but Arthurian armor silently communicates, and miscommunicates, a knight's true identity. We can read Arthurian armor as a silent symbiote that envelops the knight's body to recreate an armorial doubleness. Doubleness is exemplified in Malory's text through depictions of sacred armor that seemingly has a life of its own. E. Jane Burns notes that armor plays a crucial double-role in a knight's identity, both in revealing his martial prowess and encasing the body so it is unseen.¹⁸ Armorial doubleness, as I see it, does more. The sacred armor in Malory's text is personified as an entity with a silent

¹⁷ Allen J. Frantzen, *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 42.

¹⁸ Jane E. Burns, *Refashioning Courtly Love: Launcelot as Ladies' Man or Lady/Man? Constructing Medieval Sexuality*. ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James Alfred Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Also see E. Jane Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading Through Clothes in Medieval French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 136.

identity. Armor is separate from its wearer, but in some instances, Malory takes great care to show how the armor “dies” before the wearer dies. When the knight, Balin, slays his opponent, Lanceor, “the hauberk perysshed” first before Lanceor laid “as a dede corps.”¹⁹ When Arthur, bloody and severely wounded from his battle with the knight Accolon, retrieves Excalibur, Arthur speaks to the sheathed sword as if it was his long lost lover: “how hast ben from me al to long / & moche dommage hast thow done me.”²⁰ Excalibur is one of the most powerful weapons in *Le Morte D’Arthur*, but it is treated in Malory’s text as a kidnapped damsel. As demonstrated in these brief examples, armorial doubleness, where armor reconfigures the knightly body as part of another nonhuman body, is intrinsic to the process of knightly degeneration and regeneration.

Just as Christ has an intimate relationship to the cross, knights are expected to have an intimate relationship with their armor. As indicated by Springer, “the double nature of the armoured knight is analogous to the double nature of Christ, both master and victim, divine and human.”²¹ Arthurian sacred armor mediates a knight’s ability for self-sacrifice. Sacred armor is not a reminder of life, but a precursor to a necessary death, like a “pre-reliquary” that temporarily preserves the body until it is ready to be sacrificed.

¹⁹ Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Humanities Text Initiative, 1997), 82. <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/MaloryWks2>. This chapter uses the digital version of Caxton’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*. The site organizes Malory’s work through page numbers, and these will be used as a reference guide, with the URL.

²⁰ Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur*, 132.

²¹ Springer, *Armour and Masculinity*, 40.

When blood is shed to cleanse the land, observes Alex Mueller, “badges and banners become visual reminders of the deaths that accompany all heraldic assertions, from battle standards to coats of arms.”²² Sacred armor ceases to function as signifiers of life, lineage, and stability. If medieval knights were meant to follow in Christ’s example, Malory’s work shows how both knights and their sacred armor are sacrificed to purge the land of corruption. An honorable knight’s blood, more specifically, becomes a “cure” that coats not only their failing armor, but spills, rather ritualistically and repetitively, onto the earth to cleanse the soil. The process in which brother fights brother, in which armor is sundered, and blood is spilt, becomes a way for Malory to critique the very systems of chivalry that instigated the conflict in the first place.

Robeson points out the central thesis of all chivalric manuals is that chivalry, as an ideology and as a practice, “would work if every knight would only follow the code. For this reason, the manuals of Llul, Charny, and Bonet include detailed prescriptions of what exactly constitutes honorable knighthood as well as expressions of disillusion with contemporary knights who no longer practice true chivalry.”²³ Malory’s knights navigate the fictions and realities of chivalry in order to determine which actions lead to a sense of worship and which actions lead to shame. *Le Morte D’Arthur* is a narrative of failing armored bodies interlaced within the catalogue of deeds of chivalry, war, and death. Many knights inhabit Malory’s text, but for the purpose of this chapter, I focus on Arthur,

²² Alex Mueller, “The Historiography of the Dragon: Heraldic Violence in the Alliterative Morte Arthur,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 32 (2010): 298.

²³ Robeson, “‘Noble Knights and ‘Michievous’ War,” 28.

Balin, and Launcelot as three significant representatives of Malory's depiction of sacrificial knighthood and the contradictions of chivalry. More specifically, the process in which their armor fails, and the manner of their subsequent deaths, remind readers that the knightly body's degeneration is never just a one-way trip—rather, the body undergoes a cyclical transformation where degeneration is necessary regeneration.

Arguably, acts of wounding and healing in this text are practiced in a cyclic fashion and celebrated as inevitabilities. At times, and contrary to the need for self-preservation, Malory's narrative tells of knights rushing blindly into battle and expecting injury. This chivalric mentality has microcosmic, and macrocosmic, relevance. At the microcosmic level, when Arthur, Balin, and Launcelot are injured, their wounds become a narrative motif that confirms their value as members of the Round Table; in other words, their wounds are testaments to their courage. When regenerated, their knightly scars become badges of honor, equivalent to the armor they wear. At a macrocosmic level, violent actions fuel the knights' death drive; their desire for degeneration, as a proof of self-worth, has a large scale impact in Malory's diegesis. Violence is a continually repeated ceremony of maleness, and "smiting enemies to the earth," a significant motif in Malory's description of battle, leads to spilt blood ritualistically cleansing the land of civil strife. In Malory's work, the action of knights falling "down to the erthe" is repeated constantly.²⁴ Knights (along with their arms, armor, horses, and blood) are smote down, fall down, swoon down, or even kneel down, 238 times.²⁵ The

²⁴ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 42.

²⁵ This number was calculated based on the digital version of *Le Morte D'Arthur*.

one constant in all the variations of phrasing is the downwards trajectory of bodies and prostheses, and the word “erthe.” Through this strategic repetition, Malory’s text hints the land itself is corrupted, like a body infected by a disease, and must be purified through the ritual of combat. Evidence of a corrupted earth is presented in the final battle. For a fleeting moment, peace becomes possible as Arthur and Mordred discuss treaties. Both sides are anxious and distrustful, and both Mordred and Arthur warn their men that should they see a single sword drawn, they must meet in combat. At first, “they were agreyd & accorded thorouly” but soon

came an adder [a venomous snake] out of a lytel hethe busshe & hyt stonge a kngyhte on the foot / & whan the kngyht felte hym stongen he looked down and sawe the adder / & than he drewe his swerde to slege the adder / & thought of none other harme / And whan the hoost on bothe partyes saw that swerde [...] bothe hoostes dressyd hem to gyders [...] And neuer was there seen a more doolfuller bataylle in no crysten londe.²⁶

Arthur’s bloodiest battle, where “an hondred thousand layed deed vpon the down,” was caused by a single snake and a single sword.²⁷ The seemingly trivial presence of a snake draws on the biblical reference of the serpent that infiltrates and corrupts Eden. In Arthur’s case, a creature from the natural world poisons any hope of peace with a single bite, and war ensues.

²⁶ Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur*, 845-846.

²⁷ Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur*, 846.

Arthur's Sheath

Elaine Scarry describes war, civil or not, as an event where “each side works to bring the other side to its perceived level of intolerable injury.”²⁸ Scarry’s concepts of war, pain, and injury resonate with Malory’s knights. First, by willingly sacrificing their bodies in combat, knights endure suffering. At the same time, knights must cause their opponents to suffer. A knight’s worthiness is measured by their effectiveness in battle. Launcelot, for instance, is a renowned knight whose status is enhanced by his kill-count. When Launcelot saves Guinevere, he slays nineteen knights, including Gawain’s brothers Gareth and Gaheris.²⁹ While these deaths further instigate the civil turmoil in Arthur’s realm, Launcelot is still praised for his skill. This is a reminder of Geoffroi de Charny’s mantra: “He who does best is most worthy.”³⁰ The longer version of this ideology is as follows:

When, through the grace of God, [knights] find out and witness such supremely noble affairs as battles, were they also to be granted the grace and favor if performing great deeds, then such men should indeed thank Our Lord [...] And when they recognize what great benefit and honor it is, this increases their determination to strive and seek out opportunities for such deeds of arms [...] He who is the most fortunate in often taking part in them [...] is of that much greater worth than those who have done less.³¹

²⁸ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 155.

²⁹ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 811.

³⁰ Geoffroi de Charny, *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny: Text, Context, and Translation*, ed. Richard W. Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy (University of Pennsylvania Press: 1996), 95.

³¹ De Charny, *The Book of Chivalry*, 105.

Geoffroi de Charny's work, *The Book of Chivalry*, is one of the few surviving manuals of the fourteenth century that preserves chivalric ideology. In his work, Charny expounds chivalric ideology: how a knight should act, and what a knight should wear, and what a knight should reject. Malory, who while imprisoned for numerous crimes was nonetheless knighted, must have been aware of the maxim: "He who does best is most worthy." Scarry's "perceived level of intolerable injury" might indicate the level of ennobling devotion for Malory's knights. Devotion justifies pain and knightly degeneration, and both the wounds—the destruction of the flesh—and the broken armor—the symbolic destruction of the body—are reminders of civil violence that permeates throughout Arthur's kingdom.

In Book IV, Arthur's worthiness is tested when his sister, Morgan le Fay, steals Excalibur and gives the sword to Accolon. As previously mentioned, the sword can be thought of as a kidnapped damsel because of how Arthur speaks to it. But what is also interesting about the encounter with Accolon is how Arthur is wounded by his beloved weapon. Arthur's battle with the knight Accolon in Book IV is an example of cyclical degeneration and regeneration. In Book I, Merlin notes that Excalibur's sheath is more valuable than the actual blade because of its magical, medical properties: "for the scaubard is worth x of the swerdys / for whyles ye haue the scaubard vpon yow ye shalle neuer lese no blood / be ye neuer so sore wounded therfor kepe wel the scaubard alweyes with yow."³² And in Book II, we are again reminded of the sheath's power. During the

³² Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 74.

burial of twelve knights, key figures from Arthurian legend congregate together, including Gawain, Morgan le Fay, and Merlin. Merlin prophesizes the events to befall Arthur and Balin, and Merlin reminds Arthur of the sheath's powers: "kepe wel the scaubard of Excalibur / for ye shalle lese no blood whyle ye haue the scauberd vpon yow though ye haue as many woundes vpon yow as ye may haue."³³

Contrary to depictions of Excalibur in popular culture, the blade is not the most valuable asset—the sheath demonstrates medicinal properties similar to Chaucer's brass steed and other mechanical-magical prostheses. The sheath augments the body by being a wearable technology that is worn, not only by Arthur, but also by Excalibur. In this particular case, the sheath mediates the relationship between the sword and the king. Book I's burial sequence foreshadows events that occur in Book IV: Excalibur is stolen by Morgan le Fay, in an act of symbolic castration that deprives Arthur of power, and presents the sword and sheath to her lover, Accolon. Arthur is given a forgery of Excalibur, and when he battles Accolon, he receives serious injuries:

But for the most party euery stroke that Accolon gaf he wounded sore
Arthur / that it was merueylle he stode / And alweyes his blood fylle from
hym fast / whan Arthur beheld the ground so sore bebledde he was
desmayed / and thenne he demed treason that his swerd was changed.³⁴

Malory repeats these lines soon after:

Arthur lost so moche blood that it was merueille he stode on his feet / but
he was soo ful of knyghthode that knyghtly he endured the payne.³⁵

³³ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 89.

³⁴ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 130.

³⁵ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 130.

While these passages might sound redundant, the repetition functions more so as a ritualistic, recurring chant that emphasizes a key aspect of idealized chivalric masculinity. We are reminded of Arthur's toughness, but more importantly, his excessive wounds and loss of blood arguably makes him more heroic. By Geoffroi de Charny's logic, Arthur endures the best, therefore he is the "most worthy" to hold the very sword that cuts him. Arthur validates his kingship by sacrificing his blood to regain Excalibur. In Arthur's case, the kingly body is meant to be risked and bloodied. Richard Kaeper suggests Arthur's shift between benevolent king and violent knight is problematic because it demonstrates how the definition of the knightly and kingly body are in constant flux.³⁶ A king's regal immunity is predicated on material ownership, and when Arthur loses his sheath, he is rendered open to physical harm. In this sequence of events, Arthur is not invulnerable; Arthur's kingly body is violated and opened, and Arthur's battle with Accolon, and his subsequent battle with Mordred, emphasizes much blood Arthur loses. Moreover, these passages also remind us of how Arthur's body is a "marvel" to behold. As Derek G. Neal explains, aspects of masculinity "are themselves grounded, and detectible, in the body."³⁷ Despite the openness of his body, Arthur is not emasculated. Moments of survival and triumph reaffirm Arthur's status as a military leader capable of

³⁶ Richard Kaeper, *War, Justice and the Public Order: England and France in the Latter Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 155.

³⁷ Derek G. Neal, *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 128.

stopping those who oppose his rule. But as proof of survival and triumph, the body must be wounded.

The link between physical attributes and physical capabilities is supported by medieval pedagogies concerning masculinity. According to Hodges, “Very rarely does Malory show crippling injuries; the vast majority of the time wounds are either mortal or they heal. This allows injuries to be educational without ending young knights’ careers.”³⁸ While Arthur’s armorial sheath prosthetically enhances his knight-king body, it is only a temporary advantage. The prosthesis is a technological construct that is doomed to fail, but, ironically, for the betterment of the wearer. Given how bodies are injured in Malory’s work, Arthur’s armor and sheath are meant to fail so a hyper-masculine ideal can persevere. According to Laura Finke and Martin Schichtman’s work on Malory’s description of violence as symbolic capital, an economy of masculinity, one predicated on materiality and prostheses, has defined an admired sense of maleness with combative aggression and assertiveness. For Finke and Schichtman, “masculinity is not a transparent or essential quality which we must take as a given, as inevitable.”³⁹ Moreover, as Arthur and Accolon’s battle demonstrates, masculinity is built around violent exchanges that determine “hierarchies among men.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Kenneth Hodges, “Wounded Masculinity,” 19.

³⁹ Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Schichtman, “No Pain, No Gain: Violence as Symbolic Capital in Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur*,” *Arthuriana* 8.2 (Summer 1998): 116.

⁴⁰ Finke and Schichtman, “No Pain, No Gain,” 119.

Interestingly, the ritualistic repetition of violence in Arthur's encounter with Accolon can be considered an example of the Bakhtinian concept of grotesque realism. Large scaled war, like single combat, has a carnivalesque quality in its repetitiveness. When knights vow to triumph in combat, this act is a precursor to the grotesque degeneration of one body or another. In the Bakhtinian sense, oath-making is a performative act that leads to "the rending of the human body."⁴¹ Moreover, Mikhail Bakhtin has noted that chivalric romances do not shy from "images of dismemberment and detailed anatomic descriptions of wounds and deaths."⁴² The grotesque realism of broken armor and open, wounded bodies is not meant to be seen as a negative experience; rather, such events have some positive aspects that do not feminize the male body; rather, moments of wounding transform the body and elevate that body to a higher status.

The battle between Accolon and Arthur is also another example of smiting as an act of cleansing. When Arthur and Accolon first meet in battle, they ritualistically dress, then smite each other with extreme force: they "lete their horses renne so fast that eyther smote other in the myddes of the shelde / with their speres hede / that bothe hors and man wente to the erthe."⁴³ Malory has a tendency to describe violent clashes in vivid, anatomical detail. As noted above in the phrase "wente to the erthe," battles tend to emphasize a "downward trajectory." Malory tends to describe blood as a sacred liquid

⁴¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky. (Indiana University Press: 2009), 192.

⁴² Bahktin, *Rabelais*, 354.

⁴³ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 130.

that falls, and when Arthur finally retrieves Excalibur from Accolon, he strikes Accolon: “And therewith syr Arthur russhed on hym with alle his myghte and pulled hym to the erthe / and thēne russhed of his helme / and gaf hym suche a buffet on the hede that the blood cam oute at his eres / his nose & his mouthe.”⁴⁴ Eventually, even Accolon dies of blood loss: “he had bled soo moche blood that he myghte not lyue.”⁴⁵ If we apply Geoffroi de Charny’s logic to Accolon’s death, Accolon did not fight the best, therefore he is not “the most worthy.” The motifs of falling bodies, specifically to the earth, and spilling blood are not isolated to a single encounter; in most of Malory’s battles, bodies are smote to the earth, so much so that it becomes a cyclical cleansing and regenerative process that occurs throughout the narrative.

It should be noted here that despite the countless deaths catalogued in Malory’s work, it is the land that benefits from broken armor and bodily sacrifice. In Laura Finke and Martin Schichtman’s more recent essay, “Arthur Pendragon: Eco-Warrior,” they write: “Chivalry has always been a protection racket in which the reward for protecting women and the land (always imagined as metonymically connected) is ownership of their bodies.”⁴⁶ In a way, the spilling of blood metaphorically cleanses the land, and should the heroic knight die in service of his king and country, his blood not only becomes part of the cleansing, it also fulfills themes of sacrifice associated with courtly love and fealty

⁴⁴ Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur*, 132.

⁴⁵ Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur*, 135.

⁴⁶ Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Schichtman, “Arthur Pendragon, Eco-Warrior,” *Arthuriana* 23.1 (Spring 2013): 10.

towards the king. According to Lisa Robeson, “The principle of the two-bodied king [...] asserts that a ruler such as Arthur exists both as the embodiment of his realm and as a private individual.”⁴⁷ This further emphasizes the communal link between land and king. Furthermore, the doubleness of Arthur’s body shows a parallel degeneration: when Arthur is corrupted by civil strife, the realm falls. But when the king dies, the realm regenerates. The link between king-land-knights demonstrates messianic attributes connected to Malory’s knights—Arthur, Balin, and Launcelot, for instance, may be imperfect and guilty of various sins, but they attempt to redeem themselves through combat, which becomes a form of spiritual rehabilitation that rids the land of corruption.

Wounds and broken armor reaffirm the knight’s skill and survivability, and sacred armor becomes the medium through which knights can achieve a “messianic” masculinity through violence, blood, and sacrifice. Malory had a specific knowledge of warfare, and his text relies on detailed descriptions of battles. More specifically, given his emphasis on battlefield carnage, Malory demonstrates an awareness towards the reality of war. As Megan Arkenberg notes: Malory “rarely skimps on the details of split skulls and dripping or spurting blood that accompany battle between men.”⁴⁸ In addition to retaining a sense of realism, Malory’s over-emphasis on blood, also seems to uphold blood’s sacredness—blood is the necessary component that turns a ritual of violence and sacrifice into a ritual of purification, one that cleanses not just the knight, but the landscape torn

⁴⁷ Robeson, “Noble Knights and ‘Mischievous War,’” 11.

⁴⁸ Megan Arkenberg, “‘A Mayde, and Last of Youre Blood’: Galahad’s Asexuality and its Significance in *Le Morte D’Arthur*,” *Arthuriana* 24.3 (Fall 2015): 10.

asunder by civil war and corruption. Blood is a useful motif that ties knights together via fraternal blood ties. For Cory Rushton, blood ties are one of the closest possible relationships between two men: as he states, “Malory emphasizes the unconscious call of blood to blood.”⁴⁹ Such instances solidify the importance of a fraternal order in Arthur’s realm, but in dire circumstances, the shedding of blood, specifically of a brother’s or kinsman’s, exacerbates the ironic tragedy.

Balin’s Folly

The armorial prostheses in Malory’s work, like Arthur’s sheath, help mediate our understanding of Sir Balin’s armor. As demonstrated throughout Malory’s text, the need to distinguish between appearance and reality is predicated on moments of unveiling and unmasking. These events where ritual violence takes place reveal the true identities of friend and foe alike. Recurring motifs seen in the battle between Arthur and Accolon also appear in the tragedy of Balin and Balan. Balin and Balan are brothers who appear in Book II of *Le Morte D’Arthur*. Early in Arthur’s reign, Merlin tells Arthur that Balin is a superior knight, albeit he Arthur’s prisoner for killing one of the king’s cousins. Once freed, Balin meets a mysterious damsel who gives him a sword fitting for only a virtuous knight. It is soon revealed that the sword is cursed; whoever wields the blade will kill his own brother. In Book II, Malory’s narrative hinges on Balin’s tragic folly, his penchant for excessive violence, that foreshadows the degradation of the Arthurian realm. The

⁴⁹ Cory Rushton, “Absent Fathers, Unexpected Sons: Paternity in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*,” *Studies in Philology* 101.2 (Spring 2004): 141.

concept of defilement initiates Balin's narrative. An unnamed damsel warns Arthur: "beware ye be not defoyled with shame trechery ne gyle [...] be a clene knyght withoute vylony."⁵⁰ The concept of defilement conflates disease with shame, and this sentiment recurs in the last book of *Le Morte D'Arthur*, on Gawain's deathbed and on the eve of Arthur's battle with Mordred. Perhaps one of the most relevant lines of *Le Morte D'Arthur* is found in the Winchester edition of Malory's work. Dying from a mortal wound, Gawain says, "Thorow me and my pryde ye have all thys shame a disease."⁵¹ Gawain seemingly conflates in one sentence the sin of pride and shame as a disease. Upon closer inspection, "ye have this shame a disease" does not refer to Gawain, but to whom Gawain is speaking to: Arthur. Gawain's line is likened to the language of contagion and transmission. Gawain, through his sin of pride, infects Arthur with shame, which is further enhanced by Mordred, the product of Arthur's incestual act with his sister, Morgause. Interestingly, the fall of chivalry and the inevitable, necessary failure of armor is demonstrated in Mordred's insurrection. Mordred is not only a dishonorable character because he is a product of incest, but also because he discards the sword, the lance, and the shield, the traditional arms and armor of chivalry, for siege weapons. In his assault on the tower of London, which sheltered Guinevere, Mordred "threwe many grete

⁵⁰ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 77.

⁵¹ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 709. Interestingly, these lines do not appear in the Caxton text but in Eugene Vinaver's edition. See William Matthews, "A Question of Texts," *Arthuriana* 7.1 (Spring 1997), 93-133. Note that Matthews name does not appear in the digital version of the article. Both the Caxton text and the Winchester versions are useful, and Matthews discusses the variations between both editions. As Matthews notes, the Caxton edition removes Gawain's acknowledgement of his pride.

engynes vnto theym / and shotte grete gonnes.”⁵² Whether or not the “grete gonnes” could be interpreted as the use of ballista or trebuchets, it is also likely that Malory imagined the use of cannons. Mordred represents anti-chivalry because Mordred’s unnecessary war disrupts political and moral stability. Robeson argues that Mordred is not a worshipful knight and is therefore not honorable: “he is usurping his uncle’s kingdom [and] he seeks to marry his uncle’s/father’s wife to legitimize his claim.”⁵³

Ironically, following the chivalrous path leads to Mordred’s usurpation and Arthur’s demise. The degeneration of Arthur’s body parallels the corruption of his realm. Sarah Peverly recognizes the tragic consequences of human error: “Paradoxically, in fulfilling his obligations and expecting his knights to do the same, Arthur also lends himself to disaster, for the numerous battles he commits himself to as feudal lord mean that the kingdom is unwittingly left in the hands of traitor.”⁵⁴ Malory’s narrative presents fathers who fight against sons, brothers who kill brothers, and all because of an unforeseen error.

Similar to Lancelot, Balin is guilty of some of the most barbaric death sequences in Malory’s text—readers first encounter Balin as a prisoner who killed Arthur’s unnamed cousin. Similar to Arthur’s sword in the stone, Balin is the only knight capable

⁵² Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte D’Arthur*, 839.

⁵³ Robeson, “‘Noble Knights and ‘Michievous’ War,” 26.

⁵⁴ Sarah L. Peverly, “Political Consciousness and the Literary Mind in Late Medieval England: Men ‘Brought up of nought’ in Vale, Hardyng, Mankind, and Malory,” *Studies in Philology* 105.1 (Winter 2008): 26.

of unsheathing a sword presented to Arthur's court. Balin, as indicated in the early stages of Book II, is doomed when he decides to keep the sword, despite dire warnings from the damsel: "ye are not wyse to kepe the swerd from me / for ye shalle slee with the swerd the best frende that ye haue and the man that ye moste loue in the world / and the swerd shalle be your destruction."⁵⁵ The following events demonstrate Balin's doom: Balin, considered to be a knight without the stain of treason or villainy, ironically decapitates the Lady of the Lake, who had slain Balin's mother. He is subsequently banished from court, and in one specific sequence, what might be considered the beginning of the end in Balin's narrative, Balin pursues Garlon, an "invisible knight" also guilty of the brutal murder of women. Arriving at the castle of Pellam, the Grail King, and Garlon's brother, a battle ensues between Balin and Garlon. Balin smites Garlon, but in doing so, he also cripples the Grail King (thus setting the stage for Galahad and the Grail Quest).⁵⁶ The injury shatters the castle "to the erthe," and only Balin and Pellam survive.⁵⁷ After witnessing the murder suicide of Garnish the Mount, a damsel Garnish desires, and her lover, Balin comes into conflict with a Red Knight who guards a ford. Here, the damsel's (who first gave Balin the sword) prophecy comes true. Balin's identity is miscommunicated—Balin's shield, a crucial identity marker, is damaged, so he accepts a

⁵⁵ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 78.

⁵⁶ Balin encounters another set of brothers that demonstrates duality. Sir Garlon, the invisible knight, enacts excessive, unwarranted violence, but his foil is his brother, King Pellam, the Grail King who is associated not just with the Grail, but with other sacred artifacts including the Spear of Longinus.

⁵⁷ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 93.

friendly knight's shield in preparation for the battle against the Red Knight. The Red Knight, unfortunately, is Balan, unrecognizable by his armor. The brothers fight to the death, and only after mortally wounding each other do they realize they have committed the sin of fratricide.

Interestingly, Balin, unlike his peers, does not rush into all his battles. Rather, he hesitates, he contemplates, and in doing so, he inevitably loses his shield. In fact, Balin's tragedy hinges on the shield. As Susan Holbrook has demonstrated, a knight's shield is essential to the construction of identity, friendship, and bonds of loyalty. Launcelot hides his identity by using "a shield with the arms of Cornwall," and Palomides and Tristram are known as the "best" of knights because of their black shields.⁵⁸ The shield is a heraldic identity marker, and establishing identity is as much of a defensive measure as the shield's ability to deflect swords, lances, and arrows. Balin's narrative culminates in the tragic instance of miscommunication caused by wearing the wrong armor. More specifically, Balin, and his brother Balan, are pitted against each other because their armor miscommunicates their true identity. Balin, also known as The Knight with Two Swords, is considered one of the best knights in Arthur's realm, and enters into a castle where he is welcomed by numerous ladies and knights. The chief lady of the castle asks Balin to go to an island and joust with a knight before he is to go further in the castle—Balin considers jousting an "vnhappy customme," and his remarks arguably seem

⁵⁸ Susan Holbrook, "To the Well: Malory's Sir Palomides on Ideals of Chivalric Reputation, Male Friendship, Romantic Love, Religious Conversion—and Loyalty," *Arthuriana* 23.4 (Winter 2013): 72-97. While Holbrook focuses on Palomides, her analysis of shields, while brief, is useful in understanding Balin.

pacifistic and antithetical to a chivalric ideal that requires knights to plunge into battle.⁵⁹

But Balin soon agrees. A nameless knight, however, says Balin's shield is "not good" and lends Balin a larger, sturdier shield.⁶⁰ Balin takes the unknown shield and arrives at the island. Another lady asks Balin:

O knyght balyn why haue ye lefte your owne sheld / allas ye haue put your self in grete daunger / for by your sheld ye shold haue ben knowen / it is grete pyte of yow as euer was of knyght / for of thy prowesse & hardynes thou hast no felawe lyuyng.⁶¹

Dropping the shield functions as an act that disregards the necessity of arms, armor, and combat. It can, arguably, be read as an amateur mistake, a pacifistic action that leads to the misidentification—in the case of Balin, being incognito leads to the tragedy of fratricide. Armor, we are reminded, is inextricable and necessary to form and sustain homosocial bonds. When armor, and the identity associated with that armor, are forsook, tragedy inevitably happens. The tragedy is not the combat itself, which is applauded for its violence, but the revelation that brother killed brother.

When Balin initiates battle with the nameless knight who is quickly revealed to be his brother, Balan, their battle is witnessed by others: "Balyn loked vp to the castel and sawe the Towres stand ful of ladyes."⁶² In this particular case, men, not women, are objects to be gazed. As if cued by the audience, both brothers "went unto battle again," a

⁵⁹ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 96.

⁶⁰ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 96.

⁶¹ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 96.

⁶² Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 97.

phrase that recurs during their combative ebbs and flows of Malory's model of combat—degenerate, recover, degenerate, recover. Arguably, the battle between brothers implies that death is not meant to be immediate—the longer one stays alive on the battlefield, the longer the spectacle of courage is maintained. The spectacle is made all the more grandiose by witnesses. The flurry of their exchanges, blow by blow, details how their armor degenerates piece by piece. First their shields, then their helmets, are smote. Armor is then replaced by blood: “Thenne they wente to batail ageyn so merueillously that doubte it was to here of that bataille for the grete blood shedyng And their hawberkes vnnailed that naked they were on euery syde.”⁶³ Balin's “falling” trajectory leads to openings and more vulnerability, and Malory further describes the motif of blood and bodies that are smote to the earth. In the end, Balan acknowledges Balin's mistake in his dying breath: “Allas sayd Balan that euer I sawe this day that thorow myshap I myght not knowe yow / for I aspyed wel your two swerdys / but by cause ye had another shild I demed ye had ben another knyzt.”⁶⁴ Both Balin and Balan are ultimately buried, but the descriptions of opened bodies and blood become prominent examples of how problematic masculinity becomes when it depends on armorial constructs that are doomed to fail the wearer.

Balin's red armor and false shield guarantee fratricide because both prostheses hide Balin's true identity. Alex Mueller notes: “Whereas the appropriate heraldic symbol

⁶³ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 97.

⁶⁴ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 98.

regularly secures the chivalric status of its bearer, such signs [...] remind onlookers of the death and destruction left in their wake.⁶⁵ The doubleness of armor becomes a forceful motif in these sections of Malory's narrative. Armor is a heraldic marker of identity, but in the process of constructing identity, armor also becomes a reliquary that contains a doomed body. Vance Smith suggests that heraldic insignias are in "proximity to death."⁶⁶ Armor does not stabilize knighthood; rather, Balin's battle with Balan reminds audiences brotherly violence is a constant threat to the institution of chivalry because of the very armor that was meant to protect them. The violent, degenerative state of Arthur's kingdom is made all the more troubling by fratricide: As Robeson notes, "The most fatal battle is that between relatives and friends, not between king and subject."⁶⁷

In Helmut Nickel's analysis of Balin, he identifies fifteen motifs that suggests Balin's story is an archetypal narrative that shares commonalities with other Eurasian narratives. His work compares Balin's tale to similar multi-cultural works, and he locates a crucial aspect of armor wearing and degeneration: misidentification, pride, and the misinterpretation of the chivalric ideals leads to the destruction of the knightly body and what that body represents.⁶⁸ The fact that Balin's tragedy happens so early in Arthur's

⁶⁵ Alex Mueller, "The Historiography of Dragon: Heraldic Violence in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 32 (2010): 298.

⁶⁶ Vance Smith, *Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 198.

⁶⁷ Robeson, "'Noble Knights and 'Michievous' War,'" 15.

⁶⁸ Helmut Nickel, "About the Knight with Two Swords and the Maiden Under a Tree," *Arthuriana* 17.4 (Winter 2007): 29-48.

reign suggests that the tragedy of Balin and Balan is a precursive tale that foreshadows how armor is more problematic than it is an advantage. According to Meredith Reynolds, “Most of Malory’s knights are not readily identifiable either by appearance or speech pattern.”⁶⁹ Likewise, Sarah Gordon contends that knights have a tendency to be rendered nameless and incognito because they use multiple pieces of arms and armor to construct their identities. If knightly identities are continuously shifting and unstable, this reinforces the notion that masculinity is constructed, hidden, and malleable.⁷⁰ Balan and Balin demonstrate that being hidden and malleable does not guarantee safety. When superheroes hide their identity, anonymity becomes an advantage; when an Arthurian knight’s identity is hidden by the very armor he wears, anonymity leads to misidentification. Misidentification, and miscommunication, leads to death. More precisely, as the tragedy of Balin shows, a hidden identity places a knight in more danger, both physically and spiritually, especially when we consider how anonymity increases the likelihood that a knight will unknowingly kill his own kinsman.

The Tale of Balin reflects the tragedy of doubleness. Armorial doubleness does not save Balan, nor does armor save Balin from killing his own brother. In fact, fratricide is initiated because the very armor that is meant to protect their bodies hides their identities. The brothers fight because they are unrecognizable; only after their battle, when they have mortally wounded each other, are their identities revealed. The tale of

⁶⁹ Reynolds, “Interior Monologue in Malory,” 73.

⁷⁰ Sarah Gordon, “The Man With No Name: Identity in French Arthurian Verse Romance,” *Arthuriana*. 18.2 (2008), 70.

Balin shows how duality impacts our understanding of chivalry and its contradictions. In Balin and Balan's case, chivalry does not guarantee oaths between brothers are kept, and oaths of vengeance lead to more destruction. The duality presented in Malory's work are linked via paternity or through the fraternal chivalric code. These bodies are pulled in opposing directions, yet must meet in inevitable combat: Balan versus Balin, Arthur versus Mordred, Launcelot versus Gawain (when Launcelot kills Gawain's brother's, Gareth and Gaheris). This duality further highlights the problematic aspects of chivalry, namely how the medieval ideological system is drawn to violence even when it advocates peace.

Launcelot's Penance, and "The Armor of God"

Launcelot is considered one of the most pivotal characters in Arthurian texts, and in the final books of *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Malory incorporates Launcelot into a larger discourse concerned with violence, degeneration associated with disease, and ultimately, redemption. By the final two books, Launcelot is considered the most famous and cherished knight: "sir launcelot is an hardy knyghte / and alle ye knowe / he is the best knyghte among vs alle [...] and I knowe no kny3t that is able to matche hym."⁷¹ Interestingly, we learn more about Launcelot in the final book because of his absence from the battlefield. On the eve of final battle with Mordred, Launcelot has already been exiled for saving Guinevere and killing multiple knights, namely Gawain's brothers, Gareth and Gaheris. Gawain becomes Launcelot's sworn enemy, and they duel. When we

⁷¹ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 799

last see Gawain alive, he is on his deathbed, suffering from old, and new, wounds, some of which were caused by Launcelot. Regardless of the animosity, Gawain still believes Launcelot is the worthiest knight, and Gawain reminds Arthur of how much they need Launcelot. Given Malory's emphasis on violent encounters, Launcelot's greatness seems to be predicated on how many men he has killed, and his subsequent reputation. In Book XXI, Gawain lies on his deathbed and tells Arthur:

Had sir laūcelot ben with you as he was / this vnhappy werre had neuer
begonne / & of alle this am I causer / for sir laūcelot & his blood thorou
their prowes helde alle your cankeryd enemyes in subiectyon and
daungere.⁷²

Enemies of the realm are considered cankerous sores, and Gawain suggests that Launcelot is the only one capable of cleansing a land corrupted by civil war; Gawain's language shows how Launcelot's arms and armor are the remedy. Interestingly, Gawain's description of Launcelot's quality reflects Gawain's own guilt. Gawain notes that he is the cause of shame and disease, and if Launcelot is seen as a remedy against cankered foes, it is fitting that Gawain should die as he suffers from a wound given by Launcelot. According to Hodges, at this point in the narrative, Launcelot is no longer seen as "a causer of injuries, but as one who as acted against 'cankeryd' enemies of the body politic."⁷³ Launcelot, in other words, is meant to diminish the corruption caused by civil strife.

⁷² Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 841-842

⁷³ Hodges, "Wounded Masculinity," 23.

Perhaps of all the knights, Launcelot strongly represents how smiting and cleansing functions in a similar capacity in Malory's work. First, Launcelot's wounds and scars define him as a good warrior: "whan they sawe so many woundes vpon hym alle they demed that he had ben a man of worship."⁷⁴ Launcelot is continuously wounded, and his perseverance enhances his reputation as a stalwart fighter who consistently smites his enemies to the earth. Second, Launcelot's armorial doubleness is evidence of his violent past. Janet Jesmok writes that Launcelot's doubleness presents a problem similar to Arthur's complex knight-king body, or Balin's conflict with his brother. Launcelot might be, at least initially, the model of knighthood, but he is a paradox of chivalry who must come to terms with his own doubleness, what Jesmok describes as Launcelot's defiant alter-ego: "This dark Other at first remains within his psyche, evident only through double-adversaries, but it later erupts in action, expressing the armed fighter's violent urges generally repressed by the chivalric code."⁷⁵ Felicity Riddy also concurs with Jesmok and writes about combat as a social ritual: "knights must, on the surface, be noble and honorable while suppressing [...] the hatred necessary for successful in war and tournaments."⁷⁶ Launcelot fights many significant battles incognito. He wears other

⁷⁴ Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, 597.

⁷⁵ Janet Jesmok, "The Double Life of Malory's Launcelot du Lake," *Arthuriana* 17.4 (Winter 2007): 81.

⁷⁶ Felicity Riddy. *Sir Thomas Malory*, New York: E.J. Brill, 1987, p. 108. Also see: "Contextualizing Le Morte Darthur: Empire and Civil War." *A Companion to Malory*. Ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and A.S.G. Edwards. Cambridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 1996.

knights' armor, and in disguise of other knights, he gains the attributes of both protagonists and antagonists, even as he becomes what Jesmok calls, "a killing machine."⁷⁷ Launcelot is responsible for injuring, and killing, fellow knights of the Round Table, as well as his opponents.

Third, Launcelot's wounds hold great significance because of the very oaths he breaks. Wounds are not merely a sign of the failures of Launcelot's armor, but as he transitions from knight to monk in the aftermath of Arthur's death, the wounds signify redemption and reparation. Hodges notes that wounds create communities, and similar to the degeneration-regeneration pattern, or the ritualistic patterns of combat, Hodges notes that "wounds that heal become symbols of the cyclical partings a rejoinings of the Arthurian community, where a knight will leave on adventures, fight, rejoin the community to heal or to celebrate, and then depart again."⁷⁸ Healing bodies, not invulnerable ones, become, at least for Hodges, the foundations of sociopolitical ideals. Moments of healing, as Hodges notes, function at a more communal level that enable various groups to unite. Thus, when Launcelot is beckoned back by a dying Gawain, Launcelot is seen as redeemer, not a traitor, who unites what remains of Arthur's knights.

For me, what is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Launcelot is not his status as a warrior, nor the number of people he has killed. What is interesting about Launcelot is how he transitions from knight to priest. In the final book, Launcelot finds Guinevere

⁷⁷ Jesmok, "The Double Life of Malory's Launcelot du Lake," 86.

⁷⁸ Hodges, "Wounded Masculinity," 23.

who, in her guilt for committing adultery, lives in a nunnery. In the first step of penance, Launcelot discards his armor for the “habyte” of a priest: “Than the bysshop sayd I wyll gladly and there he put an habyte vpon Syr Launcelot / and there he seruyd god day and nyzt with prayers and fastynges.”⁷⁹ Launcelot confesses and lives in penance for his crimes. According to David Eugene Clark, Launcelot’s “continued life allows him to feel the consequences of sin and to continue to demonstrate his faith through perseverance.”⁸⁰ Moreover, the need for redemption, reparation, or “spiritual” regeneration, spreads to other knights:

So syr Bors by fortune rode so longe tyl he came to the same chapel where syr Launcelot was [...] & whan masse was doon the bysshop syr Launcelot & sir Bedwere came to syr Bors / & whan syr bors sawe sir Launcelot in that maner clothynge / than he preyed the bysshop that he myght be in the same sewte / and so there was an habyte put vpon hym / & there he lyued in prayers & fastyng / and wythin halfe a yere there was come syr Galyhud / syr Galyhodyn / sir Blamour / syr Bleoheris / syr wyllyars / syr Clarras / and sir Gohaleaniyne / So al these vij noble knyghtes there abode styll and whan they sawe syr Launcelot had taken hym to suche perfeccion they had no last to departe / but toke suche an habyte as he had / Thus they endured in grete penaunce syx yere / and than syr Launcelot took thabyte of presthod of the bysshop.⁸¹

Despite Launcelot’s faults, his penance “cleanses” the Arthurian realm by removing all remaining knights from the space of the battlefield and relocating them to the space of the church. In this regard, Launcelot removes the other knights’ armor and replaces them

⁷⁹ Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur*, 855.

⁸⁰ David Eugene Clark, “Constructing Spritual Hierarchy through Mass Attendance in the Morte D’Arthur,” *Arthuriana* 25.1 (Spring 2015): 142.

⁸¹ Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur*, 855.

with the priest's habit. This act marks a significant transition, but armorial doubleness is maintained, only sacred, martial armor is replaced with spiritual armor. For Clark, the priestly habits represent "rehabilitation through confession and penance and subsequently prove themselves through clean living."⁸² Launcelot's penance is part of a spiritual regeneration that disseminates to the few remaining knights from Arthur's destroyed court.

Kenneth Hodges notes in his work on Christian chivalric exempla: "Malory's religious engagement is not in the simple statement of abstract theological principles but in the applications of such abstract principles to the complications of [...] political life."⁸³ Arthur, Balin, and Launcelot demonstrate how armor's symbolic significance centers on two points of chivalric ritualism: the creation of the knightly body, and the subsequent degeneration of that body. These necessary rituals are mediated by what the knights' wear, and their armorial doubleness acknowledges the cold realities of warfare—armorial prostheses are filled with symbolic capital and spent in battle. Knights must sacrifice themselves willingly, but armor is essential to the rapturous, paradoxical fantasy of invulnerability, not just from physical damage, but spiritual damage that can corrupt the soul. Malory's knights who willingly damage their two-fold body, like Launcelot does, are worthy, and clinging to armor arguably becomes a sign of inexperience, treachery, and cowardice.

⁸² Clark, "Constructing Spritual Hierarchy," 148.

⁸³ Kenneth Hodges, "Haunting Pieties: Malory's Use of Chivalric Christian Exempla after the Grail," *Arthuriana* 17.2 (Summer 2007): 45.

The medieval Christian interpretation of armorial doubleness is important for understanding Malory's use of armorial prostheses. Launcelot's acts of violence and subsequent acts of sacrifice inevitably intersects with the concept of the Armor of God, perhaps more than the other knights because of his reputation. Found in the *Book of Ephesians*, the Armor of God underscores a process of spiritual transformation Launcelot goes through:

Induite vos armaturam Dei, ut possitis stare adversus insidias diaboli: Quoniam non est nobis colluctatio adversus carnem et sanguinem, sed adversus principes, et potestates, adversus mundi rectores tenebrarum harum, contra spiritualia nequitiæ, in caelestibus. Propterea accipite armaturam Dei, ut possitis resistere in die malo, et in omnibus perfecti stare. State ergo succincti lumbos vestros in veritate, et induti loricam justitiæ, Et calceati pedes in praeparatione Evangelii pacis, In omnibus sumentes scutum fidei, in quo possitis omnia tela nequissimi ignea extinguere: et galeam salutis assumite, et gladium spiritus (quod est verbum Dei).⁸⁴

[Put you on the armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the deceits of the devil. For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood; but against principalities and power, against the rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places. Therefore, take unto you the armour of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and to stand in all things perfect. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of justice, and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. In all things taking the shield of faith, wherewith you may be able to extinguish all the fiery darts of the most wicked one. And take unto you the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (which is the word of God).]⁸⁵

As described in this passage, the Armor of God is ornamented with abstract virtues that are meant to physically manifest into armor. Each piece of armor represents a specific

⁸⁴ *Ephesians* 6:10-17 Vulg.

⁸⁵ *Ephesians* 6:10-17 DV

virtue— truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation—and together, these “body parts” emphasize how the armor becomes an anatomically accurate simulation of the organic body. Moreover, this simulation also creates a sterilized barrier. Guinevere and Launcelot meet again, they admit their love, but the vestments of a nun and the habits of a priest redirects their passions to a more spiritual path. Thus, it is not just the armor that is symbolic, but also the flesh that is entwined with it.

The concept of spiritual “fusion” is also essential to understanding medieval Christianity and how they shaped the understanding of the body. For Launcelot, his priestly habits place him in more of an accord with the Armor of God. In acts of penance, Launcelot merges with divine grace and the body of Christ through sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, where Christ’s body transforms to bread and his blood to wine. According to Sarah Beckwith: “The outlandish insistence not simply on figurative transformation but actual corporeal transformation returned to both haunt and inspire the sacramental system.”⁸⁶ While Beckwith’s work focuses on medieval drama, she shows how medieval Christianity was enamored with bodily transformation. For knights, transformation occurs through sacred armor, and the newly formed double-body participates in regeneration and redemption. While this fusion is metaphorical, it is practiced through the recurring motif of “putting on” in Biblical verses where man is “fashioned” with sacred apparel that symbolize Christ. Launcelot is such an example, and his hybridism between the organic, spiritual, and artificial reflects medieval religious

⁸⁶ Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), 60.

dogma. Angela Gibson writes that a knight seeks “to become a vessel to confer God’s power on Arthur’s Fellowship.”⁸⁷ Gibson focuses primarily on the concept of shame in her reading of *Le Morte D’Arthur*, and her viewpoint resonates with the act of becoming-sacred. Since, as she argues, a knight in the bedchamber is rendered naked and vulnerable, the opposite—an enclosed knight in spiritual vestments—becomes the ideal. Shame, which many times has been described as an invasive force, cannot penetrate the Armor of God, the physical testament to a knight’s virtue and worth.

Le Morte D’Arthur does not end with Arthur, but with Launcelot and a small handful of knights who become priests and warrior-pilgrims. Launcelot’s sins are partly to blame for Arthur’s fall, but the sacrifice of his armor for spiritual vestments becomes part of the overall regeneration that follows the extinction of Arthur’s court. Penance, for Launcelot, is only completed after death: “Launcelot neuer after ete but lytel mete nor dranke tyl he was dede.”⁸⁸ Priesthood is a fitting end for Launcelot and the remaining knights since both knighthood and priesthood rely on armorial doubleness and steadfastness in the process of becoming: from knight to priest to death. In Launcelot’s case, the fallen knight degenerates, but it is through a “self-smiting” act of penance that connects chivalry, worship, and redemption through fasting.

⁸⁷ Angela Gibson, “Malory’s Reformulation of Shame,” *Arthuriana* 11.4 (Winter 2001): 74.

⁸⁸ Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur*, 858.

Conclusion

In Malory's work, the greatest heroes do not avoid injury; rather, they welcome their wounds and willingly shed their blood. Heroic figures, as illustrated by Malory, are meant to embrace their inevitable demise. The wounded body is not, therefore, necessarily a sign of masculine flaws or failures like a lost war; the wounded body and dismantled armor are signs of "embraced degeneration" and the willingness to be sacrificed. When armor fails, injury and death strengthen the homosocial bonds between knights—should the knight survive combat, the body heals, the body learns, and the body becomes stronger, which suggests dismantling and wounding is not just a violent, ritualistic, and spiritual experience, but an instructive one as well.

Arthur, Balin, and Launcelot are icons of chivalry whose visibility, armor, and actions are relevant to the formulation of chivalric masculinity. As these three knights demonstrate, seeing and becoming are connected—Balin and Launcelot, like Arthur, are witnessed in battle, they become objects to be gazed, and their reputations are preserved by onlookers. Balin's story, for instance, is recounted by Merlin to Arthur, and Launcelot's narrative arc functions as points of comparison in matters of loyalty, friendship, and prowess on the battlefield. Arthur, Balin, and Launcelot must contend with complex problems that come with wearing armor, namely the issues with visibility and invisibility, which ironically function as markers of their vulnerability. It might be safe to assume that Arthur, Balin, and Launcelot represent the fate of all knights since a constant is always presented: performance of masculinity, often involving violence, are spectacles of bodily degeneration. But perhaps more importantly, these spectacles of

fragmenting the knights armored double-body are what makes Malory's text a cohesive narrative. Knights who undergo ritual violence are simultaneously celebrated and marginalized, but their actions are immortalized as examples of chivalry. Robeson acknowledges that Malory's catalogs of knights "show the patterns of family and feudal obligations that make a private quarrel public [...] The lists of names also add to the worship, or chivalric reputation, of each knight [...] It seems as if their names are reminders that more than lives have been lost, but the memories and the deeds of Arthur's early years, when the Round Table was a monument of chivalry and virtuous government."⁸⁹ The catalogue of names and deeds in the entirety of *Le Morte D'Arthur* also seems to honor the dead, similar to The Moving Wall, The Wall of Honor, and Vietnam Veterans Memorial, memorial sites and spaces of worship where names are catalogued on stone to remind viewers of a soldier's sacrifice.

A warrior's body and identity, regardless of culture, time, and place, is sacred. Based on the evidence, it seems that Malory's depiction of chivalry has a tendency to blur the lines between heroic endeavors and villainous savagery. It seems that the potential for heroes to become villains, and for villains to become heroes is increased when we consider that the knightly world is one of violence and brotherhood. The heroic knight and his enemy tend to be connected at a fraternal level, but they are also set in opposition against each other. Balin is responsible for killing his brother, and Launcelot is responsible for the deaths of many of Arthur's knights, and to an extent, the destruction of the kingdom itself. The armored knight is both a hero and anti-hero, a savior as well as

⁸⁹ Robeson, "Noble Knights and 'Mischiefous' War," 19-20.

villain. Balin and Balan, for example, demonstrate the duality of the knightly body. Balin becomes reminiscent of Cain, despite all of his heroic endeavors. Balan and Balin slay each other in tragic fratricide, and only in the moment of their deaths do they recognize each other.

Malory demonstrates how violence, failure, and the destruction to the body are necessary and inevitable. But what is the endgame to all this sacrifice? Sacrifice becomes a sign of piety, and the destruction of armor and flesh, in the larger framework of Malory's narrative, is necessary for the kingdom's redemption. A recurring "putting on" initiates a transformation into vulnerability and degeneration, arguably even nudity, and is followed by the spilling of blood. In Malory's text, this is required from all knights, including Arthur, Balin, and finally, with Launcelot. Malory's work shows that the continuous need for enclosure against physical violence and emasculating shame is understandable but incomplete. Knights must also come to terms with exposure and the inevitable opening, through injury, of the male body. As demonstrated in Balin's tragic end, enclosure, while initially ideal, can be more perilous—enclosed bodies hinder and problematize the ability to communicate and identify other knights through visual signals. By going incognito, knights like Lancelot and Balin can gain multiple identities, but the schizophrenic element leads to tragedy through misidentification. The tug-and-pull between the knightly body's need for enclosure and the need for exposure, and reputation, defines how the armored male body is perceived.

Together with the motif of blood, sacred armor has medicinal qualities associated with the Armor of God, best exemplified by Launcelot. For me, the transition from

knightly armor to priestly vestments is linked with sanitation and sterilization, or in other words, the cleansing of the body from impurities. Arthur, Lancelot, and Balin, along with almost all the knights in Arthur's realm, die. But by doing so, they cleanse the land corrupted by their very crimes: incest, fratricide, matricide, patricide, filicide, adultery, and treachery. Unlike the realism attributed to Malory's text, armorial doubleness is generally an optimistic viewpoint that relies on a basic binary opposition: breaking armor and letting bodies bleed leads to the triumphs against corruptive forces. As basic as this is, this duality speaks to the religious ideology that governs how medieval audiences perceive the chivalric body— its foibles, its triumph, and the potentialities of degenerative metamorphosis. The solution to the instability and the corruption of the Arthurian world is purgation through combat, and if the knight survives combat (and only a small handful do by the very end), purgation is received through penance. Gawain's destructive pride and desire for vengeance, Mordred's lust for the crown, and Lancelot's betrayal with Guinevere are "cured" by the sacrifice of countless knights who are laid to earth.

Chapter 3

Armored Knights and Armored Automatons: The Legend of Justice and the Triple-Bodied Assemblage

The generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline: Which for that I conceiued shoulde be most plausible and pleasing, being coloured by an historicall fiction, the which the most part delight to read.

— Edmund Spenser’s letter to Walter Raleigh

In Edmund Spenser’s letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, Spenser outlines his purpose for *The Faerie Queene*. In his attempts to “fashion” a “noble person,” Spenser created a lengthy poetic work that narrated the quests of several knights, each representing a specific virtue, in service to their queen. Questing in Spenser’s work is a transformative and instructive process, and deeds of daring became a poetic treatise, one that functioned more like a courtesy book that simultaneously critiqued and supported the violence inherent to chivalric ideology. This chapter underscores significant moments where such transformations hinge on prosthetic augmentations in the form of both automaton and armor. *The Faerie Queene* is regarded as Spenser’s greatest poetic work despite the fact that the poem, like Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, is incomplete. Of the intended twelve books, only six were officially completed; the first three books were published in 1590, and the second set, Books IV-VI, in 1596. The complexity, and popularity, of *The Faerie Queene* hinges on its use of multiple layers of allegory where time is distorted and characters who initially seem like separate entities are actually one and the same. The poem ultimately works to praise Queen Elizabeth I, who is represented by several strong female characters; chief among is the Faerie Queen herself, Gloriana. More specifically,

each book centers on knights who disembark from Gloriana's court to undertake quests that secure her realm.¹

Book V of *The Faerie Queene*, the Legend of Justice, is considered one of the most complex in the collection. The Legend of Justice utilizes the conventions of the romantic epic, and follows the knight, Artegall, and his trusted Squire, an "iron man" automaton called Talus. For modern readers, Book V is structured like a television series, not unlike a crime procedural drama. At the start of each canto, we find Artegall and Talus in a new location and facing another conflict where justice is needed. Artegall and Talus work side by side; in short, one cannot exist without the other, and when they are separated, Artegall is put at risk since his actions, and reputation, are dependent on his automaton companion.

Many readers see *The Faerie Queene*'s fifth book as Spenser's historical and political allegory that reflects his experiences in Elizabethan Ireland. For instance, according to Thomas Herron, Artegall has long been associated with Lord Arthur Grey, who was appointed the Lord Deputy of Ireland in 1580; moreover, Prince Arthur, Spenser's appropriation of Arthurian myth, embodied "the entire English military effort

¹ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978). 15-18. The letter to Walter Raleigh is included in this edition in this edition of Spenser's work. As Spenser indicates in his letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, each knight represents a heroic virtue: the Redcrosse Knight, who is later revealed to be Saint George, represents Holiness in Book I; Guyon is the Knight of Temperance in Book II; Britomart represents chastity in Book III; Sir Cambell and Sir Triamond represent Friendship in Book IV; Artegall represents justice in Book V; and Calidore represents Courtesy in Book VI.

against the [Spanish] Armada, on land as well as at sea.”² Christopher Highley suggests Talus might loosely represent Richard Bingham, an English governor of Connaught, who earned a bloodthirsty reputation in Ireland, and the name “The Flail of Connaught.”³ The Legend of Justice contains explicit historical references within its allegorical complexity, specifically corruptive threats to Elizabeth I’s reign—Mary Stuart’s claim to the throne, the invasive threat of the Spanish Armada, and Spenser’s experiences with the Desmond Rebellion in Ireland.⁴

Tobias Gregory argues that the events in Book V do not “merely glorify Elizabethan foreign and colonial policy, but comment on it from an interventionists Protestant perspective that is far from univocally celebratory or optimistic [...] the military ventures in the Low Countries, France, and Ireland, which Spenser evokes were all efforts which Elizabeth supported only half-heartedly.”⁵ Gregory points out that Spenser’s writing uses “tactical amnesia” to idealize “disease-ridden and mutinous troops, the corrupt captains, and the limited military successes.”⁶ Kent Russell Lehnhof

² Thomas Herron, “The Spanish Armada, Ireland, and Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*,” *New Hibernia Review* 6.2 (Summer 2002): 92.

³ Christopher Highley, *Shakespeare, Spenser, and the Crisis and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 118-119.

⁴ Irena is the representation of Ireland in Book V. For further context, see Nicholas Canny, “Ireland, a Historical Context,” *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A.C. Hamilton et al (London: Routledge, 2006): 414.

⁵ Tobias Gregory, “Shadowing Intervention: On the Politics of *The Faerie Queene* Book 5 Cantos 10-12,” *ELH* 67.2 (Summer 2000): 366.

⁶ Gregory, “Shadowing Intervention,” 372.

approaches Artegall and Britomart from a genealogical standpoint, and he argues Britomart, as the knight of chastity, is “Elizabeth’s royal foremother [...] allowing Elizabeth a supremely virtuous mother instead of an allegedly incestuous one.”⁷ For Lehnhof, Britomart is a figure who resists contamination by preserving “racial and moral purity.”⁸ Likewise, Barbara Fuchs hones in on both an historical and genealogical reading of Book V. Fuchs reads the enemies thwarted by Artegall as political and cultural allegories: “These include identifying with Spain as an enemy of Islam, as well as opposing Spain as the tyrannical enemy of England, oppressor of the Dutch provinces, and of Ireland itself.”⁹ Moreover, Sarah Plant reads Artegall as a “promoter of the judicial arm of the English Church. His depiction as a character whose judicial duties draw him into a more secularised role than that previously imagined for a member of the clergy, draws attention to the English Church’s development as a socio-political institution.”¹⁰

All of these criticisms concerning Spenser’s work is a useful foundation, but rather than focus only on historical representations, my reading of Artegall and Talus approaches how Spenser constructs an assemblage of knight-automaton. What is perhaps more fascinating about Book V is that the assemblage moves from armorial doubleness

⁷ Kent Russell Lehnhof, “Incest and Empire in The Faerie Queene,” *ELH* 73.1 (Spring 2006): 216-217.

⁸ Lehnhof, “Incest and Empire in The Faerie Queene,” 237.

⁹ Barbara Fuchs, “Spanish Lessons: Spenser and the Irish Moriscos,” *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 42.1 (Winter 2002): 54.

¹⁰ Sarah Plant, “Spenser’s Knights: Ministers of His Church?” *Parergon* 18.3 (July 2001): 63.

towards what we might call a triple-bodied assemblage mediated by armor. More specifically, Talus is the walking, sentient, violent suit of armor that functions as Artegall's companionate prosthesis. For a brief moment, Talus also becomes Britomart's companionate prosthesis. I read Talus as the invincible, nonhuman mediator that unifies the bodies of Artegall and Britomart. This unification is significant because, as Merlin prophesizes in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*, Artegall and Britomart are destined for marriage, and Britomart is destined to bear a son who will rule with strength and "spred his banner braue."¹¹ Despite Talus's penchant for extreme violence, the automaton strangely becomes an "Eros" figure who guides the destined lovers to each other. Together, Artegall-Talus-Britomart formulate a triple-bodied assemblage.

It is difficult to reconcile both the image of Talus as a war-machine responsible for Book V's high death toll, and the image of Talus as a matchmaker. But in the macrocosm of Spenser's world, Talus's excessive violence serves a purpose: the automaton preserve's social order. Talus defends Artegall and Britomart by smiting down hundreds of adversaries, and as the unifying nexus in the triple-bodied assemblage, Talus is the mechanism by which the future is guaranteed. In this regard, reading Book V as a historical allegory is inescapable: Artegall and Britomart are destined to sire the line of future English monarchs. Similar to the relationship between King Cambyuskan and the brass steed in *The Squire's Tale*, Spenser's work shows how royal bloodlines rely on the prosthetic automaton to maintain their power, privilege, and legacy. It is through Talus's

¹¹ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978). *The Faerie Queene*, in this chapter, will be referenced by book, canto, and stanza number. Lines will be provided when analyzing specific stanzas: (III.iii.30, line 3).

ability to destroy his opponents that promises the generation, and continuous regeneration, of England's monarchical bloodline.

Unlike many of Spenser's knights who were born in Fairyland and have elvish blood, Artegall and Britomart are British knights. For Spenser, both Artegall and Britomart, like Arthur and the Redcrosse Knight, are essential figures for Elizabethans and their shared imagined history. Interestingly, Artegall, disguised as the Salvage Man with the power over wild beasts, first encounters Britomart in Book IV. The Salvage Man is the iconic "wild" figure in European culture. He appears as a hairy figure, unkempt, and uses foliage as clothing, and like Heracles, his preferred weapon is a club. That Artegall is introduced as a wild-man is neither a demotion as a knight, nor is it perceived as a negative quality. As Benjamin Myer notes: "As a champion of fallen justice, it is typically argued, Artegall must call on the barbaric energy of the wild in order to find the force necessary to bring order to civilization."¹² Artegall's initial appearance reinforces a natural fortitude, one that is raw and full of potential, and we later discover in Book V that Artegall is shaped and trained by Astraea, the goddess of justice, in the ways of law and order so that he can become a knight. Astraea completes her construction of Artegall by arming him with Talus, the iron automaton, and Chrysaor, a giant slayer's sword used to slay titans and well suited to destroy instances of corruption.¹³

¹² Benjamin Myer, "'Such is the face of falshood': Spenserian Theodicy in Ireland," *Studies in Philology* 103.4 (Fall 2006): 413.

¹³ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.i.5-12).

Britomart's quest is to locate her beloved Artegall, while Artegall's primary quest, given by Gloriana, is to liberate Irena from the clutches of the giant Grantorto. Artegall's attempts to preserve peace and thwart discord by slaying Grantorto might seem like a traditional narrative, but the excessive violence presented in Book V is part of the process that redefines armor, automaton, and the chivalric body as part of triple-bodied assemblage that unites Britomart with Artegall via Talus. Britomart is prophesized to transform from ideal warrior to ideal mother; Artegall's degenerative transformation demonstrates the necessity of the prosthetic symbiosis he has with Talus. And Talus, a liminal, complex figure, demonstrates a sense of agency, as a warrior, mediator, and guide, that blurs the line between war-machine and man. The Artegall-Talus-Britomart combination underscores how violence is a required social interaction that cleanses Fairyland of corruption. This corruption is embodied by monsters, traitorous knights, and treacherous damsels described with the language of disease. In other words, the corruption of Fairyland manifests itself as an invasive contagion. Within the episodic narrative of Book V, several key conflicts occur: Artegall and Talus face conflicts and administer justice as they traverse Fairyland towards the inevitable duel with Grantorto. These encounters, with the seductress, Munera, the false knight, Braggadochio, the trickster, Malengin, and the amazon, Radigund, all end in a violent spectacle.

Understanding Justice and Automatons

Wendy Beth Hyman notes that extensive studies into the nature of cyborgs and living machines in the medieval and early modern period are rare, but her work, as well

as the work of Jessica Wolfe, Lynsey McCulloch and Donna Haraway, have shown the growing curiosity of how these mechanical hybrid bodies played significant roles in the re-definition of the chivalric body. In fact, Hyman’s work corrects the assumption that automata and cyborgs are simply part of the new science of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such hybrid bodies are not the products of postmodern science fiction, nor do such texts tell the tale of man’s superiority to technology. These bodies, as Hyman suggests, reveal “the devolution and disassembly of personhood, suggesting an identity comprised of wheels and gears, an assemblage [...] fraught with morbidity and anxiety.”¹⁴ Analyses of Talus and Artegall demonstrate social and religious concerns about the automaton—omnipotence, agency, awareness, the relevance of the soul, and all the qualities that define what it means to be alive. In the late medieval and early modern world, both the automaton and the cyborgian armored knight, two bodies that more often accompanied each other in a series of quests, emerged as embodiments of a fluctuating, problematic, and mechanistic view of the material world. As “representations of representations of animate beings,” Hyman notes that in early modern Europe, the presence and purpose of automatons were “contested and in flux, resulting in automata that alternately promise the idealization of the human, or threaten complete disruption of the natural order altogether.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Wendy Beth Hyman, “Introduction,” *The Automaton in English Renaissance Literature* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011): 7-9. Kindle Edition.

¹⁵ See note 14 above.

Talus and Artegall's role in Book V conflates two distinct concepts: the relevance of the automaton as applied to the chivalric virtue of justice. An automaton, by definition, is a synthetic object or body that has the ability to move on its own accord. Movement, by this definition, suggests autonomy and agency. In the Legend of Justice, Talus's sentience is initially a monstrous, unnatural oddity, but Talus's sentience becomes a necessary, heroic quality. The episodic quality of the Legend of Justice puts Spenser's heroic iron man at odds with other artificial bodies and embodiments of falseness, transgressive characters who function as the antithesis to the chivalric ideal. Why did Spenser distinguish Talus, Artegall's squire and stalwart defender, as a figure of heroism and justice? Spenser, following Chaucer's positive description of the brass steed, may see Talus as an automaton that augments Artegall and Britomart. Spenser gives Talus an unprecedented amount of agency, despite being a secondary character in Artegall's quest. Talus is a supernatural guide that inhabits the threshold between the dead and the living, between mechanical and sentient. Talus's presence is made more significant when we consider the ways that the automaton's agency parallels Artegall's degeneration—the closer Artegall is to danger, in other words, the more Talus asserts himself and becomes a medium of Artegall's recovery and the fulfillment of the virtue of justice.

For the early modern audience, justice was one of the four cardinal virtues recognized in antiquity and Christian theology. In late medieval and early modern England, justice connected both the judgments of the court and church, and was thus the unifying virtue that connected religion, politics, loyalty, temperance, and mercy. In Fairyland, the kingdom of Gloriana, justice is the key component of order and peace, and

lacking in the world due to invasion and corruption. In the proem of Book V, the speaker laments the lack of justice: “Me seemes the world is runne quite out of square, / From the first point of his appointed sourse, / And being once amisse growe daily wourse and wourse.”¹⁶ Similar to Malory’s work, Spenser describes a state of cosmic, moral, and worldly entropy: the proem of the Legend of Justice establishes that the world is in “ruinous decay” and only through the queen’s divine, sovereign justice can the world be restored.¹⁷

According to Joel Altman, justice is divided into two concepts: “Distributive justice apportions the wealth and honors a person may acquire through social interaction, and is based on the system of value governing a particular society [...] Corrective justice acts on a strictly arithmetical basis to restore the balance disturbed when one individual takes more than his or her share from another.”¹⁸ Altman’s definition is fitting when we consider the role of automatons and armor within the diegesis of *The Faerie Queene*. When we think of social interaction in the context of chivalry, we must expect violence to be an inevitable social “interaction” amongst battling groups. Honor amongst survivors is embodied in the armor they wear, or the armor they acquire. The narrative is, at the macrocosm, all about corrective justice and the restoration of harmony—Artegall must free Irena, and in doing so, he cleanses the world from falseness and disorder, ultimately

¹⁶ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V proem 1, lines 7-9).

¹⁷ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V proem 6, line 9).

¹⁸ Joel Altman, “Justice and Equity,” *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A.C. Hamilton et al (London: Routledge, 2006): 414.

represented by the giant, Grantorto, and the Blatant Beast. On his way to the battle, however, Artegall encounters others who are in need of justice—to some extent, one can imagine Artegall policing the land and nurturing solidarity in a land torn asunder by maleficent beings.

Contextualizing Talus

Spenser's Talus is seen as the iron man who represents the failure of military might and stoicism, fantasies of English justice in Ireland, and advances in western technologies.¹⁹ Within Spenser's allegorical layers are encoded representations of Spenser's experiences in Ireland, where the English monarchy attempted to forcibly establish authority. Spenser was secretary to Arthur Grey, the Lord Deputy of Ireland from 1580 to 1584, and Artegall, to some degree, was a representation of Grey. Moreover, several antagonists in Book V were seen as Irishmen. For instance, Harold Skulsky hypothesizes that the trickster-shapeshifter Malengin, one of Talus's victims, was Irish because of his hair and clothing.²⁰ Spenser's time with Grey was not without controversy nor carnage. According to Brian Lockety, Grey savagely killed the Irish and his "scorched-earth campaign" proved to be a disaster for the monarchy.²¹ In one

¹⁹ Lynsey McCulloch, "Antique Myth, Early Modern Mechanism: The Secret History of Spenser's Iron Man," *The Automaton in English Renaissance Literature*, ed. Wendy Beth Hyman (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011): 61.

²⁰ Harold Skulsky, "Malengin," *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A.C. Hamilton et al (London: Routledge, 2006): 450.

²¹ Brian C. Lockety, *Early Modern Catholics, Royalists, and Cosmopolitans: English Transnationalism and the Christian Commonwealth* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 178.

instance, Grey slaughtered roughly seven hundred men, women, and children at Smerwick Harbor in September 1580.²² While Artegall may be meant to represent Grey, in many ways such excessive violence seems to better parallel Talus's brutality in the narrative. Thus, Artegall and Talus are at the heart of what can be construed, at least partially, as an allegory of colonialism. For Richard McCabe, Talus embodies the "heart of darkness" in Spenser's commentary on colonialization.²³ To some degree, blame shifts to Talus for his unrelenting brutality, despite the fact that the automaton is simply doing what Artegall commands. It is unclear whether Spenser approved or disapproved of Lord Grey's actions; Book V does not simply praise the virtue of justice, but also seeks to critique what the chivalric system became in the sixteenth century. In key moments, justice fails in *The Faerie Queene* due to human error, and the responsibility to restore Artegall falls on Talus, who is nonhuman and therefore cannot be subject to human flaws.

In initial analyses of Talus—studies that focused on technological significance—the automaton came to represent early modern industrial developments. As indicated in the first chapter of this project, automatons represented the highest forms of technological progress that sought to merge metal with flesh. Autonomy was no longer in the realm of organic creatures, and Talus, like the brass steed, became the next iteration of premodern automata that exemplifies the fortitude, complexity, and potential of a courtly spectacle. In terms of armor technology, however, advances in metal armor reached its apotheosis.

²² Ciaran Brady, "Grey, Arthur, fourteenth Baron of Wilton," *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A.C. Hamilton et al (London: Routledge, 2006): 341.

²³ Richard McCabe, *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment: Elizabethan Ireland and the Poetics of Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.

Gunpowder became more prevalent, and as usage of ranged weaponry increased, so did the use of armor decline; however, the aesthetic elegance of armor remained in courtly pageantry, and together with the automata that shared the same space, metal bodies became identifiers of status outside of the battlefield.

According to Jessica Wolfe, in the sixteenth century battlefields in Ireland and on the seas against the Spanish Armada, the politics of military humanism unleashed devastating military machines and newfangled strategies. For Wolfe, Talus is an unfeeling war-machine that functions as a warning against stoicism and the “fashioning” of humans into tools for war: “Talus engages in the increasingly common siege-style warfare of Spenser’s day and performs the military duties, not of a living soldier but rather of a war machine, an instrument that threatens to supersede the chivalric knight.”²⁴ Such practices, Wolfe suggests, result in a Talus-like rage due to emotional repression. Talus is Spenser’s device to articulate militaristic ideals, specifically the waning sense of the chivalric sense of order. For Wolfe, Talus’s insensibility and hardness externalize Spenser’s concerns about the effects of mercy in times of war, and the automaton challenges the morality of mechanized warfare and the transformation of men into objects of war, thus usurping mankind’s privilege in the ontological ladder.²⁵ Furthermore, Wolfe notes that Spenser does the opposite of his intention in Book V; rather than fashion a gentleman as he indicated to Walter Raleigh, Spenser creates a creature of metal that

²⁴ Jessica Wolfe, *Humanism, Machinery, and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 205.

²⁵ See note 24 above.

mimics man in body alone. Talus's invulnerability, though a military fantasy, is what dehumanizes him. Wolfe seems to be Talus's harshest critic, and her argument is sound, despite the fact that Talus, in short amounts, does show some sense of empathy, if only towards Artegall and Britomart. My reading will demonstrate that Talus does not supersede Artegall nor Britomart. Rather, he enables both knights to fulfill their quest.

Lynsey McCulloch argues that traditional interpretations of Talus as a monstrous anomaly that represents the atrocities in Elizabethan Ireland are insufficient, and scholars can build on these past readings to establish a new understanding of the cyborgian squire.²⁶ McCulloch focuses on Talus's overlooked attributes: the ability to move swiftly and gracefully, the ability to reveal knowledge as a mediator and storyteller, and Talus's genealogy as an intertextual appropriation of myths and legends.²⁷ Such a reading is an antithesis to the image of Talus as only a violent metal man devoid of agency and emotion. Moreover, as McCulloch reminds us, Talus's connection with Astraea suggests he is a positive, necessary force. I agree with much of McCulloch's assessment of Talus; in my reading, Talus is the will of a sovereign goddess embodied in a hyper-masculinized machine-man prosthesis. Talus does not simply function as a representative of Astraea, goddess of justice. Talus, like Artegall, is an "instrument," an early modern cyborg who, as Artegall's squire and Britomart's companion, prosthetically augments the heroic knights and the virtues of justice and chastity. As the first cyborgian "Iron Man," Talus is sentient armor and a companionate prosthesis whose relationship between Artegall and

²⁶ McCulloch, "Antique Myth, Early Modern Mechanism," 61. Kindle Edition.

²⁷ See note 26 above.

Britomart functions through proximity and companionship. Their triumvirate connection highlights the necessary balance of human behavior so essential to the scales of justice: temperance, chastity, and mercy balances wrath, passion, and rigidity. Moreover, Talus and Artégall collapse the distinctions between man and machine. This collapse suggests that the machine-man is composed of different bodies “fused” by their shared struggles. These struggles, in the name of another triumvirate, the tri-matriarchy of Gloriana, Astraea, and Irena, comment on the necessity of and apprehension for sentient machines and the creation of cyborgian knights.

Like the various hybrid characters and “manufactured” figures in the *Book of Justice*, including Artégall and Braggadochio, Talus challenges the notions of how chivalric bodies are manufactured and to what extent they are real or mere fantasy. However, in his complexity, Talus’s brutality becomes necessary to sustain order in an order-less world. In the context of early modern England and the violent histories of both its real and fantastical past, Talus’s brutality is relevant, realistic, and ultimately, in support of chivalric rituals where violence begets degeneration. The level of degeneration we witness Artégall undergo when Talus is absent is an example that underscores two concepts: first, Talus’s lack of presence ironically reminds us of his cultural importance—he is a representative of automatons and armor, and the possession of both establishes those who held, and exchanged, power. Second, the relationship between Artégall and Talus reminds us that the degenerative state of the literary knight ultimately functions as a transformative precursor to the idealization of the chivalric body. To this

end, while Artegall is considered the main figure in Book V, Talus functions as the mediator for Artegall's transformation.

Understanding Talus-Artegall

Gloriana may be the embodiment of the goddess of justice in Fairyland, but she does not necessarily save the world herself. Her divine sovereignty relies on heroic knights who function as prostheses that extend her grasp. In fact, Artegall is simultaneously glorified and objectified; in the proem, the speaker links Artegall with Hercules, and then states that the queen's "great justice prayesd ouer all [is] / The instrument whereof loe here thy Artegall."²⁸ Similarly, Talus too is described as an instrument of justice. As the narrative describes, Astraea flees to the heavens when the corruption of the land was too unbearable. But in her departure, she leaves Talus to inevitably become Artegall's defender:

But when she parted hence, she left her groome
An yron man, which did on her attend
Alwayes, to execute her stedfast doome,
And willed him with Artegall to wend,
And doe that euer thing he did intend.
His name was Talus, made of yron mould,
Immoueable, resistlesse, without end.
Who in his hand an yron flale did hould,
With which he thresht out falshood, and did truth vnfold.²⁹

²⁸ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (v proem.xi lines 8-9).

²⁹ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.i.9. lines 1-9).

This passage introduces Talus as a machine-man. According to Elizabeth Bieman, Talus is a projected extension of Artegall, and this is “suggested both in imagery— ‘strong as Lyon’—and in his name. The ‘Tal’ syllable is often present in the primitive names of Hercules [...] An iron man now by virtue of Spenser's alchemy [...] is marked by strength, invulnerability and impassivity in his role of stern law enforcement, civil and martial. The relationship suggested is that Talus is to Artegall as Artegall is to Astraea.”³⁰ But because he is made of an iron mold, and is considered immoveable and “without end,” there is clearly a nonhuman aspect about the figure. In fact, these characteristics have been associated with giants and other creatures that threaten human life; the irony of the text is that Artegall relies on Talus, a giant-like figure, to battle against a giant.³¹ However, strength and endurance are characteristics of an ideal warrior—a militaristic and chivalric fantasy of a universal soldier who can resist damage and fatigue. To some degree, because Artegall is considered a descendant of Heracles, as established in Book V’s proem, Talus can be comparable to Ioleus, Heracles nephew and “sidekick.” However, Talus is arguably more akin to the Nemean Lion, a powerful creature slayed by Heracles during his Labors. The lion’s fur skin, said to be impenetrable, became

³⁰ Elizabeth Bieman, “Britomart in The Faerie Queene,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 37.2 (January 1968): 159.

³¹ McCulloch, “Antique Myth, Early Modern Mechanism,” 67. Kindle Edition. McCulloch notes that despite Artegall’s larger than life stature, references to Talus as a groom or squire suggests the iron man can be perceived as an automaton with youthful attributes, particularly swiftness and lightness. Here Talus is compared to two animals. The oxymoron is as follows: Talus is “swift as a swallow” but also as “strong as a Lyon in his Lordly might” (V.i.20). Later in Canto VI, he is described as a Spaniel dutifully watching over his master. This suggests Talus is a far more complex creature, not just a hulking behemoth.

Heracles's armor. In a similar fashion, Talus, a powerful nonhuman, is controlled and functions as a protective force. The lion may have been a living creature, but Talus straddles the line between living and dead. The narrative association between Artegall, Heracles, Talus, and the Nemean Lion resonates as a pattern of conquest and acquisition: that which is deemed dangerous is either killed or controlled, and thus its body, alive or dead or in between, becomes a prosthetic device that enhances other bodies. The skins of fallen animals become augmentations in multiple cultures, and they function as protective fashion that increases the social value of its wearer. Thus, Talus enhances Artegall the same way the Nemean Lion enhances Heracles.

Such associations also bring to mind the significance of Talus's composition. The idea that iron mold can become a sentient creature would be a stunning example of either magic or science for an early modern reader, but at the metaphorical level, the shaping of iron demonstrates a mastery of earth, fire, and water. Armorers were capable of shaping formless metal into the human form, essentially breathing life into the inanimate. And if man was made from the dust, a sentient being manufactured from a more valuable metal makes Talus far more divine, and more superhuman, than subhuman. As indicated in chapter two, armor tends to have a "life" and "identity" of its own separate from its wearer. Spenser takes the concept of living armor and actualizes it in Talus. The iron man may be a composite of a machine made in man's image, but his immovability suggests he has a resistance to what humans are susceptible to: corruption that can taint any system of justice and judgment. In fact, the speaker notes that Talus is invulnerable to charms and

spells, and perhaps invulnerable to love and sexual desire.³² Together with his resistance to magic, the emphasis on Talus's remorselessness and lack of emotion is not necessarily a sign of dehumanization; rather, Talus represents the law's requirement for objectivity and judgement without bias. In either case, Talus is impenetrable because he is a living monument that embodies pure justice. Talus punishes, but it is Artegall who balances the scales.

Moreover, the mastery of earth is reinforced by Talus's weapon: the flail. The flail was initially a tool utilized by farmers to harvest wheat, but like many agricultural tools, it was appropriated in late medieval Europe and turned into a blunt weapon capable of damaging bodies in armor. However, Spenser does not use the language of combat to describe Talus's martial prowess; rather, he utilizes the language of farmers: "In his hand a yron flale did houlde, / With which he thresht out falshood, and did truth vnfold."³³ And later in Canto IV, Spenser describes the flail as a "strange weapon, never wont in warre."³⁴ While threshing is synonymous to beating, striking, and knocking, the use of the word, in association with the flail, suggests that Talus is a caretaker of the earth responsible for purging the earth of the blight of falseness. As Astraea's "groom," and arguably her creation, Talus, who is both an agrarian and technological hybrid, is tasked with helping Artegall return the land to its former glory, just as a farmer must cultivate

³² Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.ii.22).

³³ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.i.12. lines 8-9).

³⁴ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.iv.44, line 2).

the land after a famine or a war. A more violent of example of Talus as a reaping farmer appears towards the final cantos of Book V.

In Canto XI, on the eve of Artegall's battle against the giant Grantorto, Artegall and Talus save the knight Burbon and his damsel, Flourdelis, from a group of rascals. Unfortunately, for Burbon, in the midst of battle, he has compulsively thrown away his shield, which allegorically represents the shield of faith.³⁵ For Artegall, neglecting armor is a problem, and we can assume at this stage he speaks from experience: previously in the fifth canto, Artegall is stripped of armor and imprisoned by Radigund, an unchaste Amazon and Britomart's foil. Artegall chides Burbon for abandoning his shield: "Hard is the case, the which ye doe complaine, / Yet not so hard [...] As to abandon, that which doth containe / Your honours stile, that is your warlike shield."³⁶ Artegall speaks in the language of instructive chivalric treatises, and he teaches Burbon that abandoning the shield is an act of dishonor. Interestingly, while Artegall teaches, Talus attacks, then hunts, the "raskall many" who assaulted the shield-less Burbon. According to Gregory, Artegall's exemplary status comes at a cost: "Artegall remains blameless, but it becomes

³⁵ See *Ephesians* 6:10-17 DV. "Put you on the armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the deceits of the devil. For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood; but against principalities and power, against the rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places. Therefore, take unto you the armour of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and to stand in all things perfect. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of justice, and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. *In all things taking the shield of faith*, wherewith you may be able to extinguish all the fiery darts of the most wicked one. And take unto you the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (which is the word of God)."

³⁶ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.xi.55, lines 2-6).

evident that his power has limits. While his intervention succeeds militarily—Talus, as usual, puts the peasants to flight.”³⁷ Gregory highlights how so much of Artegall’s physical prowess and agency depends on Talus, who answers conflicts exclusively with violence, not diplomacy.

When Talus pursues the group of rascals who are described as having “vnpittied spoyle,” Talus is unstoppable: “Ne ceased not, till all their scattred crew / Into the sea he droue quite from the soyle [...] / But Artegall seeing his cruell deed, / Commanded him from slaughter to recoyle.”³⁸ This final stanza in Canto XI is useful because it underscores multiple patterns: first, only Artegall can vocally command Talus to stop, which he must do in multiple occasions. Gregory reads this as a hint of instability in Talus: “If one chooses to conceive of the iron groom as capable of emotion, one could imagine him here as slaughtering out of frustration.”³⁹ Second, Talus’s violence is associated with removing “spoyles” from the soil. In this context, “spoyles” could be stolen goods, or at another level, corruptive forces that spoil the earth. Talus drives his enemies away, from the soil to sea, like a farmer who removes weeds or who thrashes the wheat.

³⁷ Gregory, “Shadowing Intervention,” 376.

³⁸ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.xi.65, lines 3-7).

³⁹ Gregory, “Shadowing Intervention,” 377.

The metaphor of Talus as a reaping farmer becomes more prevalent in the seventh stanza of the twelfth canto. When Artegall and Talus finally step onto Irena's land, they are met with resistance. With his iron flail, Talus mows down throngs of opponents:

Talus sternely did vpon them set, /
And brusht, and battred them without remorse, /
That on the ground he left full any a corse; /
Ne any able was him to withstand, /
But he them ouerthrew both men and horse, /
That they lay scattred ouer all the land, /
As thicke as doth the seede after the sowers hand.⁴⁰

Richard McCabe has read this sequence as ferocious violence “sublimated into an image of revitalisation: it is difficult to remember the ‘seeds’ as corpses, the furrows mass graves.”⁴¹ For McCabe, the agricultural aspect of Talus as a farming tool demonstrates how reaping is necessary; Talus's flail reaps so new crops can grow, and the land can regenerate. In this particular case, violence and bloodletting begins to cleanse Irena's land from Grantorto's corruption.

Baffling and Bloodletting

If Talus is considered the bringer of truth and the destroyer of deception, it is no wonder that his greatest nemesis is Malengin. The text even emphasizes, in the brief introduction to each canto, that this is “whom Talus doth dismay.”⁴² This fact only

⁴⁰ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.xii.7, lines 3-9).

⁴¹ Richard McCabe, “The Fate of Irena: Spenser and Political Violence,” *Spenser and Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Patricia Coughlan (Cork: Cork University Press, 1989): 121 (109-125).

⁴² Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V. Introduction to Canto IX).

revealed towards the end of *The Legend of Justice* in Canto XI, since the story focuses primarily on Artegall's quest. This conflict is significant because it allows Spenser to indirectly develop Talus's character. Though many antagonists are guilty of falseness, Malengin is the personification of guile, deceit, and evil machinations. In contrast to Talus's "unmovable" body, Malengin is a shapeshifter, who eludes Artegall and Talus by transforming into a goat, a bush, a bird, a stone, a hedgehog, and finally a snake. These transformations might signal the corruption of nature, not necessarily its mutability. Yet, there is also something agrarian, even pastoral, about these transformations. Talus forces Malengin to transform, and thus, dictates how and where Malengin moves; in other words, Talus controls a corrupted sense of nature. Talus, in one instance, recalls the image of a farmer, flail in hand, thrashing wheat: "Then to a bush [Malengin] did transforme, / But he the bush did beat."⁴³ When Talus subdues Malengin for the last time, Malengin is a snake. Talus, with great fury, strikes Malengin down: "He with his yron flayle / Gan driue at him, with so huge might and maine, / That all his bones, as small as sandy grayle / He broke, and did his bowel disentrayne."⁴⁴ Talus's rage against such a diminutive figure—the speaker emphasizes how small Malengin's bones—seems displaced at first. But it is fitting that the snake is Malengin's final form. The image of Talus striking down a snake recalls images of the archangel Michael towering over Satan in his serpent form, or Heracles against the hydra, and the snake he slew when he was a child, or even a farmer striking a snake hiding in the grass. There is also a redemptive

⁴³ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.ix.17, lines 3-4).

⁴⁴ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.ix.19, lines 2-5).

quality to the violence as well; Spenser foregoes the symbol of the snake as a representation of wisdom and fertility and rather focuses on the Christian interpretation of the serpent—a dangerous, invasive creature of deceit that instigated man’s fall from the Edenic paradise. Like Saint Michael and Heracles, it is up to a nonhuman, superhuman, one with deified qualities, to smite evil.

At a basic level, Talus does what automata have been known to do throughout literature and history—they are guardians of temples, tombs, and treasures, spaces within the earth. Hyman states automata “exists at the boundaries between two or more worlds or states of being. Tombs and labyrinths, for instance, occupy the boundary between life and death [...] gardens and laboratories lie at the boundary between the natural and artificial, or between what is free and what is controlled.”⁴⁵ No wonder that Talus threshes—he balances the wilderness and civilization, between farmer and armored knight. Like his predecessor, Talos, in Greek myth, Talus defends sacred bodies with an agrarian flail, be it the boundaries of Fairyland or that of actual bodies of Artegall and his bride, Britomart. Interestingly, for early modern readers, the land is the bodily extension of the sovereign, thus it is fitting for Talus to guard both the land and Artegall’s love. Talus guards Artegall, and subsequently Artegall’s bride, Britomart, because as the tale tells, Britomart’s union with Artegall will beget offspring that will eventually lead to the Tudor line: “Thy fruitfull Ofspring, shall from thee descend; / Braue Captaines, and most mighty warriours, / That shall their conquests through all lands extend, / And their

⁴⁵ Wendy Beth Hyman, “Introduction,” *The Automaton in English Renaissance Literature* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011): 18. Kindle Edition.

decayed kingdoms shall amend.”⁴⁶ Procreation is viable solution to degeneration and decay, and Artegall’s progeny, like Talus, is meant to secure the land.

Talus is a liminal figure who guards at the threshold where artificiality and naturalness and sentience converge. It is this focal point where disorder and order, reality and illusion become distinguishable. In Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” she notes how cyborgs are hybrid “boundary” figures who diminish the binary oppositions between man and animal, and man and machine.⁴⁷ Yet such a break from conventional dichotomies could be seen as a threat; hence Talus, like so many automatons, straddles the lines between wonder and fear, and why, as the theory of the uncanny valley postulates, audiences are both drawn to, and repulsed by, artificial lifeforms that learn, and mimic, human behavior and appearance.⁴⁸ Subverting the hierarchy between man and thing can resonate as the mastery of the earth, but it can also be seen as a threat from the unnatural. For instance, the Amazon warriors in the Legend of Justice thwart male authority and force captured knights, namely Artegall in Canto VI, to wear women’s clothing. The Amazons become agents of disorder that reflect Spenser’s

⁴⁶ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (III.iii.22, lines 2-5).

⁴⁷ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), 151.

⁴⁸ While the theory of the uncanny valley, and Haraway’s work, are used to understand robotics in the twentieth and twenty-first century, it anachronistically resonates with our reading of Talus, the early modern android sculpted from iron parts. Spenser’s language describes Talus with both fear and awe. His inhuman violence is needed but reviled, and he becomes more “divine” when he functions as a guide.

“discomfort with the performance of gender.”⁴⁹ While Talus is used by Spenser to critique judicial powers in Ireland, the automaton is simultaneously viewed as a figure of agricultural and military might, a necessary, violent power, and one that would be effective in “cultivating” a sense of order within a broken country.

Talus’s body and proclivity for violence hinges on his genealogical connection to more figures in Classical literature, not just Talos from Crete. In fact, Spenser’s initial description of Talus echoes Hesiod’s description of men made of bronze: they were “Strange and full of power. And they loved the groans / The groans and violence of war; they ate / No bread; their hearts were flinty-hard; they were / Terrible men; their strength was great, their arms / And shoulders and their limbs invincible.”⁵⁰ Similar to Talus, these bronze men were constructed by a divine being and invulnerable. We are reminded of Talus’s connection to Astraea, and his divine origins suggests the automaton is more than a mechanism that moves with the complexity of a human body—Talus is an exemplar of the cooperation between technology and the supernatural, and he obscures the lines between human and nonhuman. For Lynsey McCulloch, “More-than-human and less-than-human hereby coexist. This radical confluence is perceptible too in the work of Spenser’s contemporaries and the early modern period’s wider concern with the vexed

⁴⁹ McCulloch, “Antique Myth, Early Modern Mechanism,” 68. Kindle Edition.

⁵⁰ Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, trans. Dorothea Wender (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), 63.

interface of art and nature, mechanics and magic.”⁵¹ This coexistence appears throughout Spenser’s work, but it is prosthetic in design; Talus has a prosthetic responsibility.

Spenser suggests that Talus is “the right hand of Iustice truely hight.”⁵² While this is a more positive description, the speaker hints to how devastating that right hand can be: Talus is also described as “the horror of [Artegall’s] wreakfull hand.”⁵³ However, while Talus is a metaphorical companionate prosthesis that augments justice’s right hand, Artegall too functions within the same capacity; recall that Artegall is first and foremost an “instrument” of justice. The knight, after all, mechanically goes from one judicial case to the next as he travels to Grantorto, as if the quest functioned like an assembly line; with each stop, Artegall transforms himself and augments both his body and his knowledge of justice. At one point, Spenser associates Artegall with a blacksmith. When Artegall confronts Radigund the Amazon, Artegall is “as a Smith that to his cunning feat / The stubborn mettall seeketh to subdew, / [...] With his great yron fledge doth strongly on it beat.”⁵⁴ While Talus is seen as both an agricultural and militaristic mechanism, he is a metal body controlled by Artegall. In the battle with Radigund, Artegall is the smith and the Amazon is the “mettall [he] seeketh to subdew.”⁵⁵ Moreover, Artegall, like Talus,

⁵¹ McCulloch, “Antique Myth, Early Modern Mechanism,” 65. Kindle Edition.

⁵² Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.iv.1, line 9).

⁵³ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.i.8, line 8).

⁵⁴ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.v.7, lines 6-9).

⁵⁵ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.v.7, line 7).

is mechanized— his strokes, as the Speaker hints, are repetitive in motion and direction, like a blacksmith constantly striking the same spot on the steel. And ultimately, such descriptions suggest Artegall is the master of a metal bestowed upon him from the goddess of justice.

However, as McCulloch has noted, the differentiation between master and follower are problematic, especially during moments when Artegall must restrain Talus. The relationship between armored man and armored machine foregrounds “the pair’s cooperative effort and ultimate commonality.”⁵⁶ Artegall regulates Talus’s devastating power, and in turn, Talus can do what Artegall cannot. In Canto II, for instance, Artegall asks Talus to “inuent” a way to enter a defended castle.⁵⁷ Talus is given the freedom to construct an efficient strategy, but Talus’s strategy is to merely charge in and destroy all those in his path, and the violence he enacts takes an additional eight stanzas, stanzas 21 through 28, to establish: The speaker notes how Talus’s attacks are like “thundred strokes thereon so hideouslie, / That all the peece he shaked from the flore, / And filled all the house with feare and great vprore.”⁵⁸ The speaker further describes how Talus was unmoved by prayers and continued his assault—the language of the attack emphasizes victims’ fears and Talus’s unstoppable onslaught: “Yet for no pittie would he change the course / Of Iustice, which in Talus hand did lye [...] without remorse.”⁵⁹ Artegall was

⁵⁶ McCulloch, “Antique Myth, Early Modern Mechanism,” 66. Kindle Edition.

⁵⁷ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.ii.20, line 8).

⁵⁸ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.ii.21, lines 7-9).

⁵⁹ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.ii.26, lines 1-3).

then tasked with subduing his armored automaton: “All which when Talus thoroughly had performed, / Sir Artegall vndid.”⁶⁰ Artegall stays Talus’s hand, and cites clemency, expediency, and politic reserve as reasons. Interestingly, Artegall witnesses Talus’s onslaught and waits to stop his squire, suggesting that violence was a necessary evil required to quickly traverse to the next stage of the knight’s journey to combat an even greater threat. Talus’s prosthetic responsibility enables him to selflessly guard Artegall’s morality by doing what can be construed as morally reprehensible acts of ritual violence.

Perhaps the most prominent act of violence occurs when the Artegall and Talus confront the false knight Braggadochio. At the most basic level, this encounter leads to a “good-cop-bad-cop” scenario. Talus, in his violent rage, plays the abusive cop, and Artegall restrains him. This is an episodic pattern that occurs often within each canto. Canto III begins with a tournament. In such a space, the knights are incognito, and Braggadochio poses as a false knight. His “kighthood” is constructed in previous Books of *The Faerie Queene*, where he steals the accoutrements of other knights, namely Guyon’s horse, to compose his false identity. To some degree, Braggadochio follows the edicts of Geoffroi de Charny, who wrote in *The Book of Chivalry* that looting was acceptable and even expected.⁶¹ However, in the idealized diegesis of *The Faerie Queene*, Braggadochio is nothing more than a common criminal. It is worth noting that

⁶⁰ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.ii.28, lines 6-7).

⁶¹ Geoffroi de Charny, *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny: Text, Context, and Translation*, ed. Richard W. Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy (University of Pennsylvania Press: 1996), 55.

Braggadochio is Artegall and Talus's foil, and though a minor and arguably comic character, his degeneration, at the hands of Talus, speaks to a significant commentary about chivalry. Braggadochio is ultimately a corrupted man, the antithesis of all the chivalric qualities that Artegall represents. While knights rely on a level of deception and incognito, Braggadochio's "courage lent a cloke to cowardice."⁶² Braggadochio represents weakness, folly, and a lack of virtue, but he functions as a figure that contributes to Spenser's discourse on falseness and truth. As I have discussed in my previous chapters, corruption is often synonymous with infection, which is why the language of disease becomes prominent in Spenser, just as it does in Chaucer and Mallory. Thus, Braggadochio functions like a metaphoric infection whose real face is "deform'd with infamie."⁶³ In fact, Braggadochio is first introduced in Book II, where he steals a horse belonging to Guyon, the knight of temperance. He subsequently moves to Books III to V, sowing discord and confusion. Ultimately, it is Talus who stops the false knight:

So did he mitigate Sir Artegall,
But Talus by the backe the boaster hent,
And drawing him out of the open hall,
Vpon him did inflict this punishment.
First he his beard di shaue, and fowly shent:
Then from him reft hist shield, and it reuerst,
And blotted out his armes with falsehood blent,
And himselfe baffuld, and his armes vnherst,
And broke his sword in twaine, and all his armour sperst.⁶⁴

⁶² Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.iii.15, line 5).

⁶³ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.iii.38, line 4).

⁶⁴ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.iii.7, lines 1-9).

Talus initiates the ritual of baffling, a process by which the significance of accoutrements is undone in a rather violent fashion. Chivalry is dependent on establishing social distinctions through prosthesis—the possession of special garments and armor that signify status within the community. Baffling is a practice that not only degrades a body, but also initiates both a symbolic and physical degeneration as knightly accoutrements are forcibly removed. As indicated in the stanza, Talus’s first step is to shave Braggadochio’s beard off. While early modern fashion sensibilities changed, *The Faerie Queene* adheres to medieval traditions. Thus, as Laura Clark notes, “beards represent a positive element of masculinity: the more magnificent the beard, the more magnificent the man. This link between physical attributes and masculine capability can be traced from the twelfth-century Holy Land to fifteenth-century England.”⁶⁵ The removal of the beard functions as a symbolic castration, a reversal from wisdom and old age to the frailties of youth. The shaving of hair is also a process those infected with a disease or parasite must undergo.

The initial creation of a knight involves the ritual bestowing of arms and armor, and likewise, the growth of the beard to demonstrate maturity, status, wealth, and experience. Baffling a knight—reversing the ritual by taking away the knightly accouterment—solidified his dishonor, failure, unworthiness, and ultimate alienation from society. The shaving of the beard is then followed by Talus’s breaking of Braggadochio’s armor and the sundering of his weapons. Braggadochio’s shield is

⁶⁵ Laura Clark, “Fashionable Beards and Beards as Fashion: Beard Coats in Thomas Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur*,” *Parergon* 31.1 (2014): 96.

destroyed and his sword is broken in two. And perhaps more significantly, Talus blots his heraldic insignia, an act akin to the erasure of his name and identity. All of this, as implied in the text, is public. Braggadochio's baffling demonstrates how relevant arms and armor are in the construction of masculine identity in late medieval and early modern Europe. It should be noted that Braggadochio's baffling was a secondary option. Initially, Artegall, through his judicial prudence, deemed Braggadochio unfit to live. Only Guyon, the personification of temperance, stays his hand. In the scene I have been discussing, however, Artegall and Guyon stand back and witness not only Braggadochio's baffling, but also witness Talus as he proceeds to violently beat the false knight, an act that reveals Braggadochio's deformed face. Braggadochio lives, but Talus purges the land of Braggadochio's corruption with the false knight's own blood and broken armor.

Interestingly, it is not just Braggadochio who is baffled. The most significant baffling occurs when Artegall faces Radigund, the amazon queen. Radigund is, like Braggadochio, considered an unnatural threat to chivalric masculinity. Whereas Braggadochio is an insult to chivalry and a thief of knightly accoutrements, Radigund is dangerous because she is capable of emasculating her male victims and usurping patriarchal authority. The speaker notes: "Such is the crueltie of womenkynd, / When they have shaken off the shamefast band / [...] That then all rule and reason they withstand, / To purchase a licentious libertie."⁶⁶ In Canto V, Artegall and Talus save Sir Terpine from hanging; Terpine is hunting amazon warriors who captured and killed

⁶⁶ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.v.25, lines 1-6).

several knights. Artegall, Talus, and Terpine face Radigund, who overwhelms Terpine. Artegall fights Radigund twice—he defeats her, and they commit to a rematch. Artegall almost wins, but in removing her helmet to behead her, he is stunned by her beauty into mercy and pity. According to Lockey: “Artegall fails to exercise equity correctly and the result of his failure is his capture and imprisonment by Radigund.”⁶⁷ Artegall’s failure can be seen as his misstep of the judicial code—he shows mercy when mercy is not due. In fact, most moments of justice’s failure happen when mercy is evoked, which suggests mercy is a flawed concept when compared to necessary brutality.

But at the same time, Artegall’s reaction to Radigund’s beauty suggests that he has been enchanted and “subdewd by guile.”⁶⁸ The language reinforces this: “Yet he was iustly damned by the doome / Of his owne mouth, that spake so wareless a word, / To be her thrall, and seruice her afford [...] Yet after by abandoning his sword, / He wilfull lost.”⁶⁹ Unlike Talus who is impervious to charms and seduction, Artegall curses himself, throws his sword, and is made “a womans slaue.”⁷⁰ As Myers rightly notes, Artegall’s failure is a common feature in *The Faerie Queene*: “like many of the heroes of Spenser’s poem, [Artegall] is led astray by misleading outward signs.”⁷¹ The power of justice is

⁶⁷ Lockey, *Early Modern Catholics, Royalists, and Cosmopolitans*, 172.

⁶⁸ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V. Introduction to Canto V).

⁶⁹ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.v.17, lines 3-8).

⁷⁰ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.v.23, line 5).

⁷¹ Myer, “‘Such is the face of falshood’: Spenserian Theodicy in Ireland,” 413.

subdued, and even Talus cannot take action because of Artegall's willing surrender. Artegall's punishment is similar to Braggadochio's; in an ironic twist, both the false knight and the knight of justice undergo the ritual of baffling. In Canto V, the speaker describes Artegall's fate:

Then tooke the Amazon this noble knight,
Left to her will by his owne wilfull blame,
And caused him to be disarmed quight,
Of all the ornaments of knightly name,
With which whylome he gotten had great fame:
In stead whereof she made him to be dight
In womans weedes, that is to manhood shame,
And put before his lap a napron white,
In stead of Curiets and bases fit for fight.⁷²

In this pivotal stanza, Artegall is baffled, albeit the physical violence of combat has ceased and the symbolic degeneration is increased significantly. The speaker emphasizes how quickly Artegall is disarmed of the ornaments that construct his fame and status. Rather than be made nude, Artegall is forced to wear women's attire, and the speaker actively compares these clothes to armor "fit for fight." The body is not necessarily wounded by the new clothes, but they become the physical manifestation of shame, the wounding of masculinity, and the diminishment of the chivalric ideal. Stanzas XVII to XXV in Canto V highlight Artegall's human flaws, namely his weakness to female beauty—and as we will later see, this is in stark contrast to Talus, who is impervious to charms and seduction. But where is Talus, and why does he not save Artegall? When Artegall is captured by Radigund, the knight willingly surrenders according to the chivalric code. Artegall's willing surrender disables Talus's ability to defend the knight,

⁷² Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.v.20, lines 1-9).

despite the fact that Talus easily slayed numerous amazon warriors, and could slay many more.⁷³ Talus must abide by his master's wishes, and Artegall is imprisoned within a room filled "with monuments of many knights decay."⁷⁴ This sequence is fascinating because of Talus's inaction and subsequent absence. Artegall is metaphorically castrated—his wearable armor has been replaced by female attire, and his prosthetic automaton is incapable of action.

Rejuvenation, Lineage, and the Necessity of Violence

Ritual violence inevitably leads to the sundering of armor and the wounding of the body. Through sacrificial and bloody degeneration, a knight materializes into corporeality the immaterial, messianic virtue inherent in chivalry: the knights' suffering aids the greater good, and his body becomes evidence of his righteousness. At certain points in the narrative, it is Talus who conducts the ritual of violence; however, because the automaton is impervious to damage, there is little risk, and heroism is diluted when the threat of death is absent. Violence, in these instances, becomes a means to push the narrative closer to finality. Yet, as McCulloch warns, Talus cannot be read as a singular being solely casted "in cruelty and indomitability."⁷⁵ Talus is under orders to follow Artegall's every command, and in later cantos, violence is justified as a defense of virtue

⁷³ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.v.19).

⁷⁴ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.v.21, line 4).

⁷⁵ McCulloch, "Antique Myth, Early Modern Mechanism," 67. Kindle Edition.

in a virtue-less world. The speaker sees Talus as Artegall's "gard and gouernment" in Canto IV, and later as "the true guide of [Artegall's] way and vertuous gouernment."⁷⁶ As noted earlier, Talus is impervious not only to physical damage, but also to emotional and psychological damage (in the form of spells or charms), which suggests a lack of emotion. In Canto VI, when Talus tells Britomart of Artegall's capture by Radigund, the speaker notes how Talus is devoid of feelings of sorrow. However, the speaker also notes that as Talus tells Britomart the news, the automaton, for a brief moment, "did inly chill and quake, / And stood still mute, as one in great suspence."⁷⁷ While Talus might be remorseless, he exhibits consciousness and fear, because he is not in a position to defend Artegall. But in terms of the narrative, it seems that Artegall's capture, and Talus's unexpected absence, were necessary and inevitable character building moments that offer a chance for Artegall's redemption and reunion with his beloved. This approach is antithetical to the sole reading that Talus is a construct meant for brutality. In the moment he tells Britomart of Artegall's capture, he becomes both a "Mars" figure and an "Eros" figure; he instigates the duel between the women warriors, but he also guides the destined lovers, Artegall and Britomart, to their first meeting. While Talus is a threat to humans, he also stabilizes the very lives and lineage under his care.

For McCulloch, "Boundaries, entryways, and thresholds are vulnerable to various kinds of attack and incursion, and apotropaic statuary placed at doors or gates was

⁷⁶ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.iv.3, line 9 and V.viii.3, line 9).

⁷⁷ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.vi.9, lines 6-7).

thought to guard against potential intruders or disease.”⁷⁸ The defense against disease is perhaps the most crucial ability Talus showcases. According to Bieman, corrupted figures like Braggadochio and Munera, along with the various monsters and giants that have invaded Fairyland, can be read as “sores on the body politic.”⁷⁹ In the second Canto of Book V, Munera, a female figure with automaton-like features— namely her golden hands and silver feet— attempts to seduce Talus. Munera, according to Sarah Plant, is “a representative of the sins of greed and excess [...] Spenser labels her sin and that of her defenders as blasphemy.”⁸⁰ Talus, however, is immune to her sexual advances, and consequently, he executes Munera in the following stanza:

Her selfe then tooke he by the slender wast,
In vaine loud crying, and into the flood
Ouer the Castle wall adowne he cast,
And there her drowned in the dirty mud:
But the streame washt away her guilty blood.
Thereafter all that mucky pelfe he tooke,
The spoile of peoples euill gotten good,
The which her sire had scrap't by hooke and crooke,
And burning all to ashes, powr'd it downe the brooke.⁸¹

As this stanza shows, Talus’s actions, the execution of a seductress and the burning of corruption, are analogous to what happens with diseased, corrupted bodies. The “spoile of peoples,” in the context of disease, suggests that Talus, in smiting Munera to earth,

⁷⁸ McCulloch, “Antique Myth, Early Modern Mechanism,” 70. Kindle Edition.

⁷⁹ Bieman, “Britomart in The Faerie Queene,” 160.

⁸⁰ Sarah Plant, “Spenser’s Knights,” 78.

⁸¹ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.ii.27, lines 1-9).

cleanses people who were guilty of avarice, which Spenser imagines as a diseased body. Munera's death by drowning purges her body of "guilty blood," and the infected space of her castle is purged with fire. Talus is not only a defensive prosthesis, but also a preventative one that prevents sins, which function as diseases in Spenser's work, from potentially infecting Britomart and Artegall. Talus is, as Plant reads the automaton, "Artegall's instrument of purgation [...] providing both a deserved penance and an instructive spectacle."⁸² In fact, in many cases Artegall dispatches Talus to take offensive action while he witnesses the combat. Artegall does so when the two encounter Amazon warriors, Munera, Braggadochio, and Malengin, as well as a host of other enemies. Artegall remains free from harm, and Talus absorbs it.

Artegall and Britomart's bodies are perhaps more sacred than other knights: In sustaining both Britomart's chastity and Artegall's justice, the line of English monarchs will be sustained without question: "Thy fruitfull Ofspring, shall from thee descend; / Braue Captaines, and most mighty warrours, / That shall their conquests through all lands extend, / And their decayed kingdoms shall amend."⁸³ As Louis Montrose has suggested, so much of the Elizabethan imaginary depends on Talus: "Britomart is Artegall's betrothed, and it is from their prospective union that Spenser creates his fictional genealogy for Queen Elizabeth. Only Britomart can defeat Radigund, because Radigund is Britomart's double: the shadow side of the virago, a personified projection of

⁸² Sarah Plant, "Spenser's Knights," 79.

⁸³ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (III.iii.22, lines 2-5).

everything in Artegall's love that threatens to mollify his martial rigor and turn him to womanishness."⁸⁴ Talus's actions suggest he is very well aware of the future union between Artegall and Britomart, and thus defends her as much as he does Artegall. Talus is seen many times guarding the doorways where Artegall and Britomart sleep. The bedchamber is relevant because it is the space of procreation and always in danger of infiltration. In other words, Talus is already defending Britomart and Artegall's unborn royal children. Thus, Talus restlessly guards, and in this example, he:

His eye-lids sad, but watcht continually,
Lying without her dore in great disease;
Like a Spaniell wayting carefully
Least any should betray his Lady treacherously.⁸⁵

Talus's "sad" eyelids reaffirm his steadfast dedication, and hints at empathy, and reverence, towards Britomart. Moreover, the fact that Talus is compared to a loyal dog, a living creature, hints at some sense of sentience. Talus, therefore, willingly stands at the forefront and as the ultimate defense, and time and again, it is he who disposes of unnatural, invasive, "infective" threats that could corrupt Britomart's potential for motherhood. If Talus is Artegall's right hand of justice, Talus is also Britomart's chastity belt. Again, Talus is armor never worn, but one that stalwartly defends her purity through proximity and companionship. It can also be noted here that Artegall and Britomart's union is also predicated on a sense of sameness created by the very armor they wear, not just the armored automaton that follows them. According to Lehnhof: "The pair's

⁸⁴ Louis Adrian Montrose, "Spenser and the Elizabethan Political Imaginary," *ELH* 69.4 (Winter 2002): 936.

⁸⁵ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (III.iii.22, lines 6-9).

reproductive destiny demands a heterosexuality that strains the poem's homonormativity. This tension is partially and provisionally assuaged by Britomart's transvestism. Her male attire covers up her uncomfortable anatomical otherness and her compelling performance of masculinity puts in play a show of sameness [...] Artegall must ultimately see through the reassuring masquerade if the couple is to commence the business of begetting the British nation."⁸⁶ Both armor and automata secures the destiny of the star-crossed knights and the construction of the triple-bodied assemblage.

Talus's willingness to guard Artegall and Britomart suggests the iron man has consciousness and agency. While Talus must always be commanded, and his agency is akin to that of a loyal soldier following orders, Talus is not a mindless automaton. Talus exhibits the abilities normally associated with sentience: autonomous movement, emotion, a sense of duty, and the ability to speak. It is this ability that saves Artegall from Radigund's prison of decay. Recall that Talus cannot save Artegall because the knight of justice willingly surrendered in shame and was baffled. Yet in a demonstration of intelligence, Talus finds a loophole—he finds and tells Britomart, and has her rescue her beloved. Talus's very human ability to tell stories saves Artegall and restores the knight's honor. Ironically, it is Talus's non-combative moments—his dedication to guarding his lord and his ability to tell stories—that makes him an appealing figure, and why James Nohrnberg calls Talus “a helpful giant who aids the hero on his quest.”⁸⁷ Rather than

⁸⁶ Lehnhof, “Incest and Empire in *The Faerie Queene*,” 236.

⁸⁷ James Nohrnberg, *The Analogy of the Faerie Queene* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 417.

creating a sense that Talus is an image of a future man-machine, the iron man is a reminder that he is also an image of a glorified past, a figure from the age of justice. Talus is situated between both the glorified past and a future full of potential.

Talus Against the Monsters of Rust

Ultimately, Talus's metal body in Book V functions as a Spensarian response to the monsters and corrupted knights that plague *The Faerie Queene's* previous four books. Introduced in the early cantos of Book I, the motifs of rust, and its foil, "yron," as well as disease, are used to describe multiple characters, specifically antagonists who appear in later books. The motif begins in Book I, the Legend of Holiness, and establishes the connections between rust and disease through the image of the rusted dagger wield by the monstrous manifestation of the deadly sin, Wrath:

Bitter despight, with rancours rusty knife,
And fretting grieffe the enemy of life;
All these, and many euils moe haunt ire,
The swelling Splene, and Frenzy raging rife,
The shaking Palsey, and Saint Fraunces fire:
Such one was Wrath, the last of this vngodly tire.⁸⁸

Rust continuously recurs in the form of a knife or "rusty blood" in multiple books in *The Faerie Queene*. When Artegall encounters the goodly queen, Mercilla, she is adorned with gold and bathed in light, and in a display of strength and resiliency, "at her feet her sword was likewise layde. / Whose long rest rusted the bright steely brand."⁸⁹ Mercilla is

⁸⁸ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (I.iv.35, lines 4-9).

⁸⁹ *The Faerie Queene* (V.ix.30.lines 6-7).

depicted as a figure who rises against, and resists, degeneration. Rust and disease then manifests itself as that the Blatant Beast, Envy, and Detraction, a diseased figure with a distorted mouth “foming with poison.” attacks Artegall and Talus at the end of Book V.⁹⁰

But, more specifically, in more fascinating instances, rust is part of the monstrous anatomy: diseased bellies, diseased minds, and allusions to venereal disease are present in each book. The embodiments of the seven deadly sins in Book I that precede Wrath’s rusted dagger are linked with diseases: Idleness is described as a creature with a “grievous malady” and a “shaking feuer raignd”⁹¹; Gluttony’s belly is “full of diseases was his carcass blew”⁹²; Lechery’s “filthinesse” is linked with syphilis that “rots the marrow, and consumes the braine”⁹³; Avarice’s “vile disease” and “grievous gout” torments him “full sore”⁹⁴; and Envy, whom Artegall and Talus must face at the end of Book V, is described with “cankred teeth” and a “discoloured” appearance.⁹⁵ Wrath too is described with symptoms linked with disease: a swelling spleen, “Frenzy raging rife,” and a “shaking palsey.” Redcrosse's Great Dragon of Book I has metallic scales, iron swords for teeth, and black and red spots that implies a burned, rusting effect.⁹⁶ When

⁹⁰ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.xii.36, line 2).

⁹¹ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (I.iv.20, line 8).

⁹² Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (I.iv.23, line 6).

⁹³ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (I.iv.26, line 8).

⁹⁴ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (I.iv.29, lines 6-7).

⁹⁵ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (I.iv.30-1, lines 3,1).

⁹⁶ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (I.xi.8-14).

Guyon encounters Mammon in Book II, the demon of greed is described as having an "yron coate all ouergrowne with rust."⁹⁷

Arguably, these images of rusty monsters culminate with both Grantorto, Artegall's destined nemesis, and the more nefarious Blatant Beast that terrorize the last two Books of *The Faerie Queene* (Books V and VI). Grantorto, in fitting with the pattern, wears an "yron plate" and a steel cap "of colour rustie browne."⁹⁸ Unlike other battles in Spenser's work, Artegall's battle with Grantorto is short. Artegall smites the giant, and the language of the ritual smite, established in Chapter II, reappears. Similar to Malory's descriptions of battles, namely the recurring emphasis on blood and bodies falling towards the earth, Artegall's brings down the giant: "He did him smite with all his might and maine, / That falling on his mother earth he fed."⁹⁹ Recall that Talus's execution of Munera ends in a similar fashion—the giant's defiled blood, like Munera's, feeds, and is cleansed by, the earth in an act of regeneration. What follows is a short respite, where Artegall establishes law and order and Talus becomes its enforcer because, as we are reminded, he can reveal all crimes.¹⁰⁰ Order, at least in a specific location, is restored. While one might expect more from the conflict with Grantorto, the giant is overshadowed by more sinister creatures, specifically the Blatant Beast.

⁹⁷ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (II.vii.iv, line 1).

⁹⁸ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.xii.14, lines 3,6).

⁹⁹ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.xii.23, lines 6-7).

¹⁰⁰ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.xii.26).

Unfortunately, for Artegall, victory is very short-lived. It is at this moment that Spenser introduces the Blatant Beast in stanza 37. With Grantorto slain, the Blatant Beast, with Detraction and Envy, attack Artegall and Talus as the two make their way back to Gloriana's court. In a fitting way that coincides with Talus's destruction of Malengin, Envy throws a half-eaten snake that bites Artegall. But it is when they unleash the Blatant Beast that Artegall and Talus are forced to flee towards Gloriana's court. The Legend of Justice does not have a happy ending— Artegall and Talus face an uncertain fate as they flee the Blatant Beast. The Blatant Beast is a grotesque hell hound whose ravenous maw is composed of a thousand tongues:

For that beastes teeth, which wounded you tofore,
Are so exceeding venemous and keene,
Made all of rusty yron, rankling sore.¹⁰¹

The mouth of the beast represents discord and the perversion of language, a hallmark of memory and knowledge. Thus, not only does the beast attack with its ravenous maw; its consorts, Envy and Detraction, attack with stones and “bitter words.”¹⁰² The Beast functions as Artegall's ultimate foil: whereas the knight's genealogy is linked to Heracles, the Blatant Beast is the offspring of the monstrous hybrids Cerberus and the Chimaera. What makes the Blatant Beast so dangerous is that even by the end of Book VI, it remains on the loose: “he broke his yron chain [...] / Thenceforth more mischief and more scath he wrought.”¹⁰³ Thus, the Beast's destruction would ensure the sanctity of

¹⁰¹ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (VI.vi.9, lines 1-3).

¹⁰² Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (V.xii.42, line 1).

¹⁰³ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (VI.xii.38, line 8, 39 line 1).

Fairyland. But if we read *The Faerie Queene* as a whole, Books I-VI as one massive narrative, the tale ultimately does not end happily, but with fear and uncertainty. While figures of falseness are executed, and the giants are destroyed, and the Great Dragon lies dead, it is the Blatant Beast that runs free as it defiles the land. The last two stanzas of *The Faerie Queene* end, not with victory, but a warning: the Beast has grown so “great and strong” that there is no hope for escape.¹⁰⁴ This is Spenser’s final thought. As Ronald Bond has noted, “Of all the fiends, monsters, and dragons [...] the Blatant Beast alone terrorizes the poet.”¹⁰⁵ If being bitten by the beast’s rusty teeth is to be inflicted with incurable, festering sores, the beast demonstrates, like Spenser’s other monstrous antagonists, the strongest connections between rust and contagion, more so than the Great Dragon and the Seven Deadly Sins. The text emphasizes the juxtaposition between the defiled, rusted Beast whose organic body is “open,” with Talus’s metal form. Thus, the text hints that, if Spenser did continue his work, Talus might have confronted the Beast—who is capable of tearing through iron—in another book.

Rusted bodies, or body parts, represent a mode of bodily fragmentation, but it is unlike the damaged armors of various Spenserian heroes. In a discussion of medieval armor in contemporary film, Carl James Grindley reminds us that in medieval narratives, regardless of whether it is a fourteenth century text or a twenty-first century film, “a

¹⁰⁴ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, (VI.xii.40-1).

¹⁰⁵ Ronald Bond, “Blatant Beast,” *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A.C. Hamilton et al (London: Routledge, 2006): 98.

filthy, dented, or incomplete suit of armor sometimes indicates moral superiority.”¹⁰⁶

While Artegall and Britomart are heroes that don armor that is either lost, dismantled, or damaged, the monstrous villains they must conquer are affiliated with rust and disease. Only Talus’s armored body is not damaged; we are reminded that he is an unstoppable, impenetrable force bestowed to Artegall by the goddess Astraea herself, and that he is an otherworldly, liminal being who straddles various thresholds, namely that between man and machine. Unlike other rusted figures in *The Faerie Queene*, as an iron creature, there is no indication in the text of Talus’s susceptibility to the degenerative properties of rust, literally and metaphorically, which thus reinforces his divine, supernatural origin. Talus is a perfected warrior’s body, one that functions as Artegall’s companionate prosthesis who enables Artegall to fulfill his quest and restore Irena (Ireland) to order. In doing so, despite the ending, Artegall legitimizes himself as a worthy knight, one who began as a savage in Book IV, and ends as a hero, albeit running for his life, in Book V. Because of Talus’s mediation, Artegall lives, and, with Britomart, can sire a line of English monarchs that will inevitably be part of Elizabeth’s fantastical genealogy. Like Talus, the narrative is also relentless and full of potential, and able to move from legend to history.

¹⁰⁶ Carl James Grindley, "Arms and the Man: The Curious Inaccuracy of Medieval Arms and Armor in Contemporary Film," *Film and History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 36.1 (2006): 15.

Chapter 4

Digital Armor and Becoming-Medieval: Simulated Medievalisms and Learning How to Die

Of all the prostheses that mark the body, the double is doubtless the oldest. But the double is precisely not a prosthesis: it is an imaginary figure, which, just like the soul, the shadow, the mirror image, haunts the subject like his other, which makes it so that the subject is simultaneously itself and never resembles itself again, which haunts the subject like a subtle and always averted death. This is not always the case, however: when the double materializes, when it becomes visible, it signifies imminent death.

— Jean Baudrillard¹

As demonstrated in previous chapters, medieval armor and automata function as secondary bodies that become part of the human, as either a worn prosthesis or as a nonhuman companion. Together, the combination of bodies formulates what N. Katherine Hayles calls the posthuman: N. Katherine Hayles is perhaps the leading theorist on posthuman studies, and there is rarely a work on the posthuman that does not reference her ideas. For Hayles, the posthuman “implies not only a coupling with intelligent machines but a coupling so intense and multifaceted that it is no longer possible to distinguish meaningfully between the biological organism and the informational circuits in which the organism is enmeshed.”² As posthuman bodies, these medieval assemblages are integrated within contemporary digital media. This chapter will show how the connections between flesh and armor become a focal point of identity,

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2006), 95.

² N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999), 35.

meaning, and how a body is constructed, deconstructed, and perceived. Medievalism found in film and video games is a specific kind of simulation that alters how we perceive and understand the medieval posthuman. This final chapter looks for medievalism within digital studies and New Media notions of becoming. More specifically, this chapter studies contemporary medievalisms through armorial posthuman transformations apparent in the 2014 role playing video game *Destiny*, as well as the films *Iron Man* (2008), and *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014). While seemingly dissimilar in design, these narratives enable a deeper discussion of armor prostheses as symbols of posthuman transitions. Through simulations and simulacrum involving armor, these works exemplify a contemporary fascination with turning the vulnerabilities of human bodies into the triumphs and potentialities of posthuman forms.

For Jean Baudrillard, a simulation is action-oriented, a process or movement that demonstrates potentiality. A simulacrum, by comparison, is considered a material representation of form. Armor works a simulation and simulacrum of the human body. Armor is used as a display, and as an instigator, of transformation and bears a resemblance to the body it imitates. The armor is a surface, a canvas even, where all of its information is stored, from its iconography to its materiality; in these cases, identity, status, and a record of experience function as information emblazoned on the armor. Heraldry is data, like binary codes on the screen, or paint on a canvas. Unlike Baudrillard's notion that simulacrum are static entities, the armorial simulacrum displays what the body can become through the use of the prosthesis. As discussed in previous chapters, armor marks the struggle against inevitable corporeal degeneration. In

protecting the physical body, armor ultimately defends the idea of the body. When the bodies merge with armor to become a complex, posthuman hybrid, it epitomizes Baudrillard's ideas about "the end of the body, of its history, and of its vicissitudes."³ Through prostheses and simulations, Baudrillard suggests, we are made aware of the frailties of the human body; ending the original body, however, initiates the simulacra of the posthuman figure.

The "armored" bodies discussed in this project are, in one sense, a simulation of potentiality and acquisition: "to simulate is to feign what one doesn't have."⁴ In fact, armor signals both presence and absence. Like armored bodies in medieval and early modern literature—like Chaucer's Squire, Malory's Balin, Spenser's Artegall and Talus—the armored bodies in digital media, never really have a guaranteed defense against the decay of time and the inevitability of death. Their armor has defensive properties, as any second skin can have, but what they wear ultimately regulates how their bodies deteriorate and transform. The figures discussed in the project are staunch reminders of how vulnerable the body is, with or without armor. The prostheses in this chapter focus on cybernetic and mechanical formulations in video games and film. The kinds of simulated "armor"—the complexity of Iron Man, the anachronistic medieval aesthetics in *Destiny*, and the mechanics of *Edge of Tomorrow*—survey how the body

³ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 100.

⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 3.

changes by simultaneously looking back at imagined histories and moving forward through “irreversible technological progression.”⁵

Despite the complexities of prosthesis and posthumanism, a critical discourse on both makes a study of film and video games more accessible. In Sherryl Vint’s overview of N. Katherine Hayles’ work, Vint makes an astute observation: “We engineer machines but our interactions with them simultaneously re-engineer what it means to be human.”⁶ Ralph Pordzik’s work aims to show posthumanism is part of a performative matrix where new machinery redefines and improves living standards and environmental interactions.⁷ For Myra Seaman, the human is an endangered species in the posthuman world because modern techno-science “encourages us to understand the self in terms of scientific discovery [...] Our bodies are machines to be fine-tuned and perfected through additions.”⁸ Bodily transformations, according to Seaman, are always seen as augmentations that can sustain identity within a flexible and mutating body.⁹ Seaman reads Christ as a

⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, 101.

⁶ Sherryl Vint, “Embodied texts, embodied subjects: An overview of N. Katherine Hayles,” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 1.1 (Spring 2008): 115.

⁷Ralph Pordzik, “The Posthuman Future of Man: Anthropocentrism and the Other of Technology in Anglo-American Science Fiction,” *Utopian Studies* 23.1 (2012): 150.

⁸ Myra J. Seaman, “Becoming More (than) Human: Affective Posthumanism, Past and Future,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 37.2 (Summer 2007): 248. Seaman later writes on page 254: “Hybridity is essential to Christ’s participation in the human, as he is both a human person embodied in a living history and also a divine transhistorical entity.” Christ is a human-divine hybridity that changes how we read his body.

⁹ Seaman, “Becoming More (than) Human,” 250.

posthuman, and discusses how medieval and contemporary texts reveal how the posthuman is a hybrid “that is more developed, more advanced, or more powerful than the existing self.”¹⁰ For Seaman, the posthuman hybrid is filled with transformative possibilities and adaptabilities through “synthesis produced through enhancement rather than a full metamorphosis.”¹¹ According to Eugene Thacker, “What often goes unconsidered are the ways in which the human has always been posthuman and the ways in which technology has always operated as a nonhuman actant.”¹² Thacker argues that technology must be considered a tool separate from the body so that human agency is maintained. The human, according to Thacker, is the actor, and technology is the prosthetic.¹³ Following Hayles lead, Joel Dinerstein argues that the posthuman figure, a cyborg, is “a networked being composed of multiple human-machine interfaces.”¹⁴ The human machine interfaces we’ve encountered—the knight, his armor, his horse, and his automata—are all premodern posthuman figures that redefine how we approach human-technology relationships and how we understand chivalric masculinities through prostheses.

¹⁰ Seaman, “Becoming More (than) Human, 250.

¹¹ Seaman, “Becoming More (than) Human,” 254.

¹² Eugene Thacker, “Data Made Flesh: Biotechnology and the Discourse of the Posthuman,” *Cultural Critique* 53 (Winter 2003): 76-77. 72-97.

¹³ Thacker, “Data Made Flesh,” 77.

¹⁴ Joel Dinerstein, “Technology and Its Discontents: On the Verge of the Posthuman,” *American Quarterly* 58. 3 (September 2006): 570.

Film and video games have become one of the most familiar audience friendly forms of mass communication. These two mediums relay concepts of posthumanism and prostheses in more accessible ways. As a result of their accessibility, both the video game and film industries generate billions of dollars annually. For medievalists, these numbers are not in and of themselves necessarily relevant. What is important is that film and video games are the mediums through which a growing percentage of people are directly and indirectly exposed to the medieval world. In our changing technological society, the significance of armor and medieval literature can be understood in cultural texts that are not necessarily six hundred years old. Through new media narratives, audiences gain insight into the interpretations and the intertextualities associated with medievalism found in science fiction and other non-medieval works. Thus, it can be beneficial for medievalists to take video games, films, and other forms of digital media as potential pedagogical outlets. For me, “medievalizing media” underscores a theoretical, critical, and pedagogical potential within different texts.

How do *Iron Man*, *Destiny*, and *Edge of Tomorrow* connect to each other, and how do these narratives construct an interconnected network with Chaucer, Malory, and Spenser? While broad in design, the works discussed here explore how themes located in medieval and early modern literature underscore the relationship between the body and armor in much later texts and media. Each work speaks to the potentiality of transformation through the mediation of simulated armor, as well as how modern-day protagonists use their armorial doubleness to cope with degeneration and the looming inevitability of death.

As an operational prosthesis, Iron Man's armored body might signify the degeneration of the human, but it also emphasizes the hope for posthuman renewal. Tony Stark is part of the same schema that participates in a cultural medieval hero-system. This is a system of degenerative transformation, initiated by a traumatic experience, and one which requires the acquisition of "armor." In these particular cases, the system of transformation, while degenerative, attempts to deny death yet preserves the degenerated body. Tony Stark might have a posthuman body, but it is always on the verge of death because the arc reactor in his chest is the artificial heart that prevents the shrapnel in his body from tearing up his vital organs. Stark is part of the medieval hero-system, the kind we see in Chaucerian tales, Arthurian narratives, and Spenserian works. The use of armor in the contemporary world, much like the significance of armor in literature and within a historical context, constructs alternate identities and agencies.

But perhaps more present in new mediums is what I call the "Vahalla-Effect," an instructive system that pushes respective narratives in different ways. The "Valhalla-Effect" is where the hero dies but is constantly reborn, very much akin to Norse warriors who dwell forever in constant death and rebirth in Valhalla. The video-game player has the potential to enjoy transcendent, heroic strength, infinite deaths, and infinite resurrections within a digital world. Comic book heroes and protagonists in films also die and get resurrected. Simulated armor fulfills the Deleuzian act of becoming by constructing a networked identity via the armor-wearer's inevitable death. Here I develop a related argument about the disembodying potential of digitized armored body. Similar to the tales of Chaucer, Malory, and Spenser, the armored body in works like *Destiny* rely

on digital death, a metaphor for traumatic failure that comes with trial and error. This simulated death is a recognition of limitations. The digital dis/embodiment of a player's actual body within their armored avatar is consistent with medieval discourses where the body simultaneously undergoes trauma and degeneration as part of a transformative progress. For instance, in *The Squire's Tale*, the nameless knight and brass steed undergo a "trial" of public opinion at Cambyuskan's court when the knight and automaton present themselves to an audience. While not as brutal as the Knight's description of Arcite and Palamon's duel, the Squire promises more violence if he can finish his tale. Arthur, Balin, and Lancelot face the traumas of war and fratricide befitting knights in Malory's excessively violent Arthurian world. In *The Faerie Queene*, Artegall is stripped of his chivalric agency when he is stripped of his armor and his automaton, Talus. The figures from these medieval narratives simulate what the armored body must go through at the diegetic level, but each narrative also represents the kinds of struggles simulated in film and video games.

"Button me up": *Iron Man* and Desires for Transformation

The medieval concepts of armor as a signifier of transitioning and transforming, ownership and agency, has been appropriated, and integrated, in film narratives, namely 2008's *Iron Man*. While Iron Man was created as a heroic icon in the 1960s, his rebirth into modern cinema is of primary concern for our purposes. The 2008 film revival is relevant because this was arguably one of the flagship films that instigated a global awareness of armored bodies. Since the film's release, the media, following the military's lead, consistently associated the armored hero with exoskeleton prototypes. For instance,

the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) has a series of articles about how an “iron man suit” can be advantageous for the military progress.¹⁵

Iron Man is a fictional construct, forged from Stan Lee’s imagination inspired by medieval literature. Lee describes his thought process when he developed Iron Man: “If a guy had a suit of armor, but it was a modern suit of armor— not like years ago in the days of King Arthur—and what if that suit of armor made him strong as any super hero?”¹⁶ While Lee may appear to disavow “the days of King Arthur,” what his statement really indicates is that his work was influenced by Arthurian narrative and that he sought to expand on Arthurian lore in the twentieth century.¹⁷ In fact, unlike the Black Knight, Lee’s other hero that emerges from the Arthurian past into late 1960s America, Iron Man represents the medieval posthuman in the modern world precisely because he is a hybrid between medievalistic interests and technological progress, not simply a relic of history.¹⁸

¹⁵ The AAAS publishes four respected peer review journals and hosts a website, magazines, and podcasts. For example, see Warren Cornwall, “Can we build an ‘Iron Man’ Suit that Gives Soldiers a Robotic Boost?,” *Science*, October 15, 2015, <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2015>. The article provides insight to failed exoskeletons, like the fittingly named HULC (Human Universal Load Carrier), and the continuation of the TALOS project.

¹⁶ E. Paul Zehr, *Inventing Iron Man: The Possibility of a Human Machine* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins UP, 2011), 195.

¹⁷ In a series of interviews, Stan Lee has confirmed that he was influenced by Arthurian myth. See Jeff McLaughlin, *Stan Lee: Conversations* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 116.

¹⁸ For more context, see Stan Lee’s work on the Black Knight. Stan Lee, et al, *Marvel Masterworks: Atlas Era Black Knight / Yellow Claw, Volume 1*, (New York: Marvel 2009).

Similar to how knights in *Morte D'Arthur* and *The Faerie Queene* undergo degenerative experiences to initiate their transformation, an interesting pattern is presented in the *Iron Man* narrative: heroes, in these kinds of stories, must undergo traumatic experiences. Bruce Wayne's parents are murdered in front of him—he becomes Batman. Kal-el, also known as Clark Kent, is orphaned when his planet is annihilated—he becomes Superman. Peter Parker's uncle is killed—Parker becomes Spider Man. Tony Stark becomes Iron Man because he is mortally wounded in the middle of a war. While the 1960s origin story of Iron Man begins in the Vietnam War, the 2008 film version takes place in Afghanistan, and Stark is mortally wounded by his own creation, a Stark Industry missile.¹⁹ As shrapnel from his missile draws closer to his heart, Stark is captured by terrorists, and in a makeshift cave, he initially gives up and resigns to a slow death when he realizes his weapons are used by his enemies. Fortunately for Tony Stark, he shares the cave with Yinsen, an engineer and medical doctor, who saves Stark by plugging a magnet and battery in his heart. Yinsen hints that Stark died, if only briefly, by telling him that those afflicted shrapnel are called “the walking dead.”²⁰ Interestingly, like Arthurian knights drawn to action, Stark is “brought to life” not just because of the prostheses he constructs, but because his sense of masculinity is questioned. Upon seeing the devastation his weapons caused, Stark is challenged by Yinsen:

Look, what you just saw, that is your legacy, Stark. Your life's work, in the hands of those murderers. Is that how you want to go out? Is this the

¹⁹ *Iron Man*, directed by John Favreau (2008; Burbank, CA: Marvel Film Studios), Digital.

²⁰ *Iron Man*, directed by John Favreau.

last act of defiance of the great Tony Stark? Or are you going to do something about it?²¹

For me, Yinsen's words are just as responsible for Iron Man's creation. First, Yinsen questions Stark's legacy that is inextricably tied not just to his ingenuity, but also his connection to his father. In fact, "legacy" is uttered four specific times in the film. The antagonist, Obidiah Stane, tells Stark, "This is your legacy" when he uses Stark's technology to immobilize him.²² When Stark is presented with prestigious awards, he is introduced with a voice-over that states: "Tony ushers in a new era for his father's legacy."²³ And Tony reclaims his agency when he tells Stane: "I just don't want a high body count to be our only legacy."²⁴

If Stark does not leave a lasting mark on the world, then he will be forgotten. Or, he will be shamed and his reputation will be tarnished. Second, when Yinsen asks, "Is that how you want to go out?" the question drives Stark to contemplate the idea of the honorable, inescapable death. The question is not whether Stark will live or die. Instead, the question assumes Stark will inevitably die so, as Yinsen hints, he should die fighting. In a way, this becomes a subtle reminder that the superhero universe thrives on the cyclical narrative: all heroes suffer and die, but all heroes are reborn only to die again. To keep his hyper-masculinity intact, Stark is forced to own his death—he chooses how he

²¹ *Iron Man*, directed by John Favreau.

²² *Iron Man*, directed by John Favreau.

²³ *Iron Man*, directed by John Favreau.

²⁴ *Iron Man*, directed by John Favreau.

wants to die and creates an armored suit. However, Stark's armor does not stop death; more specifically, it preserves a dying body, like a pre-reliquary, and regulates his death. We are reminded throughout the entire film, even in the second film, that shrapnel is embedded too close to his heart. And in *Iron Man 2*, the very suit that preserves his body turns on him; the energy that runs the arc reactor acts like radiation that deteriorates the body from inside. As seen in Figure 1 below, this deterioration appears like a disease that spreads in the form of circuitry coming from the chest.²⁵

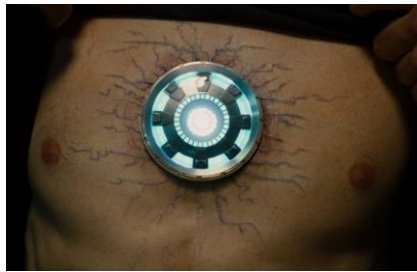


Figure 1: In *Iron Man 2*, Stark's body is poisoned with "Palladium," the "battery" that helps power his suit. Interestingly, the "disease" spreads like circuitry emanating from his prosthesis.²⁶

The Mark I Armor, as seen in Figure 2 below, is not the polished, symmetrical, and illuminated armor we associate with hero. Rather, the first suit of armor is a bricolage of various parts and scrap metal salvaged, then stitched together, from within Stark's cave.

²⁵ *Iron Man 2*, directed by John Favreau (2008; Burbank, CA: Marvel Film Studios), Digital.

²⁶ *Iron Man 2*, directed by John Favreau.



Figure 2: Tony Stark's Mark I Armor created in the confines of a cave. Here, it is reconstructed in Tony's lab.²⁷

The armor is bulky, moves haphazardly, and is quite fragile. When Tony finally escapes his prison, the armor breaks apart in mid-air. Stark's transformation into a posthuman begins with his prosthetic heart. Stark also ceases to be a billionaire playboy—in his construction of his suit, he is depicted as a gritty blacksmith as the camera takes great care to emphasize the hammer strokes, the fires of the forge, and clang of metal hitting metal.²⁸ When Stark first dons the armor, he tells Yinsen: “Come over here and *button me up*.”²⁹ It is an odd turn of phrase, considering how bulky the armor is, but it speaks to how the prosthetic gets turned on. The armor is worn like clothing, but requires a series of algorithms, uploads, and button presses to begin.

²⁷ *Iron Man*, directed by John Favreau.

²⁸ *Iron Man*, directed by John Favreau.

²⁹ *Iron Man*, directed by John Favreau (emphasis mine).

In a way, death transforms Tony into a posthuman cyborgian hero. According to Patrick Corgan, “All technologies have a profound relation to death because death is at the heart of the human effort to survive and adapt to the challenges of the exterior world. It is to death, which is the future in its most challenging form of indeterminate inevitability, that technology responds.”³⁰ Nevertheless, despite the technological upgrades he makes to the suit, we are reminded that there is a hole in his chest and microscopic pieces of shrapnel continue to endanger his life. Despite the realities associated with Iron Man’s fictional armor, Iron Man nonetheless represents the potentiality of the American military complex. The red and gold armor show what super-soldiers might become through a reliance on technology, not just brute force.

Like many heroic narratives, Stark’s transformation into Iron Man adjusts to the cultural conflicts of the time. In 1963, it was the Vietnam War; in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, terrorism became the most apparent conflict. In comparison to the 2008 film adaptation’s origin story, the 1963 version is just as telling. Through his armor, the 2008 version of Iron Man becomes a response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the hero potentially fulfills the nationalistic and patriotic fantasies of destroying terrorism. In both the 1960 and 2008 version of Iron Man, Stark’s armored suit undergoes a transformation from rusted, bulky armor to the traditional red-gold schematic. While the film implies that the color scheme is inspired by the flames painted on Stark’s hot rod, the comic has a more interesting justification. In *Tales of*

³⁰ Patrick Corgan, *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoculture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 131.

Suspense, Issue 40, Stark's date, Marion, comments on how terrifying Stark's armor looks:

[Iron Man] actually frightens people [...] He battles menaces like in olden times! So, if he's a modern knight in shining armor, why doesn't he wear golden metal instead of that dull, grey armor? Then, when people see his golden armor, they won't panic! They'll know he has a heart of gold and an appearance to match his golden deeds.³¹

The suit is subsequently coated with "untarnishable" gold paint.³² E. Paul Zehr suggests that Stark's gold armor was not a practical nor strategic change but "was used to play off of Tony Stark's persona as a flamboyant ladies' man."³³ However, Stan Lee's emphasis on the adjective "untarnishable" demonstrates that the writer was very much aware of gold's ability to resist corrosion and its potentially even its ability to protect against radiation, which at the height of the Cold War in the 1960s, was a looming fear linked with nuclear annihilation. Furthermore, the writers were also clearly aware of the positive, appealing connotations of gold and how the metal functions as a representation of divine luminosity. As I have discussed previously, specific metals like brass and gold have ideal defensive properties that apply to fictional worlds in literature as well as scientific discourse.

³¹ Stan Lee et al. *The Invincible Iron Man* (New York: Marvel, 2010), 21. This is an anthology that collects *Tales of Suspense*, issues 39-50, which compose the Iron Man origin story. The original arc ran from 1963-1964. The lines quoted in this example come from *Tales of Suspense 40*, page 21 in the anthology.

³² Lee, *Tales of Suspense 40*, 21.

³³ Zehr, *Inventing Iron Man*, loc. 275. Kindle Edition.

Stark's armor, in its transition from a dull grey to a gold sheen, is a reminder of his inevitable death, and like a religious reliquary, the armor contains and preserves his degenerating body. As *Natural History* indicates, gold has unique properties that allow it to preserve various objects. While Pliny the Elder is vague and hardly scientific, such ideas are not necessarily far from the truth, especially when we consider medieval theories about gold's elemental simplicity and resistances. Tony Stark's body is preserved by his red and (predominantly) gold armor.³⁴ Moreover, his predicament is a demonstration of how prostheses signal the inevitable destruction of flesh. When Stark emerges as a double body of mortally wounded flesh and life-saving armor, he initiates the transition from failed flesh to posthuman becoming.

Interestingly, a discussion of Iron Man enables an interdisciplinary discourse that can move beyond literature, yet maintain a specific discussion on armorial defense. Gold is not simply an indicator of wealth or used solely for religious significance. Gold's more practical relevance applies to the creation of real prostheses and contemporary

³⁴ See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology in Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 10, 158. The most prominent tincture used in heraldry is gules, which is red. And from a cultural standpoint, red is one of most prominent colors in the public, masculine social sphere. Red is the color of war and blood, and thus has a sacred connotation. The blood of Christ, in medieval society, is a sacred reminder of heroic sacrifice. According to Caroline Walker Bynum, blood signifies the Eucharist, violence, and binary oppositions between man/woman and purity/pollution. At some level, functions as an "armor" when it pours from the knight's body and coats the skin. And if heraldry signifies genealogy and legacy, then gules, as blood, "expresses the continuity of family and family honor; it requires vengeance if violated." Blood becomes the sign of mutability, and thus, red armor increasingly becomes a prosthesis that signifies devotion, both religious and familial.

metalwork. For instance, there is a correlation between gold's defensive properties in classical and medieval literature and its properties established in science and technology. Gold becomes a useful metal, or "armor," for space suits and orbital instruments because it reflects incoming radiation and disperses heat. And gold, like the bronze and brass discussed in the first chapter, is resistant to deterioration and does not rust like other metals.³⁵ Gold, or Or in heraldic and armorial terms, also has special significance. It is a symbol of human achievement, given to victors as the spoils of war, but is a metal that has long been associated with a divinity, luminosity and intellect in medieval world. In fact, within the discourse of armor and heraldry, gold and silver were categorized as the *light* colors, or in more specific terms, the colors of light. Gold became the physical representation of sacred light that emanates from heaven, and religious spaces were decorated with gilded statues and images, and sets of liturgical equipment were made out of gold.³⁶ Moreover, there is also a long tradition of offerings, or the sacrifice of gold, to political and religious institutions. Interestingly, gold, like brass discussed in chapter one, has unique defensive properties. According to Pliny the Elder, gold functioned defensively. *Natural History* specifically indicates that gold defends the wounded and

³⁵ Catherine Louis and Olivier Pluchery, *Gold Nanoparticles for Physics, Chemistry, and Biology* (London: Imperial College Press, 2012), 7.

³⁶ Peter Barnet et al, *Medieval Treasures from Hildesheim* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2013), 18-19. Gold is one of the key components in medieval liturgical tools including crosses, reliquaries, and altars.

infants from sorcery; water, with a gold infusion, can preserve objects and can heal deteriorations of the face.³⁷

The military has experimented with armor prototypes for several years, but since the emergence of the film, information on such projects are arguably seen as groundbreaking and accepted in public knowledge. The War on Terror might also subtly influence how fictional and nonfictional armored bodies are perceived. In fact, film to some degree romanticizes armor. While many might protest war, a rise in weapon sales, or nuclear proliferation, a suit of armor has an undeniable attractiveness because of its aesthetics and because of its potential to transform its wearer. For instance, the U.S. military continues to develop Project TALOS (Tactical Assault Light Operator Suit), a robotic exoskeleton that can augment and defend soldiers who wear it; still in its prototype phase, the TALOS schematics promise resistance to weapon fire, augmentations to strength and endurance, and integrated systems of communication and biometric feedback.³⁸ Such features play on the desires of invulnerability established in narratives like *Iron Man*, but these desires tend to hide the brutal realities of heroism and warfare. Those versed in classical, medieval, and early modern literature may be quick to associate the acronym TALOS with the mythical giant in Greek myth of the same name, or the automaton named Talus that follows and protects Artegall in *The Faerie Queene*.

³⁷ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. John Bostock Crane and Gregory R. Hastings, (United Kingdom: Delphi Classics, 2015), 33.25. Kindle Edition.

³⁸ United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM), “Broad Agency Announcement for Tactical Assault Light Operator Suit (TALOS) Technologies for use by Special Operations Forces,” (September 04, 2013):1-3.

However, for the majority, TALOS is affectionately identified as the “Iron Man Suit” by the media and by civilians familiar with exoskeleton development projects in MIT, Boston Dynamics, and SOCOM.³⁹

Iron Man becomes a useful, and overly used example of the posthuman figure in popular culture because he is an easily accessible icon. The Stark-Iron Man posthuman hybrid reminds us that a significant posthuman discourse forms intersections between the humanities and science and technology studies. As Rosi Braidotti indicates in her work on posthumanism: “This contemporary disciplinary field raises crucial ethical and conceptual questions about the status of the human, but is generally reluctant to undertake a full study of their implications.”⁴⁰ To consider Iron Man’s armor as both life-preserver and reliquary that mediates an inevitable death is to evoke Braidotti’s Deleuzian inspired notion of posthuman necro-politics: “inhuman forces of technology have moved into the body, intensifying the spectral reminders of the corpse-to-come.”⁴¹ Iron Man becomes a modern, even accessible, representation of necro-political armor: “The technological artefact and the mechanic ‘other’ are both gendered and eroticized in modernism and become the emblem of a technology-driven future.”⁴² As a representation of heroism and

³⁹ As an example, see an article provided by the Wall Street Journal. Dion Nissenbaum, “US Military Turns to Hollywood to Outfit the Soldier of the Future: Designer of ‘Iron Man’ Suit Among Those Working on High-Tech Gear for Elite Troops,” *The Wall Street Journal* Update 4 July 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-military-turns-to-hollywood-to-outfit-the-soldier-of-the-future-1404527893>.

⁴⁰ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 113.

⁴¹ Braidotti, *Posthuman*, 121.

⁴² Braidotti, *Posthuman*, 105.

a technologically-driven future, Stark sacrifices his human body, specifically his heart, to achieve complete biomechanical integration with his suit.

Undead Cyborgs in Armor: The Lure of Armorial Doubleness in *Destiny*

The aesthetics of Stark's form-fitting armor, notions of sacrifice, and what Braidotti calls necro-politics, have influenced the digital landscape of the video game industry. In 2014, Bungie, a division of Activision-Blizzard, and leading video game developer known for its strong narratives and armored protagonists, launched *Destiny*, a first-person role playing game that enabled players to meet other players online to undertake perilous quests. The basic premise of the game appropriates the vagaries of heroic tales that pit the Light against the Darkness. Set in the far future, humanity is overwhelmed by The Darkness, an incorporeal nemesis, and three distinct alien collectives bent on destroying the Solar System: the Vex, biomechanical automatons; the Hive, a religious sect of skeletal, swarm-like aliens; and the Fallen, a conglomeration of royal houses ruled by Kells, the equivalent of what we might call barons. The only stronghold that stands against the onslaught, The Last City, is protected by an enigmatic, moon-like sphere known only as The Traveler, the manifestation, and wielder, of Light. Not much is known about this Traveler, save that in an attempt to thwart its enemies, it resurrects undead warriors, known as Guardians. The player role-plays as one of these Guardians, and chooses from three classes: a Titan, a Hunter, or a Warlock, classes that are equivalent to the standard warrior-archer-mage combination inherent in many games, most of which, at the very least, contain contextual medievalism. In fact, borrowing from classic board games like *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Destiny* players find treasure chests,

and acquire random loot packages in containers shaped like dodecahedrons. In this diegesis, players are constantly reminded that they are the final hope in a universe of conflict. The player's objective is straightforward: scour the Solar System for enemies, defend the city, and become more powerful—in the game, the act of becoming relies on the acquisition of arms and armor.

Destiny is a game aligned more with science fantasy than science fiction. Other games, like *Assassin's Creed II* and *Skyrim*, make use of medieval armor in interesting ways; however, despite being set in a far future, what is interesting is how much of the *Destiny's* ludic design relies on medieval principles and armorial prostheses. In *Destiny*, guardians are undead cyborgian warriors, and like Malory's and Spenser's knights, they are called upon to sacrifice themselves, again, for the greater good. Guardians resonate with audiences because they are simulations of posthuman potentialities. As demonstrated by Iron Man and other heroes, the cyborgian body of the Guardian is a more dominant fixture because of what they represent. Dinerstein states: "The posthuman is the dream of bodies of pure potentiality—ones that do not decay but plug into networks of information and pleasure."⁴³ The arms and armor a player can obtain within the game is an aesthetically pleasing simulation, but symbolically, the arms and armor become their heraldic insignia, a testament to their status, experience, skill, and long, grueling hours of play. Like in many other games, the player's avatar, and the spoils of battle they amass, become an extension of their public identity in a game community whose

⁴³ Dinerstein, "Technology and Its Discontents," 588.

population rivals that of real countries. In fact, according to Activision-Blizzard's 2015 official financial report, *Destiny* is considered one of the most successful franchises in gaming history; the game made an estimate of 500 million dollars and has a player base of 25 million users who spend, at least, three hours a day within the game universe.⁴⁴ While these numbers are not necessarily important to an analysis of the game's design and narrative, the data demonstrates that millions of players utilize medieval practices that have fundamentally shaped concepts of gender, simulation, and potentiality.

A *Destiny* player is endowed with the ability to acquire arms and armor by progressively improving through the act of "grinding," a term for those who routinely repeat the same levels of a game to acquire more effective gear. The best gear they can acquire cannot be purchased with in-game currency from a vendor. The most effective gear is acquired by repeatedly killing their opponents. In fact, in *Destiny*, the ideal "grind" occurs at the endgame raid, where the more time players invest in the game, the more likely they will get a suit of armor, one that is aesthetically similar to their AI opponents. Players brandish their arms and armor not because of their high defensive statistics and other advantageous perks that increase their efficiency and survivability in battle. These players show off their treasures because it grants them status and increases their reputation amongst all the other players in the shared world. The simulation of arms

⁴⁴ Activision-Blizzard. "Activision-Blizzard Announces Agreement to Acquire King Digital Agreement and Better-Than-Expected Third Quarter 2015 Financial Results," *Activision-Blizzard*, 2015. <http://investor.activision.com/>.

and armor, in other words, feeds player vanity to an extent, and it calls to mind Geoffroi de Charny's ideal: "He who does best is most worthy."⁴⁵

The acquisition of arms and armor, and the countless number of deaths and resurrections a player must go through to get the best gear, reminds us of how the posthuman assemblage has instructive elements. As indicated by Liel Leibovitz, video game simulations require problem solving, critical thinking, and team building.⁴⁶ The fantasy of the game functions, at one level, as a metaphor for concepts such as transformation, gender discourse, and Otherness. But because it is a participatory, immersive medium, players must learn to live in the simulation by studying other players' activity, how to effectively "loot," and by understanding the aesthetics of specific types of armor, players must learn how to dress in the game.

In a monthly competition known as "The Iron Banner," *Destiny* players compete with each other in Valhalla-like arenas where players fight, die, and get reborn, ideally with more experience so they can die less. If players wear gear that has the Iron Banner's heraldic insignia, they can effectively rank up faster than players who do not have those specific pieces of heraldry. If players emerge victorious, they can be rewarded with armor that, unlike armor sets in the rest of the game, are very medieval in design. As seen in Figure 3 below, a Warlock's upper body armor, "Iron Companion Vestments" is

⁴⁵ Geoffroi de Charny, *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny: Text, Context, and Translation*, ed. Richard W. Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy (University of Pennsylvania Press: 1996), 95.

⁴⁶ Liel Leibovitz, et al., "Playing to Lose: On Video Games, Excess, and Expenditure," *The Velvet Light Trap* 72 (Fall 2013): 72.

composed of ring mail, or chain mail, a common armor used between thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Iron Companion Vestments show the heraldic insignia of two combatant wolf-heads divided by an eradicated tree.⁴⁷



Figure 3: Destiny’s Iron Companion Vestments. Note the Iron Banner heraldic symbol and the chain mail.⁴⁸

Elysse T. Meredith’s work discusses the relevance of digital objects and uses *World of Warcraft*, the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game, or MMORPG, as her case study. Interestingly, *World of Warcraft* has many similarities to *Destiny* in terms of its value system. When players enter their inventory menu, items are labeled via color. Color labels dominate both games—green items are uncommon, blue items are rare, purple items are epic, and exotic items are yellow. This color system is very popular and has been adopted by other franchises; *Halo 5* and *The Division*, both online games with a large fan base, use the system to delineate which items hold the most value. *Destiny*’s

⁴⁷ See A.C. Fox-Davies, *A Complete Guide to Heraldry* (New York: Skyhorse, 1909), 166. “Combatant” and “eradicated” are heraldic terminologies utilized by A.C. Fox-Davies in his 1909 work. The term “combatant” indicates two images (normally beasts) that face each other on a heraldic field. “Eradicated” indicates that the heraldic tree’s roots are shown.

⁴⁸ *Destiny*, Bungie, 09 September 2014, Video game.

rules only allow one piece of exotic armor, and one exotic weapon to be brought to battle, and the ideal is to have all remaining armor and weapon slots be purple. As Meredith notes:

Within video games, the relationship between person and object is particularly interesting because the object is not physically real. Although these objects blend digital art and text (via item descriptions and statistics), continuously pointing towards real objects, they are intangible. Existing solely as projected renderings, they are only relative to physical objects. Yet the items presented in *World of Warcraft* are not even facsimiles of real armor and weaponry; rather, they are filtered through the limitations of video game modeling and *World of Warcraft*'s quasi-cartoonish aesthetic and high-fantasy lens.⁴⁹

Regardless of appearance, and despite both games pushing a narrative, players are driven by the acquisition of valuable purple and yellow treasures. When displayed and used, exotic and legendary items determine a player's status and experience. *Destiny* functions along the parameters of what Janet Murray calls "Cyber-drama" because it attempts to build a gaming community where its human participants the chance to gain a sense of agency.⁵⁰ While *World of Warcraft*'s armor is cartoonish, *Destiny*'s display of arms and armor is graphically superior, and we can see more details and embellishments in every piece of armor the game offers. What is interesting, then, is that a significant amount of armor in the futuristic science fantasy game is anachronistic. Some key pieces of armor

⁴⁹ Elysse T. Meredith, "Color Tensions: Medieval and Contemporary Concepts in Classifying and Using Digital Objects in *World of Warcraft*," *Digital Gaming Re-imagines the Middle Ages*, ed. Daniel T. Kline (New York: Routledge, 2014): 81. (81-92).

⁵⁰ Janet Murray, "From Game-Story to Cyber-drama," *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 2-11.

are either grotesque and mimics the appearance of enemies the player kills. Others are “medievalistic” in design:



Figure 4: (left) The Iron Companion Mask and (right) an early sixteenth century closed burgonet with a hinged bevor attributed to Kolman Helmschmid from Germany.⁵¹

Figure 4 shows certain pieces of armor are inspired from late medieval and early modern designs; more specifically, the figure displays the Hunter class’s “Iron Companion Mask” in comparison to the early sixteenth century closed-burgonet. There are clear similarities in terms of shape and design. Both helms have a falling buff, a projecting peak, and what appears as raised field etching that added miniscule details to early sixteenth century armors.⁵² The ornamental aspects of the Iron Companion Mask strengthen its anachronistic appeal. Side by side, there is a sense of familiarity in the design of this helmet that pulls from history and literature. Moreover, the fact that the armor is named a

⁵¹ *Destiny*, Bungie, 09 September 2014, Video game. The closed burgonet is provided by the MET, which was gifted to them by George Pratt in 1927: <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/26441>.

⁵² Scott Fliegel, *Arms and Armor: The Cleveland Museum of Art* (New York: Abrams 1998).

“companion” reminds us of how medieval and early modern armors function as companionate prostheses.



Figure 5: a side by side comparison the Iron Companion Helm with a thirteenth century great helm.⁵³

Seen in in Figure 5, the Iron Companion Helm’s rectangular shape and location of the eye slits is very much aligned with the thirteenth-fourteenth century great helm. The ornamentation of the etched tree spreading its branches is intricate, which in the game world arguably enhances its aesthetic value. The concept of value is not just limited to *Destiny*’s diegesis. The most intricate armors in the Medici collections were the most expensive, but like digital armor in a video game, these sets of armor functioned more like a simulation or representation of military prowess.⁵⁴ For the most part, the more

⁵³ For the image on the right, see *Destiny*, Bungie, 09 September 2014, Video game. The image on the left is from a historical reenactment. See <http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/knight-from-northern-italy-with-great-helm-sword-and-shield-news-photo/587773831>.

⁵⁴ A discussion of Medici armor can be found in Scott Fliegel, *Arms and Armor: The Cleveland Museum of Art* (New York: Abrams 1998), and Carolyn Springer, *Armour and Masculinity in the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2010).

ornamental an armor is, the more fragile it becomes. Such armors instruct viewers to focus more on the wearer's status rather than how effective the wearer is on the battlefield. The battles in *Destiny* are simulations, but armor earned in the Iron Banner reveal how dedicated a player is, so oftentimes, shooting skills correspond to one's reputation.

The acquisition of this armor tends to be relative to how long a player has spent in the multiplayer battlefield, and to an extent, how many other players were "killed." According to Matthew Wilhelm and Andrew Kappell, "The experience may enable the player's engagement with more traditional historical narratives to increase by virtue of their exposure to some of the most important parts of the historians' toolkit."⁵⁵ I would further this statement and include the fact that video games also utilize the "medievalists" or "early modernists" toolkit. For instance, the Iron Banner's "advisor," a character who provides prizes and bounties, is named Lord Saladin. For players unfamiliar with the name's significance, Saladin is a noble Saracen king found in the histories of the Crusades, and in many medieval works. Interestingly, some of the prizes from the Iron Banner also reference literature. If players are lucky, they can earn "Bretomart's Stand," a heavy machine gun, and arguably a reference to *The Faerie Queene*'s Britomart, or they can earn the "Iron Camelot Helmet," undoubtedly a

⁵⁵ Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B.R. Elliot, "Conclusion(s): Playing at the True Myths, Engaging with Authentic Histories," *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York: Bloomsbury), 363.

reference to Arthurian legend.⁵⁶ As the figures above demonstrate, players construct their futuristic selves through armor that relies on the real, and imagined, past.

A version of plate armor in the game, known as The Crest of the Alpha Lupi, is emblazoned with a heraldic insignia of the wolf and the eagle. In one version worn by Titans, both wolf and eagle are addorsed. In another variation worn by Hunters, seen in Figure 6, the plate is emblazoned with eagle wings, displayed and expanded, with a guardant wolf's head.⁵⁷

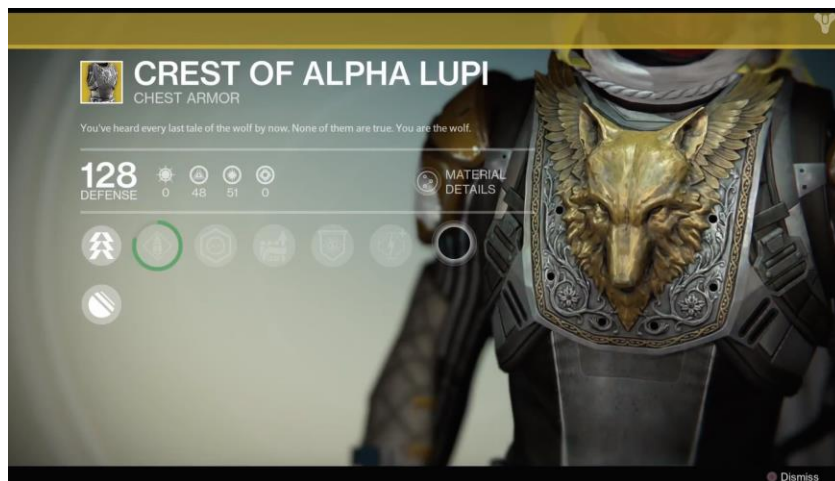


Figure 6: the Hunter's "Crest of the Alpha Lupi."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Arms and armor from Destiny are catalogued on Bungie's website. Their dedicated archive is called "The Armory." See <https://www.bungie.net/en/Armory>.

⁵⁷ Fox-Davies, *A Complete Guide to Heraldry*, 176, 187, and 233. The terms "addorsed" (when the creatures face away from each other), "displayed and expanded" (which indicates how a bird's wings are presented), and "guardant" (front-facing beast) are also established in A.C. Fox-Davies work.

⁵⁸ *Destiny*, Bungie, 09 September 2014, Video game.

As a digital simulation of armor, the Crest of the Alpha Lupi demonstrates both literary and historical significance. Similar Chaucer's brass steed, the Crest of the Alpha Lupi is armor that has astrological significance—Alpha Lupi is the brightest star in the constellation Lupus. And like the brass steed, the armor is endowed with regenerative properties. If a fellow Guardian dies, a perk called “Keeper of the Pack” enables a player who wears the Crest of the Alpha Lupi to “revive fallen teammates and be revived faster.”⁵⁹ In this particular case, if a player wears this particular armor, this connotes that he or she will play a more supportive role.

Interestingly, some of the most valuable armor in *Destiny* is, in Springer's categorization of armor, grotesque. This kind of armor is considered the oldest and “frequently assumes the form of a demonic mask and uses zoomorphic, abstract, or other apotropaic imagery to intimidate the enemy.”⁶⁰ The practice of acquiring this armor is similar to how heroes in classical works and medieval romances take armor from slain foes. To acquire such armor, players need to undertake what is called the end-game raid. Each raid requires a fireteam of six Guardians to undertake a combination of puzzles and challenging enemies. The raid culminates with a battle against a towering boss, essentially a giant. Teamwork, patience, and problem-solving skills are required to successfully complete raids. A resulting victory means that players can potentially acquire new arms and armor that mimic the enemy's aesthetics. Take for instance the

⁵⁹ *Destiny*, Bungie, 09 September 2014, Video game.

⁶⁰ Carolyn Springer, *Armour and Masculinity in the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 54.

“King’s Fall” raid, the most recent raid that pits six Guardians against enemies known as the Hive. The Guardians’ objective is to slay their King, Oryx. Successfully completing each trial offers the potential for finding armor. While the armor is not guaranteed because of a randomized loot system, each piece of armor, if obtained, looks like the Hive: the armor is alien, grotesque, and unlike the more medievalesque armor players can acquire.

The Hive armor aesthetics is described in the game’s Grimoire, a collection of digital cards that function as an expository narrative.⁶¹ According to the Grimoire, the Hives’ armor is skeletal in design: “Centuries of battle have toughened its bony protrusions on its body into an armor [...] strengthened by the Hive magic.”⁶² Despite the grotesque quality of using an enemy’s body as armor, some pieces of Hive raid gear have similarities to medieval armor. For instance, as seen in Figure 7, if players kill an exalted Hive-Knight known as The War-priest, they can wear its “skeleton” as armor.

⁶¹ Interestingly, *Destiny*, does not present a strong narrative; rather it relies on abstract binary oppositions like “Light” versus “Darkness.” However, the stronger narratives are presented as a digital Grimoire on Bungie’s website, where the narrative is divided into collectible cards.

⁶² Joseph Staten, et al. “Grimoire,” *Destiny*, Bungie.net, <https://www.bungie.net/en/Grimoire>.



Figure 7: On the left, a Titan Guardian is wearing a full set of Raid Armor. On the right is the War-priest. If successful, a Guardian can wear their enemies.

The acquisition of grotesque armor in *Destiny* enables a symbolic system of communication that tells a narrative of their progress, effort, and status. According to Springer, the acquisition of grotesque armor represents triumph over the beast and the acquisition of the beast's strength. Grotesque armor, in both literature and history, functions as a trophy that simulates the power of the beast, and most importantly, *the wearer's* power over the beast.⁶³ In this way acquisition of Hive armor is similar to Perseus's acquisition of Medusa's head, or Heracles's acquisition of the Nemean Lion's impenetrable skin.

The game's system of organization and recognition, similar to other role-playing games, gives value and meaning to their lives, or time, invested in the *Destiny*. This organizational activity is similar to Ernest Becker's notion of character armor, which is a

⁶³ Springer, *Arms and Armor*, 56.

prosthetic image in itself, “the arming of the personality so that it can maneuver in a threatening world.”⁶⁴ As demonstrated by *Destiny*’s armor system, a dependency on simulations represents a dependency on real world technologies to shape simulated identities. For example, a game controller, as a prosthetic extension, enables a player to partake in the simulation. The visualizations of armor prompt us to consider the extent to which narratives of the future are determined by an understanding of the past; as *Destiny* demonstrates, the medieval past becomes a point of reference for futuristic fictions.

Perhaps unbeknownst to a majority of *Destiny*’s player base, they are engaging with medieval acts of becoming to formulate their sense of self in the digital world. Interestingly, in *Destiny*, we see the valorization of the posthuman: cyborgs, hybrids, armorial doubleness, and companionate prostheses. From the very beginning, a player is accompanied by a “ghost,” a floating, talking, geometrically complex, sentient being that functions as the player’s guide, and in certain scenarios, a player’s flashlight. Armorial doubleness is achieved from the onset, and the player proceeds to add more armorial layers to their avatar as they progress through the game. Eventually, the ghost becomes a mere background object, and emphasis is placed on creating a real companion network with up to five additional players. Together as a “fireteam” of six, players role-play as a band of futuristic knights who go on a quest, “the raid,” against gigantic enemies. Players die, get resurrected, and continue to fight to build an impressive collection of arms and

⁶⁴ Becker, Ernest. *Angel in Armor: A Post-Freudian Perspective on the Nature of Man*. New York: MacMillan, 1975. Print.

armor. In other words, the ludic design of *Destiny* requires the cyclical construction, deconstruction, and regeneration of the digital “armored body.”

The armor, however, does not indicate a triumph over death. Death in this game, like almost all video games, is absolute and ever-present. Players will have many simulated deaths before they finally beat the raid. Likewise, resurrection is also guaranteed. Death is never the end in the digital world; rather, it is a process by which a player improves, and transforms, by experiencing consistent death, which equates to the trauma of losing. In a more concise way: the more a player dies, the more they learn how not to die.

The “Valhalla-Effect” in *Edge of Tomorrow*

The concept of a hero donning a suit of armor is commonplace in other films and video games. *Edge of Tomorrow* is a unique film because it fuses together the tropes I locate in *Iron Man* and *Destiny*. More specifically, the film’s narrative hinges on an understanding of video games. William Cage, the protagonist of *Edge of Tomorrow*, is a sly manipulator and propaganda master whose work compels soldiers to fight a losing battle against Mimics, large, beast-like organisms that function like a virus that infects planets. As a defensive measure, the Mimics have the ability to control time: “Whenever an Alpha is killed, an automatic response is triggered,” we are told. “The Omega starts the day over again [...] And an enemy that knows the future can’t lose.”⁶⁵ Cage is, by all accounts, inexperienced in combat and afraid to die, but he is arrested and forcibly thrust

⁶⁵ *Edge of Tomorrow*, directed by Doug Liman (2014; Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, 2014), Digital.

into the war he propagandizes. The key battle of the film, Operation Downfall, aesthetically references World War I and World War II, specifically the Battle of Normandy, and Cage witnesses the countless deaths of men and women around him. In a chance encounter with an Alpha, a Mimic whose blood holds the power to break the rules of time, Cage inadvertently detonates a mine. But rather than die, Cage is “infected” with the Alpha’s blood, thus giving him the ability to manipulate time. This ability, however, is restricted and traumatic: when Cage dies, he must relive the same day. This scenario is similar to what occurs in Norse myth. Like the warriors who enter Valhalla, Cage fights, painfully dies, and reawakens with the full knowledge that each day ends with his inevitable death. At one point, Cage mentions that he has fought the same battle more times than anyone else.⁶⁶ To be more specific, Cage officially dies on screen twenty-six times; however, it is fair to assume that the film cuts through hundreds of death scenes. Consider that Rita Vrataski, the film’s deuteragonist who previously held the power to rewind time, mentions that she saw a fellow soldier die three hundred times.⁶⁷

Edge of Tomorrow presents Braidotti’s necro-politics within a ludic video-game methodology. When he puts on his armor, Cage undergoes two different transformations simultaneously: one that is physical, and one that is temporal. The crucial element, however, is time, and it is through the ability to rewind time, not just armor, that enables Cage’s transformation from an inexperienced coward to a grizzly soldier who can wear, and use, armor efficiently. The armor in this film is called the New Jacket technology,

⁶⁶ *Edge of Tomorrow*, Doug Liman (2014).

⁶⁷ *Edge of Tomorrow*, Doug Liman (2014).

and aesthetically, the exoskeleton is more mechanical in design and similar to the first iteration of Iron Man armor created in a cave. As seen in Figure 8, the armor is very much similar in bulk to Stark’s Mark I armor from the first film.



Figure 8: Tom Cruise, as William Cage, wearing New Jacket armor. The picture to the right shows the New Jacket’s “angel wings” that essentially make Cage a four-armed warrior.

While clunky, bulkier, and less refined than *Destiny*’s armor, the New Jacket functions like a simulation that attempts to hide the body within an industrial “machinic” armor. The armor extends the human body by providing an additional two gun-carrying arms—what the film’s soldiers call “angel wings”—that extends from the armor’s back.⁶⁸ What is more interesting about the New Jacket is that it does not do what it promises. In the opening sequence, Cage promotes wartime propaganda by emphasizing the significance of armor: “This is an alien invasion in a global war, Cage says, “With the New Jacket Technology and limited amount of training, we’ve been able to create super-soldiers

⁶⁸ *Edge of Tomorrow*, Doug Liman, 2014.

[like] Rita Vrataski, the Angel of Verdun.”⁶⁹ However, very much like the sacred armors of *Le Morte D’Arthur*, the New Jacket fails.

When Cage implies that a soldier can master the New Jacket with “limited amount of training,” it is ironic, faulty reasoning. In a way similar to how Arteggall depends on Talus for violent action, Cage demonstrates a sense of technological dependency on New Jacket armor—according to Cage, soldiers do not need extensive training time to master the armor. Hence, they can bypass the time they would normally need to adjust themselves to the new armor. Fueled by Cage’s rhetoric, the New Jacket promises both ease and immortality. In a way, then, New Jacket technology, at first, becomes a manifestation of falseness. When Cage implies that it only takes a limited amount of training to wear armor, his statement dismisses the fact that with time comes routine, and that with routine, the armored soldier becomes more experienced, strategic, and valuable. Rather than make super-soldiers, New Jacket armor makes poor quality soldiers. The pivotal battle sequence of Operation Downfall shows William Cage and his group, J Squad, storming the beaches of France. They die immediately, and their quick deaths contradict the promises of the New Jacket propaganda. Essentially, Cage experiences his first death exactly twenty-five minutes into the film. While this is narratively relevant, it calls to mind the fact that in order to become a posthuman, prostheses are only half the equation. Cage literally needs time to master the armor, and he gains an infinite amount. In fact, unlike the brass and gold armor discussed in previous

⁶⁹ *Edge of Tomorrow*, Doug Liman, 2014.

sections of this project, the New Jacket does not defend against contagion—Cage is infected with the Alpha Mimic’s blood which leads to the film’s temporal irregularities. While the New Jacket technology enables soldiers to become more resilient fighters, it is a fleeting feeling that only occurs before battle, and it does not guarantee survival or the rank of “super-soldier.” In fact, Rita Vrataski only earns her reputation as the “Angel of Verdun” because, unbeknownst to the public, for an unspecified amount of time she too was infected with Mimic blood and was able to reset the day. The most powerful prosthesis, in this regard, is not what is worn, but what is integrated within the body—the blood of the opponent. The Alpha’s blood becomes a prosthesis that grants temporal powers to the film’s protagonist. This is not necessarily a bad thing. As Tully Barnett argues, “narratives of disease can be framed as positive experiences [...] the focus on the virus opens new possibilities for imagining subjectivity. This iteration of the posthuman merges human and virus—both biological and technological—to forge more powerful metaphors of the human as posthuman. Moreover, it posits viral infection as a form of posthuman experience.”⁷⁰ As much pain and suffering as Cage goes through, the Mimic blood is what makes him an effective armored soldier, and this is what enables him to ultimately survive. Put in another way, the Mimic blood becomes the mediating prosthesis that merges Cage’s body with the New Jacket armor. The human, the metal, and the alien blood formulate a complex posthuman triumvirate.

⁷⁰ Tully Barnett, “Remediating the Infected Body: Writing the Viral Self in Melinda Rackham’s carrier,” *Biography* 35.1 (Winter 2012): 56.

Early in the film, before Cage acquires his armor, he is demoted and charged as a deserter. Cage's status degenerates before he elevates, and his commanding officer, Master Sergeant Farell, eloquently tells Cage what he is to face:

Come nightfall, these men will all reach the same conclusion: that you're a coward and a liar, putting your life above theirs. The good news is there's hope for you, private—hope in the form of glorious combat. Battle is the great redeemer, the fiery crucible in which the only true heroes are forged, the one place where all men truly share the same rank, regardless of what kind of parasitic scum they were going in [...] I envy you Cage. Tomorrow morning, you will be baptized. Born again.⁷¹

Arguably one of the most crucial pieces of dialogues in the film, Farell establishes, rather prophetically, the theme of degeneration and transformation through “glorious combat.” *Edge of Tomorrow* enables audiences to contemplate real and simulated death as part of a posthuman process of becoming; rather than just think of degeneration as a one-way-trip to death, its part of a regenerative process. In other words, Master Sargent Farell is right: Cage transitions from a coward (who does not know how to turn off the safety on his gun) to a cyborgian soldier (who knows how to pull the trigger); Cage first fears death, then he becomes immortal and soon yearns for a death he cannot have. By doing so, he gets closer to the Arthurian chivalric ideal that necessitates sacrifice for a greater cause.

Braidotti's Deleuzian necro-politics becomes essential to the film's narrative. Cage must acknowledge the macabre. When a fellow soldier tells Cage that there is something wrong with his suit, Cage replies: “There's a dead guy in it.”⁷² Death is a recurring theme, but rather than hold a negative connotation, the film compels audiences

⁷¹ *Edge of Tomorrow*, Doug Liman, 2014.

⁷² *Edge of Tomorrow*, Doug Liman, 2014.

to treat death as a strategic advantage and instructive in design. Operation Downfall is repeated, and Cage dies over and over again. But in death, Cage learns how to survive, and learns how to avoid what caused his previous death. By video game standards, this is considered progress. Many games, like *Destiny*, intentionally increase in difficulty. Every encounter within a *Destiny* raid requires players to defeat an alien threat or a collaborative puzzle-trap that might “kill” the player in one hit. However, after hundreds of deaths, players learn how to survive and eventually progress. Death is inevitable, but through teamwork and problem solving skills, players can learn and advance and grow.

The film’s macabre video game methodology is presented through a series of montage sequences and quick scene cuts to demonstrate Cage’s progress. Key sequences are concerned with Cage’s transformation into an armored super-soldier. In one montage, Cage trains in an arena against mechanized claws that simulate the Mimics’ speedy tentacle attacks. Combat training sequences are quick, repetitive, and end with Cage being injured, in sometimes darkly humorous ways. And in every training sequence, Cage is brutally executed by Vrataski, who functions not just as Cage’s companion, but also his teacher, executioner, and guide who shows him how to fight, how to die, and how to use his power to rewind time. Execution, in this film, is akin to resetting a game. In fact, audiences watch Cage die eleven times during his training sequence.⁷³ Cage suffers, and in some cases he dies slowly on the battlefield, but he becomes stronger and more lethal. At a certain point, Cage has died so many times, he demonstrates his

⁷³*Edge of Tomorrow*, Doug Liman, 2014.

expertise when he quickly calculates how much ammunition he needs. He anticipates Mimic locations, and he realizes that helmets provide little defense and are more of a distraction. Because of Cage's power to reset the day, he seemingly has an infinite amount of time to learn how to handle his second body, the New Jacket armor. Cage's objective, despite the time-bending complexity of the plot, is simple. Vrataski tells him: "You have to die. Every day. Until the Omega is destroyed."⁷⁴ At the most direct level, this is an example of how the "Valhalla Effect" is way to understand the concept of sacrifice and death as part of a necro-political chivalric ideology demonstrated in premodern literature, films, and video games. Rather than a mead hall, Cage's Valhalla becomes the coasts of France mired by the realities of war.

The film, at the most basic foundation, relies on ludic game design to use instruction as a narrative device. At its core, this is the nature of learning through death in a video game. William Cage becomes the metaphorical game player who learns through innumerable deaths and resurrections. Simulated death is tied to the theme of learning through failing bodies. According to Jesper Juul, failure is pedagogically advantageous: "failure is an integral element of the overall experience of playing a game, a motivator, something that helps us consider our strategies."⁷⁵ Failure, or a simulated death in a video game, is positive because it is educational. In Cage's case, death needs to be willingly

⁷⁴*Edge of Tomorrow*, Doug Liman, 2014.

⁷⁵ Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), loc. 193. Kindle Edition.

accepted, not because it is the hero's way to be brave, but because it leads to growth and progress. Without death, in other words, there is only stasis.⁷⁶

According to Sachi Shimomura in her use of stasis and anti-stasis to read *The Knight's Tale*, "History decays constantly into stasis in their narrative; time stops or fragments into moments possessing no rooted connections to their pasts."⁷⁷ Stasis, which in the film means stopping time, is an advantage that inevitably becomes one of the hurdles Cage must overcome for the sake of progress, despite the fact that resetting time defies the finality of death. Words like "reset" and "game over" are effectively used to remind audiences of how Cage uses gameplay techniques to survive.⁷⁸ When Cage asks how he can control his time-bending powers, he learns that death is control.

By repeating Operation Downfall, Cage and Rita die. But with every reset, both soldiers strategize new routes and different offensive strikes to maneuver through a battlefield that inevitably becomes more and more familiar. Cage learns to be the master of his armored body, but with the passage of time, we see how mastering the physical body leads to Cage's emotional deterioration—in a different montage sequence, Cage has to witness Vrataski die first before he succumbs to a Mimic. At one point, Vrataski asks Cage how many times he reset the day; he never gives an exact number, but the narrative

⁷⁶ This is pedagogically useful. According to Jesper Juul, a fear of failure leads to procrastination: we perform poorly because we fear that our performance is will be deemed poor. See Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), loc. 324. Kindle Edition

⁷⁷ Sachi Shimomura, "The Walking Dead in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review* 48.1 (2013): 14.

⁷⁸ *Edge of Tomorrow*, Doug Liman, 2014.

suggests that Cage has relived the same day and the same traumas so many times that he is emotionally destroyed. Emotions are rarely spoken in this film, but the film's editing implies that Cage grows to romantically care for Vrataski. His pain and weariness becomes more apparent with his cold stares and despairing remark: "No matter what we do, no matter how carefully we plan, we can't get off that beach [...]" "No matter what I do, this is as far as you can make it. I wish I didn't know you. But I do."⁷⁹ During Cage's early resurrections, he feels obligated to try to save his squad. He fails but keeps trying. In initial attempts to find Rita Vrataski, and to train under her guidance, the film resembles a darkly humorous comedy of errors. When Cage tries to elude Master Sargent Ferrell, Cage miscalculates his escape and rolls onto an incoming truck. By the middle of the film, however, Cage's sense of duty fades, the comedy ceases, and his armor fails, reminding us of the inevitable deterioration of the body.

By the end of the film, the theme shifts from learning through death and failure to the constant of sacrifice: "Neither one of us is getting out of here," reminds Vrataski, once they realize that their final assault on the Mimic's Omega mind was always a suicide mission.⁸⁰ Cage, Vrataski, and the surviving members of J Squad sacrifice themselves to eliminate the Omega. There is no courage without fear, we are told, but there is no meaning without sacrifice. The things between survival and death—the suits of armor, the plane that shields them from incoming fire—only serve to regulate how

⁷⁹ *Edge of Tomorrow*, Doug Liman, 2014.

⁸⁰ *Edge of Tomorrow*, Doug Liman, 2014.

they die by providing extra time. In fact, through his mastery of armor, Cage earns his extra game-time. By the end of the film, Cage becomes a four-armed warrior that takes down multiple Mimics. The looming certainty of death is expected for soldiers. Cage's emotional deterioration is a reminder of how war diminishes the strongest ideologies and the strongest armorial bodies. Cage learns how to act like a chivalrous soldier, and with enough time, he learns how to die. According to Allan Frantzen, a persistent pattern appears in war narratives: "when young men filled with illusions of chivalry were ordered to walk into machine-gun fire, an ancient brotherhood fell before the weapons of a new age."⁸¹

The New Jacket exoskeleton becomes the physical embodiment of wartime propaganda. The New Jacket's promise of invulnerability appeals to young soldiers, and it urges many of them to fight in battle. Much of Frantzen's critical work relies on a keen distinction between chivalric sacrifice, anti-sacrifice, and the medium between both, self-sacrifice:

[Sacrifice] calls for the taking of one life to avenge the loss of another and thus for perpetuating cyclical violence. [Anti-sacrifice] opposes the taking of life and seeks to bring the cycle of violence to a halt. Chivalry, I argue, not only made both responses available to knights and to their modern descendants but validated a third response, self-sacrifice, that conflated prowess and piety and blurred the lines between sacrifice and anti-sacrifice.⁸²

⁸¹Frantzen, *Bloody Good*, 2.

⁸²Frantzen, *Bloody Good*, 3.

While Frantzen's work focuses on medievalism found in World War I, I find that his ideas on chivalry in the Great War apply to *Edge of Tomorrow*. First, the film appropriates and reimagines images and places of the Great War— namely Verdun, the trenches, and No Man's Land— as futuristic battlegrounds. These battlegrounds, while anachronistic, test chivalric masculinity. Ultimately, in this space, Cage learns that in his posthuman act of becoming-machine, he must also become the sacrificial, archetypal hero. Death, failure, and sacrifice are embodied in the New Jacket armor, which becomes a visual meditation on memento mori. To make sense of death, Braidotti reminds us, “we need an unconventional approach that rests on a preliminary and fundamental distinction between personal death and impersonal death.”⁸³ Cage's predicament is an unconventional manipulation of time to impact the narrative. What becomes problematic about the soldiers' sacrifice, at least in the film, is that they fight for the justifiable cause to preserve humanity, but they storm the beach under false pretense and with the false hope that the New Jacket armor provides. Such propaganda has been witnessed in the World Wars that *Edge of Tomorrow* borrows from: as Frantzen puts it, “Myth, art, and propaganda conspire to suppress blood and struggle— to say nothing of war— and present the surface of heroic masculinity as a free-floating fantasy while leaving the substance of virtue [sacrifice] unexamined.”⁸⁴

Ironically though, as misleading as propaganda is, it is the very poster of an armored Vrataski, as the “Angel of Verdun,” brandishing a giant sword, that draws Cage

⁸³ Braidotti, *Posthuman*, 131.

⁸⁴ Frantzen, *Bloody Good*, 14.

towards her crashed ship during his first few reincarnations. The Mimics too utilized a kind of propaganda, in the form of psychical visions emitted from the Omega Mimic—soldiers were misdirected and were allowed to believe they won as part of the Mimic’s strategy to claim their defenses. These segments of the film demonstrate how media coverage can alter our subjectivity and how we interpret armored bodies—we know the New Jacket armor does not fulfill what it promises, but the film’s propaganda machine tells the world that it works. Time travel seems like an amazing concept that fulfills fantasies, but we are instructed to see time as a burden. Armor seems like it can augment the body, but the film teaches us that using armor takes time to master. Without time for mastery, New Jacket technology becomes a disadvantage that can kill the wearer. The temporal complexities of the film lead to potential paradoxes and illogical consistencies inherent to time-travel narratives; but from an instructive standpoint, the film is a useful example for studying armorial doubleness or even the tripled-bodied assemblage discussed in the prior two chapters. Armor is only useful when the right temporal conditions are made, but even then it does not guarantee survival. Cage still has to learn new tricks and new strategies when progress a “level” he has never encountered. Ultimately, it is by the grace of time-altering alien blood, a bioorganic prosthesis, that initiates Cage’s posthuman transformation into a full-armored, machinic knight, one who regenerates to save the world.

Each work presented in this chapter transposes us beyond the confines of bodily boundaries and human and nonhuman identities. Armor networks enable the human to become posthuman by creating hybrid bodies linked to animals, metals, and planetary

and astrological forces. Iron Man, Destiny, and Edge of Tomorrow makes us aware of the limitations of our embodied selves. The concept of the armorial assemblage requires us to read nonhuman forms as prosthetics. Joining with a prosthesis forces multiple fusions, transitions, and transformations. This leads to hybrid doubleness, or even a triple-bodied assemblage. By sacrificing the original human body, and by fusing that body with various prosthetics, the posthuman body emerges from the ashes only to progress through time via the cyclicity of further degeneration and regeneration.

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